

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #4

Fall 2011

Test Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress

Each year the scale scores and the percent of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on tests in reading, mathematics, and other content areas are reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These scores are based on testing samples of students from each state, whose scores then are used to judge the overall quality of education in the United States. In this sense, we treat the United States as though it were a single school district—instead of a country consisting of more than 14,000 separate districts.

If you graduated from high school twenty, thirty, or even forty years ago, you probably agree with George Orwell who said that, “Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.”

NAEP first tested national samples of students beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Currently, scientifically drawn samples of students from each state are tested. As a result, there are both state profiles and national results.

Nationally, NAEP scores allow us to compare performance levels over time. Many wrongly believe that national test scores have declined dramatically from earlier years. In fact, the average score in the areas most frequently tested, reading and mathematics, have increased since 1971.¹

Average scale scores for 9-, 13-, and 17- year olds on NAEP reading tests, 1971 – 2008

Age	1971	1980	1988	1996	2008	Gain
17	285	285	290	288	285	---
13	255	258	257	258	260	5
9	208	215	212	212	220	12

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Average scale scores for 9-, 13-, and 17- year olds on NAEP mathematics tests, 1973 - 2008

Age	1973	1982	1990	1996	2008	Gain
17	304	298	305	307	306	2
13	266	269	270	274	281	15
9	219	219	230	231	243	24

These results occurred despite the fact that there are many more children living in poverty today than ten or twenty years ago. Likewise, the numbers of special education children and English language learners have increased significantly. Research consistently shows that family income is negatively correlated with academic achievement. English Language Learners and students with special needs also tend to show lower levels of academic success.²

- English Language Learners:** The proportion of students in the United States classified as English Language Learners increased from 3.5 million in 1997-98 to 5.3 million in 2008-09—an increase of 51 percent. During the same period, the general student population increased by 7.2 percent.³
- Children in Poverty:** The U.S. Census reports that overall 21 percent of all children under age 18 lived in poverty in 2008. This figure compares with 16.2 percent in 2000.⁴ The rates of poverty differ widely across ethnic groups: While 11.9 percent of white children lived in poverty in 2008, the figures for Black and Hispanic children were 35.4 percent and 33.1 percent, respectively.⁵
- Students with Special needs:** In 1998, 8 percent of the nation's children were identified as having special needs. By 2010, the number of special needs children increased to 14 percent of the total student population—an increase of 75 percent.⁶

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Each time that NAEP scores are released, the critics of public education tend to emphasize two facts: (1) the percent of students who score Proficient or Advanced remains quite low, and (2) there has been little improvement (“progress”) since the last assessment.

Given the changes in demographics in recent years, the gains in NAEP test scores could be perceived as something positive. At the very least, never forget that the cohort of students you went to school with did about the same as today’s students on NAEP tests.

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Endnotes

¹ “The Nation’s Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress in Reading and Mathematics 2008.” Available online: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2008/2009479.asp>).

² For example, only 3% of ELL students were Proficient on 2009 8th grade Reading Test administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This compares with 34% for non-ELLs. Likewise, only 12% of ELL students were proficient in 4th grade mathematics, compared with 42% of non-ELLs.

³ “English Language Learners.” Available online: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/english-language-learners/>.

⁴ Poverty in the United States: 2000. Available online: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p60-214.pdf>.

⁵ Poverty in the United States. Available online: <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>. For additional data see: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/census/1960/index.html>.

⁶ Data provided in interview with Stephanie Petska at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction on August 23, 2011. Also see the following: http://www.upi.com/Health_News/2008/03/05/14-percent-of-US-kids-with-special-needs/UPI-93651204755296/ and <http://dpi.wi.gov/sped/ccreports.html>.