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 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, 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...
Something nagged in the back of my mind about "sampling error" and "testing ethics."