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State's low math goal gives up easy scores

A smart basketball coach doesn't let his team practice on a goal that's 5 feet high. The players won't be ready for a game where the baskets are raised to 10 feet.

But North Carolina sets a low target on state math tests. Scores for fourth- and eighth-graders look terrific -- like a reverse, two-handed dunk -- until you notice the players don't have to jump. The same effort won't be good enough when the standards are higher.

Ninety-three percent of North Carolina's fourth-graders passed year-end math tests in 2005. But only 40 percent were considered proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The disparity between North Carolina's evaluations and its placement on the NAEP is wider than any other state's except West Virginia.

Maybe they practice on 4-foot baskets there.

North Carolina must raise its standard and get a more realistic idea of how its students are doing in math.

Colleges already know. University of North Carolina institutions have to put 12 percent of freshmen from state high schools into remedial math classes. Only 3 percent have to take remedial English.

The numbers are higher at some institutions. For example, 30 of the 45 Guilford County high school graduates who enrolled at N.C. Central University as freshmen last fall were placed in remedial math classes, according to a UNC system report. Those students might have thought they were doing well in math throughout elementary and secondary school, but N.C. Central thought otherwise.

Let's get more realistic, starting in elementary school. Meeting low standards doesn't help anyone in the long run.

State Board of Education Chairman Howard Lee endorses raising the bar. So does the director of testing and evaluation for Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools, who says current standards lack value. "We are fooling ourselves to say those achievement levels are legitimate," Diane Villwock told The News & Observer of Raleigh.

Changes will be resisted by some. A higher threshold means more students are likely to fall short and require tutoring or, worse, retention. Costs will go up.

But costs already are escalating. They go up when colleges have to provide remedial instruction. They go up when graduates can't qualify for jobs that require basic math skills. They go up when employers can't find the kind of workers they need and relocate to other states or overseas.

Almost anyone can look like a star if he shoots at a low basket. North Carolina students need to compete at a higher level.

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