

Since 1985, Connecticut has used the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) to measure student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics at the fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade levels. The CMT has also been used as a de facto accountability measure for schools whose students are taking the test. Three basic grade configurations are used at this level in Connecticut: K-5 and 6-8 (Type I), K-6 and 7-8 (Type II), and K-8. Until 1994, the K-5 schools were not accountable for the achievement levels of students who had attended Type I schools but had moved on to the sixth grade at a new school, while the K-6 schools were accountable for the achievement levels of their sixth-grade students.

In 1994, a change in testing and reporting procedures required sixth-grade students from Type I schools to identify the K-5 school they had attended. This allowed the researchers to compare CMT data from this group of sixth-graders with data from sixth-graders who were still at their original K-6 school. The researchers hoped to learn whether students attending schools with a K-5 grade span performed as well as their K—6 cohorts. The results indicated that in all subject areas the performance of sixth-grade students at the Type II schools was better than the performance of sixth-grade students from Type I schools. Tucker and Andrada pose three possible explanations for this outcome:

1. There were less incentive and little opportunity for the school administering the sixth-grade portion of the test to prepare Type I students (who had just arrived at the school after completing fifth-grade elsewhere) for the CMT because the administering school would not receive credit for Type I students' performance.
2. Type I schools had no incentive to prepare their fifth-grade students for the sixth-grade portion of the CMT because those Type I schools were not being held accountable for their graduates' performance at the administering school.
3. Information about the nature and importance of the sixth-grade portion of the CMT was not being made available to students and teachers in Type I schools; therefore, the teachers were not familiar with the best methods for preparing their fifth-grade students adequately for the sixth-grade portion of the CMT.

This study demonstrates the subtle ways in which grade span can work for or against students learning within a particular school system. The authors conclude by noting that, as shown in the Connecticut example, school-level policies and practices can vary dramatically depending on the grade span used within a school.

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