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Will the Virginia Governor's Push for Higher Expectations on State Tests Affect Student Learning?

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Matthew Chingos

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Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin and his administration want to raise the bar for students to pass the state's standardized tests "from the lowest in the nation to the highest in the nation" by next spring.[1] His goal is to close the "honesty gap" between the 79 percent of Virginia students who pass the state's tests and the 39 percent who pass a rigorous national test.[2] But data from 32 states that raised expectations on their tests over the past decade suggest that this change is unlikely to make much difference on its own.

Federal law requires all states to test students in math and reading annually from grades 3 to 8 and once in high school, but states choose which tests to use and what level of performance constitutes "proficiency." During the era of the Common Core State Standards initiative (roughly 2010–15), education advocates and federal policymakers pushed states to adopt higher-quality tests that are more challenging to pass, on the theory that high expectations will push students and schools to improve performance.[3]

States are also required to participate in a common national test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is taken every two years by a representative sample of students. NAEP allows me to use a common measuring stick to examine what happened to student achievement in states that dramatically increased expectations for students. Did scores rise as schools and families felt increased urgency and teachers taught the more advanced material required to pass the tests? Or did scores decline as a result of educators and students feeling demoralized by low passing rates? Or was this change not significant enough to make a difference either way?

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[1] Heather Graf, "Virginia Leaders React to 'Nation's Report Card' That Shows Decline in Student Test Scores," ABC 7News, October 24, 2022, https://wjla.com/news/local/student-test-scores-nations-report-card-virginia-leaders-react-to-decline-glenn-youngkin-louise-lucas-mamie-locke-national-assessment-of-educational-progress-naep-national-center-for-education-statistics-commissioner-peggy-carr.

[2] Statistics from author's calculations using 2018–19 EDFacts and National Assessment of Educational Progress data. See also Office of the Virginia Governor, "Governor Youngkin Releases Education Report Finding Sliding Education Performance and Lowered Standards in Virginia," news release, May 19, 2022, https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/news-releases/2022/may/name-933341-en.html; and Virginia Department of Education, *Our Commitment to Virginians: High Expectations and Excellence for All Students* (Richmond: Virginia Department of Education, 2022). The difference between student performance on state tests and the NAEP was termed the "honesty gap" by the Collaborative for Student Success (https://honestygap.org/faq/).

[3] Paul E. Peterson, Samuel Barrows, and Thomas Gift, "After Common Core, States Set Rigorous Standards," *Education Next*, last updated January 27, 2016, https://www.educationnext.org/after-common-core-states-set-rigorous-standards/.

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My analysis of NAEP data indicates that the 32 states that introduced new tests with much higher expectations for students did not see much change, either positive or negative, in student achievement in math and reading. In light of this finding, it may make more sense for Virginia state policymakers to make changes to passing scores in concert with the broader reforms to standards, assessment, and accountability that the Youngkin administration is planning for the coming years, rather than rushing to raise expectations on this spring's tests.

Measuring Expectations on State Tests and Identifying Large Changes

I measure the level of expectations on each state's tests annually from 2009–10 through 2018–19 using the honesty gap measure, which is the difference between the share of students scoring proficient on four different state tests (math and reading in the fourth and eighth grades), accessed via the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal, and the share scoring proficient on the NAEP in the same grade and subject, accessed via the NAEP Data Explorer.[4] A larger honesty gap means that expectations for students are lower (so the state test is easier to pass).

Averaged across the four tests, Virginia had the second-largest honesty gap in 2018–19: 79 percent of students scored proficient on the state tests compared with 39 percent on the NAEP, a difference of 40 percentage points. Only Louisiana had a larger gap (42 percentage points), and most states (35 states and DC) had gaps smaller than 15 percentage points, though very few states had completely closed their gaps (appendix table A.1).[5]

I identify states that substantially raised expectations as those that decreased the honesty gap (compared with the prior year) by at least 30 percentage points in a particular grade and subject. I identify 32 states (including DC) that did so in at least one grade and subject; most (23) of them did so in 2013–14 or 2014–15. Appendix table A.2 lists all the states that made large changes, including in what grade and subject and when.

States typically do not change the passing scores on tests they have been using for several years. Most efforts to increase expectations are coupled with the adoption of new tests with higher expectations for what constitutes proficiency. The states that narrowed their honesty gaps during the 2010s largely did so by implementing tests aligned to the Common Core standards, including both

[4] NAEP was administered in January and February of odd-numbered years through 2019. I interpolated scores for even-numbered years as the average of the adjacent years (e.g., I impute the 2016 scores as the average of 2015 and 2017). I calculate state averages of proficiency rates on state tests as the average of the reported district-level scores (using the midpoint of the reported range in the EDFacts data, when applicable) weighted by the number of test takers in that district. I do not use 2022 NAEP data because proficiency rates on state tests are not yet widely available for 2021–22, and the pandemic's disruptive effects would make it difficult to tie 2022 scores to prepandemic policy changes.

