



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **New Study Finds Little Evidence That Federal Emphasis on “Proficient” Performance Has Shortchanged Advanced or Low-Achieving Students**

#### ***Many States Show Gains Since 2002 at All Achievement Levels***

WASHINGTON, D.C.—June 17, 2009—Student performance on state reading and math tests has generally risen at three achievement levels, according to a 50-state study by the Center on Education Policy (CEP). The study found more states with gains than declines in the percentages of students reaching or exceeding the basic, proficient, and advanced levels of achievement, and relatively few instances of sizeable declines in the percentage scoring below the basic level.

Achievement also improved in most states at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The CEP study analyzed test score trends, where available, from 2002, the year the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) took effect, through 2008. (Some states did not have trends going back to 2002 because they had adopted new tests or made other major changes in their testing systems.) The study expands on CEP’s previous two reports on achievement by examining, for the first time, test results at the “advanced” level and at the “basic” level-and-above—as well as at the “proficient” level and above, which is the benchmark that matters most for federal accountability under NCLB.

#### **ASSESSING PERFORMANCE AT LEVELS ABOVE AND BELOW PROFICIENT**

CEP found that, even though NCLB creates incentives for schools to focus on ensuring students reach the proficient level, states posted gains at the advanced and basic-and-above levels as well. At the basic-and-above level, 71 percent of the trend lines analyzed across various subjects and grades showed gains. At the advanced level, 71 percent of the trend lines analyzed showed improvement.

“If accountability policies were indeed shortchanging high- and low-achieving students, we would expect to see stagnation or decline at the basic and advanced levels,” said Jack Jennings, CEP’s president and CEO. “Instead, the percentages of students scoring at the basic-and-above and advanced levels have increased much more often than they have decreased, especially in the lower grades.”

Gains were somewhat more prevalent at the proficient-and-above level than at the other two achievement levels. Of the trend lines analyzed at the proficient-and-above level, 83 percent displayed gains, while 15 percent showed declines. The size of the gains was also larger, on average, at the proficient-and-above level. However, this may be partly due to a test-related statistical issue: When average test scores go up, the percentage of students at the proficient level tends to grow faster than at the basic and advanced levels because more students' scores tend to be clustered near the proficient level.

At the advanced level, the size of the gains in elementary and middle school math were close or equal to those at the proficient level and there were more upward trends than downward. These findings generally point to a significant movement of students from proficient to advanced. At the basic level, too, there were more gains than declines. Although some states posted declines at the basic level, most were slight.

"There are several possible explanations for the upward trends. The most hopeful explanation is that students are learning more and consequently are performing better on state tests," Jennings said. "There is probably also a cumulative effect of test-focused instruction at work."

More gains have been made in math than in reading, according to the report. The size of the percentage gains across all states was greater in math than in reading, data which is confirmed by the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

### **HIGH SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT CONTINUES TO LAG**

The report notes that achievement at the high school level has improved but still lags behind elementary and middle school achievement. The average annual percentage point gains for high school students tended to be lower than at the elementary or middle school levels. There may be several reasons for the divergence in performance between students at the lower and higher grades, among them that it is more difficult to engage and motive high school students or that high schools receive fewer federal resources.

Although CEP collected test data from all 50 states, achievement trends were included in the report only for states with at least three years of comparable test data for a particular subject, grade, and achievement level. A change in test results was considered to be a "trend" only if it was based on at least three years of data in order to account for yearly fluctuations in test scores that are unrelated to students' learning.

The report, titled *State Test Score Trends Through 2007-08, Part I: Is the Emphasis on "Proficiency" Shortchanging Higher- and Lower-Achieving Students?*, is available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org). Also available on the Web site are achievement data profiles for each of the 50 states, as well as other CEP publications.

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*Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.*