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Grading on the Curve?

By giving out grades, teachers let students know how well they are doing. But two new reports suggest that getting a good grade is easier in Kansas than it should be. This is consistent with our belief, at the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, that Kansans should not be complacent about school test scores.

Every year, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is given to a sample of schools across the country. The assessment, also known as the Nation's Report Card, is administered for reading, mathematics, and other subjects. Like any good testing system, it sets a standard for success. It lets us know how many students meet the standard and how many do not.

In addition to the NAEP, states have their own tests. Unlike the NAEP, which has a single standard, these tests have their own definition of success. The definitions can range greatly from state to state.

In June, the Institute of Education Sciences, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education, compared how the Nation's Report Card defines success to how states define success on their own tests. It found that some states are more demanding than others.

For example, on the 2005 NAEP for eighth-grade reading, a student who scored 281 qualified as "proficient." Yet "proficient" on the average state's own test translated into a score of 246, or 12 percent easier. In other words, states are giving Bs to C students. Kansas is no different. Here, the student who scored proficient on the state test would score only a 242—"below proficient"—on the NAEP.

You can find a similar pattern in mathematics. On the 2005 test for fourth-grade mathematics, the NAEP "cut score," the required score for proficiency, was 249. Yet on the average state's test, a student need only score a 222, or 11 percent lower. The cut score on the Kansas test translated into a 218 on the NAEP. That's just above "basic" and well below "proficient." Tests for 2003 showed mismatches as well.

In October, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Northwest Evaluation Association conducted a different comparison. The two groups consulted the MAP, or Measures of Academic Progress, a test the association offers to school districts across the country. They translated cut scores on state tests into performance on the MAP.

In third grade math, a student considered proficient by the Colorado test would be in the sixth percentile on the MAP. That is, Colorado would consider as proficient a student who was outperformed by 94 percent of all students taking the MAP. At the other extreme, a fourth-grade mathematics student in Massachusetts had to be in the 77th percentile to be proficient on the state test.

The variation across states would cause grief for those parents who, after finding that their own state considers their children proficient, move to one with higher expectations. All of a sudden, Suzy isn't proficient anymore.

Even parents who don't move can face this problem. That's because the cut score within a state can vary from grade to grade, even for the same subject. A so-called proficient student in elementary school may not, state tests to the contrary, be on track to proficiency in middle school.

There are many reasons why state scores are inflated, but two stand out. The first is an abnormally easy test. The other is setting the cut score too low. Either way, students are not well-served.

The researchers concluded that in Kansas, "the reported proficiency rates may overestimate the proportion of third-grade students who are actually on track to be proficient in eighth-grade mathematics." The authors concluded that "the higher rates of mathematics proficiency that the state has reported for elementary school students are somewhat misleading." One reason may be that the cut scores were lower than the national average for grades three, six and eight.

Kansas did do a better job in setting cut scores for reading. They were at the national norm for most grades, and even higher for grades three and five. But in no case did a Kansas cut score above the 45th percentile on the MAP. Kansas kids could perform below the national average and still be considered proficient by the state.

The law gives school districts a privileged position. Each one has significant power within its given boundaries, with a near-exclusive claim on the taxes that we impose on ourselves for childhood education. Given this fact, the public is ill-served if, as these two reports suggest, they're grading on a curve.

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