

spotlight

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THE ABCs OF PUBLIC DISGRACE

North Carolina's school-accountability system has misled parents and taxpayers

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The state's end-of-year and end-of-course tests should be replaced with an independent, field-tested, and credible national test of student performance, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. North Carolina should also set an intermediate goal of at least half of students showing proficiency and 90 percent testing at the "basic" level as defined by reputable national tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

2. Between 1997 and 2007, the General Assembly appropriated nearly \$1 billion for ABC bonuses, but this program has failed in its stated intention to connect teacher rewards to real gains in student achievement. Thus, in addition to measuring, reporting, and rewarding overall growth in school test scores, the state and local school districts should reward individual teachers based on the value they add to the performance of their students.

3. State policymakers should deregulate and decentralize public schools — while maintaining accountability for results — by abolishing teacher tenure and rigid certification rules and also by giving districts more flexibility in spending existing dollars.

for the last 10 years, the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction have perpetrated a major fraud that has cheated North Carolina's students of a quality education.

Beginning in 1996, the state implemented a comprehensive program of education testing called the ABCs of Public Education. It did not take long for state leaders to declare North Carolina a national leader in implementing state-level accountability measures. In 1999, then Governor James Hunt declared that, "we're holding our schools accountable for results. Education Week Magazine says no state is doing more than North Carolina to put in place real and meaningful accountability measures."

Now state education officials admit that some of these accountability measures have been neither real nor meaningful. As a result, the State Board of Education slightly raised the standards on 2005-2006 math tests to align state

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proficiency standards with the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards. For the last ten years, the state classified a high percentage of North Carolina’s students as proficient on state math tests, but the U.S. Department of Education classified a much lower percentage of our students as proficient on federal NAEP math tests. The sizeable difference between the two percentages suggests that the North Carolina state standards have been relatively lax for several years, especially when compared to states with a rigorous state testing program such as South Carolina.

While the 2005-2006 math standards are an improvement over the remarkably weak 2004-2005 standards, they are hardly rigorous. To be classified as proficient on the 2004-2005 end-of-grade math tests, students were required to answer an average of 40.7 percent of the questions correctly (33 out of 80). To be classified as proficient on the 2005-2006 end-of-grade math tests, students were required to answer an average of 49.4 percent of the questions correctly (25 out of 50). Despite raising the passing level, students who answered half of the questions incorrectly on most state math tests would still be classified as proficient or performing at grade level.

Moreover, students who guess on these exams can significantly offset the effect of raising the passing level. Students could be classified as proficient on the 2005-2006 math tests if they knew the answers to only 32.5 percent of the questions (17 out of 50) and guessed on the rest. That percentage dropped to an average of 24 percent (12 out of 50) for students who could eliminate one option before guessing.

The N.C. End-of-Grade Test vs. the Federal NAEP Test

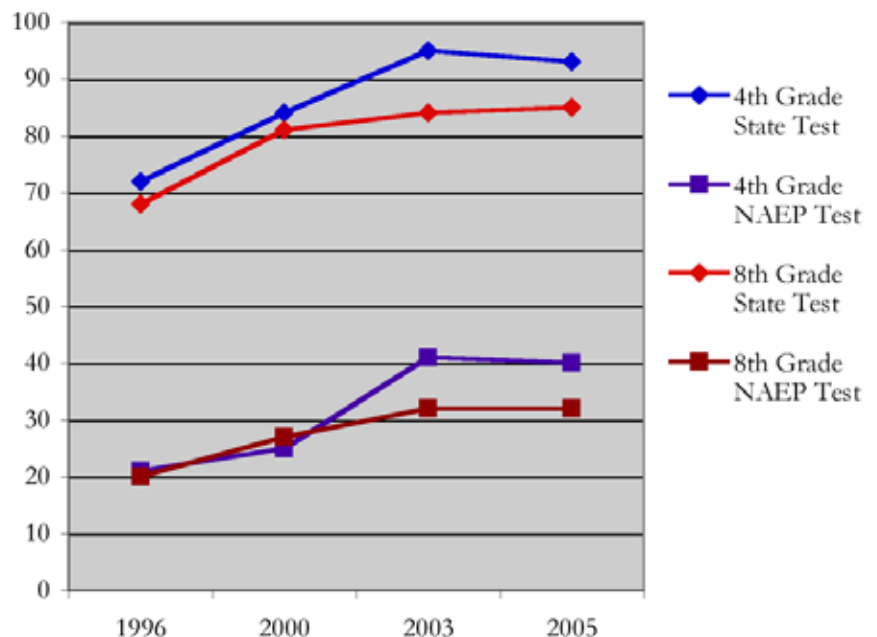
In October 2006, the North Carolina State Board of Education set new math achievement levels in order to align state proficiency standards with the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards.¹ Over ten years, the Department of Public Instruction reported math proficiency scores that were significantly higher than reported on the NAEP test (see Figure 1).

