

Tennessee Academic Standards Taking a Leap Forward

The results of the most recent administration of the state's achievement testing program conducted last spring for students in grades three through eight are currently embargoed from public release. The reason for the embargo is to allow the state adequate time to provide reports to local school systems that can then be examined for accuracy and appealed as appropriate. The data is "rolled out" in phases to school systems as the statistical processes are completed.

While not all reports have been generated and provided to school systems, enough has been received to verify media reports regarding the increased rigor associated with the tests taken last April. Those were the first given based upon new curriculum standards implemented during the 2009 – 2010 school year. Tennessee's academic standards have been regularly described as being some of the lowest in the nation. Such criticism was justified, but that changed since the adoption of the new standards for reading/language arts, math, and science. I recently participated in a professional learning event at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, during which it was stated that with the possible exception of Massachusetts, Tennessee's academic standards were the highest in the nation.

The new standards were set by a third-party contractor that used education experts from around the county, along with selected Tennessee educators. Skills were ranked from least difficult to most difficult for each grade level, and the point at which it was believed the necessary knowledge and skills for that grade was identified as the "proficient" level. These decisions were also examined in relation to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessment, a national assessment given to a sample of students each year.

Parents of students in local schools should have already received their children's Individual Profile Report. The report provides a description of students' performance in the four areas tested – reading/language arts; math; science; and social studies. It should be noted that the social studies standards have not yet been updated. Schools' performance regarding whether or not their students made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is based only on reading/language arts and math performance. AYP is one measure used to evaluate how schools and school systems and reported through the State Report Card that will be available once the embargo is lifted.

For those who do not regularly work with student data and/or who don't feel fully informed regarding the new standards, perhaps some specific examples will best illustrate the leap made in the level of Tennessee's new standards.

A fifth grade math student who took the achievement test prior to the implementation of the new standards had to score only around the tenth percentile to be "proficient" and around the 50th percentile to be "advanced." The new standards require that more difficult tests be developed and administered to students. Not only were the new tests more difficult, students had to score higher to be "proficient." A fifth grade math student

taking the new test last spring had to score at approximately the 68th percentile to be “proficient” and about the 90th percentile to be “advanced.”

Another example is that of a fifth grader who scored at the 58th percentile on the earlier assessment, and in sixth grade scored at the 77th percentile on the new assessment. Clearly, the student performed better, especially considering the new test is more difficult; however, due to the standards being raised, the student went from being considered “advanced” to simply being “proficient.”

What does all this mean? First of all, the Individual Profile Reports that students have taken home may appear to suggest that students’ academic performance has declined. While that is certainly possible on an individual basis, the overriding reason for the appearance is the quick and dramatic rise in academic standards. Next, when the State lifts the embargo and the school and system report cards are released, performance will appear much lower than in past years. Due to the implementation of new standards, these results should be viewed as a new baseline against which future years’ performance will be measured, not as an accurate indicator of current performance.

Principals and teachers are working diligently to revise curriculum materials, to select better teaching materials, and are participating in professional learning activities to better equip themselves to meet the challenges ahead. All of this takes time. It will be at least three to five years before some results are become evident due to the work it will take to fully implement new standards with so many students already in a “pipeline” that must be radically reconstructed.

I believe in public education and in what our educators can do, however, they can’t do the necessary work alone. The support and engagement of parents is crucial to students’ success. Even those who don’t have students in schools must understand that the level of education provided for the next generation has a direct impact on the quality of life for the entire community and seek ways to support schools, teachers, and students. There is much work to be done, but the rewards are immeasurable – not only for students, but for us all.