



NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly in-depth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
Published by the NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS PANEL

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NAEP ANALYSIS REVEALS DETAILS ON STATES BEYOND SIMPLE SCORES

Since state-by-state data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) became available in 1990, state policymakers have used average scores as a check on their students' progress in a general way. Media attention gives the reporting a sort of "horse-race" aura, drawing comparisons among the 32-44 states that usually have participated.

NAEP data contain much more useful information, according to a new analysis by Paul Barton for the National Education Goals Panel. Formerly associate director of NAEP, he used tables prepared by the Educational Testing Service, which administers NAEP, to ferret out details originally envisioned in 1990 when the National Education Goals were adopted by the nation's governors and former President Bush. Goal 3 – student achievement – sets as the first objective: "The academic performance of all students at the elementary and secondary levels will increase significantly in every quartile, and the distribution of minority students in each quartile will more closely reflect the student population as a whole."

NAEP employs a common developmental scale score and reports results in performance levels — advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. The Goals Panel has historically reported progress on NAEP in terms of the change in the percent of students who have reached the proficient level or higher. This reporting of the data, however, does not sufficiently track changes in student achievement. Barton's analysis, on the other hand, shows that performance by quartile differs significantly from average scores and that little progress has been made in closing the white/minority achievement gap. Moreover, except for a few states, the data do not describe any certain patterns nationwide and probably raise more questions for policymakers than give answers.

Some of the highlights from Barton's analysis of reading trends between 1992 and 1998 (4th grade) and math trends be-

tween 1990 and 1996 (4th and 8th grades):

- States generally are making greater progress in math achievement than in reading. At the 8th grade, average student achievement in math improved significantly in 28 of the 32 states participating and declined in none. Data are available from more states at the 4th grade level, where 15 states raised average NAEP scores significantly, 20 improved the scores of students in the bottom quartile, and 16 states improved scores of students in the top quartile. Four or fewer states lost ground in average scores or in those of students in either the top or bottom quartiles.
- Reading score trends are disturbing on all measures. While 4th grade students were making good progress on math achievement, only 7 (of 36) states registered improved student scores in reading; scores declined in three states. Moreover, only three showed improved performance in the bottom quartile, and 12 improved performance of the top quartile. The scores of students in the bottom quartile in 18 states declined, but none of the states showed declines in the top quartile. In other words, good readers were getting better while weak readers were falling further behind.
- The achievement gap remains a large problem. Only one state reduced the achievement gap between the top and bottom quartiles in 4th grade reading, and only one reduced the gap in reading between white and minority students. In math, a few more reduced the gap between the top and bottom quartiles—eight at the 4th grade and five at the 8th grade. Only two states reduced the gap between white and minority students in 4th grade, and none reduced the gap in 8th grade math.

The importance of these findings is in the questions they stimulate. For example, why are students performing better in math than in reading? Gene Bottoms, director of the High Schools That Work project of the Southern Regional Education Board, attributes greater state-level activity in math and science policymaking for the progress he sees among high school students in his network of 700 high schools. There has not been as much consistency in policymaking in the area of literacy, he says.

States have used several tools to promote higher math and science achievement. The State Systemic Initiative of the National Science Foundation (NSF) provided funding for professional development, curriculum cohesion, and technical assistance in 26 states. NSF also has an urban initiative and a Local Systemic Change initiative, which focuses on professional development. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) introduced its new standards in 1989, and while each state developed its own approach to math standards, the NCTM standards produced some consistency and provided a focus for professional development efforts. NSF funded the development of resources to match the new standards. Also, the U.S. Department of Education supports curriculum framework efforts.

Some experts note that math achievement is much more influenced by school effects than reading, which is more reflective of children's experiences before they begin school and in their non-school activities.

A consensus is developing on infusing greater cognitive development into pre-school programs for disadvantaged children so they acquire the literacy experiences available to other children. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study results from the kindergarten year (1999) show that children from more



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disadvantaged backgrounds close the gap in basic skills knowledge, a gap that was evident when they entered kindergarten. When it comes to gaining more sophisticated reading and math knowledge and skills, however, such as recognizing words by sight or solving simple addition and subtraction problems, the gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged children widens in kindergarten.

