

Other Topics

Punching Wholes Into Parts, or Beating the Percentile Averages

At last, a novel answer to the testing dilemma!
But don't hold your breath—a few wrinkles
need to be ironed out first.

I drove to work last Monday behind an orange school bus. This was not unusual, since I must be marshaled in front of my chalkboard before the first bell rings. But as I pulled up to pass the bus, I was surprised to see that the rear emergency door had been removed and the opening covered with stout wire mesh. A mob of young pigs looked out at me. I was taken by their curious stares, their cute bristly faces peering out the back door with "No Passing When Stopped" in large black letters over their heads.

The recycled bus turned off onto a dirt road and left me behind, but the sight of those dark eyes, snub noses, and hairy ears had charmed me. And as random images are wont to do, they began to form into an idea. "Of course," I thought. "Pigs! The very answer to our testing dilemma."

For it had come to pass in my school district that every administrator, teacher, and student was to be judged by norm-referenced testing. Those students whose scores fell below the 50th percentile would be found wanting, their teachers would not receive merit pay, and their schools would be deemed deficient. What to do? The nature of percentiles is that, no matter how you line up the scores, half will be below average and half above. And no matter how hard you work to improve, half must needs fall below the other half.

We could solve this dilemma with pigs. These bacon factories are said to be among the smartest animal species, but in no way can even the smartest porker approach the mental agility of *homo sapiens*. If we enrolled the same

number of pigs as we did students, and administered the tests to them as well as to our human enrollment, the pigs would fill up the bottom half, and all our boys and girls would rank in the top 50 percent.

Before I dazzled the governor with this proposal, I visited the farmer who had transformed the old school bus. He scratched his head under his feed store cap, shifted the straw he was chewing on to the opposite side of his mouth, and spoke. "Well, I don't know," he ventured. "For one thing, each pig consumes at least 15 pounds of feed per day. This would seriously strain the most efficient cafeteria. And because most of these pigs are orphaned, from what you might call broken homes, they would all qualify for free lunches. Add to that the noise, the space requirements, the expense of one instructor (state certified, of course) per 28 enrollment, additional restroom facilities, *et cetera, et cetera*, and you might end up with considerable aggravation."

I seemed to have reached a dead end—but only temporarily. For it came to mind that the national percentiles for the tests are determined by a "norm group," which consists of sample students from different areas of the country: from rural and urban areas, from rich and poor localities, from large and small schools. All we really needed was a matching norm group of hogs: those from large and small farms, pampered

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pets, and those running free in the woods. Plug their scores in with the regular student norms, and we wouldn't have to enroll young shoats in each classroom. Our boys and girls could just take the test, their scores would match those of the human sample, and all the children in the United States would be in the top 50 percentiles.

Or so it seemed. Of course, there were a few moral issues. For instance, if a child did chance to score among the percentiles of the agricultural contingent, he or she might not be labeled "at risk" or "Ee-Em-Ar." He or she could be called "Pee-Eye-Gee." This was not too palatable a prospect. Also, something nagged in the back of my mind about "sampling error" and "testing ethics." So I decided not to present my idea to the Secretary of Education right away.

While I was struggling with these complexities, the Orwell crowd solved the problem by sticking pens in it. A

recent newspaper headline declared, "Reading Scores in All States Above 50th Percentile," and not a single Letter to the Editor complained. You remember the old scam where the agent promised you a 50 percent return on your investment? You gave him \$100—and a year later he returned \$50 and kept the rest. At least those con men recognized 50 percent as one half. The new process is like taking a stack of group test results and putting them in the top box, leaving the bottom box empty. Then you declare that the top box contains half of the scores. The invisible scores in the "bottom" 50 percentiles appear only when grants are requested for remedial education. I think maybe it's done with mirrors—which is certainly less messy than pigs. □

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