[5] My approach is distinct from a proficiency standards mapping study (e.g., "Mapping State Proficiency Standards," US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed December 2, 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/statemapping/) but is an easy-to-understand measure of the honesty gap that can be calculated by state annually using publicly available data.

state-specific tests and tests developed by two multistate consortia (the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced).[6]

Does Achievement Increase When Expectations Rise?

States that raised expectations on state tests, by definition, experience large declines in student proficiency rates on state tests (figure 1). Scores do make a modest recovery of roughly 10 percentage points over five years in most cases (with the exception of eighth-grade reading).

But proficiency rates on the NAEP remained largely flat after states made their own tests harder to pass. For example, the average proficiency rate in fourth-grade math among states that raised expectations was 40 percent the year before the policy change and was 39 to 40 percent in the five years that followed.[7]

Because raising expectations generally coincided with the adoption of new Common Core–aligned tests (which was part of the broader implementation of the new standards), any observed changes in achievement will reflect this full set of policy changes.[8] The increase in state test scores is consistent with schools and students becoming more familiar with the new tests, but the lack of an increase in NAEP scores suggests that increased state test scores did not coincide with an increase in student learning as measured by a consistent national test.

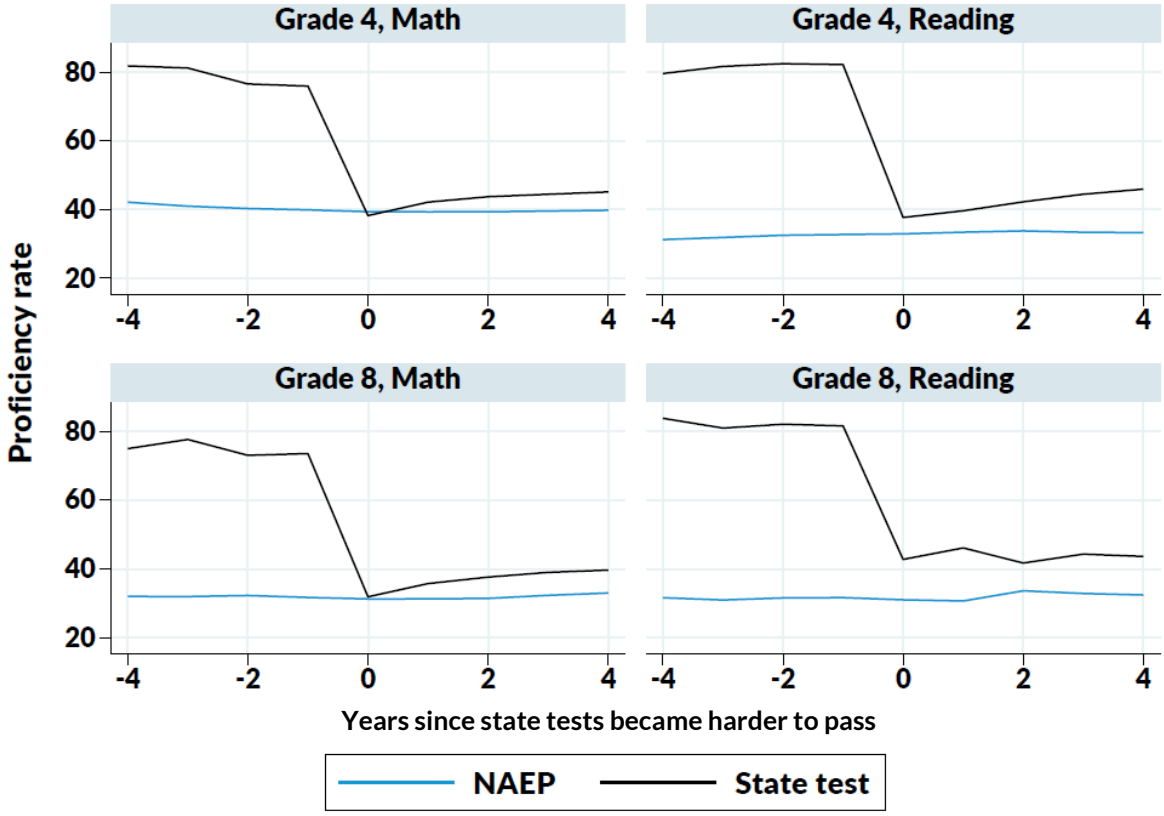
[6] Andrew Ujifusa, "Scores Drop on KY's Common Core–Aligned Tests," EducationWeek, November 2, 2012, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/scores-drop-on-ky-s-common-core-aligned-tests/2012/11.

