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DOES KANSAS GRADE ITSELF ON THE CURVE?

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Executive Summary

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy believes that Kansas children would benefit from increased competition among schools, whether that competition occurs through the establishment of more charter schools, a voucher program, or tax credits for educational expenses.

One rationale offered against taking these steps is that these reforms are solutions in search of a problem: Since Kansas schools are doing well, why make any changes? After all, Kansas schools regularly rank above the average on national tests, and scores are increasing on state assessments. Newspaper accounts of schools in Kansas regularly offer glowing testimonials of their performance. Advocates of increased spending can point to the latest test scores and declare success: More money delivers great results; we only need to invest more.

But what if the test scores aren't as good as they appear at first glance? Then more fundamental reforms are called for.

This study looks at four forms of evaluations of school performance including graduation rates, state assessments, The Nation's Report Card, and Measures of Academic Process. These evaluations reveal the following:

- The average graduation rate in Kansas schools is, according to Education Week, 74% rather than the 88% reported by the Kansas Building Report Card.
- A student could score below proficient on the Nation's Report Card yet score proficient according to state standards.
- Kansas overstates and inflates student proficiency scores

Based on this information and other evidence the report concludes that the education situation is not as sanguine as commonly portrayed. Kansas students are not doing as well as commonly thought and it is time to create a system that is truly responsive to what students and parents want and need. It is time for true educational choice in Kansas.



Introduction

While many Kansans feel that their school systems are doing just fine in providing a solid education for Kansas children, for some, this is a faulty impression. Since we all care about children and want them to have good educational opportunities, we should make sure that schools are providing the educational value that they are supposed to provide.

There are many different ways of evaluating the performance of a school and a school system, including:

- Graduation rates
- State assessments
- The Nation's Report Card
- Measures of Academic Progress

How then is Kansas doing on these various measures?

The Graduation Rate

The minimal criterion for evaluating a school is its graduation rate. Do students who enter high school actually complete it on time? During the 2005-06 school year, the rate for Kansas schools, as reported by the Kansas State Department of Education, was 89.7 percent. This was an improvement from the 83 percent of 2002.¹

Yet a little bit of digging shows that more improvement is required. In April, an organization founded by Colin Powell, America's Promise Alliance, grabbed headlines with its report "Cities in Crisis."² At the time of the report, Powell said that the number of dropouts in the U.S. – 1.2 million a year – "is "more than a problem, it's a catastrophe."³

Since the report covered the 50 largest school systems in the country, USD 259 Wichita was the only Kansas school district included in the report. The report stated that the district's graduation rate for 2003-04 was 60 percent.

The report relied on a database compiled by Education Week, the trade magazine of the public school industry. The database included information not only on the 50 largest districts in the country, but on nearly all districts. It is a powerful tool for reviewing graduation rates of specific districts as well as states.

According to the Education Week database, the graduation rate for Kansas during the 2003-04 school year was 74 percent. While that was higher than the national average of 71 percent, it was lower than the rate, 88 percent, offered by the Kansas Report Card, an online publication of the KSDE.⁴

The graduation rate for the state of Kansas was not the only point of difference between the Education Week database and the Kansas Report Card. Half of the state's public school students attend one of the 20 largest districts. The Kansas Report Card gave a higher graduation rate for 16 of those 20 districts than Education Week did.⁵



According to the Kansas Building Report Card, the graduation rate for 2003-04 was 88 percent. According to Education Week, it was only 74 percent.

Experts can have honest disagreements over the proper way to count dropouts and calculate the graduation rate. But the pervasive difference between these two reports—not only for the state but for its largest districts as well—suggests that the lofty graduation rates published in Kansas overstate the performance of schools.

The Education Week data reveal other concerns. First, there was no change in the five-year trend from 2001 to 2005. Second, the graduation rates for some groups of students were horrible, with more Hispanic students dropping out than graduating. Black students graduated at a rate just barely better than a flip of the coin.

All students	74.3
Female	75.8
Male	70.8
White	79.0
Asian	72.2
Black	54.7
Hispanic	46.2
American Indian	46.1

The Scores on Kansas Assessments

Another way of measuring the performance of schools is to look at test scores. According to the state assessments, Kansas is doing well. For example, they show that in the 2006-07 school year, 84 percent of 4th-grade students and 79 percent of 8th-grade students scored “meets standards” or better in reading. For math, 85 percent of 4th-grade students scored “meets standards” or better, though there was a significant drop-off for the 8th-grade class, in which only 71 percent received that score.

