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An Evaluation of Factors that Impact Positive School Climate for School Psychologists in a Time of Conflicting Educational Mandates

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January 20, 2010

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Educators including school psychologists must negotiate the differing demands of legal mandates and recent educational initiatives that impact their practice and school climate in order to maintain positive effects for students and other school personnel. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002) and its requirements that schools demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measured by large-scale testing efforts of all students impact school functions, goals, and climate in both positive and negative ways. As well, another federal mandate, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with its emphasis on targeted instruction based on individualized diagnostic testing, creates its own demands for school psychologists. Additionally, the emerging Response to Intervention initiative using student progress monitoring and continuous testing as primary factors for making eligibility decisions for special services is at variance in some ways to the traditional, customary practices of school psychologists. These mandates and practices are somewhat at odds with each other and as related to the traditional professional work of school psychologists. They influence the roles of school psychologists and perceptions of school climate because of the expectations for psychologists to use new procedures that depend on new, or acquired but underused professional skill sets, to help children and teachers. This article evaluates the factors inherent in or flowing from these mandates (particularly the NCLB AYP requirement) and initiatives as they impact school climate in general but with a focus on the school psychologists, particularly. Ethical dimensions that emerge from the differing mandates also play a role in positive school climate and will be part of the discussion. Finally, a fit for school psychologists that bridges some of the dissonant areas is described.

School Climate

School climate (SC) is a somewhat elusive construct yet it is identifiable by educators in a given school setting and can be "perceived" as positive or negative. It is important because it is intertwined with professional efficacy and student outcomes. School Climate is described as "the characteristics of the total environment in a school building" (Chance & Chance, 2002, p. 20), encompassing a school's ecology, milieu, organization, and culture. When schools have positive climates, communication flows well; administrators are supportive and respectful of staff abilities. SC is perceived as positive for psychologists in schools where respect and recognition are present (Manz, Mautone, & Martin, 2009). Mautone, Manz, Martin, and White (2009) maintain that administrators, particularly, and teachers can have a positive effect on psychologists' sense of professional efficacy by recognizing their competencies and supporting their collaborative efforts with parents and teachers. Professional efficacy is described by Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, and Hoy (1998) as the extent to which educators feel they are making a positive difference in schools and with children. Most importantly for children, positive SC is associated with their development, productivity and learning outcomes (National School Climate Council, 2007). This nexus between school climate, professional efficacy, and student progress is fragile and affected by our school laws and procedures.

Education reform brought by the NCLB and IDEA/special education mandates (Faircloth, 2004) affect SC, too. That is, there is potential dissonance created by the distinctions that exist between the NCLB and the principle requirements of the special educational mandate that can mitigate against the development of positive school climates and psychologists' professional efficacy.

School Climate Under the Clouds of NCLB

The NCLB was passed in 2001 with the primary goals of creating high educational standards for all children, using appropriate tests to measure whether standards are met, placing "highly qualified" teachers in every classroom, and increasing funding to support the entire process (NCLB, 2002). These goals are positive yet some negative effects are surfacing. A foundational tenant of the NCLB is for schools to formally measure student progress each year, the Adequate Yearly Progress provision, with a requirement for schools to demonstrate that students on average are showing academic growth. AYP presents as a sound concept and practice on the surface but it is difficult to accurately define and measure, and the meaning of its measured outcome is not straightforward.

Positive Goals

The NCLB calls for evidence of academic progress for students who have traditionally performed poorly in schools such as those who come from disadvantaged environments, are English language learners (ELL), or have disabilities and often did not receive appropriate instruction (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2003). A sense of efficacy on the part of educators to effect progress with these children has traditionally been low. The NCLB requirement for higher academic achievement for all students forces schools to focus on improving teaching, providing better instructional materials/resources, and increasing exposure to general education curriculum for almost all students.

Negative Effects

While the major goal of NCLB is to create uniformly high academic standards and outcomes, the requirement for AYP and the use of large-scale assessments has the potential for unintended negative outcomes at both the system and individual levels (NASP, 2003). This affects school climate by injecting unreasonable accountability that pressurizes teachers, staff, and students as subgroup achievement data is disaggregated and sanctions are applied or threatened (Faircloth,

2004). In evaluating the overall outcome of the NCLB, a closer examination of its tenets, data reliability/validity, and special education requirements seems necessary.

Several problems implementing and measuring the effects of the NCLB have emerged. For instance, NCLB freely allows states to define academic proficiency differently, thereby implying that student progress may be defined differently, too. Hence, the application of sanctions based on not meeting AYP can be seen as unfair and demoralizing given the problems in defining progress across schools and districts. Particular problems also arise due to the requirement for schools to employ "highly qualified teachers." This is especially problematic as it relates to the sciences, math areas, and special education, the embedded educational system for approximately 10% of all students which has been characterized as an unfunded mandate since 1975.

