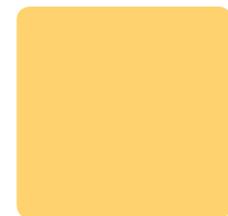


# Connecting RESEARCH to PRACTICE: Knowing Who Is Proficient Isn't Always Sufficient



HIGHLIGHTS research findings, policy and practice options, and resources | August 2009



# Introduction

During the past decade, the percentage of proficient students (PPS) has become the primary indicator of school performance. Educators use the PPS to monitor changes in performance over time, compare performance across groups, and assess trends in achievement gaps. The PPS is also relatively new, first used with the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the 1990s. The PPS seems to be a straightforward indicator of student performance. However, can we trust a single, simple indicator to provide essential information about a very complex system? Can the PPS support the inferences we want to make from it?

A recent *Connecting Research to Practice* conference hosted by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest addressed these questions and provided answers. In his keynote address, Andrew Ho, Ph.D., argued that the PPS, when used as the sole summary statistic for measuring the performance of a school, district, or state, distorts nearly every important, large-scale, test-driven inference.<sup>1</sup> Distortions at these scales may then lead policymakers and educators to misinterpret gaps, trends, and trends in gaps in populations at all levels of the education system.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than relying on a single tool for effectively representing school performance in the future, educators should use a set of complementary statistical procedures, each of which provides a necessary perspective on the complex school-performance picture. The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing of the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (1999) also strongly recommends the use of multiple measures and discourages the reliance on any single measure.

<sup>1</sup> This presentation was based on Dr. Ho's earlier article (2008). For additional background, see Holland (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Visit <http://www2.learningpt.org/gaps/#materials> to find links to a video of Dr. Ho explaining the components of his research and his slide presentation from the *Connecting Research to Practice* event.

This brief includes three components to help educators and policymakers understand the limitations of relying on a single measurement tool and the value of continually seeking out multiple perspectives on student performance data. First, the executive summary provides an overview of the brief's argument and explains how the multiple tools we recommend are insufficient on their own but robust when used together. The second section provides a more detailed explanation of the particular limitations of the PPS that many educators are not even aware of. The final section describes in more detail how each tool functions, what it does well, and what its limitations are. We hope each of these sections will allow you to quickly determine what you know, what you need to know, and how to more effectively monitor—and thereby improve—your school's performance.

# Executive Summary

The most important conclusion to take away from this brief is that every measurement tool offers one perspective on the changes that occur within a student population but that each perspective alone is incomplete and potentially misleading. Educators and policymakers need a set of complementary measurement tools to accurately understand how students are responding to interventions and how schools are progressing. The following summary outlines the benefits and limitations of a number of measurement tools and describes how the benefits of one can help compensate for the limitations of another.

- The **Percentage of Proficient Students (PPS)** provides a clear, static measure of the proportion of students who are above a given cut score. The PPS also allows educators to compare the proportion of students above a cut score across groups.
  - **Limitations:** The PPS depends heavily on the cut score, which can contribute to misleading inferences about student performance trends and gaps. The limitations of the PPS are further exacerbated when student distributions are nonnormal (i.e., most of the time).
  - **What is needed?** A tool that accounts for changes in student performance at all points of a distribution (not just at a cut score) even under nonnormal conditions.
- The **average** (arithmetic mean) provides a simple and understandable measure of distribution-wide performance. Educators, therefore, should reinstate the average as the default tool for measuring distribution-wide performance trends and for trends in gaps between subgroups.
  - **Limitations:** While the average does account for changes throughout a distribution, it fails to represent changes that cancel each other out. It is also disproportionately impacted by the presence of outlier scores (scores that are either much higher or much lower than the majority).
  - **What is needed?** A tool that allows educators to track a distribution's variability. Such a tool would complement what the mean tells educators about how a distribution is performing overall by indicating how students at different points in a distribution are performing independently of each other over time.

