

KERA UPDATE

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#28

1998 ACT and SAT Scores Are In

Kentucky newspaper editorials have been celebrating since the ACT scores released a few weeks ago. The new results showed that the state's ACT Composite score improved by 0.1 point in relation to the national average from 1997 to 1998. Banners like "evidence mounts in KERA's favor" and "scores of success" blossomed.

Well, it might be worthwhile to take a more analytical approach and examine the overall trend for these two tests during the decade of KERA.

The ACT: The top graph on the right shows the annual differences between Kentucky's ACT Composite score and the national average since 1990. Due to limited space, the 0.3 point improvement from 1982 to 1990 isn't shown, but the real message is that, since the early 1990's, Kentucky lost 0.3 points relative to the national ACT average. The new 1998 results only recover one third of that loss.

There is more to this story. From 1997 to 1998, Kentucky's ACT Science Reasoning and Reading scores stayed flat compared to the rest of the nation. The ACT English score did go up a tenth, but ACT Math actually declined a tenth. Looking at these individual results, I was surprised the ACT Composite didn't stay flat, as well. So, I called ACT. Due to rounding to the nearest tenth, Kentucky's ACT Composite just squeaked over the value of 20.15 needed to go from 20.1 to 20.2. The real change was something like 20.146 to 20.154 or so — just a few thousandths of a point. That's improvement, but not the breathtaking kind that the editorials imply. Of course, maybe the national average just missed going to 21.1 by a few thousandths of a point, too. Anyway, the overall trend is clear on the graph. Maybe we turned the corner, or maybe we are experiencing

another of those education bounce effects we saw so regularly with jumpy KIRIS scores. Anyway, with the latest overall Composite movement measured in thousandths, I'd like to see a few more years of data to counter the continuous decline we started in 1993.

The SAT: I always get nervous taking Kentucky's SAT results too seriously. This year, the percentage of Kentucky students taking the SAT did rise by one percent, but still only the top 13 percent of our students took this test. That is a biased and skewed sample. However, the SAT results are interesting this year for several reasons.

First, Kentucky slid on Verbal again compared to the rest of the nation. That is an intriguing trend for a state reform effort that is concentrating, perhaps even to excess, on writing. Overall, Kentucky's best students have lost about 10 points of ground on the SAT Verbal since the early days of KIRIS. That is curious.

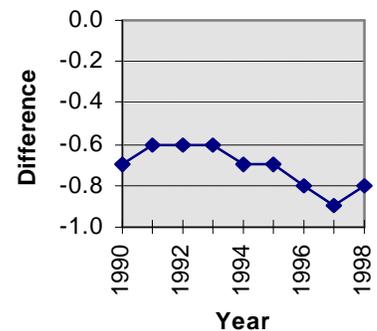
Second, SAT math jumped a year or so after Kentucky discontinued the dubious experiment with math portfolios. You cannot make a similar comparison with ACT, because ACT allowed calculators for the first time just as the portfolio program was shutting down. That caused a jump in ACT Math scores nationwide and in Kentucky that is unrelated to the portfolios.

Last, like the ACT Composite trend, even the very nice one year improvement in SAT Math from 1997 to 1998 does not regain all the lost ground from the early days of the decade before KIRIS.

Bottom Line: Let's see several more years of trend data before we declare the evidence is mounting in KERA's favor.

After all, we still have a way to go just to regain all the lost ground.

Difference Between Kentucky's ACT Composite and US Average



Difference Between Kentucky Verbal and Math SAT Scores and National Averages

