



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress

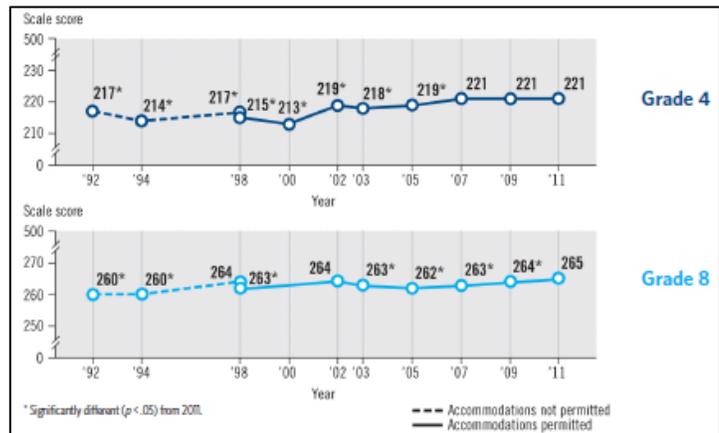


NATION'S REPORT CARD REVEALS MODEST INCREASES IN MATH AND READING: Report Shows One-Quarter of Eighth Graders Reading Below Most Basic Level

The nation's fourth- and eighth-grade students posted the highest average math scores ever on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, which was released on November 1. Results in reading were mixed; average scores were up slightly for eighth graders, but they remained unchanged for fourth graders.

As shown in the chart to the right, fourth graders' average reading scores have held steady since 2007 while average scores in eighth grade increased by only 2 points since 2007.

In addition to providing an overall average score, the Nation's Report Card breaks down data by achievement levels and race and ethnicity. Among the nationally representative sample of 168,200 eighth graders who took the test, only 34 percent scored at or above the Proficient level in reading. On the other end of the spectrum, 24 percent scored below the Basic achievement level, meaning that they could not recognize the main purpose of an informative article.



“Having nearly one-quarter of all eighth-grade students reading below the most basic level is unacceptable in today's knowledge-based economy,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Without basic reading skills, these students will struggle to make their way toward a high school diploma. More often than not, they will fall behind as they encounter more challenging subject matter in high school and will eventually drop out.”

According to the report card, average reading scores for white, black, and Hispanic eighth-grade students were higher in 2011 than in any of the previous assessment years. However, it also finds that large achievement gaps continue to exist between average reading scores for white students (a score of 274 out of 500) and the average scores of black (249), Hispanic (252), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (252). Asian/Pacific Islanders posted the highest average reading score among eighth graders (275).

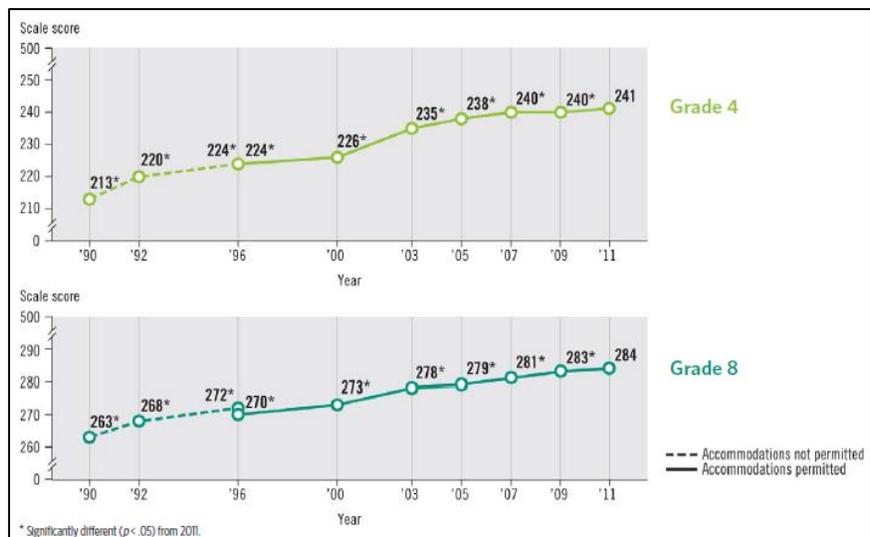
The report card also provides profiles of students scoring at the lower end of the scale (below the 25th percentile) and those scoring at the higher end (above the 75th percentile) to demonstrate how the two groups differed demographically. As shown in the table below, students scoring at the lower end of the scale tend to be disproportionately students of color and low-income students.

	Eighth Graders Scoring Below the 25th Percentile	Eighth Graders Scoring Above the 75th Percentile
White students	36%	72%
Black students	26%	6%
Hispanic students	32%	11%
Asian students	3%	8%
Students eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch	67%	21%
Students with at least one parent who graduated from college	32%	71%

In math, the average scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students have improved significantly since the first Nation’s Report Card in 1990, but progress has slowed in recent years.

