

Needed: A Better Nation's Report Card

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The periodic National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) exams are widely referred to as the Nation's Report Card. Because the typically still-easy NAEP questions are more rigorous than most state exams, NAEP results that have mostly not increased during a decades long reform frenzy and an inflation-adjusted tripling of per pupil funding, are widely seen as more credible than state exam results. That says a lot about the sad state of most states' standardized test-based accountability systems, because as a 'no-stakes' test, the credibility of NAEP results is not easily taken for granted. 'No-stakes' means, in this instance, that the sample of students that take a NAEP exam face no consequences for their performance on the exam; good or bad.

Because of the 'no-stakes' nature of the NAEP, and the extent to which NAEP scores are used as indicators of school system performance (public and private school students take the test), I have been concerned enough about students' lack of incentive to try hard on the exam that I have repeatedly asked my colleagues if that aspect of the NAEP concerns them. In the rare instances where I got any answer at all, it has been a sort of the-emperor-has-no-clothes reaction where they implicitly say that it must be okay or it wouldn't be so widely used. Though with much trepidation, in part because all of the other indicators, formal and informal, also point to [Nation-at-Risk](#) outcomes, I have also held the 'it must be okay' attitude.

Two recent events changed that. 1.) On June 10, I spent most of a day working with an expert in assessment. He has forgotten more about assessment of students' knowledge and skills than most of us will ever know. I asked him about the 'no-stakes' NAEP. He said no stakes would have little or no effect on 4th graders' effort level, it would significantly impact 8th graders' effort level but their effort level would not be totally compromised, and that most 17-year-olds would

make little or no effort; that they would often just randomly mark answers to be done, quickly. 2.) One of this semester's students in my School System Reform Studies course said she had recently been in the NAEP sample; that she had taken a NAEP exam; exerting no effort, whatsoever, and that her peers generally did likewise.

The good news is that US high school seniors may be better prepared for life and higher education than the abysmal NAEP scores for 17-year-olds have indicated. But, as I said above, NAEP scores are not the only indicator of '[Nation-at-Risk](#)' outcomes. The bad news is that we lack a reliable, consistent-over-all-50-states, objective measure of school system effectiveness. We need one; one that students give their maximum effort on so that we can rely on the scores as good measures of what students know and can do.

Until there are at least some prizes available for high scores, I will try to avoid relying on any NAEP scores above the 4th grade level. When we begin to pursue the changes we need to create a more credible and reliable NAEP, we should also increase the sample size enough to have widespread [reliable sub-state data](#) so that we can, for example, compare metropolitan-level school systems with significant school choice to metropolitan-level systems without school choice.