

The Good – and the Not-So-Good – News About American Schools

Prepared by the Center on National Education Policy

Phi Delta Kappa
408 North Union Street
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
800/766-1156

Center on National Education Policy
1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite #310
Washington, DC 20036
202/822-8065

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Introduction

Hardly a week goes by, it seems, without a story in the press or on television about the sorry condition of American public education. Criticisms and negative reports about elementary and secondary schooling appear so frequently that they have shaken support for public education, at least according to several recent opinion polls.

But how accurate is the prevailing view of public education? This booklet presents the basic facts about what our schools have done right and what our students have accomplished — the good news — and what they need to do better — the not-so-good news.

In contrast to the generally negative stories that seem to garner the most media attention, the evidence shows that American public schools, while they have a long way to go before we can say that our children are learning everything they need to know to be productive and knowledgeable citizens in tomorrow's world, are better than they are given credit for being — and are getting even better in several respects.

We hope that this booklet will help clear up some confusion and dispel some common misconceptions about education in the United States. If Americans can agree on the basic facts, both good and bad, then we may find it easier to move toward consensus on how to solve our education problems, a more fruitful endeavor than continuing to haggle over who is to blame for the condition of public schools.

The data we have included in this document come from a variety of reliable sources and outline the basic facts in five areas: academic coursework, school completion and dropout rates, years of schooling, commitment of resources, and student achievement. These data are presented for various years and age groups because uniform information is not always collected.

Many assertions, both positive and negative, have been made about American public schools, such as that U.S. students are more creative than students from other nations or that U.S. students lack discipline in classrooms. However, we were unable to find the same type of reliable data to support these statements that we found in the five areas that are featured.

Particular attention should be paid to how we have dealt with data regarding student achievement. Information on student achievement can be gathered only from tests, which have several limitations; therefore, the data presented in that area are discussed differently from the other areas where the data are more straightforward. Nonetheless, we have attempted to paint an accurate picture of how our students are doing.

Our purpose with this publication is to help our country engage in a civil debate on how to improve education, a conversation based on objective facts. Through this debate we must find ways to make schools better, but we also must take pride in what they have done well.

Overview

There is much good news about American education that often is ignored. But there also are serious problems that American educators and concerned citizens need to address. The data show that:

- High school students are taking harder courses;
- The dropout rate has gone down, especially for African-American students, even as students in general are meeting tougher graduation requirements;
- Americans are attaining more years of education than ever before;
- The nation is devoting more resources to education; and
- Educational achievement has gone up over the past decade in some subjects, with particular increases among minority students.

However, schools, parents, and communities need to work together to ensure that:

- Even more students take harder courses before they graduate from high school, and that more instructional time is spent on important academic subjects;
- More poor, African-American, and Hispanic students graduate from high school;
- More students who begin postsecondary education finish, and other students are provided with the opportunity for further training for employment;
- Funding disparities among school districts are reduced, and adequate resources are provided to offset costs that schools incur in meeting requirements for special purposes; and
- Students' proficiency in critical academic subjects is increased.

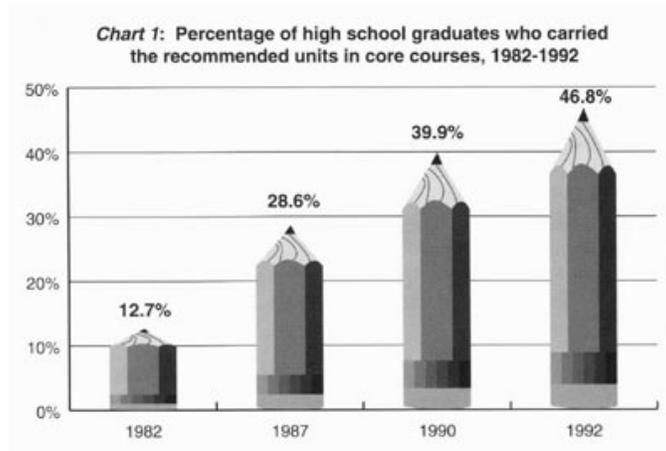
Achieving this last goal of improved student achievement will require changes in national priorities and coordinated efforts from schools, parents, students, communities, and governments.