[7] An analysis of average NAEP scale scores produces similar results.

[8] Matthew M. Chingos, "Standardized Testing and the Common Core Standards: You Get What You Pay For?" (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013).

FIGURE 1

NAEP Scores Held Steady after States Made Tests Harder to Pass



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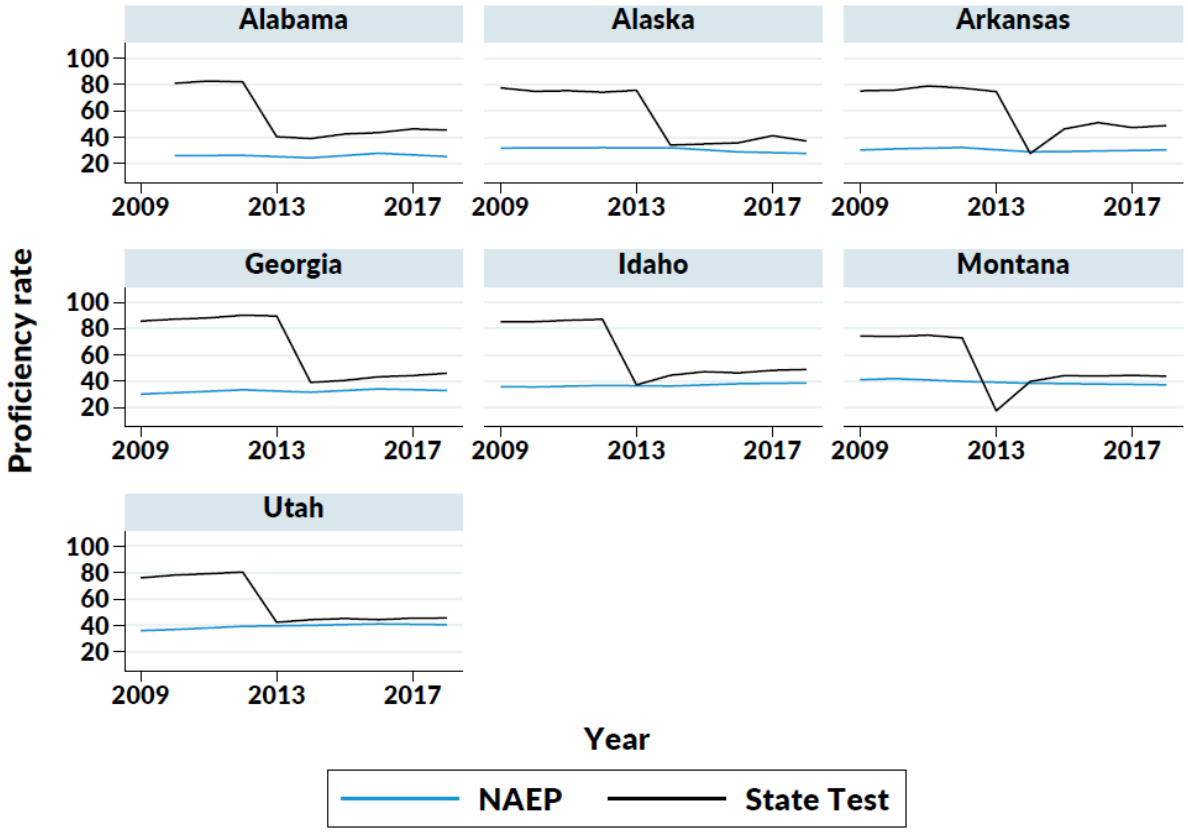
Source: Author's calculations from EDFacts and NAEP data.
Note: NAEP = National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Did individual states have different experiences than what the averages suggest, perhaps because of differences in how they implemented the policy change? Figure 2 shows data (averaged across all four tests) from the seven states that narrowed their honesty gaps by at least 30 percentage points across all four tests.

The seven states vary in how much their proficiency rates on state tests recovered after they adopted new, more challenging tests, but all show flat trends in their average proficiency rates on the NAEP.

