

GRADING ON A  
**CURVE**

THE ILLUSION OF  
EXCELLENCE  
IN OHIO'S SCHOOLS

**A+**

By Ann E. Sheldon  
& Colleen D. Grady

Ohio Association for Gifted Children  
[www.oagc.com](http://www.oagc.com) • November 2011

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# GRADING ON A CURVE

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## *The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio's Schools*

Released by the Ohio Association for Gifted Children  
November 2011

### About the Ohio Association for Gifted Children

Since 1952, the Ohio Association for Gifted Children has been working with families and educators to promote the best interest of gifted children. The OAGC advances understanding of the needs of the gifted, promotes establishment of programs and services for gifted students, and encourages the exchange of information on the national, state, and local level. The OAGC is an affiliate organization of the National Association for Gifted Children.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

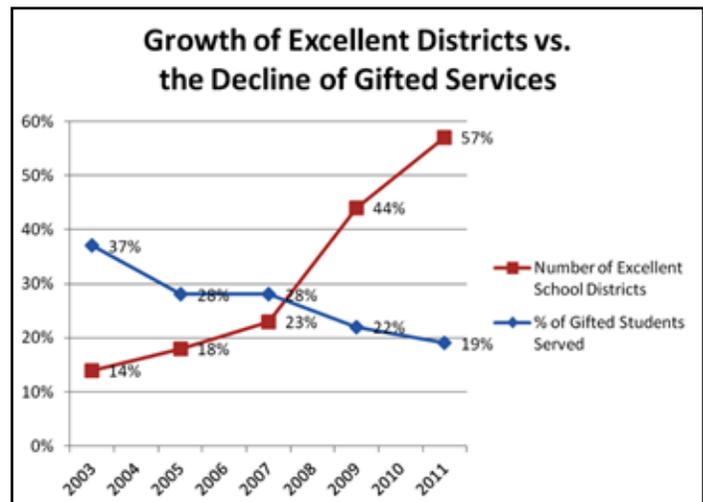
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Each year, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) evaluates every school district on a set of performance measures that add up to a final grade on a district report card. In the 2002–2003 school year, ODE rated 85 districts as excellent. Today, 352—almost 60% of all districts—are rated as excellent or excellent with distinction. Do the levels of student performance growth in Ohio warrant a quadrupling of the number of districts in the excellent category over the past decade?

**Why are there so many excellent school districts in Ohio?** There are many factors contributing to the increase in the ranks of excellent districts in Ohio, including the addition of the performance index and value-added measures to the accountability system, as well as low cut scores on Ohio’s assessment tests. The cut scores for proficiency in reading on the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAAs) range, as a percentage of total items, from 35% (6th grade) to 57% (3rd grade) in reading and from 32% (7th grade) to 58% (3rd grade) in math. The proficiency cut scores as a percentage of total items in math and reading are 43% on the Ohio Graduation Test. Even accelerated and advanced cut scores are surprisingly low at some grade levels.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report shows that Ohio’s cut scores and performance levels are below national standards. This year, 42.8% of Ohio’s 4th-graders scored at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 44.6% in math. The NAEP report indicates that 9% of Ohio’s students scored at the advanced level in reading, and 8% in math. In the 8th grade, 51.6% of Ohio’s students scored at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 33.7% in math. NAEP scores show only 3% of Ohio’s 8th-grade students scoring at advanced levels in reading, and 8% in math.

**Is there a negative impact if all districts are considered to be excellent?** Policymakers frequently are asked to waive categorical spending constraints and educational requirements for excellent districts. But what if these districts are not truly high performing? The current accountability system has had a particularly negative impact on the services to and performance by Ohio’s gifted students. In 1999, 41% of Ohio’s gifted students were receiving gifted services. Last year, that figure dropped to 19%.



**So what makes a district truly excellent?** While it is important that minimum standards be met, it also can be useful to evaluate excellent school districts by other measures:

*Advanced Placement Examinations*

- ✓ 67 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had zero students take AP exams.

*ACT Scores*

- ✓ 109 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had average ACT scores below the state average.

*Diplomas with Honors*

- ✓ 160 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had fewer than 20% of their graduating class receive diplomas with honors.

*College Remediation Rates*

- ✓ 136 districts rated excellent had college remediation rates above the state average.

*Services to Gifted Students*

- ✓ 220 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction serve fewer than 20% of their identified gifted population.
- ✓ 85 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction reported serving *zero* gifted students.
- ✓ 205 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction have decreased services to gifted students since 2008.

**A Tale of Two Districts.** While some of Ohio’s districts rated excellent do fall short, other districts truly deserve the designation. It is useful to compare the extremes of excellence in Ohio:

<i>District A</i>	<i>District B</i>
26 of 26 performance indicators met	17 of 26 performance indicators met
Mean ACT score of 24	Mean ACT score of 18
65% of gifted student population served	0% of gifted student population served
81% of students taking AP exams scored 3 or better	No students took AP exams
34% college remediation rate	81% college remediation rate
Per-pupil expenditure: \$11,814	Per-pupil expenditure: \$11,493

**Recommendations.** Ohio policymakers should consider the following:

- ✓ *Incorporate high-quality metrics in the accountability system.* Ohio’s accountability system should include measures such as college remediation rates, performance on Advanced Placement tests, numbers of students who are successfully accelerated, student performance on ACT/SAT exams, services to gifted students, and numbers of students who qualify for diplomas with honors.
- ✓ *Move to nationally normed benchmarked high school assessments.* Ohio should move to a national assessment test such as the ACT or SAT. In addition, Ohio policymakers should remove the high stakes aspect of student performance on the new assessments.
- ✓ *Eliminate the labeling of districts until a meaningful system can be developed.* Districts should concentrate on constant improvement toward high-level standards rather than achieving an arbitrary rating based on low-level metrics.
- ✓ *Incorporate an automatic trigger to increase cut scores.* Ohio should increase cut scores on achievement tests as more districts receive higher ratings to encourage improvement.
- ✓ *Reevaluate how the value-added growth measure is used.* Any change to this area should include more public transparency, including the ability to view student growth by quintile.
- ✓ *Eliminate multiple pathways to ratings in favor of a single pathway with multiple components.* For any rating to be meaningful and understandable to the general public, districts need to be evaluated in the same way.

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# GRADING ON A CURVE

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*The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio's Schools*

**Excellence is rarely found, more rarely valued.**

**—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

## INTRODUCTION—FEELING GREAT

It is a great feeling to be recognized as excellent, isn't it? It just feels wonderful to know that your hard work has paid off, that you have produced something of outstanding quality or superior merit, and that you are remarkably good at what you do—extraordinary, in fact. Everyone wants to feel as if they produce excellent work. Everyone wants their effort to merit a trophy, a medal, or an A+ on a report card. But the truth is, not all efforts produce excellent results.

It is common practice for every little soccer player to receive the same end-of-season trophy, regardless of the number of goals scored or even whether Junior managed to make contact with the ball at all. While it might temporarily build the self-esteem of a youngster to receive a medal merely for showing up on the soccer field, not every player on that field is excellent. No matter how many trophies are given out, every player, every parent, and every coach knows which players are truly excellent and which have spent the season looking for four-leaf clovers.

The classroom is a bit different. Effort sometimes is incorporated into an overall grade. For the most part, however, students are graded on the basis of mastery of the subject material. Imagine, for a moment, a scenario in which almost 60% of the students in a classroom receive an A or an A+. Imagine that some of those A students have an excellent grasp of the material but that others have not mastered the majority of the material. Imagine, as well, the parents' surprise when they discover that their "A student" is not really an excellent student, that he or she may not be proficient and may not even be ready for the next grade level.

## EXCELLENCE IN OHIO: REALITY, ILLUSION, OR CRUEL HOAX?

The state of Ohio not only allows but actually encourages such deception. Each year, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) evaluates every district on a set of performance measures that add up to final grade on a district report card. Each district receives a rating of excellent with distinction, excellent, effective, continuous improvement, academic watch, or academic emergency. In the 2010–2011 school year, 352 school districts received a ranking of excellent or excellent with distinction, an increase from 297 districts in 2009–2010—almost 58% of all districts in Ohio. Is it really possible that a majority of districts in Ohio are producing students who perform at extraordinary levels? As it turns out, the answer is a simple and resounding No. Although there are indeed some high-performing districts in Ohio, the standards used to grade districts in this state are shockingly low. The more one analyzes what it takes to be an excellent district, the clearer it becomes that something is horribly wrong with Ohio’s standards for excellence.

The purpose of this report is not to castigate Ohio’s excellent school districts, some of which are doing a wonderful job of educating their students. Indeed, school districts must work within the accountability system that state policymakers have developed. Instead, the purpose of this report is to evaluate the effectiveness of the system as it has evolved over the last decade and to question whether it is adequate to ensure that Ohio’s children will be prepared as the state moves toward college- and career-ready standards.

### *Excellence in Ohio: Three Pathways*

Ohio’s report card rating system was developed in the 1990s, partly as a response to the unacceptable number of students graduating from high school without attaining the requisite level of knowledge. Policymakers wanted a more accurate and honest measure of how Ohio’s students were really performing. Part of the rationale for establishing the district accountability system may have been a response to the *DeRolph* school funding lawsuit. Policymakers were adamant that if schools expected to get more state funding, the public had a right to know how well those districts were performing as a result of that increased funding.

Initially, the report card ratings were based solely on performance measures, or indicators. Ohio currently measures district performance on the basis of 26 such indicators, and requires that districts meet at least 25 of these performance standards to qualify as excellent. Twenty-four measures relate to district student performance on Ohio Achievement Assessments in Grades 3 through 8 and on the Ohio Graduation Test in Grades 10 and 11. The remaining two measure attendance and graduation rates. *None of these indicators relates to performance beyond the level of minimum proficiency, and none measures whether districts are producing college- and career-ready graduates.* In fact, the achievement standard requires only that 75% of students assessed at various grade levels score at a proficient level. For example, if 75% of all 3rd-graders in a district test at a level of proficient or above in math, the district meets the indicator for 3rd-grade math. Put another way, the state’s accountability system allows 25% of students in Grade 3 to perform at below-proficient levels in math.

