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A Look at the Education Crisis: Tests, Standards, and the Future of American Education

By Ulrich Boser, Perpetual Baffour, and Steph Vela January 2016

Introduction and summary

In many ways standards-based school reform is at a crossroads. On one side, the movement has made tremendous strides. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, known simply as Common Core, is now strongly established in more than 40 states.¹ Many teachers believe that the new, higher academic standards have helped them improve instruction.² And, most importantly, a solid body of data demonstrates that the standards-based reform movement has shown success in raising student outcomes.³

In some areas, outcome indicators are on the rise. Over the past two decades, for instance, the number of students of color performing at grade level in reading and math has more than doubled in elementary and middle school.⁴ Meanwhile, high school graduation rates are the highest they have ever been: 81 percent of the class of 2013 received their diploma within four years.⁵

But clearly much work remains. Achievement gaps in many subject areas remain large. For example, only 21 percent of low-income fourth-grade students achieved proficiency on the 2015 NAEP reading test compared to 52 percent of nonpoor students.⁶ And if students of color graduated at the same rate as their white peers, they would receive nearly two hundred thousand more diplomas each year.⁷

In a way, the question for education advocates boils down to: What's next? For a few vocal observers, the answer to this question is—surprisingly—anything but standards-based reform. In other words, these observers believe that the standards-based reform effort—and its associated assessments and accountability efforts—have been a total failure. In a policy memo released last year, Kevin Welner and William Mathis of the National Education Policy Center argued that “we as a nation have devoted enormous amounts of time and money to the focused goal of increasing test scores, and we have almost nothing to show for it.”⁸

Some, such as blogger Anthony Cody, argue that policymakers should not really even focus on raising standards or improving tests or reforming accountability systems. Instead, Cody believes that policy leaders should aim to create a “healthy ecosystem” for students.⁹ From this perspective, resources would be better invested in improving prenatal care and child nutrition than in reforming public schools.¹⁰

One of the most vocal proponents of this view is education historian Diane Ravitch. Although Ravitch was once a leading advocate of national standards, the former U.S. assistant secretary of education has shifted her position dramatically in recent years.¹¹ In interviews, Ravitch is adamant that “the current sense of crisis about our nation’s public schools is exaggerated.”¹² She criticizes the Common Core as “blind faith in the standardization of tests and curriculum.”¹³ Or, as Ravitch argues, “We have a national policy that is a theory based on an assumption grounded in hope.”¹⁴

The argument over the scope and nature of the education problem in the United States is particularly important to the political debate over the Common Core. In some parts of the country, there has been a backlash against the standards. For instance, almost 60,000 students in Washington state opted out of Common Core tests.¹⁵ In some affluent Washington municipalities more than 90 percent of high schoolers opted out of the math tests.¹⁶

Other states, such as Oklahoma, have simply backed out of the standards.¹⁷ And for some political leaders, such as former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R), the new standards are a classic example of government overreach.¹⁸ While others, including former Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R), see them as part of a grand conspiracy.¹⁹

Part of the reason for the backlash against Common Core is the belief that schools are actually doing pretty well—particularly in affluent areas. In fact, many parents give high grades to the schools in their communities, regardless of the school’s location or background. According to a 2014 PDK/Gallup poll, around 50 percent of parents gave their child’s school an A or B grade.²⁰

This sort of optimism about the state of public schools has led some parents to crusade against the new standards, arguing that the Common Core is simply too difficult. “To me we are setting our kids up to fail,” one parent told CNN.²¹ “The reading passages are three levels above the child’s current grade level.”²²

To look more deeply at the state of our education system—and the state of standards-based reform—the authors of this report analyzed the latest data from two national assessments: NAEP and the Trial Urban District Assessment, or TUDA.

The NAEP assessment, long known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” was administered for the first time in 1969.²³ NAEP exams in math and reading are given every two years to a random sample of schools and students in each state and almost two dozen urban districts.²⁴

While NAEP assesses student progress at the national and state level, TUDA is used to report the performance of large urban districts.²⁵ The TUDA test was first administered in 2002 and served as a way to “focus attention on urban education” by providing district-level NAEP exams.²⁶ In 2002, there were only six participating urban districts; that number has since increased to 21 districts.

Using data from TUDA and NAEP, this report estimates the absolute number of students at or above proficient for each disaggregated group. We started with the overall percentages of students scoring proficient or above or scoring advanced or above on each NAEP exam in 2015. We then compared these data with estimates of the total school-age population for each group.²⁷ To our knowledge, this is the first time that such an analysis has been done.

