

WHY KANSAS MUST IMPROVE ITS ABOVE-AVERAGE TEST SCORES KANSANS MUST NOT BE COMPLACENT ABOUT QUALITY OF EDUCATION

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

Some people respond to the calls for competition in education by saying, in effect, if it isn't broke, don't fix it. One recent news account, for example, said that "Kansas schools have a phenomenal record." In other words, the power of competition, which Kansans depend on in their daily lives to produce better goods and services of all sorts, is not needed in education, because the schools are doing just fine.

But should our pride in above-average schools stand in the way of enhancing the role of competition and choice to produce excellent results at the best cost? Not if we take a closer look at the performance of schools today.

High School Graduation: Still a Long Ways to Go

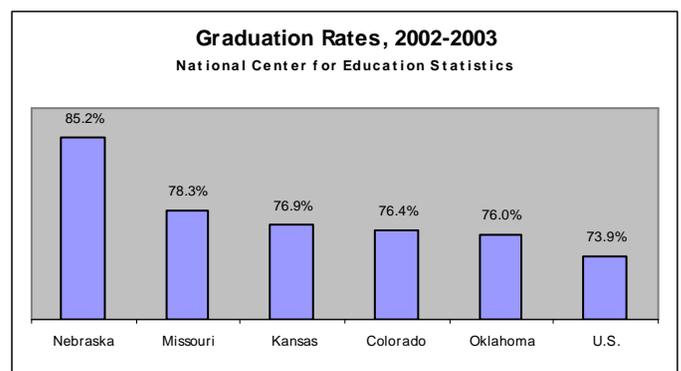
One way of measuring the success of a school system is the high school graduation rates of its students. Can a school, in other words, equip a student to meet the requirements of graduation? A high school diploma is no guarantee of success in life or in the university, of course, but students who fail to earn a diploma earn, on average, only two dollars for every three earned by high school graduates. Without graduating from high school, a person is unlikely to earn a college degree, meaning that he is likely to fall even further behind; the high school dropout earns only one dollar for every three earned by a college graduate.¹ Society suffers as well; costs from increased public welfare spending on and crime caused by dropouts has been estimated, by one account, to reach \$24 billion for

men between the ages of 25 and 34.² No matter how we count the cost, when a student does not complete high school, the implications are significant, and usually negative.

Better than Average, But Good Enough?

How well, then, does Kansas do in seeing students through to high school graduation? The standard keeper of graduation rates across the states is the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), a unit of the U.S. Department of Education.

True to the belief that Kansas schools do a better-than-average job of educating students, the graduation rate for Kansas exceeds that of the nation as a whole, 76.9 percent versus 73.9 percent.³



Two other observations should be noted, however. First, the Kansas graduation rate lags that of two of its four bordering states. Missouri ranks higher, at



78.3 percent, and Nebraska checks in even higher, at 85.2 percent.⁴ Kansans may think that their schools do a better-than-average job, but half of its neighbors do even better.

An even more important observation is that a better-than-average graduation rate still leaves a lot to be desired. A graduation rate of 76.9 is a far cry from a 100 percent, or even 90 percent rate.

Minority Groups Ill-Served

The graduation numbers are even more troubling when they are broken out into ethnic and racial groups. The Manhattan Institute and the Black Alliance for Educational Options disaggregated the numbers in a report authored by Dr. Jay Greene.⁵ Green applied a different standard to graduation rates than the NCES, which generally produced slightly lower graduation rates. By his reckoning, the national graduation rate for the freshman class of 1998 is 71 percent, while Kansas, the rate was 76 percent.⁶

More noteworthy, however, are Greene’s calculation of graduation rates by race and ethnicity. The performance of minority groups might be considered nothing short of dismal. In Kansas, just over half of African-Americans (54 percent) who entered ninth grade left school with a high school diploma. While that was “good enough” to exceed the rate in Nebraska, it failed to keep pace with Colorado, Missouri, and Oklahoma. As a number on its own, it is appalling.

Graduation rates: African-Americans⁷

State	Graduation rates
Oklahoma	64
Missouri	58
Colorado	55
Kansas	54
Nebraska	53

Latinos are a growing part of the population, both here and nationally. Their graduation rate is poor. One in two Latinos in Kansas graduates, a number that is better than that found in Nebraska and

Colorado, but lower than Oklahoma and Missouri’s rates.

