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## **Proficiency Games**

*By John R. LaPlante*

If you have a child or grandchild, ask yourself which would you prefer: An unpleasant but honest assessment of his performance in school, or a report card that makes you feel good but grossly overstates the child's performance? The high marks may be temporarily gratifying, but eventually poor performance in learning will be found out. Life does not grade on a curve.

According to a new report published by the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, grade inflation is a problem in American education, with many states grading their schools on the curve. The report highlights results from recent studies that suggest that across the country, official statements of school performance are inflated.

Unfortunately, Kansas is not immune from this problem. Take graduation rates, for example. According to the Kansas Building Report Card, the graduation rate for 2003-04 was 88 percent. But according to the prestigious newspaper *Education Week*, which recently released a new report on graduation rates and high school dropouts, it was only 74 percent.

Meanwhile, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that by focusing on state test results, states, including Kansas, are overestimating the performance of their schools. For example, Kansas assessments say that 85 percent of fourth-grade students are proficient in math. But the NAEP says that only 28 percent are. The NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card, is overseen by a bipartisan panel that includes Gov. Sebelius. Oddly enough, it's possible for a Kansas student to score below proficient on the nation's report card and still be considered proficient by state standards.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, meanwhile, gives Kansas a C- for the rigor of its proficiency standards. Research published by the U.S. Department of Education gives a similar message.

Why is there a disconnect between national and state test result? No Child Left Behind gives states incentives to give their schools easy A's. Civic pride is another factor. Fear of making serious changes to the way we run schools is another reason.

The most popular forms of school reform simply tinker at the edges: larger budgets, smaller classes, more elaborate facilities. There's nothing wrong, we hear from many school and political leaders, that more money and some hard work can't fix. And what can't be fixed by spending more can be fixed by putting children into the school system at an even younger age or making children spend more time in school.

But if the schools aren't doing as well as we think—and the Flint Hills, Fordham Institute and U.S. Department of Education reports suggest that they aren't—then it's time for some change

beyond tinkering with the current system. That change is enhanced school choice for parents. A strong charter school sector, vouchers, or tax credits would add immeasurably to the parental toolbox, by employing the power of competition among service providers. We use that power in many areas of life, including higher education.

Once we use that power, perhaps the rosy state assessments will be more meaningful.

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