Subject and grade	Students who “Meet Standards” or Better
Math-4 th	85%
Math-8 th	71%
Reading-4 th	84%
Reading-8 th	79%

Cross-Checking State Assessments with the Nation’s Report Card

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is also known as the Nation’s Report Card. It goes back to 1964, when the Carnegie Corporation provided the initial grant money. Today, the National Center for Education Statistics, an organization within the U.S. Department of Education, is responsible for the program, and a bipartisan, independent group of 26 people provides policy oversight. These members include governors, state legislators, teachers, education specialists, school officials, business leaders, and members of the general public. Gov. Kathleen Sebelius is a member of the group.⁶

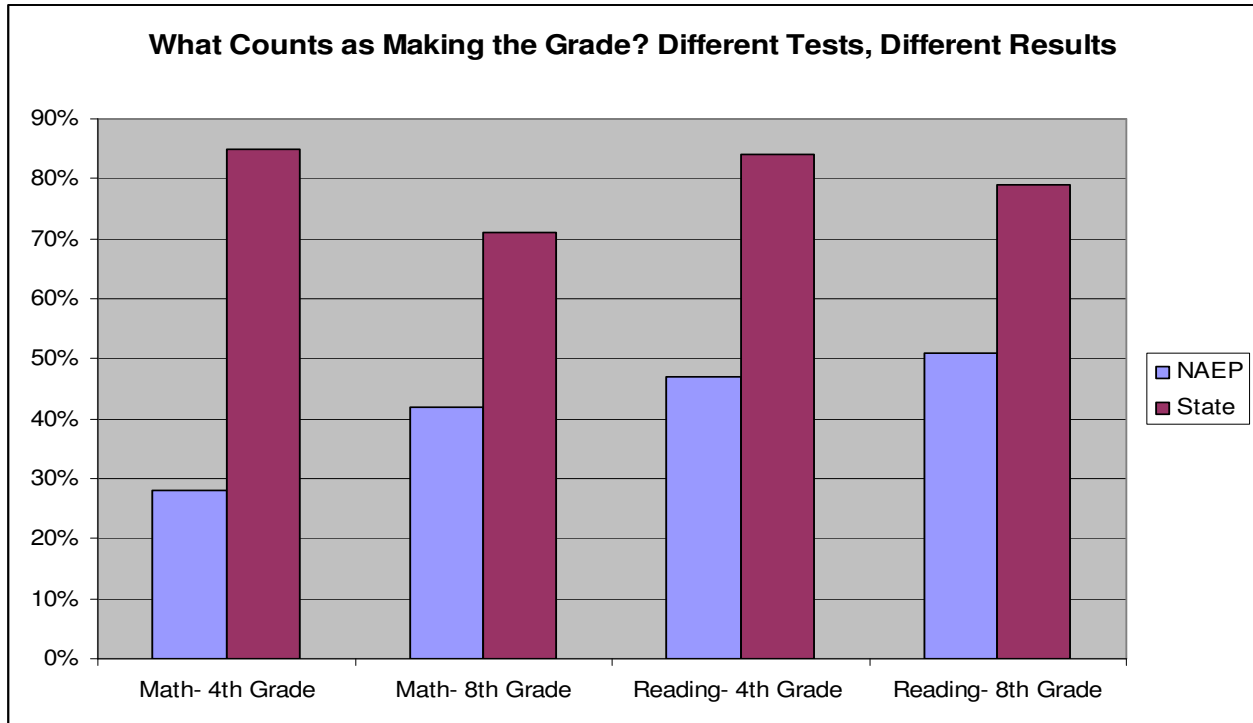
Over time, more and more states participated, with a sample of Kansas schools joining the effort in 1998. In 2007, all 50 states participated in the reading and mathematics tests. Other tests including writing and science, are being developed.



Kansas schools, to their credit, do help students become more proficient in reading and mathematics at both the 4th and 8th grade levels than the nation as a whole does.

Math-4th	28
Math-8th	42
Reading-4th	47
Reading-8th	51

But careful readers will observe a noticeable difference between the number on the state assessments and those of the NAEP. In short, Kansas schools look much better on state assessments than they do on the NAEP.



(Numbers represent the percentage of students who score at proficient or better on the NAEP or “meets standards” or better on the Kansas assessments)

Does No Child Left Behind Encourage Weak Standards?

The federal law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has put an increased emphasis on student test scores. It says that schools need to achieve 100 percent student proficiency by 2014. Schools that fail to bring all students up to that level must take a series of steps, some of which—such as pay for supplemental tutoring—may be useful to students, but disruptive to school employees. The possibility of disruption, along with philosophical objections to portions of the law, makes No Child Left Behind unpopular.

Yet despite its very high (one could say unrealistic) goals, the law does give states a great deal of flexibility.



