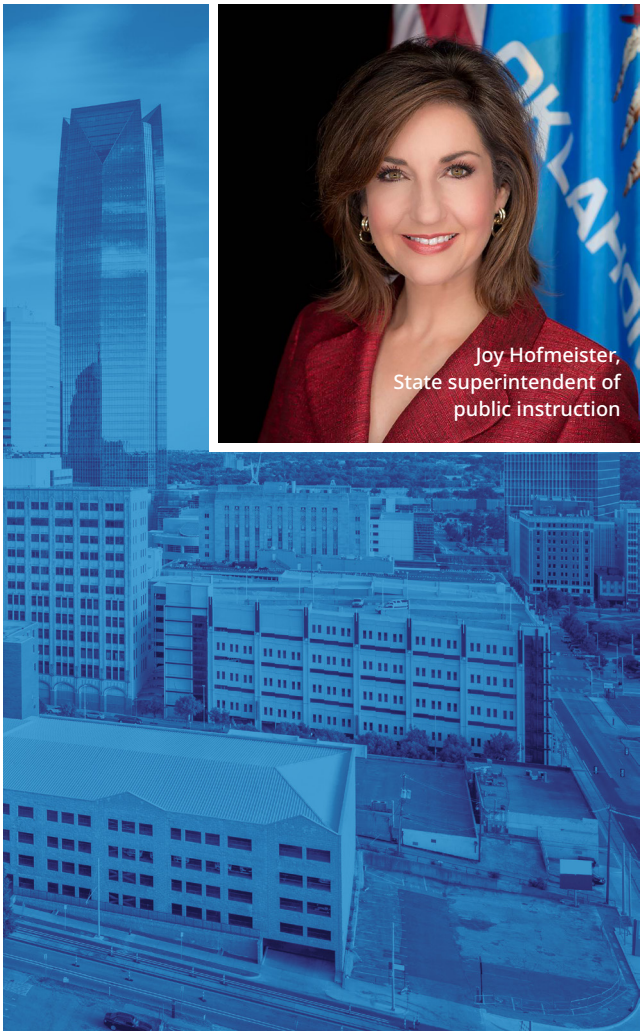
Oklahoma Looks to NAEP To Raise Expectations for Students

When Joy Hofmeister became Oklahoma's state superintendent of public instruction in 2015, her top priority was rewriting academic standards for the state's K-12 schools. The state had cycled through several versions of standards, but Hofmeister's goal wasn't just to describe again what students should know and be able to do — she wanted to align the standards to the expectations for students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

> "We knew that to be a top state, we needed to have an honest set of standards," said Hofmeister. "We view NAEP as a baseline for aligning those standards to be nationally and globally competitive. This was something everyone in our state could agree upon because NAEP was not new — it's trusted and has been in our state for decades."



Joy Hofmeister, State superintendent of public instruction

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So in 2016, the state began a concerted effort to write and adopt new academic standards for grades K-12 in English language arts and mathematics. Through community meetings and public comment periods, the state included thousands of Oklahomans in the process of writing the new standards, including stakeholders from higher education, business leaders, parents and families, and subject-matter experts.

"Writing new academic standards was our first task as a new administration," said Rebecca Logan, executive director of NAEP and international assessments at the Oklahoma State Department of Education. "It seemed logical to look to NAEP and use some of the NAEP framework materials for what we would translate into academic standards."

The Oklahoma Department of Education also used the NAEP frameworks — the blueprints for the content and design of each NAEP assessment — to ensure that the state's new assessment mirrored expectations on The Nation's Report Card.

The effort paid off, according to an **August 2019 study** from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Since 2003, NCES has compared each state's standard for proficient performance in reading and mathematics at grades 4 and 8 by placing the state standards onto a common NAEP scale. This process of "state mapping" **shows where each state's performance standards falls** on the NAEP scale and in relation to the NAEP achievement levels: *NAEP Basic*, *NAEP Proficient*, and *NAEP Advanced*.