Graduation rates: Latinos⁸

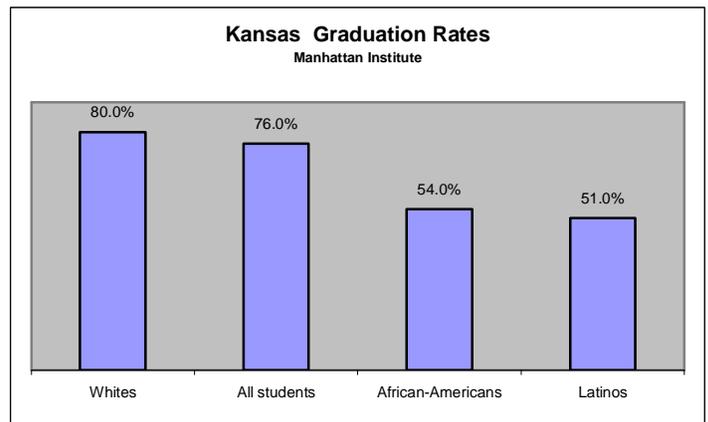
State	Graduation rates
Missouri	63
Oklahoma	57
Kansas	51
Nebraska	50
Colorado	47

Even among whites, the student group with the best graduation rates, one of five students did not graduate.

Graduation rates: Whites⁹

State	Graduation rate
Nebraska	90
Kansas	80
Missouri / Oklahoma	78
Colorado	75

Putting together the numbers for all major groups in the state, we find that Kansas is not seeing enough students through to a high school diploma.



The Nation’s Report Card: Is Basic Good Enough?

As it does with graduation rates, Kansas does pretty well compared to some other states when it comes to national tests. The National Assessment of



Educational Progress, otherwise known as NAEP, is sometimes called the Nation's Report Card.¹⁰

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) keeps track of NAEP scores for each of the states, enabling researchers, citizens, and policy makers to evaluate the absolute and relative success of states in producing an educated citizenry. The NCES has (or is developing) tests for 11 different subjects, including the arts, civics, geography, science, and history. Some subjects are tested only sporadically, every four or five years for example, or in some cases, only once since 1969.

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal government provided states a very strong financial incentive to administer, every two years, NAEP tests in math and reading for the fourth and eighth grades. States are given a scale score, ranging from 0 to 500. This score allows us to compare Kansas against other states and the nation as a whole.

According to the NCES, the Kansas fourth-grade math scale score for the 2005 assessment is better, at a statistically significant level, than those of the nation as well as the surrounding states of Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. The eighth grade score is better than the national score, as well as of Missouri and Oklahoma. It is only as good as those of Colorado and Nebraska.

The relative advantage of Kansas schools drops some when reading scores are reviewed. For the 2005 assessment, the Kansas fourth grade score exceeds the national score, as well as that of Oklahoma. It is not significantly different from the score of the other three neighboring states. In the eighth grade score, Kansas exceeds the nation as well as Oklahoma. It is equal to Colorado, Nebraska, and Missouri.¹¹ In other words, it relatively good but not overwhelmingly superior.

These discussions, however, focus on the curve, Kansas compared with other states and the nation as a whole. What about a straight scale?

The NCES converts scale scores into four levels of achievement: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. Below basic is undesirable, as the very term suggests. But even a "basic" level of achievement represents an incomplete education for the grade level being assessed. The ideal levels of achievement are proficient (competency over the subject matter) and advanced.

NAEP Achievement Levels

Basic: **Partial mastery** of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.

Proficient: **Solid academic performance** for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

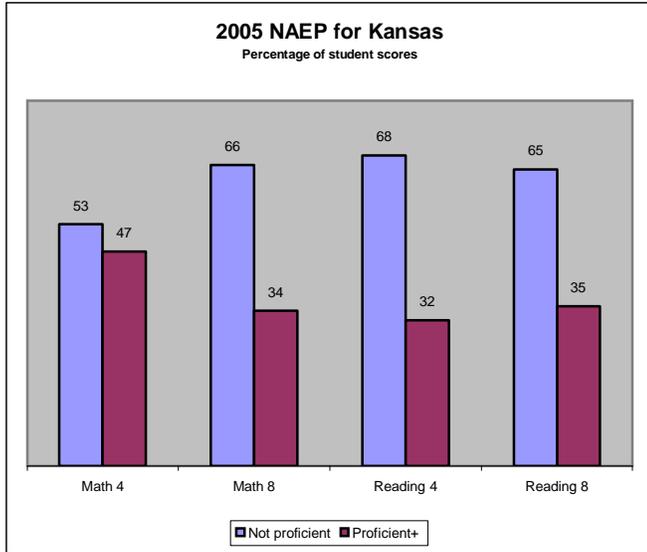
Advanced: **Superior performance.**

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/mathematics/achievement.asp>

As with graduation rates, the anecdotal glow of Kansas diminishes somewhat when we look at actual data. A powerful way of looking at the performance of schools in a state is to divide the results of each grade-level assessment into "not proficient" ("below basic," and "basic") and "proficient" ("proficient," and "advanced.")