- **Percentiles** provide one simple way to visualize student performance at different points in a distribution over time. Percentiles allow educators to get a sense of how their distributions are changing from one year to the next. Disaggregating a whole distribution by performance level permits, for example, educators to track and compare the effects of interventions on different performance subgroups independently of each other. It can answer questions such as, “How have the lowest performing students done relative to the average students during the past three years? Is the gap getting smaller?”
  - Limitations: Allows comparison only between different *performance* subgroups (90th percentile versus 50th percentile) and not other kinds of subgroups, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.
  - What is needed? A tool that allows educators to compare all types of subgroups within a school and the gaps between them.
- **Effect sizes**, although more complex to calculate, provide a way to track and compare the differences in student performance across grades, subjects, tests, and other criteria.
  - Limitations: Careful attention must be paid to comparisons across criteria to prevent specious claims. Lay audiences, and, therefore, educators who communicate with them, may find its calculation challenging.
  - What is needed? Additional tools that help educators accurately account for changes in student performance at all points of a distribution, allow for detailed subgroup comparisons, and monitor relevant changes in demographics.

Each of these tools provides partial information about a bigger and more complex school-performance picture. When used together, these tools form the basis for a representative and defensible analysis of student performance. Even though this toolbox provides a solid foundation from which to engage questions of student performance, educators and policymakers should continually feel as though they need additional perspectives. Every measurement tool has strengths and limitations. Educators have the responsibility to develop and use a set of measurement tools with compensating strengths that provide an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the changes in their students’ performance. It may seem a little more complicated to do so, but, with so much at stake, it is likely better to be rigorous than wrong.

# Misleading Doesn't Mean Wrong, Just Misleading

It is important for educators and policymakers to recognize that the limitations of the PPS do not mean that it is wrong. In fact, the PPS is mathematically and computationally sound. Consequently, policymakers and educators believe they are using a simple, accurate, and understandable statistical measure for evaluating student performance over time. As it turns out, the PPS's simplicity masks significant limitations that can result in misleading and costly conclusions about how schools are performing.

What does the PPS do? It provides a simple way to answer the question, "Do we have more students proficient this year over last year?" If that is all educators were interested in, the PPS would be perfectly suitable. But knowing whether student performance changed is only part of the information educators need. Educators also need to know by how much student performance changed and how student performance in one group changed relative to the performance of other groups. Unfortunately, the PPS turns out to be an unreliable measure of both the magnitude of student performance change and the changes between groups (i.e., gaps and trends in gaps). There are two reasons why: First, the PPS is heavily dependent on a given cut score, and, second, the PPS is insensitive to the ways distributions shift over time.

For any given change in school performance, the percentage of students who are proficient depends heavily on the location of the cut score. Even under the simple conditions of a normal (bell curve) distribution and uniform progress, different cut scores yield dramatically different calculations of the PPS.<sup>3</sup> The key to understanding why is to understand what a cut score is and how it interacts with a given distribution. A cut score is simply a subjective point on some test scale above which students are considered to be proficient and below which they are not considered to be proficient. The proportion of students above a cut score is used to evaluate how well a school is performing

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<sup>3</sup> Uniform progress means all students improving by exactly the same amount, thereby shifting the entire distribution to the right.

at one point in time. Changes in that proportion are then used to evaluate how a school progresses from one year to the next. It is here—where educators seek to evaluate school performance reliably over time—that the risks of relying on the PPS as the sole measure of performance manifest. Remember that the area under a curve represents the total number of students who scored on a particular test. Most students will score somewhere in the middle of a distribution, and fewer will score either very high or very low. Figure 1 shows how the PPS measures achievement trends over time. As you can see, the change in the percentage of proficient students depends on how many students are under the curve near the cut score. Because there is an unequal number of students at each point under the curve, the closer a cut score moves to the mode of the distribution (where most students are), the larger the PPS's change will be. As a result, the same change in a school's performance can yield dramatically different percentages of proficient students with different cut score conditions. Figure 2 shows how the location of the cut score affects the PPS even under the still simple trend conditions of uniform progress.

