



**Rating Teachers: a Job for Journalists?**  
**The Los Angeles Times and “Value-Added” Analysis**  
**Epilogue**

During June and July 2010, *Los Angeles Times* Assistant Managing Editor David Lauter and the team who had worked on the teacher rankings story held a series of meetings. They briefed Online Deputy Editor Megan Garvey, Web Producer Ken Schwencke and other data team members on what the core group had done over the preceding year. Lauter remembers the mood:

A couple of people on the core team sort of bridled at that... [They said] we’ve been spending months on this. Who are you guys to tell us that you need to be convinced? Just take our word for it. But my feeling was, we’re going to be asking readers to accept this. And we need to be able to explain it, defend it. If we can’t do that internally, we’re not going to be able to do it externally. So let’s engage in the conversation.<sup>1</sup>

At the initial meetings, Garvey recalls that “there were high emotions, hard feelings and even yelling at times.”<sup>2</sup> To help the data team understand value-added analysis, the editors provided the draft of a report prepared for the *LA Times* by RAND Corporation consultant Richard Buddin, in which he explained value-added analysis and his methodology in ranking the Los Angeles teachers.<sup>3</sup> The editors also gave Garvey, Schwencke and others drafts of the stories that reporters Jason Felch and Jason Song had written.

After a month of meetings and reading-in, Schwencke and Garvey changed their minds and were ready to move forward with the project. In late July, the data team created an online presentation of the teacher rankings for the *LA Times* website. They were persuaded in part by a decision editors made to make the database available to public school third-to-fifth grade teachers two weeks *before* the public saw it. That would give teachers an opportunity to comment on their rankings. “I was eventually convinced, and I [now] firmly believe that it’s a useful tool for parents to

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with David Lauter on March 28, 2011 in Los Angeles. All further quotes from Lauter, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s interview with Megan Garvey on March 30, 2011 in Los Angeles. All further quotes from Garvey, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Buddin, “How Effective Are Los Angeles Elementary Teachers and Schools?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2010. See: <http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2010-08/55538493.pdf>

actually look at a teacher or school and see how they're being rated," says Schwencke.<sup>4</sup> Garvey admired the stories that accompanied the numbers: "I thought that they had found very compelling instances where what we were seeing in the data was being seen in real life."

On August 14, 2010 the first story in the series called "Grading the Teachers" ran in the paper and online.<sup>5</sup> "Who's teaching L.A.'s kids?" laid out the scope of the series, explained value-added analysis, and painted portraits of individual teachers, some of whom the *Times* had ranked as highly effective and others deemed highly ineffective. Felch and Song interviewed these teachers about their ratings before publication, and included their responses.

As for the thousands of other teachers, the August 14 story informed all third- to fifth grade public school teachers that their names and ratings might be in the newspaper's database. The *Times* invited each teacher to comment on his/her value-added scores during a two-week preview period. Some 2,000 teachers checked their ratings and about 300 posted comments.

On August 29, the *Times* posted the teacher ratings together with their names.<sup>6</sup> The union, Los Angeles Teachers United, severely criticized the paper and deemed the teacher ratings "reckless and destructive."<sup>7</sup> Union leadership called for a boycott of the *Times* and picketed the newspaper. "It was a firestorm," says Special Projects Editor Julie Marquis.<sup>8</sup> But there was also praise. One reader commented: "Bravo!!!... This is such a nationally important story that will improve the public education discourse and the quality of education itself."<sup>9</sup> On the website OurLA.org, a blogger wrote: "The *Times*... has injected into the debate about... the decline of public schools meaningful data, analysis and reason. It is a shining moment for the *Times*."<sup>10</sup>

But the discussion did not end there. The Education Sector, an independent think tank, opined on August 18 that value-added analysis was useful only in rating schools, not teachers, because "the accuracy of the measure increases with the number of students. For a 3rd grade teacher with 20 students... 20 observations are just not enough to determine a teacher's effectiveness. In contrast, hundreds of observations at a school can provide a much more accurate measure."<sup>11</sup> In his blog for edweek.org, Rick Hess, Education Policy Director for