The average citizen, and even lawmaker, may be surprised at the results.





At no grade level (fourth or eighth) or subject matter (math or reading) does the percentage of students reaching the proficient-or-better level exceed 50 percent. Aside from fourth-grade math, the proficient-or-better level barely exceeds one third of all students. While reading scores improve somewhat from fourth grade to eighth (32 percent achieving proficient-or-better, rising to 35 percent), they actually decline in math, suggesting that students (and schools) are not keeping up with expectations.¹²

Little Change Over Time

Another way to look at the state of education is to see how the assessment results have changed over time. Kansas has a limited history with the NAEP, but it is not promising.

When the tests of statistical significance are taken in to account, the percentage of students scoring “basic” or better on the fourth grade and eighth assessment in math was not higher in 2005 than in 2000.¹³

In reading, the percentage of students scoring “basic” or better on the eighth grade assessment did not improve between 1998 and 2005.¹⁴

The Kansas Assessment

In addition to using the NAEP, Kansas has its own assessments. Like the NAEP, they show that there is room for improvement.

Student performance is classified into five categories: unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, advanced, and exemplary.¹⁵ The Kansas assessment has differences as well as similarities with the NAEP, but both show that too many children are learning at mediocre levels.

Kansas Assessment Performance Levels

(Source: Kansas Department of Education)

Exemplary: Students who perform at the exemplary level on the Kansas State Assessments consistently demonstrate high performance. These students have a well-developed ability to apply knowledge and skills in all situations. Their work is superior.

Advanced: Students who perform at the advanced level on the Kansas State Assessments frequently demonstrate high performance. These students effectively demonstrate the ability to apply knowledge and skills in most situations. They have a command of difficult, rigorous and challenging material.

Proficient: Students who perform at the proficient level on the Kansas State Assessments demonstrate a mastery of core skills. These students exhibit competence in applying knowledge and skills in most problem situations. They show evidence of solid performance.

Basic: Students who perform at the basic level on the Kansas State Assessments show partial mastery of fundamental skills. These students have a basic knowledge of content, but struggle in applying knowledge and skills in problem situations.

Unsatisfactory: Students who perform at the unsatisfactory level on the Kansas State Assessments demonstrate a lack of core knowledge, skills and concepts. Their command of the content is very limited and their ability to apply knowledge or demonstrate understanding is minimal.



The Kansas Department of Education allows anyone with access to the Internet see how students did in five different tests: reading, math, science, and social studies. The tests are given at various grade levels: fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, tenth, and eleventh.

There are some good points to be seen in the results: over 37 percent of fourth grade students scored “exemplary”—the highest category—on the math test, for example.

But there are also some troubling trends. First, the percentage of students achieving at the highest levels goes down. For each test, the percentage of students in the “exemplary” category *decreases* as the grade level increases. It is as if extra years of schooling has a negative, not a positive effect on students. In three of the four subjects (science being the exception), the percentage of students earning the “advanced” score decreases as well.

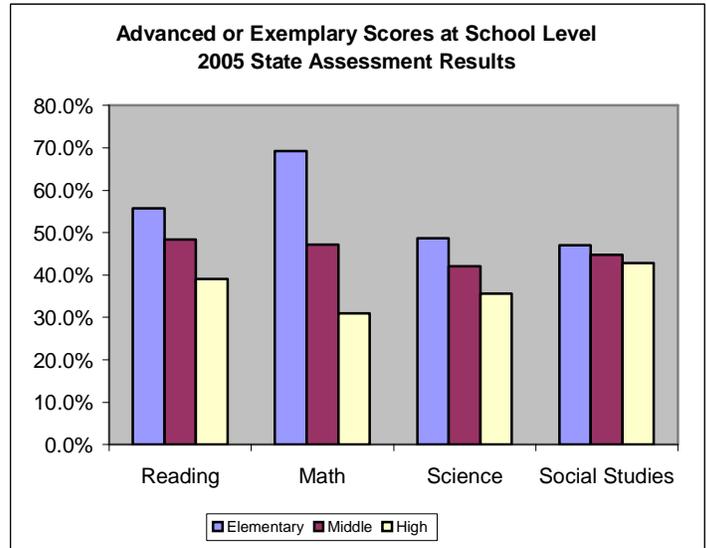
Kansas Report Card 2004-2005
Source: Kansas Department of Education
<http://online.ksde.org/rcard/>
Percentage of students in each performance level

