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H.S. Reformers Seize on NAEP Scores to Help Make Case

Advocates want to step up NCLB accountability at secondary level.

By **Mary Ann Zehr**

High school reform advocates are using long-term-trend data from the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress to argue that reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act should step up accountability for high schools.

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"We think that high school reform has not been brought to scale. There hasn't been a dedicated focus on improving high school skills over time," Lyndsay M. Pinkus, the director of strategic initiatives for the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, said last week. She believes provisions pertaining to high schools in the 7-year-old federal law need to be expanded and improved.



Trend data from NAEP released late last month show that average scores for 9- and 13-year-olds in both reading and mathematics have risen significantly since the assessment was first given in the early 1970s, while the average scores for 17-year-olds in those subjects have stayed flat.

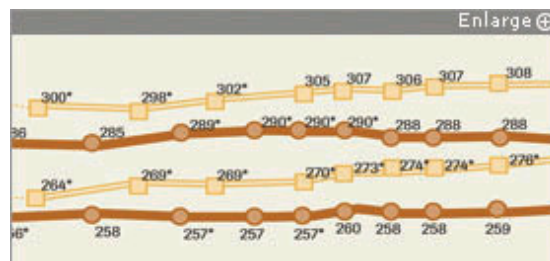
Reading scores for 17-year-olds increased significantly from 2004 to 2008, however, but not enough for the NAEP trend report to consider the scores in reading to have increased significantly overall since the 1970s. From 2004 to 2008, math scores for 17-year-olds didn't show a similar increase; they were stagnant.

Disagreement Over Results

The Obama administration had little to say about the long-term-trend data. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released a statement saying "we are pleased to see some recent progress among all age groups in reading and among younger age groups in math." He didn't mention the stagnant scores for 17-year-olds.

In high schools, the NAEP data "tell a troubling story, especially in light of our need to compete in a global knowledge economy," former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings wrote in a May 4 [commentary](#) in *The Washington Post*. Her opinion piece, however, emphasized the good news that NAEP scores had risen significantly over the past nine years for 9- and 13-year-olds, and she attributed the rise to implementation of the NCLB law, which she championed as a member of President George W. Bush's administration.

NAEP Long-Term Trend



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics

Other education experts, such as Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham

Institute, in Washington, contested that explanation. He wrote in the institute's blog, [Flypaper](#), that the "lion's share" of gains for 9- and 13-year-olds in math and reading on NAEP from 1999 to 2008 occurred from 1999 to 2004, not from 2004 to 2008, so that "one could even claim that NCLB slowed the rate of gain."

Andrew J. Coulson, the director of the Cato Institute Center for Educational Freedom, also in Washington, wrote in a column on the center's Web site that the stagnant scores for 17-year-olds on NAEP "reveal a productivity collapse unparalleled in any other sector of the economy."

But Henry "Hank" Kepner, the president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, based in Reston, Va., played down the seriousness of the flat NAEP scores for the older students, saying he preferred to use the word "stable" to describe them.

The scores show "we haven't gone backwards," he said, and he asked whether 17-year-olds are taking NAEP seriously and trying to do their best on it.

"We're able to get the younger kids, 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds, psyched up to do things. High school seniors are pretty blasé," he said. "It has no relevance to them, and they are being bombarded with tests."

Mr. Kepner also questioned whether the NAEP framework matches the kind of math students are learning in school, contending that the assessment emphasizes math that leads to precalculus rather than to applied math, such as understanding statistics, that is increasingly popular in schools.

NAEP's long-term-trend assessments chart educational achievement of students since the tests were launched in the early 1970s. Unlike the content on the regular NAEP, which changes with shifts in curriculum and instruction in U.S. schools, the content of the long-term-trend assessments stays the same so that student performance can be tracked over decades.

The Alliance for Excellent Education's Ms. Pinkus said indicators for measuring high school performance need to be improved in the reauthorization of the NCLB law. Her organization, she said, is pushing for graduation rates that are commonly measured across states.

Provisions for gauging proficiency among high school students must be strengthened in the reauthorization of the law, Ms. Pinkus added. Now, she said, proficiency is usually measured by one state test that is administered in the 10th grade but is based on 8th grade standards. Her group would like to see the reauthorized law require an additional test at the high school level.

"We need better tests, better graduation rates, better accountability systems, and more-sophisticated data-driven interventions to help students meet expectations," Ms. Pinkus said.

Joseph Harris, the director of the National High School Center, based at the American Institutes for Research, in Washington, surmised that a lack of adolescent-literacy instruction may be responsible for the flat scores of 17-year-olds in reading over more than three decades.

"One of the things that's been stable all these years is there is no formal focus on literacy instruction," he said.

Mr. Harris said he'd like to see the definition of a "highly qualified" teacher in the law include requirements for teachers to know pedagogy as well as be certified in the content areas they teach.

Achievement Gaps Persist

In both reading and math on the long-term-trend NAEP, average scores climbed a significant amount

for the younger students. For 9-year-olds, they increased 4 points, to 220, in reading and 4 points, to 243, in math. For 13-year-olds, scores increased 3 points, to 260, in reading and 3 points, to 281, in math.

The data show that most gender gaps in both reading and math have stayed about the same since the early 1970s. Across all three age groups, girls outperformed boys in reading in 2008. In two of the three age groups assessed—13- and 17-year-olds—boys scored higher than girls in math that same year. In math, 9-year-old students of both sexes scored about the same.

Racial and ethnic achievement gaps show a different pattern, however. Most such gaps have narrowed in both reading and math since the early or mid-1970s. But they did not change significantly in either subject from 2004 to 2008.