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<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Ken Schwencke on March 31, 2011, in Los Angeles. All further quotes from Schwencke, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Felch, Jason Song and Doug Smith, "Grading the Teachers," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2010. See: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-teachers-value-20100815,0,2695044.story>

<sup>6</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2010, "Grading the Teachers" series. The 2010 rankings are no longer available. the updated 2011 version is at <http://projects.latimes.com/value-added/>

<sup>7</sup> Press Release from United Teachers Los Angeles, "Posting of deeply flawed Times database is reckless," August 29, 2010. See: <http://www.utla.net/node/3036>

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Julie Marquis on March 29, 2011 in Los Angeles. All further quotes from Marquis, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>9</sup> Email from Caprice Yong to Jason Felch, Sandra Poindexter, Doug Smith and Jason Song, August 17, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> David A. Lehrer, "The LA Times at its Best," ourLA.org, August 17, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Rob Manwaring, "LA Times Value-Added Release—Problems and Solutions," *The Quick & the Ed*, August 18, 2010. See: <http://www.quickanded.com/2010/08/la-times-value-added-release—problems-and-solutions.html>

the American Enterprise Institute, also came out against the *Times* series. "I think it's a mistake to get in the business of publicly identifying individual teachers in this fashion," Hess wrote. "I think it confuses as much as it clarifies, puts more stress on primitive systems than they can bear, and promises to unnecessarily entangle a useful management tool in personalities and public reputations."<sup>12</sup>

As the mixed reviews came in, a sad event occurred. On September 24, 2010 Rigoberto Ruelas, a 5th-grade teacher in the LAUSD, committed suicide. The *Times* had ranked Ruelas as average in his ability to raise students' English scores and less effective in raising math scores.<sup>13</sup> The Teachers Union and some of Ruelas' family interpreted his decision to take his life as a reaction to his ratings.<sup>14</sup> Ruelas, however, did not leave a note and there was no evidence to support this. Editor Russ Stanton describes his staff as "deeply saddened" by Ruelas' suicide: "I feel very badly for the family and for his students and for his colleagues. We did the best job we could at covering [his death] and his memorial service and documented [them] like we would any other story."<sup>15</sup>

In early February 2011, the most comprehensive criticism of the "Grading the teachers" series was released. Education researchers Derek C. Briggs and Ben Domingue from the University of Colorado at Boulder asserted: "The research on which the *Los Angeles Times* relied for its August 2010 teacher effectiveness reporting was demonstrably inadequate to support the published rankings."<sup>16</sup> For instance, in analyzing the value-added model developed by *Times* consultant Buddin, Briggs questioned his assumption that students were being assigned to teachers in a random fashion. Briggs said their research had found that students were, in fact, often "assigned to teachers in ways that systematically advantage some teachers and disadvantage others (e.g. stronger students tending to be in certain teachers' classrooms)." The researchers concluded that Buddin's value-added results were due "at least in part" to this bias because, they asserted, his analysis favored teachers who taught the stronger students.

Briggs also developed what he argued was a stronger value-added model. He used the same LAUSD data that the *Times* had used but added three variables: a longer history for student test performance; peer influence; and school level factors. The researcher said that "[i]f the *L.A. Times* model were perfectly accurate, there would be no difference in results between the two models." But the Colorado model yielded different results, most notably in English, where nearly 54 percent of teacher ratings changed. Some change was

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<sup>12</sup> Rick Hess, "LAT on Teacher Value-Added: A Disheartening Replay," edweek.org, August 17, 2010. See: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick\\_hess\\_straight\\_up/2010/08/lat\\_on\\_teacher\\_valueadded\\_a\\_disheartening\\_replay.htm](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2010/08/lat_on_teacher_valueadded_a_disheartening_replay.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Zavis and Tony Barboza, "Teacher's suicide shocks school," *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> "School, community and family to hold candlelight vigil in honor of Rigoberto Ruelas," United Teachers Los Angeles, November 4, 2010. See: <http://www.utla.net/node/3115>

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Russ Stanton on March 31, 2011, in Los Angeles. All further quotes from Stanton, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>16</sup> "Due Diligence and the Evaluation of Teachers," by Derek C. Briggs and Ben Domingue, See this link for all references to this study: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/due-diligence>

moderate but 8 percent of the teachers identified as effective by the Colorado model were found to be ineffective by the *Times*. About 12 percent of the teachers found to be ineffective by the Colorado model were identified as effective by the *Times*. While the researchers found some aspects of Buddin's model sound, their overall conclusion was negative.