There are two additional pathways to excellence if districts fail to meet this standard. The first is the performance index, which is a weighted formula that rewards districts for the performance of all students—not just those who score above proficient levels. Each predetermined weight is multiplied by the percentage of student scores (for all tests) at that level and totaled to calculate the school or district performance index score. Districts must score 100 or above on their performance index (PI) to qualify as an excellent district, regardless of how many performance indicators that district actually meets.

**Fig. 1. Performance Index Weights**

Untested Student	0.0
Limited Proficient	.3
Basic Proficient	.6
Proficient	1.0
Accelerated	1.1
Advanced	1.2

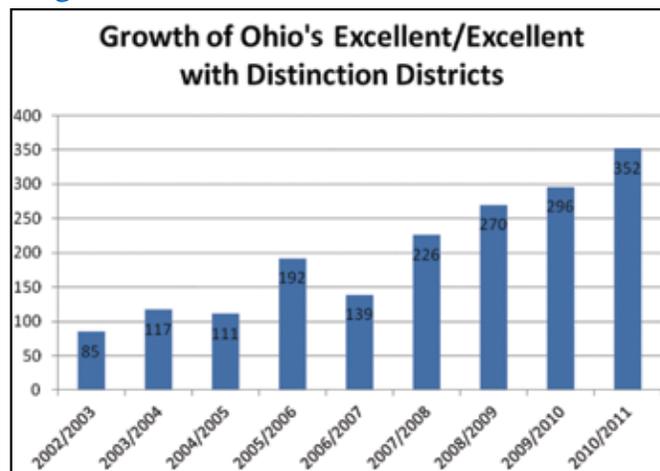
Source: Ohio Department of Education

A third pathway allows districts to be “bumped up” a rating for student growth above the expected level or for value-added gains, regardless of the number of indicators met or the relative performance of students on the performance index. In some cases, districts receive a “double bump,” moving up not just one level, but two, on the basis of performance index score and value-added gains. Even the initial standards, based on minimal levels of proficiency, were not low enough. These two alternative pathways have lowered the bar for excellence to an embarrassing level.

**Who Is Excellent in Ohio?**

In the 2002–2003 school year, the Ohio Department of Education rated 85 districts as excellent. In 2006–2007, 139 districts were rated as excellent. Today, 352 districts are rated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

**Fig. 2.**



Source: Ohio Department of Education

Do the levels of student performance growth in Ohio warrant a quadrupling of the number of districts in the excellent category over the past decade? Or has the state merely manipulated the accountability system to swell the numbers of excellent districts? The answer is likely the latter. On the current state report card, 95 districts rated as excellent or excellent with distinction did not qualify on the basis of the number of performance indicators met. Thirty-nine of those districts were rated excellent on the basis of their performance index scores, and the other 56 qualified on the basis of a bump from their value-added scores. Thirteen of those districts would have received a rating of continuous improvement on the basis of performance indicators. One district met only 13 performance indicators out of 26. Does it seem reasonable that a district that has met only half of the performance indicators is rated excellent? Are parents and other community members likely to understand that many students in their school district have not mastered minimal levels of proficiency when the state of Ohio declares that the district is doing an excellent job?

### *Adding Complexity but Questionable Value*

Why are so many districts rated excellent? The increase in the number of districts rated excellent and above can be traced in part to the inclusion of the performance index and value-added score manipulations over the past few years. The performance index was introduced in the 2002–2003 school year as a temporary measure to be used until a value-added growth score could be incorporated into the school report card. The value-added growth measure, however, never replaced the performance index; it merely joined the report card as yet another pathway to excellence.

The concept behind using the value-added measure was simple. The value-added measure allowed schools and districts to demonstrate growth of student achievement rather than just meeting minimum proficiency levels. More effective districts, the reasoning went, should provide at least one year's worth of growth for all students. The value-added measure was incorporated into Ohio's accountability system ostensibly to make the progress of Ohio's students more transparent. Districts no longer would be able to hide behind minimal performance indicators. The public would be able to see the growth or lack thereof not just for students in a grade level but for each quintile of the student population so that growth of *all* children would be visible.

Although the value-added measure may be useful at the district level to evaluate student growth, the implementation of the growth measure on the report card has served only to confuse the public even more. Districts that have made but little progress on the performance indicators still achieve inexplicable rating gains. The one measure that parents of high-ability students really wished to view, however—growth by student quintile—has never been made available to the public. A recent brief from the Thomas Fordham Foundation (*Ohio Education Gadfly* 5(15), September 21, 2011) sums up the issue:

A school district in Ohio can fail to have students in any grade or subject at the 75 percent proficiency level (the state goal) yet still receive a Continuous Improvement (C) rating if the district's 4th through 8th grade students exceed expected growth on the value-added rating. The state gives a school district a bump of one full academic rating (from a D to a C, for example) for exceeding expected gains regardless of the overall proficiency results of students in the school.

Thus, schools may never make progress in actually closing the achievement gap in terms of student proficiency. Worse, critics contend, school districts with stagnant or even declining achievement scores are spared consequences because of their value-added gains.

The tweaking of the value-added dimension appears to have served only to confound policymakers and the public. The composite score ratings of various districts indicate a very low bar for receiving a value-added bump. One district, for example, received only one "above expected" rating (of a possible 10) in composite value-added scores from Grades 3 through 8, yet it received an "above expected" value-added score overall. The statistics behind the calculation very well may support this rating, but as Superintendent Stan Heffner stated at the September 2011 State Board of Education meeting, "It doesn't pass the smell test. When more than half the districts are above average, it gives one pause."

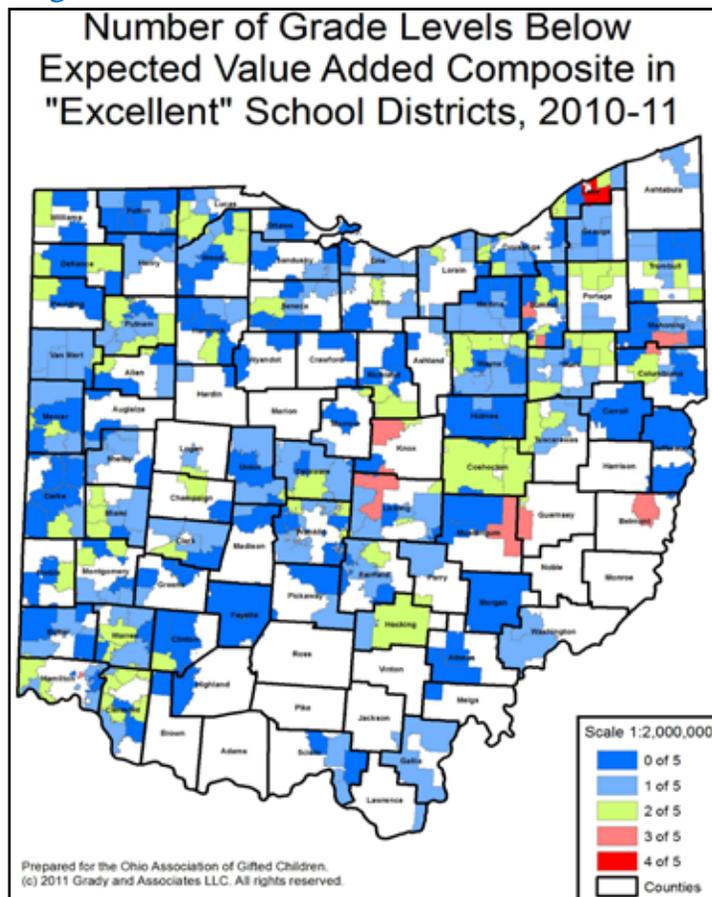
In fact, when one looks at the value-added performance of the districts rated excellent, it gives one more than pause. It makes one wonder how such a great concept as value-added growth has become so distorted in Ohio's accountability system.

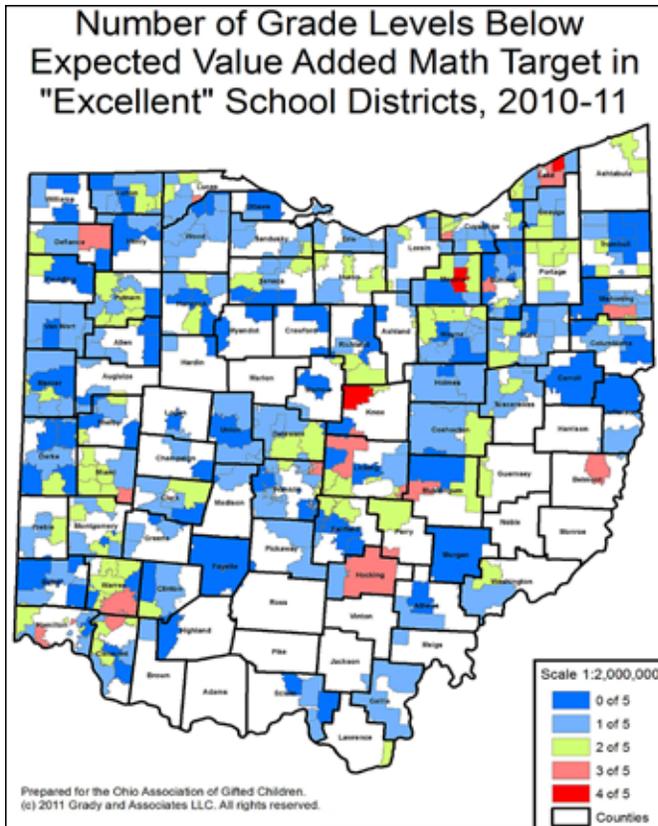
Here is a breakdown of how districts rated excellent fared on value-added scores alone:

- ✓ Only 53 districts rated excellent/excellent with distinction met value-added growth measures in all grades for both math and reading.
- ✓ 41 school districts rated excellent/excellent with distinction had overall negative value-added scores: the majority of the grade levels in which student growth can be measured did not provide a year's worth of growth.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. White areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

Fig. 3.





- ✓ 47 school districts rated excellent/excellent with distinction had negative overall value-added growth for math. 110 districts had negative value-added growth in 2 out of 5 grade levels (40%) tested for math. 98 districts met value-added growth in all grade levels for math.