Under the NCLB, all public schools within a state must meet increasingly restrictive AYP objectives that began in 2001 and continue to 2014. More specifically, states are required to increase scores on reading, writing, and math tests from the starting point in 2001-2002 of around 60-70% proficiency to 100% of students being proficient in 2014. Graduation rates and at least one other academic assessment such as the results of locally administered tests or retention rates are required to demonstrate AYP. Each year, school leaders are held responsible for making sure that their schools make incremental progress toward the year 2014 goal of 100% student progress. The accomplishment of AYP is determined by looking at data derived from annual statewide tests (i.e., large-scale assessments) and other measures by comparing group average scores to preset incremental goals.

Large-scale assessments like those used to determine AYP were created to test all students in a given population in an effort "to measure attainment of uniform, high academic standards" (NASP, 2003, p. 1). Such assessments are deemed to be "high-stakes" when they are primary determinants for making critical decisions about students' retention or promotion. In other words, large-scale

assessments are often used for a variety of purposes (e.g., to calculate AYP, to inform instruction, to measure student progress toward standards). They are arguably high stakes for teachers, too, as student yearly progress is becoming a factor in yearly teacher evaluations. Sanctions for not meeting the standards such as replacing faculty and administrative receivership hold a serious tone for school personnel and can be counter productive in developing positive school climate.

Problems in Interpretation: Large Scale Testing Outcomes from a Sample of States

Some of the interpretation problems of large scale testing outcomes can be illustrated from state AYP figures. An understanding of normal distribution is helpful in this discussion. It is generally accepted that norm based standardized testing of large populations related to human traits and abilities such as intellectual ability and academic achievement yields scores that fall into a normal distribution depicting a "Bell Curve" when the scores are plotted along a distribution line (Slavin, 2009). In a normal distribution of statistical data, there will be 4.54% of population scores that will fall two standard deviations beyond the mean (i.e., average score), 2.27% at each end of the distribution. Students' academic achievement scores based on standardized testing instruments such as called for by the NCLB should also tend to yield a normal distribution given a large enough sample size.

Sample States: Nevada, California, and Florida

Publicly accessible, on-line information sources from three states' annual AYP reports illustrate testing outcome trends for their population of students. For this article, the authors adapted each of the states' data to graphic form for ease of visual analysis and comparison. First, starting with Nevada, data was obtained from the 2007-2008 Accountability Report (Clark County School District, n.d.). As can be seen in Figure 1, data of test scores in reading, writing, and math from students throughout the state during the 2006-2007 school year yields a performance outcome as illustrated by the graph.

In Figures 2 and 3, statewide data from California accountability reports (California Department of Education, February 2008) for fifth and eighth grade testing results in English/language arts and math is graphically represented for two academic years: 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. As can be seen in Figure 2, the 5th grade data demonstrated a slightly skewed curve versus a more symmetrical curve in the 8th grade data as shown in Figure 3.

Data from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) (Florida Department of Education, n.d.) was graphed for all grades in reading and math and is presented in Figure 4. The FCAT ranks students' performance into five levels of proficiency with L1 being the lowest to L5 being the highest. The reading scores in Figure 4 appear to be positively skewed toward the lowest two levels of performance on the FCAT, meaning that there are proportionally more students' scores at the lower end than at the higher end of the distribution. A closer examination indicates differences between scores based on ethnic background. As can be seen in Figure 5 of reading trends by ethnicity (Florida Department of Education, n.d.), Hispanic students' scores appear to fall within a positively skewed curve. Moreover, African American students' scores yield no curve, but a positively skewed distribution meaning that there are proportionally more students' scores at the lower end than at the higher end of the distribution. Since distributions typically fall normally around the mean, accounting for the anomalous distribution is important. Some hypotheses as to why these students' scores are lower than other students' scores include cultural biases in testing, inadequate teaching methods or resources, and limited exposure to appropriate education. In this case, the validity of the tests is called into question.

When comparing statewide testing data from all three states to the normal distribution curve, it appears that the positive correlation with academic functioning is supported. The only case in which data did not fall into a normal distribution was for reading scores with the African American

population in Florida. As mentioned earlier, a variety of factors could be accountable for the skew toward low performance.

Implications for AYP

Skewed data trends are inconsistent with basic principles of standardized, academic achievement testing data that is normally distributed around the mean across large sample sizes. Yet, NCLB's requirements for AYP are essentially asking for negatively skewed data with the goal of all student scores to be eventually on or above grade level means. Based on current data and research-based statistical distributions, it appears to be illogical to expect that 100% of students will achieve at or above grade level by 2014. Additionally, statewide test scores of English Language Learners and students with learning disabilities are included when calculating AYP, adding data to the lower percentiles in an academic performance distribution. A case in point is that 5.5% of all students are currently identified with learning disabilities nation wide (NASP, 2007) and will tend to learn at a slower-than-average rate and score below grade level on standardized tests.

