



The Role of “High Performance Standards” in American Education

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Introduction

Every two years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) releases state level results in reading and mathematics for fourth and eighth graders. Following the release of NAEP results, studies about the rigor of the states’ performance standards appear. The recent studies about the rigor of state performance standards include *Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto NAEP Scales: Results From the 2015 NAEP Reading and Mathematics Assessments* (Bandeira de Mello, Rahman & Park, 2018), and *Have States Maintained High Expectations for Student Performance? An analysis of 2017 state proficiency standards* (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018).

Many of America’s media outlets report the major studies of “proficiency standards”. Here are some important “media takes” about the two recent studies that the new media shared with the American public:

High standards not associated with student achievement. Comparison of state proficiency standards released today by the National Center for Education Statistics that looks at 2015 data. But more states than ever, including Louisiana, are raising their standards closer to the proficiency bar set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress — commonly referred to as the Nation’s Report Card. But just because state standards are higher, that doesn’t mean students are performing better. Carr said there is no correlation between states with high standards and test results (Stringer, 2018).

Standards are not about student achievement. This is not information about how well kids are doing in school, Paul Peterson, the study’s author, explained. This is only a measure of how high the bar has been set for evaluating students (Marra, 2018).

Hope that high standards might improve instruction. But not all education experts will be pleased by the upwards shift in state proficiency levels.... Yet Carr is hopeful about the trend toward higher standards, noting that more rigorous classroom work might come out of it (Abamu, 2018).

State proficiency standards are too low. A new Stanford University analysis of state and national test scores shows more Ohio students pass state exams than similar nationwide tests, which researchers say means the state's proficiency standards are too low (Marra, 2018).

States mislead public about student performance. If states set their proficiency bar high, the difference between their test and the NAEP will be small. However, states have been setting their bar low, leading people to believe students were prepared for life after high school. In reality, [...] they were falling behind (Lardieri, 2018).

Standards used to praise or condemn a state. For the first time ever, the authors of the report from Education Next gave Tennessee an A for the state's academic standards in 2017, after the state had received a B or B-grade for several years and an F for the state's academic standards in 2009 (Staff Reports, 2018).

High Standards and Student Achievement

Proficiency standards are NOT about how well kids are doing in school. Indeed, there is very little, if any, correlation between the rigor a state's proficiency standards and overall student achievement in the state. The magnitude of *this lack of correlation*, to be fully comprehended and appreciated, must be seen in a simple graphic format.

Figures 1 through 4 describe the correlation between the rigor of state performance standards denoted as *letter grades* (A, A-, B+, B, etc.), as calculated by Hamlin & Peterson (2018), and the state average scores on the 2017 NAEP.

The correlations from the Hamlin and Peterson study were 0.045 for grade 4 reading, 0.047 for grade 8 reading, -0.028 for grade 4 mathematics, and -0.058 for grade 8 mathematics.

Figures 5 through 8 describe the correlation between the rigor of state performance standards denoted as *NAEP equivalent scores*, as calculated by Bandeira de Mello, Rahman & Park (2018), and the state average scores on the 2015 NAEP.

The correlations from the Bandeira de Mello study were -0.077 for grade 4 reading, 0.010 for grade 8 reading, -0.185 for grade 4 mathematics, and 0.314 for grade 8 mathematics.

Just because state standards are higher, that does not mean students are performing better. Peggy G. Carr, acting commissioner of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) understood there is no correlation between states with high standards and test results (Stringer, 2018). Nonetheless, she expressed hope that the trend toward higher standards *might somehow* result in more rigorous classroom work (Abamu, 2018).

