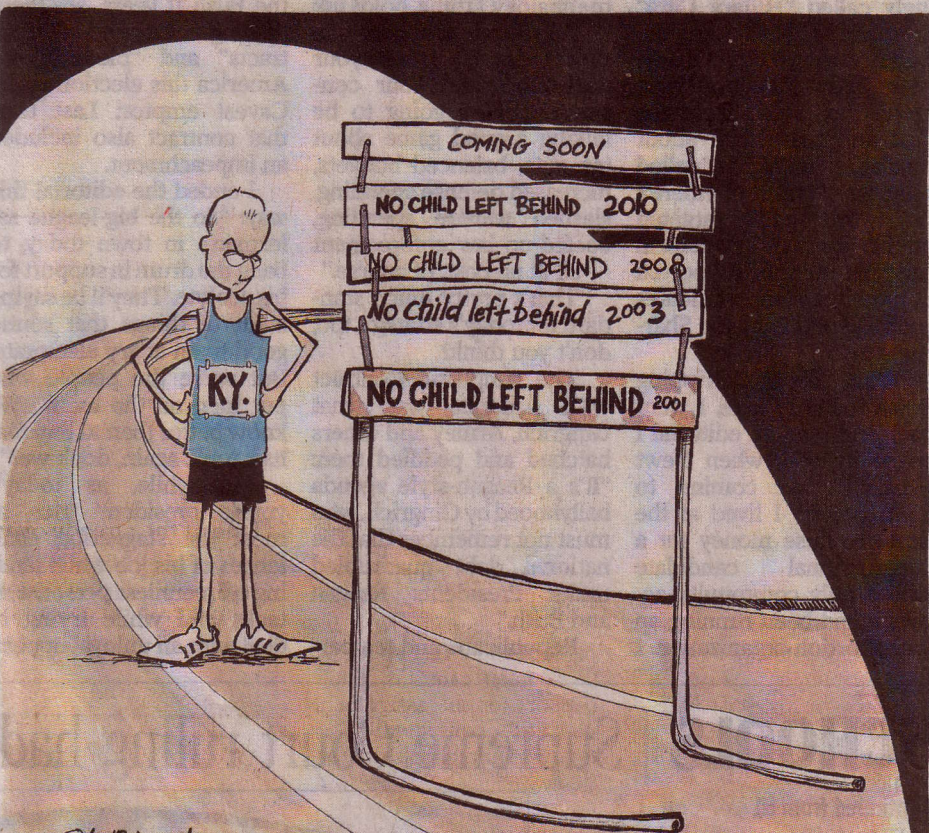


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# A faulty measure

No one should be pleased with the scores of Jefferson County's public schools in the latest round of No Child Left Behind testing, but they are not evidence of a system that is failing or in disarray.

Certainly, taken as a whole, there are items of interest in the results. That math scores declined across all three tested grade levels while reading scores rose, for example, is evidence of a disturbing pattern in American education of low levels of proficiency in math and science. The drop in social studies scores is so stark that baffled JCPS administrators must pursue an explanation and response. In cases where previously struggling schools, such as Portland Elementary, showed big gains, administrators and teachers should study the schools' approaches for plans that might be put to good use elsewhere.

Unfortunately, however, the score reports inevitably are viewed in many quarters as indicative of success or failure of individual schools, their teachers and their students. That is unsound analysis and a deeply flawed basis upon which to evaluate a public school system or to make personnel or curriculum decisions.

Standardized tests increasingly are looked upon unfavorably by professional educators. The reasons are many, but a critical fac-

tor is that they don't measure reliably a student's overall understanding of a subject area, critical thinking skills or ability to communicate effectively what he or she knows. The goals are arbitrary and likely can never be reached by some schools. If assessments must rest sometimes on standardized tests, schools should be judged on progress toward goals, not whether a predetermined percentage of students score at a particular level.

In the case of an urban system like Jefferson County's, some schools "fail" because scores — as they are nationally — tend to be lower among minority, low-income, learning-disabled and English-limited students. Some students are homeless, and many come from troubled households. All these factors tend to lower standardized test scores.

Finally, the impression of "failing" schools can create the opposite effect that is intended. Instead of sparking improvement, teachers, students and parents may become discouraged. Why push for success if a label of failure seems preordained?

Public education, in Jefferson County and across Kentucky, faces stiff challenges on many fronts. The many Kentuckians who yearn for academic excellence in the state's schools should not let a single test score distract them from the important work ahead.