While emphasizing that no area important to whole child development should be neglected, a new report from the National Research Council, *Eager to Learn*, notes that a rich research base suggests "more can be learned in the preschool years than was previously understood." Emergent literacy skills can be developed, for example, through story reading, providing materials for scribbling and "writing" in pretend play, participating in classroom conversation, and identifying letters and words.

Well planned, high-quality early childhood programs are much more critical for young children from circumstances that place them at risk, the report says, but many children from low-income households "are served in child care programs of such low quality that learning and development are not enhanced and may even be jeopardized." The Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy of NRC, which produced the report, recommends that the federal government fund high-quality, center-based preschool programs "for all children at high risk of school failure."

States should play a strong role in assuring quality preschool programs generally, the report advises. All states, it says, should develop program standards (e.g., for school-home relationships, class size, specification of pedagogical goals and content, education background of teachers). They also should set research-based content standards and develop a career ladder for early childhood teachers.

Policy discussions are now taking place on increasing the emphasis on cognitive skills in Head Start programs, a strategy recommended by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips in *America's Next Achievement Test: Closing the Black-White Test Score Gap*. This emphasis also is a center of President Bush's Early Reading First Program proposal, which would give grants to pre-schools to implement pre-reading initiatives.

The analysis of the state trends on NAEP reading and math scores revealed several other issues. For example, it would be rational to attribute the decline in reading scores of students in the lowest quartile to the increase in the number of English-language learners in the schools. However, states most heavily impacted by immigrant children—notably, California, Texas, and New York—did not have a decline in 4th grade reading scores during the 1990s.



The declines were scattered in all parts of the country. The states showing no decline in scores have different policies regarding the inclusion of language-minority students in testing programs, so this factor would not fully explain their performance.

The widening of the 4th grade reading achievement gap between top and bottom quartiles in 16 states during a time when research-based strategies for teaching early reading skills were more readily available leads to questions of whether the research is being used and by whom. In 12 states, by contrast, students in the top quartile improved their reading scores; in five of them, the bottom quartile declined at the same time.

New research from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education addresses the lack of capacity of low-performing schools to understand the need to change and to use leverage tools such as research-based practice. Also, according to education researcher Jennifer O'Day, "most current policies and policy talk assume the problem lies in the school" when the actual focus for capacity building might need to be the system.

The size of the gaps—between quartiles and between white and minority students—varies widely across the states. On the basis of the NAEP scale points, the gaps in 4th grade reading by quartiles ranged from 102 points in California to 71 points in Maine and Wisconsin. The 4th grade gap in math between white and minority student scores ranged from 56 in the District of Columbia to 11 in North Dakota.

This variation in state results is dramatized in an analysis of NAEP results by the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C. group that advocates for disadvantaged students. Its analysis shows that achievement gaps of minority and/or poor children would shrink significantly or even disappear if states achieved the same results as what the Trust calls top-performing "frontier states." For example:

- The white-black gap in 8th grade writing would disappear in seven states (Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Utah West Virginia, Arkansas, and Hawaii) if black students in those states wrote as well as black 8th graders in Texas do.
- The white-Hispanic gap in 8th grade math in California would shrink by two-thirds if that state's Hispanic students performed as well in math as Hispanics in Iowa do.

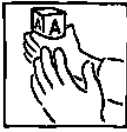
According to Kati Haycock, director of the Trust, "if race and income mattered more than school policy and practice, NAEP scores for minority and poor kids would be pretty much the same from state to state. But they're not.... This demonstrates clearly that what we do—and don't do—in schools matters a lot."

Barton's analysis identifies states that are making improvements in NAEP performance in reading, math, or both. Among those that show significant progress in both subjects are Connecticut, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Their stories point to the importance of long-term, consistent, and focused state policies directed at building the capacity of teachers and schools to improve student achievement.

