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Data shows one-third of Florida's top educators have students progressing below expectations

22 top teachers scored negative, and 16 scored positive

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By [Christopher J. Brooks & Denise Smith Amos](#)

When Apryl Shackelford was crowned Duval County's 2013 Teacher of the Year, school board members and the superintendent hailed her as one of Florida's best educators.

Now the former Northwestern Middle School reading teacher who specialized in struggling readers has had her top teacher tiara tilted.

New state figures that are supposed to measure teacher effectiveness gave her a negative score for the last school year. A negative score means the state believes she allowed her students to fall below expectations for annual progress in reading.

Shackelford is not buying it.

"I know my students made progress," she said. "Every student needs an effective teacher, so I agree with measuring teachers. But I do not believe [the scores] should be a substantial factor in a teacher's evaluation. ... Students are more than test scores, and so are teachers."

Across Florida, top-ranking public schools and highly-thought-of teachers are learning that the state's model for quantifying teacher quality, called the Value-Added Model, or VAM, is tarnishing their reputation. Some teachers say they don't believe the numbers, and others say they may bear some validity though they don't tell the whole story.

Making sense of the data: [Comparing Duval schools' VAM scores and FCAT letter grades](#)

Making sense of the data: [Duval's top VAM scores, by school](#)

Making sense of the data: [Duval's lowest VAM scores, by school](#)

"We have some awesome teachers, some of the best in Florida, but I don't think some of the scores are truly reflecting who that is in the classroom," Shackelford said.

Consider that 22 of the 67 school districts' reigning Teachers of the Year have negative VAM scores; 16 have positive scores. (Some scores aren't reported by the state to protect student identities.) Last year's statewide Teacher of the Year winner, Dorina Sackman of Orange County, also had a negative VAM score.

DUVAL SEMIFINALISTS

In Duval County, among the current 15 semifinalists vying for Teacher of the Year, there are at least two teachers with negative VAM scores. Desirae Royal, a JEB Stuart Middle School science and math teacher, had a negative VAM score, but she suspects there's some truth in it.

"I feel like I could have had greater values in some areas as far as student performance," she said.

Being a mathematician, she loves formulas.

"I love VAM scores, and I love the model because I like the accountability," she said. "I grade my students. I work in public service. Why shouldn't I be graded?"

But Royal urges teachers and parents to look beyond the VAM scores to the full teacher evaluation, or just visit a classroom before passing judgment.

"You have to dig deeper," she said. "Sometimes what you see on paper is not what you see in the classroom."

While these teachers' cases may raise eyebrows, not every teacher of the year had negative VAM scores.

James Howell, the 2011 Clay County Teacher of the Year who had a positive score, said he pays no attention to his score.

"And I don't know anyone who does," said Howell, adding that the scores and formula are too complex.

"All you have to do is ask [the state] to explain them to you. No administrator can do it."

MEASURING AN ART

The main issue with value-added, Howell said, is that legislators and the architects of the formula are trying to objectively quantify something that's an art, namely teaching.

Database: [Search VAM scores for teachers, schools and school districts](#)

Doctors are judged by a collection of doctors in the American Medical Association, and lawyers are judged by fellow lawyers in state bar associations. But teachers are perhaps the only profession where lawmakers without a teaching background have decided educators are to be evaluated with numbers, Howell said.

Howell, who has been at Orange Park High School for 15 years, said his fellow teachers are baffled by the scores.

"Nobody has any faith in [the scores]," he said. "My score is just as invalid as anyone else's."

AWARD CRITERIA

Some local education leaders said there are probable explanations.

Nikolai Vitti, Duval's superintendent, said the Teacher of the Year award is not supposed to reflect how teachers did on evaluations; it's supposed to pay tribute to unsung heroes in education who have the respect of peers, parents and students.

"The Teacher of the Year doesn't necessarily have to be the [district's] best teacher," he said, adding that maybe districts should hold separate ceremonies for the teachers with the highest growth rates.

Trey Csar, whose organization, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund, helps coordinate Duval's Teacher of the Year contest, said the disconnect may be in which student scores count.

Many Teacher of the Year candidates, he said, don't teach the FCAT-tested subjects used in VAM calculations — reading and math. Many teach art, science, social studies, a foreign language, even kindergarten. Tests for those students are not used in the VAM.

Instead, those teachers' VAM scores likely came from schoolwide averages or from the reading and math test scores of each teacher's students, regardless of classroom subject.

Also, the VAM formula tries to adjust for differences among schools to give teachers a more level playing field, changing the results.

"Even if you have a great teacher ... if they're in a school where the overall score is low, that will drag down a great teacher's score," Csar said.

SHE'S POSITIVE HER STUDENTS ARE LEARNING

Kelly Watt, a 2013 Clay County Teacher of the Year finalist, said she ignores her negative VAM score because it is based not on her social studies and civics classes but on the FCAT reading tests her students took.

"Yes, my VAM was negative, but it wasn't based on anything I did or didn't do," she said.

"I know my weaknesses, and I know my strengths, and my VAM scores don't need to show me that," Watt said. "I know my kids are learning."

SCHOOL GRADES

But there are anomalies in schoolwide VAM results, too.

In Duval County, for instance, nine schools that received A's on state report cards last year — thanks to high student test scores — also received negative VAM scores. Six of those schools had had straight A's all decade long.

There also was an F school and a D school that showed positive VAM results.

Schools, too, may score A's on state report cards and still have negative VAM scores, Csar said, because the school-grading system and the teacher evaluation system are disconnected.

The school-grading formula relies largely on students gaining proficiency in subjects, but VAM calculates how much academic growth a teacher is responsible for, he said. Ultimately, "those two systems are not aligned and that's going to lead to some confusion," he said.

Csar said the state education department needs to consider using similar formulas for teacher evaluation and for school letter-grading.

Vitti echoed Csar's comments.

"Just because you're at an A school, that doesn't mean your student is being offered a better education than F schools," said Vitti, alluding to the fact that F schools will house teachers who show great growth among their students.

[Khristopher J. Brooks: \(904\) 359-4104](#)

[Denise Amos: \(904\) 359-4083](#)

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