How States Can Inflate Proficiency Numbers

- *Create vague, easy-to-achieve and hard-to-test-for expectations*
- *Use questions with multiple choice rather than long-form answers*
- *Set low “cut scores,” akin to awarding an “A” for a score of 80 percent*
- *Establish a timetable that expects schools to make minimal progress until 2013, and then deliver miraculous results by the NCLB deadline of 2014*

Each state is free to use its own test in complying with the law. A state can also create its own definition of “proficiency,” which could be vague and thus hard to fail. A state can also use or create its own proficiency test, which could in turn be challenging or difficult.

Equally important, a state is free to determine how many questions a student must correctly answer to be scored as “proficient.” This score is called a “cut score.” Just as a teacher may say that either 90 percent or 80 percent correct counts as an “A,” a state is free to determine the cut score on its assessments. Since education is largely a state (and in turn, local) responsibility, another analogy may be more appropriate: A state is like a student who gets to create his own test, score the test, and then determine what score counts as an “A.”

This flexibility, coupled with the difficulties of complying with NCLB, gives states incentives to go easy on schools. Some politicians will loathe the prospect of raising taxes to pay for increased funding while others will fear upsetting entrenched interests within the education industry by calling for substantial reforms such as merit pay for teachers or the creation of a voucher program. This is not to say that we have evidence of the purposeful “dumbing down” of standards. But the incentives for this to occur are there.

The U.S. Department of Education has already noted that some states take advantage of the leniency built into No Child Left Behind.

In June of last year, 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. Some states are more demanding than others.⁷

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

A Kansas student could score below proficient on the nation’s report card and yet be considered proficient by state standards.

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 to score the equivalent of a 222, or 11 percent lower. In Kansas, the



cut score on the state assessment translated into a 218 on the NAEP. That's just above "basic" and well below "proficient" on the Nation's Report Card. Tests for 2003 showed mismatches as well.

Crosschecking State Assessments Against the MAP

In October 2007, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute also suggested that the academic performance of many states is not as good as it would first appear. Hence the title of the its report was *The Proficiency Illusion*.⁸ Together with the Northwest Evaluation Association, the institute used the MAP, or Measures of Academic Progress, to evaluate schools.

The association offers the MAP to member schools and districts.⁹ The Fordham researchers translated the cut scores required for state tests onto the state's performance on the MAP. Like the NAEP, then, the MAP is a way for states to validate their own assessments against a national standard. The results showed that "proficient" in one state was nowhere near "proficient" in others.

The most obvious case of grade inflation may have come from the math test for 3rd-grade students in Colorado. A score that qualified a student as proficient on the state test there would have been outperformed by 94 percent of all the students across the country taking the MAP. At the other extreme, a fourth-grade mathematics student in Massachusetts had to be in the 77th percentile of MAP scores to be proficient on the state test.

As for Kansas, the association concluded that "the reported proficiency rates may overestimate the proportion of third-grade students who are actually on track to be proficient in eighth-grade mathematics." It also said 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 across the board, what counted as "proficient" in Kansas was below the national average performance on the MAP. Kansas students could perform below the national average and still be considered proficient by the state.

Kansas Standards Get a "C-"

The rigor of state standards, and by extension, the validity of glowing reports about school performance, came under further questioning at the hands of Paul E. Peterson and Fredrick M. Hess, a Harvard professor and education policy fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, respectively. Writing in the Summer 2008 edition of *Education Next*, Peterson and Hess graded the states on the toughness of their proficiency standards.¹⁰

Kansas standards earned a mere C-, suggesting that state statistics overstate the performance of Kansas schools.



They compared the percentage of students who scored proficient on state tests with the percentage who scored proficient on the NAEP. If the same number of students were proficient on both the state test and the NAEP, Peterson and Hess gave that state an “A,” saying it had “world-class standards” comparable to the NAEP. If, on the other hand, the state’s test showed a much greater rate of proficiency, “then state proficiency figures should be regarded as inflated.”

The three states with an F—Georgia, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—“declare most student proficient even when their performance is miles short of the NAEP standard,” they said.

Kansas earned an overall grade of C- from the researchers, suggesting that its own tests overstate the performance of Kansas’s schools. The state earned a C- for 2003 and 2005 as well, suggesting that the problem is not new. Among Kansas’s neighbors, Missouri scored the best, with an A-.

Strength of Kansas Standards in 2007		
	4 th grade	8 th grade
Math	C	C
Reading	C-	C-
Source: <i>Education Next</i> , Summer 2008		

As the deadline for meeting No Child Left Behind approaches, states will be increasingly tempted to inflate the findings of their own assessments. According to the authors of the *Education Next* article, states in general are reporting increasing performance in 8th-grade math and reading that is not reflected in the NAEP—suggesting that grade inflation is the latest fad in education.

