Letter to the Editor, The Idaho Statesman
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Politicians are dumbing down tests, losing accountability

I discovered in third grade how to convert an F into A with a little bit of creative penmanship. I can't tell you how impressed my mom was with my academic progress when she saw my report card. It now looks like the Idaho Department of Education (IDOE) is using the same technique to inflate student academic growth reports. According to the Wall Street Journal, the IDOE reported that 82 percent of eighth-graders were deemed "proficient" in reading. At the same time, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported only 32 percent. How is this possible? [underline added]

Idaho responded to the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act by creating the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). States were allowed to come up with their own tests and grading system. The temptation to dumb down tests and inflate grades is irresistible. When politicians make up and grade a test, you can expect everybody to get an A.

After a visit with my mother's "board" of education, I discontinued enhancing my report card and went to work memorizing my multiplication tables. Real self-esteem is the result of achievement, not pretension. Thanks Mom and Mrs. Coffman for truth and accountability.

Gale Pooley, Eagle

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Test comparisons aren't so simple

How can Idaho score 82 percent "proficient" on the state test (ISAT) and only 32 percent "proficient" on a national test (NAEP)?

The No Child Left Behind Act requires Idaho to specify what should be taught at each grade level, and to test the extent to which students are achieving that content. It also requires Idaho to define "proficient" as meeting grade-level expectations, or proficiency in a subject.

The NAEP definition of "proficient" is not synonymous with meeting grade-level expectations (ISAT's definition of proficient) nor with proficiency in a subject (NAEP's definition of Basic). Appropriate comparisons focus on "proficiency in a subject," i.e., ISAT proficient vs. NAEP Basic.

The Wall Street Journal made a mistake when it compared ISAT proficient with NAEP Proficient. The Wall Street Journal actually compared a "C" performance on ISAT to a "B+" performance on NAEP. The appropriate comparison is Idaho's 82 percent proficient on ISAT vs. its 78 percent Basic on NAEP, a more realistic "C" to "C" comparison.

Please visit Idaho NAEP on the State Board of Education Web site at http://www.boardofed.idaho.gov/naep/ for more about Idaho's NAEP 2007 results and using NAEP to compare states or confirm state test results.

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