



U.S.

Test Scores Under Common Core Show That ‘Proficient’ Varies by State

By **MOTOKO RICH** OCT. 6, 2015

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio seems to have taken a page from Lake Wobegon, where all the children are above average.

Last month, state officials releasing an early batch of test scores declared that two-thirds of students at most grade levels were proficient on reading and math tests given last spring under the new Common Core requirements.

Yet similar scores on the same tests meant something quite different in Illinois, where education officials said only about a third of students were on track. And in Massachusetts, typically one of the strongest academic performers, the state said about half of the students who took the same tests as Ohio’s children met expectations.

It all came down to the different labels each state used to describe the exact same scores on the same tests.

That kind of inconsistency in educational standards is what the Common Core — academic guidelines for kindergarten through high school reading and

math that were adopted by more than 40 states — was intended to redress. But Ohio is not alone in adjusting the goal posts. In California and North Carolina, state officials reporting headline results lumped together groups of students who either passed or nearly passed the tests. And in Florida, the education commissioner recommended passing rates less stringent than in other states.

“This was exactly the problem that a lot of policy makers and educators were trying to solve,” said Karen Nussle, the executive director of the Collaborative for Student Success, a Common Core advocacy group, “to get a more honest assessment of where kids are and being transparent about that with parents and educators so that we could do something about it.”

The Common Core was devised by experts convened by state education commissioners and governors to set uniform benchmarks for learning. But as it has been put into place, it has faced increasing backlash, both from politicians, who argue that it infringes on states’ independence to determine education policy, and from parents and teachers, who object to the more stringent testing that has come with the new guidelines.

Before the Common Core, each state set its own standards and devised its own tests. Some states made the standardized tests so easy or set passing scores so low that virtually all students were rated proficient even as they scored much lower on federal exams and showed up for college requiring remedial help. Here in Columbus, the school district is still recovering from a scandal in which many principals removed low-performing students from enrollment records in order to improve school ratings.

But as the results from the first Common Core tests have rolled out, education officials again seem to be subtly broadening definitions of success.

“That mentality of saying let’s set proficient at a level where not too many people fail is going to kill us,” said Marc S. Tucker, the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, a nonprofit think tank. “The global standard of what proficient is keeps moving up.”

Last spring, Ohio, 10 other states and Washington, D.C., used tests devised by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or Parcc, one of two groups responsible for creating Common Core tests. Before the grading process began, Parcc convened a group of educators from participating states to set five performance levels. Students scoring at the lowest level “did not yet meet expectations,” according to the Parcc designations, while those at the highest level “exceeded expectations.”

Those in the middle range, the Parcc group decided, had “approached expectations.” But in Ohio, students who scored in that range were labeled “proficient.” Ohio’s results are based on students — about two-thirds of the total — who took the exams online. Results for students who took the test on paper have not yet been released, but will be scored using the same performance levels.

Some teachers see the state’s presentation as misleading. “They shot themselves in the foot by putting it that way,” Kathryn Roston, a fourth-grade teacher at West Broad Elementary School here, said upon seeing how Ohio categorized the test results. “If you look up ‘proficient’ in the dictionary, what does that mean? Does it mean what they are making it mean?”

Officials say their hands were tied by state law. James Wright, the director of the Ohio Department of Education’s Office of Curriculum and Assessment, said the legislature requires the department to designate five performance levels on the standardized tests, with Level 3 labeled “proficient.”

“We’ve been very transparent about which levels we’re talking about,” Mr. Wright said.

He added that parents or teachers can easily look up what proportion of students in the state scored at each of the Parcc levels.

The Common Core has been bedeviled by controversy almost from the start; because of the backlash, a few states have already abandoned the

Common Core. Fewer than half of the 40 that adopted it originally are using tests from either of the testing consortia that develop the exams, making it difficult to equate results from different states.

“It may be a little too premature to declare it a failure,” said James A. Peysner, the secretary of education in Massachusetts, where the State Board of Education will vote in November on whether to use the Parcc tests, “but for sure it’s in retreat.”

More confusion is to come. Over the summer, the Ohio legislature voted to abandon the Parcc test and commission a new test developer to devise yet another set of exams. Three other states similarly scrapped the Parcc test after administering it this year, creating an increasingly atomized landscape across the country.

Parents and educators are still complaining about the increased difficulty of the tests, which demand more writing and complex problem solving than earlier exams, causing scores to drop. In New York, which first rolled out Common Core tests three years ago, a precipitous decline in pass rates set off protests.

New laws requiring that teacher evaluations be based partly on student test scores further stoked anxieties, and a growing number of parents, balking at what they view as an oppressive testing culture, have opted their children out of standardized tests altogether. In over 40 districts throughout Ohio, more than 5 percent of students opted out of tests last spring, said Michael Evans and Andrew Saultz, professors of education at Miami University.

Adrienne Dawson, a home health nurse whose 12-year-old son, Adrian Tucker, is in seventh grade at Berwick Alternative K-8 School on the east side of Columbus, said she was daunted by the complexity of sample questions she looked at last spring. “It was a Ph.D. test if you ask me,” she said on a recent morning after she had dropped Adrian off for class.

Despite the pushback, teachers here continue to infuse their lessons with Common Core principles.

In a seventh-grade English class at Berwick recently, Rashaun James had posted this thought, paraphrased from the Common Core: “Gather relevant information from multiple sources and draw conclusions.”

Her teaching methods were more creative than the dry standard suggested. Cordoning off a large space in the middle of the classroom with yellow caution tape, she had faked a crime scene, strewing dirt and gravel from the school garden across a large piece of butcher paper on which she had drawn outlines of two bodies and stamped footprints of shoes dipped in red paint.

Ms. James urged the students to analyze the clues and come up with possible victims, suspects and motives for an ultimate assignment of writing a narrative about the crime.

She was not too concerned how the assignment would affect test performance. In 10 years of teaching, she said, tests changed and policies came and went. The Common Core could “go away tomorrow,” she said.

“But does it make a difference in terms of whether I have a crime scene in my classroom?” she added. “There will always be a crime scene in my classroom.”

A version of this article appears in print on October 7, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Test Scores Under Common Core Show ‘Proficient’ Varies by State.