Reading “Achievement vs. Standard,” Grade 4 and Grade 8

Sources: Hamlin and Peterson (2018), and NAEP Data Explorer

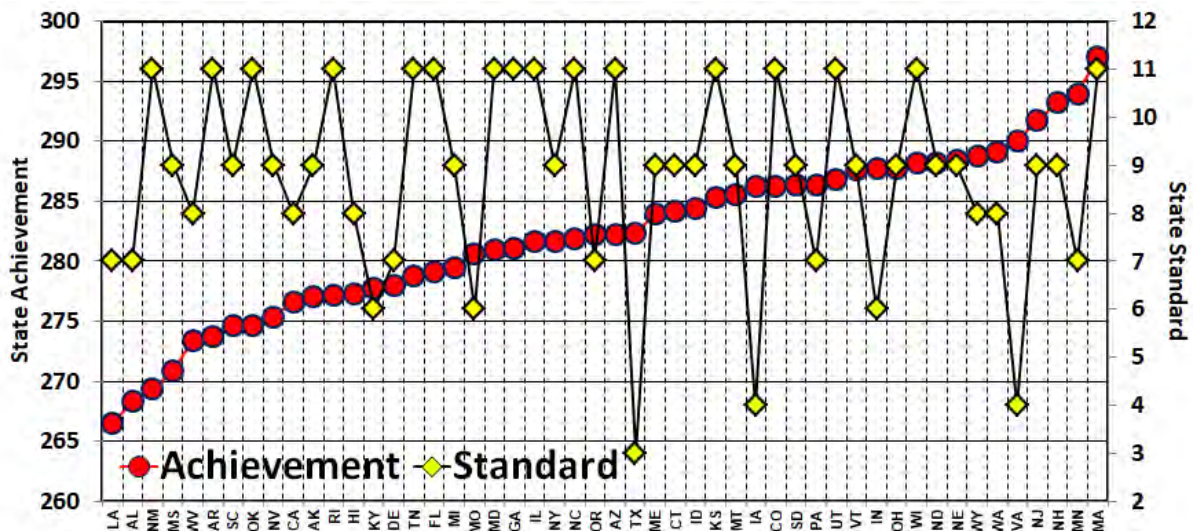


Figure 1. The association between the “Letter Grades” assigned to state fourth grade reading standards for achievement and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP fourth grade reading assessment, 2017. The standard vs. achievement correlation for fourth grade reading: $r = 0.045$.

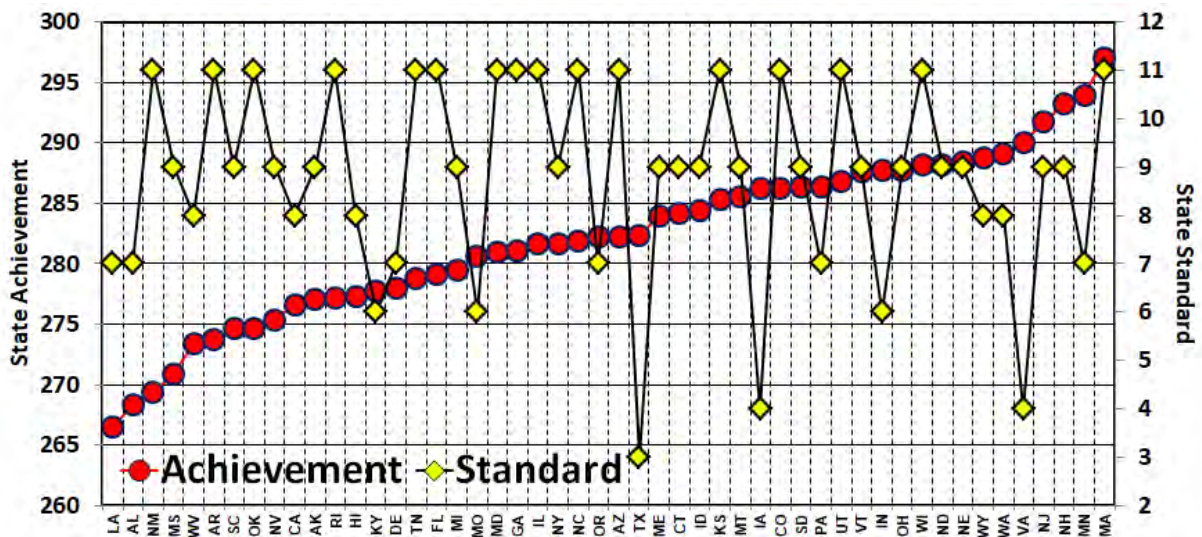


Figure 2. The association between the “Letter Grades” assigned to state eighth grade reading standards and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP eighth grade reading assessment, 2017. The “achievement vs. standard correlation” for eighth grade reading: $r = 0.047$.

