

EARLY LEARNING AT THE TURBULENT DUSK OF THE PANGLOSS ERA

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Introduction/Executive Summary

In the No Child Left Behind era, state K–12 education systems have been judged by how many students achieved proficiency on state accountability tests. States were given the flexibility to set their own definitions of proficiency, and in many states proficiency was defined at a level much lower than on national and international assessments. In many states, that disconnect is about to be resolved, as states will redefine proficiency to better match national and international definitions. One effect of this change will be to dramatically reduce the number of students considered proficient on state tests—which will lead to lower measured performance by districts and schools in state accountability systems.



With state accountability systems showing a major change in the performance of districts and schools, governors and legislators are likely to feel a renewed sense of urgency about changes to their education system. Advocates for early learning can work in advance to channel that sense of urgency into the reforms best calculated to change the long-term trajectory of state academic achievement: high-quality early learning. This advance work may be critical, because when the new scores come out it may create a fluid policy environment where it will be hard to

get traction for any actions that have not been well-positioned in advance. Other education advocacy groups will be preparing for the big shift, and early learning advocates should do the same. In an environment where policymakers will feel pressure to act, it will be important to direct their attention to research-based strategies like high-quality early learning that are the most likely to improve student outcomes.

I. “The Pangloss Effect”

For many years, education experts and commentators have been aware that states have been systematically adjusting downward the standards and metrics by which they evaluate schools, resulting in overstated rates of proficiency. While the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) consistently show that roughly 1/3 of students are proficient in reading and math,² state assessments frequently use a definition of proficiency that includes a far higher percentage of students. In 2006, Kevin Carey of Education Sector developed a “Pangloss Index” to show just how much divergence there was between national proficiency levels and the ones set by states.³ The index was named after Dr. Pangloss, a character in Voltaire’s *Candide* “who insisted, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that we live in the best of all possible worlds.”⁴

The Panglossian approach has been nearly universal. In 2009, 49 of 51 states and jurisdictions reported the percentage of students deemed proficient by state tests as at least 20 percentage points higher than the percentage considered proficient by NAEP standards, with an average difference across states of 42 percentage points. For example, Ohio reported 82% of its 4th-grade students proficient in reading, while NAEP showed that only 36% of the same students were proficient—and Ohio is far from an outlier.⁵

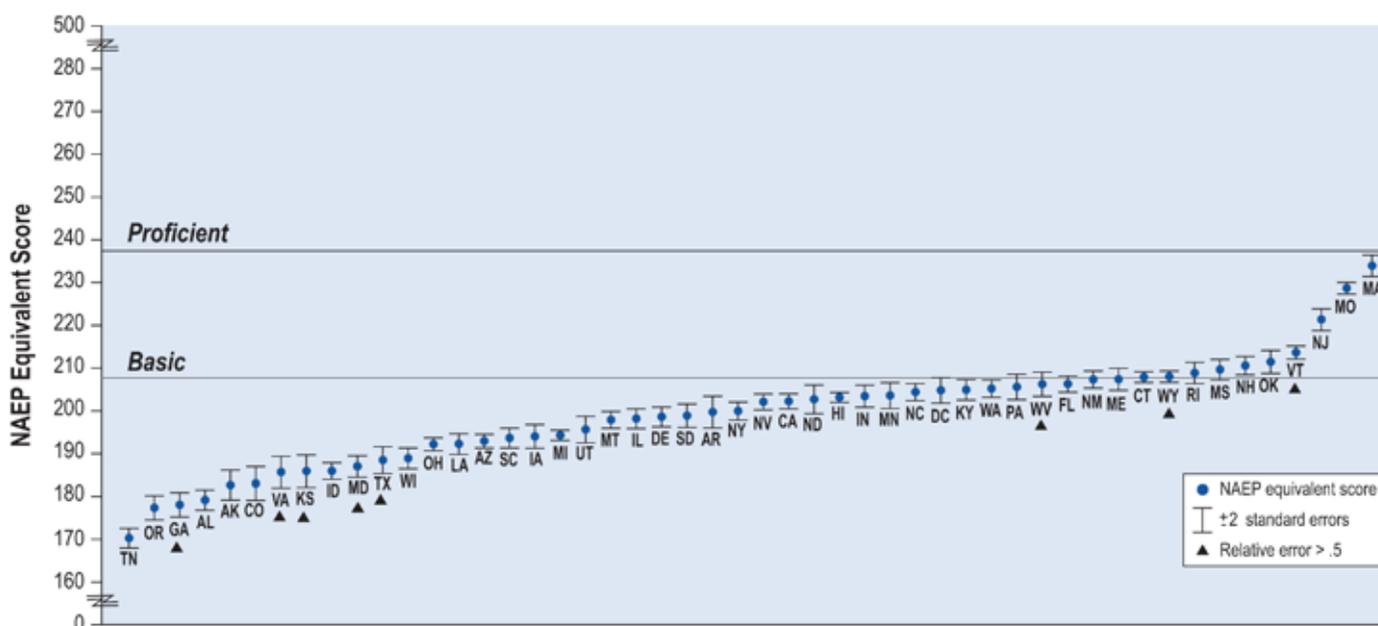
But states are on the cusp of eliminating the discrepancy between their self-assessments of proficiency and those of national measures like NAEP. The 46 states that decided to adopt the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts also agreed to participate in volunteer consortia whose objectives are to produce assessments aligned to the new standards. The competencies required for proficiency on the assessments being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced consortia are expected to be more comparable to those of NAEP; states are expected to begin using these tests in the 2014–2015 school year.⁶

