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New CATS Credibility Crisis: Inflated Scores, Deflated Goals, Part 1

Kentucky's Commonwealth Assessment and Testing System (CATS) for schools has new credibility problems. The newspapers recently carried well-deserved criticism of the new CATS scoring standards, and *KERA Update 55* also outlines good evidence that New CATS strongly overstates Kentucky students' proficiency in individual subjects. By itself, this inflation is serious; but, scoring isn't the only New CATS headache.

CATS experienced another change which might actually do even more than inflated scoring to "dumb down" Kentucky education. This separate problem involves a major change to the process of setting school goals for each two year testing cycle. Here's what is happening:

New CATS includes a big change in what schools must do in order to avoid sanctions and to qualify for a reward. Under the new program, schools fall into one of three categories: "Meeting Goal," "Progressing," or "Assistance." Meeting Goal is self-explanatory. Schools that stay on this track will reach the Kentucky

Department of Education's (KDE) oft-proclaimed goal of a score of 100 in 2014.

The category of **Progressing** is a totally new animal. According to information from KDE, schools in this category cannot receive sanctions. In addition, if a school increases its score from the previous biennium (which apparently could be an increase as small as a mere 0.1 points), then the school can even get a reward!

Thus, under the New CATS program, we won't sanction many schools that don't meet KDE's often proclaimed goal of 100. In many cases we will even give them a reward!

Consider the Paces Creek Elementary school's Growth Chart in the figure. In the year 2014, Paces Creek's Assistance Line score is only 78.5. According to KDE, if Paces Creek scores anywhere above this level, it will be free of any possible sanctions. In addition, if the school increases its score by that mere 0.1 points over its year 2012 score, it will get a reward. So, it is entirely possible that

Paces Creek could score as low as 78.6 in the year 2014 and both be free of sanctions AND get monetary rewards.

A spot-check of top and bottom schools indicates that no matter whether we look at elementary, middle or high school growth charts, the assistance line score in 2014 is always somewhat less than 80.

The **Progressing** category seems awfully similar to the old scoring system's criteria for meeting the goal. Because this is now the new threshold for sanctions, it seems reasonable to claim that **KDE's new accountability process has lowered the effective goal from 100 to something less than 80.** That is a huge drop. Coupled with the recent, inflated reset of the scoring standard, **New CATS represents a sharp reduction in effective expectations for Kentucky students.**

One question remains: Despite the "dumbing down" in the new assessment plan, was the old KIRIS/CATS scoring too hard? Is this new scoring more appropriate? Well, I don't think so. The new scoring unquestionably inflates proficiency ratings compared to those Kentucky received from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And, our decade-long flat performance on the ACT also says Kentucky's self-declared boost in scores isn't valid, either.

In the end, New CATS just looks like a cover up for the fact that Kentucky education really isn't making adequate progress, not even if we only compare ourselves to our old KIRIS/CATS. **We need something better.**

Paces Creek Elementary School — Long-Term Accountability Growth Chart