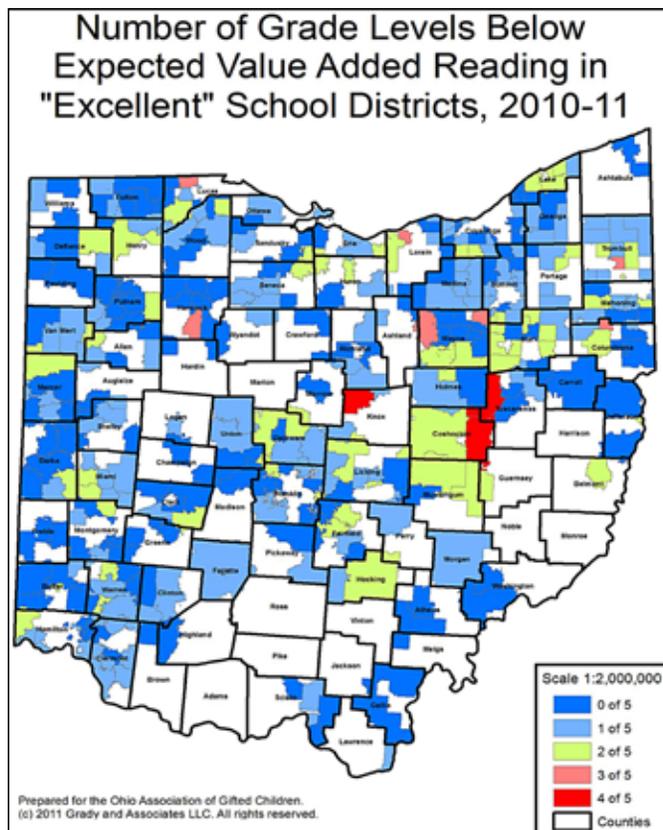
Fig. 4.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

- ✓ 36 districts rated excellent/excellent with distinction had negative overall value-added growth for reading. 65 districts had negative value-added growth in 2 out of 5 grade levels (40%) for reading. 156 districts made value-added growth in reading for all grade level tests.
- ✓ One district rated excellent had negative value-added growth in 4 out 5 grades tested in math and 4 out of 5 grades tested in reading.

Fig. 5.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.



*Cut Scores and False Advertising—When Accelerated/Advanced Isn't*

**It is wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us.**  
*—Issac Disraeli*

The performance index and value-added measures are not the only factors contributing to Ohio's burgeoning ranks of excellent districts. Low cut scores on Ohio's assessment tests also play a major role. While it may not be a realistic goal for 100% of all students to be proficient in every subject or grade, there is a profound difference between setting standards for minimum performance and bestowing labels of excellent performance based on nothing more than these minimal standards. One could, perhaps, make an argument in favor of using minimum standards to designate district excellence *if* proficiency standards were set at a very high level. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The raw cut scores for proficiency levels on the Ohio Achievement Assessments and Ohio Graduation Test are quite low. In fact, the cut scores for levels deemed "accelerated" or "advanced" are, in some cases, astonishingly low. The cut scores for proficiency in reading on the Ohio Achievement Assessments for the 2011 administration range, as a percentage of total items, from 35% (6th grade) to 57% (3rd grade) in reading and 32% (7th grade) to 58% (3rd grade) in math. On the Ohio Graduation Test, the cut scores for proficiency in math and reading, as a percentage of total items, are 43%. Accelerated cut scores as a percentage of total items range from 61% (6th grade) to 80% (8th grade) in reading and 61% (8th grade) to 79% (3rd grade) in math. Finally, advanced cut score percentages range from 76% (6th grade) to 90% (4th grade) in reading and 65% (6th grade) to 88% (3rd grade) in math. OGT advanced cut score percentages are 79% in reading and 77% in math.

**Fig. 6. Spring 2011 Ohio Achievement Assessment and Ohio Graduation Test Raw Cut Scores**

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	OGT
Reading Proficient Cut Score	28/49	23/49	25/49	17/49	21/47	23/48	20.5/48
Reading Proficient Percentage	57%	47%	51%	35%	45%	48%	43%
Reading Accelerated Cut Score	34/49	37/49	39/49	30/49	31/47	34/48	31.5/48
Reading Accelerated Percentage	69%	76%	80%	61%	66%	71%	66%
Reading Advanced Cut Score	40/49	44/49	43/49	37/49	38/47	40/48	38/48
Reading Advanced Percentage	82%	90%	88%	76%	81%	83%	79%
Math Proficient Cut Score	30/52	25/52	25/52	20/50	16/50	16/46	20/46
Math Proficient Percentage	58%	48%	48%	40%	32%	35%	43%
Math Accelerated Cut Score	41/52	37/52	34/52	29/50	29/50	28/46	29/46
Math Accelerated Percentage	79%	71%	65%	58%	58%	61%	63%
Math Advanced Cut Score	46/52	43/52	38/52	34/50	36/50	36/46	35.5/46
Math Advanced Percentage	88%	83%	73%	68%	72%	78%	77%

Source: Ohio Department of Education

While some of the advanced level cut scores seem reasonable (90% in 4th-grade reading), some clearly do not. Rarely is a score of 68% on a test (6th-grade math) considered to be advanced. These cut scores for accelerated and advanced levels of performance are significant for two reasons. First, districts receive additional weighting for students who perform at accelerated and advanced levels, which helps those districts attain a higher performance index. Districts receive a weighting of 1.1 for each student scoring at the accelerated level, and a weighting of 1.2 for each student scoring at the advanced level. Low cut scores for these levels translate into higher performance index scores, allowing more districts to receive an excellent rating. More important, parents of students who are scoring at accelerated and advanced levels are given, in many cases, a false sense of their child's true performance. This is particularly true for students who score at the accelerated level. The term "accelerated" has a very specific meaning in education. It is used to describe students who are achieving at above-grade performance levels. Many gifted education professionals in Ohio have fielded requests that students be accelerated by grade level on the basis of their "accelerated" level of performance on an Ohio Achievement Assessment. Parents often are shocked to learn that there is no above-grade-level material on these assessments and that the cut scores are so low that their children may not even be performing at a proficient or average level on any nationally standardized measure.

### *NAEP Score Comparison*

The U.S. Department of Education recently released an FAQ on new flexibility on No Child Left Behind goals. The following statement from this document perfectly sums up the problem with Ohio's accountability system:

In many states, parents are being told that their children are proficient based on a low bar. Many of them are being lied to because their children aren't really being prepared for college and careers.

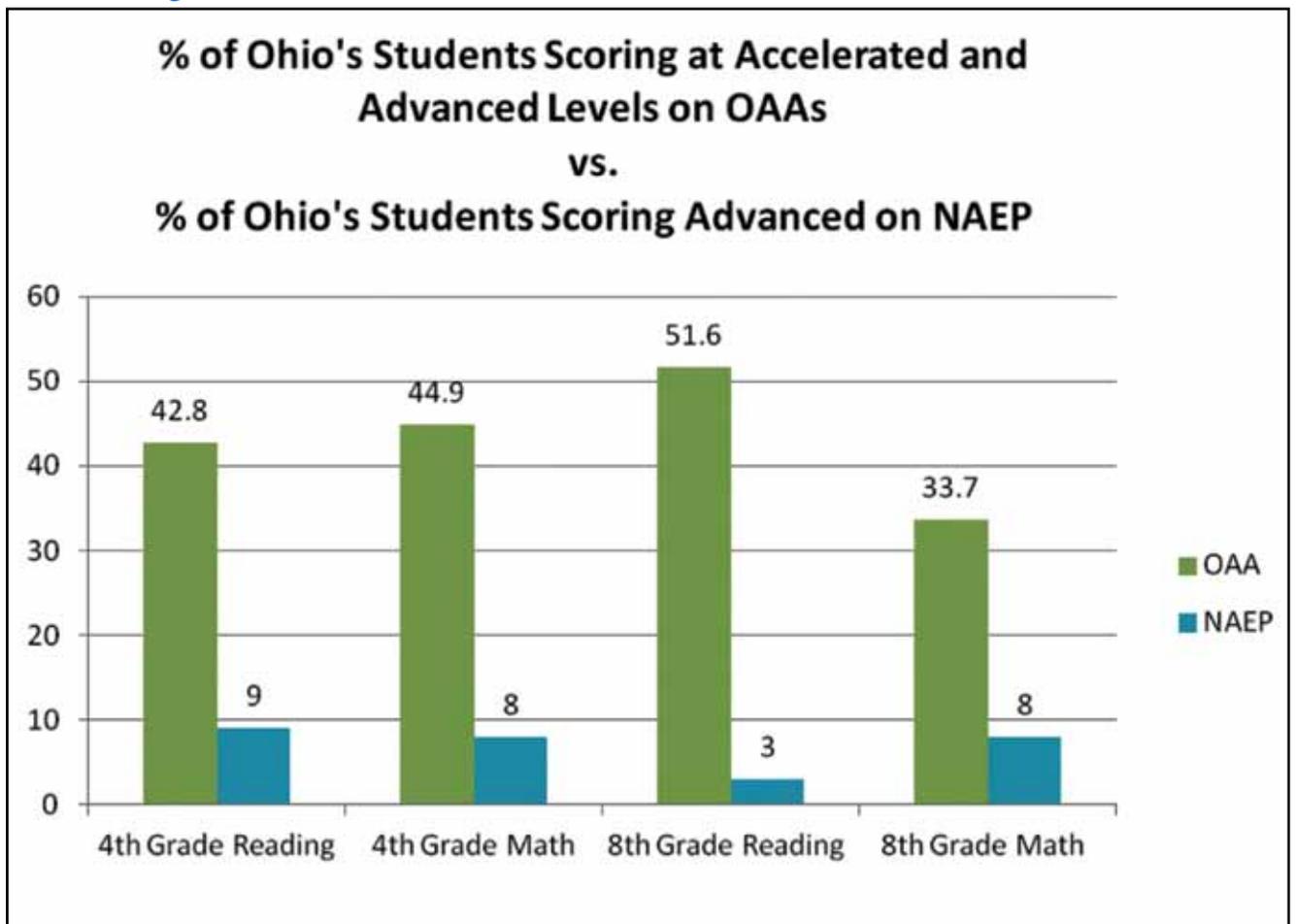
Ohio's accountability system is perpetuating the very problem that it was designed to eliminate. More and more families believe that their children are performing at higher and higher levels, when in fact there is no guarantee that children scoring at proficient levels are any more prepared to enter college or the workforce than were students two decades ago when the system was introduced.

