



## Same As It Ever Was: High School Seniors' Reading and Math Performance Stagnates

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Since 1970, K-12 education spending in the United States has tripled in inflation-adjusted dollars. However, the [just-released results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), otherwise known as the "Nation's Report Card" and "the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas," shows no score improvements for high school seniors in reading and math since 2009 and little progress over the last decade. These results offer depressing and ongoing evidence of stagnation, confirming findings from the [NAEP long-term trend analysis](#) of high school seniors scores in reading, math, and science, which has been showing flat lines since the early 1970s.

Twelfth graders' average math score remained at 153 when comparing the 2013 results with [those from 2009](#). Just 26 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level in math.

In reading, the national average stayed flat at 288, with 37 percent of students scoring at or above proficient. The national average for reading decreased by four points since the current version of the test's first administration in 1992.

The gap between white and Latino students in reading remains just as large as it was 15 years ago, and the gap between black and white students has widened because black students' average reading scores have fallen. In 2013, 16 percent of black seniors and 23 percent of Hispanic seniors were proficient in reading, while 7 percent of black seniors and 12 percent of Hispanic seniors were proficient in math. The trend is consistent with similar flat results from the ACT and SAT college exams that show stagnant scores and large achievement gaps.

What these ongoing dismal NAEP results for our nation's 17 year olds make clear, is that there is still no relationship between increasing school spending and academic performance. Education productivity has not been our strong suit.

In the United States [per-pupil school costs](#) have risen substantially over the past 40 years. According to the U.S. Department of Education's *Digest of Education Statistics*, in 1970-71, public schools spent \$6,012 per student, when the amounts are adjusted for inflation and stated in modern dollars. That figure now totals \$13,692. Andrew Coulson, education researcher from the Cato institute [does the math](#) and finds that we currently spend more than \$164,000 for one student's K-12 education compared with just under \$57,000 for a complete K-12 education in 1970.

Among the things that this dramatic increase in spending has purchased are [more teachers and administrators per student](#). According to a 2013 report on the [school staffing surge](#) in the United States, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported that between fiscal year 1950 and 2009, the number of K-12 public school students in the United States increased by 96 percent, while the number of school employees grew 386 percent. Of those personnel, teachers' numbers increased 252 percent, while administrators and non-teaching staff increased by 702 percent, more than seven times the increase in students.

Consequently, for public schools, the number of pupils per teacher—that is, the pupil/teacher ratio—declined from 26.9 *pupils per teacher in 1955* to 22 in 1970 to a historic low of [15 pupils per teacher in fall 2012](#). And despite some real education budget cuts during the recession, teaching jobs appear to be making a comeback. In the May 2014 jobs report [there were 12,000 net new hires](#) in local government education, plus another 1,300 in state government education.

All of these education jobs have not made us very internationally efficient or competitive. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, [Education at a Glance 2013](#), which uses slightly different figures than the U.S. government, annual per-student spending by educational institutions in the United States (USD \$15,171) is higher than in any other OECD country.

In [Does Money Buy Strong performance in PISA?](#), the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) also examined the relationship between a nation's education spending and academic performance. OECD looked at cumulative expenditure on education—the total dollar amount spent on educating a student from the age of 6 to the age of 15—and found that, after a threshold of about USD \$35,000 per student, expenditure is unrelated to performance on the international PISA exam. For example, countries that spend more than USD \$100,000 per student from the age of 6 to 15, such as Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States, show similar levels of performance as countries that spend less than half that amount per student, such as Estonia, Hungary, and Poland.

In fact, the OECD study found that "staffing up" is not the path to higher academic performance. The countries that perform well on the PISA attract teachers with higher academic achievement into the teaching profession by offering higher salaries and greater professional status. Quality matters rather than quantity. In addition, these countries do not hold on to the myth of smaller class sizes. The PISA study finds that the size of the class is unrelated to the school system's overall performance. Higher performing countries prioritize investment in high-quality teachers over smaller class sizes.

Finally, these flat scores matter not just because of the boatloads of money we spend on K-12 education, but because of the additional \$185 billion a year we spend in higher education student aid. Scoring proficient on the NAEP is a pretty good predictor of college success. A 2009 study linked NAEP math scores to SAT results, and [found that reaching proficiency was roughly equivalent to scoring a 500 on the math portion of the SAT](#). The College Board indicates that a 500 score correlates with averaging a B- in first-year college courses. Obviously, improving the student achievement and proficiency rates of high school seniors would improve college completion as well.

Rather than a 700 percent increase in school administrators, what we need is to decentralize education and embrace school models where the money always "follows the child" to the education service level. The only way to lower costs and to improve quality is to increase the direct control that families have over education resources.

Years of recent legislative victories for school choice have led to a total of 49 private school choice programs available to children and their families across the United States and Washington, DC. These programs include 22 voucher programs, 16 tax-credit scholarship programs, two education savings account program, and eight individual tax credit/deduction programs. More than 300,000 students used vouchers and tax-credit scholarships to enroll in the school of their choice. In 2013 an additional 847,000 parents and families received tax relief through individual tax credit/deductions for approved educational expenses.

As of the current school year more than [2.5 million students were enrolled in public charter schools](#), making up more than 5 percent of total public school enrollment nationwide. This school year more than 561 new charter schools opened and 206 weak charter schools closed. It is projected that we will have 7,000 charters with 5 million kids by the end of this decade.

In addition, "course choice" and Education Savings Accounts allow money to follow kids to the appropriate course level and to multiple education providers and services—managed by the discretion of the parents. In fact, the Florida legislature [just passed](#) the nation's second education savings account program, the Florida Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts, to which students with disabilities can apply. The education dollars can be spent on education expenses such as private school tuition, therapies, digital learning, curriculum, and prepaid college savings.

Private school students have [performed higher on NAEP exams](#) and increasing evidence shows that both [charter schools](#) and [private choice programs](#) are improving student performance—especially for the most disadvantaged students.

We've seen little change in school performance for our public high school seniors, despite soaring education costs in traditional public schools. But school choice and competition show promise to improve outcomes for students by allowing families to find the schools and education services that best match their needs. Healthy competition can keep schools focused on improving the quality of their services to students.