Mathematics “Achievement vs. Standard,” Grade 4 and Grade 8

Sources: Hamlin and Peterson (2018), and NAEP Data Explorer

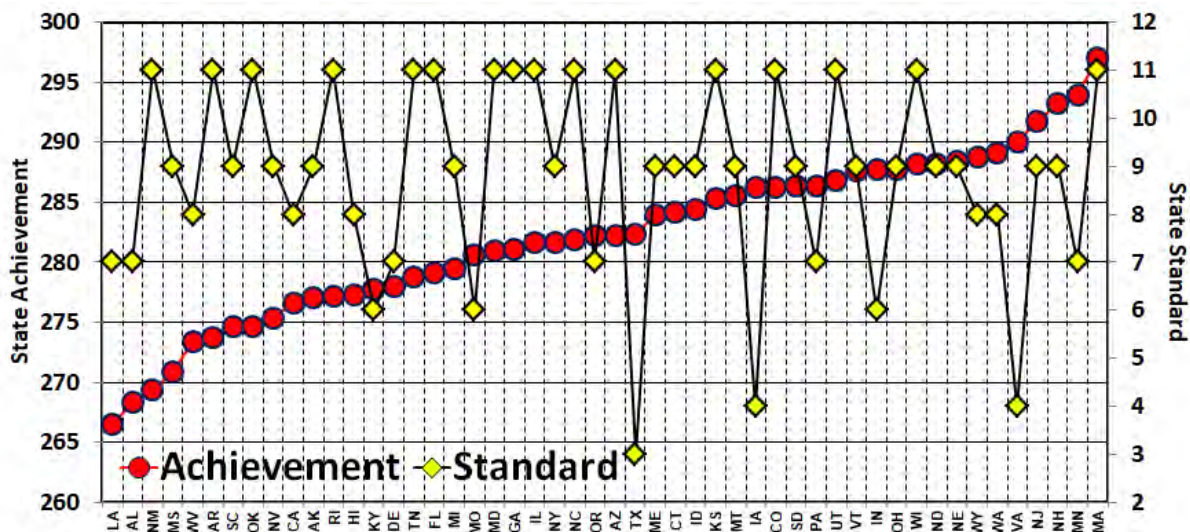


Figure 3. The association between the “Letter Grades” assigned to state fourth grade mathematics standards for achievement and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP fourth grade mathematics assessment, 2017. The “achievement vs. standard” correlation for fourth grade reading: $r = -0.028$.

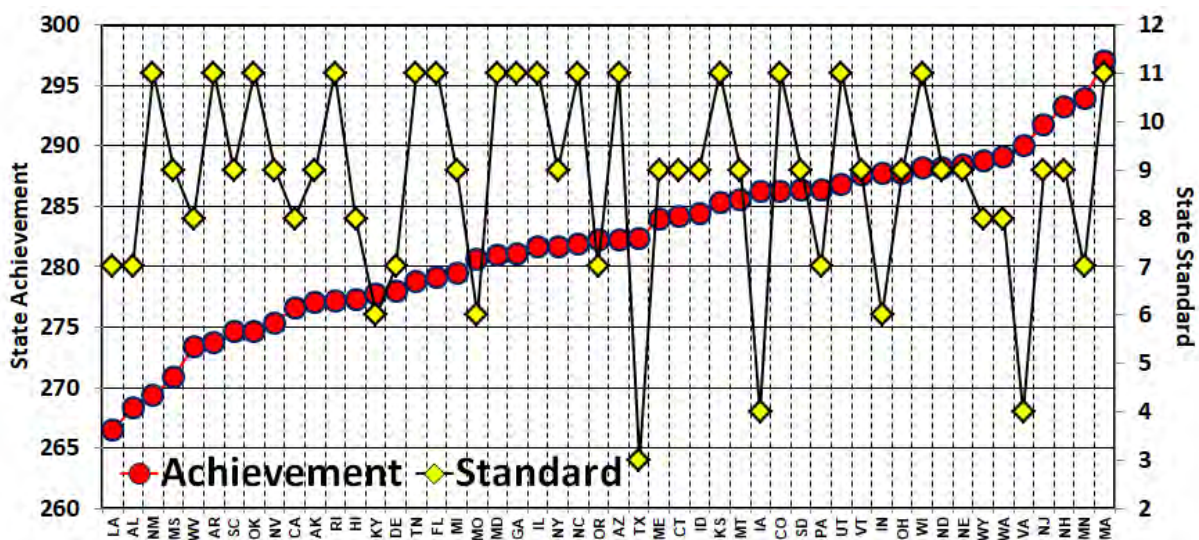


Figure 4. The association between the “Letter Grades” assigned to state eighth grade mathematics standards and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP eighth grade mathematics assessment, 2017. The “achievement vs. standard” correlation for eighth grade mathematics: $r = -0.058$.

