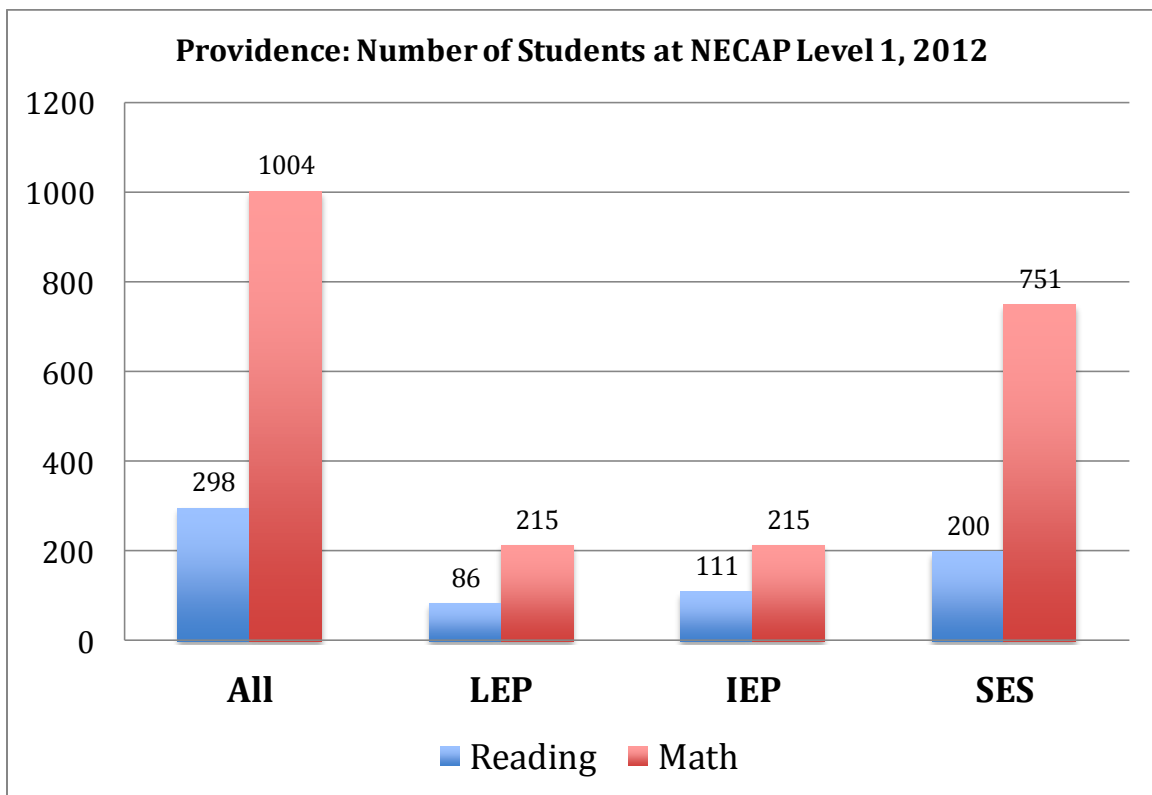


Dear Councilman Zurier,

I am writing in response to your last email, which indicated you will be talking with the Providence Schools administration about their plans to respond to the latest NECAP results. This is of import because the NECAP will be used as one of three determinative factors for graduation in 2014.

I want to begin by displaying the extent of the problem faced by the Providence Schools. The following chart shows how many students in Providence scored at Level 1 on the last NECAP. The numbers for all students correspond to 20% of the test takers in reading (1 out of 5 students) and 65% (a little more than 3 out of 5 students) in math. Even in reading, where the results are strongest, the incidence of 1 out of 5 student is high enough to think of this situation as an endemic, systematic problem, not a problem that can be fixed by a few simple tweaks or even catch up courses. The problem lies in the day-to-day conduct of education in the Providence system. By the way, this problem is not particular to Providence; it is endemic in all urban school districts, and tightly associated with poverty.