Also as a criterion for achieving AYP success, schools must meet fixed proficiency percentages. Schools may show gains in student learning rates and academic achievement levels; however, they get no credit for improvement because they did not make pre-set target percentages. Further, each state determines its own standards for how it defines academic proficiency. Therefore, comparisons of student proficiency percentages in reading, writing, and math between states could well be invalid, making sanctions or rewards seemingly subjectively based on "where one lives." In sum, the requirement for AYP based on standardized, norm-based test results is a goal with significant, vexing, and perhaps insurmountable problems in validating; yet it affects all conscientious school personnel that are touched by the procedures and policies that are necessary to implement and interpret it.

Effects of AYP on School Climate

As 2014 approaches, AYP standards will be hard to meet as they are currently being measured. A result of reaching or not reaching AYP standards is that administrators, as well as school staff, are "rewarded or sanctioned based on student test performance despite having little or no influence on some factors that significantly impact student achievement" (NASP, 2003, p. 2) such as transiency, re-zoning, neighborhood socio-economic status, parental involvement, financial and technological resources, etc. Also, principals are forced into making decisions related to testing, often without clear procedures in place and with unpredictable outcomes. For example, in an effort to help their schools make AYP, principals may be tempted to allocate educational resources (e.g., computers/ software, tutors) to students who need only a few extra test points to reach proficiency, leaving fewer resources for students who have no current chance of achieving proficiency (e.g., some English Language Learners and students with disabilities.)

Building-wide testing can put students, teachers, and administrators at risk for anxiety and other forms of emotional distress. As the NASP (2003) notes, large-scale testing "can also have unintended but negative effects on the education provided to all students by narrowing the curriculum and unduly emphasizing basic skills to the exclusion of the arts, technology, sciences, and humanities; creating a culture of 'teach-to-the-test;' increasing the psychological stress on children and families and decreasing job satisfaction" (p. 2) for school personnel. Unfortunately, teachers may even attempt to separate low achieving students from their classes in order to assure that these students' scores don't decrease class wide testing averages. Conversely, there may be an impetus in schools to maintain the number of special education students below critical limits so that the school will not have to report AYP for that group. In sum, NCLB and AYP reveal that schools will do more than "good teaching" to maximize student learning as judged by group test scores.

From their training and general disposition, most school psychologists advocate for children with disabilities and other learning challenges as a basic work ethic or principle. Supporting the NCLB with its whole school focus to the perceived detriment of an individual child focus may be difficult, pulling school psychologists away from their traditional service orientation. Generally, school psychologists are well trained in understanding statistics and measurement concepts. For these professionals, the nuanced and misusage of statistics can be frustrating when it is a basis for evaluating schools and the professional good work that occurs there. These factors impact morale and ease in the work place and place school psychologists in certain ethical netherlands.

Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas for School Psychologists

Faircloth (2004) takes us in an ethical direction in understanding the impacts of NCLB on the education of children with disabilities in particular. She presents a picture of certain conflicts posed by the principles and implementation of NCLB vis-à-vis the IDEA. For example, Faircloth reminds us that successful outcomes for the former are measured by omnibus, school or district wide measurements of achievement, whereas instruction, intervention planning, and progress monitoring for children with disabilities must be individualized. Further, Faircloth (2004) outlined the ethical dilemmas that are inherent in accommodating NCLB and the IDEA requirements. These dilemmas affect school climate for school psychologists in that they present a challenge pertaining to the kinds of responsibilities and activities they seek and want to predominate in the work place (schools).

School climate can be affected by the stress or dilemmas school psychologists feel when dealing with educational change. NCLB and the IDEA are dynamic educational movements mandating policies that shape the manner in which school psychologists approach student learning and thus the manner in which they perform their jobs. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) presented a model of ethics for educational problem solving that Faircloth (2004) expanded on as they relate to NCLB, special education laws and practices, and the education of students with disadvantages. The

four ethical considerations are the ethics of justice, care, critique, and the profession. These ethical principles affect the work of school psychologists in particular ways that are somewhat different from other school personnel.

The ethic of justice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001) in schools is based on notions of fairness and equity. A long history of separate and different education for children with disabilities makes this ethic relatively easy to understand; however, the more recent challenges regarding the benefits of inclusive education have been constant and nagging. The NCLB supports the ethic of justice, calling for the maximization of benefits to all children. While school psychologists may well favor this, it is also true that psychologists have had a tradition as previously stated of advocating strongly for the individualized educations, treatments, and assessments of children with disabilities and commonly other low achieving children.

