

KERA UPDATE

January 2001

#53

Is *Quality Counts* Counting with Fuzzy Math?

In mid-January, *Education Week* and the Pew Charitable Trusts issued their latest version of an annual report on public education, titled *Quality Counts*. I have had growing concerns about the conclusions in this report for several years. The year 2001 edition has raised them again.

Quality Counts awards top grades to those states which conform to a radical approach to education reform in the area of standards and accountability. Although tremendous controversy rages about whether these radical ideas really improve education, *Quality Counts* boldly presents its chosen reform model as reflective of "best thinking" on education. That isn't too surprising considering that Pew funds much of this report. Pew has spent millions of dollars in states like Kentucky to promote its idea of what works best in education.

However, the question remains, are Pew and *Education Week* right? Well, perhaps, or perhaps not. Certainly, this short paper isn't going to provide definitive answers. But, the paper can raise some serious questions about whether *Quality Counts*' grades for standards and assessment correlate to actual state performance on two important academic tests, specifically the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress for 4th grade reading, and the year 2000 ACT college entrance test.

Table 1 shows the four states that received the highest scores for standards and assessment in *Quality Counts 2001* and four of the five states that received the lowest numerical scores and a grade of "F." One state, North Dakota, didn't participate in NAEP in 1998 and isn't included for that reason.

At first glance, it is obvious the top rated

states in *Quality Counts* were clearly outperformed on NAEP by the bottom rated states. In addition, the bottom rated states generally had much lower levels of exclusion of students with learning disabilities

have roughly equal percentages of graduates who take the ACT are shown, as this is an important consideration in ACT comparisons. Again, top rated *Quality Counts* states are outperformed by the "F" states.

Table 1. Comparison of Top and Bottom Rated States in *Quality Counts* To Their Performance on the 1998 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Assessment

	QC Top States				QC Bottom States			
	MD	NY	KY	NM	IA	MT	MN	RI
QC Grade	A	A	A-	A-	F	F	F	F
1998 NAEP Reading	215	216	218*	206	223	226	222	218
NAEP Exclusion	9%	5%	10%	9%	8%	4%	3%	6%

Note: NAEP Exclusion is shown as a percentage of the raw random sample originally selected for possible testing.

from the assessment. This is important, because as more of these academically challenged students are excluded, scores will inflate. In fact, Kentucky, in particular, with a 10% exclusion rate, probably did not deserve a NAEP score of 218 in 1998. Kentucky's actual score error can only be estimated but may well range from 3 to 6 points. That is why the state is marked with an asterisk. Probably, scores for Maryland and New Mexico also have some inflation error in relation to states in Table 1 that have much lower rates of exclusion.

Table 2 compares the top and bottom rated states in *Quality Counts* to their performance on the ACT college entrance test. Only those states that

After reviewing the data, one wonders if *Quality Counts* is on target with its assertion that the standards and accountability grading system is based on "best thinking." If so, why don't the states graded "A" do better on important tests? Is it possible the "best thinking" in *Quality Counts* really doesn't correlate to improved student performance? The data here would indicate that. Maybe *Quality Counts* is superfluous to what really counts.

Table 2. Comparison of Top and Bottom Rated States in

	QC Top Rated		QC Bottom Rated		
	KY	NM	IA	MT	MN
QC Grade	A-	A-	F	F	F
2000 ACT SCORE	20.1	20.1	22.0	21.8	22.0
% TESTED	71	66	69	58	66

Notes: % Tested is of high school graduates. Only states with generally similar participation rates included.