Policy Implications

At a time when personal and community well-being are affected by a global marketplace, it is imperative that public policies to encourage a citizenry that is knowledgeable, filled with skills, and self-sufficient and able to adapt: In a word, educated. There are two major approaches to improving the state of education in America and in Kansas.

The first involves tinkering around the edges and pouring more money into the status quo. “If only we had more money. If only we had smaller classes. If only we had better teachers. If only we had better parents.” The *Montoy* decision from the Kansas Supreme Court and its legislative aftermath reflect this approach. This approach is also inherently political, relying on legislators to appropriate more money, and for school boards to rule over their given geographic boundaries.

A second approach seeks a bottoms-up transformation involving families and education entrepreneurs. The logic is one of strengthening the power of parents to take back their children’s education from the education establishment, as well as harnessing the natural power of competition that we see in many areas of life, including higher education. Nationally, charter schools are part of this approach, as are measures such as tax credits and vouchers.

Advocates of the first approach, which include nearly all elected officials, especially those serving in school boards, argue for increasing the size of school budgets. Gov. Sebelius’s pre-K proposal and the proposals of various legislators to lower the mandatory enrollment age and move all children to all-day kindergarten say that we need to keep doing what we’re doing, only spend more on it and make children spend more time in it. No fundamental change is required, the thinking goes, because the current arrangements are working well. But a second look at graduation rates and test scores show that they’re not working nearly as well as we like to think.



Conclusion

While we all want to believe children are receiving a quality education in their schools, the truth is too many children lack proficiency in basic skills. The report from *Education Week* suggests that the official graduation rate of Kansas's schools is overstated. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education, the Fordham Institute, and *Education Next* suggest that student proficiency, as reported on state assessments, is inflated. While grade inflation is more serious problem in some states than it is in Kansas, Kansas is not immune. No Child Left Behind, civic pride, and self-interest all provide incentives to inflate the performance of schools, in Kansas as elsewhere.

Kansans should hold the state accountable for those standards and demand more education options so that the children of this state can truly become proficient.

About the Author



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Notes:

¹ "Kansas Building Report Card," Kansas State Department of Education, available at http://online.ksde.org/rcard/state_grad.aspx?org_no=D%.

² Christopher B. Swanson, "Cities in Crisis," America's Promise Alliance, April 1, 2008, available at: www.americaspromise.org.

³ Ken Thomas, "Report: Low Grad Rates in US Cities," Associated Press, April 1, 2008, available at

<http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5heUgDfYJ5ytrg1mE6JqQliCiBXOgD8VOS5RG0>.

⁴ This database, "District Graduation Rate Map Tool," can be found at

<http://www.edweek.org/apps/maps/>. The graduation rate is calculated by a four step process. The number of 10th grade students in year 2 is multiplied by the number of 9th grade students in year 1. A similar calculation is made for students in 11th grade and 12th grade. Also, the number of diploma recipients in year 2 is divided by the number of 12th grade students in year 1. Each of these ratios is multiplied to obtain the final graduation rate. According to the documentation, "The [Cumulative Promotion Index] represents graduating from high school as a process rather than a single event." Thus, it projects the likelihood that the typical student entering the ninth grade will graduate with a diploma four years later.

⁵ For numbers on these 20 districts, as well as the different means of calculating the rates, see John R. LaPlante, "Complacency is Not an Option: Why Kansas Needs to Drop Its Dropout Rate," *Flint Hills Center for Public Policy*, 12 June 2008. Available at www.flinthills.org.



⁶ For information about the National Assessment Governing Board, the group that oversees the NAEP, see www.nagb.org.

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, "Mapping 2005 Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales," June 2007, available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2007482.asp>.

⁸ Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "The Proficiency Illusion," October 2007, available at: www.edexcellence.net/doc/The_Proficiency_Illusion.pdf.

⁹ Of the 184 members of the Northwest Evaluation Association from Kansas, 168 are school districts, two are special state schools (the Kansas Juvenile Justice System and the Kansas School for the Deaf), one is an Indian (the Kickapoo Nation School) and the balance are private schools. See "NWEA Members," Northwest Evaluation Association. Available at <http://www.nwea.org/about/index.asp>.

¹⁰ Paul E. Peterson and Frederick M. Hess, "Few States Set World-Class Standards," *Education Next*, Summer 2008. Available at: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/18845034.html>.

MORE ABOUT THE FLINT HILLS CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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