Reporter Felch wrote a story about the Colorado study headlined "Separate study confirms many Los Angeles Times findings on teacher effectiveness," with the subhead "A University of Colorado review of Los Angeles Unified teacher effectiveness also raises some questions about the precision of ratings as reported in The Times."<sup>17</sup> In his article, Felch pointed out a possible conflict of interest: "Briggs' study was partly funded by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, which is run by the heads of several Midwestern teachers unions and supported by the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the country." Later, the *Times* published a detailed response to the Briggs critique.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, on May 8, 2011 the *Times* followed up its 2010 series with updated rankings.<sup>19</sup> The revised database expanded to 11,500 the number of public school teachers rated, and included the 6,000 teachers rated in 2010. Some of the 6,000 received ratings different from a year earlier because Buddin and Smith had made changes to the original design in response to criticisms they found justified. Their revised model contained several new variables: educational attainment of the student's parents, class size, student mobility, five levels of English proficiency and peer effects. They also posted an explanation of how value-added analyses could yield different results depending on the variables used.<sup>20</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* leadership continued to feel it had acted correctly in publishing the 2010 database, as well as in updating those results in 2011. Says Editor Stanton:

I think it's an improvement, and I would view [the 2011 rankings] as Windows 2.0 or something. That it's a better, improved version of something that was pretty darn good to begin with.

The series also earned accolades outside the *Times*. "Grading the Teachers" won the 2010 Scripps Howard Award for Public Service Reporting, as well as the 2010 Education Writers Association's second place prize for investigative reporting.<sup>21</sup> Stanton is proud of what his staff accomplished with the series.

It's kicked up a lot of interest around the country... The *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* have cited our work. It's gotten a lot of

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<sup>17</sup> Jason Felch, "Separate study confirms many Los Angeles Times findings on teacher effectiveness," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2011. See: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-teacher-study-20110207.0,2144294.story>

<sup>18</sup> "Times responds to criticism of teacher analysis," February 14, 2011. See: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/readers/2011/02/times-responds-to-criticism-of-teacher-analysis.html>

<sup>19</sup> Jason Felch and Jason Song, "Times updates and expands value-added ratings for Los Angeles elementary school teachers," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2011 See: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-value-added20110508.0,930050.story> and <http://projects.latimes.com/value-added/>

<sup>20</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*. See: <http://projects.latimes.com/value-added/value-added-comparison#yona-brand>

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.scripps.com/foundation/news/releases/11march18.html>; also Education Writers Association Award, [http://www.ewa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=contest\\_winners](http://www.ewa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=contest_winners)

attention. US Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan's been out here a couple of times. He's spoken about it... And that's one of the many beauties of the project. While our problems in Los Angeles are big, they're not unique to LA. There are a lot of other school districts around the country that are wrestling with this issue. So we felt like what we were doing would advance the discussion not only here, but around the country. And it has.

In late March 2011, incoming LAUSD superintendent John Deasy announced that the district would start using value-added analysis, confidentially providing teachers with their scores. Deasy also said that, for the first year, the scores would not be used in formal evaluations. Any future use would depend on negotiations with the teachers' union.<sup>22</sup>

*This case was written by Alice Irene Pifer for the Knight Case Studies Initiative, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. The faculty sponsor was Professor LynNell Hancock. Funding was provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (08/2011)*

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<sup>22</sup> Teresa Watanabe, "LAUSD tackles a tough formula," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2011. See: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-adv-value-add-20110328,0,3903343.story>