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Test scores stagnate for high schoolers

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Younger students fare better

Reading and math scores for high school students have stagnated since the early 1970s, according to national test results released Tuesday by the Department of Education.

But scores among 9- and 13-year-olds increased slightly over the same time period on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as the Nation's Report Card.

Since the last release in 2004, achievement gaps between white students and their black and Hispanic counterparts have remained largely unchanged. Among 17-year-olds, gaps in reading scores have widened.

“For 17 year olds, the final products of our system, we don't seem to be able to make any improvements,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “The lesson is that we have an education system largely impervious to change. A lot of rhetoric, but little ever happens.”

Education analysts cited some good news in the increased number of students taking higher-level math courses, a heavy focus in local districts like Montgomery and Fairfax counties.

In 1986, 16 percent of 13-year-olds were enrolled in an algebra course. By 2008, that had nearly doubled to 30 percent. Those students subsequently scored higher on the test, the report said.

Also, since 2004, students whose parents did not earn a high school diploma made larger gains in math than students whose parents had at least a high school degree. Even so, they remained the lowest achievers.

“The gains are modest,” said David Driscoll, former Massachusetts commissioner of education. “But one would hope those current 9- and 13-year-olds, when they become 17-year-olds will bring their higher scores with them.”

Rep. George Miller, D-California, chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, called the report “further proof that we must do better.”


“While it’s good news that younger students are making meaningful gains in reading and math, it’s deeply troubling that many high school students are not,” Miller said.

“This is another in a long line of test results that show a little improvement, but nothing to write home about,” said McCluskey, a staunch advocate for charter schools and private school vouchers. “It’s nothing that seems to justify how much additional money we’ve spent on education, year after year, for decades.”

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