KERA UPDATE

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CATS Performance Levels, Where 'Proficient' Equals 'Distinguished'

Years ago, courtesy of the Air Force, I got conversant with a 'new' education process. It started by determining things students should know and be able to do at the end of the course. Then, the process worked backwards. An early step developed goal and expectations standards that could be expressed in highly measurable terms. Eventually, those measurable standards were used to develop curriculum. The process didn't stop there though. There was also constant testing against those highly measurable standards to see if students were actually successful.

If that sounds like Kentucky's present public school education philosophy, it is. The difference is this theory was originally intended for narrow-scope, well-defined technical education like training military pilots. So far, this outcome oriented approach has not proved to be effective with much broader scope, difficult to define programs such as public school education. And, the reason for that may well be the fundamental requirement that the goals and standards ***must*** be defined in highly measurable terms.

Which brings me to the point of this ***Update.*** The Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE) December '99 - January '00 edition of the ***Kentucky Teacher*** newsletter and the KDE Web Site list newly proposed descriptors for the four performance levels used in our CATS assessment — the ever popular 'Novice,' 'Apprentice,' 'Proficient' and 'Distinguished.' Put bluntly, the new performance definitions not only are clearly not measurable, but, in some cases, level descriptors for ***different*** classifications are actually ***identical***!

Consider the general 'P1' descriptor: "Student demonstrates broad knowledge of the content area." Compare that to the 'D1' descriptor: "Student demonstrates extensive knowledge of the content area." The ***only*** difference is the use of 'broad' for the 'Proficient' grade and 'extensive' for the 'Distinguished' grade.

Now, a quick English lesson. ***Roget's International Thesaurus*** says that 'extensive' and 'broad' are synonyms — they mean the same thing. So, even if the P1 and D1 descriptors were measurable, which they are not, they cannot be used to define two different grading categories. By the way, ***Roget's*** lists 'partial' and 'limited' as synonyms, too. You will find examples using both of these term pairs in the table below. Keep in mind, these are supposed to be descriptors for ***different*** CATS scores.

Clearly, this sheds more light on the issue of our dismal attempts to create accountability assessments in Kentucky. Aside from a basic question about feasibility, until we get some people involved who have at least a broad or extensive (take your pick) understanding of basic English as well as some real expertise in accountability systems, our attempts to create a good assessment are never going to be successful at doing more

Examples from Proposed CATS Descriptors

Legend: N3 is the Novice #3 descriptor, A3 is the Apprentice #3 descriptor, P1 is the Proficient #1 descriptor, etc.

Note: Synonym pairs listed in Roget's International Thesaurus, 3rd Edition: Broad & Extensive Partial & Limited

General Descriptors P1 Student demonstrates ***broad*** knowledge of the content area. P5 Student demonstrates ***broad*** use of critical thinking skills.	 D1 Student demonstrates ***extensive*** knowledge of the content area. D5 Student demonstrates ***extensive*** use of critical thinking skills.
Math Descriptors N3 Student demonstrates a ***limited*** understanding of core content.	 A3 Student demonstrates a ***partial*** understanding of core content.
Science Descriptors P1 Student demonstrates ***broad*** knowledge of science content. P3 Student demonstrates ***broad*** understanding of unifying science themes/concepts and vocabulary. P5 Student demonstrates ***brad (sic)*** use of critical thinking and scientific reasoning.	 D1 Student demonstrates ***extensive*** knowledge of science content. D3 Student demonstrates an ***extensive*** understanding of unifying science themes/concepts and vocabulary. D5 Student demonstrates ***extensive*** use of scientific reasoning and critical thinking skills.