



## Education Consumers Foundation

### **Second Annual Value-Added Achievement Awards**

State Capitol  
Nashville, Tennessee  
May 7, 2007

Remarks of J. E. Stone, President  
Education Consumers Foundation

Thank you Brett, and thank you all for being here. Since we have quite a program today, I will get right to my remarks.

Due to the work of Dr. William Sanders, the foresight of the Tennessee General Assembly, and the support of Tennessee's Governors beginning with the McWherter administration in 1992, Tennessee has the most sophisticated and mature educational accountability system in the nation. It is about 10 years ahead of the rest of the country and is currently being adopted by other states and the U. S. Department of Education.

It is Tennessee's Value-Added Assessment System—TVAAS—that makes it possible for us to identify the principals who will be honored here today. Most states do not have the kind of data that would enable parents, the public, and their elected representatives to see for themselves which schools are doing the best job.

In that regard, I want to recognize a member of the 1992 General Assembly who was instrumental in the adoption of TVAAS and a champion of fair and accurate educational accountability in the years before and since. He is Representative David Coffey of Oak Ridge.

David, would you please stand.

Value-added assessment is no simple thing to understand and David Coffey has a better understanding of it and its vital role in education policy than any elected official I have encountered in a 35-year career. He is an enthusiastic supporter of these awards and a tireless champion of school improvement. The citizens of Tennessee and the nation owe

him a debt of gratitude for the efforts he has quietly made to promote and sustain high quality school accountability.

Thank-you, David.

The Education Consumers Foundation serves parents, taxpayers, and their elected representatives, and one of our goals has been to put educational accountability data into a form that is useful to our constituency.

The centerpiece of our effort is our School Performance Charts. (Show middle school chart) They are available on our website [www.education-consumers.com](http://www.education-consumers.com), and they enable education's consumers to see how their local schools stack up against others in their area and around the state. If you have not already done so, I would encourage you try them out. They are simple but they convey a clear message about school quality in Tennessee.

By the way, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the help given us by Dr. George Cunningham of the University of Louisville in analyzing the data on which our School Performance Charts are based. Thank-you Dr. Cunningham.

In addition to School Performance Charts, our website provides a wealth of information about educational policy and practice. I won't take time today to mention all the areas, but I do want to give you a brief overview of two charts that illustrate how Tennessee's TVAAS data challenges some long-standing misconceptions about successful schools. To fully appreciate what these charts have to say about effective schooling, you will need to download them from our website.

The first of these is a scatterplot of [Student Poverty versus School Effectiveness](#).

Each datapoint on the chart represents a Tennessee elementary school. Each school is located on the basis of the school's value-added achievement gain and the percentage of its students that are enrolled in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. A school's Free and Reduced Lunch percentage is the standard indicator of whether a school is considered to be a low or high poverty school.

The datapoints above the horizontal midline are schools whose students have annual achievement gains that are above the state average. Schools to the right side of the chart have the higher percentages of students eligible for the Free and Reduced lunch program.

What this chart shows is there is virtually no relationship between student poverty and the ability of schools to boost student achievement. At the lower-left there are schools that have

few students of poverty, yet they are clearly underperforming with regard to annual achievement gain. At the upper right, there are schools that have 90% and above poverty rates and yet they are producing very substantial achievement gains.

What this data suggests is that the big difference among schools with regard to the results that they are producing is not the composition of their student bodies. Rather, it is how they go about their business, i.e., how their teachers teach and how their principals lead.

Now let me show you one last chart from our website. It displays Tennessee's elementary and middle schools on the basis of their TVAAS and TCAP scores and it distinguishes between low and high poverty schools. I call this one my "[Birdshot Chart](#)."

Again, a datapoint represents a Tennessee elementary or middle school. Each school is located by the annual value-added achievement gains of its students and by its average TCAP achievement test performance. Schools closer to the top of the chart are doing a superior job of producing year-by-year increases in student achievement. Schools to the right of the chart have students with higher average achievement test scores.

Notice also that there are different types of datapoints. The blue plus signs are schools that have more than 50% of their students eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch program. The green diamonds are schools that have less than 50% of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The red datapoints are this year's Value-Added Achievement Award winners. I will talk about the importance of these distinctions in a moment.