The ethic of care is based on notions of concern for overall child development. Since the NCLB is focused on achieving global academic standards, sanctions for underachievement produce some dissonance with the ethic of care. For example, school-day instruction may tend to emphasize specific academic areas and test-taking skills in hopes that schoolwide scoring increases. School psychologists understand students' diverse aptitudes and the need for individualization of not only academic goals, but also the development of social skills, talents in the fine arts, physical health, adaptive functioning, and vocational knowledge.

The ethic of critique calls for the right to question policy. Rather than being simply a "question authority" right, the ethic of critique underlies critical analysis. With an emphasis on standardized group testing, NCLB has been criticized for increasing drop-out rates and low grades for low income and minority students. Again, many school psychologists have traditionally taken on an advocacy role for at-risk students and may see the NCLB as a marginalized mandate, even if unwittingly so.

The ethic of the profession (Faircloth, 2004) has as a basis the mandate for leaders to act in ethical manners with the best interest of children at the center of all decisions. School psychologists have a code of conduct and ethical standards that place professional ethics in prominence. For school psychologists, professional ethics may impact their forthright participation in implementing or advocating for some sections of NCLB that they see as contrary to individual student rights such as those that the IDEA seems to emphasize. Another ethic for psychologists is to use science responsibly. A primary example is that school psychologists have expertise and competency in assessment and measurement issues and must use that knowledge in critical analysis of their work even if it entails criticism of large scale measurement and assessment practices.

Fortunately, ethics can also guide decision making and problem solving in educational challenges. In sum, educational mandates can be a source of ethical frustration. The dissonance that school psychologists experience dealing with these issues needs to be reconciled if the work place is to be a positive one.

Options for Developing Greater Sense of Professional Efficacy and Positive School Climate

Given the aforementioned factors that affect school psychologists, how do they find a good fit for the changing educational context? As noted, school psychologists may well not feel in harmony with, and may even be cynical about, education mandates that appear to have short-comings such as measurement validity problems inherent in the NCLB. What has evolved is a certain skepticism about the full appropriate use of statistics for demonstrating AYP positive outcomes. School psychologists have a few options available for improving school climate and their sense of efficacy in light of the dissonance they may feel.

One option is addressing these issues via organizational support. For example, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is working to address problems with NCLB, lobbying Congress and

the U.S. Department of Education to make changes, and working with parent and other groups to secure promised funding (AFT Policy Brief Number 18, July 2004). Professional school psychology organizations should do more to publish articles and advocate their positions about NCLB (e.g., NASP, 2003). Eventually, whether these types of efforts make an impact or whether the reality of normal curve statistics hits on or before 2014, lawmakers will hopefully "see the light" and modify the requirements for AYP standards or interpretations of the outcome scores.

At a more local level, school psychologists might best focus on what they can control, helping to create a positive school climate. Although school psychologists may not have a role specifically in the delivery of large-scale assessments or the implementation of NCLB procedures, they have historically advocated for expanding their role and expertise to the greater school environment, the NCLB focus. In addition to the traditional service delivery model, school psychologists are well prepared to understand the complexities and statistics of large scale testing, including the appropriate and inappropriate interpretations of group assessment outcomes. As consultation sources, school psychologists can aid administration teams as they make instructional decisions based on testing results.

An unplanned but fortuitous nexus of NCLB with its emphasis on showing overall school improvements and special education principles that focus on individual student progress seems to have emerged. The rather recent general education initiative known as Response to Instruction calls for a close examination of basic skills instructional practices and a more individualized student-centered special education correlate known as Response to Intervention. RtI has diagnostic applications, allowing psychologists to redirect their time, competencies, and service toward preventative, collaborative educational and mental health efforts in schools such as described by Mautone et al. (2009). If this service delivery model is the primary method of service for any given school psychologist, it mitigates against the time consuming traditional diagnostic testing for special

education which is a well known, yet a less appreciated, school psychologist practice in favor of collaborative approaches. Moreover, RtI may well lead to more favorable perceptions of school climate and self efficacy (Manz et al., 2009) especially as delivered in a multi-tiered model.

Multi-tiered models involve RtI teaching practices in which student progress is interpreted as their measured response to teacher instruction (Wright, 2007). Multi-tiered models provide increased intensity of instruction, interventions, and resources addressing all students' needs. This is brought about by academic and behavioral progress monitoring allowing for a fluid system in which data-based decisions guide individual students to higher or lower levels of instructional intensity to address skill deficits or to enhance skill acquisition. Moreover, early interventions rather than "after failure" interventions are provided by which students experience success immediately (potentially) at their instructional levels.

