



After Common Core: Achievement Gap Widens in U.S. as Lowest Performing Students Drop Further in Reading

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December 8, 2017

The scores of United States fourth graders dropped on an international measure of reading skills – with those of the lowest-performing students declining the most – following years of the implementation of Common Core.

According to results released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) this week, in 2016, the average score in the U.S. on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) dropped to 549 out of 1,000 from the average score of 556 in 2011. The results translate into the nation's decline from fifth in international ranking in 2011 to 13th in 2016 out of 58 international education systems.

“The good news from the latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study is that basic literacy is at an all-time high worldwide and a majority of countries have seen rising reading achievement in the last decade,” writes Sarah Sparks at *Education Week*. “The bad news is that students in the United States are bucking the trend.”

“We seem to be declining as other education systems record larger gains on the assessment,” said Peggy G. Carr, acting commissioner for the federal NCES, according to the *Washington Post*. “This is a trend we’ve seen on other international assessments in which the U.S. participates.”

“[T]he PIRLS shows flattened achievement over time for the top-performing 20 percent of students taking the test, and declining scores for the lowest 20 percent of students, bringing the average score down,” writes Sparks. “While students at schools with poverty rates above 50 percent performed on average at least 20 scale points lower than wealthier schools, the schools with 10 percent to 25 percent poverty had higher average reading scores than the wealthiest schools.”

“Other education systems seem to be doing a better job of moving students through more levels of achievement to higher levels of achievement,” Carr said.

The results come five to seven years after most states adopted the Common Core standards – a progressive public-private partnership reform, the primary intent of which was to lower the achievement gap between upper and middle class students and those from the lower socio-economic levels.

Education Dive reports:

In the years since most states have adopted the Common Core standards, reading achievement has declined among America’s 4th-graders, both in terms of the average score as well as in comparison to their peers in other countries, according to the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) announced today.

In response to the news about U.S. PIRLS scores, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos – a supporter of school choice and charter schools – did not mention Common Core, but tweeted, “Our students can’t move ahead – in school or in life – if they’re falling behind in reading. We must do better for students, parents & educators. We must #RethinkSchool.”

Students in Singapore topped the rankings on the PIRLS, with Russia, Ireland, Finland, Hong Kong, Poland, Norway, and Latvia – one of the poorest nations in Europe – coming in ahead of the United States with statistical differences.

According to the *Post*:

The report adds to a worrisome body of evidence that academic achievement is stagnant or slipping among U.S. schoolchildren. Fourth-graders and eighth-graders continued to lag behind their counterparts in Asian countries in math and science, according to another international exam administered in 2015. That same year, high school seniors showed unchanged results in reading and slipping scores in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, an exam given every two years. Reading scores on that test for fourth-graders remained unchanged and dropped for eighth-graders.

As Breitbart News reported in April of 2016, only about 37 percent of U.S. 12th graders are prepared for math and reading at the college level, according to the 2015 NAEP – also known as the Nation’s Report Card.

In addition, results of the 2015 Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) found American students showing, at best, mediocre performance in math, science, and reading.

Despite the clear drop in performance in U.S. students on a variety of measures, schools in the country nevertheless appear fixated on “social and emotional learning” (SEL).

The *Post* notes that Harvard University education professor Martin West partly attributes the continued widening achievement gap in the United States to the Great Recession, which, he

reportedly said, led to great poverty in the U.S. and forced states to drastically cut education budgets.

However, Ze'ev Wurman, a former George W. Bush U.S. Education Department senior policy adviser, tells Breitbart News the tumble in U.S. scores on PIRLS is “not surprising”:

We have had warning signs for it since Common Core was adopted and harshly criticized by leading literacy researchers. Peggy Carr, the acting NCES Commissioner, correctly said that we have seen this trend on other international assessments. Yet even when the recent drop in reading on our own NAEP is mentioned, the fact that the 2015 NAEP drop in 8th grade was the largest ever is rarely brought up. The 2017 NAEP results are delayed to early spring 2018 due to technical issues, yet they don't promise to get any better.

Wurman adds that while U.S. educational achievement has a history of not improving at a fast enough pace, further damage has been done by implementation of the Common Core standards.

“What we see since the Common Core took over is that our educational achievement is actually deteriorating rather than just being unable to keep up,” he explains. “Yet all Martin West of Harvard could think of as the cause was the recession and poverty, but nothing about the elephant in the room — the massive deterioration of educational standards and expectations under Common Core.”

The Common Core was a federally promoted education initiative introduced in the Obama administration's 2009 stimulus bill through a competitive grant program called Race to the Top (RttT). The program was developed by three private organizations in Washington D.C.: the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve Inc., a nonprofit education organization that says it is committed to college and career readiness. All three organizations were privately funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and none of these groups are accountable to parents, teachers, students, or taxpayers.

Though DeVos – who has supported organizations and individuals who are champions of the Common Core – has said, “There really isn't any Common Core anymore” in the nation's schools, *Education Week* reports, “at least 37 states” are still using the Common Core standards or its rebrands as of the end of 2016.

Education Dive notes Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago – one of the authors of the Core – says the standards are still in effect in 42 states. He attributes the continued decline in U.S. students' performance to the controversy surrounding the Core and the subsequent difficulties in implementing them.

“The CCSS standards are definitely rigorous and they were widely adopted,” he said. “And yet, I'd be hard pressed to say that I believed that schools have focused like a laser beam on accomplishing these standards.”

Asked by Breitbart News about the possible relationship between Common Core and the continued decline in U.S. students' performance on PIRLS, Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at Cato Institute, says he is cautious about making any definitive

statements based on this one test – which does not provide a “longitudinal breakdown of informational reading scores.”

“That said, it does not bode well for the Core that we saw overall reading scores fall between 2011 and 2016—basically, the Core era—and that on acquiring and using information—the major emphasis of the Core—we were beaten by 15 systems, more than outpaced us on overall reading,” he tells Breitbart News.

Jane Robbins, senior fellow at the Washington, DC-based American Principles Project, observes the tendency by some experts to avoid naming Common Core as a major culprit in the continued decline in American education performance.

“It’s fascinating how many commentators ignore the elephant in the room,” she tells Breitbart News. “DeVos suggests school structure is the problem, others blame recession and poverty. No one admits the glaringly obvious fact that the downward spiral of academic performance coincides with the implementation of Common Core.”

“How much more evidence do we need that Common Core was a terrible idea from the beginning and should be scrapped?” Robbins adds.

Wurman agrees, referring to the narrative fed to states by Common Core supporters nearly a decade ago.

“One wonders for how long will the states – and Gates-funded educational researchers – keep the charade that Common Core standards are ‘rigorous’ and ‘demanding’ in view of the deteriorating reality hitting their faces,” he says. “At some point even all the Bill Gates billions thrown at propping up this mediocre and ill-conceived educational disaster should not justify harming the future of millions of children.”