CONNECTICUT



THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS



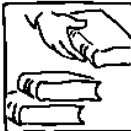
Goal 1: Ready to Learn



Goal 2: School Completion



Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship



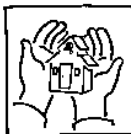
Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development



Goal 5: Mathematics and Science



Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning



Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools



Goal 8: Parental Participation

The performance of Connecticut's students on NAEP reading and math assessments improved in every area analyzed in the Barton report. Average scores, performances of both the bottom quartile and top quartile and percent of students scoring at the proficient level all increased during the 1990s.

As other studies of policymaking in Connecticut explain, the gradual improvement in student achievement actually stems from actions taken in the late 1970s that focused on teacher quality. These were written into state law in a major reform package passed in 1986. Since then, Connecticut has consistently aligned all policies regarding standards, curriculum, low-stakes assessments, and teacher support, especially with regard to low-performing schools.

Recent state court decisions and legislative action reinforced this emphasis, and there is no better example than in the area of reading. An Office of Priority Schools, created in 1997, focuses on the 28 lowest scoring schools in reading, spread among 14 districts. A \$20 million appropriation from the legislature funds proposals from the schools. "We look for anything that supports higher reading achievement," according to Kristina Elias-Staron, language arts consultant in the Connecticut State Department of Education. "These can be for books, reading specialists in the school, enhancement of the library—whatever the school can justify that it needs."

In addition, legislation established the Early Reading Success Institute, which ran an academy in the summer of 2000 to train a core of educators on research-based strategies in early reading. The emphasis of the institute is on diagnostic assessment and developing individualized instruction. Those in the first cohort "have become the literacy experts for their schools," Elias-Staron says, "and continue to meet once a month to share ideas and update their skills." Initially focused on teachers, principals, and librarians of grades K-3 in the priority schools, the special preparation is expected to reach 70 percent of the teachers in these schools (40 percent have participated in the professional development so far). Regional service agencies provide follow-up development. Eventually, all primary grade teachers and principals will have opportunities to take part in the institute's programs.

Another example of informed policymaking in Connecticut is last year's report of The Early Reading Success Panel. Established by the legislature, the panel represented all viewpoints on teaching reading, and included several legislators. The resulting *Blueprint for Reading Achievement* creates a consensus "that the commissioner (Theodore Sergi) insisted as the outcome of the panel," Elias-Staron says. The blueprint is being distributed to educators and parents throughout the state. As a further alignment, it also is to be used by teacher preparation institutions. By 2003, candidates for teacher



certification must demonstrate that they know the principles for teaching reading that are set out in the blueprint.

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MISSISSIPPI

“Systemic and aggressive” policies are pulling Mississippi’s schools off the bottom, according to Benita Potter, director of reading, early childhood education, and language arts in the State Department of Education. While the state’s students and schools have a long way to go, she admits, the progress made so far has received the attention of national experts. Like Connecticut, the initiatives are continuing to build on past efforts and successes and to focus on creating greater capacity at the school level.

The average NAEP scores of 4th grade students in math, and the performance of both the bottom and top quartiles improved during the 1990s. The 4th grade reading scores improved on all of these measures, as well as in the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level.

Mississippi’s challenge is enormous. On the basis of eligibility for free/reduced price lunches, the school-age population in Mississippi is the fourth poorest in the country; about 63 percent of public school students are served free or reduced-price lunches. A high proportion of children is being raised by a single parent or grandparents, and the literacy rate of adults is the lowest in the country.

Potter gives much of the credit for the progress being made to the direct support given by the state department and other resources to schools. The state department, she says, changed its image in the early 1990s to one of a service agency. It provided reading specialists for the schools, trained para-professionals on research-based strategies, and brought pre-school providers into the literacy effort. A collaborative arrangement with Head Start programs, for example, helps their teachers understand the literacy model being used in the schools and align their performance standards to the K-3 curriculum. This contact also boosts opportunities to increase adult literacy across the state.