Many schools are turning to multi-tiered models of instruction and intervention that encompass the learning needs of all students (NASP, 2007) by implementing schoolwide, academic tiered and positive behavior support systems while developing collaborative relationships with parents and staff in preventative efforts such as described by Manz et al. (2009).Mautone et al. (2009) argue that school climate will improve for school psychologists by decreasing the burden of special educational eligibility assessments in favor of expanding their role in collaborative problem-solving with families and staff. The important by-product of these efforts is the increased sense of efficacy brought about through engaging in preventative models of service delivery and increased respect and recognition from school colleagues. In such service systems, where intervention integrity is a paramount factor, school psychologists can provide consultation and even assessment where it is permissible. This will become a huge issue as the RtI model receives additional rigorous attention particularly because eligibility for services is impacted by the integrity of instructional procedures.

Finally, a key to the success for multi-tiered service delivery models as called for by the NCLB is collaboration, which is also a key element for positive self efficacy for school psychologists (Mautone et al., 2009) and positive school climate (National School Climate Council, 2007; Manz et al., 2009). In fully applying such models of instruction and intervention, we can find an ethical underpinning for our work. These service delivery models balance NCLB concerns for schoolwide improvements while addressing individual children who are struggling and require more intensive or individualized interventions.

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Figure Captions

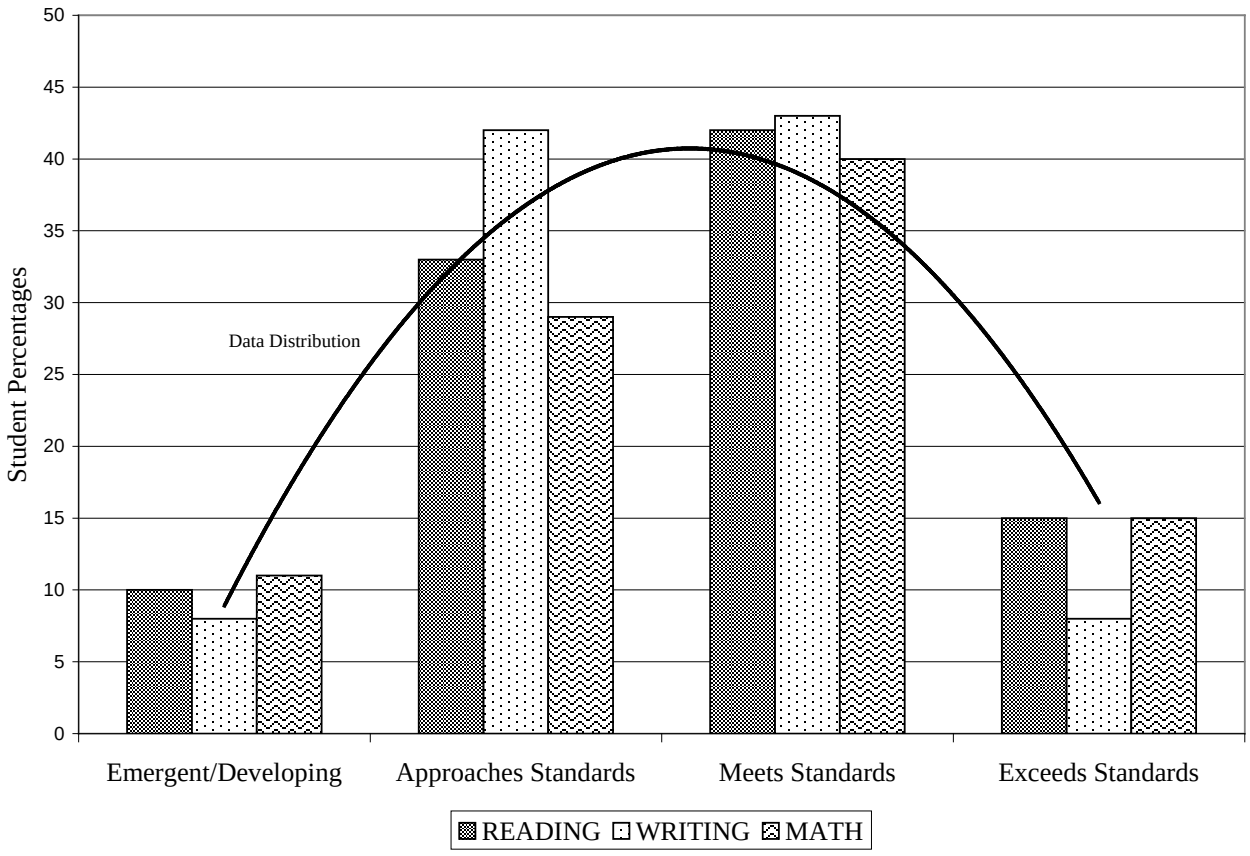
Figure 1. Nevada standards-based testing from 2006-2007.

Figure 2. California fifth grade testing results from 2005-06 and 2006-07.

Figure 3. California eighth grade testing results from 2006-06 and 2006-07.

