

Does the Public Use Information to Hold Elected Officials Accountable for Educational Performance?

How accurate are citizen's beliefs about students' performance on end-of-year state tests and how does learning about student performance affect the evaluation of institutions responsible for education policy in Tennessee?

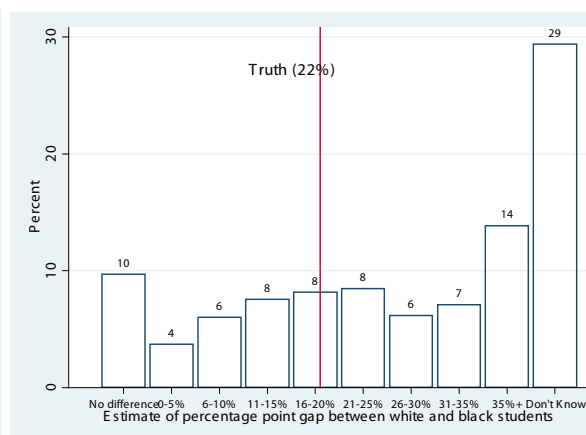
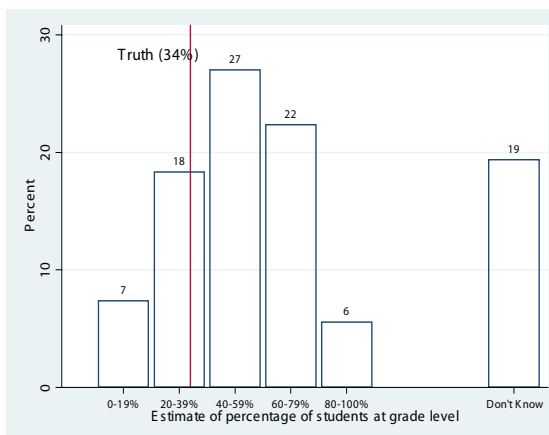
This question goes to the core of the ongoing debate on education reform in Tennessee and throughout the country. As President Obama noted in February 2012, "our job is to harness [the best] ideas, to lift up best practices, to hold states and schools accountable for making them work."¹ In a new CSDI working paper, Joshua Clinton, associate professor of political science and CSDI co-director, and Jason Grissom, assistant professor of public policy and education and CSDI faculty affiliate, use an experiment

conducted within a survey of 1,500 randomly selected Tennesseans to evaluate the extent to which the public is likely to hold various state actors responsible for student performance.

Clinton and Grissom find that despite the emphasis in education policy in Tennessee on promoting accountability based on student performance, most Tennesseans are unaware of how well students actually perform on end-of-year evaluations or how much difference there is between the performance of white and black students. For example, as shown in the figure below, only 20% of respondents chose the correct range for the fraction of students in grades kindergarten through eighth

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grade who scored at level "proficient" or better on the 2009-10 round of statewide standardized tests (34% of students scored proficient or better), while only 8% of respondents chose the category containing the true gap between black and white student performance (22%).



¹ Remarks by the President on No Child Left Behind. February 9, 2012. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/09/remarks-president-no-child-left-behind-flexibility>

By employing a unique experimental design which provided actual test score data to survey respondents after they gave their initial beliefs on performance and evaluations of officials, Clinton and Grissom demonstrate that citizens appear to update their evaluations of educational institutions in a reasonable fashion despite the lack of accurate initial beliefs. For example, respondents downgraded their initial evaluations of the Tennessee Department of

Left Behind, government-provided pre-kindergarten programs, public vouchers for private school attendance, charter schools, and differential pay for teachers working in low-income area schools—did not change after they learned about actual levels of student performance or about the difference in student performance between black and white students. Instead, respondents continued to favor the policy positions most associated with their ideological or partisan preferences.

The findings from this study lead to at least two important implications for education policy. First, because citizens overestimate student performance in the state, they are more approving of the public officials responsible for education policy than they would be if they had more accurate beliefs about educational performance. Second, while learning about actual student performance changes how favorably the citizens view those public officials responsible for education policy, it has no effect on proposed educational reforms. In contrast, support for the various educational reforms is based more on partisanship than on reactions to learning about the actual level of student performance.

The study also hints at the broader question of democratic accountability for elected officials. From Madison's arguments in the *Federalist Papers* to modern democratic theory, the connection between information and subsequent voting behavior remains a fundamental assumption

of electoral accountability. In support of that assumption, Clinton and Grissom find that citizens can review performance information and adjust their evaluations of public officials *if* they are aware of the actual performance levels. Most citizens, however, do not have a very good sense of the overall level of student performance in the state. As they acknowledge, however, citizens armed with information about poor performance still might not vote out officials or support reform proposals because of other factors that influence voting decisions (e.g., partisanship). Moreover, even though important decisions are being made at the state level with respect to education policy (e.g., vouchers), perhaps citizens have better information about the performance of their local school district. While Clinton and Grissom's article provides important evidence about the informational aspect of accountability, it also raises important questions about how to evaluate democratic accountability and citizen engagement.

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The research summarized in this policy brief can be found in CSDI Working Paper 7-2012, "Public Information, Public Learning, and Public Opinion: Democratic Accountability in Education Policy" by Joshua D. Clinton and Jason A. Grissom: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/CSDI_WP_07-2012.pdf

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Education after receiving statewide performance information showing test scores were lower than the respondents' baseline beliefs. After receiving the statewide performance data, citizens did not, however, change their grades for their local school boards as they did for the state-level organizations.

Interestingly, Clinton and Grissom also find no evidence that learning about student performance has any real effect on preferences about possible education reforms. Respondents' opinions about a range of proposals—test-based teacher performance pay, No Child