

DISTRICT OFFICE:

534 BROADHOLLOW ROAD, SUITE 302
MELVILLE, NY 11747
PHONE: (631) 777-7391
PHONE: (516) 505-1448
PHONE: (718) 875-1675
FAX: (631) 777-7610



WASHINGTON OFFICE:

2457 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
PHONE: (202) 225-3335
FAX: (202) 225-4669
www.house.gov/israel
Twitter: @RepSteveIsrael

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

STEVE ISRAEL
Third District, New York

March 13, 2015

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with Sheri Lederman, a 4th grade teacher from Great Neck, NY, in my congressional district. Sheri has been teaching for 17 years, has a doctorate in education, and has been consistently recognized as an outstanding educator. Her research into how children learn was awarded the Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award in 2012 by Hofstra University.

Despite Sheri's demonstrated record of effectiveness, on the "student growth" portion of her 2013-2014 assessment she received a score of 1 out of 20, which ranked her as "ineffective" in that category and lowered her composite score from "highly effective" to "effective." That year Sheri received a perfect score in every other category besides "student growth" and thus received a total score of 81 of 100.

As you may know, New York, like many states, uses a statistical model to evaluate how much a teacher contributes to students' academic achievement. The evaluation method, known as value-added modeling, or VAM, is designed to predict how students with similar characteristics would perform on standardized exams and growth over time. Teachers are then rated on how their students compare with the theoretical students.

Many states, such as New York, were strongly encouraged by the U.S. Department of Education, through Race to the Top grants, to implement teacher and principal effectiveness improvements. To meet those improvements many states chose to use value-added modeling.

While I commend the efforts of Race to the Top and agree that every child should have a qualified and effective teacher, I am increasingly concerned with the use of value-added modeling. Most alarming is that it is increasingly promoted as a factor in high-stakes decisions relating to compensation, evaluation, hiring and dismissing, and promotion of teachers all while growing doubt surrounds the validity and reliability of such models.

In a report released last year by the American Statistical Association, the largest organization of statistics professionals in the U.S., it was found that "VAMs typically measure correlation, not causation" and that effects, either positive or negative, "that have been attributed to a teacher may actually be caused by other

factors that are not captured in the model.” The report goes on to state that “ranking teachers by their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality.”

In light of the report by the American Statistical Association I would like the U.S. Department of Education to address my specific concerns:

- 1) Does the U.S Department of Education believe that VAMs accurately measure a teacher’s contribution to student growth?
- 2) What form of guidance has the U.S Department of Education provided to states that are using VAM to measure teacher effectiveness?
- 3) Has the U.S. Department of Education issued any guidance to states specifically on how states and Local Education Authorities should handle appeals for teacher evaluation scores generated by VAMs?
- 4) Has the U.S. Department of Education identified covariates of interest that should be included in a model that attempts to isolate teacher contribution to student growth?
- 5) Has the U.S. Department of Education identified covariates that should not be included in the model that attempts to isolate teacher contribution?
- 6) What alternatives to VAM have been found to be suitable to measure teacher effectiveness?

I commend your efforts to improve our nation’s education system as it is the bedrock of our children's future success and American competitiveness in a global economy, but we must ensure that any reforms that are put in place are not only valid, but support great teachers like Sheri Lederman. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



STEVE ISRAEL

Member of Congress

cc:

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Robert C. Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education and Workforce
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515