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In many states, this will create a sudden and significant drop in the number of students considered proficient, which will have a ripple effect on school and district accountability.⁷ Figure 1 (see following page) shows the equivalent NAEP score for the level of achievement that each state defined as “proficient” on their statewide assessment in 2009.⁸ From this data it is clear that many students who have consistently scored in the proficient range in most states will no longer be considered proficient when the new assessments are implemented in 2014–2015. The effect will vary from state to state; states like Ohio, whose level of proficiency ranked “below basic” on the NAEP scale, will see a larger drop than a state like Missouri, whose defined level of proficiency is already more closely aligned with the NAEP scale.

Figure 1.

NAEP scale equivalents of state grade 4 reading standards for proficient performance, by state: 2009



The two lines above each state abbreviation indicate the range of relative error in mapping the NAEP equivalent to the state standards. A black triangle under a state indicates that the relative error is too large to support useful inferences without additional evidence.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

As the table shows, in most states the current definition of proficiency is well below what NAEP considers proficient. While the numbers vary slightly in 8th grade and on mathematics assessments, the basic idea is the same: states have set a much lower bar than NAEP, and raising that bar will cause a large number of students who were previously considered to be proficient to be considered not proficient.

II. Preparing for the Changeover: Communication is Key

It is important to remember that the change in proficiency scores will be a change in communication, not substance. The public education system will not suddenly be dramatically worse than it was a year or two earlier, even if its reporting metrics drop precipitously. Appropriately, states are already mobilizing communication strategies in response to make educators and the public aware of the upcoming changes, to try to manage them effectively.

One state that has been proactive in addressing the impending changes is Kentucky. As the first state to implement statewide assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards, its results serve to validate the prediction of historic drops in student test scores. In 2010, prior to the more rigorous standards and assessments, 76% of Kentucky 4th-graders were classified proficient in reading; in 2011, based on the new system, this dropped to 48%.⁹ Kentucky prepared for the change by launching a “ReadyKentucky” initiative, through which policy and business leaders engaged in extensive outreach to help the public understand why the upcoming changes were important and what they meant.¹⁰

With 36 states having set their proficiency benchmarks lower than that of Kentucky, the results with which Kentucky are grappling are bound to become a national trend as states begin implementing assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Even though the change is solely a communication change, it is likely that the difference in how results are reported will create an increased action imperative

for changes to the education system. This is a potentially significant advocacy opportunity for early learning, but taking advantage of that opportunity will require thoughtful and state-specific outreach and communication.

III. Early Learning in the New Policy Environment

Research shows that by kindergarten, there is already a measurable achievement gap for economically disadvantaged children. As shown in the report *Inequality at the Starting Gate*, the average cognitive scores of preschool-age children in the lowest socioeconomic group are 60% below the average scores of children in the highest socioeconomic group.¹¹ High-quality early learning has been shown to help improve long-term outcomes. Professor James Heckman has repeatedly shown that early interventions for disadvantaged children “raise the quality of the workforce, enhance the productivity of schools and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency.”¹² As states come under increased pressure to take actions that raise student achievement, advocates should be poised to promote high-quality early learning as part of the systemic solution—the kind of policies that governors of both parties have been promoting with increasing frequency.¹³

In preparing for the shift, early learning advocates should be mindful that the policy terrain is likely to be treacherous, and that their advocacy may be most successful if focused on issues that policymakers will find directly connected to improving student achievement. Even experts who support this shift recognize that it will be challenging to execute successfully.¹⁴ In developing outreach and communication plans, advocates must take account of changing alliances, and be concrete in their requests for action.

