THE USE OF

'VALUE-ADDED' MEASURES

IN SCHOOL EVALUATION:

A VIEW FROM ENGLAND

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This paper is about the type of measurement of schools' performance that has come to be known as 'value added'. In the first main section, the paper gives an account of the context for value-added approaches in education, and provides some criteria for calculating and presenting value-added measures appropriately. The second half of the paper discusses the implications of a study undertaken to explore how schools actually use value-added information and concludes by suggesting that 'the psychology and sociology of using numbers' need to be better understood.

An overview of 'value-added' approaches

'Value-added' measurement of educational performance is here to stay or else on the way in the education systems of several countries. In the United Kingdom, and more particularly England, for example, the national value-added system—initiated in 1998—at the moment produces information for primary and secondary schools 'to assist schools in looking at their own pupils' progress against the national pic-
ture', based on national curriculum test and public examination results. As soon as it is feasible, the government proposes to include value-added measures in the tables that publish information about the performance of every school in the country. As I argued in a recent report (Saunders, 1999b), the introduction of the national value-added system could be seen as the culmination of a decade of sustained and fairly public argument about how to measure the performance of pupils in the nation's schools in a way that sheds light on progress as well as standards.

Measured at the school level, value added is the most accurate way we have at present of calculating how well schools perform with their pupils. If only 'raw' results are used to assess a school's performance, they reveal more about the background of the pupils than about the performance of the school. Value-added measurement works by discounting factors tied into pupils' achievements but unrelated to institutional quality. Such factors include pupils' prior attainment, sex, ethnic group, date of birth, level of special educational need and social disadvantage. These factors—whether correlated positively with performance (as in the case of prior attainment) or negatively (as in the case of social disadvantage)—turn up as empirically verifiable items in study after study.

However, this sharpened focus on more sophisticated ways of evaluating schools' performance—which may have far-reaching consequences for the education system, the schools and their pupils—means that it is crucial to get the calculation, interpretation and uses of 'value-added' data right.

What is the context for 'value added'

The context and rationale for calculating value-added measures of performance have changed dramatically since the 1980s, when 'value added' was regarded as a quasi-technical idea that had strayed into education from economics. Educational 'value added' is one of those terms that comes with an agenda already attached: the agenda in this case being the political preoccupation in the United Kingdom (as in other nations) with standards and quality in education, or rather the lack of quality and/or of deterioration in standards therein and the wish of politicians to get better value for public expenditure. For some time, this agenda has been explicitly attached to the issue of global competitiveness, and the consensus belief that education and training are important levers for economic competitive advantage. For their part, education managers and school principals have often wanted to demonstrate that standards (particularly in their own institutions) have not been slipping, that the profession is giving value for money.

One could say that value added was an idea waiting for its time: the ideas and methodological models that lay behind the introduction of value added in education were already well established by the early 1990s. But when value-added approaches began to be talked about outside the circle of educational scholars and statisticians, the then secretary of state for education in England was scathing about what he was convinced were ever more sophisticated ways of 'cooking' schools' results: he wanted to stick with 'raw' ones that were simple to compile and under-