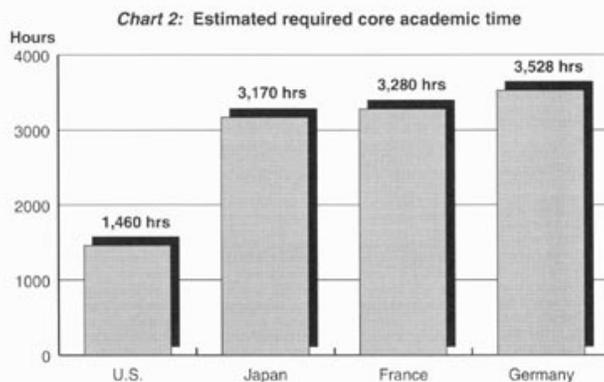
Five Areas

I. ACADEMIC COURSEWORK

The Good News — More Rigorous Coursework. American students are taking more courses and harder courses — especially academic ones — to graduate from high school than students of ten years ago.

- In 1992 nearly half of the graduating seniors, or 47%, had taken a core curriculum consisting of four years of English and three years each of science, math, and social studies. This marks a considerable increase over the 13% of 1982 high school graduates who completed this same core curriculum. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, pp. iii and 79.)
- In 1992 more high school graduates pursued courses in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, chemistry, and physics than their counterparts of 1982 did. For example, 70% of 1992 graduating seniors had enrolled in a course in geometry, compared to 48% in 1982. Between 1982 and 1992, the percentage of seniors completing a calculus course increased from 4% to 10%, while the proportion of students taking chemistry, biology, and physics — all three courses — increased from 10% to 22%. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, pp. iii and 80.)





The Not-So-Good News. Although American schools have made progress in raising course requirements, we still have a long way to go in terms of both the number of students who take a core academic curriculum and the amount of school instructional time devoted to academic courses.

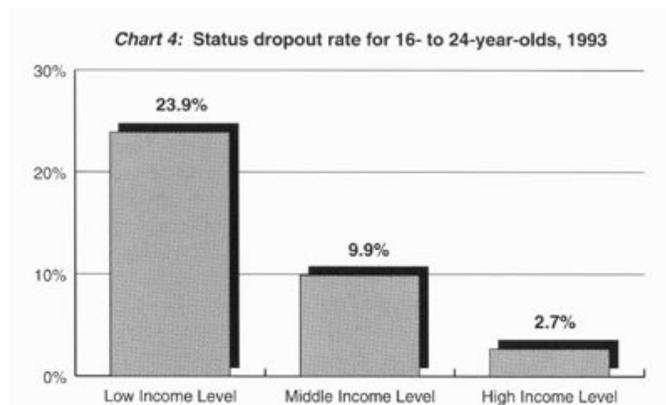
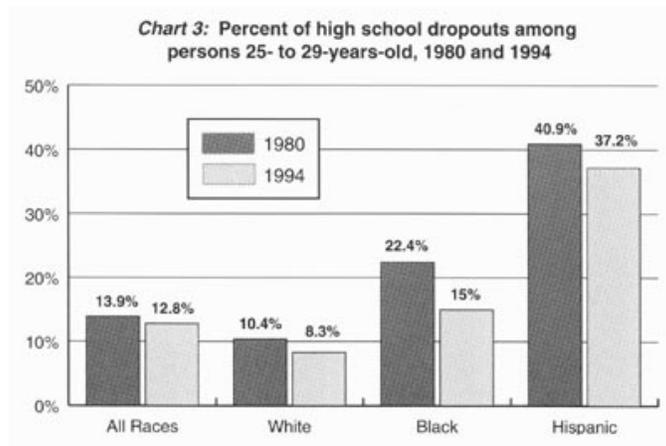
- In 1992, 53% of graduating seniors had not completed four years of English and three years each of science, math, and social studies. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, pp. iii and 80.)
- On average, American students are required to spend about 41% of their school day during their four years of high school studying a core curriculum that includes English language arts, mathematics, science, history, geography, civics, foreign languages, and the arts. The other 59% of the school day is available for electives, which might include nonacademic courses, remediation, enrichment, or other activities. American schools require their students to spend only about half as much time on core academic subjects as do schools in Germany, France, and Japan. (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, pp. 17-19.)