Reading “Standard vs. Achievement,” Grade 4 and Grade 8

Sources: Bandeira de Mello, Rahman, & Park (2018) and NAEP Data Explorer

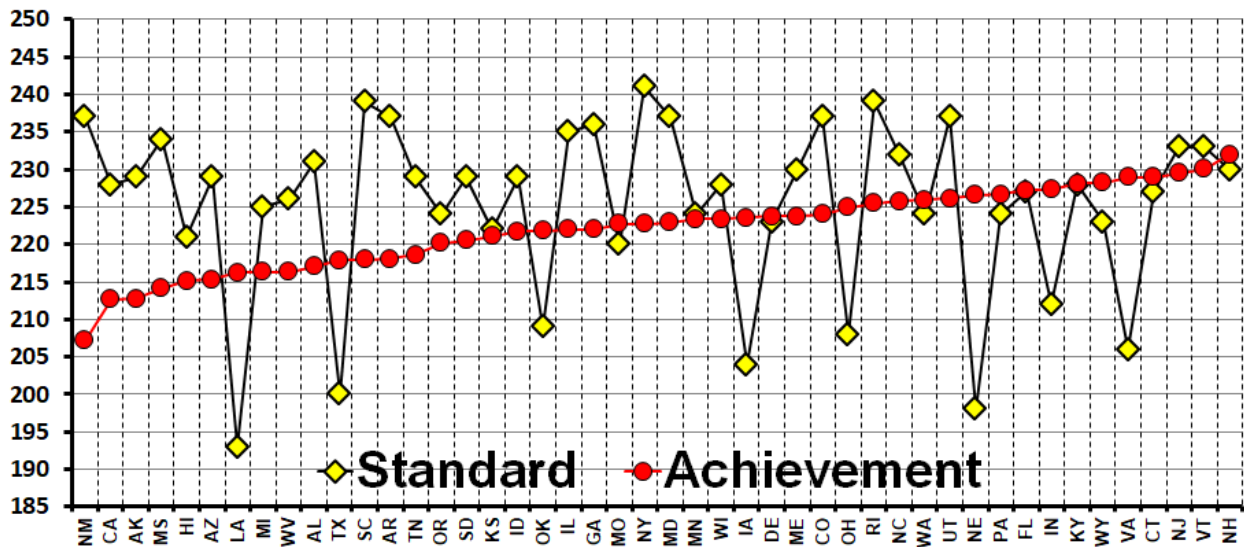


Figure 5. The association between the “NAEP scale equivalents” of state fourth grade reading standards for “proficient” performance and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP fourth grade reading assessment, 2015. The “standard vs. achievement” correlation for fourth grade reading: $r = -0.077$.

