



Opinion

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Don't play games with proficiency standards

If you think back to your days in school, you might remember some teachers who graded on a curve. Is Kansas grading its schools on the curve as well?

Under the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), students in all states are tested in reading, math, and other subjects. Kansas, like other states, administers its own, separate assessments as well.

Both state tests and the NAEP place students into one of several categories. The most important category for both is "proficient." The federal law known as No Child Left Behind sets a goal that by 2014, every child will score proficient or better.

"Proficient" does not mean what a well-educated adult should be able to do. It is defined by the NAEP as what student--all student--should have learned and been able to do at their tested grade level.

So how well do Kansas schools perform? According to the Kansas Department of Education, which collects and compiles the results from both tests, Kansas' schools are bringing three out of four students up to the proficient level (or better) on the state assessments in math and reading.

In grade 5, 78 percent of students are reading at proficient or better. The number is nearly the same for students in grade 8, at 77 percent. The record for math is even better at grade 4, with 85 percent proficient or better. At grade 7, 68 percent are proficient or better.

How does Kansas do on the national standard of the NAEP? The results aren't quite as good, to put it mildly. Remember that on the state assessments, roughly three of every four students score proficient or better. On the NAEP, only one out of four is proficient.

Here are the proficiency-or-better rates for reading on the NAEP: 32 percent for grade 4, and 35 percent for grade 8. The results are not much better in math: 47 percent at grade 4, and 34 percent proficient at grade 8. For fourth-grade math score, Kansas' own evaluations overstate student achievement by 80 percent. For everything else, they overstate it by 100 percent--or more.

Why the discrepancies? Under No Child Left Behind, states are free to use their own definitions of proficiency. Many are doing so. One reason may be that the federal law forces the increased use of competition among schools, should a state fail to achieve its goals. States can try to fend that off by grading schools on the curve.

As our research at the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy has shown, Kansas has not lacked for spending more money on education. It's time to add some choice and competition to that financial commitment. If nothing else, it's certainly not time to water down the proficiency standards.

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