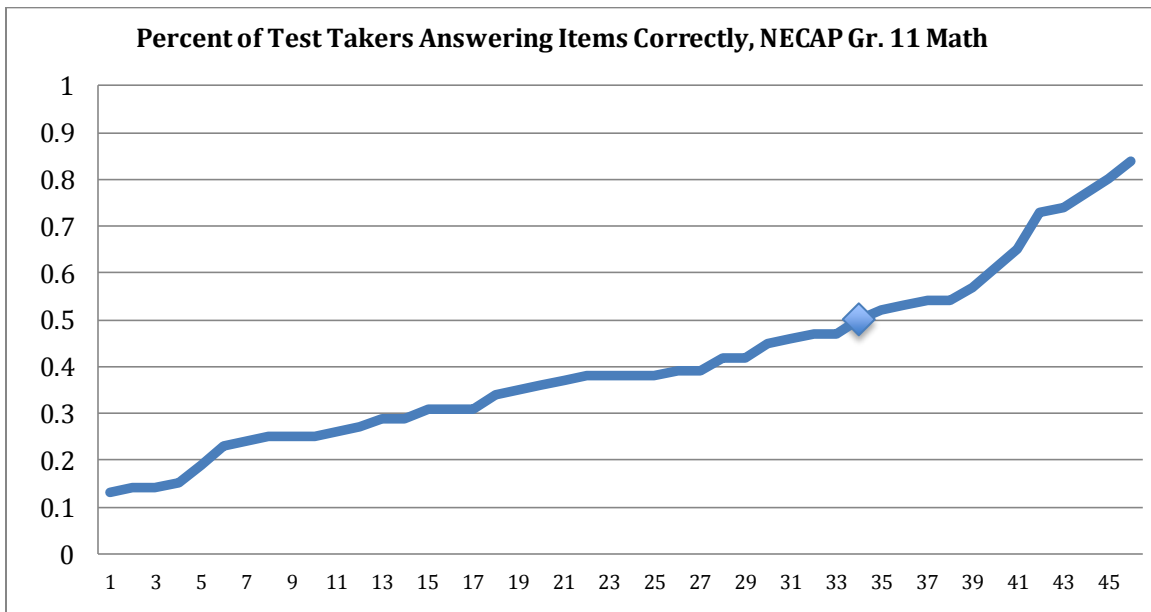


The chart also shows that the issues Providence will need to effectively deal with are 1) its LEP and IEP populations and 2) math. Providence's efforts to close the gap in math achievement for its special populations have not been particularly

successful in the past and the administration will need to make a compelling argument that they can move the 430 IEP and LEP students out of level 1. My conviction is that they such severe resource constraints that they cannot implement the programming necessary to move these students to higher achievement levels.

In order to get a clearer picture of the challenge the math test poses, I have charted out the performance of all math test takers on each item on the test, as reported by the Measured Progress technical report. The items are arranged from left to right by the percentage of students who answered the item correctly. So, for example, a little more than ten percent of students answered the first item correctly, meaning it is a very difficult item—students answering it correctly are in the 90th percentile of test takers.

Although it is not immediately intuitive, the chart shows that the items on the math test are very hard, which corresponds to the disproportionate number of students at level 1 in math compared to the numbers in reading. It is not until the 34th item on the math test that half the students get the correct answer. On a 46-item test, this means there are only 22 items that half or more test takers get correct. And it is not until the 42nd item that 70% of the students get the item correct. If you consider an item that 70% of the students get correct and easy item, then there are only four easy items on the math test.



This is an important point because students will be required to get 5 to 8 additional questions correct on their retest and there are not 5 to 8 items of reasonable difficulty on the math test for them to get right. It is important for you to be sure the Providence Administration understands how difficult it will be for students to pass the math test or even do better on it in their last try.

I bring all this up as a resident of Providence and a former employee of the Department of Education (RIDE). As I see the facts, and as I have shown them to you, it is very likely that the NECAP, as a graduation standard, violates the civil rights of students, particularly students who do not test well.

My conviction is that that there are large portions—much larger than RIDE acknowledges--of the student population who are disadvantaged by standardized tests. For these students, there should be alternative ways to demonstrate math and reading achievement; perhaps in the way severely handicapped students currently demonstrate their achievement via a portfolio.

Alternatively, all students who meet their course requirements and the performance requirements for graduation could receive a diploma and the diploma would display their NECAP scores. That way, colleges, employers and other interested parties would know how well the students scored on that test and use the information accordingly. The NECAP could be used as additional information about the diploma as opposed to a barrier to earning the diploma. My larger point is that there are many alternatives to current NECAP policy that are more educationally reasonable and far less punitive to students.

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