II. SCHOOL COMPLETION AND DROPOUT RATES

The Good News — Fewer Dropouts. Since the early 1980s, the rate of students dropping out of high school has declined, particularly among African-American students. Although there are several different ways to measure that rate (and problems with each measure), the same general trend is evident in all: More children are staying in school. The decline in the dropout rate is particularly noteworthy because some observers predicted that it would increase during the 1980s as a result of states increasing their coursework requirements for graduation.

- In 1980, 13.9% of all 25- to 29-year-olds in the United States did not have a high school diploma or equivalency certificate; by 1994, this percentage had declined to 12.8%. (U.S. Department of Education, *1995 Digest of Education Statistics*, p. 111.)
- The percentage of African-Americans ages 25 to 29 years who did not have a high school

diploma or equivalency certificate declined from 22.4% in 1980 to 15% in 1994. (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 Digest of Education Statistics, p. 111.)



The Not-So-Good News. Students from low-income families of all races are more likely to drop out of school than are students from middle- or high-income families. And because minority children are more likely to be poor than are white children, a large gap persists between the graduation rates of white and African-American students, and an even greater gap between white and Hispanic youth.

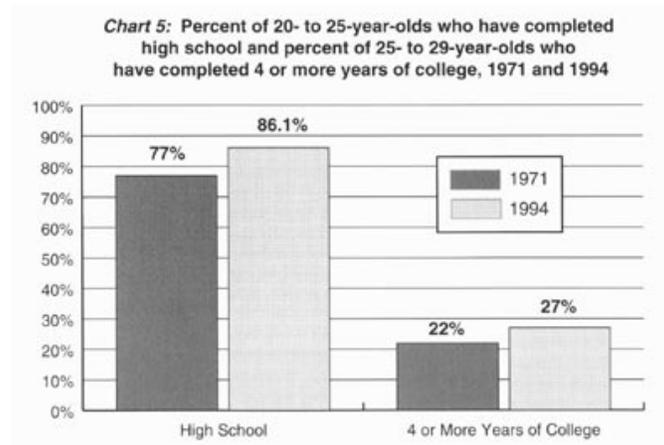
- In 1993, 23.9% of 16- to 24-year-olds from low-income families were dropouts, while 9.9% of individuals from middle-income families and 2.7% of individuals from high-income families in that age group were dropouts. (U.S. Department of Education, Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993, p. 18.)
- In 1994, 92% of the 25- to 29-year-old white population had either a high school diploma

or an equivalency certificate, compared with 85% of African-American young people and 61% of Hispanics in this age group. (It should be noted that schools face some special challenges in trying to address the Hispanic dropout rate. Among the Hispanic youth who drop out are many new immigrants who received an inadequate education in their homeland or were not literate in Spanish. For Hispanic youth who speak English well, the graduation rate is much higher.) (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 Digest of Education Statistics, p. 111.)

III. YEARS OF SCHOOLING

The Good News — More Years of Schooling. Americans are completing more years of schooling than ever before, placing the United States at the top of industrialized nations in measures of educational attainment.

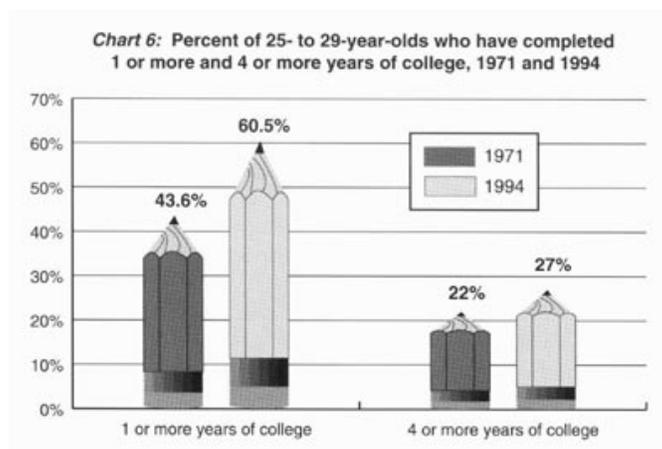
- Between 1971 and 1994 the percentage of the U.S. population, ages 25 to 29, who had completed high school rose 9 percentage points to 86%, and the percentage who had completed 4 or more years of college increased 5 points to 27%. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, p. 72.)



