

Getting a Better Picture of Student Success

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

About ten percent of spending on primary and secondary education in the United States comes from the federal government. For ten years now, federal law has tied this spending to student performance. States have been required to show progress through yearly testing.

But states say testing tells only part of the story about efforts by schools and students to improve. So the Obama administration has eased the limits on states in measuring performance.

The western state of Colorado, for example, has a new assessment method. This new measurement tool is called the Colorado Growth Model. The idea is to show academic growth, not just achievement on tests. It combines test scores, family income levels, school size, the ethnicity of the student and many other factors.

Bill Bonk is one of the creators of the Colorado Growth Model.



Shelley Schlender

A new measurement tool in Colorado calculates academic growth based on a number of elements. These include test scores, family income levels, school size and student ethnicity.

BILL BONK: "A big part of that has been the calculation of academic growth. It's a very fancy calculation. We're very proud of it."

The results from schools across the state are shown online on a graph. The graph shows a school's average score on standardized tests as well as its academic growth.

Josh Smith is principal of a middle school in a network of public charter schools called West Denver Prep. Charter schools are publicly funded but not operated

the same as traditional public schools. Mr. Smith says he likes to show his students this graph so they can see their school's progress.

Many of his students have parents who do not speak English. He likes to play word games with his students, like having them expand their vocabulary by finding another way to say "I'm good."

JOSH SMITH: "Good morning, Daisy."

STUDENT: "Good morning, Mr. Smith."

JOSH SMITH: "How are you this morning?"

STUDENT: "Phenomenal."

JOSH SMITH: "Phenomenal! I love it."

Eighth grader Juan Soltero says games like these, and studying hard, have helped raise his expectations for himself. He says he wants to be an electrical engineer.

JUAN SOLTERO: "The teachers, they really want you to learn. They really do love you. They give you support and talk you through things. It's not just about academics. You have to be comfortable in learning so you can just stick it in your head."

On average, students enter sixth grade at West Denver Prep performing below grade level. But three years later, most are outperforming other students across the state.

The new assessment method shows that, each year, the average West Denver Prep student learns more math than ninety-four percent of all the students in Colorado. Reading and writing scores also show growth. Josh Smith says perhaps the most important thing they should learn is to believe in themselves.

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report. You can watch a video about West Denver Prep and the Colorado Growth Model at voaspecialenglish.com. We also have captioned videos of our reports at the VOA Learning English channel on YouTube. I'm Christopher Cruise.

Contributing: Shelley Schlender