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'No Child' leading to grade laxity

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We all know about the old problem of “grade inflation.” Lately, when it comes to following the federal No Child Left Behind law, some states have been getting into the act.

Under NCLB, every state must test students to make sure each is proficient in mathematics and reading by 2014. But the law gives each state a lot of flexibility: States are free to use their own tests to comply with the law. They can also determine what score constitutes “proficient.”

That’s where things get interesting.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (www.edexcellence.net) is a Washington, D.C.-based organization that is generally pro-school choice. (The Institute is unrelated to Fordham University in New York.) Yet unlike school choice advocates who assail NCLB or a federal role for education, Fordham supports both the law and national (though not necessarily federal) testing.

In October, the Institute released a report that criticized states for having lax testing standards. The title of the report—“The Proficiency Illusion”—gives away the game.

The report starts with the story of a mythical family in Michigan. Susie Smith, a fourth-grader, scores very low on the state math test and yet is declared proficient. Her parents, seeing only the “proficient” label, are pleased, thinking that she is on track to doing well throughout her school years.

As a result of her state’s very low standard, however, her performance, and that of her school, is inflated. As a result, say the Fordham authors, “if Susie lived in California or Massachusetts or South Carolina, she would have missed the ‘proficiency’ cut-off by a mile.”

Imagine not just a single Smith family, but a school of Smith children, and you have a school that despite doing well by the standard of NCLB, isn’t learning much. Imagine a state of such schools, and you have a state that is systematically dumbing-down education.

Methodology

Given that states have their own tests for NCLB compliance, how did the Institute come to criticize Michigan? What prompted it to applaud both Massachusetts and South Carolina, two states not normally spoken of in the same category in education?

Twenty-six states administer the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress), which is produced by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA, <http://www.nwea.org>). In simplest terms, the analysts from the NWEA compared a state's performance on the MAP with its reported performance for No Child Left Behind. Then they determined which MAP percentile a student would have had to achieve to be labeled "proficient" in each state. They is the "cut score." One limit of the report is that the MAP is given in only 26 states.

The analysts then asked three questions of each state, including "How easy is it to be proficient?"

Colorado set the lowest bar. As a matter of policy, it declared that students scoring "basic" on the state assessments would be declared "proficient"—a higher level of performance—for the purposes of NCLB. Under the law, that was its right.

Not surprisingly, the cut score for Colorado was very low. Colorado's third-grade students had to score in only the 6th percentile on the MAP to be deemed "proficient." The state with the highest expectations was Massachusetts. In the Bay State, a fourth-grade student who was in the 76th percentile was not considered proficient. (The cut off: 77th percentile.)

On the whole, Minnesota is more rigorous than average for both math and reading, with third grade the only grade where the state falls below the average. But for grades four through eight, Minnesota cut scores are higher than the sample average. Its least demanding cut score was third grade reading, in which the state ranked 16 out of 26. Its most demanding cut score was fifth grade mathematics, which placed at fourth out of 26.

Even so, there's some laxity in Minnesota standards. The most demanding standard was fifth grade mathematics. There, scoring proficient on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II translated into the 54th percentile on the MAP. The least demanding test was third grade math, which required only a performance at the 26th percentile.

So what does this mean for parents, voters, educators and lawmakers? For all the protests and heartache of NCLB, we're not necessarily getting much return. States are setting the bar low, and in some cases, setting it very low. As China, India and other countries enter the world economy, though, being "better than Mississippi" doesn't cut it anymore.

The focus on increasing student achievement is good. The stated purpose of improving the performance of all students, especially the lowest performing ones, is just. But No Child Left Behind, at least as practiced, is falling short.

The law could reap many social and economic dividends if it actually produced results. But the number of loopholes in the law, including the ability to set low thresholds for proficiency, should give observers pause. It may turn out that the most enduring legacy will be the law's demonstration of the limits of standards-based education reform.