

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

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## What is a Performance Standard?

In the world of measurement and achievement testing, content and performance standards are important concepts.

### Content Standards

Content standards are descriptions of the knowledge and skills that students should possess, or descriptions of what students should know and be able to do. Examples of content standards might include the following: students will be able to use a microscope to identify specific objects, or students will know important events that led up to the U.S. Civil War.

### Performance Standards

A performance standard defines what a student must know and/or be able to do to attain a certain level, such as passing a test or scoring proficient on some measurement scale.

### Setting Performance Standards

By definition, identifying performance standards is arbitrary. On Wisconsin's Knowledge & Concepts Examination (WKCE) there are four levels of performance (commonly referred to as proficiency levels or proficiency categories by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction):

1. Advanced,
2. Proficient,
3. Basic, and
4. Minimal.

Wisconsin's performance standards were set in February of 2003 by a group of 240 citizens, including educators, government leaders, and representatives of business and labor. The standards were set by examining actual student response on the WKCE and

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using their own personal judgment. They met over a period of three days in Madison to set the four performance standards on each test.

## **Cut scores**

Establishing performance standards on a multiple choice test requires the identification of a cut score—one that separates students who score below a certain level from students who score above that level. Some tests have only a single cut score—one that defines pass and fail.

Other tests, such as those used by the State of Wisconsin, have several cut scores, which then are used to place students into one of several levels of performance--such as minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced.

## **Standard-Setting Methods**

There are numerous standard-setting procedures, all of which require human judgment by qualified persons.<sup>1</sup> It's important to recognize that different standard-setting methods tend to result in different cut scores. Even different groups of people using the same procedure are likely to end up with different results.<sup>2</sup>

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the more common methods are the following: Nedelsky, Angoff, Ebel, Borderline Group, Contrasting Groups, and Bookmark.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent summary of standard setting see: A Primer on Setting Cut Scores on Tests of Educational Achievement by Michael Zieky & Marianne Perie. Available online: [http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Cut\\_Scores\\_Primer.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Cut_Scores_Primer.pdf).