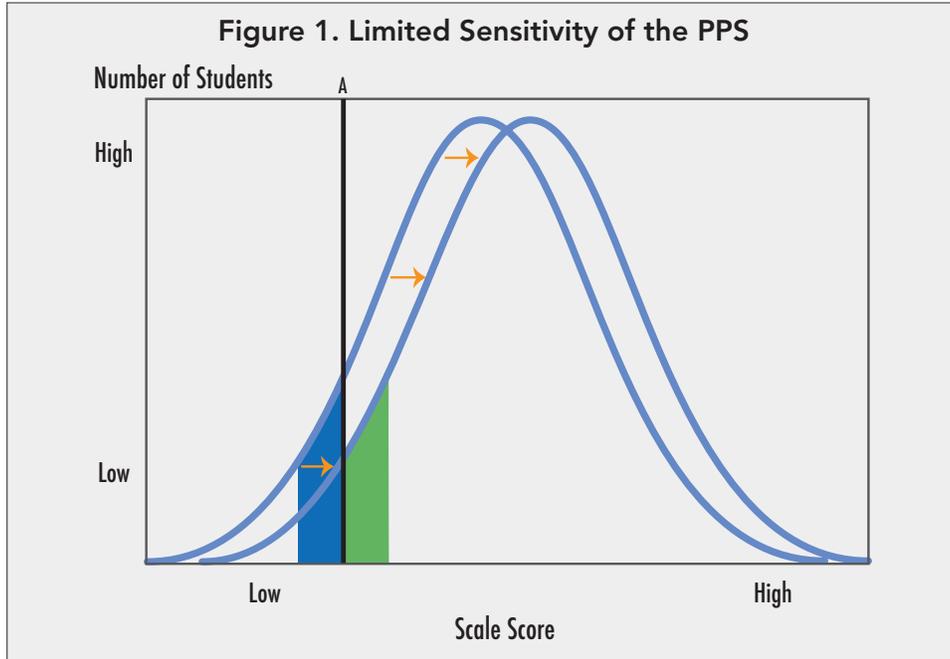


Figure 1 shows the narrow sensitivity of the PPS as a school progresses uniformly from Time 1 to Time 2 (all students improve by the same amount over the same time, causing the whole distribution to shift to the right). In this example, the percentage of proficient students increases by the proportion of students under the curve, directly to the left of the cut score (black line).

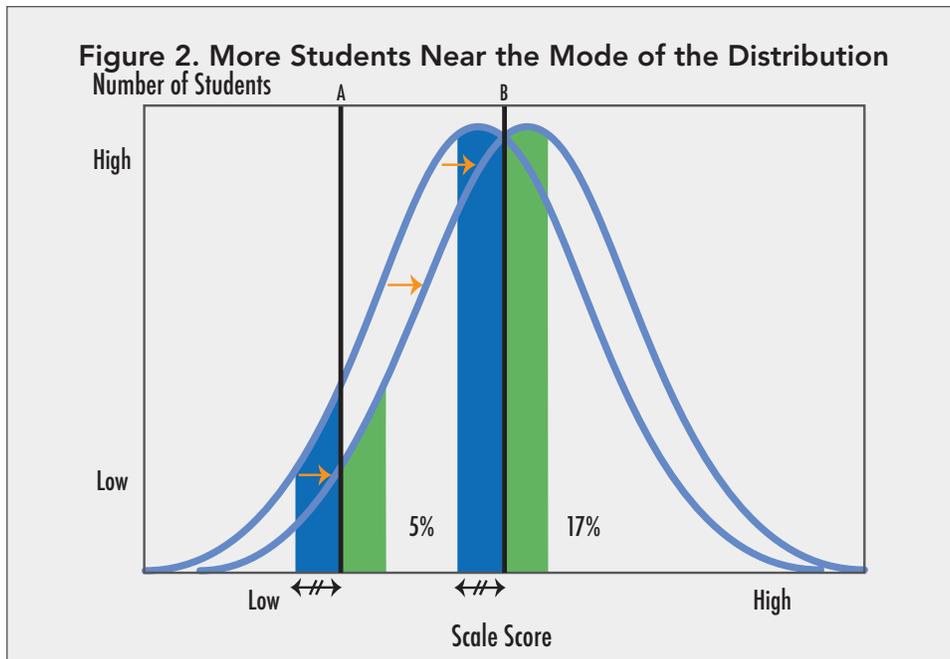
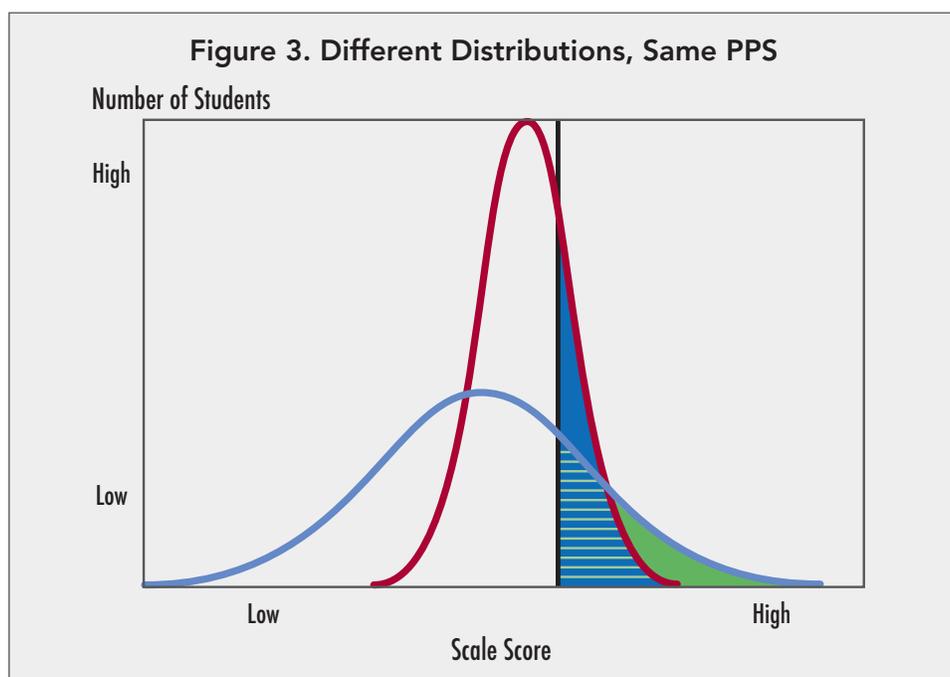


