The Lake Wobegon Effect

SEEING WHAT “WE NEED TO SEE” IN EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT INFORMATION
If Wo-be-gone, Where Did it Go?

Lake Wobegon is a virtual village:

“where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average,”

Created by MN humorist Garrison Kiellor and known to millions via his Public Radio program A Prairie Home Companion.
Wo-be-in-Poverty, Masked by Way of Racial Profiling

Conjecture:
The preference to see our kin as "above average" can subtly create a need to point to the "below average." *(Not any intention Kiellor ever had.)*

Line of Inquiry:
In the KC Region how is the effect of *poverty* on education achievement being obscured via the Lake Wobegon Effect?
Thesis: Virtual Reality Distorts Education Achievement Reporting
Education and Workforce Views

We will be taking a look at:

- Design for reader engagement
- Numbers and suggestive calculations
- Seeming incongruities
- Race and Poverty as lenses
Text, Figure, or Subtext?

College and Career Readiness

A look at primary and secondary education in the Kansas City metro

Just as high-quality early learning opportunities open doors to success in school, primary and secondary education can pave the way for success in college and in the workforce.

The Mid-America Regional Council and its education partners are working to identify and track key indicators that can help determine whether students in the Kansas City metro are on the path to greater opportunities.

In addition to basic demographics like race and income, we measure the number of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FFASA); graduation rates; and scores on college placement tests such as the ACT. We also examine how students in the Kansas City metro are doing compared to those in peer metro areas. Over the next two years, we will add more data measurements, such as student access to career experiences and early college credit programs offered during high school.

In the Kansas City region, a strong network of school districts, community colleges, universities, workforce development boards and organizations like the KC STEM Alliance and PREP-KC are committed to working together to ensure that all secondary students have the opportunity to move onward and upward, building a skilled workforce that will provide an edge in the new economy.

Features:

- Dense discouraging text,
- Easy icons, nostalgia content
- Impossibly precise numbers
- Soothing color palette
- Scope and scale mismatch
- Mislabeling – Daycare equals Pre-School?
Text, Figure, or Subtext?

**Features:**
- All students or some?
- More impossibly precise numbers
- Why the racial demographics first?
- Why the White fraction first?
- Bright for the wealth divide
- Subdued for the FRL fraction
- Incidental significance of Race headlines,
- Actual weight of poverty down-played?
- Incongruities abound, Photoshop obscures?
Enter Lake Wobegon?

Features:

- How is Race an independent variable in school achievement?
- Why not a Regional Profile?
- Virtuous Blue goes with “White” and “Studious”
- Why bar charts with averages?
- “Below US average” - Really?
- “How do our students measure up?” – Really
- Actual weight of poverty now obscured by “Who is above and below average.”
- Incongruities abound, Photoshop further obscures?
Wo-be-Where: Race or Poverty?

Features:

- Right capsule:
  - Where’s a difference?
  - “Above US average” - Really?

- Left capsule:
  - What’s the comparison?
  - Why Graduation Rates?
  - Red-Orange-Green: Which is the Independent Variable?
  - Where does your conclusion settle: Orange-Green vs. Blue?
  - Or Red vs. Blue?

*Very soothing in Lake Wobegon*
There is a pattern
It correlates with income and opportunity – not with Race
Summary

Mindset: Majority (White) Privilege “chalks the game field”

Criteria: Race is a simpler “explanation” than Poverty

Beneficiaries: Those wanting to be assured they are “Above Average”

Challenge: How to deconstruct the Lake Wobegon Effect as a distorting lens on Education research and public information
Post-Script

Three Articles Last Week in the New York Times

• Can Student have Too Much Tech?
• A Future Segregated by Science?
• Closing Education Gap Will Lift Economy a Study Finds