

KERA UPDATE

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#39

HOLDING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE WITH CATS

The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) has launched a campaign to make students individually accountable for their scores in the Commonwealth Assessment and Testing System (CATS). KBE seems very focused on making students toe the line on CATS as a way to boost scores; but, are the kids' interests being adequately protected?

Part 1 of this series looks at CATS' glaring absence of a student and parent appeal process. This part addresses some serious technical issues that indicate CATS isn't ready for high stakes individual student accountability.

CATS Continues The KIRIS Tradition of Flawed Reporting

A testing program cannot be better than the technical accuracy of its reports. CATS started off badly in this area. On October 15th, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported that 'Student Item Level Reports' had errors that switched scores around. The example cited: a student's science scores appeared in the reading section. But, other problems also occurred such as subject summary lists that got jumbled so one student received another's scores and percentile rank for the same subject.

These errors were identified by local school staff and apparently impacted many students. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and its technical contractors missed them. Schools demanded corrections.

But, what if errors only impacted one or two students? Would schools spot that? Would the burden of proof be on the student and his parents? As pointed out in

Part 1 of this series, with no individual appeal process, how could the student or a parent correct such a mistake?

Multiple CATS Test Forms Cannot Support an Individual Accountability Program

CATS uses several different test booklets, or forms. As a result, all Kentucky students in a given grade don't really take the same test. And, because of the way CATS is designed and scored, some forms can be much easier than others. When that happens, the state compensates by curving raw scores. But, curving can make it impossible for some students to achieve top scores. In other words, if a student gets an easier test booklet, he might have no chance to get a top score.

Clearly, this is inequity of the highest order. KDE says they are trying to make all forms of the test equally difficult. But, they already tried to do that with KIRIS — for 7 years! The problem remains because open response questions in CATS make this difficult, if not impossible. Will student accountability be fair while this problem remains unsolved?

There's also a question whether this only impacts top students. For example, a CATS student level report showed one student scored 83.3 percent on the multiple

choice CATS questions for reading and got a 2.17 average for the open response section. This student was only rated 'Apprentice-High' and was ranked at the 67th percentile of all students for reading. Yet, a student rated 'Proficient' and ranked at the 71st percentile scored only 79.2% and 2.00 respectively (See table below)! The explanation offered: the second student got a harder form of the test. How would the first student perform if he took the second form of the test? We don't know. Also, given the great difficulty of scoring and equating open response questions, how can we be sure KDE's curve is close to accurate?

Is CATS Really Ready for Individual Use?

There are an awful lot of unresolved technical problems in CATS, especially for individual student use. We must learn much more before the State Board uses this unvalidated assessment to impact the futures of our kids. Let's get some validity rulings from our panel of technical experts, and let's see evidence the apparently unending technical glitches in Kentucky's assessment reports are fixed before anyone starts tarring children with the consequences.

| WHAT'S WRONG HERE? | Raw Multiple Choice Score | Raw Open Response Average Score | CATS Grade | CATS Percentile |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--|-------------------|------------------------|
| Student One | 83.3% | 2.17 | Apprentice - High | 67 |
| Student Two | 79.2% | 2.00 | Proficient | 71 |