- The educational attainment of the U.S. population is high compared to that of other large industrialized nations. In 1992 the United States did better than Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Canada in the percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds who had completed secondary school and the percentage who had completed college. Some states are doing extremely well on this yardstick: In 1989 in more than half the states, 23% of the 25-to 64-year-old population had obtained a college degree. This rate is higher than for any foreign country. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, p. 74; and U.S. Department of Education, *Education in the States and Nations/1988*, p. 69)

The Not-So-Good News. Many students who start postsecondary education do not finish, and students who do not pursue postsecondary education or who leave college have few avenues to obtain the training needed for employment.

- In 1994 among all 25- to 29-year-olds, 60% have attended some college, but only 27% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Among 25- to 29-year-old white students, 30% have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, while 16% of African Americans and 13% of Hispanics in that age group have done so. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, p. 72.)
- U.S. schools devote most of their resources to preparing students for college, and yet approximately three-fourths of those students will not obtain a baccalaureate degree. For each student who goes on to college, the U.S. invests about \$20,000, which is more than twice the amount (\$9,000) that the U.S. spends on noncollege-bound youth. (U.S. General Accounting Office, *Transition from School-to-Work: Linking Education and Worksite Training*, p. 10-11; and U.S. General Accounting Office, *Training Strategies: Preparing Noncollege Youth for Employment in the U.S. and Foreign Countries*, p. 23.)



IV. COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

The Good News — Increasing Commitment. The United States devotes substantial resources to education and has increased this commitment over the years.

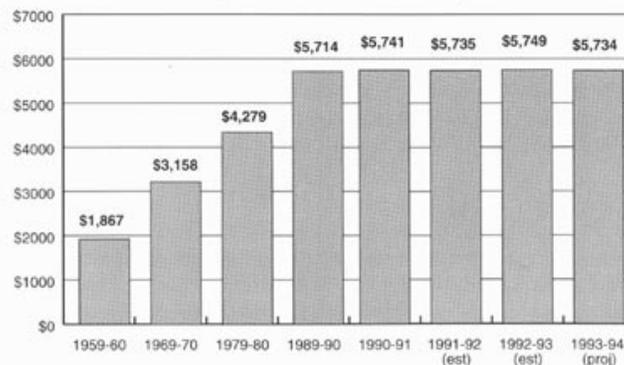
- Between 1960 and 1990 the average per pupil expenditure for K-12 education in the United States, adjusted for inflation, increased by more than 200%. (Odden et al., p. 163.)
- More money for schools can have a considerable positive effect on the quality and outcomes of schooling. For example, smaller class sizes, more experienced teachers, and teachers of high academic ability have significant effects on student achievement and dropout rates. These characteristics are more likely to be found in school districts with

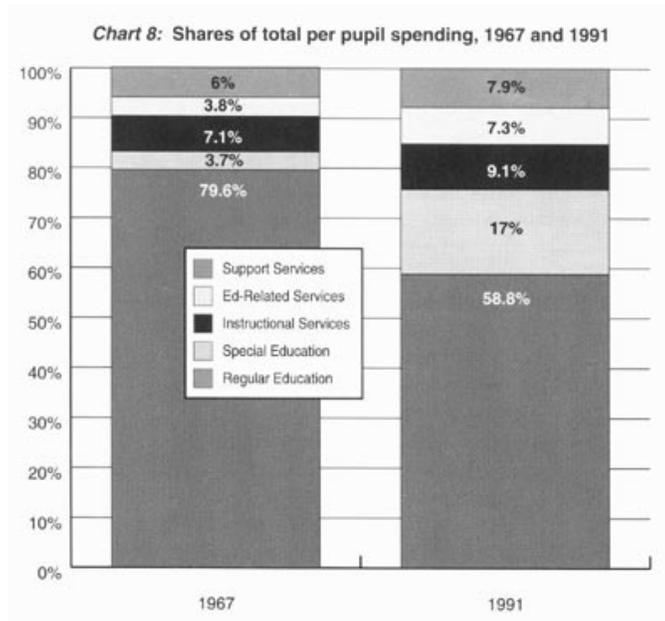
higher levels of funding. (Ferguson, pp. 2-3.)