Beyond the problem of low cut scores, there is the tricky issue of how Ohio's bar for proficiency compares nationally. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a measurement of what America's students know and what they can do in various subject areas. Since NAEP assessments are administered uniformly across the nation, the results serve as a common metric for all states. The latest NAEP report shows that Ohio's cut scores do not reach the national standard for proficiency. The most recent report from the NAEP shows that Ohio's proficiency standards for reading

for the 4th grade are at the “below basic” level nationally. Math proficiency standards for 4th grade fare a little better: Ohio’s standards creep up to the basic level. In the 8th grade, Ohio’s standards for reading and math are at the basic level (National Assessment of Educational Progress).

The comparison between what Ohio considers to be accelerated or advanced performance and what the NAEP considers to be advanced performance is even more interesting. This year, in the 4th grade, 42.8% of Ohio public students scored at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, as did 44.6% in math. The latest figures from the NAEP indicate that 9% of Ohio’s students score at the advanced level in reading, and 8% in math. In the 8th grade, 51.6% of Ohio’s public students score at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 33.7% in math. NAEP scores show 3% of Ohio’s 8th-grade students scoring at advanced levels in reading, and 8% in math.

Fig. 7.



Source: Ohio Department of Education

A major disconnect exists when Ohio’s standards suggest that 51.7% of 8th-graders are performing at an accelerated or advanced level in reading, and the national data suggest that only a small fraction of these 8th-graders are anywhere near an advanced level.

## IS THE ILLUSION OF EXCELLENCE HARMFUL?

Districts love to point to their fine report card rating as evidence of high performance. Real estate agents love to tout those excellent ratings as proof that a home in the community is a good value. But at some point, Ohioans may want to take a serious look at what is really happening in their school districts. Parents and taxpayers need to know that “excellent” may not be as advertised. It is a disservice to the general public, to parents, and especially to children when we pretend that more and more districts are doing a stellar job, when they are not. The stakes are much higher than they are for 1st-grade soccer players, who are all superstars. Policymakers must acknowledge that there are serious flaws in an evaluation system that says that the majority of districts are doing excellent work when all of the data comparing Ohio students nationally and internationally paint a very different picture.

### *Policy Implications*

There is another critical reason to take a hard look at what constitutes an excellent district. Policymakers are increasingly inclined to waive education standards, categorical spending constraints, and other requirements for districts that appear to be high performing. The argument is, why tie the hands of administrators in districts that are so effective? Just give them a pot of money and let them continue to do their excellent job. Recently, Ohio policymakers raised the ante even further by distributing a monetary reward to districts rated excellent. In the current biennial budget, each district rated excellent or excellent with distinction received extra per-pupil funding. The stakes are higher now when it comes to receiving this excellent rating. But what if these highly rated districts aren’t really doing an excellent job? Who suffers the consequences? As the bar for excellence declines and the stakes for failing to achieve that rating rise, districts are provided with increasing incentives to manipulate the system to maintain their high ratings. As Linda Haycock, a school board member from the Shawnee Local School District, recently shared with the Ohio House Education committee,

The quality of the current education system is measured and rated on test scores—specifically reading and math scores—and graduation rates which are flawed inefficient and unreliable. Testing ratings and graduation requirements can easily be manipulated to imply a higher quality of education than actual performance. (Ohio House Education Committee, September 21, 2011, testimony on HB 136)

In light of this commentary, Ohio's performance on the Algebra II assessment pilot is an example of how the state has kept standards low and buried efforts both to raise standards and to provide direct comparisons to other states. The pilot program run by the American Diploma Project, widely publicized in 2005, was designed to evaluate students in multiple states for true college math readiness on the basis of cut scores that could not be manipulated by districts or state education agencies. In 2009, Ohio students who participated in the project scored poorly—86.6% scored at below proficient levels. Ohio's participation in the project declined sharply in 2010 (American Diploma Project). In fact, there appears to be little or any mention of this exam, which once was touted as the first step toward ensuring that Ohio students were truly prepared for college.

### *Can Ohio Compete Globally?*

Regardless of how the situation is viewed locally, from a global perspective, it is clear: Ohioans are undereducated. A Brookings Institution report, *Education, Demand, and Unemployment in Metropolitan America* (September 2011), rates several of Ohio's largest cities as having long-term structural issues arising from the mismatch of worker education and occupational demand.

If Ohioans continue to pretend that the majority of our districts are doing an excellent job, the consequences are staggering. Dr. Eric Hanushek, in testimony before the Ohio House and Senate Education Committees in March of 2011, spoke of how woefully prepared Ohio's most privileged students are to compete globally. His comments regarding the performance of Ohio students on international math tests are a stark reminder of what happens when districts focus only on minimal levels of achievement.

It is not pretty, especially given that this is where our scientists and engineers of the future are likely to be drawn. Particularly telling is the third figure that compares children of college educated parents with all children in other countries. Ohio is slightly above the U.S. average, but behind 18 countries. This performance of the most privileged Ohio students puts them on par with the average student from Iceland or Estonia. (Ohio House and Senate Special Joint Education Committee Hearing, March 10, 2011)

Ohio's best math students are on par with average students from Estonia? Yet the majority of the state's districts are rated excellent. How can this be?

Recent data from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) show an even more interesting perspective. The ODE worked with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to map OAA and OGT proficiency scores against an international assessment. The results are stark. In terms of both the cut scores for proficiency and the numbers of Ohio students who would be considered proficient on international scale, it is clear that Ohio students are not prepared to compete with their global peers.

Fig. 8.

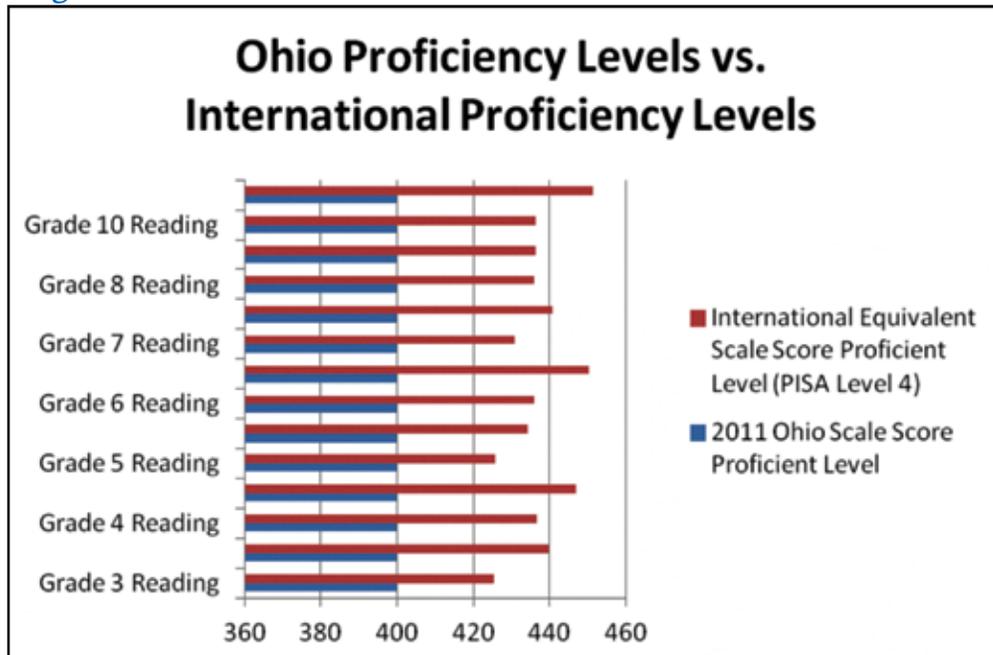
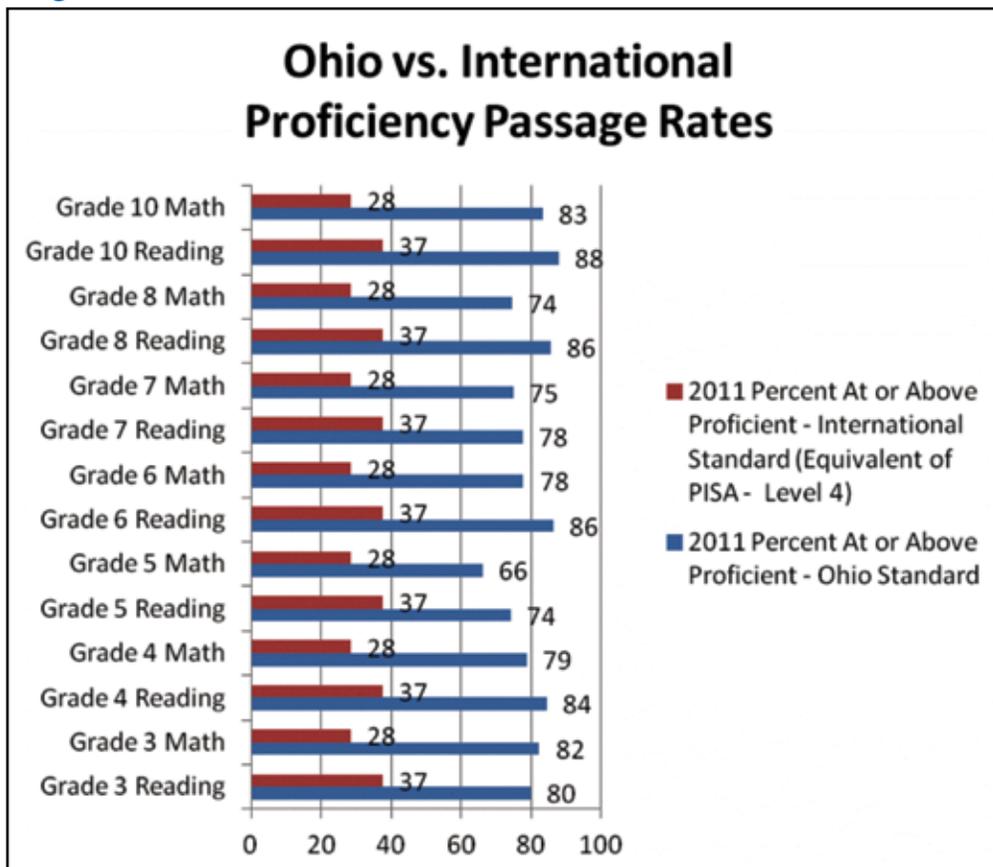