Figure 2 shows the same school from Figure 1 but with one additional cut score near the mode of the distribution. Notice how the same shift in distribution-wide performance (uniformly to the right) yields a hugely different change to the PPS—either 5 percent or 17 percent. Depending on the location of its cut score (A or B), this school could claim that during the past year, it increased schoolwide performance by 5 percent or by 17 percent. This huge variation is evidence of how unreliable the PPS is for evaluating trends in school performance.

The PPS's limitations are further exacerbated by real-world distributions. Unlike Figure 2, real-world distributions are unlikely to be perfectly normal and are very unlikely to exhibit uniform progress. The inability to adjust to the unpredictability of distributions is the second limitation of the PPS. As any teacher will tell you, a classroom of students rarely if ever changes their performance in a perfectly equal way—even if the whole class improves on average over time. Some students will improve now and experience setbacks later; some will show no improvement for a long time and reach their learning point (their “ah-ha” moment) in a few months, resulting in dramatic improvement; and some will be all over the place for reasons a teacher cannot figure out. The chaos of classroom performance is mirrored at the district, state, and national levels. As a result, the combination of what happens both inside and outside of the classroom causes student performance to shift in unexpected ways. It is this natural ebb and flow of student performance that the PPS is likely to misrepresent.

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The tendency for the PPS to ignore changes in a distribution could lead to intense and unnecessary disagreements about changes in school performance. For example, some stakeholders could be misled and confused when school performance seems to change but the PPS remains the same. It is not difficult to imagine how different stakeholders would respond to a change in school performance such as that shown in Figure 3. Feedback from parents and teachers may suggest that a large portion of students seem to be performing less well while others seem to be doing much better. At the same time, administrators may insist—given their PPS reports—that there has been no important change in the school's performance. Is either one of these conclusions more correct than the other? No, the PPS correctly identifies 24 percent of students being above the cut score at each time period. However, the PPS does fail, in this instance, to represent a significant change in school performance. The disconnect between the information provided by the PPS and other indicators of performance could have important decision-making implications that policymakers, educators, parents, and students should be aware of.



In the real world, distributions are rarely normal. Consider the limitations of relying on the PPS to monitor the change in this admittedly extreme example shown in Figure 3. The red curve represents student scores in a school at Time 1. The blue curve represents student scores at Time 2. At the cut score represented by the black line, both distributions have the same percentage of proficient students (24 percent in the shaded areas). Do you believe that this school has not changed in any important way? The PPS's reliance on the cut score means that this school would report the same percentage of proficient students even though it has experienced significant changes in student performance. The PPS suggests that the school is performing exactly the same at Time 1 and Time 2, when in reality it is performing in a very different way. The distribution at Time 2 suggests that this school propelled many students far beyond their previous performance. However, their improvement was offset by a performance decline for a much larger proportion of students, some of whom fell far below the lowest score at Time 1.

