Harvard University researcher Daniel M. Koretz had some good news and some bad news today for policymakers looking ahead to the reauthorization of the federal No Child Left Behind Act: The nation’s K-12 students are now attending Lake Wobegon schools.

That is, he said, for reasons that are politically better but academically worse, rampantly inflated standardized test scores are giving the misbegotten impression that, as in the fictional town made famous by radio personality Garrison Keillor, all children are above average.

“We know that we are creating, in many cases, with our test-based accountability system, illusions of progress,” Mr. Koretz told a roomful of policymakers and educators at a panel discussion here hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank.

Mr. Koretz, a professor of education at Harvard’s graduate school of education who has written a new book, *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*, added that under the No Child Left Behind law, widespread teaching to the test, strategic reallocation of teaching talent, and other means of gaming the high-stakes testing system have conspired to produce scores on state standardized tests that are substantially better than students’ mastery of the material.

“If you tell people that performance on that tested sample is what matters, that’s what they worry about, so you can get inappropriate responses in the classroom and inflated test scores,” he said, citing research in the 1990s on the state standardized test then in use in Kentucky, which was designed to measure similar aspects of proficiency as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called “the nation’s report card.”

Scores on both tests should have moved more or less in lock step, he said. But instead, 4th grade reading scores rose dramatically on the state test, which in many ways resembled an NCLB-test prototype, from 1992 to 1994, while sliding slightly on the NAEP over the same period.

“If you’re a parent in Kentucky, what you care about is whether your kids can read, not how well they can do on the state test,” Mr. Koretz said. “And the national assessment told us that in fact the gains in the state test were bogus.”

**Obscuring or Illuminating?**

Bella Rosenberg, an education consultant and a longtime special assistant to the American Federation of Teachers’ late president, Albert Shanker, echoed many of Mr. Koretz’s critiques.

“This is officially sanctioned malpractice—if we did this in health, in medical practice, we’d all be dead by now,” she said of the testing system under the NCLB law. “The fact is, we’re doing a great job of obscuring instead of illuminating achievement gaps.”
But fellow panelist Roberto Rodriguez, a senior education adviser to U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., the chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee who helped shepherd the NCLB law through Congress in 2001, cautioned against “throwing the baby out with the bath water.”

While a more effective accountability system “needs to be a goal, I would argue, of the upcoming reauthorization of the ESEA,” he said, referring to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is now known as NCLB, “summative assessment is a critically important area of accountability.”

With regard to the tug-of-war between advocates of the current standards-based system and detractors who prefer a system that better reflects the curriculum, Mr. Rodriguez said, “I think we can have our cake and eat it too.”

Williamson M. Evers, the U.S. Department of Education’s assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development, who attended the panel discussion, suggested that any changes to the NCLB law should preserve its essence. “Some are proposing changes in accountability that remove consequences; this would make it accountability in name only,” Mr. Evers said in an e-mail. “Results should be comparable statewide, or parents, taxpayers, and teachers themselves can’t tell how students are doing.”