North Carolina’s state standards are among the weakest of any state in the nation. Paul E. Peterson of Harvard University and Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute have published an insightful study designed to assess the rigor of state proficiency levels.² Because of the large gap between the state End-of-Grade (EOG) and NAEP test results, North Carolina received an overall grade of “D-” in last year’s edition and an “F” in this year’s edition of the study.

Peterson and Hess calculated the difference between the percentage of students who met proficiency standards on state tests and those that met proficiency standards on the NAEP reading and mathematics tests for each state. A larger gap between the two means that state standards are less rigorous. This is a useful comparison that has been replicated in other studies of state testing.³ As Peterson and Hess point out, these results do not assess student performance. Instead, the results allow researchers to compare state testing standards to a common, federally-mandated standard, that is, the highly-regarded NAEP test.

The gap in proficiency percentages between North Carolina’s state math tests and the NAEP math tests are the largest of any state in the region (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT (AND ABOVE) ON STATE EOG AND NAEP MATH TESTS (NAEP TESTING YEARS ONLY)



What does this mean? While a high percentage of North Carolina's students are categorized as proficient on state tests (between 85 and 93 percent in 2005), a low percentage of our students are categorized as proficient on NAEP tests (between 32 and 40 percent in 2005). The sizeable difference between the two percentages (53 percent in 2005) suggests that the North Carolina state standards are relatively lax compared to other states' standards.

South Carolina, on the other hand, has much higher state standards than any other state in the region or nation. In fact, South Carolina was only one of six states to receive an "A" from Peterson and Hess. In 2005, South Carolina's 4th and 8th grade math proficiency results were almost identical to the NAEP results (a difference of -7 percent and 5 percent respectively), while North Carolina's state math standards were considerably lower (a difference of 53 percent) than the NAEP standards. Peterson and Hess aptly concluded, "Suzy could be a good reader in North Carolina, where standards are low, but a failure in neighboring South Carolina, where standards are higher."⁵

End-Of-Grade Math Tests: A Higher Standard?

The State Board of Education recently announced that they had raised math standards (cut lines) for the 2005-2006 end-of-grade math tests. But despite a drop in pass rates, this change did not make the tests considerably more difficult to pass. Just how much does the change "raise the bar," as state education Superintendent June Atkinson promised it would?⁷

To be classified as proficient on the 2004-05 end-of-grade math tests, students were required to answer an average of 40.7 percent of the questions correctly (33 out of 80). This ranged from a high of 53.75 percent on the 3rd grade test to a low of 33.75 percent on the 8th grade test (see Table 1).

To be classified as proficient on the 2005-06 end-of-grade math tests, students were required to answer an average of 49.4 percent of the questions correctly (25 out of 50). This ranged from a high of 52 percent on the 5th grade math test to a low of 48 percent on the 6th and 7th grade tests. Despite raising the passing level on the

Figure 2. Differences in Proficiency Percentages of 4th Grade Students in Math — 2005 Tests
Higher percentages equal less rigorous tests⁴

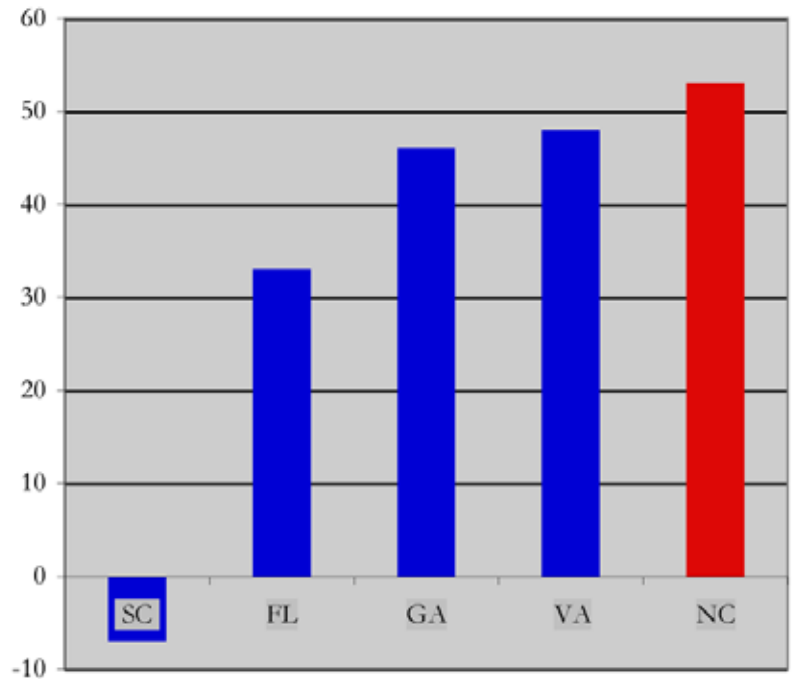


Figure 3. Differences in Proficiency Percentages of 8th Grade Students in Math — 2005 Tests
Higher percentages equal less rigorous tests⁶

