

The Meaning and Significance of *Novice* Performance on Assessments

Wayne D. Lewis, Jr., PhD, Kentucky Commissioner of Education

April 2019 Report to the Kentucky Board of Education

I have come to understand that while Kentucky has used K-PREP assessments for some time with their accompanying four performance levels for students, there is not widespread understanding of what these performance levels mean. K-PREP performance levels, ranging from the *Novice* to the *Distinguished* levels, have greater meaning than simply performance levels one (1) through four (4).

The *Novice* performance level for students on the K-PREP state assessments is the lowest of four performance levels. At the highest performance level, a student performing at the ***Distinguished*** level demonstrates *comprehensive understanding* of the Kentucky Academic Standards in that content area at their grade level. One level below *Distinguished*, a student scoring at the ***Proficient*** level demonstrates a *broad understanding* of the Kentucky Academic Standards in that content area at their grade level. A level below *Proficient*, at the ***Apprentice*** level, a student demonstrates a basic understanding of the Kentucky Academic standards in that content area at their grade level. And at the very lowest performance level, ***Novice***, a student demonstrates minimal understanding of the standards in the content area at grade level.

Specifically, a student scoring at the ***Novice*** performance level on the 8th grade reading and mathematics K-PREP assessment means he has a minimal understanding of the standards in reading and math at grade 8; that he communicates ideas ineffectively or inaccurately, providing little detail and little or no support; and his attempts at problem-solving or critical thinking are minimal or inappropriate.

To put it more plainly, a student scoring at the *Novice* performance level is in a state of academic emergency. She is in deep academic trouble. Far from having a comprehensive or broad understanding of grade level material, the *Novice* performing student has not demonstrated even a basic understanding of grade level content. As such, her performance at this emergency level should cause parents and educators to be seriously concerned about the student's academic well-being. Similar to finding a child in a medical emergency situation, an immediate, intentional, and skilled instructional response to the student's academic emergency situation is necessary for recovery. Otherwise, like with a medical emergency, the chances for her academic recovery are slim; and those chances for recovery diminish more and more with each passing week that the emergency is not attended to.

The percentage of Kentucky students performing at this level of academic emergency is alarming. In 2018 on the 8th grade K-PREP reading and math assessments, 17% of all Kentucky students performed at the *Novice* level. Nearly a quarter (23%) of economically disadvantaged students performed at *Novice* in reading and math. Over a third of African American students performed at *Novice* levels in reading (37%) and math (36%). And in some Kentucky school districts, over a third of economically disadvantaged students and over 40% of African American students performed at the *Novice* levels in reading and math.

Many factors contribute to students' academic performance. Some of those factors include elements of students' lives well-beyond the control of schools. Other school level factors, however, can and do have a significant impact on students' academic performance. It is those school level factors, where educators and leaders can and do have significant influence on students' performance, that we must improve.

First and foremost, we must ensure that each and every Kentucky student has access to effective, grade-level appropriate, academic standards-aligned instruction. Doing so will require first, acknowledgement of our current education policy and practice shortcomings, as well as time, training, and resources. The greatest educational equity issue of our time is that economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and students with disabilities are less likely to have access to effective, standards-aligned instruction at grade level, less likely to have access to high quality curriculum and instructional materials, and less likely to have a teacher who has and holds him to high academic expectations. Research shows that when those school level inequities are removed for those students, even without changing home and community factors, their academic and behavioral outcomes change.

Changing school inequities alone is not likely enough to completely eliminate achievement gaps, but such reform will go a long way toward significantly reducing the number and percentage of students who demonstrate minimal understanding of reading and math content at grade level. Simply put, if students do not receive effective, grade-level appropriate, standards-aligned instruction, it is wholly unreasonable to expect that they would be able to demonstrate anything more than minimal understanding of grade level content when they are assessed at the end of the school year.