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Performance Inflation in Kansas Schools?

By John R. LaPlante

Schools in other parts of the country might be bad, but Kansas schools are seeing high levels of student performance and graduation, right?

Maybe not. A report issued by the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, which looks at research from the U.S. Department of Education and other organizations, questions that belief.

"We're all prone to some grade inflation in the ways that we think about schools," said John R. LaPlante, Education Policy Fellow of the Wichita-based think tank. "We want to believe that our schools are better than other schools, but we can't always rely on the state's standards to determine if that's true." The report, "Does Kansas Grade Itself on the Curve? " is available at www.flinthills.org.

According to data compiled by Education Week, the graduation rate for Kansas in 2004-05 was 74 percent-much less than the 88 percent stated by the Kansas Building Report Card. And last year, a report by the U.S. Department of Education suggested that states-including Kansas-inflate their proficiency rates. A student who "meets standards" according to Kansas standards would fall well below "proficient" on the Nation's Report Card. The Fordham Institute, using the Measures of Academic Progress test, confirmed those findings. A recent report in Education Next gives Kansas a "C-" for its standards.

"For years, especially with the Kansas Supreme Court's Montoy decision, we've been caught up in the belief that Kansas schools are great and they just need some more money," said LaPlante. "But when performance is actually low despite a pouring in of money, it's time to give parents and students choices so that performance can be enhanced and costs controlled."