Alliances Are Likely to Shift

In many states the shift may create a dynamic in which “reform” organizations take aggressive stances pushing for change, and institutional groups representing K–12 professionals (superintendents, principals, and unions) may be put on the defensive. The exact nature of this dynamic will vary from state to state depending on the relationships among those groups. In some states it is likely that allegiances within the legislature may shift and that discourse may become more pointed.

Early learning advocates will need to be sensitive to these dynamics, but it may offer some opportunities for early learning advocacy. High-quality early learning may be a reform that both reform groups and professional groups can support; early learning advocates may want to work in advance with education reform advocates and advocates for the professional groups to position them that way. While states should not focus exclusively on short-term strategies directed toward children in the grade spans subject to accountability testing, it is obviously appropriate that states undertake efforts focused on those years—meaning that early learning can be positioned as a complement to those strategies, rather than in opposition to them. And unlike some proposals that might emerge (such as vouchers), early learning may be something that a wide range of constituencies can agree to.

In addition to changing dynamics among stakeholders, it is also likely that dynamics among policymakers will shift, as many policymakers are likely to be nervous about the upcoming changes. Positioning high-quality early learning as an important solution to the problem with policymakers may make it easier to advocate for it when the change occurs, especially if other advocacy organizations are already lined up in support.

While the change in proficiency reporting offers opportunities, it also has its risks. If early learning is identified as a critical strategy, it will place new pressures on providers to deliver high quality, and on state agencies to develop an effective system; this is the right kind of pressure, but in some states it will be new pressure that affects existing relationships within the early learning community. In states where early learning programs have been ineffective, advocates may argue for improving quality, but some policy leaders may push instead to redirect early learning funds to other reforms. As important as it is to have strategies for pushing change affirmatively, it is also important that advocates be prepared to defend gains they have made in the past.

In a fluid environment, early learning advocates will need to pay close attention to their communications and messaging. One possible approach is to say that while the adjustment in proficiency levels does not change what is actually happening in schools, it does change our understanding of what is happening; to actually improve what is happening in a fundamental way, we need to improve kindergarten readiness, which is a major purpose of high-quality early learning. In many states it will be important for early learning advocates to focus on positive messaging about the impact of high-quality early learning rather than engaging in negative messaging about the quality of K–12 schools, which may run the risk of alienating potential allies.

Specificity and Connectivity Will Be Assets

Even if policymakers are interested in doing something about high-quality early learning, they are unlikely to take action unless they are given something specific to do. This will require the early learning community to develop concrete action plans that are likely to be acceptable to a broad range of constituencies. The big shift may provide a good hook for forcing action within the early learning community if there has been resistance to the formation of a common agenda; this huge downward adjustment will likely not be repeated any time soon, and stakeholders should be mobilized to avoid squandering the opportunity.

In coming up with specific actions to propose, advocates may want to focus on actions that are connected to K–12 and the need to improve long-term student achievement. Policymakers may well be heavily focused on assessments and standards, but that can still leave opportunities for early learning advocates, including:

- *Improving Access to High-Quality Early Learning.* In many states there are existing high-quality early learning programs whose impact is limited by lack of access for the children who need it; the programs simply are not funded at levels sufficient to provide broad service. In other states, there are early learning programs that are not funded at per-child levels that allow them to provide high enough quality to have a meaningful impact on long-term child outcomes. Improving access to quality early learning will improve kindergarten readiness and have a ripple effect through the K–12 years. If the state does not have its own high-quality program, it can supplement investment in federal programs like Head Start—potentially adding its own quality requirements to help achieve the outcomes it desires.¹⁵
 - o In some states, the existing early learning programs have been the subject of evaluations or research. In these states, advocates must be prepared to address the research base relating to their own state program as part of their advocacy. In some states the research base shows early learning leading to increased test scores.¹⁶ In other states the research shows that the existing programs will need to be of significantly higher quality to lead to improved child outcomes—and in those cases, advocates should be up front about the need to improve quality.
 - o In a political context where a heavy emphasis will be placed on test score improvement, advocates must not lose sight of the fact that not only have high-quality early learning programs

been shown to improve student performance, but many of the most important benefits of early learning are long-term outcomes not tied directly to student accountability test scores.¹⁷