The Not-So-Good News. Although there has been a general increase in spending, much of the funding growth in K-12 education over the last several years has been channeled toward special purposes, such as providing nonacademic services and educating children with disabilities, rather than toward regular academic instruction. And because a big chunk of school funding comes from local property taxes, spending inequities persist among school districts.

- In 1967 nearly 80% of spending for elementary and secondary education was allocated to regular instructional programs; by 1991 the percentage had dropped to about 59%. Where did the money go? Spending on education for children with disabilities increased from 3.7% of school budgets in 1967 to 17% in 1991, while spending for education-related services, such as counseling, desegregation, health, and psychological services, nearly doubled over that same time period. (Economic Policy Institute, pp. 7-8.)
- In several states, per pupil spending in the most affluent school districts greatly exceeds spending in the poorer districts. Some public school districts in the U.S. spend \$2,500 per pupil for education, while others spend \$15,000. Even when the lowest and highest 5% of districts within a state are excluded from spending comparisons, per pupil discrepancies are still wide: for example, \$4,470 versus \$8,403 in the low-spending and high-spending districts in Pennsylvania in 1991-92; \$6,088 versus \$11,210 in New York. (Odden et al., p. 163; and Riddle and White.)

Chart 7: Education expenditures per pupil, 1959-1994
(in constant 1992-93 dollars)





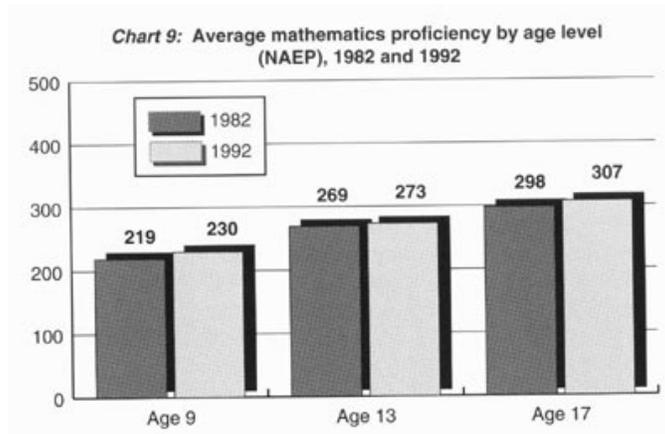
V. STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In the four previous areas, the data are relatively straightforward. The number and type of courses students are taking can be tallied; the number of students who have not completed high school can be estimated; the years of schooling that adults have completed can be quantified; and the dollars spent on education can be totaled. Measuring student achievement is a much more difficult undertaking. Determining how much students are learning involves complex decisions about what to measure and how to measure it.

In the U.S. education system, tests are the primary instruments used to gauge student achievement. American students take many different tests that vary greatly in their purposes, features, limitations, and accuracy. Although tests can provide us with valuable feedback about student learning, they also can be subject to misunderstanding and misuse. In addition, they simply may not report on the most important student abilities because we do not know how to measure them or because it is costly to do so. For these reasons, the discussion of U.S. student achievement that follows includes some basic information about the nature of the tests commonly used to draw broad conclusions about student learning.

Student Achievement on a National Assessment

The United States has no national test of academic performance that all students must take. The closest thing we have is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a test that the U.S. Department of Education has been administering since 1969. The original (and continuing) purpose of NAEP has been to measure the performance of students at ages 9, 13, and 17 in mathematics, science, and reading and to provide results that can be examined over a period of years. Thus NAEP enables us to compare the mathematics, science, and reading performance of students in the 1990s with that of their counterparts of the 1970s.



NAEP has several limitations. First, as noted above, NAEP is not a true national exam. It is administered only to a small but representative sample of students. Second, the items included on a NAEP assessment may or may not reflect material that students have been taught. Decisions about curriculum in the United States are made at the local rather than the national level, and so American children study different material at different times. Third, NAEP is a test with “low stakes,” meaning that there is no reward or penalty attached to student scores. Consequently, students may not take a NAEP test as seriously as they do an exam that affects their grade or their future.

