

## THE PROFICIENCY ILLUSION

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A new study, released last month by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Washington, D. C.), substantiates the charges that I have been making for some time about the deceptive character of state achievement tests under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The study's apt title is *The Proficiency Illusion*.

The Institute's press release summarizes with brutal and admirable frankness the essential finding of the study:

The tests that states use to measure academic progress under the No Child Left Behind Act are creating a false impression of success, especially in reading and especially in the early grades.... As a result, students may be performing worse in reading, and worse in elementary school, than is readily apparent by looking at passing rates on state tests.

This is undeniably true to anyone who looks without a vested interest and without bias at state testing programs.

There are many reasons for the gap created by the NCLB between the proficiency levels claimed by an individual state for its students and their actual proficiency levels.

First, as the Fordham report states, "By mandating that all students reach 'proficiency' by 2014, [NCLB] tempts states to define proficiency downward." That this has happened is sadly the case. What the study does not—and was not designed to—explain is why. In simple terms, this happened because the individual states failed to rebuild their curricula from the ground up. Complying with the letter of the law became an excuse for failing to confront the spirit of rigor that was alleged to be behind the law.

Of course, those who formulated the law did so in such a way as to invite the subversion of its stated goal. The commitment to "local control" of schools—a mantra beloved by the right—gutted the legislation before it was enacted. No less damaging would have been a curriculum formulated by the left, which might have accepted a national curriculum, but would have so loaded it with ephemeral fluff that any meaningful rigor in the curriculum would have been eviscerated.

Second, there is an enormous variation in the levels of difficulty in the tests of the individual states. Beyond that, there is variation in what the individual states specify as the passing score that constitutes proficiency (the so-called "cut score"), with many states setting cut scores as low as 50 percent and below.

Sometimes one hears a parent bemoaning the fact that his or her child missed 'passing' the state test by only one point. If the passing score is 50, that means that the student scored 49. I have little sympathy for such complaints. The parent should be insisting that the passing score should be higher for all students, and on a more challenging test.

Third, the Fordham report states that "Improvements in passing rates on state tests can largely be explained by declines in the difficulty of those tests...these declines raise questions about whether the NCLB-era achievement gains reported by many states represent true growth in student learning." This means that when faced with the results of the initial and relatively unchallenging tests given in response to NCLB, the states either reformulated the tests to make them even easier or lowered the passing score to allow more students to "pass."

Fourth, "Many states are setting the bar significantly lower in elementary school than in middle school, giving parents, educators, and the public the false impression that...elementary schools are performing at much higher levels." This explains why school districts have over-emphasized high school performance and have left the elementary schools relatively untouched and unaware of the depths of their failure. Consequently, there is no cause for celebration if your school is named a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School. At best, such a designation is an instance of damning with faint praise. At worst, it is a temptation to be satisfied with the status quo.

Finally, the report clearly and concisely puts its finger on the glaring defect of the NCLB: "The central flaw in NCLB is that it allows each state to set its own definition of what constitutes 'proficiency.'" In other words, without a nationally uniform and standardized curriculum and assessment, our schools will continue to fail.

The conclusion, stated in the study's Executive Summary, is sobering:

Thus, five years into implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, there is no common understanding of what "proficiency" means... This suggests that the goal of achieving "100 percent proficiency" has no coherent meaning, either... The whole rationale for standards-based reform was that it would make expectations for student learning more rigorous and uniform. Judging by the findings of this study, we are as far from that objective as ever.

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