

COMMENTARY

Up Against the Wall

By John Merrow

Standing against the kitchen wall was a ritual when my sisters and I were kids. First we'd take off our shoes and stretch ourselves to be as tall as possible; then either Mom or Pop would mark our height and write the date next to the mark. We'd do this every six months or so, so we could see if we were getting any taller. When our little brothers got big enough to be included, we used the kitchen doorframe. I'm sure lots of families still do that.

Education is embracing that concept. Naturally, educators have given it two fancy names, "the growth model" or the "value added" approach.

Basically, it means testing students at the beginning of the year and then again at the end, to see how much they've learned. Under this approach, a year's worth of academic growth in a school year is the minimum measure of success. Less than that, failure.



—Patti Raine

Actually, some supporters of the growth model say they expect low-performing students to advance more than one year in a given school year, so that they reach grade level. Kati Haycock of the Education Trust, a wary supporter, is adamant that growth models not be a subterfuge "to let schools, districts, and states off the hook."

In 2006, **her organization called the growth model** a "paper exercise" unless it is used to "identify the students and schools most in need of help and ensure they get the assistance and resources they need."

Those concerns notwithstanding, the education "growth model" seems poised to become the *latest* "best idea ever" in the faddish world of education. It has supporters among both liberals and conservatives. Many liberals, who think the federal No Child Left Behind Act places too much emphasis on a single end-of-the-year test, like the before-and-after approach of the growth model. Some conservatives are excited about finally being able to

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measure *teacher* effectiveness. And the Bush administration, which has already endorsed pilot versions in five states, is likely to embrace the growth model in a big way, if only to deflect the increasing criticism of the No Child Left Behind law as the debate about its reauthorization heats up.

The family growth model works for three reasons. Even if a family moves from New York to Oregon, the measure—that yardstick—remains the same. Just copy the numbers, put them on the wall of the new kitchen, and keep on taking measurements. It works because families strive to feed their children nourishing food. It works because parents tend to focus on the whole child, not just on how tall he stands on the day they happen to measure him.

Education’s growth model is problematic for a number of reasons. It simply will not work in most urban schools, where the student-turnover rate often exceeds 50 percent. That is, by late spring, more than half the kids who started at one school in September are now going to other schools. A niece of mine who is teaching elementary school in Orlando, Fla., told me that her class had changed 40 percent by mid-January. If that many of the students who began in her class go elsewhere during the year, who’s accountable for learning?

A growth model might provide educators what some religions call “an occasion of sin,” a strong temptation for schools to triage, either openly or quietly, by “misplacing” the records of kids who move. And since it’s often the most needy, most vulnerable (and the lowest-scoring) students who move between schools, it’s hard to make a convincing argument that a growth model will do a *better* job of making sure those children are not left behind.

To have a valid growth model, schools need what families have: a common yardstick.

It’s true that, no matter how many schools a kid attends, a test can be given at the beginning of the year and another one at the end, but for the test *results* to have any genuine meaning, the curricula must fit, and the two tests must be connected. That’s rarely true.

Moms and Dads do their best to see that their children eat nourishing food, but not because they’re worried about the marks on the wall; they want their children to be healthy and strong. Schools seem to care more about the marks on the wall, unfortunately, and may be providing less-than-nourishing academic food. The month or so of hectic drill that often precedes the tests is really the equivalent of junk food; it’s a sugar fix that might boost the scores but will not lead to real growth.

In other words, to have a valid growth model, schools need what families have: a common yardstick. But schools also need a generally agreed-upon (and nourishing) curriculum. So if we want to develop a valid “growth model,” we first need to debate what belongs in the curriculum and figure out what sort of performance measures make sense. Let’s not rush to put our children up against the wall, educationally speaking.

John Merrow is the education correspondent for “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer” on PBS, and is the president of Learning Matters Inc., in New York City.