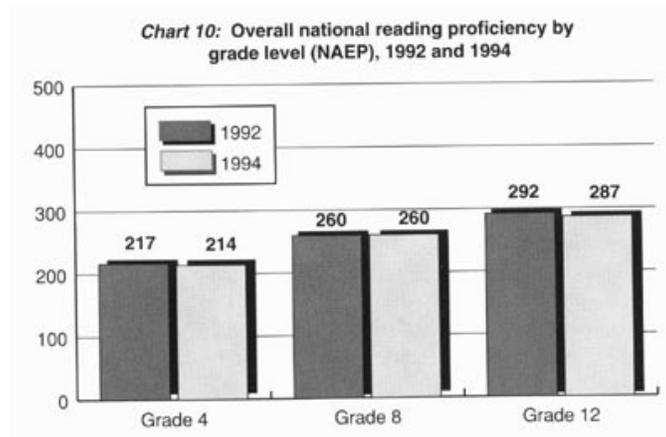
Other features of NAEP also influence the meaning of NAEP scores. Through the years NAEP has been expanded to cover additional academic areas, such as history and geography. But unlike the mathematics, science, and reading assessments, these new NAEP tests do not yield information about changes in achievement over time. Many of the new NAEP assessments also employ innovative testing methods, such as open-ended essay questions, that are not yet common in state and local standardized testing programs. And in the early 1990s NAEP began using standards of student proficiency — judgments about what students ought to know in a given subject — to report student scores. This method of reporting shows the percentages of 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students who have reached basic, proficient, and advanced levels of performance. Unlike the more typical norm-referenced standardized test, this approach does not rank students against the expected performance of their peer group.

The Good News — Rising Achievement in Some Subjects for Some Students. It appears that the school reform efforts of the 1980s have had a positive effect.

- In **mathematics**, student performance on the NAEP improved significantly between 1973 and 1992 at all three ages. In particular, great gains were made during the decade between 1982 and 1992, reversing NAEP achievement declines of the 1970s and early 1980s. By 1992 average math achievement had returned to the peak level of the early 1970s for all age groups. (Mullis et al., pp. 6, 7, and 50; U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education* 1995, p. iv; and U.S. Department of Education, *High School Students Ten*

Years After A Nation at Risk, p. 5.)

- The period between 1982 and 1992 also saw **science** achievement improve across all three age groups. Nine-year-olds in particular made significant gains, reversing the steady declines in their performance during the 1970s. In 1992 the performance of 9-year-olds on the NAEP science assessment was significantly higher than that of 9-year-olds in 1970. (Mullis et al., p. 48.)



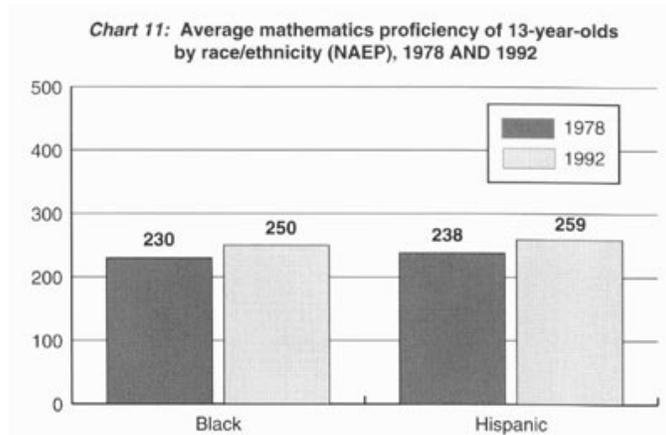
- Between 1971 and 1992 there were significant gains on the NAEP reading assessment among 13- and 17-year-old students. The reading achievement of 9-year-olds peaked in 1980, then fell in subsequent years; by 1992 average scores of 9-year-olds stood about where they were in 1971. (Mullis et al., pp. 132 and 155.)

The Not-So-Good News. Some scores remain low or static.

