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Editorial

Test and Switch

Congress hoped that if it required the states to give annual tests in return for federal education aid, state politicians would be encouraged — or at least embarrassed — into improving dismal schools and closing the achievement gap between rich and poor children.

That's not how things have worked out. Many states have gamed the system — and misled voters — devising weak tests, setting low passing scores or changing tests from year to year to prevent accurate comparisons over time. The charade will continue, and children will continue to be shortchanged, until the country develops a rigorous national test keyed to national standards.

This problem is highlighted in a recent study by Policy Analysis for California Education, a research center run by Stanford University and the University of California, that analyzed the testing practices of a dozen states between 1992 and 2006. States that performed swimmingly on their own weak math and reading tests tended to score dismally on the more rigorous federal National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as NAEP.

In nearly all of the states studied, students did noticeably worse on federal tests than on state tests. In Oklahoma, the gap in scores was a shocking 60 percentage points in math and 51 percentage points in reading. In Texas, that gap was 52 percentage points in math and 56 points in reading. The state that came closest to the federal standard was Massachusetts, where there was a modest 1 percent gap in math and 10 percent gap in reading.

New York was not included in this study. But the same issue emerged here earlier this month when NAEP scores for the state's students turned out to be strikingly lower than scores achieved on the state-level test.

Advocates of the mediocre status quo will oppose any requirement for a national test. Congress could get the process started by instructing the NAEP board, an independent body created by the federal government, to create a rigorous, high-quality test and offer it to the states free — if they use federal scoring standards. Congress might push things further if it published a list of states that still insisted on using their own weaker tests. Americans need an accurate picture of how this country's students are doing.

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