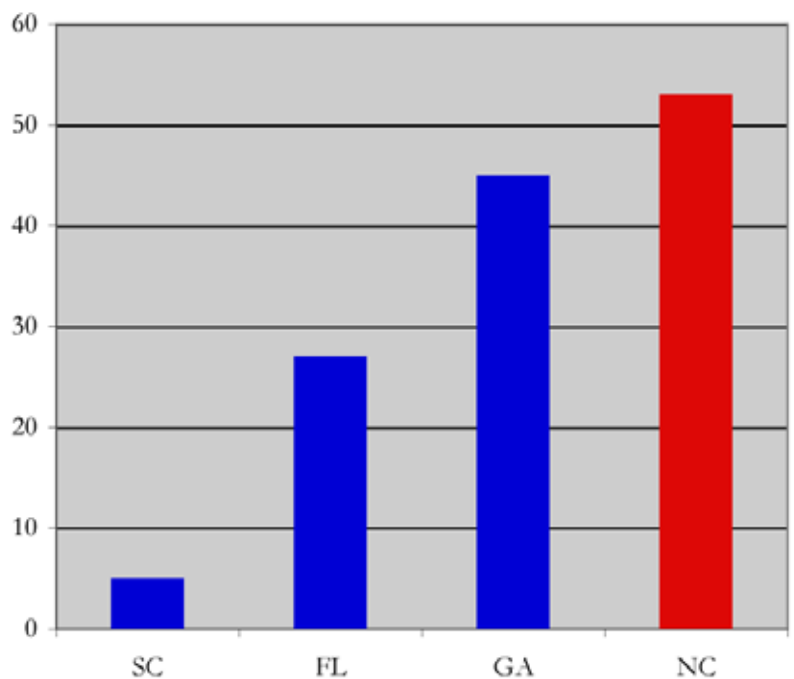


TABLE 1. HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED TO KNOW TO PASS AN END-OF-GRADE MATH TEST?⁸

<i>Year</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>No. of Questions</i>	<i>Pass Rate</i>	<i>No. Correct Answers Required to Pass</i>	<i>Pct. Correct Answers Required to Pass</i>	<i>Pct. Correct Answers Required to Pass (1/4 Guess)</i>	<i>Pct. Correct Answers Required to Pass (1/3 Guess)</i>
2004-05	3	80	86.10%	43	53.75%	38.33%	30.63%
2005-06	3	50	68.70%	25	50.00%	33.33%	25.00%
<i>Change:</i>					-3.75%	-5.00%	-5.63%
2004-05	4	80	92.30%	34	42.50%	23.33%	13.75%
2005-06	4	50	65.90%	25	50.00%	33.33%	25.00%
<i>Change:</i>					7.50%	10.00%	11.25%
2004-05	5	80	90.90%	30	37.50%	16.67%	6.25%
2005-06	5	50	63.90%	26	52.00%	36.00%	28.00%
<i>Change:</i>					12.50%	19.33%	21.75%
2004-05	6	80	90.20%	30.5	38.13%	17.50%	7.19%
2005-06	6	50	62.50%	24	48.00%	30.67%	22.00%
<i>Change:</i>					13.88%	13.17%	14.81%
2004-05	7	80	85.20%	31	38.75%	18.33%	8.13%
2005-06	7	50	62.30%	24	48.00%	30.67%	22.00%
<i>Change:</i>					9.25%	12.33%	13.88%
2004-05	8	80	84.80%	27	33.75%	11.67%	0.63%
2005-06	8	60	61.10%	29	48.33%	31.11%	22.50%
<i>Change:</i>					14.58%	19.44%	21.88%

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math tests, students who answered half of the questions wrong would still be classified as performing at grade level on nearly all end-of-grade math tests (see Table 1).

Guessing can significantly offset the effect of raising the passing level. In fact, for the 2004-05 math tests, students could easily attain grade-level proficiency by guessing. With the exception of the 3rd and 4th grade math tests, if students could eliminate one of the four multiple choice test options before guessing, they needed to know less than 9 percent of answers (7 out of 80) to be classified as proficient (See Table 1).