The dashed red lines crossing the chart represent the minimum level of performance necessary for a school to be assigned a grade of "A" by Commissioner Seivers department. In other words, schools that are above the horizontal line are producing A-level student achievement gains each year. The schools that are to the right of the vertical red line have students who have reached the A-level criterion for student achievement that is set by the Department.

Now, here is a critically important distinction to be understood about these two grades:

The grade for value-added gains (i.e., how close a school is to the top of the chart) is mostly influenced by how the school goes about its business, and that's why we believe our winning schools deserve a world of credit for the job they are doing. We say they are effective schools.

The grade for student achievement (i.e., how far a school is to the right of the chart) is mostly influenced by the composition of the student body. Notice that green diamonds

representing low poverty schools are predominately to the right of the chart and the blue plus signs are predominately to the left, thus you can see that the grade for student achievement levels is mainly a matter of the degree to which a school has been assigned socially and economically advantaged students.

Let me close with a few additional observations about the Birdshot Chart:

1. Notice that high achievement gains are being produced by low and high poverty schools as well as by low and high achievement schools. In other words, contrary to popular belief, it is not unreasonable for parents, policymakers, and the public to expect all schools to produce annual achievement gains similar to those demonstrated by Tennessee's highest performers.

If all of Tennessee's schools improved to the levels of our award winners, Tennessee's 12<sup>th</sup> grade achievement test averages would eventually rise to the highest in the nation.

2. Notice the blue pluses in the upper right hand quadrant of the chart. These are high poverty schools that have both high gains and high student achievement. Again, poverty is not an insurmountable barrier to student achievement.

By the way, the Education Consumers Foundation is making a special effort to study Tennessee's high performing, high poverty schools. We want to know more about what makes them exceptionally effective, so we asked Dr. Guy Bruce, an educational consultant from Illinois, to interview a sample of the winning principals. Dr. Bruce will be making his preliminary report to the ECF Board tomorrow. A synopsis will be available on our website today.

3. Also, notice the green diamonds in the lower right quadrant. These are schools with advantaged and talented students who are, in the words of Dr. William Sanders, being permitted to "coast." These are the schools that send significant numbers of their students to college, and they are probably producing more than their fair share of the 1/3 of entering college students who find that they need remedial coursework.

4. Notice the blue pluses in the lower left quadrant. These are schools with disadvantaged students who are being permitted to fall farther behind, year after year. On the whole, these schools are likely to be major contributors to the school dropout problem.

5. The blue pluses in the upper left are the schools that are producing the kind of accelerated rates of learning that will be necessary to bring at-risk students up to speed in

terms of exit levels of student achievement. These are the schools that perhaps more than any others are fulfilling the mission of free public schooling for all.

For a hundred years, public education has been supported by the American public because it has the power to give children from even the most disadvantaged circumstances the knowledge and skills they need for success in college and the workplace. These are schools that affirm the worth of the American investment in education by enabling their students to “be all they can be.”

6. Finally, notice that despite everything the high-performing, high-poverty schools are doing, they have a very steep hill to climb to bring their students to the levels of achievement enjoyed by students with more advantaged backgrounds. It isn't a task they can accomplish by themselves.

The data represented in this chart covers grades 4-8. High poverty schools have low achievement scores because their students start at a lower level. Students who start behind have to run faster to catch up, but the faster running has to begin before the 4<sup>th</sup> grade if there is to be any realistic chance of outcomes such as entrance into a competitive college.

Fourth graders are students who have been enrolled in school for 4 years—K-3—prior to their entrance into the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Tennessee is now considering a statewide requirement of another year of school prior to kindergarten. A pre-kindergarten year may substantially alleviate the problem of disadvantaged 4<sup>th</sup> graders starting from so far behind, but the data provided by our Birdshot Chart suggests that other interventions may be needed.

Neither Tennessee nor any other state collects the kind of achievement data necessary to make a value-added assessment of student progress for the first 4 years of schooling. However, if one makes the not-unreasonable assumption that the differences among schools in grades preK-3 are pretty much like the ones seen in our Birdshot Chart, it is apparent that substantial improvement in student readiness for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade could be obtained by identifying and promoting school effectiveness in the preK-3 grades.

Thus, I would encourage policymakers to consider an extension of a value-added style of assessment to earlier grades so that effective schools and their leaders might be identified and encouraged and the less effective ones helped to improve.

Thanks so much for your time and attention.