In addition to consistent promotion of certain dimensions of reading instruction, drawn from the research, the state department funds extended day and year learning opportunities for students. “We keep our pulse on the research,” Potter says, often through personal communication that included a hearing in Mississippi by the National Reading Panel.

The Mississippi Reading Initiative...Every Child a Reader was developed in 1997 by the State Superintendent’s Management Team and the State Board of Education. The legislature adopted and funded the initiative in 1998. Its purpose is to use scientifically based reading research and best practices to ensure that all children read well and independently by the third grade.



RESOURCES

Achievement and Reducing Gaps: Reporting Progress Toward Goals for Academic Achievement, Paul Barton for the National Education Goals Panel, 1225 22nd St. NW, Suite 502, Washington, DC 20037; 202/724-0015; www.negp.gov

Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class 1998-99, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, <http://www.nces.ed.gov/ecls>

Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers, National Research Council, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 2101 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20418; <http://www.nap.edu>

Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement, Connecticut State Department of Education, 165 Capitol Ave., Hartford, CT 06145

Education Watch, the Education Trust, 1725 K St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20006; 202/293-1217; www.edtrust.org

The law requires every school district in Mississippi to establish and implement a program for reading reform. Funds from the legislature were used to pilot the Mississippi Reading Reform Model in six low-performing school districts. Last year (2000), a \$100 million donation established the Barksdale Reading Institute on the campus of the University of Mississippi. It funds implementation of the Mississippi Reading Reform Model, which currently includes four components:

- High quality professional development for teachers, administrators, and support staff
- Early literacy interventions to ensure school readiness
- Extended instructional opportunities for children
- Parent/family literacy programs

The state department deploys 14 reading specialists to the neediest schools on a weekly basis to help them implement this model. In addition, the Barksdale Reading Institute provides six specialists, and the state education department has applied for a Reading Excellence Act grant to reach more schools.

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(reading initiatives are under directory listing)

NORTH CAROLINA

“Reduce the achievement gap” is a consistent message from state officials in North Carolina, including the legislature, governor’s office, and state board of education. On the four indicators in Barton’s analysis of NAEP results—average scores, scores in both the bottom and top quartiles, and percentage of students scoring proficient—North Carolina students improved their performance at 4th and 8th grades in math. In 4th grade reading, the average NAEP scores and those of students in the bottom quartile improved, and the state was the only one of 36 that closed the quartile gap.

The state is putting a lot of effort and resources into improving the performance of the lowest achieving students, according to Carolyn Cobb, chief of the evaluation section of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Also, “the whole accountability program provides incentives for meeting or exceeding expected



What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Goals Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
- Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
- Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, or e-mail, or by Internet.

growth," she explains. Schools with performances low enough to be given sanctions receive focused help from state assistance teams. The teams found poor alignment to state standards, lack of leadership, and other shortcomings that "add up to ignoring common sense," she says. Some of the schools with assistance team help have "bobbed in and out of achievement increases, but most have gotten a good grip on what they need to do and moved forward," Cobb adds.

The State Department established a school improvement division that works with low-performing schools and conducted a study of schools that were able to close the achievement gap even though they enroll high percentages of minority students and those from low-income families. The year 2000 study, "Closing the Achievement Gap: Views from Nine Schools," has been disseminated throughout the state. It found several common themes among the achieving schools, including:

- Collegial leadership that gives teachers autonomy while holding them accountable and makes sure teachers have the resources, including professional development, that they need
- Instructional focus on mastering basic competencies in reading, writing, and math, aided by district-wide pacing guides and teacher-developed thematic units; elective teachers included in the focus; abundant professional development opportunities, especially in writing instruction
- Periodic assessment, every 6-9 weeks, and data disaggregation and analyses that provides data by teacher, by student, and by curriculum objective
- Use of technology resources is focused on teaching core academic skills, especially to students who are struggling the most.

Other common characteristics were one-on-one tutoring, small-group arrangements, and a culture of achievement. None of the schools selected a single initiative as most responsible for success with poor and minority students, but, rather, in most cases success was attributed to the cumulative effects of several factors.

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