The ease with which educators are misled by the PPS is unfortunately not limited simply to trends in achievement but also includes inferences about changes in the gaps and trends in gaps between groups. As was the case with achievement trends, conclusions about the sizes of gaps between subgroups in a school and the trends in those gaps (whether they are getting smaller or larger) fluctuate dramatically with the choice of cut score. Figure 4 shows how trends in gaps as measured by the PPS can even exhibit sign reversal under different cut score conditions (that is, flip from showing a reduction in the gap to showing an increase in the gap given the same change in performance). Educators and policymakers need to be much more aware of the fact that the gaps

and trends in gaps determined through the PPS are often distorted and misrepresented. How can educators create strategies to improve equality when one cut score tells them achievement gaps are shrinking and another says they are increasing? Analyses conducted using the percentage of proficient students do not provide reliable conclusions about an education system's progress. In the end, the widespread use of the PPS has limited educators' ability to effectively answer necessary questions about student performance while crowding out the use of more capable alternatives.

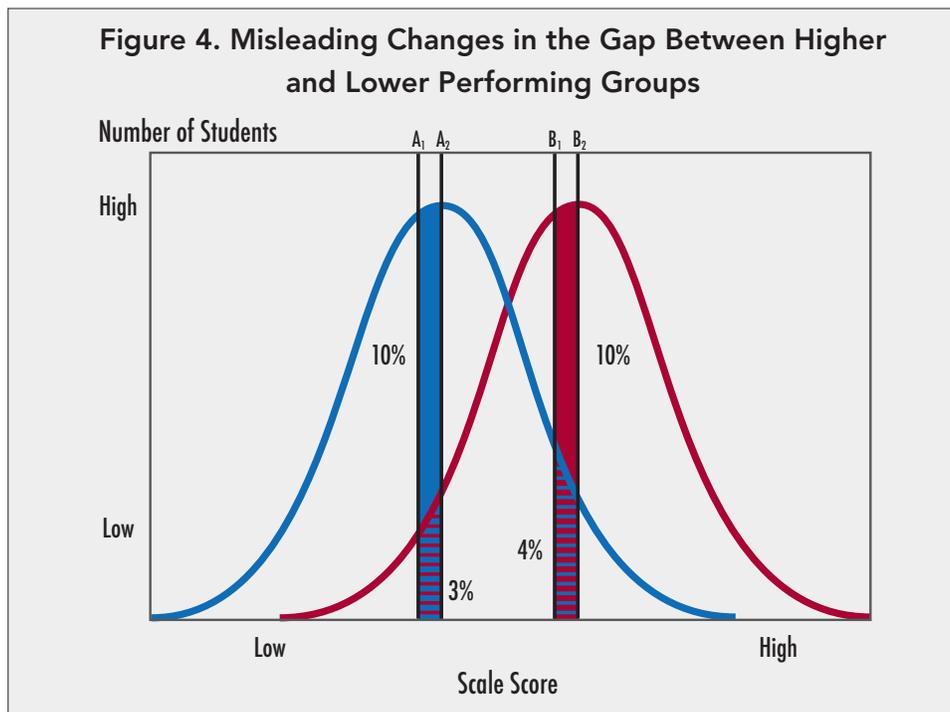


Figure 4 shows the distributions of two subgroups—one higher performing (red curve) and one lower performing (blue curve). The figure illustrates the effects of two different cut scores (A and B at time periods 1 and 2) on the trend in the gap between the two groups. The shaded area under the curves at each cut score represents the change in the PPS under conditions of uniform progress by all students in both groups. The blue shading indicates a 10 percent increase in the PPS for the lower performing group (area under the blue curve) and a 3 percent increase in the higher performing group (area under the red curve). With the cut score near the mode of the lower performing group, the gap between the higher performing group and the lower performing group *decreases* by 7 percent (3%–10%). By contrast, the red shading shows a 10 percent increase for the higher performing group (area under the red curve) and a 4 percent increase for the lower performing group (area under the blue curve). With the cut score near the mode of the higher performing group, the gap between the higher performing group and the lower performing group *increases* by 6 percent (10%–4%). The PPS gives these two wildly different changes (–7% and +6%) in the gap without there being any true change in the relationship between the groups' performance. Because they both improve uniformly, there can be no change in the gap between them.