As shown in the graph to the right, fourth graders’ average math scores have increased by only 1 point since 2007. Among eighth graders, the average math score has increased 3 points since 2007.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said the NAEP results are “reason for concern as much as optimism.” He praised the continual, albeit modest, increases but said that faster progress was necessary.



“While student achievement is up since 2009 in both grades in mathematics and in eighth-grade reading, it’s clear that achievement is not accelerating fast enough for our nation’s children to compete in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century,” [Duncan said](#). “After significant NAEP gains in the 1990s, particularly in mathematics, the 2011 results continue a pattern of modest progress. ... Enhancing education for all is the key to our nation’s economic prosperity. It is time for America to renew the promise of providing all children a world-class education.”

The Nation’s Report Cards in reading and math are available at <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>.

Alliance to Hold Webinar Examining Results from 2011 Nation’s Report Card

On **Wednesday, November 30, from 1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. (ET)**, the Alliance for Excellent Education will hold a webinar to delve deeper into the reading and mathematics results on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation’s Report Card.

The webinar will feature **Jack Buckley, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics; David Driscoll, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board and former Massachusetts commissioner of education; and Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

Panelists will review findings from the Nation’s Report Cards in reading and math and discuss what can be done to close unacceptable achievement gaps and increase the achievement levels of all students. They will also answer questions from webinar viewers. Register and submit questions for the webinar online at <http://media.all4ed.org/registration-nov-30-2011>.



SENATE COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON LEGISLATION TO REWRITE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: Senators Harkin and Enzi Outline Pros, Cons of Legislation

On November 8, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee held a hearing on a bill it recently passed to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The hearing was an unusual one because hearings typically happen before a committee passes legislation, but this one was part of a deal with **Senator Rand Paul (R-KY)** who believed the committee did not allow members enough time to read and discuss the bill before voting to approve it during an October 20 markup.

In his [opening statement](#), **HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** seemed to address Paul’s objection by noting that the committee had held ten hearings on a “full range of issues” covered under NCLB. Harkin also said that he had held “numerous” stakeholder meetings and participated in “lengthy” negotiations with Republicans on the bill.



Harkin said the bipartisan bill that the committee passed “takes several important steps forward” but added that he is “sure there is more that can be done.” Specifically, Harkin noted that the bill provides a “laser-like” focus on turning around the bottom 5 percent of schools and the nation’s “dropout factories,” which are high schools that graduate less than 60 percent of their students. He said the bill would close the “comparability loophole” and help ensure that Title I schools get their fair share of federal resources while resetting the national goal from students attaining “proficiency” to ensuring that students graduate from high school prepared for college and a career.

“I know for certain [that] current law is not bringing about the significant improvements in student achievement that our country needs and our children deserve,” Harkin said. “We must reauthorize to get out from under the stifling and ineffective No Child Left Behind Act.”

Senator Mike Enzi, top Republican on the HELP Committee, also devoted a portion of his [opening remarks](#) to highlight the preparation that went into the bill. He said the committee had heard testimony from over seventy witnesses and received input from people across the country who submitted additional views and solutions through the committee’s website.

Enzi called the committee’s markup of the bill last month a “major step forward” in the process to rewrite NCLB but said he expected “many more changes” to the bill. While recognizing that NCLB has its faults, Enzi also highlighted several positive aspects of the current law, including its role in providing greater transparency of student outcomes and shining a light on the performance of individual students as well as the schools they attend.



However, Enzi said that NCLB also “placed strict one-size-fits-all rules” on how states and school districts address deficiencies within schools. He praised the bill the committee passed last month for removing “most of those federal mandates” and asking states to “intervene only in their bottom 5 percent of schools and those schools with the largest achievement gaps.”

The “5 percent provision” to which Enzi refers has drawn significant criticism from business organizations as well as those representing students with disabilities, low-income students, and students of color. In response, Enzi said that having the goal of students graduating college and career ready requires “intensive, step-by-step, grade-by-grade planning, not some marker as to whether the student’s prepared on the day they graduate.” To meet this goal, Enzi said states will need to design “rubrics” that get their students on this path and do not need “unnecessary federal micromanagement” that says how and when students should reach each progressive milestone.

In his opening remarks, Enzi acknowledged that Harkin would have supported “far greater federally designed accountability.” Indeed, Harkin has said that he wanted to keep achievement targets in the bill but dropped them in an effort to keep the bill bipartisan and draw support from Senate Republicans.