Figure 4. Florida FCAT scores for all students from 2007-2008.

Figure 5. FCAT ethnic breakdowns for reading from 2007-2008.



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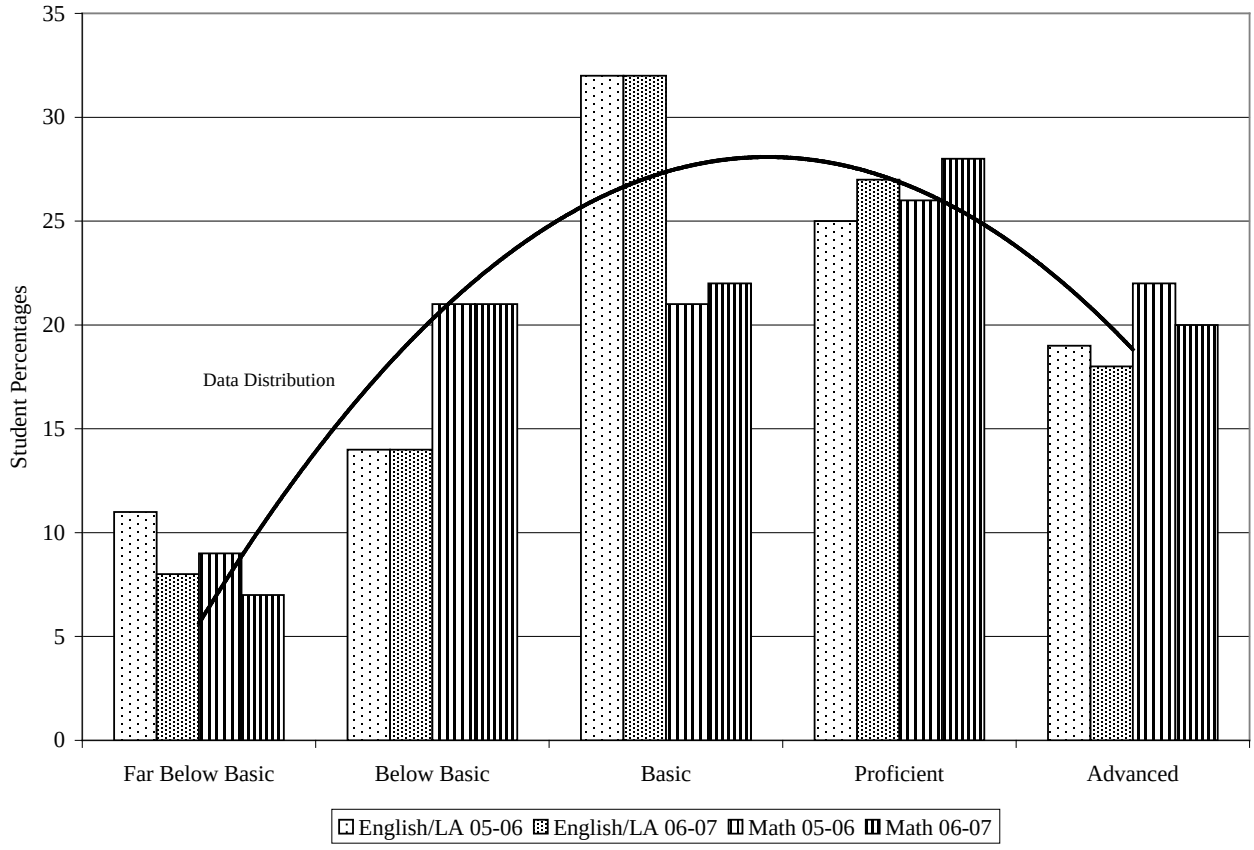


Figure 2. California fifth grade testing results from 2005-06 and 2006-07.