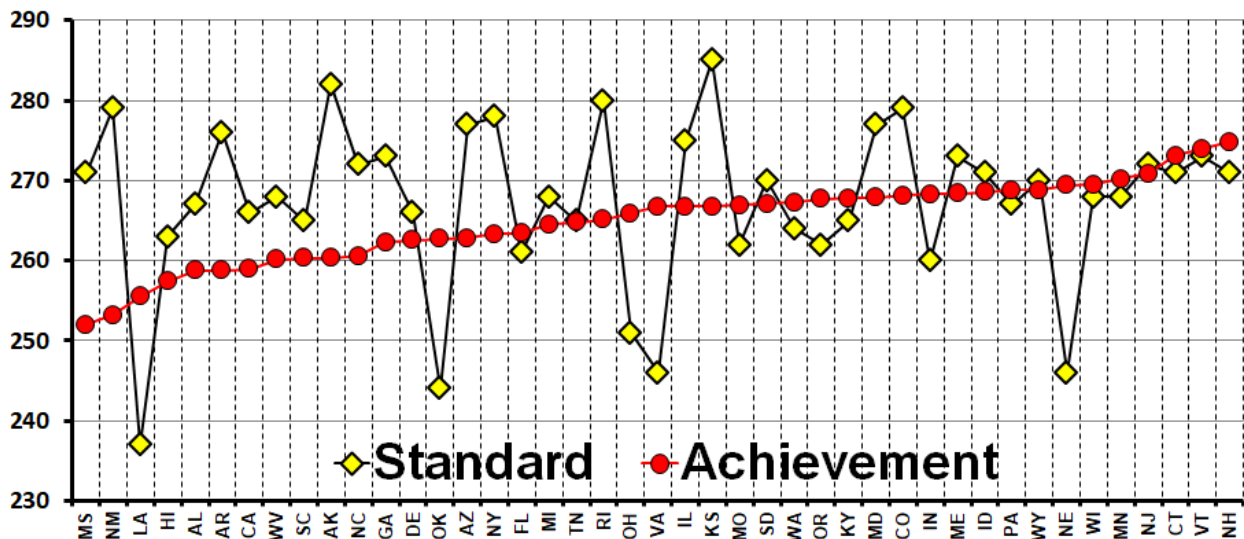


Figure 6. The association between the “NAEP scale equivalents” of state eighth grade reading standards for “proficient” performance and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP eighth grade reading assessment, 2015. The “standard vs. achievement” correlation for eighth grade reading: $r = 0.010$.

Mathematics “Standard vs. Achievement,” Grade 4 and Grade 8

Sources: Bandeira de Mello, Rahman, & Park (2018) and NAEP Data Explorer

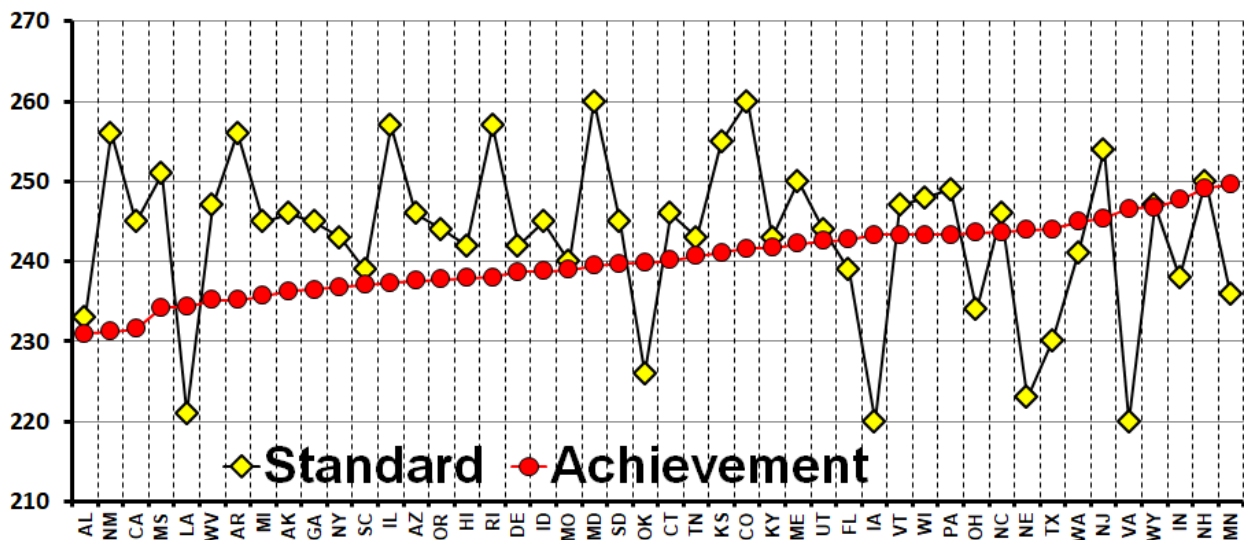


Figure 7. The association between the “NAEP scale equivalents” of state fourth grade mathematics standards for “proficient” performance and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP fourth grade reading assessment, 2015. The “standard vs. achievement” correlation for fourth grade mathematics: $r = -0.185$.

