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Grading on the Curve

By John R. LaPlante

By giving out grades, teachers let students know how well they are doing. But a report from the U.S. Department of Education suggests 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.

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 and mathematics. 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. In June, the U.S. Department of Education compared how the Nation's Report Card defines success to how states define success by 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.

In October, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Northwest Evaluation Association used a different test, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), to evaluate the toughness of state tests.

For third grade math, a student considered proficient by the Colorado state 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.

The variation across state tests would cause grief for those parents who, after finding that their state considers their children proficient, move to one with higher expectations. Even parents who don't move can face this problem. That's because even within a state, the threshold score for proficiency, also called the "cut score," can vary from grade to grade even for the same subject. The cause is setting expectations for middle school too high, or setting expectations for elementary school too low.

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 cut scores were lower than the national average in grades three, six and eight. The authors concluded that "the higher rates of mathematics proficiency that the state has reported for elementary school students are somewhat misleading."

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

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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