

# FAQs about VAM Scores

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**Question:** I received 28 points on the “VAM part” of my evaluation. Which student results were used to generate that result?

**Answer:** If you taught Reading/Language Arts or Mathematics to students in grades 4-10 or if you taught Algebra, the State’s contractor produced your VAM estimate. That estimate is a reflection of how much your students grew academically compared with academically and demographically similar students in the State who scored at similar levels on the last year’s FCAT. Last year (2011-2012), if you did not teach any of these subjects, but students in your class participated in the FCAT Reading, your VAM estimate was based on the results of just those students. This year (2012-2013), if you did not teach any of these subjects, your VAM score was a reflection of how well students in your school scored on the FCAT Reading and Mathematics compared with the academically and demographically similar students in the State.

**Question:** I taught mathematics. So, my students scored 28 points better than similar students in the State?

**Answer:** No, for each subject area the actual VAM estimates in each grade level were transformed into one of the four point categories as follows. If a teacher’s VAM estimate was sufficiently high (so that one could be 95% confident that it exceeded the statewide average), 50 points were assigned. On the other end, if a teacher’s VAM estimate was low (so that one could be 95% confident that it was below the statewide average), 12.5 points were assigned. Similarly, if a teacher’s VAM estimate was low, but we did not have a very high confidence that it was lower than the statewide average, 25 points were assigned. Finally, all other VAM estimates were transformed into 37.5 points. Similar process was used for schoolwide VAM estimates.

**Question:** Why did the district use those 4 specific numbers for the point values?

**Answer:** Since the “VAM part” constituted 50% of the total teacher evaluation, the 0-50 range was split into 4 equal intervals and then the highest value in each interval was used to assign points.

**Question:** But I received 28 points. This number is not one of the four numbers mentioned. How can this be?

**Answer:** If you received VAM estimates in more than one subject area and/or more than one grade level, the points were averaged.

**Question:** I only received 25 points on the VAM part of my evaluation, yet I had 100 percent of my students making learning gains. How can this be?

**Answer:** The methodology for generating learning gains is very different from the formula for computing the VAM estimate. State-defined rules determine whether a student makes a learning gain; those rules are not based on any statistical model. For example, a student may have remained in level 3 in reading even though the student's scale score dropped. In the state grading system, the student earns a learning gain (regardless of the scale score difference) because the student maintained the achievement level 3. But in the VAM, it is likely that the student did not reach the predicted scale score and therefore affected the teacher's VAM estimate negatively. We must remember that learning gain and VAM are two different measure of student progress.

**Question:** People at all levels praise my teaching ability and I've never received anything but highly positive evaluations in the past. Why isn't my VAM score among the highest?

**Answer:** There are various aspects to teaching and you very well may be excellent in many. The VAM score, however, is a reflection only of the extent to which your students exceeded expectations (performed better than academically and demographically similar students in the State) on the standardized test.

**Question:** But my students scored very high on the test. In fact, I know a teacher whose students scored lower than mine, but she received a higher VAM. How is that possible?

**Answer:** The VAM score is related to the degree to which your students exceeded expectations. Scoring high is not enough; they must score higher than would have been predicted for similar students.

**Question:** How can I know how high my students are expected to score?

**Answer:** The actual expectation is complicated to figure out precisely. However, the single best predictor is the student's score from the previous year. Perhaps you have an understanding of your students' percentile standings within the State from last year. To the extent that they improve on their percentile standings, your VAM estimate will improve. Think of it like this: you and your students are competing against similar students in the State. Instruct your students so that they outscore their peers in the State. That will translate into a higher VAM estimate.

**Question:** But the VAM doesn't give me any useable advice for improving my classes. What teaching behaviors should I change to improve my VAM score?

**Answer:** You may receive useful advice on that issue from many different sources. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the VAM methodology that addresses ways to improve the effectiveness of your teaching.