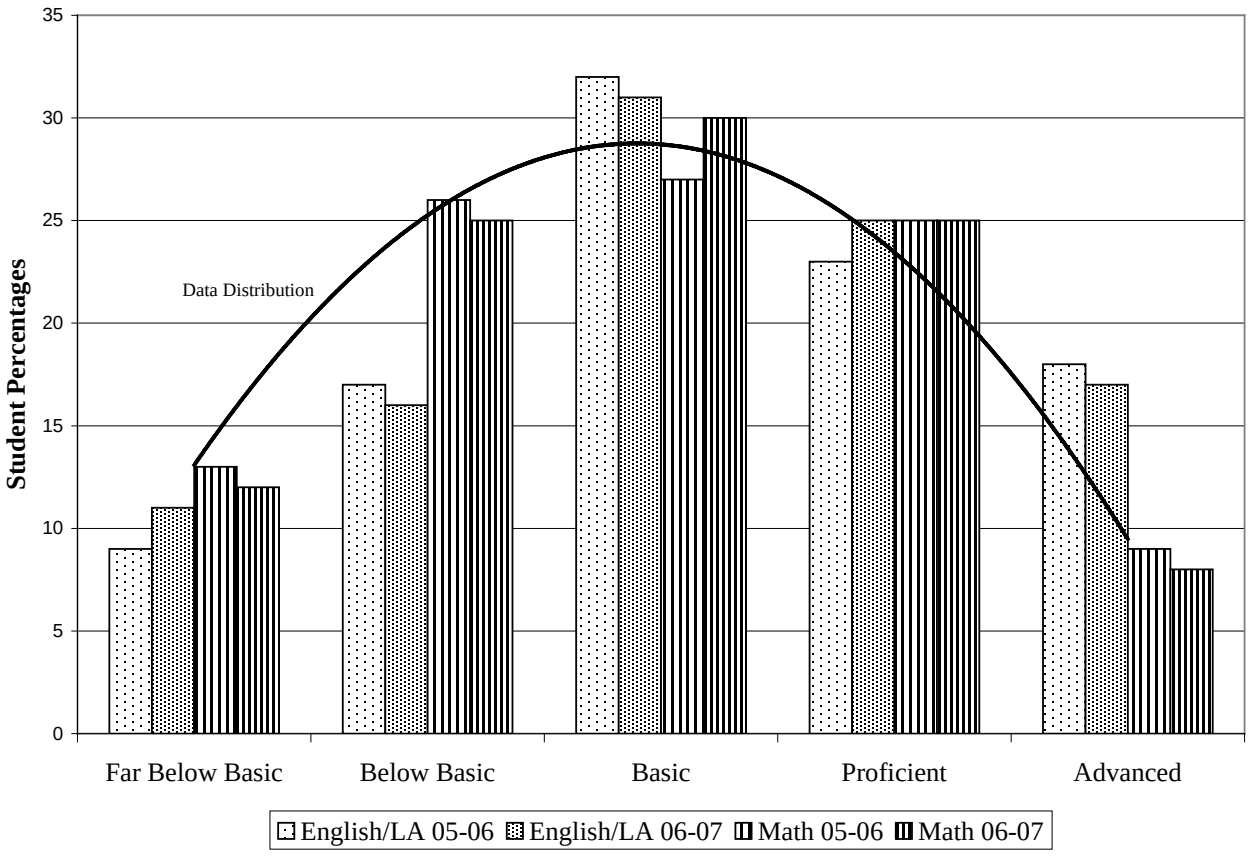
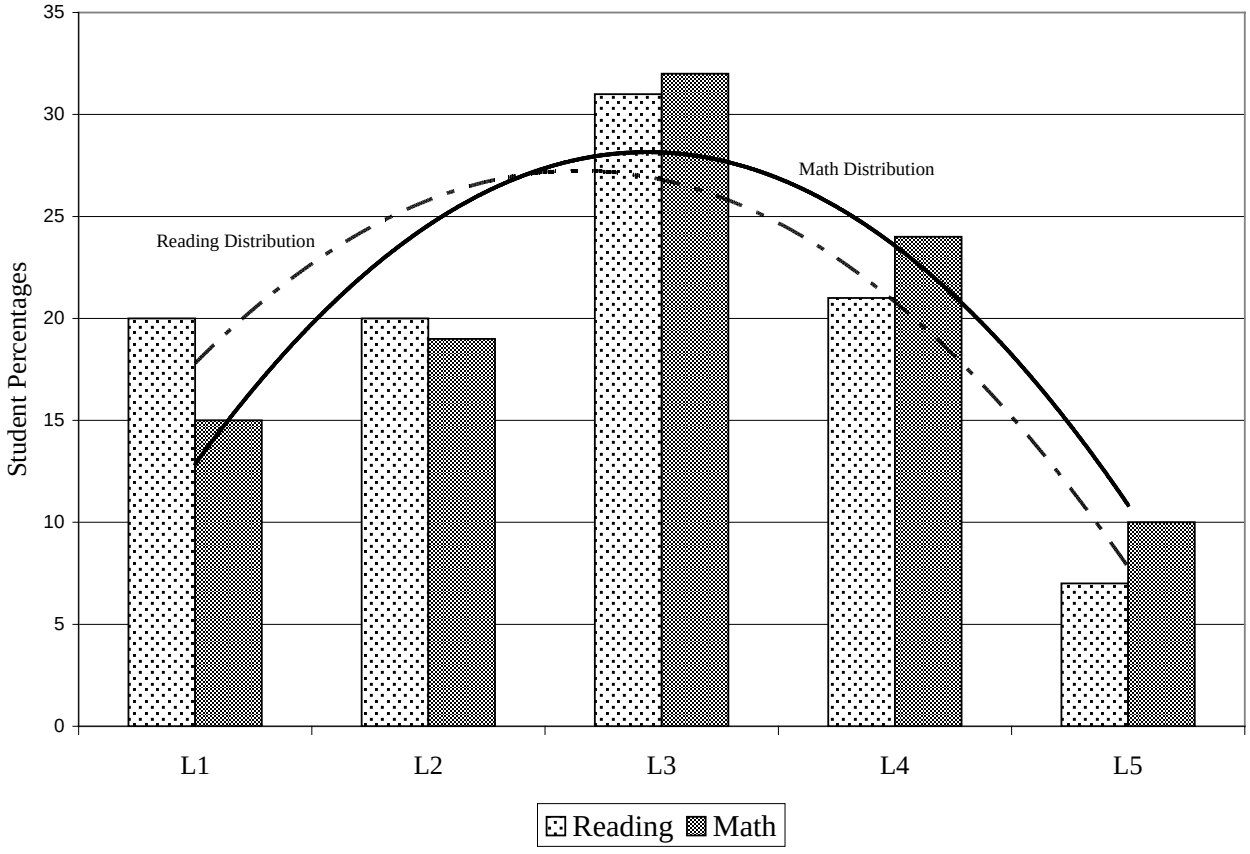


