

KERA UPDATE

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HOLDING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE WITH CATS

Recently, the Kentucky Board of Education launched a campaign to make students individually accountable for their scores in the Commonwealth Assessment and Testing System (CATS). The Board seems highly focused on making students toe the line on CATS as a way to boost scores, but you have to wonder who is looking out for the kids.

While CATS provides an appeal process for schools who think their scores are wrong, there is no such protection for individual students. That wasn't too important so long as CATS scores were not used in ways that might harm individual students; but, the Board's proposals will change that.

By the way, the Board is jumping the gun on this issue. There is a legal provision that relates to using CATS for individual student purposes. Here is what House Bill 53, which created CATS, says in Section 9:

"Student scores from any assessment under Section 11 of this Act that are determined by the National Technical Advisory Panel to be valid and reliable at the individual level shall be included on the student transcript" (Note: Section 11 outlines CATS).

Clearly, legislators want the technical panel to find CATS valid and reliable for individuals *before* scores go on transcripts. Getting enough data to make this technical determination appears to be years away. But, the Board wants to force local districts into student accountability now, before the national technical panel issues its findings. That certainly seems like an attempt to circumvent the spirit, if not the letter, of the law.

Worse, news reports don't mention any Board discussion of an appeal process for students in the rush to make them accountable. That raises uncomfortable questions about whether the Board is fairly considering the interests of all Kentuckians, including students and parents.

Is an appeal process an issue? Aside from very serious questions about the technical accuracy of CATS scoring and reporting (covered in *KERA Update 39*), consider some reasons why a student might want to challenge CATS before his or her scores go on a transcript or are used for such things as placement in gifted, AP or remedial courses:

- 1. PLACEMENT IN UPPER QUARTER OF CLASS** Kids smart enough to place in the top quarter of the class don't deserve a "Novice." They probably aren't an "Apprentice," either.
- 2. PLACEMENT IN TOP QUARTILE OF ACT OR SAT** If a student scores in the top quarter of either one of these challenging tests, he or she certainly should be able to appeal low CATS scores.
- 3. STRONG GRADEPOINT AVERAGE** This ties closely with placement in the upper quarter of the class, but it certainly could form a separate basis for an appeal.
- 4. NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLAR** No National Merit Scholar should ever rank as a "Novice" or "Apprentice."
- 5. STRONG COLLEGE GRADEPOINT AVERAGE** Superior

college performance would indicate that a low CATS score was in error. The case gets stronger if high college performance is maintained for two or more years. Students applying for highly competitive positions (e.g. medical or legal school) don't want any unrealistically low scores on any transcript and might need this protection.

6. EVIDENCE FROM THE NEW CATS LONGITUDINAL STUDY CATS requires KDE to do studies of the same group of students over time. These studies may involve testing the same group of students in multiple years. A student with a strong trend line that drops during the year that scores go on transcripts certainly should be able to appeal.

7. HIGH SCORES ON AP TESTS IN SAME SUBJECT(S)

8. A COMBINATION OF SUPERIOR PERFORMANCES Most certainly, a student who performed well on more than one of the indicators above has an extra strong basis for a CATS appeal.

Other intelligent causes for appeal can be developed, as well. The point is: **if we are going to hold Kentucky students to individual account under CATS, then they must be offered a program to appeal obviously inaccurate results.**

Before the Kentucky Board of Education moves farther towards making students accountable for CATS, let's see some provisions for a student and parent appeal process.