Students could be classified as proficient on the 2005-2006 math tests if they knew the answers to only 32.5 percent of the questions (17 out of 50) and guessed on the rest. That percentage dropped to an average of 24 percent (12 out of 50) for students who could eliminate one of the four multiple choice test options before guessing (see Table 1).

Even though the 2005-06 math standards are an improvement over the remarkably weak 2004-05 standards, they are hardly rigorous.

TABLE 2. GENERAL FUND APPROPRIATION FOR ABC BONUSES, FY 1997-98 TO FY 2006-07

<i>Year</i>	<i>Appropriation</i>
1997-98	\$72,400,000
1998-99	\$89,425,243
1999-2000	\$118,000,000
2000-01	\$120,000,000
2001-02	\$93,100,000
2002-03	\$101,000,000
2003-04	\$96,000,000
2004-05	\$108,000,000
2005-06	\$100,000,000
2006-07	\$90,000,000
<i>Total</i>	\$987,925,243

ABC Bonuses: A Billion-Dollar Entitlement Program

Between 1997 and 2007, the General Assembly appropriated nearly \$1 billion for ABC bonuses (see Table 2).⁹ The purpose of the program was to offer the entire faculty and staff of a school a monetary incentive to improve student performance on state-administered end-of-grade and end-of-course tests. Thus, even low-performing faculty and staff members receive a bonus, as long as they worked in a school that met the requirements for a bonus.

Considering North Carolina's history of low state testing standards, the bonuses have been easy to earn. In 2003, for example, 94 percent of schools qualified for ABC bonuses. The state's low standards even allowed teachers at low-performing schools to obtain bonuses for marginal improvements in student performance. In 2005, every faculty and staff member at six Guilford County high schools received ABC bonuses for gains in test scores, even though the state listed all six as among the worst high schools in the state.¹⁰ Rather than rewarding individual excellence, the ABC bonus program is an entitlement program tied to a weak accountability system.

Conclusion: An Accountability System Beyond Repair

The State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction have failed to respond to years of criticism of the ABCs testing program's lack of rigor, transparency, and comparability.

For years, the John Locke Foundation has led the chorus of individuals and groups that recognize that North Carolina's state tests are too easy to pass. Moreover, the John Locke Foundation has been a leader in calling for the Department of Public Instruction to release detailed information about the total cost of the testing program, the methodology used to establish cut lines and proficiency levels, the process used to develop and adopt test questions, and details of the state's data analysis. Instead, the Department of Public Instruction has conducted this program in near absolute secrecy. Finally, the John Locke Foundation has been at the forefront of calling for a nationally normed test that would measure North Carolina students against those throughout the country.

After all, in 1998 the John Locke Foundation observed, "If you set your bar of expectations low, it's been proven that students will follow suit." After ten years of low expectations, it is time to lead students in a different direction.

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Notes

1. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "State Board of Education Raises Standards for Student Achievement," October 12, 2006, www.dpi.state.nc.us/newsroom/news/2006-07/20061012-01.
2. Paul E. Peterson and Frederick M. Hess, "Keeping an Eye on State Standards: A Race to the Bottom?" *Education Next*, Summer 2006, pp. 28-29.
3. For example, see Jennifer Sloan McCombs, "Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, A Long Uphill Road: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York," *The Rand Corporation*, 2005, pp. 55-60.
4. NAEP data obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states. State testing data obtained from the state department of education websites.
5. *Op. cit.* at note 2, p. 28.
6. *Op. cit.* at note 4. Eighth grade math scores were not available for Virginia.
7. Todd Silberman, "Fewer High Schools Meet Goals," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh), October 6, 2006.
8. Data provided by William T. Lynch, Ph.D., October 6, 2006. The original spreadsheet has been abridged and slightly reformatted for the purposes of this report. The mean scores for 2004-05 and 2005-06 (all grades and for three different assumptions of sigma, 10%, 12%, and 14%) and the differences in the mean values between the 2005-06 and 2004-05 tests have not been included here.
9. Data provided by Adam Levinson, Fiscal Research Division, North Carolina General Assembly, October 30, 2006. If a school meets a state-established growth standard on its ABC tests, each certified teacher and administrator receives a bonus up to \$750. If a school exceeds that standard, certified staff receives a bonus up to \$1,500. Teacher assistants receive up to \$375 and \$500 respectively.
10. Bruce Buchanan, "Low-testing schools still get bonuses in ABCs," *Greensboro News & Record*, September 24, 2005.