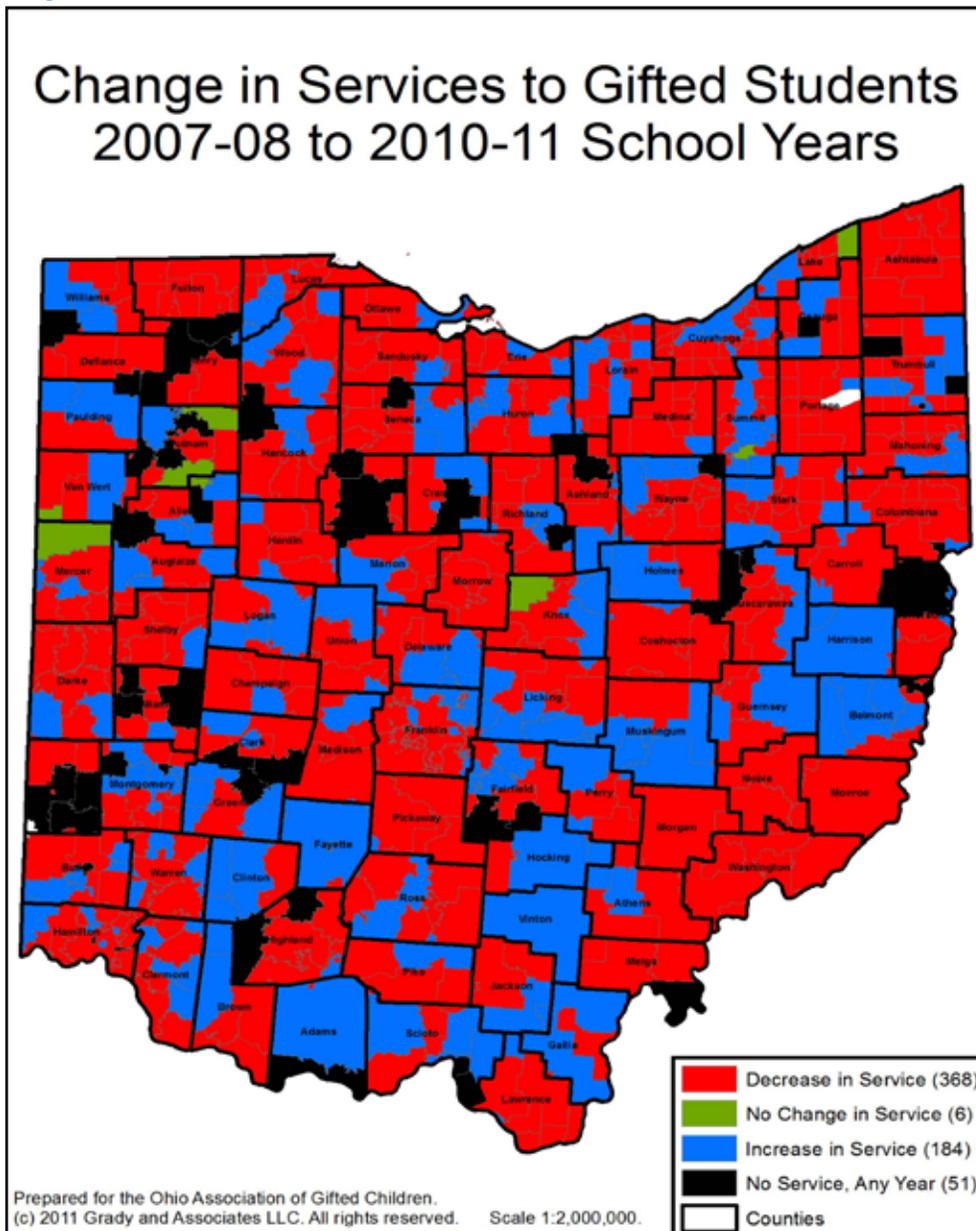
Fig. 9.



*How the Illusion Has Made Opportunities for High-Ability Students Disappear*

The current accountability system has had a negative impact on the level of services and performance of Ohio's gifted and high-achieving students, student populations whose potential the state can ill afford to lose. In Ohio, districts are not required to provide appropriate learning opportunities to gifted students: they may decide whether to serve their identified gifted students or not. In 1999, 41% of Ohio's gifted students received gifted services. By last year, that figure had dropped to 19%. This year, those numbers will drop again as many districts faced with budget cuts slash gifted services, honors courses, and Advanced Placement classes.

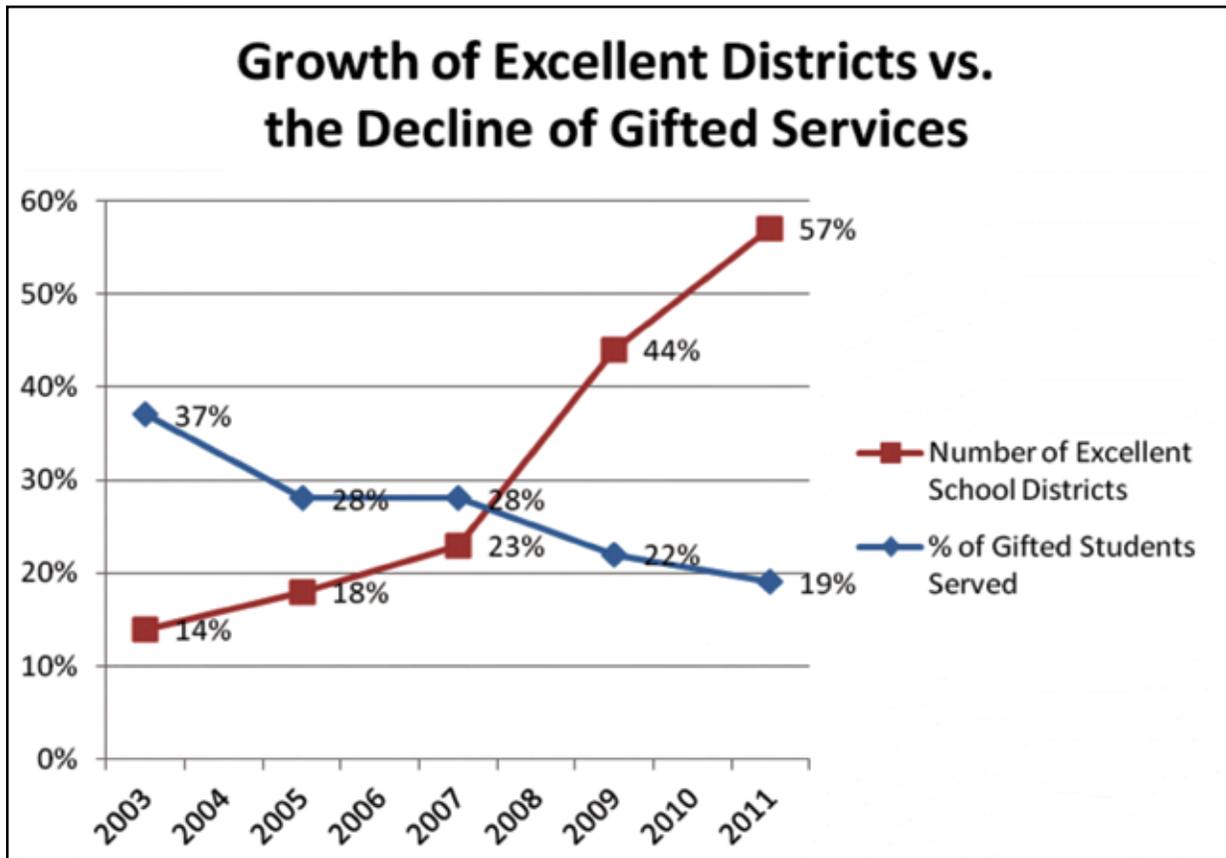
Fig. 10.



Source: Ohio Department of Education.

The emphasis on achieving minimal standards affords districts little incentive to provide for the needs of gifted students. The increasing mania to close the achievement gap provides perverse incentives to suppress the achievement gains of high achievers. Districts are reluctant to accelerate students, and really, there is little incentive to do so. Each new reform movement, from heterogeneous grouping to the small schools initiative, appears to have made things just that much worse for high-ability/high-achieving students. As long as high achievers' scores remain above the minimal level of proficiency, districts can ignore their needs. As the number of excellent districts has increased over the past decade, so has the level of gifted services declined.

Fig. 11.



Source: Ohio Department of Education

A new report from the Fordham Foundation (*Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude*) confirms what educators in the gifted field have known for years. In part because of these reforms, early high-achieving students become more likely to lose academic ground as they move through the school system. Up to 50% of early achievers score lower on math and reading achievement tests in later years. The longer they are in school, the worse their performance becomes. So what distinguished high achievers who maintained their high scores from those who didn't? Those who sustained advanced performance were more likely to have access to gifted services and high-level coursework.

Bestowing the label of excellence on districts that do little to provide for students beyond basic proficiency helps no one. Even in elite, affluent suburbs, communities are lulled into complacent acceptance of the status quo even as their children perform at a level nowhere near excellent. This phenomenon is nicely explained by Jay Greene, coauthor of *When the Best Is Mediocre*:

[S]tate accountability systems and the desire to rationalize the lack of quality options have encouraged the elites to compare their affluent suburban districts to the large urban ones in their state. These inappropriate comparisons have falsely reassured them that their own school districts are doing well. This false reassurance has also perhaps undermined the desire among the elites to engage in dramatic education reform. As long as the elites hold onto the belief that their own school districts are excellent, they have little desire to push for the kind of significant systemic reforms that might improve their districts as well as the large urban districts. They may wish the urban districts well and hope matters improve, but their taste for bold reform is limited by a false contentment with their own situation.

