

# Assessment and Accountability to Transform America's Schools

**Dr. Theodore Hershberg is a professor of public policy and history; a director of the Center for Greater Philadelphia at the University of Philadelphia; and a powerful advocate for collaborative, standards-based school reform.**

**Hershberg is also the executive director of Operation Public Education (OPE), which promotes new assessment and accountability systems to transform America's schools.**

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The Twentieth Century education model falls short of meeting the demands of the Twenty-first Century economy, according to Theodore Hershberg. Dr. Hershberg was a featured speaker at Measured Progress's third annual [Education Leadership Conference](#), "Building Critical Bridges," last month in Danvers, Massachusetts.

Hershberg began his discussion of the critical connections between classroom performance, curriculum development, and assessment methodologies with a historical perspective of the American education system. Our education system, he explained, was designed to teach basic literacy, socialize most students for employment in manufacturing, and identify the top fifth of students who were most likely to go on to college—all essential to meet the demands of a Twentieth-Century economy.

With the Twenty-first Century, however, comes an entirely new set of demands, and the "economic argument" for preserving the status quo—that the American economy is the best in the world; therefore, our schools must also be good (or good enough)—no longer holds true. "New technologies of the Twenty-first Century favor the better educated," Hershberg said, "so we're now asking our schools to educate all students—not just the top fifth—and to educate them to higher levels than ever before. And we're asking schools to do it using a system not designed to work under these new expectations."

Hershberg noted that in the last thirty years we've increased school spending in inflation-adjusted terms, on a per-pupil basis, by 110 percent; we've doubled the number of teachers with master's degrees; and we've reduced class size by 22 percent. "Yet in spite of these changes," he continued, "we've seen precious little evidence of improvement. The reason: we have a system designed for a different century and a different economy. It's like trying to put a square peg in a round hole—no matter how hard you try, it just doesn't fit."

## A New Vision

Hershberg has a vision of a new education system designed to accommodate the requirements of the new century. Under this new system, success would be measured using "value-added assessment" methodology, a statistical method to measure academic achievement pioneered for the state of Tennessee by Dr. William Sanders.

"Value-added assessment is not a test," Hershberg explained, "but a way of looking at the results that come from tests so we can determine whether the students in a classroom, school, or district are making sufficient academic growth each year."

"The value-added methodology works because it separates '*student*' effects from '*school*' effects," he continued, "by measuring a student's annual growth in two areas: that which can be linked to the student and family and that which can be attributed to the teacher, school, or district. It looks at the individual student over time, regardless of whether the student starts the year at, below, or above grade level. In effect, each student serves as his or her own 'baseline.'"

At the start of each academic year, a "projected score" is created for each student based on grade and subject. At the end of the year, the projected score is compared to the actual score to measure achievement. Educators can say that a student has achieved "one year's worth of growth" if the projected score and actual score are similar.

"What makes value-added fair to students is that a projected score is based on a student's prior academic record, ensuring that all children are expected to make progress each year from wherever they start," Hershberg noted.

It is for this same reason that this system is fair to educators. “The use of prior academic achievement incorporates student background characteristics, such as race and socioeconomic factors, and reflects all the bias that’s out there,” he added. With this methodology, the mix of students in a classroom or a school no longer matters. The wealthiest communities can be compared with the poorest communities because assessments look at individual students’ academic progress rather than how students scored on an absolute scale.

“With the value-added assessment concept, the definition of a ‘good’ school becomes one that ‘stretches’ its kids every year so that they perform at levels higher than their past academic record would indicate,” Hershberg said. “And because No Child Left Behind requires all schools to bring their students to proficiency, a good school must also be one that meets this requirement. With value-added, over time all students should be able to achieve high standards.”

According to Hershberg, the challenge for many will come as they try to close the gap between high standards and student performance levels. “To do this,” he said, “schools must do two things. First, don’t lose ground. If all you did was keep kids moving along at the rate they did in the past, you would close a large part of this gap. In fact, even if that’s all we did, we’d be dramatically better off.

“Next,” Hershberg added, “you have to change the systems in which educators work. This means higher quality instructional leadership and investing in the resources teachers need to meet these new and demanding standards.”

### **Value-Added at Work: the Tennessee Example**

To offer a specific example, Hershberg presented data from the state of Tennessee, where value-added has been used to track each of the state’s nearly 900,000 students since 1992.

For the 1996-97 school year, of the 1,209 K–8 schools in Tennessee, 166 had math scores exceeding 110 percent, far more than a year’s growth in a single year. (A score of “100” would mean that on average, all students experienced a year’s growth in a single year.) At the same time, 121 schools scored between 60 and 70 percent; students fell short of the growth they had achieved in the past. “If you assume that an affluent school district with high test scores would appear in the former group,” Hershberg said, “you may or may not be correct. In fact, many of these schools were found in the group with scores of between 90 and 100 percent.”

What is even more significant, according to Hershberg, is the fact that many schools with the highest value-added scores were low-income, high-minority schools. “These schools did an excellent job of ‘stretching’ their students,” he said. “Yet these schools never appeared as successful in school rankings based on achievement.”

In addition to Tennessee, value-added assessment is in use in Pennsylvania and Ohio, as well as in more than 300 other school districts in 21 states.

Donna Eason