

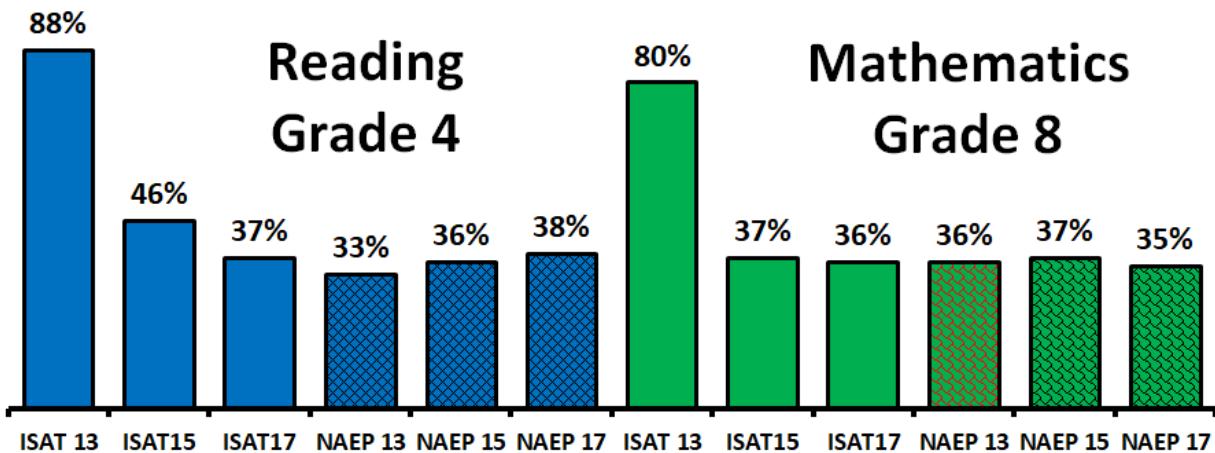


Race to the Bottom, Dumbing Down Tests, and the “Honesty Gap”

Since NCLB came on the scene, school reformers seeking public money for private education or for corporate profit centers have capitalized on confusion generated by the fact that the federal government had two definitions of “proficient.” They proclaimed that officials in the nation’s public schools engaged in a race to the bottom by dumbing down their state tests to make themselves look good to parents.

The champions of high standards proclaimed “NAEP Proficient” as the only legitimate metric, but the states had to use the NCLB definition to receive federal funds. Reformers reported the NAEP percent Proficient-and-above (only A’s). On the other hand, as required by NCLB, states reported the ISAT percent at grade level or above (C’s, B’s and A’s), which correlates with NAEP percent Basic-and-above. This is why states reported higher proficient percentages than the school reformers. Of course, reformers attacked neighborhood schools claiming that officials were dumbing down their state tests and were lying to parents and patrons in order to hide their failing schools and to make themselves look better, thus the “Honesty Gap.”

Idaho’s supposed “Honesty Gap” is now a moot issue. In 2015, Idaho adopted the SBAC test to replace the ISAT used for NCLB testing and reporting requirements. SBAC developers created achievement levels to match as closely as possible NAEP’s achievement levels. In the chart below, the old ISAT proficient-and-above metric ended in 2013. Idaho’s new ISAT proficient-and-above metric started in 2015, and it appears to resemble NAEP’s Proficient-and-above metric.



Recently champions of high performance standards have recognized Idaho for raising its performance standards. Peterson, for example, an editor of the Hoover Foundation’s “Education Next” rated the rigor of Idaho’s performance standards at “D” in 2009 for the old ISAT. The rating for today’s ISAT in 2017 is at “B+”.

I guess some may feel good about the higher standards noted by school reformers, but it really does not matter. Raising the rigor of test standards does not increase student learning (and that is what Idaho public schools are supposed to be about). The ISAT/SBAC, without a clear “theory of action” is not going to contribute to increased student achievement.

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