

Student Achievement in Jeffco

Can any of you reading this explain what “Median Growth Percentile” means?

If you can't, don't worry, because you have lots of company.

Here's a short and somewhat simplified explanation (leaving out the uglier math). Assume your child starts a 1600 meter race with 99 other runners, and finishes 25th. Compared to the other runners, that places her or him in the 75th percentile, with 99 being the top and zero the bottom.

Now let's further assume that your child ran with four friends, who finished in the 35th, 42nd, 55th, 62nd, and 75th percentiles. The median (mid-point) percentile for this group of runners is the 55th.

So should your child apply for a college track scholarship?

On the basis of the race percentile alone, there is no way to answer that question. Why? Because the race percentile is a measure of your child's relative, not absolute performance. For the latter, you would have to know their actual time in the race, and compare it to the absolute standard that is required to be considered for a track scholarship. If your child ran a 4:05 then D1 schools will come knocking. But if your child ran a 10 minute 1600, they won't.

This analogy makes a critical point. When school district staff waxes eloquent about Median Growth Percentiles remember this: They tell you nothing about the absolute state of student achievement, or how fast it is improving on an absolute basis. In fact, apparently impressive MGPs can hide more disturbing truths.

The following table shows the percent of Cherry Creek students who met or exceeded grade-level state standards in Math and English Language Arts over the past three years. In the last row, we've added the Median Growth Percentiles for the 2016 to 2017 period, and below

that, we note test participation rates.

Math

Pct Meets or Exceeds State Standards

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8*
2015 CMAS	44	37	38	42	33	16
2016 CMAS	45	39	42	41	35	19
2017 CMAS	47	40	41	41	33	20
2016-17 MGP		52	54	57	50	49
2015 Participation	97%	96%	96%	96%	92%	90%
2016 Participation	98%	98%	98%	97%	96%	92%
2017 Participation	98%	98%	98%	97%	96%	94%

**Grade 8 results are for the 67% of students who take grade level math assessment, rather than higher level math assessment*

English Language Arts

Pct Meets or Exceeds State Standards

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
2015 CMAS	44	50	49	52	49	48
2016 CMAS	42	50	47	49	49	46
2017 CMAS	45	52	52	52	51	51
2016-17 MGP		56	51	61	44	47

This table makes a number of points.

First, where participation rates are high, more than half of Jeffco students failed to meet state math standards – and only about half met state English Language Arts standards. This result is not all due to poverty – only 33% of Jeffco students are on free and reduced lunch.

Second, about two thirds of Jeffco 8th graders take the grade-level rather than advanced math assessment. Their performance is deeply worrying, especially in a world where technology is rapidly improving and STEM skills are now critical in many jobs.

Third, there is minimal evidence of any improvement in Jeffco’s performance over the past three years.

Finally, the data make clear how foolish it is to only rely on Median Growth Percentiles to judge district performance. Consider the

highlighted example in the table. On the 2016 CMAS, 41 percent of Jeffco sixth graders met or exceeded state math standards. On the 2017 CMAS, only 33 percent of Jeffco seventh graders met state standards – a decline of 8 percent. Yet this negative performance placed Jeffco in the 50thth Median “Growth” Percentile. Contrary to popular belief, this is not a cause for celebration.

To return to our previous discussion of MGPs, what this really means is that Jeffco was in the middle of a group of very slow runners who failed to keep up with the grade-to-grade increase in the rigor of state math standards.

Finally, consider the performance of Jeffco students on the ACT assessment that every 11th grader took in 2016 (before Colorado switched to the SAT). Fifty-five percent did not meet the reading benchmark for college and career readiness. Fifty-six percent did not meet the math benchmark. And sixty percent failed to meet the science benchmark.

According to a recent 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).

Unfortunately, if present trends continue, far too many Jeffco parents are one day going to be shocked, either when they are told their children can’t access high school content, they don’t get into their target college, or they learn that they need to pay for non-credit remedial courses.