

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #3

Fall 2011

What Does it Mean to be Proficient in Reading or Mathematics?

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law passed in 2001 required each state to establish its own definitions of Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Minimal. The definition of proficient is crucial because this law requires 100% of students in each state to be proficient by 2013-14.

Common dictionary definitions define proficiency as an advanced level of expertise or knowledge:

- “Performing in a given art, skill, or branch of learning with expert correctness and facility,” taken from the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines proficient as “well advanced in an art, occupation, or branch of knowledge.”

In addition to states’ establishing different definitions of “proficient,” national standards were set as well. Wisconsin’s definition of proficient differs from that used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

- The National Assessment Governing Board (of NAEP) defines proficient as “competency over challenging subject matter.”
- Proficient in Wisconsin, however, is defined by the Department of Public Instruction as being when a student is “at grade level.”¹

As might be expected, results differ on the percent of students scoring proficient on the state and NAEP tests. The Center for Public Education and others suggest that the discrepancies between the percent proficient on NAEP and state tests results from the fact that different definitions of proficient were used.² This certainly is the case in Wisconsin.

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- Forty percent of Wisconsin fourth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading on tests administered by NAEP in 2009³, while the figure given by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for state tests was 81%.⁴ A similar difference is found in most states.
- Likewise, on the 2007 NAEP mathematics assessment, 37% of Wisconsin's eighth graders were proficient or advanced. This compares with the 75% proficient or advanced on Wisconsin's 8th grade mathematics test.

The consequences of these differences were predictable: critics charged that Wisconsin and other states deliberately set their standards low in order to mislead the public.⁵ In 2009, the Secretary of Education entered into the fray by accusing states of “low balling” expectations to meet the requirements set by the federal education law.⁶

Why is Wisconsin's definition of proficient different from that of National Assessment?

Under No Child Left Behind, 95% of students in a school and district must be tested each year, and 100% must score proficient on state tests by 2013-14. When Wisconsin's standards were set in 2003, the standards-setting committee, which was comprised of citizens, educators, government leaders, and representatives of business and labor, was aware of the 100% requirement. The committee set a practical standard they thought students would be able to meet.

Think of it this way: suppose every student in a school is required to run a mile within a certain time or the school will face serious sanctions, including “restructuring” or dissolution. Faced with these possibilities, it would be irrational for the school to establish a “world class standard,” such as a five-minute mile—few students could achieve it. Instead, a 15-minute mile would be a more reasonable target.

If there is blame to be assessed for these so-called weak performance standards, we might start with those who established the impossible target of having every student score proficient or advanced on state tests under NCLB. They should have known that when 100 percent of students have to meet any goal, that goal must be obtainable.

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Is NAEP's definition of proficient reasonable?

On the U.S. Department of Education website there are three statements that are critical of both the process and product of the NAEP standard-setting procedures.⁷

The first statement, from the National Academy of Sciences, concluded that "NAEP's current achievement level setting procedures remain fundamentally flawed. The judgment tasks are difficult and confusing; raters' judgments of different item types are internally inconsistent; appropriate validity evidence for the cut scores is lacking; and the process has produced unreasonable results." Many of these standards were set in the mid-1990s.

We also learn that, in 2001, Congress reauthorized the Elementary Secondary Education Act, also called No Child Left Behind. With reauthorization, Congress stipulated that NAEP achievement levels be used on a trial basis until the Commissioner of Education Statistics determines that the achievement levels are "reasonable, valid, and informative to the public."

Until that determination is made, the National Assessment Governing Board must clearly note the trial status of achievement levels in all NAEP reports. The National Center of Education Statistics agrees, suggesting that NAEP scores should continue to be "interpreted and used with caution." This so-called "trial basis" use of NAEP standards that were set in the 1990s goes on and on and is used today to discredit standards set by many states nationally.

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Endnotes

¹ "NAEP and State Assessments." Retrieved on August 20, 2010: <http://dpi.wi.gov/oea/pdf/naepfacts.pdf>.

² "The proficiency debate; a guide to NAEP achievement levels." Retrieved on August 20, 2010: http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/site/c.lvIXIiN0JwE/b.5057641/k.9D8F/The_proficiency_debate_A_guide_to_NAEP_achievement_levels.htm.

³ "NAEP State Profiles." Retrieved on August 15, 2010: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.

⁴ "How did students perform on state tests at grades 3-8 and 10?" Retrieved on August 20, 2010: <http://data.dpi.state.wi.us/Data/StateTestsPerformance.aspx?GraphFile=BlankPageUrl&S4orALL=1&SRegion=1&SCounty=47&SAthleticConf=45&SCESA=05&FULLKEY=``````````&Qquad=performance.aspx>.

⁵ "State sets low test standards." Retrieved on August 29, 2010: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/29257294.html>).

⁶ State Standards Rising in Reading but Not in Math. Retrieved on August 20, 2010: <http://educationnext.org/state-standards-rising-in-reading-but-not-in-math/>.

⁷ "The Status of Achievement Levels." Retrieved on August 20, 2010: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/achlevdev.asp?id=sc>).