Consider, for example, Cleveland, Ohio, where 6 percent of African American students who took the NAEP eighth-grade math test scored at the proficient level or above. However, only a subset of the district’s students actually took the NAEP.²⁸ We estimated that, if all the African American students in the district had actually taken the test, 6 percent of the approximately 1,340 such students—or approximately 80 total—would have scored proficient or above.²⁹ For this report, the authors rounded these totals to the nearest ten for the city-specific data because the results were approximations of the exact figure. For the state-level data, we rounded to the nearest hundred, thousand, or tens of thousands.

We looked at proficiency rates for several groups of students, including students of color and students with disabilities. We used these rates to estimate the total number of students in each group that were performing at the proficient or advanced level.

Our research revealed several key findings:

Some states and districts are making clear gains

In Massachusetts, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring proficient or above in math jumped from 41 percent in 2003 to 54 percent in 2013.³⁰ In other words, about 7,000 more fourth-graders in Massachusetts are reaching proficiency now than they were 10 years ago.³¹ In other states, such as Florida, the same rate rose from 31 percent to 42 percent, meaning around 22,000 more fourth-graders are scoring at grade level in math than they were 10 years ago.³²

Many districts have also made clear gains. Since 2002, thousands more students of color in the nation's cities have scored proficient or above on the reading and math NAEP exams.³³ In Boston, for instance, nearly 1,000 more Hispanic fourth- and eighth-graders are now proficient in math.³⁴ Similarly, the District of Columbia has also seen about 1,000 more fourth-graders scoring proficient or above in math and reading.³⁵ In Charlotte, at least 2,000 more fourth graders can now do math at grade level.³⁶

The state and local policy environment matters

Many of the cities and states that have embraced standards-based reform have seen clear gains. The District of Columbia, for instance, has been a national leader in the reform movement, and high school graduation rates and other student outcomes have been jumped upwards in the city.³⁷ Or take Charlotte, North Carolina. The district has long been strong on using accountability systems and data-driven decision-making to bolster achievement and narrow achievement gaps.³⁸

Perhaps the best example is Massachusetts, where there is a clear link between the state's standard-based reform efforts and a large jump in student outcomes.³⁹ Over the past decade, low-income students in the Bay State have seen a 12-point increase in scores on the fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP exams. Today, low-income students in Massachusetts are among the nation's highest performing.⁴⁰

While a rigorous analysis of the policy context in each city is far beyond the scope of this report, some reform-oriented areas have shown clear results.

In many locations, students of color and students living in poverty still have extraordinarily low achievement

According to our analysis, an estimated 120 black students in fourth grade score proficient or above on the NAEP mathematics assessment in Detroit. This is not a misprint: A reliable, high-quality exam shows that just a little more than 100 African American fourth-graders are performing grade-level work in math in the city.⁴¹

Students in other cities have similarly low results. In Atlanta, a depressing total of around 60 Hispanic fourth-graders score proficient or above on the reading NAEP exam. The numbers are even worse in Cleveland, where based on our estimates, only some 30 Latino eighth-graders would be considered proficient in math.⁴²

While this report calculated absolute numbers to highlight the dramatic extent of the education problem, the percentage outcomes for each of these cities is just as shocking. In fourth-grade reading, only 13 percent of Hispanic students in Cleveland reached proficiency. In fourth-grade math, only 11 percent of African American students in Atlanta reached proficiency. In Fresno, California, only 7 percent of low-income eighth-graders can read at grade level.⁴³

When it comes to students performing at the advanced level, outcomes are also rock bottom

In the entire United States, only about 123,000 eighth-graders—or 3 percent—scored at the advanced level in reading on the NAEP exams. Again, this is not a misprint: Just around 120,000 eighth graders are doing excellent work in middle school English language arts in the whole country.⁴⁴

In some states, the issue is also dire when it comes to high-level work, and only a few hundred students have reached the advanced level in some grades. Around 410 eighth-graders in Mississippi, for instance, are reading at the advanced level; in New Mexico, there are approximately 230 eighth-graders achieving at that level. In West Virginia, only about 610 eighth-graders are considered advanced in math.⁴⁵

While there has been substantial progress over the past decade—particularly in cities and states that have embraced standards-based reform—the nation still faces a pressing education crisis, particularly when it comes to students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. The sooner that the American public takes action, the better prepared the nation will be for the future.

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