State Reading			
	Grade 5	Grade 8	Grade 11
Unsatisfactory	4.7%	5.7%	10.6%
Basic	17.4%	17.4%	25.0%
Proficient	21.9%	28.4%	25.0%
Advanced	31.6%	35.1%	26.7%
Exemplary	24.1%	13.2%	12.4%

State Math			
	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 10
Unsatisfactory	3.9%	12.3%	23.8%
Basic	11.0%	19.0%	24.6%
Proficient	15.6%	21.2%	20.2%
Advanced	31.7%	25.2%	13.4%
Exemplary	37.5%	22.0%	17.6%

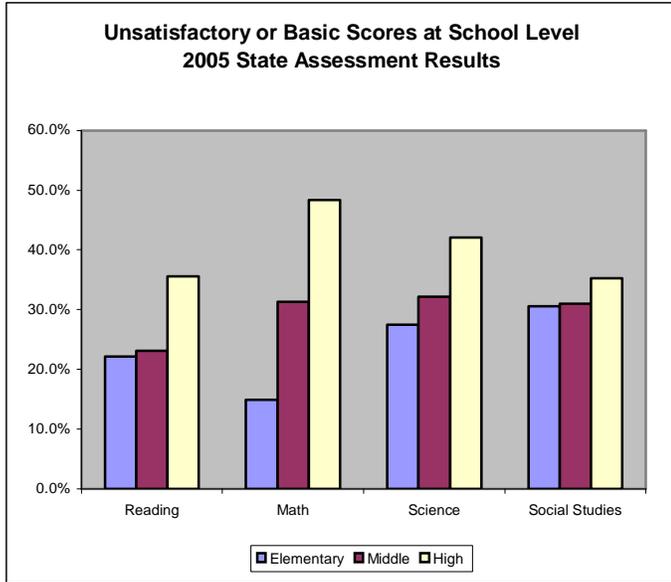
State Science			
	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 10
Unsatisfactory	6.3%	12.4%	20.2%
Basic	21.2%	19.8%	21.9%
Proficient	23.6%	25.6%	22.1%
Advanced	30.6%	25.6%	19.3%
Exemplary	18.1%	16.4%	16.3%

State Social Studies			
	Grade 6	Grade 8	Grade 11
Unsatisfactory	9.3%	8.8%	12.8%
Basic	21.3%	22.2%	22.5%
Proficient	22.2%	24.0%	21.7%
Advanced	27.5%	25.9%	26.2%
Exemplary	19.5%	18.9%	16.6%

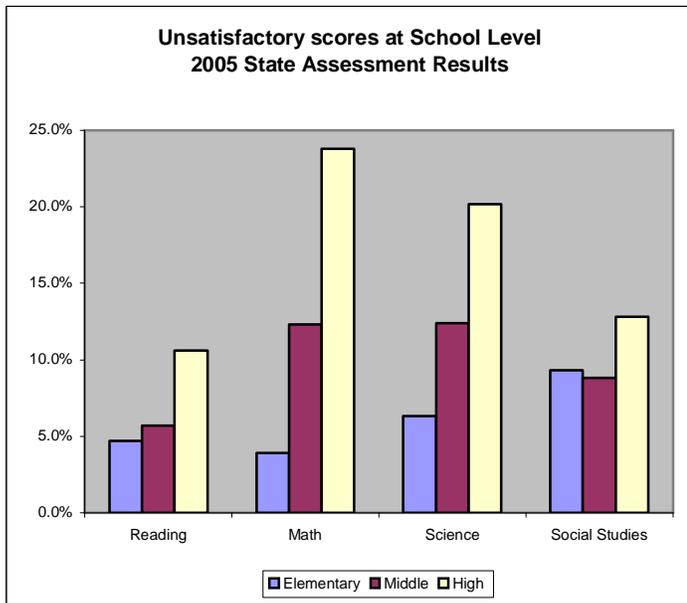


While the portion of students getting the highest marks goes down, the percentage of students scoring the lowest levels goes up as we move towards high school. Recall the definition of unsatisfactory and basic. Unsatisfactory means that students have a “very limited” command of the content, and a “minimal” ability to “apply knowledge or demonstrate understanding.” Basic, one step up, means that students “struggle in applying knowledge and skills in problem situations.” One would hope that the percentage of students in these categories goes down over time. But the results suggest the opposite is true. For each subject, the percentage of students earning an unsatisfactory score is higher in middle school than in elementary school, and is higher in high school than in middle school.¹⁶





Another troubling trend can be found: for three of the four subjects (social studies being the exception), the percentage of students getting an unsatisfactory score *increases* from elementary school to middle school to high school.