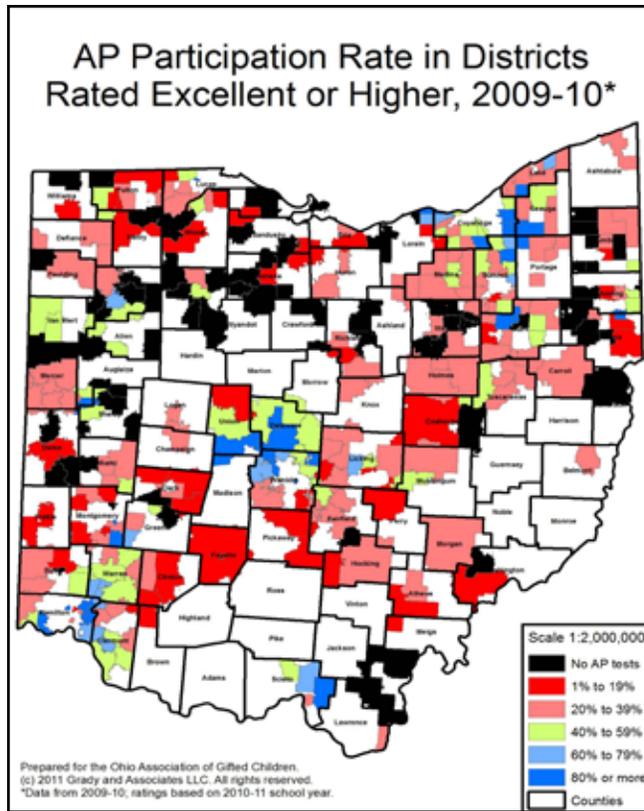
Radio audiences laugh at the imaginary Lake Wobegon, where all students are above average, but Ohio has taken things to a level that some have described as Lake Wobegon on steroids, and the damage to the educational system is becoming evident. It is time to take an honest look at state standards and to see how these “excellent” districts are truly performing. Parents, policymakers, and the general public no longer can afford to pretend that the emperor is clothed. It is time to take a look at the ugly, naked truth about the accountability system in Ohio.

## EXCELLENCE THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

Tweaks to the accountability system have made it easier than ever to be rated as an excellent district in Ohio. If so many districts are rated excellent, however, it may be useful—indeed necessary—to evaluate these districts by a different set of standards. It is a useful exercise to analyze this year’s bumper crop of districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction on the basis of student ACT scores, Advanced Placement exams, diplomas with honors, college remediation rates, and services to gifted students. Certainly, these are measures on which most people would expect truly excellent districts to rate highly.

### *Advanced Placement Examinations*

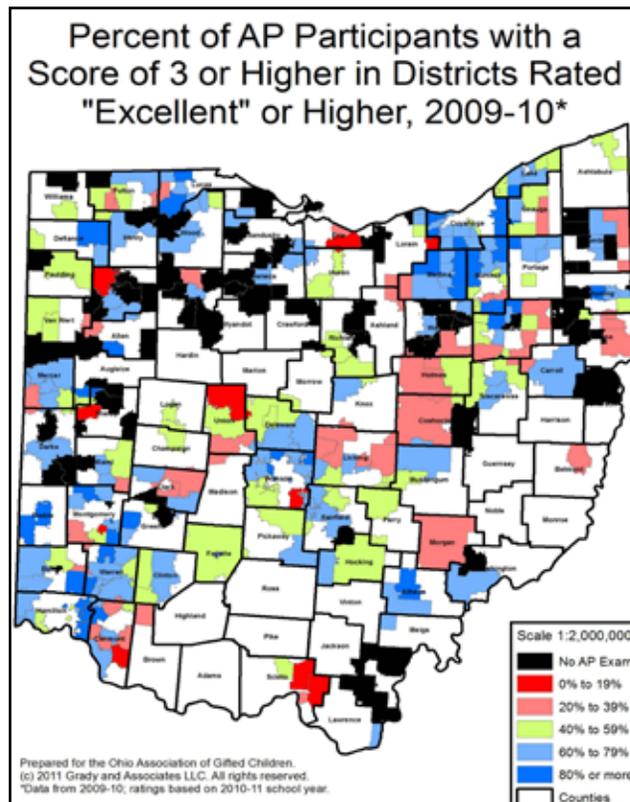
Performance on Advanced Placement examinations is nationally recognized as a rigorous assessment of student achievement. In Ohio, 67 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had zero students who took Advanced Placement examinations. An additional 32 districts had fewer than 10 students who took Advanced Placement examinations. For those districts that could be counted or whose students took AP exams, 74 rated excellent or excellent with distinction had fewer than 50% of their students score a 3 or above, and in 178 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction, 50% or more of the students taking an AP exam scored a 3 or above.



✓ 67 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had zero students take AP exams.

Fig. 12.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.



✓ 74 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had fewer than 50% of their students score a 3 or above.

Fig. 13.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

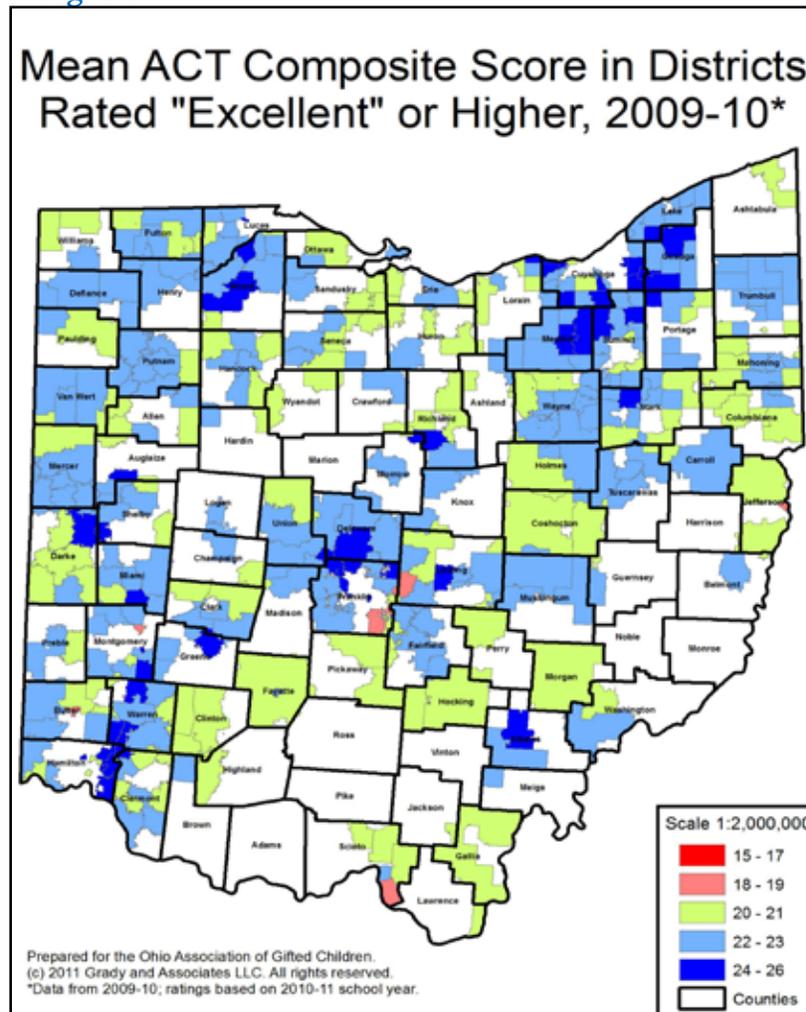
## ACT Scores

Ohio's average composite ACT score is 21.8. This number is critically important, as the ACT readiness report indicates that a student must have a minimum composite score of 21.25 or above in order to succeed in freshman college courses. So how do students in Ohio's excellent districts fare on the ACT?

- ✓ 109 (31%) had ACT scores below the state average, up from 90 last year.
- ✓ 27 had average ACT scores of 20 or below.
- ✓ One district had average ACT scores of 18.

One would assume that Ohio's districts rated excellent would perform well above the state average. In fact, the average ACT score for Ohio's excellent districts is approximately 22, the same as the average of all districts, regardless of rating.

Fig. 14.



Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

## Diplomas with Honors

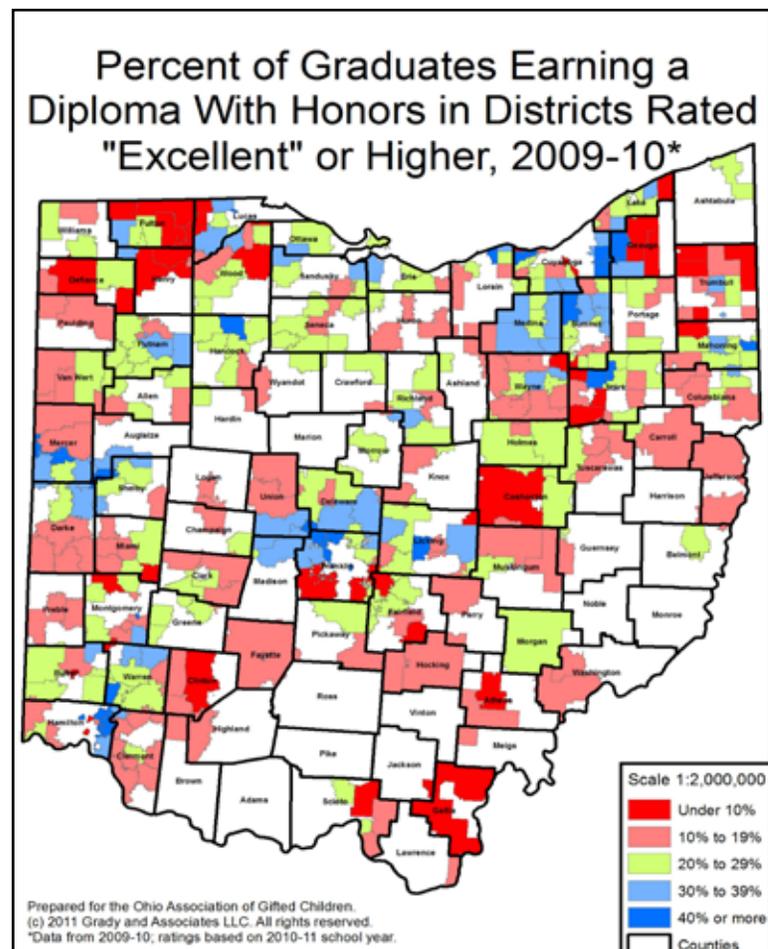
Data on the number of district graduates taking a rigorous curriculum formerly were readily available; now it is no longer easy to obtain this information, as the State Board of Education voted to remove it from district report cards in 2010. It is still possible, however, to track the percentage of districts whose students receive an Ohio diploma with honors. To earn this distinction, a student must meet at least seven of the following eight criteria:

- ✓ Earn four units of English;
- ✓ Earn at least four units of mathematics, which shall include Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, and another higher-level course or a four-year sequence of courses that covers equivalent content;
- ✓ Earn at least four units of science, including one unit of physics and one unit of chemistry;
- ✓ Earn four units of social studies;
- ✓ Earn three units of foreign languages (which must include no fewer than two units for which credit is sought—i.e., three units of one language or two units each of two languages);
- ✓ Earn one unit of fine arts;
- ✓ Maintain an overall high school grade point average of at least 3.5 on a 4-point scale up to the last grading period of the senior year; or
- ✓ Obtain a composite score of 27 on the ACT assessment (excluding the optional writing test) or a combined score of 1210 on the College Board's SAT verbal and mathematics sections (excluding the required writing section).

One would expect that an excellent district would have a high percentage of students graduating with a diploma with honors. In fact, 160 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had less than 20% of their graduating class receive diplomas with honors. Twenty-four districts rated excellent or above reported that *no* students received a diploma with honors.

Fig. 15.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.



### College Remediation Rates

Ohio's accountability system purportedly is designed to ensure that students reach college-ready standards. It is curious, then, that one of the most significant measures that could help determine college readiness—college remediation rates—is absent from the current accountability system. How do districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction fare on this measure? The most recent data released from the board of regents indicate that students from 136 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction were taking college remediation courses at a level above the state average. This is up from last year's figure of 116. Sixty-four of these districts have college remediation rates of 50% or more, and one excellent district had a college remediation rate of 83%. As Ohio's average college remediation rates have risen from 38% to 41%, it seems counterintuitive that more districts should be rated excellent or above.

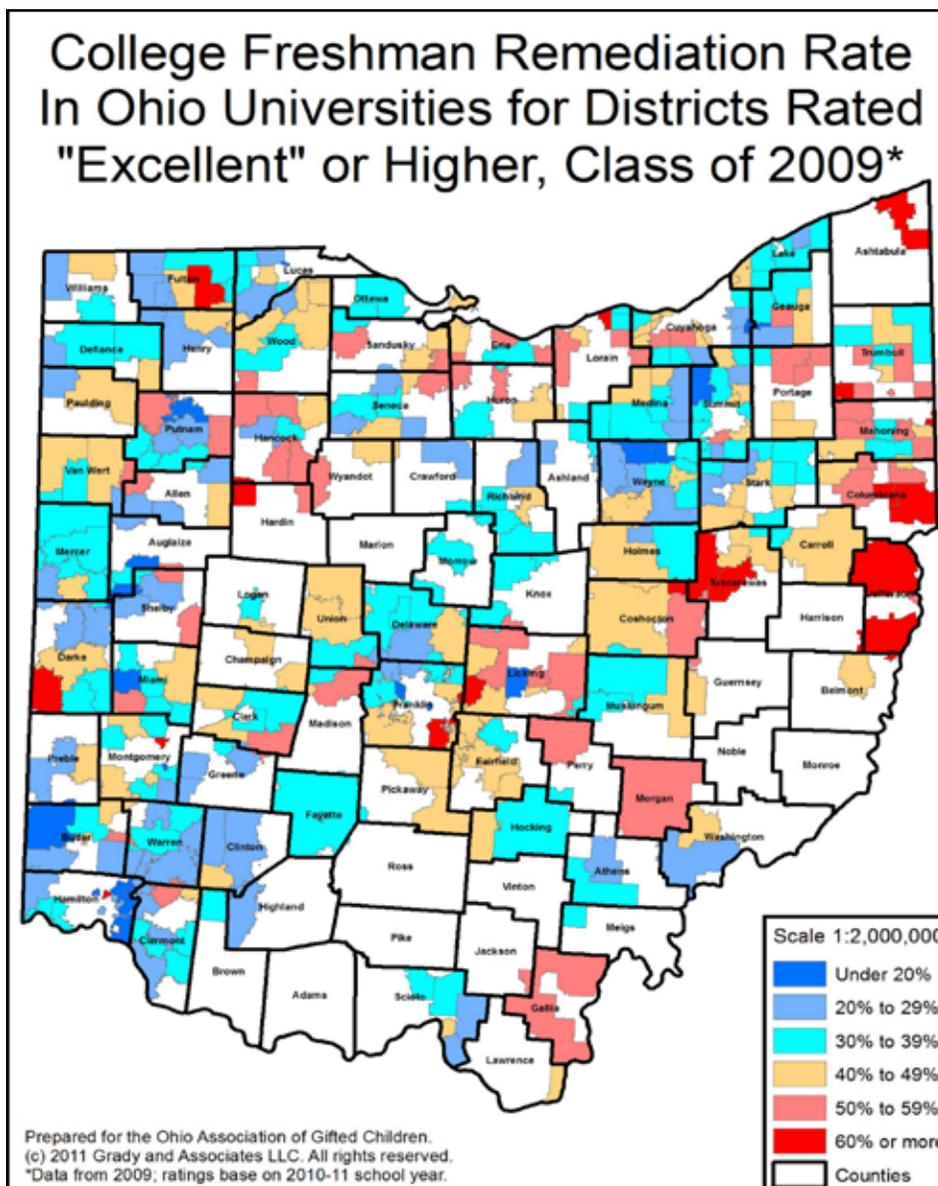


Fig. 16.

Source: Ohio Board of Regents. Note: 2009 data soon will be released to the public. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

### Services to Gifted Students

One would think that a district rated as excellent would provide appropriate learning opportunities for the full range of students within the district. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Ohio. Of the 352 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction, 220 serve less than 20% of their identified gifted population, an increase from 179 such districts last year. Eighty-five districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction reported serving *zero* gifted students. Most disturbing, 205 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction have *decreased* the number of gifted students served over the past three years. Cuts to gifted programs for the current school year are not reflected in this figure. *Gifted in the 21st Century*, the 2001 report adopted by the State Board of Education, spoke of “perverse incentives [in Ohio’s accountability system] that can negatively impact students who are gifted and unintentionally limit their ability to demonstrate sufficient growth.” A decade later, these perverse incentives remain fully embedded in Ohio’s accountability system.