- *Adding Programs for Infants and Toddlers.* In some states preschool programs are available for 3- and 4-year-olds, but there is nothing available for younger children (ages 0–3). Early Head Start and high-quality home visiting are programs that serve infants and toddlers, and help increase the odds that the most at-risk children will enter kindergarten ready to succeed. State funds can be used to expand these programs beyond the levels supported by the federal government.
- *Improving the Understanding of the Common Core in the Early Learning and Early Elementary Years.* Although the Common Core State Standards currently begin at kindergarten, it is important for professionals serving children younger than five to become familiar with the content and philosophy behind their development. At the heart of the new standards is a heightened focus on teaching critical thinking skills for practical application. Joint professional development involving early learning and early elementary teachers can help both groups understand the Common Core standards, and the expectations and practices used in the years immediately before and after their work with children. Ideally this will lead to changes in teaching practice that do more to encourage learning through exploration and discovery.
- *Aligning Multiple Domains of Standards Across Age Spans.* Leading states like Massachusetts, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are recognizing that while the Common Core standards can strengthen instruction in reading and math, overall instruction will be strengthened by diversifying the range of standards used in early elementary instruction. Early learning standards typically take a comprehensive approach and focus on skills and abilities rather than just subject matter knowledge.¹⁸ States can build alignment in their standards by developing early elementary standards in new domains building upwards from early elementary standards.
- *Strengthening the Use of Assessments in the Early Years.* An increasing number of states are using kindergarten entry assessments to understand where children are when they start school, which can help educators understand how much work needs to be done in elementary school—and how much work needs to be done before that.¹⁹ Adding kindergarten entry assessments can help states diagnose the knowledge and skill levels of children when they enter kindergarten, which can help define the need for additional and/or higher quality early learning services; if children are entering kindergarten already behind—and low income children frequently are—that will help make the case for high-quality early learning as a strategy for improving academic performance.²⁰
 - Beyond kindergarten entry assessment, states can also use screening tools and formative assessments with early learners to help early learning professionals support child learning and development.²¹
- *Improving Workforce Quality and Support.* If K–12 reforms are including wholesale changes to how teachers are prepared and professional development, early learning advocates should be alert to those efforts to see if they can piggyback on them. Early learning advocates should be ready with ideas of what they might want out of preparation and professional development reform. One possibility is to incorporate more focus on the development of young children in preparation and professional development for K–12 personnel, utilizing the existing research base on how children learn to improve professional practice.
- *Family Engagement.* The best early learning programs all are designed to actively engage families as partners. Student success in early learning and K–12 is closely linked with families being engaged

in their child's education. Family engagement should be included in early learning programs and strengthened in K–12; for example, some early learning design principles could prove valuable in the K–12 reform context, especially if states are considering new school models and ways to engage students beyond their test scores. While in some states reforms may focus too narrowly on test-score-improvement strategies, states that take a broader view will benefit from information on how the best early learning programs work with parents.

Taken together, these actions may change the positioning of early learning in the state's policy landscape. They may draw early learning advocates into new relationships that force them to think beyond birth to five, sharing their expertise with new audiences who previously focused on K–12. This means advocates will not only need to navigate changing alliances among other key policy players, they may need to manage their own alliances changing as well. Taking advantage of this advocacy opportunity will also challenge many advocates to draw a tighter link between early learning programs and academic outcomes than they had previously. These changes can ultimately be positive, but are not inevitably so, and advocates will need to manage them carefully.

Conclusion

For years, K–12 education data has been measured and reported one way—and now, it will be measured and reported in a meaningfully different way. Even if the only immediate change is one of communication, that change presents a communication opportunity for early learning advocates. Early learning advocates should use this opportunity to press for expanded access to high-quality early learning, which in many states will represent the best strategy for improving the long-term trajectory of child outcomes. While strategies may vary from state to state, it is likely that across states early learning advocates should be planning for the shift, lining up allies, and developing specific plans that can be positioned as helping to improve the state's long-term educational outcomes.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Ounce Policy Conversations are published by the Ounce of Prevention Fund to stimulate and facilitate discussion on topics of interest in early learning policy. We welcome feedback on this paper, and may address that feedback in subsequent versions of this paper or in other papers. If you have comments or questions, please visit our webpage at www.ounceofprevention.org/policyconversations or contact Elliot Regenstein at eregenstein@ounceofprevention.org.

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Endnotes

1. Elliot Regenstein is the senior vice president for advocacy and policy at the Ounce of Prevention Fund. Angela Hubbard is an early childhood fellow at the Ounce of Prevention Fund. The authors are grateful to their many colleagues at the Ounce of Prevention Fund who contributed to drafts of this paper. They are also grateful to their external reviewers: Susan Hibbard, Amanda Szekely, and Albert Wat. Special thanks to Stu Silberman, executive director of the Prichard Committee in Kentucky, who was interviewed as part of the research process.
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