The latest state mapping study shows just how far Oklahoma has raised the bar for its students. Earlier, under the state's now-defunct Priority Academic Student Skills standards, Oklahoma ranked in the bottom quarter of states compared to NAEP in reading and math. In the new study, based on 2017 data, Oklahoma showed improvement in several areas. The biggest improvement can be seen in grade 8 mathematics—Oklahoma's NAEP equivalent score was in the NAEP Below Basic range in 2003 but moved up to the *NAEP Proficient* range in 2017. In reading at grades 4 and 8, Oklahoma's NAEP equivalent score was in the NAEP Below Basic range in 2003 but moved up to the *NAEP Basic* range in 2017.

Big changes in performance standards can mean some uncomfortable changes in assessment results, and Hofmeister's office was careful to avoid misunderstandings by families and the media.

State leaders conducted dozens of hours of advance work with media outlets to explain the "apples to oranges" nature of the new test results, since the proportion of students who achieved proficiency on the state assessments dropped dramatically. They also gave district leaders resources to use to communicate with families.

Jennifer Monies is now a member of the Oklahoma State School Board and was the executive director of Oklahoma Achieves, an education initiative of the State Chamber of Oklahoma, when the new standards were being developed.

"The process was very transparent and methodical," recalled Monies. "We got the standards right, then we got the testing right, then we got the accountability system right. I think that progression was really important."

Their hard work paid off. In 2017, when the proportion of students reported as "proficient" on state exams dropped by 50 percent or more, Oklahoma's families, teachers, and business community rallied around the new standards.

"From the business standpoint, all they want is to have people who are qualified to do jobs when they graduate," said Monies. "So we owed it to the students in Oklahoma to be honest about how they're performing, and we owed it to the broader community to have that national and global comparability."

"I am pleased that Oklahoma has aligned our [academic] standards to NAEP's," said Ryan Walters, the executive director of Oklahoma Achieves. "This will help provide more rigorous curriculum in our classrooms, and it will give us a better understanding of how our students measure up to a high standard."

For Oklahoma educators, raising academic and performance standards and implementing new assessments has brought fresh enthusiasm and new ideas to classrooms, says April Grace, superintendent of Shawnee School District, outside of Oklahoma City. But the next step is ensuring that teachers have the resources and experience they need to teach to more challenging standards and prepare students for college and careers.

In contrast to the previous standards, Oklahoma's new standards call for students to:

- Focus on deep thinking, conceptual understanding, and real-world problem-solving skills

- Set expectations for students to be ready for college, careers, and citizenship
- Incorporate literacy in science, social studies, and technical subjects

- Emphasize the use of citations and examples from texts when creating opinions and arguments
- Increase rigor and grade-level expectations

- Determine the full range of support needed for students who are learning English or have special needs

The state's new standards emphasize more complex tasks in an effort to better prepare students for life after high school.

"These new standards really emphasize the point that we have to continue to push students to more cognitively complex tasks in our classrooms," said Grace. "If you look at the way students have to work through these mental processes, they're doing work that's essential for their life beyond high school. We are setting students on a more life-ready path."

One major benefit of Oklahoma's approach, she says, is that district leaders have not had to spend valuable time explaining the new test results to parents and other stakeholders.

"Everyone knew that it wasn't going to be pretty the first year," said Grace. "But I think [Superintendent Hofmeister] did a great job being out in front. They're continuing that ongoing message about setting a new bar and reminding people that it's not apples to apples. The immediate results can't be our only focus."

The state's results on the 2019 Nation's Report Card were largely unchanged from 2017. In grade 4 mathematics, the average score of 237 was below the national average of 240 for public school students. In grade 8 mathematics, the average score of 276 was below the national average score of 281. In reading, grade 4 students scored 216, below the national average score of 219. In grade 8, the average score was 258—down from 261 in 2017—and below the national average score of 262.

A closer look at the results, however, shows improvement among several groups of students in key areas. In grade 8 math, Oklahoma's Hispanic students improved their average score by eight points, and students learning English as a second language jumped 14 points. Black students in grade 4 also improved their average math score, increasing from 218 to 223, but the increase was not statistically significant.

"We're not there yet, and we're not going to make excuses," said Hofmeister. "But we're going to demand what our kids deserve. And we couldn't do any of it without NAEP."

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