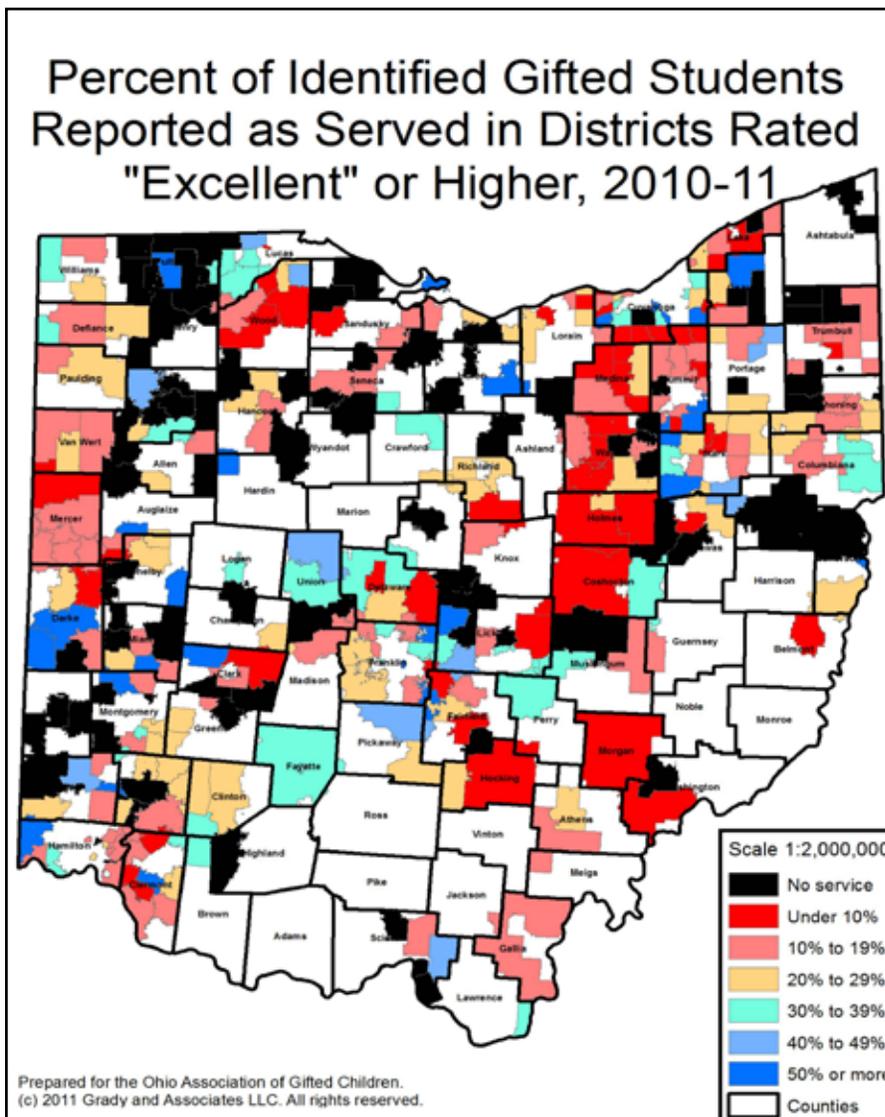
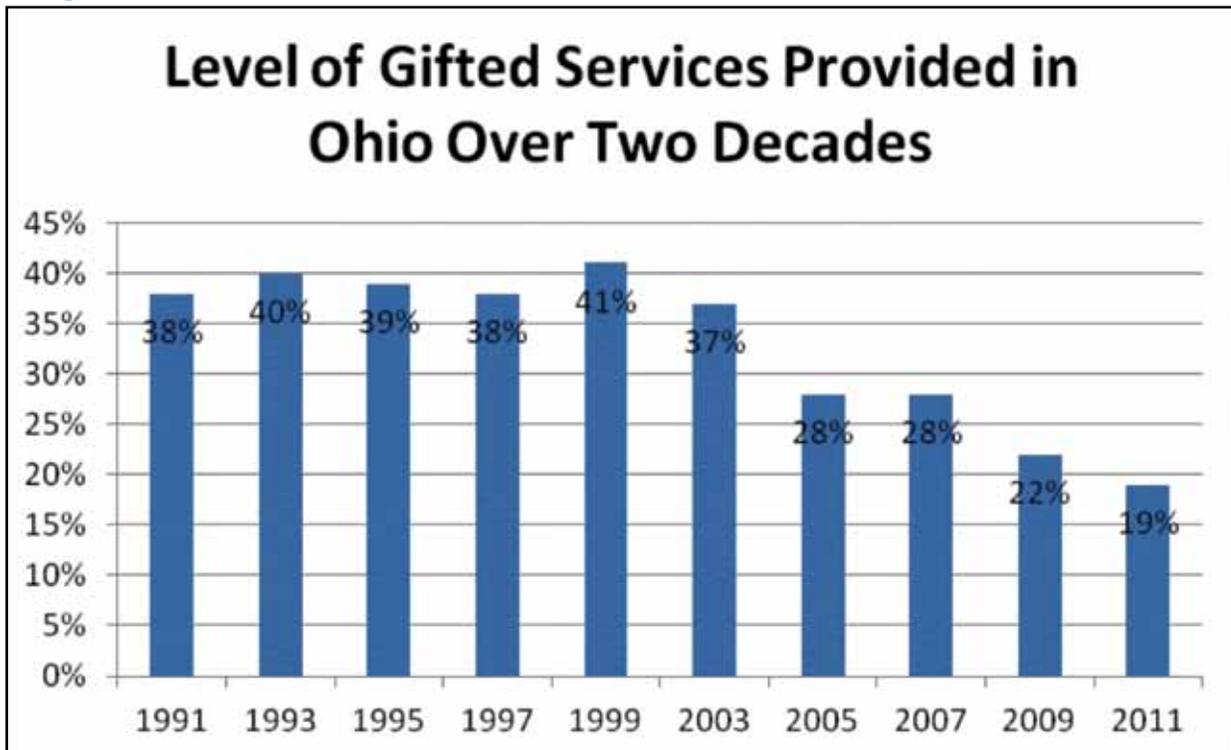


Fig. 17.

Source: Ohio Department of Education. Uncolored areas include districts not designated as excellent or excellent with distinction.

Because there are no performance or accountability standards in place for serving gifted students, there are no consequences to districts that eliminate services. Districts often view services to gifted students as a frill they cannot afford. In fact, the level of gifted services has declined rapidly in the last decade because of stagnant levels of state gifted funding and a series of education reforms that have excluded gifted children from consideration in setting educational priorities. In order to reverse the decline, Ohio's new education funding system will need to include resources for gifted students that are connected to services. Testimony during the last budget debate offers a chilling reminder that gifted students do not always "make it on their own," as many commonly believe. Dr. Patricia Farrenkopf, in testimony before the House Finance Committee, related that almost two-thirds of the students in her district's credit recovery program had been identified as gifted but not served (House Finance Testimony on HB 153, April 2011).

Fig. 18.



Source: Ohio Department of Education

Evidence from multiple national studies indicates that the highest-achieving students are losing ground. As a state-level policy issue, though, can Ohio afford to limit the potential of its gifted students? Ohio will never be competitive nationally or internationally if this trend is not reversed. An accountability system that ignores the gifted population contributes to the problem.

## A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS

Although many of Ohio’s excellent-rated districts fall short, this is not to say that some districts do not truly deserve the designation. The problem is that by lowering standards to allow the majority of districts to achieve a designation of excellent or excellent with distinction, Ohio has made a mockery of the term “excellent.” Unless a parent knows how to dig more deeply into the Ohio Department of Education’s website for a clearer understanding of how the local district is serving its students, the label of excellent does not mean much. In order to demonstrate the extent of the problem, it is useful to compare the extremes of excellence in Ohio.

District A is a real district in Ohio. In 2010–2011, District A met 26 out of 26 performance indicators. Average ACT scores are 24. The district serves 65% of identified gifted students. Thirty-seven percent of the district’s graduates received a diploma with honors, and 81% of the students who took Advanced Placement examinations scored a 3 or above. College remediation rates for graduates of District A are 34%. A new tool called the Global Report Card, which compares districts against international standards, rated District A at 66% in math and 76% in reading. District A’s per-pupil expenditure is \$11,814.

District B is also a real district in Ohio. In 2010–2011, District B met 17 out of 26 performance indicators. Average ACT scores are 18. The district serves none of its identified gifted students. No students took Advanced Placement examinations, and fewer than 14% of graduates received a diploma with honors. College remediation rates for graduates of District B are 81%. The Global Report Card rates District B at 30% in math and 40% in reading. District B’s per-pupil expenditure is \$11,493.

*Fig. 19. A Tale of Two Excellent-Rated Districts*

<i>District A</i>	<i>District B</i>
✓ 26 of 26 performance indicators met	✓ 17 of 26 performance indicators met
✓ Mean ACT score of 24	✓ Mean ACT score of 18
✓ 65% of gifted student population served	✓ 0% of gifted student population served
✓ 81% of students taking AP exams scored 3 or better	✓ No students took AP exams
✓ 34% college remediation rate	✓ 81% college remediation rate
✓ Per pupil expenditure: \$11,814	✓ Per pupil expenditure: \$11,493

The state of Ohio labeled both of these districts excellent. Which district would you like your child to attend?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem is clear. Ohio's accountability system does not pass the smell test. A system in which districts with mediocre performance are labeled excellent does little to improve the education of Ohio's children. The system is misleading, at best. At worst, it forces policymakers to make decisions that have significant financial and educational impact based on faulty and contradictory information. Without an honest appraisal of both the strengths and weaknesses of each district, Ohio will not be able to move toward a system that supports the kind of college- and career-ready workforce that is imperative for Ohio citizens to be nationally and globally competitive.

The solution is also clear. Ohio needs an accountability system that is fair and transparent and that accounts for the performance of all children, sets high expectations for districts and students alike, and discourages districts from gaming the system or resting on their laurels.

Ohio policymakers should consider the following as they create a new, honest system:

- ✓ *Incorporate high-quality metrics into the accountability system.* Ohio's performance indicators are mediocre at best. They show where minimal levels of proficiency are, but do little to measure how well a district is doing to take students beyond proficiency. The system shows how districts comply with minimum standards but does little to show whether districts are reaching true standards of excellence. Ohio policymakers should consider inclusion of such measures as college remediation rates, performance on Advanced Placement tests, numbers of students who are successfully accelerated, average student performance on ACT/SAT exams, services to gifted students, and numbers of students who qualify for diplomas with honors.
- ✓ *Move to nationally normed benchmarked high school assessments.* Ohio should move away from the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) to a national assessment, such as the ACT or SAT. The OGT serves very little purpose if the state's goal is to ensure that students are college- or career-ready and fails to provide a basis for national and international comparisons. In addition, Ohio policymakers should remove the high stakes aspect of student performance on the new assessments. The current requirement that students pass the OGT to graduate has had some serious unintended consequences for the most vulnerable high school students.
- ✓ *Eliminate the labeling of all districts until a meaningful system can be developed.* There is not a single district in Ohio that can't improve student performance. Bestowing labels of excellent distracts policymakers and the public alike from examining the individual metrics of each district. It also contributes to the false impression that districts that achieve high ratings do not need to improve student performance and causes districts to game the system in order to achieve a higher ranking. Ohio needs to build an accountability system that is transparent, meaningful and requires continuous improvement of all districts. Massachusetts, a state that has very high standards for

accountability, uses no district ratings and, in fact, discourages the use of accountability measures to rank districts. Policymakers in that state believe that districts should concentrate on constant improvement toward high-level standards rather than an arbitrary rating that allows districts to declare they have achieved enough.

- ✓ *Incorporate an automatic trigger to increase cut scores.* Even if Ohio policymakers maintain the current system of district rating, the system must be changed to encourage continual growth. One possible solution is to emulate the process in Florida, where cut scores on achievement tests are automatically increased as more districts achieve higher ratings. This ensures that all districts are constantly striving to improve. In addition, the performance levels of “limited basic” and “accelerated” should be eliminated to be consistent with NAEP ratings.
- ✓ *Reevaluate how the value-added growth measure is used.* Student growth measures are an important part of the state evaluation system, but the current implementation of the measure is confusing. In particular, it makes no sense that district ratings are improved if value-added growth is above average for one year, but it takes two years of below-level growth for district ratings to go down. It is also bewildering that districts can achieve above-level composite growth scores even when students in multiple grades are making below-level gains. Any change to this area should include more transparency, such as the ability to view student growth broken down by quintile.
- ✓ *Eliminate multiple pathways to ratings in favor of a single pathway with multiple components.* For any rating to be meaningful and understandable to the general public, districts need to be evaluated in the same way.

Ohio’s children and taxpayers deserve an educational system in which the low bar of proficiency is not disguised as the ultimate goal. The illusion of excellence does little to prepare these children for the future. It is time for Ohioans to face reality and to replace the Lake Wobegon system of educational accountability with one in which there are no limits to measuring achievement gains and in which minimum standards are clearly established as a floor, not a ceiling. Ohio must stop grading its districts on a curve.

