

Is Your Student on Track?

According to a new report, “86% of Colorado parents surveyed believe their child is on track to meet the goals and expectations for learning at his or her grade level” (“Hearts and Minds of Parents in an Uncertain World” by Learning Heroes).

Parents are right to worry about whether their children are on track, as globalization and rapidly improving technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, robotics, etc.) have made a rigorous education more important than ever before to their future ability to earn a living.

Moreover, at the aggregate level researchers have found that substantially improving Colorado’s K12 education results could increase the size of our economy by over 200% (“It Pays to Improve School Quality” by Hanushek, Ruhose, and Woessmann). Faster economic growth would also make it much easier to meet many of the other challenges we face.

So are Colorado parents right to feel so confident that their children are on track?

Since many people think that student achievement problems are only found where poverty is high, let’s look at 2015 results in ten affluent Front Range districts that spend \$3.6 billion per year to educate 353,000 children.

The following table shows the percent of students who met or exceeded Colorado grade level standards in English Language Arts and Social Science on the 2015 PARCC tests (and note that participation rates on all of these were above 90%). The districts are ordered by their percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL):

**2015 CMAS/PARCC
Pct Meets/Exceeds State Std
ELA & Social Studies**

	FRL Pct	ELA-4	SOC-4	ELA-6	SOC-7	ELA-8
Lewis Palmer	12%	53%	29%	63%	30%	68%
Douglas County	12%	52%	21%	53%	25%	49%
Academy	14%	60%	29%	52%	29%	60%
Cheyenne Mountain	14%	62%	36%	62%	33%	58%
Littleton	18%	63%	30%	53%	32%	54%
Boulder Valley	22%	60%	32%	58%	25%	52%
Cherry Creek	30%	55%	28%	45%	24%	51%
Poudre	31%	60%	28%	55%	26%	54%
Jefferson County	31%	50%	22%	52%	23%	48%
St. Vrain	32%	46%	24%	40%	21%	46%
<i>Average</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>28%</i>	<i>53%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>54%</i>

The next table shows the percent of students who met or exceeded Colorado grade level standards in Math and Science on the 2015 PARCC tests (note that I've included the results for Algebra 1, which many students in these districts take in Grade 8):

**2015 CMAS/PARCC
Pct Meets/Exceeds State Std
Math & Science**

	FRL Pct	MATH-4	SCI-5	MATH-6	ALG-1	SCI-8
Lewis Palmer	12%	46%	52%	58%	52%	45%
Douglas County	12%	38%	45%	46%	51%	37%
Academy	14%	49%	49%	50%	50%	50%
Cheyenne Mountain	14%	50%	55%	59%	62%	41%
Littleton	18%	40%	55%	47%	52%	50%
Boulder Valley	22%	52%	60%	46%	49%	42%
Cherry Creek	30%	41%	44%	42%	45%	41%
Poudre	31%	46%	51%	46%	46%	48%
Jefferson County	31%	37%	44%	42%	42%	44%
St. Vrain	32%	34%	43%	33%	26%	38%
<i>Average</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>47%</i>	<i>47%</i>	<i>44%</i>

The picture doesn't get much brighter when you skip ahead to high school and measure how many students are college-and-career ready, based on their scores on the ACT taken by every 11th grader in Colorado.

Even if you look ONLY at the students who do not qualify for free or reduced lunch, only a little more than half of them are hitting the college readiness benchmarks.

2015 Grade 11 ACT Percent C&C Ready

Students NOT Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch

	Reading	Math	Science
Lewis Palmer	69%	65%	58%
Douglas County	47%	51%	46%
Academy	56%	54%	51%
Cheyenne Mountain	63%	71%	58%
Littleton	58%	61%	55%
Boulder Valley	66%	66%	62%
Cherry Creek	52%	54%	50%
Poudre	61%	59%	56%
Jefferson County	50%	53%	48%
St. Vrain	47%	47%	46%
<i>Average</i>	<i>57%</i>	<i>58%</i>	<i>53%</i>

Finally, in Colorado, 35% of high school graduates who attend college have to take non-credit remedial courses. A recent research report, "Out of Pocket" by Barry and Dannenberg, found that across the United States 45% of students taking these remedial courses came from middle, upper middle, and upper class families – and that students who take them are 74% more likely to drop out of college.

In sum, there is convincing evidence that many Colorado parents are dangerously overconfident about how well their children are being prepared to meet the challenges they will face in the years ahead. Far too many of our kids are not on track, and each year they remain below state standards makes it more difficult for them to catch up (see "Catching Up to College and Career Readiness" by the ACT organization).

While we can certainly debate the right solutions to pursue, let us all agree that continuing to defend the K12 status quo is not an option, and that even in Colorado's most affluent suburbs we need to substantially improve the performance of our public schools.

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