

Summary Added value

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To what extent are data about 'learning gains' and 'added value' useful for raising the quality of education? Learning gains refer to the growth of students. Added value refers to what schools contribute to the average growth of students. In order to ascertain added value in a particular school subject, test results over a longer period of time have to be considered in relation to each other as well as to the background data of students.

The council takes the view that learning gains and added value are useful instruments to help schools improve their education. However, they are not suitable for an assessment of the quality of the school as a whole.

Data about learning gains give schools a better understanding of students' development in the subjects or curriculum domains under consideration. On the basis of these data schools are better able to provide custom-made education. Added value is a useful instrument to compare learning gains in one's own school with those in other schools, as an aid to fuller reflection. But it is too narrow as an indicator for an assessment of the school. Added value can only shed light on those dimensions in education that can be measured with valid tests, such as language and arithmetic. The full range of students' development, in which non-cognitive skills play a role as well, is left out of consideration. Also, there are different ways to assess added value – substantive choices are required (such as with regard to background data for which correction takes place), and there are statistic limitations involving that results have always to be considered within their context. Finally, as an instrument of assessment, added value may provoke strategic behavior. Schools may concentrate on testable curriculum elements and neglect other elements.

Recommendation 1: give the school ownership of the instruments learning gains and added value

A proper use of learning gains and added value for raising the quality of education requires that schools become owners of these instruments. Principals and teachers need more knowledge of statistics and practice-oriented research. The council pleads for the introduction of data teams in which principals and teachers, together with a researcher, explore solutions to concrete questions, and for a more research-oriented attitude in schools. Also, the council pleads for making data about learning gains and added value available for research. This promotes reflection about these data and a further development of practical applications.

Recommendation 2: when assessing a school, bear in mind that indicators of school results have their limitations

Supervision of schools is not to be confined to what can be measured by indicators of school results, but should address the broad quality of education, and promote improvement of this broad quality. For this purpose a better balance is required between result and process indicators, as the current emphasis is too strongly on the first category. Schools should be given the necessary space to have substantive talks with the inspectorate about the circumstances lying behind school results. Also, the council takes the view that the level of schooling of parents could be represented more adequately in existing indicators of school results. Finally, the success of students in continuing education (and in society) may be better monitored by schools themselves.