Educators and policymakers should now be clear about the potentially misleading consequences of depending on a single metric that in turn depends on a narrow part of a student distribution. Ho (2009) articulates a solution this way: Remember the old carpenter’s adage of “measure twice, cut once”? In education, we should “cut once and measure everywhere [in the distribution].” There is no inherent problem with having expectations, goals, or standards (a place to cut), but as we’ve seen, measuring at just one part of a distribution can lead only to limited and often unreliable conclusions about how schools perform and change. The next section of this brief will highlight and explain a number of alternative approaches that policymakers and educators can use to more accurately evaluate gaps, trends, and trends in gaps in school performance.

In education, we should “cut once and measure everywhere [in the distribution].”

# The Once and Future Measures of School Performance

The pressure to evaluate changes in student performance often leads educators and policymakers to depend on quick and simple measurement tools. Although these tools may appear to be straightforward and efficient, they often inadequately represent the true complexities of school performance. With a little more effort, however, policymakers and educators can use multiple approaches to better understand school performance in ways that are more representative, defensible, and policy relevant.

Multiple tools benefit school improvement efforts by compensating for the potentially misleading aspects of any single measure. As part of the REL Midwest *Connecting Research to Practice* event, Dr. Ho recommended some easy-to-use approaches to get educators started. As it turns out, the best way to develop a more complete understanding of school performance in the future is to redeploy performance measures that educators have always had.<sup>4</sup>

## Tool 1: Average (Arithmetic Mean)

During the REL Midwest *Connecting Research to Practice* event, Dr. Ho reflected nostalgically on the times when “means roamed the earth.” As the concept of proficiency has become entrenched in educational research and reporting, other measurement tools, such as the mean, were crowded out and often stopped being reported entirely. Dr. Ho (2009) argues that the exclusion of the mean is detrimental to the ability of schools and states to evaluate performance effectively. In the transition to the PPS, one of the easiest and most defensible statistics to evaluate and track student performance was lost. Dr. Ho argues strongly that the mean should be reinstated as the default trend and trends in gaps measure for public education reporting.

<sup>4</sup> Learning Point Associates can provide interested educators and policymakers with an Excel spreadsheet that is preformatted to calculate these and other measures using a district’s own data. Technical assistance in interpreting the results is also available.

What makes the mean so useful? The calculation of the mean includes every score in a distribution. Unlike the PPS, which accounts for performance in only one part of a distribution, the mean accounts for the performance in every part of a distribution. This distribution-wide perspective makes the mean a more effective measure of total school performance over time. Although means provide a more representative measure of a distribution's change than the PPS, they, too, have limitations. For example, changes in student performance at one end of a distribution could negate changes at the other end, thereby eliminating the mean's ability to represent the trend. Just as means help make up for the limitations of the PPS, percentiles help show what means miss.

## Tool 2: Percentiles

While means successfully incorporate all of the scores across a distribution, they can fail to represent more detailed information that educators need. One way to display the potentially hidden variations in performance that means miss is by using percentiles.

Percentiles add value in two important ways. First, percentiles provide a way to check the interpretability of the mean by representing the variability of a distribution. If the mean fails to show an important change in performance across a population, percentiles can show it. Second, beyond supporting the mean, percentile bands provide more detailed representations of the performance of subgroups within a population. For example, educators can use percentiles to quickly see how their low-performing group is doing relative to their high-performing group. Are they moving closer together and decreasing the gap between them or moving farther apart and increasing the gap between them? The percentiles in Figure 5 show how this information could be presented and what it could show. By representing data in percentiles, educators can quickly understand their school's current performance and its trend over time. When means show no difference in performance, percentiles allow you to separate your school into different performance groups and evaluate those groups independently of each other.