FIGURE 2

NAEP Scores Held Steady in Seven States That Raised Expectations across Four Different Tests



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Source: Author's calculations from EDFacts and NAEP data.
Note: NAEP = National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Implications for Virginia Policymakers

This simple comparison of test scores following large increases in what is required of students to pass state tests is by no means definitive.[9] But the results do indicate that the many states that made big changes to their state testing systems—largely by introducing new tests that are harder to pass—did not see improvements in NAEP performance in the years that followed.[10]

[9] In particular, this analysis does not compare test scores in states that made the policy change with a comparison group of states that did not. Some states that did not narrow their honesty gaps by at least 30 percentage points did narrow them by a smaller amount, complicating such a comparison. But it is worth noting that the period covered by the data in this analysis generally saw flat NAEP scores nationwide (see "2019 NAEP Mathematics and Reading Assessments: Highlighted Results at Grades 4 and 8 for the Nation, States, and Districts," accessed December 2, 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020012), so it is unlikely that the stagnant levels of performance in the gap-closing states were markedly different from trends in other states.

[10] The results are also consistent with a 2018 analysis of proficiency standards (see Daniel Hamlin and Paul E. Peterson, "Have States Maintained High Expectations for Student Performance?" *Education Next*, last updated May

The Youngkin administration's arguments for raising passing standards—without immediately implementing new tests—are rooted in more than setting higher expectations for students. Virginia education officials argue that closing the honesty gap is needed to "provide quality information about student achievement and growth, as well as the health of our state's education system."[11] The passing score that corresponds to "quality information" involves subjective judgment by state policymakers, as demonstrated by the wide variation in honesty gaps across states.

An education reform agenda rooted in standards and testing would be a stark reversal from Virginia's policies during the 2010s, when it was one of a small number of states to reject the Common Core standards and associated new assessments. The result of that decision was that most other states narrowed their honesty gaps, leaving Virginia the outlier that it is today.

Governor Youngkin has called for the state Board of Education to "raise Virginia's expectations for students from the lowest in the nation to the highest by the time [Virginia] students take their [Standards of Learning] exams next spring." In addition, the Youngkin administration has called for Virginia to make major changes to its accreditation and accountability policies and revamp its curricular standards over the next few years.[12]

A key question facing state policymakers is whether to change passing scores immediately, as Governor Youngkin has proposed, or wait to make those changes alongside the other proposed reforms. Virginia policymakers will have to consider the urgency of making the current tests harder to pass relative to the potential benefits of communicating to educators and the public a clear set of coordinated policy changes, given that the passing scores on state tests interact with other policies, such as accreditation, accountability, and student progression.

The experiences from other states indicate that, even though there may be other rationales for setting higher passing scores on Virginia's existing tests, state policymakers should not expect this policy change to advance student learning. And making this change as soon as this school year may be confusing to educators and policymakers, given that further changes to testing and accountability are planned for future years.

22, 2018, https://www.educationnext.org/have-states-maintained-high-expectations-student-performance-analysis-2017-proficiency-standards/) and a 2020 analysis of Common Core implementation (see Tom Loveless, "Common Core Has Not Worked," *Education Next*, January 14, 2020, https://www.educationnext.org/common-core-has-not-worked-forum-decade-on-has-common-core-failed/), both of which used different approaches from the present analysis.

[11] Virginia Department of Education, *Our Commitment to Virginians*.

[12] Office of the Virginia Governor, "Our Commitment to Virginia's Children" (Richmond: Office of the Virginia Governor, n.d.); and Virginia Department of Education, *Our Commitment to Virginians*.

