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Reply to Harris

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In his rejoinder, Harris (2012) writes that we centered our review around the idea that he thinks value-added measures are “good enough.” We did errantly place the phrase in quotation marks at one point, when we should have used italics. However, *good enough*, was indeed how we interpreted Harris’ stance on the use of value-added for education accountability. Harris poses the question, “Do we have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that value-added is better than the status quo and viable alternatives?” (2011, p. 169). He responds that “we can do better than credentials and checklists” and that even though “there is insufficient evidence about the use of value added...there is a strong rationale behind using value-added as at least one part of the overall system of ensuring effective instruction” (Harris, 2011, p. 169).

Throughout the book Harris points out the statistical, technical, and practical problems with value-added which are compounded at the teacher-level, noting for example that:

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- “[T]ests do not accurately represent the contributions teachers and schools make to student achievement” (Harris, 2011, p. 6);
- “[V]alue-added performance measures will include statistical errors, which makes errors in decisions more likely” (Harris, 2011, p. 89);
- “[W]e will inevitably make some mistakes and we have to decide which ones are the ‘wrong’ ones” (Harris, 2011, p. 90);
- “Because random error is worse for individual teachers (because they have fewer students than whole schools), the regression to the mean problem is also worse than it was for school-level value-added measures” (Harris, 2011, p. 114);
- “Teachers might battle one another to work in particular grades and subjects where other teachers are thought to be effective and have high value-added” (Harris, 2011, p. 124);
- “[F]or those schools where mobility is greatest (usually high-poverty schools), value-added measures are less viable” (Harris, 2011, p. 132);
- “Since the core idea is that value-added is based on student growth, the implications of test ceilings are evident” (Harris, 2011, p. 134);
- “We are statistically confident that very low-value-added teachers are not terrific, but we are not so sure that they are worse than average teachers” (Harris, 2011, p. 140);
- “Because we are using a specific cutoff, there will certainly be teachers just above the cut-off whose actual performance is almost identical to teachers just below the cut-off” (Harris, 2011, p. 141); and
- “[Value-added measures], especially when based on a single year of data, can bounce around from year to year in ways that are unrelated to changes in true performance” (Harris, 2011, p. 141).

Noting these issues and his own concerns with value-added (perhaps not as thoroughly as we would have hoped), the book contains information on how to use and move forward with value-added assessment regardless. For example, stating “[T]here are dozens of ways that value-added measures can be used” (Harris, 2011, p. 161) and that the book was specifically written to serve as “a user’s manual for value added” (Harris, 2011, p. 4). As such, we

interpreted that Harris believes value-added is *good enough* to be used for educational accountability.

The following quotations further support our reasoning and rationale:

- “My intention in this book is to find a more productive middle ground, one that uses value-added measures as one part of a system of performance measures and accountability that improves not only test scores, but teaching and learning” Harris, 2011, (p. 3);
- “I have long advocated accountability based on *school* value-added measures. There are many reasons to think that replacing school-level snapshots with school value-added measures would produce noticeably better accountability” (Harris, 2011, p. 9);
- “The rapid expansion of standardized testing, with individual student scores linked to specific teachers over time, has opened up a world of evaluation possibilities, including value-added measures” (Harris, 2011, p. 10);
- “Since value-added addresses so many of the problems with current accountability systems focused on snapshots, it could reasonably be expected to reduce the frustration many teachers feel with performance measures” (Harris, 2011, p. 66);
- “I discuss a middle ground between teacher and school value-added – team value-added” (Harris, 2011, p. 110);
- “[I]n the real world, waiting for the perfect accountability measure is not a viable option” (Harris, 2011, p. 157); and
- “Practitioners cannot defer actions until there are solutions that have the levels of confidence that researchers demand because those solutions may never appear” (Harris, 2011, p. 158).

When someone writes a book with the careful intention of taking a balanced approach, it should be expected that in absence of definitive conclusions, readers will take away various perceptions on the author’s stance. Additionally, readers may be familiar with the author’s previous work, which can also inform readers’ perceptions. In 2009, Harris wrote, “No performance measure or accountability policy is perfect, of course, and it may be that the

assumptions are not violated too severely and that teacher value-added accountability is better than the alternatives” (p. 322). In that same article, Harris again presents the strengths and weaknesses of value-added, yet still asymmetrically favors value-added. In another manuscript, Harris writes that “the issue is not whether to use value-added measurement, but how” (Harris, 2010, p. 69). We are not the first to position Harris as a value-added advocate either, or as one who prefers this accountability method over others (see also, Armour-Garb, 2009; CCSSO, 2010; Otterman, 2010; Scherrer, 2011).

Nonetheless, Harris writes, “No matter how good or bad we decide the [value-added] measures are, at the end of the day, the validity of a measure depends on what conclusions one wishes to draw with it” (Harris, 2011, p. 149). The conclusion we are drawing with this, and standing by our review of Harris’s book (2011), is that value-added is not *good enough* to be attaching any sort of consequences much less any such decisions to its output. Value-added may not even be *good enough* even at the most basic, pragmatic level.

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