

Reaction to Fordham's "High Flyers" Report

Naomi Chudowsky, Ph.D. and Victor Chudowsky, Ph.D.
Caldera Research, LLC and Consultants to the Center on Education Policy

The Fordham Institute recently released a report with alarming conclusions about the academic performance of our nation's top students. A press release stated that "30 to 50 percent of America's best students failed to maintain lead performance over time," indicating a neglect of the "talented tenth." "Are we leaving our highest performing students behind in the quest to raise the test scores of students at the bottom?" Fordham asked. *Education Week* reported these contentions under the headline, "Early Achievers Lose Academic Edge, Researchers Conclude." Taken together, the press release and headlines would lead one to believe that the report proves that our top students are doing worse, at least in part due to No Child Left Behind and various "leveling" policies.

The problem is that the conclusions in Fordham's press release and spin do not reflect what's in the research report itself. Fordham commissioned the Northwest Evaluation Association to conduct the study, which focused on students scoring at or above the 90th percentile on NWEA's MAP tests. The actual findings, as stated by the NWEA researchers, are more modest and less alarming:

- Most top-performing students remain top-performers as they progress through school, but there is a 30-50% turnover in this group over the course of five or six years, depending on the grade/topic;
- Those who fell out of the 90th percentile usually fell only to the 80th or 70th percentile;
- Score growth was higher for low achievers than high achievers.

What's more, the report has a finding which completely contradicts the headlines. On page 2, it is stated:

"That doesn't mean the pool of high-achieving students shrank. On the contrary, it grew, thanks to a greater number of students—we call them the "Late Bloomers"—who entered the high-achieving ranks over time."

It almost seems like there are two reports—the one written by NWEA researchers and a mythical one which was commented upon by the Fordham Institute. In the *Education Week* article, Mike Petrilli of Fordham suggested that helping kids at the bottom has the effect of hurting kids at the top. Proof of this would be that scores for low-performing kids improve, and scores for high-performing kids stagnate or decline. But there is no evidence of this phenomenon in the report. NWEA found solid academic growth for the highest achievers (as well as for middle and low achievers) for all grades and both subjects, with the possible exception of middle/high school reading. There, the trend was still upward, but not as dramatic

as those of in other grade/subject combinations. Differences in score growth in the context of overall rising scores do not prove that top performers are being ignored.

The Fordham/NWEA study focuses on the top performers over time, and some of the alarm is derived from the fact that there is substantial turnover in this group over five or six years. But if the SAME students do not rank in the 90th percentile consistently, is that really bad news? Would a better outcome for Fordham be one where the top 10% in 4th grade maintained the exact same ranking in grade 8? That a substantial number of students are able to improve their standing over time, beating their peers, seems like good news to us. It shows that middle-performing students are being served by our education system and competitive merit is at work.

There are two better questions to ask if we want to determine whether the academic performance of our top students has suffered or improved:

- 1) Are more students reaching some set level defined as advanced on a standardized test?
- 2) Are the top 10% of students of today scoring at higher levels than the top 10% of students in the past?

The Center on Education Policy conducted a series of studies that addressed the first question and found mixed results. The large majority of states showed gains in the percentages of 4th and 8th graders reaching the advanced level on state tests in both reading and math between 2002 and 2009. However, this was not the case at the high school level, where a third or more of states showed declines at the advanced level. Brookings Institution scholar Tom Loveless did a study for the Fordham Institute a few years back that addressed the second question using NAEP results. He found big gains for low achievers and smaller gains for high achievers. For example, between 2000 and 2007, in 8th grade math, the score corresponding to the 90th percentile rose from 320 to 325. The score at the 10th percentile rose from 221 to 234. It is a value judgment, but many people who advocate for narrowing achievement gaps would see this pattern of advances at both ends of the achievement spectrum, with larger advances at the low end, as a positive development.

We agree that there are trends at the advanced achievement level that deserve serious attention, especially at the high school level. However, the Fordham study does not support the doomsday conclusions that were publicized.

References

McMurrer, J. and Kober, N. (2011). State Test Score Trends Through 2008-09, Part 5: Progress Lags in High School, Especially for Advanced Achievers. Center on Education Policy. <http://www.cep-dc.org/>

Chudowsky, N. and Chudowsky, V (2011). State Test Score Trends Through 2008-09, Part 3: Student Achievement at 8th Grade. Center on Education Policy. (includes comparison of trends at grades 4 and 8 at advanced). <http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentTopicID=16>

Loveless, T. (2008). High-Achieving Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind. Thomas Fordham Institute.

http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2008/200806_highachievingstudentsintheeraofnochildleftbehind/20080618_high_achievers_part1.pdf