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State Test Scores in Reading and Mathematics Continue To Increase, Achievement Gaps Narrow

Positive Trends in State Test Scores Seen Since 2002

WASHINGTON, D.C. – June 24, 2008 – Student scores on state tests of reading and mathematics have risen since 2002, and achievement gaps between various groups of students have narrowed more often than they have widened, according to the most comprehensive and rigorous recent analysis of state test scores. These improvements have occurred during a period when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), state education reforms, and local school improvement efforts have focused on raising test scores and narrowing achievement gaps.

The report, *Has Student Achievement Increased Since 2002?: State Test Score Trends Through 2006-07*, was released today by the nonpartisan Center on Education Policy (CEP). It analyzes state test data from all 50 states as well as trends through 2007 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only federally administered assessment of reading and math achievement. While expanding on a similar report from last year, this study continues the focus on two main questions: whether reading and math achievement has increased since 2002 and whether achievement gaps between subgroups of students have narrowed. The number of states included varies depending on the type of trend being reported. CEP excluded state data from years that should not be compared because a state introduced a new test, changed the passing score on its test, or made other major test changes. CEP also looked at two indicators of achievement on state tests – the percentage of students scoring at or above the “proficient” level and a statistic called “effect size,” which avoids some limitations of percentages proficient.

The report’s analysis found that, among the states with sufficient data, 21 states made moderate-to-large gains in math in both percentages proficient and effect sizes at the elementary level, while 22 states showed gains of this size on both indicators in middle school and 12 states posted such gains for high school. In reading, 17 states had moderate-to-large gains in percentages proficient and effect sizes at the elementary level, 14 states made such gains for middle school, and eight states showed gains for high school. Additional numbers of states made slight gains on one or both indicators or showed improvement on one indicator but lacked data on the other.

In general, the overall trends on state tests and NAEP moved in the same direction, though gains on NAEP tended to be smaller (NAEP tests are not aligned with any specific state’s academic standards). The most agreement was in grade 4 math. Of the 33 states with sufficient state test and NAEP data, 31 showed gains on both assessments.

Achievement gaps have also narrowed more often than widened on state tests and NAEP, according to CEP. The exception to the pattern of more gaps narrowing was in grade 8 math, where gaps widened on NAEP more than they narrowed. In general, NAEP tended to show larger gaps between different demographic and economic groups than state tests.

It is impossible, notes the report, to determine the extent to which these trends in test results have occurred because of NCLB. Since 2002, many different but interconnected policies and programs have been undertaken to raise achievement and close achievement gaps – some initiated by states or school districts on their own, and some in response to federal requirements. Other possible explanations for increased test scores and narrowed gaps include, among others, districts and schools devoting more instructional time to reading and math, and students and teachers becoming more familiar with the content and format of state tests.

“Through NCLB and many state and local efforts, the nation has sought to raise test scores and to narrow the achievement gap. These results show that we are making progress, although much more work needs to be done,” said Jack Jennings, president and chief executive officer of CEP. “Last year, we sought to determine whether NCLB had resulted in increased student achievement, but discovered that it is not possible to make a causal connection. We know, though, that NCLB required a vast expansion of student testing and we now have a better understanding of whether students, in general, have achieved more.”

This year’s study builds on CEP’s 2007 appraisal of student achievement described in the report, *Answering the Question that Matters Most: Has Student Achievement Increased Since No Child Left Behind?* The study also draws on knowledge gained from CEP’s broader, six-year study of state and local implementation of NCLB, published in a series of annual reports, *From the Capital to the Classroom*, and over 30 special-topic reports. These reports and other information from CEP are available online at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 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 any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.