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Are All State Exams Equal?

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Recently, policymakers at the Arkansas Department of Education were pleased to release the results of the 2008 Arkansas Benchmark exams, which indicate more Arkansas students are becoming proficient each year.

This is also good news for proponents of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal legislation aimed at increasing student achievement through the encouragement of standards-based reform. However, Arkansas, like the other 49 states, sets its own standards for proficient performance. Thus, state by state comparisons of “proficiency” may not be meaningful.

With 50 states administering 50 tests to determine whether students are meeting 50 sets of curricular standards, many worry the system will encourage policymakers to set low standards, thus creating the appearance of success with high numbers of students meeting those standards. In other words, states may engage in a “race to the bottom” for low student expectations.

RIGOROUS STANDARDS?

Paul Peterson and Frederick Hess highlight this concern in a recent *Education Next* article comparing student pass rates on state exams to the pass rates for the same student cohorts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). They argue, plainly, “If Billy and Sally cannot read in South Carolina, they should not be

able to pass muster simply by crossing the state's western border.”

States with the most rigorous standards – those whose student's NAEP proficiency rates in 2007 were nearly the same as the proficiency rates on the 2007 state exams – were given an A by Peterson and Hess. Alternatively, states were given lower grades if students easily passed state exams but did poorly on the rigorous NAEP.

Mississippi, for instance, was given an F for its very low standards. On Mississippi's own literacy assessment, 90% of 4th grade students were deemed proficient, while 19% of those students were able to earn proficient scores on the NAEP. Conversely, Missouri earned an A for state exam results that were much more in line with the NAEP standards. For example, 46% of Missouri's grade 4 students tested at the proficient level on the state literacy exam. This result is roughly on par with the NAEP results in which 32% of Missouri's grade 4 students tested at proficient levels in literacy.

HOW DID ARKANSAS DO?

The average gap in passage rates of Arkansas students between the state's own Benchmark exams and the NAEP exam was 30 percentage points. For example, 65% of Arkansas' 4th graders tested at the proficient level on the math section of the Benchmark exam while only 37% of Arkansas' students earned proficient scores on the NAEP.

Table 1: Comparison of Arkansas and National Standards of Proficiency for 2007

| | Percent Proficient Under NAEP Standards | Percent Proficient Under Arkansas Standards | Gap in Standards | Grade from Peterson and Hess |
|-------------------------|---|---|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Grade 4 Literacy | 29% | 59% | 30 percentage points | B- |
| Grade 8 Literacy | 25% | 63% | 38 percentage points | C |
| Grade 4 Math | 37% | 65% | 28 percentage points | C |
| Grade 8 Math | 24% | 48% | 24 percentage points | C |

Source: Peterson & Hess, “Few States Set World-Class Standards,” Education Next (Summer 2008)

While the figures above may not inspire confidence about the rigor of Arkansas standards, Arkansas did earn a C+ on Peterson and Hess's scale, placing Arkansas in the top 15 states on this measure.

Arkansas' relatively high ranking may well be due to the re-calibration of the proficiency levels on the Benchmark exams in 2005. That year, policymakers in the Arkansas Department of Education developed new and more rigorous “cut scores” for student proficiency, despite the fact that this change resulted in lower student pass rates during that year. Our policymakers should be praised for making this hard choice in the hopes that higher standards would foster greater student achievement.

S U M M A R Y

Overall, the Peterson and Hess report should be viewed as good news for the state, but bad news for the nation, as it indicates that most state standards are neither rigorous nor accurate.

Consider the results of the grade 4 literacy exams in several of Arkansas' neighboring states presented in Table 2. More than 80% of students in Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas performed at proficient levels according to their own state's standards on state exams. However, the NAEP results for each of the three states reveal that fewer than 30% of students were performing at proficient levels in literacy. In other words, student passage rates on state exams were approximately three times as high as they were on the NAEP!

According to the proficiency standards set by the NAEP, many states are reporting artificially high levels of student achievement on state exams. Indeed, it is difficult to make sense of figures like those in Mississippi, in which more than 70% of students can meet the state standards but cannot meet the NAEP standards.

NCLB may have created a problem by allowing states to set their own standards. Clearly, separate state standards can lead to wildly varying levels of curricular rigor. Even Arkansas – which ranked 15th in rigor of state standards – has an average “margin of error” of 30 percentage points.

In the end, our citizens should be pleased with, and our policymakers should be praised for, our ranking on this report. However, these persistent discrepancies between student performance on state exams and on the NAEP exams should temper our enthusiasm.

While recent results of the Arkansas Benchmark exams indicate that more than half of Arkansas students are performing at proficient levels, we should not draw our final conclusions until we check the results of the NAEP exams and other rigorous national assessments.

Based on: Peterson, P. E. & Hess, F.R., Few states set world class standards: in fact, most render the notion of proficiency meaningless, Education Next (Summer 2008)

Table 2: Comparison of Regional Standards of Proficiency for 2007 Grade 4 Literacy Tests

| | Percent Proficient on NAEP 2007 | Percent Proficient on State Exam 2007 ¹ | Gap in Standards | Grade from Peterson and Hess |
|-------------|---------------------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Arkansas | 29% | 59% | 30 percentage points | B- |
| Mississippi | 19% | 90% | 71 percentage points | F |
| Missouri | 32% | 46% | 14 percentage points | A |
| Oklahoma | 27% | 90% | 63 percentage points | F |
| Tennessee | 27% | 88% | 61 percentage points | F |
| Texas | 30% | 84% | 54 percentage points | D |

Source: Peterson & Hess, “Few States Set World-Class Standards,” Education Next (Summer 2008)

¹ State information was taken from Peterson and Hess's original data table, which was not included in the *Education Next* article.