

Study finds range of skills students taught in school linked to race and class size

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Pressure to meet national education standards may be the reason states with significant populations of African-American students and those with larger class sizes often require children to learn fewer skills, finds a University of Kansas researcher.

"The skills [students](#) are expected to learn in schools are not necessarily universal," said Argun Saatcioglu, a KU associate professor of education and courtesy professor of sociology.

In effort to increase their test scores and, therefore, avoid the negative consequences of failing to meet the federal standards set by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (e.g., school closures, student transfers, or lost funding), some [states](#) are reducing the skills students are expected to learn.

"Narrowing the skills students are expected to learn, results in higher proficiency gains on state assessments because students have to be proficient in fewer skills," said Saatcioglu, who will present his findings at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. "In other words, requiring students to learn less actually helps to improve state assessment results."

In order to measure the range of skills students learn, Saatcioglu examined the correlation between fourth graders' performance on state assessments and their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam between 2003 and 2009. The NAEP

provides a stable reference point, which allows for comparisons between different states' assessments. A decline in the correlation between student performance on a state's assessment and the NAEP indicates that the tests are not measuring the same skill set.

"If a state's assessment is more comparable to the NAEP, that means the state expects its students to have mastered more skills," Saatcioglu said. "If a state's assessment becomes less comparable, in that the exam measures fewer skills and hence is less demanding than NAEP, then the state's proficiency scores are likely to rise."

Saatcioglu said his findings indicate that states with higher African-American populations and those with larger class sizes tended to teach more skills in the early years of his study, but then reduced the number of skills by 2009. He argues that this may be, in part, a response to a drop in state assessment scores.

According to Saatcioglu, the study is not aiming criticism at states or districts that he found were teaching fewer skills, but instead on the effect that school accountability laws have seemingly had on perpetuating inequality within already disadvantaged communities.

"While school accountability laws were enacted to address the inequalities in our nation's public school system, our findings suggest these laws may be hurting the children they were intended to benefit," Saatcioglu said.

More information: The paper, "Are State Assessments Comparable to the NAEP? Exploring Sociological and Political Factors Related to State/NAEP Comparability," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 17, at 8:30 a.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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