Appendix

TABLE A.1

Honesty Gaps in 2018–19

State	Share Proficient on State test	Share Proficient on NAEP	"Honesty gap"
Louisiana	68%	26%	42 p.p.
Virginia	79%	39%	40 p.p.
Iowa	70%	36%	35 p.p.
Ohio	66%	38%	28 p.p.
Florida	61%	37%	24 p.p.
Alabama	45%	25%	20 p.p.
Texas	52%	32%	20 p.p.
Arkansas	49%	30%	19 p.p.
Kentucky	52%	34%	18 p.p.
Washington	55%	38%	17 p.p.
West Virginia	43%	27%	16 p.p.
Michigan	48%	32%	16 p.p.
Minnesota	58%	42%	16 p.p.
Delaware	48%	33%	15 p.p.
Hawaii	47%	32%	14 p.p.
Wyoming	54%	40%	14 p.p.
Mississippi	45%	30%	14 p.p.
South Carolina	46%	32%	14 p.p.
California	45%	31%	14 p.p.
Nebraska	52%	38%	14 p.p.
New York	48%	34%	13 p.p.
Georgia	46%	33%	13 p.p.
Nevada	43%	30%	13 p.p.
Oregon	46%	34%	12 p.p.
Arizona	44%	32%	12 p.p.
South Dakota	49%	38%	12 p.p.
New Hampshire	51%	40%	11 p.p.
Maine	47%	37%	11 p.p.
Missouri	45%	35%	11 p.p.
Connecticut	52%	41%	10 p.p.
Idaho	49%	39%	10 p.p.
New Jersey	54%	44%	10 p.p.
Alaska	37%	28%	9 p.p.
Pennsylvania	50%	40%	9 p.p.
North Dakota	46%	37%	9 p.p.
District of Columbia	36%	28%	8 p.p.
Indiana	46%	40%	7 p.p.
Montana	44%	37%	6 p.p.
Utah	46%	40%	5 p.p.
Maryland	41%	36%	5 p.p.
North Carolina	40%	37%	4 p.p.
Massachusetts	50%	47%	3 p.p.
New Mexico	27%	24%	3 p.p.
Tennessee	37%	34%	3 p.p.
Oklahoma	31%	29%	2 p.p.
Colorado	41%	40%	1 p.p.
Wisconsin	41%	40%	1 p.p.
Illinois	35%	36%	0 p.p.

State	Share Proficient on State test	Share Proficient on NAEP	"Honesty gap"
Kansas	34%	35%	-1 p.p.
Rhode Island	32%	35%	-3 p.p.

Source: Author's calculations from EDFacts and NAEP data.

Note: NAEP = National Assessment of Educational Progress; p.p. = percentage points.

TABLE A.2

Years and Sizes of Large Changes in Honesty Gaps

State	4th-grade math Year	4th-grade math Gap change	8th-grade math Year	8th-grade math Gap change	4th-grade reading Year	4th-grade reading Gap change	8th-grade reading Year	8th-grade reading Gap change
Alabama	2013	-35 p.p.	2013	-47 p.p.	2013	-48 p.p.	2013	-33 p.p.
Alaska	2014	-35 p.p.	2014	-41 p.p.	2014	-39 p.p.	2014	-52 p.p.
Arizona					2014	-35 p.p.	2014	-37 p.p.
Arkansas	2014	-47 p.p.	2014	-44 p.p.	2014	-49 p.p.	2014	-42 p.p.
Colorado	2014	-38 p.p.						
Connecticut			2014	-34 p.p.				
Delaware			2014	-31 p.p.				
District of Columbia	2014	-32 p.p.	2014	-47 p.p.				
Georgia	2014	-38 p.p.	2014	-49 p.p.	2014	-55 p.p.	2014	-57 p.p.
Idaho	2013	-44 p.p.	2013	-47 p.p.	2013	-47 p.p.	2013	-64 p.p.
Illinois	2014	-34 p.p.						
Kentucky	2011	-36 p.p.						
Maryland	2014	-46 p.p.			2014	-42 p.p.	2014	-33 p.p.
Massachusetts							2016	-31 p.p.
Michigan	2011	-51 p.p.	2011	-47 p.p.				
Mississippi	2014	-40 p.p.	2014	-39 p.p.	2014	-30 p.p.		
Montana	2013	-40 p.p.	2013	-52 p.p.	2013	-57 p.p.	2013	-71 p.p.
Nebraska							2016	-30 p.p.
New Jersey	2014	-33 p.p.						
New Mexico							2014	-35 p.p.
New York	2012	-34 p.p.	2012	-34 p.p.				
North Carolina	2012	-38 p.p.	2012	-50 p.p.			2012	-31 p.p.
North Dakota	2014	-33 p.p.			2014	-32 p.p.	2014	-30 p.p.
Oklahoma			2016	-39 p.p.			2016	-39 p.p.
Pennsylvania	2014	-32 p.p.	2014	-40 p.p.				
Rhode Island	2014	-33 p.p.			2014	-35 p.p.	2014	-38 p.p.
South Carolina			2014	-35 p.p.	2014	-47 p.p.		
South Dakota	2013	-30 p.p.						
Texas							2017	-34 p.p.
Utah	2013	-31 p.p.	2013	-36 p.p.	2013	-38 p.p.	2013	-49 p.p.
Wisconsin			2011	-33 p.p.	2011	-49 p.p.	2011	-54 p.p.
Wyoming	2013	-34 p.p.						

Source: Author's calculations from EDFacts and National Assessment of Educational Progress data.

Notes: p.p. = percentage points. Blank cells indicate that the honesty gap did not decrease by at least 30 percentage points in that state, grade, and subject.

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