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Serious public education questions in Pa.

New research from the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy documents how poor PSSA scores presage poor Keystone Exam scores in Pennsylvania.

But it also prompts two critical questions: Do such achievement test results point to a massive failure of the commonwealth's educational establishment and/or are the tests too difficult and require an overhaul?

“Indeed, one explanation of why the high percentages of students scoring below proficient on Keystone tests in 2021 -- and preceding years -- can be found in the surprisingly poor scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests in earlier years dating to 2015,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 15*).

Making the reasonable assumption that the overwhelming majority of the 8th-grade cohort in 2018 made up the 11th-grade test takers in 2021, the PSSA scores of those 8th graders in 2018 should be fairly good predictor of 11th-grade Keystone Exams performance in 2021.

“And, indeed, they are,” Haulk found. On the PSSA math test, 69 percent of 8th-grade test takers statewide in 2018 failed to score at the proficient level and 38.5 percent were below proficient on the English test.

“Thus, large percentages of below-proficient students in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades that went on to make up the preponderance of 11th graders taking the Keystone Exams in 2021 were simply moved up each year to the next grade despite not being able to do grade-level math or English or both,” Haulk says.

“Why would it be a surprise that the 69 percent of students who were not proficient in 8th-grade math failed in large numbers to score at the proficient or higher level on the 11th-grade math test despite the test being given at the end of the Algebra I course they had presumably just passed?”

The unfortunate test scores suggest there is a huge failure of public education in Pennsylvania.

“Either that or the achievement tests being administered are far too hard and need to be redesigned,” Haulk says. “In that regard, consider that even schools with superb academic rankings do not have all students scoring proficient in 8th-grade math.”

To wit, in 2018 Julia Masterman in Philadelphia, which perennially ranks near the very top in the state academically, had 7 percent of 8th graders failing to reach proficiency in math.

Then there’s Peters Township Middle School in Washington County, that, according to School Digger rankings for 2021, ranked 10th out of 797 middle schools in Pennsylvania and second best in Southwest Pennsylvania. It had 17.9 percent of 8th graders score below proficient in math in 2018.

Another strong school, Jefferson Middle in Mt Lebanon (and 11th ranked in the state), had 27 percent below proficient.

“In short, very good schools still posted what would normally be considered worrisome levels of below-proficient scores,” Haulk says.

By the way, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) had two schools with zero percent of test takers scoring proficient and three schools with under 5 percent of 8th graders scoring at the proficient level in math in 2018.

Importantly, however, even if tests were made less difficult, the scoring gap between good and very poor performance schools would remain very large with students at the poorest performing schools still extremely ill-prepared academically.

One thing is certain, Haulk concludes:

“Until the governor and Legislature stand ready to take on teacher unions, entrenched state education department employees and school boards of districts with high percentages of inadequately prepared students and enact major reforms, the status quo of unsatisfactory results will continue and tens of thousands of students will graduate each year with serious deficits in literacy and numeracy.

“And the futures of many of these graduates will be diminished accordingly,” Haulk concludes.

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