

POLICY BRIEF

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HOW GOOD ARE PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN KANSAS?

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

As lawmakers and the general public debate the proper way of funding public education, they should first ask this question: just how good are the public schools in Kansas? The short answer: the schools are above average when compared with the rest of the country, but there is certainly room for improvement.

When thinking about education, it's easy to fall victim to the Lake Wobegon effect. This phenomenon is named after a small, mythical town on the high plains. The creation of a popular radio host, Lake Wobegon is a place where "all the children are above average."

After looking at data compiled by the federal government, you might conclude that Lake Wobegon is real, and that it is ... Kansas.

The National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, collects and compares test scores of students from every state. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a group of tests given to fourth-grade and eighth-grade students. The pleasant result of those tests: public schools in Kansas produce students with above-average test scores.¹

In Kansas, for example, eighth-grade students are above the national average in math and reading scores. Fourth-grade students perform equally well.

Eight Grade Scores, 2003			
Source: National Center for Education Statistics			
Test	Average Score in Kansas	Average Score in all states	Kansas Places
Mathematics	284	276	Above average
Reading	266	261	Above average

Kansans can be proud that their schools produce above-average students. But before the celebration gets too far underway, remember that the national comparison is based on a curve. As a smart student can tell you, grading on a curve can give an incomplete picture.

When Kansas schools are judged by the standard of how much students actually know—that is, on a straight scale—the picture is not nearly as encouraging.



Percentage distribution of Kansas NAEP Scores 2003
Eighth Grade Students
Source: U.S. Department of Education

Test	Below basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Mathematics	24	42	28	6
Reading	23	42	32	3

Over one-third of eighth grade students scored “proficient” or “advanced.” That’s good news. Unfortunately, nearly one quarter of students achieved scores considered “below basic.”

The largest group of students, 42 percent, recorded “basic” scores. What does that mean? Is “basic” good enough?

Consider how the education department defines basic: “*partial* mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade [emphasis added].”² Proficient, by the way, is defined as “solid academic performance for each grade assessed.”

Two-thirds of all eighth-grade students score at a “basic” or “below basic” level. A similar pattern exists among fourth-grade students, suggesting that the shortfall is not confined to only one class of students.³

Among the states then, Kansas does a better than average job of producing good students. But there’s so much room for improvement.



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Notes

¹ Comparative statistics are available at the state profiles section of the web site of the National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp>

² “The NAEP Mathematics Achievement Levels,” NCES,

³ The record of fourth-grade students is similar, with 59 percent scoring basic or below on mathematics and 68 percent falling into that group on reading. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/mathematics/achieve.asp>

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