

# National Journal

## Latest Education Report Card Reflects Entrenched Opportunity Gaps

**Nation still lags in closing the education gap that affects students of color.**

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The nation's report card came out today, and we failed.

Students' math skills have dropped for the first time in more than 20 years, and reading scores remain stagnant, according to data released by the Education Department on Wednesday.

Officially known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the exam is given to fourth- and eighth-graders every two years. On 500-point scales, fourth-graders on average scored 240 points in math, while eighth-graders scored 282, one and two points lower than the 2013 figures, respectively. Reading scores came in at 223 for fourth-graders and 265 for eighth-graders, about the same for fourth-graders and two points lower for eighth-graders than the 2013 results.

Those overall numbers are bleak enough, but the particularly damning part of the report is that almost no sub-groups of students—Latino, black, Asian, English language learners, etc.—made gains, and the gaps between white and non-white students have largely remained the same. In other words, as the number of students of color increases, the country's education system is struggling to help these students make gains.

“Today's results serve as yet another wake-up call that we must strengthen our nation's commitment to improve the education of all children, particularly low-income students and students of color who are most likely to be underserved by their schools,” Daria Hall, director of K-12 policy development at The Education Trust, said in a statement. “While there are plausible

reasons for the declines in achievement, any stall in progress is a pause that students, especially those starting out behind, can't afford."

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Education Secretary Arne Duncan acknowledged during a call with reporters that the nation has "so much further to go" in closing the gaps in opportunities that students of color face.

"This work, while it has always been important, has never been more important," he said, referencing the fact that students of color now make up a majority of the nation's student body.

"We have to find ways to accelerate the closing of achievement gaps," he said. "The only way to do that is by closing opportunity gaps."

When asked how much the scores reflect the challenges teachers face in educating an increasingly varied student population, Duncan said "we should embrace these challenges," and added that states and cities should be learning best practices from each other.

"This is not a problem or a deficit," he continued. Instead, he said, it is a "huge opportunity to change the lives of young people" who have too often been ignored.

A new report from the Urban Institute attempts to account for student demographics in NAEP rankings. Texas and Florida, for instance, appear to fare relatively poorly. But when demographics, including markers like English proficiency and poverty, are accounted for, they do well. In other words, when similar students are compared across states, Texas and Florida appear to do a better-than-average job of educating disadvantaged students. (The New York Times' Up-shot has a solid take on the re-search here.)

Duncan said some dips in scores, such as in Baltimore, are "good news" because more students are being included in the assessment, including many more special-needs students. In 2013, Maryland excluded 66 percent of fourth-graders with disabilities from the reading exam, well above the 16 percent rate nationally. Duncan also cautioned against seeing the overall decline as a sign that Common Core standards, which have been adopted by 40 states, are not working.

"Change of this scale is a longterm effort," Duncan said. Yet the department's attempt to play offense did little to stem the flurry of negative responses from critics of Common Core.

"[The] scores should put a damper on some of the declarations of success we've seen in the past from people like U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who in 2013 credited state transitions to the Common Core national curriculum standards for upticks that year," wrote Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

When asked how to stem the persistent gap in scores between white and non-white students, and those from upper and lower-income backgrounds, Duncan called early-childhood education “the ultimate resource equity play.”

Early-childhood education has seen growing attention in recent years, with support from policy-makers on both sides of the aisle and even Wall Street firms such as Goldman Sachs. But this latest report card suggests there is no panacea for addressing low scores and persistent gaps. It will take work from not only education experts, but housing and labor policy experts as well. As the nation’s student body continues to evolve, the country also will be called on to address a wider variety of challenges.