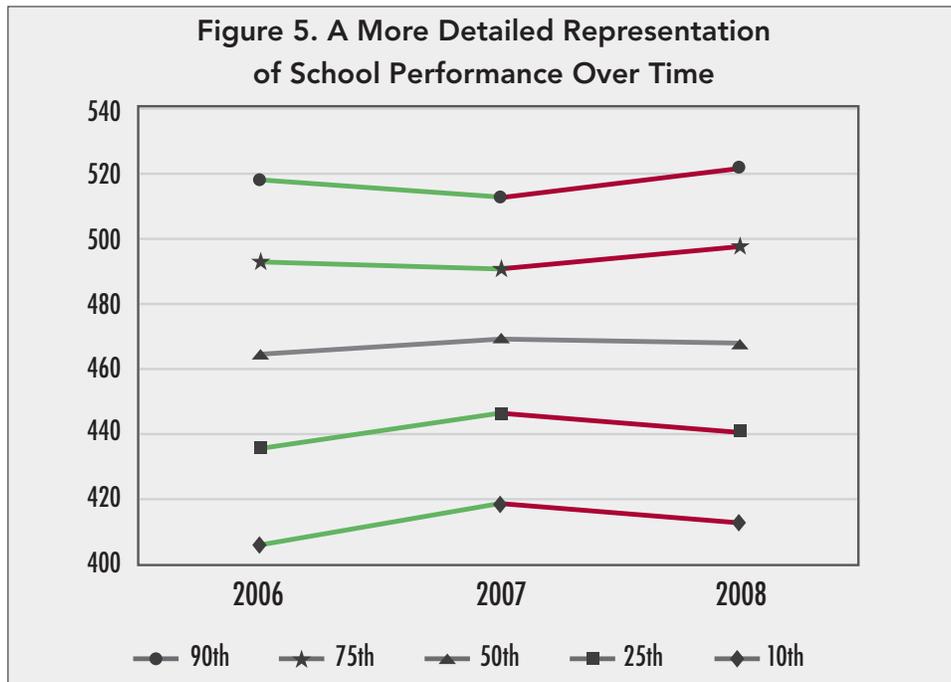


Figure 5 shows the performance change of a school over three years disaggregated into five percentile groups. The green highlighted trend lines show a decrease in the gap between the highest and lowest performing groups—the lowest improved while the highest performed less well. Over the next year, the red highlighted trend lines show an increase in the gap between the two groups—the highest improved and the lowest performed less well.

### Tool 3: Effect Sizes

Although means and percentiles represent changes in distributions over time, they cannot easily compare students across tests, grades, and subjects. Educators, however, can calculate and track the differences and changes across these groups of students with effect sizes. Effect sizes tell you not only that there is a difference between groups but also how large the differences are. If effect sizes can do that, they can also provide you with a measure of how one group progresses relative to another (i.e., the trend in the gap between groups). Effect sizes provide a number of benefits to educators and policymakers interested in understanding changes across groups, but how are effect sizes calculated? It turns out that there are many different equations for the effect size that are each meant to be used under different conditions.<sup>5</sup> All of the various equations

<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this brief to explain all of the possible variations of the effect size that a district or government agency may need to use. A good article to start with can be found at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002182.htm>. Learning Point Associates also has experienced statisticians on staff who can help develop research and evaluation approaches that will allow you to measure and track changes in student and school performance over time. .

calculate the effect size using means and standard deviations. By calculating the effect size with both the mean and standard deviation, data from different distributions can be translated into a common scale and meaningfully compared.

Ho (2009) acknowledged that the power of effect sizes to shed light on variations in student performance is balanced by a requirement of careful research design. Therefore, he recommends that this tool be used initially for more complex policy and research questions involving cross-grade, cross-subject, and cross-test comparisons. As educators and their audiences gain familiarity with them, however, effect sizes will be able to inform a wide range of performance-related questions.

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# CONNECTING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE:

## Knowing Who Is Proficient Isn't Always Sufficient

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### About Learning Point Associates

Learning Point Associates is a nationally recognized nonprofit consulting organization with 25 years of experience. In partnership with our clients, we apply research, evaluation, and direct practice to impact policy and tackle the most pressing issues in education today.

We move research from the shelf into the everyday practice of educators by leading and facilitating critical conversations. We are skilled at fostering the exchange of knowledge across ideologies and roles to ensure that fresh ideas and the latest research are injected into the national conversation on education.

Our *Connecting Research to Practice* events bring research to the field, providing opportunities for practitioners and policymakers to deepen their understanding of evidence-based research. For more information about connecting research to practice, please visit <http://www.learningpt.org/rel/events.php>.

Our Connecting Research to Practice policy briefs are designed to help educators make informed decisions about investing in programs to improve student achievement. Highlights of each policy brief include key research findings, policy and practice options, and resources for practitioners.

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