

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE
Los Angeles Unified School District

INFORMATIVE

(Revised 3-21-06)

TO: Members, Board of Education Date: March 20, 2006

FROM: Randy Ross
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SUBJECT: HOW STRINGENT IS CALIFORNIA'S CST "PROFICIENCY" STANDARD?

Under No Child Left Behind, states decide how to assess the progress of their students. Moreover, while NCLB aims for "proficiency" in reading and math for all students by 2013-14, each state sets its own criteria for "proficiency." As a result, some states' performance standards are more stringent than others. Indeed, occasionally some Board members have noted that California's performance standards are higher than those of many other states in the union.

By mapping student performance state-level assessment results onto their corresponding NAEP scores, this informative seeks to shed greater light on this matter. Appendix C of Education Trust's recent report, "Primary Progress, Secondary Challenge: A State-by-State Look at Student Achievement Patterns" by Daria Hall and Shana Kennedy, March 2006 (www2.edtrust.org), contains both state assessment and NAEP data for 2005 for 45 states for 4th grade and 44 states for 8th grade. This Informative uses these data to conduct a comparative analysis. Because of missing data, several states are not included in the analysis: New Hampshire, North Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and Vermont. In addition to these states, Rhode Island was not included in the analysis for the middle school grades.

The analysis is guided by the following questions:

- (1) How stringent are state performance standards in relation to NAEP?
- (2) How does "proficiency" on the California Standards Tests (CST) compare with "proficiency" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)?
- (3) How does "proficiency" on CST compare with "proficiency" in other states?

Summary of Key Findings

Several key points flow from this analysis that could help to inform Board members' future discussions of the relative stringency of California's standards for student proficiency:

- (1) For elementary reading and math, California’s standard for student proficiency is higher than that of roughly 60 percent of all states;
- (2) For middle school reading and math, California’s “proficiency” standard is higher than that of about three-fourths of all states; and
- (3) If the feds view NAEP’s definition of “proficiency” as gospel, then virtually all states’ performance standards are too low, including California’s.
- (4) Cross-state comparisons of student performance using state-adopted measures generally lack validity. Notwithstanding questions regarding its definition of “proficiency,” NAEP offers the best available comparative measure of state performance.

Student Proficiency: States Compared With NAEP

On the average, states have assessed that about two-thirds of their elementary and middle school students are proficient in reading (see Table 1). However, if judged by NAEP scores, only about one-third of these students are proficient in reading -- (31% for elementary and 30% for middle schools). For math, states find that about two-thirds of their elementary students are proficient and 55 percent of their middle school students are proficient. Here, too, NAEP finds that only about one-third of the nation’s elementary and middle school students are proficient in math (35 percent for elementary and 29 percent for middle schools).

Table 1:
Performance of US Students on State Assessment and NAEP
National Averages

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	State Assessment: % Proficient and Above, 2005	NAEP: % Proficient and Above, 2005	NAEP: % Basic and Above, 2005
Reading	Elementary (4)	69%	31%	64%
	Middle (8)	64%	30%	73%
Math	Elementary (4)	65%	35%	80%
	Middle (8)	55%	29%	69%

Note: N = 45 for elementary and 44 for middle schools
States with missing data were not included in analysis.

In general, therefore, states find twice as many of their students proficient in reading and math as does NAEP. Indeed, the proportion of students deemed “proficient or higher” by states is closer to the proportion of America’s students that NAEP views as “basic or above” (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 2
State Proficiency Vs NAEP Proficiency –
All States - Averages of State Ratios

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	RATIO: State to NAEP Proficient+	RATIO: State to NAEP Basic +
Reading	Elementary (4)	2.33	1.09
	Middle (8)	2.21	0.88
Math	Elementary (4)	1.91	0.82
	Middle (8)	1.98	0.80

One might also ask whether the NAEP and state assessment measures of student proficiency are highly correlated. That is, do states with high internal measures of proficiency also have relatively high proportions of students judged proficient by NAEP? Our analysis reveals that there is virtually no relationship between state elementary reading proficiency and NAEP reading proficiency. Moreover, the correlation between state “proficiency” and NAEP is weak for other areas (i.e., elementary and middle school math and middle school reading). For example, of the 45 states in the elementary school analysis, Mississippi has the highest percent of students who are proficient on its internal test (89%). Oddly, Mississippi also has the lowest percent of students who are proficient on NAEP (18%). (See Table 3.)

Table 3:
States with Highest State-to-NAEP Percent Proficient Ratios

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	RATIO: State to NAEP Proficient+	RATIO: State to NAEP Basic +
Reading	Elementary (4)	Mississippi (4.94)	Mississippi (1.85)
	Middle (8)	West Virginia (3.64)	North Carolina (1.28)
Math	Elementary (4)	Mississippi (4.16)	Mississippi (1.14)
	Middle (8)	Alabama (4.20)	Alabama (1.19)

The state’s whose internal measures of student proficiency are lowest relative to their NAEP proficiency rates is Louisiana (see Table 4). For elementary reading, the state’s percent proficient is close to NAEP’s percentage. For middle school reading, elementary math, and middle school math, Louisiana’s student performance standards appear somewhat more stringent than NAEP’s.

Table 4:
States with Lowest State-to-NAEP Ratios

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	RATIO: State to NAEP Proficient+	RATIO: State to NAEP Basic +
Reading	Elementary (4)	Louisiana (1.05)	Louisiana (0.40)
	Middle (8)	Louisiana (0.75)	Louisiana (0.24)
Math	Elementary (4)	Louisiana (0.65)	Louisiana (0.20)
	Middle (8)	Louisiana (0.44)	Louisiana (0.20)

An apparent implication of these differences is that states such as Mississippi will experience far less difficulty (than states such as Louisiana) in moving students toward 100% proficiency under NCLB

Student Proficiency: Comparing California to NAEP and Other States

So where does California fit into this picture? As Table 5 shows, about one-half of California’s fourth graders scored proficient in reading and math on the CST. However, NAEP reported proficiency for 21 percent and 28 percent, respectively, of these students. For fourth grader reading, California’s internal assessment ascribes “proficiency” to over twice as many fourth graders as NAEP (see Table 6). Indeed, for this grade and subject, California’s notion of “proficiency and above” is closer to NAEP’s lower category of “basic and above” – as was the case for the nation at large.

Table 5:
Performance of California Students on CST and NAEP

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	State Assessment: % Proficient and Above, 2005	NAEP: % Proficient and Above, 2005	NAEP: % Basic and Above, 2005
Reading	Elementary (4)	47%	21%	50%
	Middle (8)	39%	21%	60%
Math	Elementary (4)	50%	28%	71%
	Middle (8)	37%	22%	57%

For the other subjects and grade levels, the ratio of California proficiency to NAEP proficiency falls below two. However, while the California-NAEP “proficiency” ratios are relatively high, most states in the sample (from 56 percent to 77 percent) have even higher ratios than California. Overall, the relative stringency of California’s proficiency standard for elementary reading and math is just above the national average. For middle schools, however, California’s proficiency standard is higher than about three-fourths of states.

Table 6:
California Proficiency Vs NAEP Proficiency

Subject	State School Level (NAEP Grade)	RATIO: State to NAEP Proficient+	RATIO: State to NAEP Basic +	Percent of States with Higher Ratio than California	
				RATIO: State to NAEP Proficient+	RATIO: State to NAEP Basic +
Reading	Elementary (4)	2.24	0.94	56%	76%
	Middle (8)	1.86	0.65	77%	86%
Math	Elementary (4)	1.79	0.70	60%	73%
	Middle (8)	1.68	0.65	75%	75%

cc:

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