

# Growth Models for the Data Rich, Information Poor

BY JOHN L. GATTA



At the heart of the new educational reform movement is the shift from achievement status models to achievement growth models — that is, a shift from measuring achievement at a single point in time

to measuring the progress or pace of individual students or groups of students over time.

Growth models, when properly used, provide important benefits for accountability reform by allowing school systems to quantify the value-added impact of schools, programs and personnel on student learning. This transition, however, will pose challenges to local school districts. ECRA Group, a national leader in research, analytics and accountability services for local school systems and an AASA School Solutions Center member, can help support the transition.

For many, the pressure to collect more and more data and to manage and store that data longitudinally has and will continue to result in data overload and data exhaustion. Feeling *data rich and information poor*® is all too common. To benefit from achievement growth models, school systems must expand their mental models from data itself to systemic analytic models that simplify and extract meaning from data. Failure to make this change will result in school systems needing to manage and digest more and more data while still starving themselves of information.

## Local Models

Local growth models provide a promising approach. Local growth models are value-added growth models built at the local school system level upon the existing assessment foundation and practices of the school district. If developed well, such models can radically simplify the information structure of school systems by providing a rigorous, defensible, yet simple model to meet the most challenging needs of school districts.

Local growth models provide a single

model to identify students and establish individual student growth targets; link student performance to teacher and administrator evaluation; and document return on investment for programs and interventions.

In addition to simplifying a district's assessment program and information structure, local growth models answer basic questions that have frustrated educators for decades. The question "Are students growing?" is not the right question. The real question should be "Are students growing any better than they would have anyway?" Specifically, how do we know if a student or group of students performed any better than they would have had we not implemented the new reading support program, had students attended a different school or had students been taught by a different teacher?

Historically, schools have struggled to answer these questions because of the difficulty in establishing a control group against which to benchmark results. Local growth models solve this problem by generating a unique comparison for each student based on his or her individual past performance, which then can be used to examine the variance between a student's actual achievement and his or her projected achievement. Such information then can be aggregated and linked to dis-

trict resource allocations so that informed decisions can be made regarding schools, programs and personnel.

## Internal Capacities

The challenge for local school systems is that they often do not have the necessary analytic sophistication or capabilities within their organizations to choose and implement such models. One way to meet these challenges is for school districts to extend their capacity and capabilities through external partnerships.

As the new superintendent of a large diverse school district in Carpentersville, Ill., Michael Bregy said: "I wanted to redefine our definition of quality and our measures for accountability. ECRA Group's leadership and expertise related to growth models, strategic planning and community dashboards made it a reality, something we could have never accomplished on our own."

ECRA and its subsidiaries have partnered with nearly 1,000 school districts nationally. The firm can develop and deploy growth models to evaluate and communicate vital information to assist teachers, administrators and the board of education with decision making.

John Gatta is president of ECRA Group in Rosemount, Ill. E-mail: [johngatta@ecragroup.com](mailto:johngatta@ecragroup.com)

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