Figure 3. California eighth grade testing results from 2006-06 and 2006-07.



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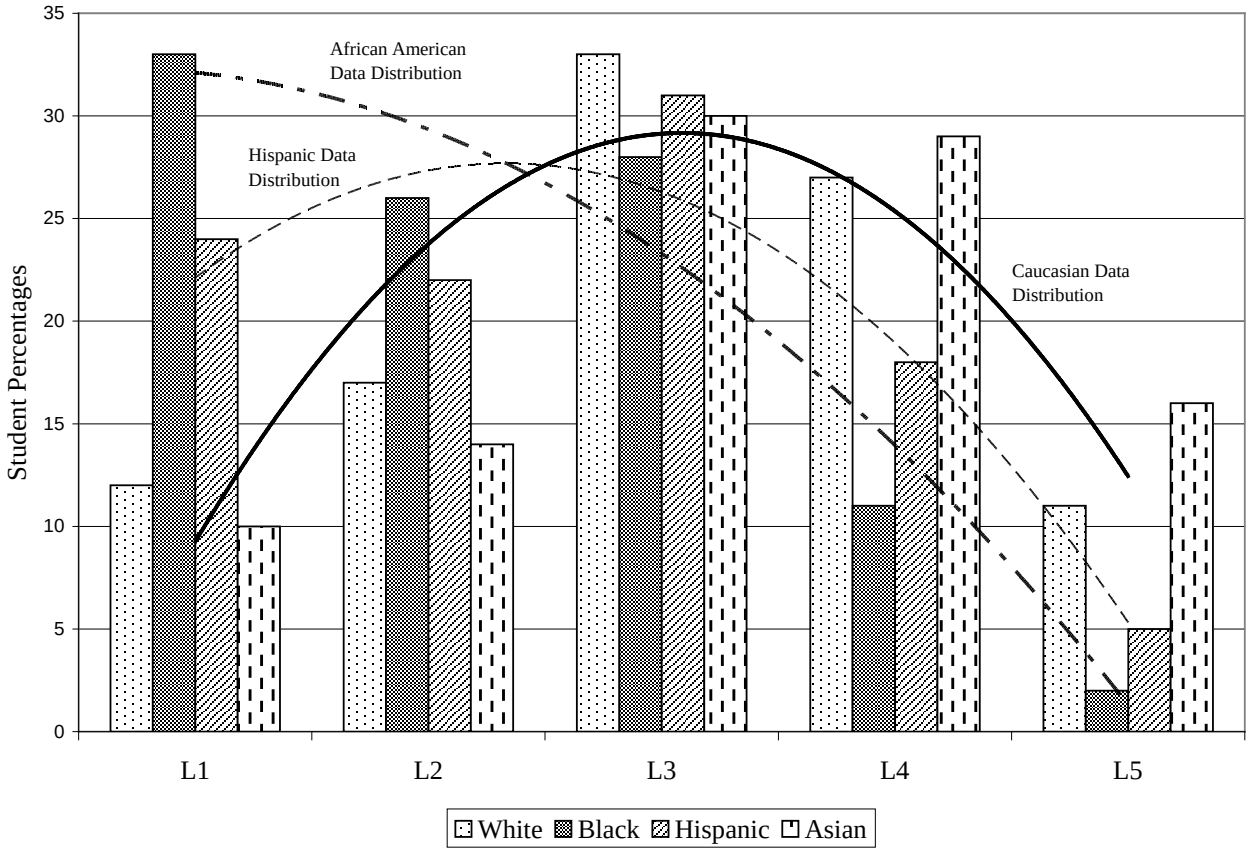

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