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‘Creative ... motivating’ and fired

By **Bill Turque**, Published: March 6

By the end of her second year at MacFarland Middle School, fifth-grade teacher Sarah Wysocki was coming into her own.

“It is a pleasure to visit a classroom in which the elements of sound teaching, motivated students and a positive learning environment are so effectively combined,” Assistant Principal Kennard Branch wrote in her May 2011 evaluation.

He urged Wysocki to share her methods with colleagues at the D.C. public school. Other observations of her classroom that year yielded good ratings.

Two months later, she was fired.

Wysocki, 31, was let go because the reading and math scores of her students didn’t grow as predicted. Her undoing was “value-added,” a complex statistical tool used to measure a teacher’s direct contribution to test results. The District and at least 25 states, under prodding from the Obama administration, have adopted or are developing value-added systems to assess teachers.

When her students fell short, the low value-added trumped her positives in the classroom. Under the D.C. teacher evaluation system, called IMPACT, the measurement counted for 50 percent of her annual appraisal. Classroom observations, such as the one Branch conducted, represented 35 percent, and collaboration with the school community and schoolwide testing trends made up the remaining 15 percent.

(Opinion: Firing reveals flaws in value-added evaluation)

Her story opens a rare window into the revolution in how teachers across the country are increasingly appraised — a mix of human observation and remorseless algorithm that is supposed to yield an authentic assessment of effectiveness. In the view of school officials, Wysocki, one of 206 D.C. teachers fired for poor performance in 2011, was appropriately judged by the same standards as her peers. Colleagues and friends say she was swept aside by a system that doesn’t always capture a teacher’s true value.

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