

NOTES ON STATE NAEP

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First, a very brief history of State NAEP.

In the beginning ... State NAEP was FORBIDDEN. National NAEP ... “yes”. Regional NAEP (the U.S. divided into four regions) ... “yes”. State NAEP ... FORBIDDEN by law. Forbidden, that is, for the federal government to collect and publish State NAEP results.

NAEP was a little-known or little-discussed “OPTION” for states that might want to use NAEP for their own results, but the option was cumbersome and expensive and was viewed as unnecessary. It was generally, or roundly, unwelcomed by states.

In the late 1980s the SREB states created a State NAEP PILOT program. For three years eight southern states pioneered a State NAEP pilot program that contained nearly all of the elements of what a few years later became the State NAEP TRIAL Assessment.

The Voluntary Trial State Assessment to be exact. In the early 1990s the “Voluntary” ... “Trial” ... State Assessment became a new, more attractive, or at least acceptable option. After a few years there was agreement that the Voluntary Trial State Assessment had been a “trial” long enough and the term “trial” was dropped. In total, 49 states participated in one or more of the Voluntary State NAEP Assessments before there was ...

MANDATORY State NAEP in reading and math, grades 4 and 8 in No Child Left Behind.

State NAEP – from FORBIDDEN to MANDATORY in a little more than 30 years with intermediate voluntary stops at “optional”, “pilot”, and “trial”.

Not only was there a Southern States’ NAEP Pilot program before there was a national State NAEP program, but there was a Southern States’ NAEP view, I believe, that was different from that in other parts of the country.

This different way of seeing and embracing State NAEP was initially, and primarily due to certain political leaders in the South. By this I mean governors and legislators. There were some state school chiefs in the front row, but governors and legislators were at the vanguard. They were the reason that there was the SREB State NAEP Pilot program years before the Governing Board or national State NAEP were created.

Three governors ... Lamar Alexander (TN), Bob Graham (FL), and Chuck Robb (VA) stepped forward first ... and then Bill Clinton (AK), Jim Hunt (NC), Dick Riley (SC), and Jay Rockefeller (WV) ... and one more governor whom you don't find in the WHO's WHO of Southern education governors, Edwin Edwards, of Louisiana. In most cases there were legislators and chief state school officers in the SREB states pushing the idea of State NAEP along with the governors who were in the lead.

Of course, the question I got from persons all over the country in the mid-1980s was "WHY?" Why do southern states want to have NAEP results? Don't you know that you will be last? "Are you all crazy?" (Maybe I added the "all" to the last question, but that is how I remember it.)

I would argue that we were not crazy. There was a southern strategy, if you will.

Yes southern governors, legislators and educators knew that their states would be behind ... maybe even last.

But they also believed that in many cases they would not be as far behind as general wisdom would have you believe, and the most important part of this southern strategy was measuring PROGRESS. They believed that measuring progress with a credible, national measure was a key to improving education.

I would argue that this was not about "spin" or "denial". Yes you could argue that focusing on progress not relative achievement was a form of spin, but these political leaders were not unaware of or denying their state's relative standing. They believed that focusing on progress, incremental but perhaps relatively surprising progress compared to the rest of the country, was an important strategy to change overall achievement and their state's relative standing.

Governor Lamar Alexander summed up this strategy well at the time when he said "it's not just about where you are, but the direction in which you are moving."

Now you may have escaped over the past decade and a half the announcements and pronouncements about the fact that the southern states have often made progress that has outpaced that of the rest of the nation, but believe me a lot of announcements and pronouncements have been made in the South, and elsewhere.

In 1959, a decade before NAEP was created, the Southern Regional Education Board laid the philosophical foundation for State NAEP in the South. A half century ago a group led by former Virginia Governor Colgate Darden made a claim that was fairly incredible and ahead of its time, politically. The SREB Goals Commission asserted that "If excellence means anything at all it is a universal concept and Southern states must be measured by the same measures used everywhere." This was not a universally held view in the South in 1959 when many were inclined to claim, "but we are poor ... we can't be judged by the same standards as other states." It was the view of a majority of the SREB states when they signed up for the State NAEP Pilot program in the 1980s in order to have progress measured by a truly national measure.

The idea that State NAEP would bring to light, or shine a light on, educational achievement problems and then something dramatic – or reasonably dramatic – would happen has not worked out as some envisioned. NAEP has been shining a light on educational achievement problems for nearly 40 years. State NAEP has been shining an even brighter light – a much brighter light – on problems (and progress) for well more than a decade.

But shining a new, brighter State NAEP light on problems and pointing out to others what can now be seen even more clearly still seems like a good idea.

It has not been surprising that states have found ways to “explain” NAEP results. That these explanations have sometimes been accepted without much more questioning has been surprising ... to me. The differences in the State NAEP results and the state assessment results may be important and may tell us some important things – or may be trying to tell us some important things. The important thing is not whether State NAEP and state assessments agree exactly, or nearly so in their percentages of students reaching performance levels that may, or may not, bear the same names.

However, when there are large – and very large – differences between State NAEP and state assessment results, these may be the “twittering canaries” for present day education. Will we listen and try to determine if these modern-day NAEP canaries are trying to tell us something important? There are important questions to be asked and discussed when there are large, and very large, differences. These questions go beyond the obvious, but important, ones about the terms “(NAEP) Proficient” and “(State) Proficient.” These questions should always include NAEP Basic and NAEP Proficient in the analysis and comparisons with state results. The obvious fact that NAEP and states have different definitions for “Proficient” should not be the end of questions or discussions.

I have never argued that the differences in State NAEP results and state assessments mean that the NAEP standards are right and the state standards are wrong. Differences, large differences, should lead us to more serious discussions about “why” than I believe have occurred. I do believe that the NAEP achievement level standards are “higher”, but the challenge for states is to “set standards high enough.” The goal, in my view, is not to make them the same as or as “high” as the NAEP achievement levels for the NAEP levels and state standards have very different purposes. But state standards should be set and revised periodically with great awareness of State NAEP standards and results if states are truly to set standards that are “high enough”.

The most important impact of State NAEP can be, and should be, on ACHIEVEMENT GAPS. NAEP has often been described as or called upon to be a “truth teller.” State NAEP is one of America’s most important achievement gap truth tellers. Too many state standards tend to minimize the achievement gaps. Frankly, they make achievement gaps appear smaller than they are. We are wittingly, or unwittingly, obfuscating and avoiding the distressing truth about these gaps. State NAEP is our best hope for shining a light on achievement gaps in American education, and hopefully for spurring us to do more about them.

That there are achievement gaps (not gap, but gaps) is, of course, not news. But the fact that there are 200-point SAT gaps among different groups of high school juniors and seniors cannot be explained in a way that is very compelling to spur public action. Achievement gaps of hundreds-of-points without standards tend to mystify and numb public attention not spur action.

The ACT College Readiness levels and results provide easier to understand and more dramatic evidence of gaps and these are results for high school juniors and seniors that can also be estimated for 8th graders and high school sophomores.

But the NAEP results at grades 4 and 8 presented by achievement levels and item mapping provide information about achievement gaps that is not available elsewhere.

I again argue that the NAEP achievement gaps information is not necessarily “correct” but it is generally different enough in comparative terms that it should be analyzed along with state achievement gaps results. I am particularly wary of claims that “the achievement gap has been eliminated (or drastically reduced)” when this claim is really that nearly all students are meeting a low standard so the achievement “gap” has been defined away.

Without State NAEP we might well eliminate an achievement gap based on a low standard and not give attention to the serious achievement gaps that are still to be tackled when different (or higher) standards are applied.