

## Data on the Plateau or Leveling Off Effect of Achievement Test Scores

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/plateau.pdf>

As schools strive valiantly to meet the accountability demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, reports from across the country indicate modest immediate test increases followed by a longer-term plateau effect. Available evidence suggests that prevailing strategies for increasing achievement test scores generate score inflation for the first few years then test averages level off (Brookings Institution, 2002; Center for Education Policy, 2005; Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Koretz, 2005).

In their report entitled *Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act* (2005), the Center for Education Policy stresses:

“Testing expert Robert Linn (2000) has noted that states often show gains during the first few years of a new high-stakes testing and accountability program, but that the gains usually hit a plateau—student test scores level off. He uses the example of Florida, where rapid gains in scores were made after the introduction of a high-stakes testing program in the late 1970s, but then scores stagnated, and scores for African Americans actually declined once they reached a high after seven years. Just recently, education officials in Indiana reported that they may be seeing a plateau effect in that state as test scores have leveled off after larger previous gains (Hupp & Hooper, 2004).”

In an article in the Los Angeles Times (8/22/04), Bruce Fuller noted that after a steady few years climb in student achievement during the 1990s, many states have experienced faltering achievement levels (e.g., Florida, Michigan, Texas). For those showing gains in the 1990s, he stresses "scores have barely budged in recent years." For example, "the same sort of fade-out" occurred in California where in 2004, the state's chief school officer confirmed that a majority of the schools had hit a plateau or worse. (The previous year's test scores showed a decline in student proficiency in just under half the elementary schools in the state.)

In Massachusetts, a June 2005 report by MassPartners for Public Schools predicts the following:

“Three-quarters of all schools in Massachusetts will fail to meet federal educational performance standards by 2014, according to an analysis of student test score data by Ed Moscovitch of Cape Ann Economics. Many of these schools will face increasingly harsh sanctions under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act. Moscovitch examined student MCAS scores over the past three years to project how many schools are likely to meet NCLB's AYP standards in the future. He said that his is an ‘optimistic’ projection since it presumes that MCAS scores will continue to rise for the next decade, although historically achievement test scores rise more rapidly in the early years after a new test is administered before reaching a plateau.”

The report includes the following:

- In 2004, 22 percent of all Massachusetts schools (384) had failed to make AYP for two years or more.
- By 2014, it is predicted that 3 out of 4 schools (1,286 out of 1,731 schools for which AYP reports are produced, or 74 percent) will fail to make AYP for two or more years. Of schools failing to make AYP, 8 out of 10 (79 percent) will fall short based on aggregate school scores, not just for subgroups. 59 percent of the schools serving the most affluent students, and 86 percent of those serving the poorest students, will fail to reach the AYP standards.

In the introduction to this report, Irwin Blumer concludes:

“Testing experts recognize that the linear progress that underlies AYP is not possible. Change does not happen in schools, or in any

---

This was prepared by the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.  
 Phone: (310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-8716 Toll Free: (866) 846-4843  
 email: [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu) website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Support comes in part from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Office of Adolescent Health.

social institution, in a linear fashion. Schools work hard to change and seek improvement in students' achievement. At some point, test scores plateau. Schools then undertake further diagnosis given the latest data and discuss further changes and how to bring them about. These changes are implemented and student achievement once again improves. This iteration continues. The work is complex and progress is interrupted as new data analysis is needed. Straight-line projections look nice, but they do not occur in real life."

One county in Maryland lamented: "Although we've had a very aggressive literacy initiative for four years at the elementary level that provided an initial surge in reading scores, it appears that the reading scores are leveling off.... Based on the MSPAP and the CTBS/CAT results, the system appears to have reached a plateau...."

Reporting on 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 11 large urban school districts, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2005) states: "For 4<sup>th</sup> graders, the percentage scoring at or above Proficient in reading increased in one district from 2003 to 2005; percentages at or above Basic and average scores did not change in any of the districts. There were no changes in the score gaps between White students and their Black or Hispanic counterparts in math or reading at 4<sup>th</sup> grade. For 8<sup>th</sup> graders, there were no

significant differences in the percentages performing at or above Basic or at or above Proficient in any district."

Available evidence, then, supports the conclusion stated by one of the regional education labs:

"The rewards and consequences for state test results tempt school leaders to become too narrowly focused on the short-term goal of increasing test scores while neglecting other important state standards outcomes that can't be tested on a one hour state test. However, it is increasingly evident that quick fix strategies (e.g., intensive test practice) might work to get scores up for a few years, but scores will ultimately plateau...." (SERVE, n.d.)

In keeping with our Center's work, we continue to suggest that the plateau is inevitable as long as schools do not develop a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to student learning. Given this, the problem requires an enhanced focus in policy and practice that results in every school moving toward a learning support system that is fully integrated into school improvement planning and implementation

---

## References

- Brookings Institution (2002). *How well are American students learning?*  
[http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/gb/brown/bc\\_report/2002/bcr\\_report.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/gb/brown/bc_report/2002/bcr_report.pdf)
- Center for Education Policy (2005). *Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act*  
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRU/articles/EPRU-0504-120-OWI.pdf>
- Fuller, B., Wright, J., Gesicki, K., & Kang, E (2007). *Gauging growth: How to judge No Child Left Behind?* Educational Researcher, 36, 268-278
- Hamilton, L., McCaffrey, D., & Koretz, D. (2005). *Threats to the Validity of Measures of Achievement Gains*. Presentation at the Maryland Assessment Research Center for Education Success Conference on Longitudinal Modeling of Student Achievement. <http://www.marces.org/conference/Longitudinal/hamilton.ppt>
- Hupp, S., & Hooper, K. L. (2004, December 10). ISTEP scores stagnant as 1 in 3 fails test. *Indianapolis Star*.
- Linn, R. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *ER Online*, 29 (2).  
<http://www.aera.net/pubs/er/arts/29-02/linn05.htm>.
- MassPartners for Public Schools (2005). *Facing Reality: What happens when good schools are labeled "failures"?* *Projecting Adequate Yearly Progress in Massachusetts schools*.  
<http://www.massteacher.org/news/headlines/ayreport.pdf>
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (2005). *The nation's report card*. See the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://www.nationsreportcard.gov>
- SERVE (n.d.). Understanding Comprehensive Reform.  
<http://www.serve.org/UCR/UCRCompFour.html>
- Washington County Public Schools (2002). News Release.  
<http://www.wcboe.k12.md.us/downloads/NewsReleases/2002/050702anews.htm>
-