Another person who prefers keeping the accountability targets in place is **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. In an [interview with *Education Week*](#), Duncan said he was “encouraged” about the process to rewrite NCLB, but said it “can’t just be about the process, it has to be about the product,” adding, “you don’t want to have a weak bill or a bad bill at the end of the day.” Duncan said that the bill might take a “step back on raising standards and accountability. We’ve seen so much progress, we’ve got to keep getting better, not going backwards.”

During a November 10 speech on the Senate floor, Harkin seemed to indicate that the Senate would not move further on the committee-passed bill until the House of Representatives passes its version of a bill. Thus far, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce has passed three pieces of legislation to rewrite different portions of NCLB, but has yet to address some of the most significant issues within education policy, including accountability and teacher effectiveness.

“Without a bipartisan bill coming out of the House, I believe it would be difficult to find a path forward that will draw the support we need from both sides of the aisle to be able to send a final bill to the President that advances education for America’s students,” [Harkin said](#). “Here in the Senate we have demonstrated that it is possible to reach bipartisan consensus despite the thorny issues in education. We all need to work together in a bipartisan way to replace the No Child Left Behind Act with a new and better law.

Video of the November 8 hearing is available at <http://1.usa.gov/syAofX>.

Will Congress Finish Its Work on a Rewrite of NCLB?

In the short video to the right, **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, examines whether Congress will be able to finish its work on a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.



Wise notes that the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee passed the bill, but it still must go to the Senate floor and be conferenced with legislation from the House of Representatives before it can go to the president for his signature. He also notes that some observers believe that the president’s plan to grant states some flexibility from certain NCLB requirements may speed up congressional action.

“That’s the real issue for this Congress,” Wise says. “Does it want to delay further acting on ESEA, but in so doing permit states to head off on their own and the executive branch to be largely determining what education reform and education policy look like?”

The odds that Congress finishes its work might be long, but as Wise points out, so were the odds that the East Coast would have its first major snowstorm before Halloween.



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE: Alabama Reaffirms Support for Common Standards as Montana Becomes Forty-Sixth State to Adopt

A move to rescind Alabama’s support for the common core state standards in English language arts and mathematics failed on November 10 when the State Board of Education passed a resolution by a 6–3 vote reaffirming its commitment to the standards.

As reported by the [Montgomery Advertiser](#), **Ella Bell, a member of the Alabama State Board of Education** said the common standards are an opportunity for Alabama students to stand toe-to-toe with students from across the country. “I am tired of Alabama being at the bottom of everything,” she said. “I cannot vote to rescind the work we have done.”

Earlier this month, Montana became the latest state to adopt the common core state standards when the state Board of Public Education adopted the common core state standards for English language arts and math on November 4.

Featured in the article is Summer Forbes, who dropped out of high school at age seventeen. Now nineteen, Forbes spends her days “hanging out with friends, completing the requirements for her diploma through an online program, and checking Craigslist for job ads.” Recently, she has gone through several low-wage positions, including seasonal positions at retail stores, fast-food outlets and social-service organizations. “I’m tired of waking up and worrying, worrying, worrying about where my next job is going to be,” Forbes says in the article.

“It was hard enough for people without a high school diploma before the downturn,” **Jonathan Bowles, director of the Center for an Urban Future in New York City** says in the article. “Those folks are at the back of the line now.”

Younger college graduates also face a tough hiring environment. According to the [second Wall Street Journal article in the “Generation Jobless” series](#), the unemployment rate for college graduates aged twenty-four and younger is 7.7 percent, which is much better than their less educated peers but still lower than older individuals with their same level of education.

The [third article in the “Generation Jobless” series](#) spotlights young men aged twenty-five to thirty-four. According to the article, the unemployment rate for males between twenty-five and thirty-four with a high school diploma is 14.4 percent, which is up from 6.1 percent before the economic downturn hit four years ago and much higher than today’s 9 percent national unemployment rate.

Without jobs, these young men often move back home or live in group houses with multiple roommates. According to recent figures from the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), the proportion of young men aged twenty-five to thirty-four living with their parents rose from 14 percent in 2005 to 20 percent in 2011. The percentage of young women living at home rose from 8 percent to 10 percent during the same time frame.

“The increase in twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds living in their parents’ homes began before the recent recession, and has continued beyond it,” said **Rose Kreider, a family demographer with the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau and author of the report**.

The job market for older individuals with lower levels of education is not much better. According to the [October 2011 jobs figures from the U.S. Department of Labor](#), the national unemployment rate is 9 percent, but it is 13.8 percent for high school dropouts aged twenty-five and older, which is more than three times higher than the unemployment rate for college graduates (4.4 percent).

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor, and Kate Bradley, copyeditor.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.