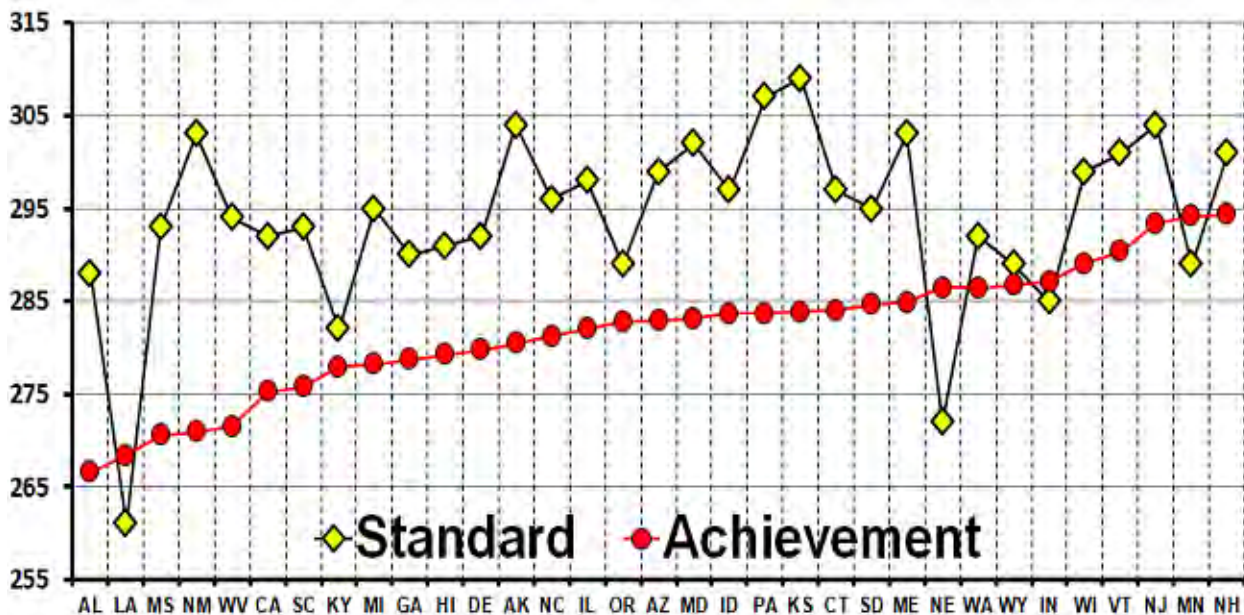


Figure 8. The association between the “NAEP scale equivalents” of state eighth grade mathematics standards for “proficient” performance and the observed performance of students in the state on the NAEP eighth grade mathematics assessment, 2015. The “standard vs. achievement” correlation for eighth grade mathematics: $r = 0.314$.

When we seek to identify the fundamental purpose of America's public schools, our focus always lands on student achievement. Even the *champions of high performance standards* know this is true. They used the promise of higher student achievement to sell higher performance standards, and when the promise failed, they found something other than their *pet project* to blame.

The nearly flat line ... reveals virtually no relationship between rising proficiency standards and test-score growth over this time period. *These results, while disheartening, do not prove that state standards are ineffective.* Test-score growth *could have been* impeded by the Great Recession of 2008–09 and concomitant declining school expenditures, or rising pension and medical costs that deflected financial resources from the classroom, or the end of the NCLB accountability system, or any one (or combination) of many other factors that may impinge upon student learning. (Hamlin and Peterson, 2018).

Perhaps if the effort and resources devoted to the implementation of high performance standards had been devoted to the improvement of classroom management and instruction, we *might have* actually experienced some elevated student achievement.

Effectiveness of Schools Across States

The justification for mapping studies was that they would enable comparisons of the effectiveness of schools across states. None of the mapping studies, however, ever got around to comparing states' actual achievement with the rigor of their proficiency standards. Figures 1 through 8 actually compare the states' standards (as letter grades or NAEP equivalent scores) with the states' student achievement scores on NAEP assessments of reading and mathematics in grades 4 and 8. There is little relationship between student achievement in a state and the state's proficiency standard. Neither statistic appears to be useful for predicting or estimating the other. There is no logical reason to postulate a relationship between proficiency standards and student achievement. Student achievement is an outcome of pedagogical activity. State proficiency standards are a product of political exercise.

There is no apparent reason to postulate a relationship between student achievement and proficiency standards because student achievement is an outcome of pedagogical activity while proficiency standards are a product of political exercise.

References

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