Conclusion

Kansans value education, and rightly so. But the pride that residents feel in the children of the state should not serve as a blinder to the fact that sizeable numbers of students do not graduate, and many—a majority—do not perform up to grade level. Worse, the problem increases as we turn our attention from elementary school to high school.

None of these observations are meant to impugn the hard work of Kansas parents, teachers, administrators, and political leaders. They're all doing what they can with the system at hand. But the system is not fulfilling its promise.

Throughout many areas of life, public purposes are achieved through private organizations as well as public ones. The federal income tax code gives parents wide latitude in securing early childhood education for their children while still gaining a public subsidy. College and university students and their families routinely take state and federal money to study at institutions run both by government entities and private ones. These two levels of education suggest what is needed, and lacking, for the K-12 system: the ability to take public dollars to a variety of schools.

It's time to conclude that the status quo of K-12 education is not so overwhelmingly satisfactory that it can't benefit from open enrollment, a charter school law that allows for multiple chartering authorities, vouchers, and other means to foster the use of competition. In short, there's nothing so "above average" about Kansas schools that we should shut the door to moving towards a consumer-oriented model of choice and competition.



John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. He can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills.org



Notes:

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "College Degree Nearly Doubles Annual Earnings, Census Bureau Reports," March 28, 2005. Available online at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/004214.html>.
- ² National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, http://www.dropoutprevention.org/stats/quick_facts/econ_impact.htm.
- ³ National Center for Educational Statistics, "The Average Freshman Graduation Rate for Public High Schools from the Common Core of Data, School Years 2001-02 and 2002-2003," October 2005, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006601.pdf>. See table 1, "Averaged freshman graduation rates, by state: School years 2001-02 and 2002-03. The numbers used in this report are for 2002-03, the last year for which cross-state numbers are available.
- ⁴ National Center for Educational Statistics, "The Average Freshman Graduation Rate for Public High Schools from the Common Core of Data, School Years 2001-02 and 2002-2003," October 2005, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006601.pdf>
- ⁵ Jay P. Greene, "Graduation Rates in the United States," April 2002, The Manhattan Institute, executive summary and Table 1, "Graduation rate by state and race," http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm.
- ⁶ Greene, Table 2, Ranking of graduation rates by state, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo_t2.htm
- ⁷ Greene, Table 3, Ranking of African-American graduation rates by http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo_t3.htm
- ⁸ Greene, Table 4, Ranking of Latino graduation rates, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo_t4.htm
- ⁹ Greene, Table 5, Ranking of White graduation rates by state, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo_t5.htm
- ¹⁰ Raw and comparative data are available through the NCES web site, which is <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>. State profiles are accessible through <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>. Due to the methods used to develop the web site, it is often not possible to "deep link" to specific pages. The reader is advised to construct searches as desired.
- ¹¹ NCES, "Cross-state comparisons, average scale scores." Go to <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/statecompare.asp> and then clicking the states as appropriate. Select the HTML comparison table.
- ¹² State profile for Kansas, NCES. Go to <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp>, select Kansas, and then "Achievement levels."
- ¹³ Kansas Department of Education, "NAEP 2005 Results," available online at <http://www.ksde.org/assessment/naep/naepnltrfall2005.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Kansas Department of Education, "NAEP 2005 Results," available online at <http://www.ksde.org/assessment/naep/naepnltrfall2005.pdf>. No summary information is given for fourth-grade results.
- ¹⁵ Kansas State Department of Education, Report Card 2004-2005, Definitions, http://online.ksde.org/rcard/definitions.aspx?org_no=D%&rpt_type=3
- ¹⁶ The state reports are not longitudinal studies that track students over time. The fact that the data show decreased performance from elementary to middle to high school is, however, troubling.

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Flint Hills Center for Public Policy

P.O. Box 782317
Wichita, KS 67278-2317
(316) 634-0218
inquiries@flinthills.org
www.flinthills.org