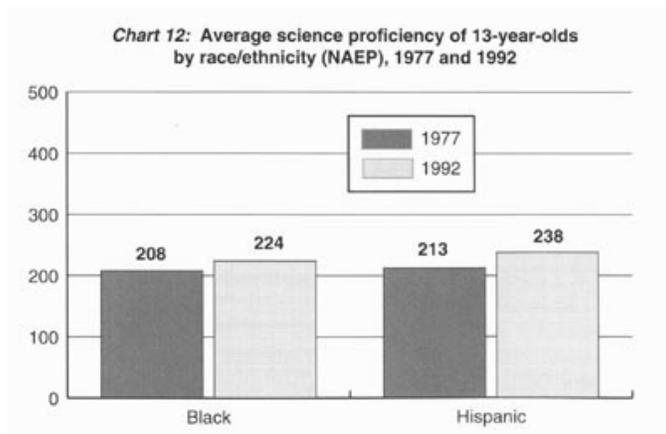
- In mathematics, science, and reading, at all three ages, it generally can be said that average performance is no worse but no better than in the early 1970s. All three subjects saw achievement gains during the 1980s and early 1990s that reversed the declines of the 1970s. In reading, however, this upswing appears to have stalled; preliminary reports from the 1994 reading assessment show declines in the reading performance of 17-year-olds between 1992 and 1994. (Mullis et al., pp. 48, 93, and 150; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1994 Reading: A First Look, Revised Edition, p. 7.)
- The new NAEP geography and history assessments are conducted by grade rather than by age, but they cover roughly comparable students. A sizable proportion of students at all grades tested — for example, more than half of the 12th-graders in history and about 30% of the 12th-graders in geography — did not meet NAEP’s definition of “basic” achievement, which is the level below what NAEP’s policy makers have determined constitutes “proficient” knowledge of a subject. It should be remembered that the NAEP

history and geography assessments do not provide longitudinal data that can be used to compare students of today with students 25 years ago. (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1994 U.S. History: A First Look, p. 19; and National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1994 Geography: A First Look, p. 16)

The Good News — Increased Minority Student Achievement. Some gains have been made by African-American and Hispanic students.

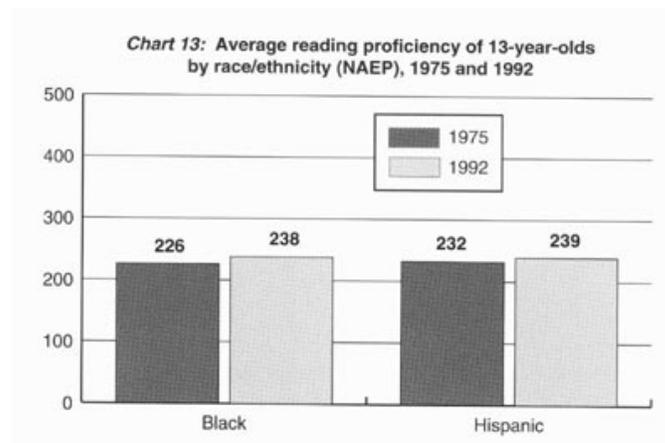


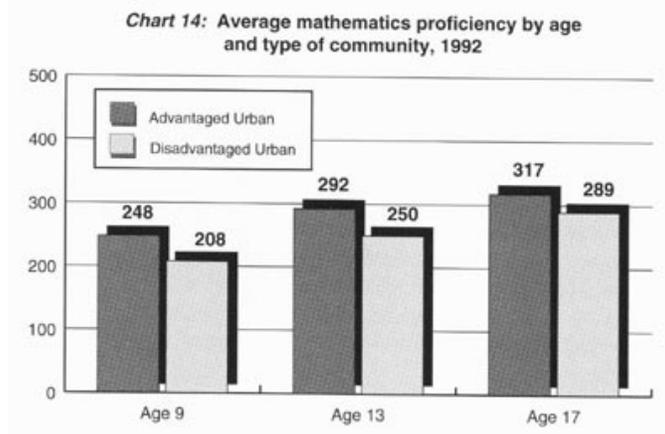
- The performance of African-American students on the NAEP math, science, and reading exams has improved steadily at all three ages since the 1970s, and the performance of Hispanic students has similarly improved. The achievement gaps between white and African-American students and between white and Hispanic students also have lessened over time. (Mullis et al., pp. 35, 80, and 137.)



The Not-So-Good News. Some gaps in performance persist.

- White students continue to outperform African-American and Hispanic students at all three ages and in all three subjects assessed by NAEP. According to NAEP reading data, African-American students, on average, may be entering high school at a reading level as much as two years below the average of their white counterparts. An analysis of the NAEP math assessment shows that the math skills of Hispanic 13-year-olds may be as much as two years behind those of white 13-year-olds. The science assessment indicates a larger gap: The achievement of Hispanic 13-year-olds is about at the same level as white 9-year-olds. The gains made during the last decade in closing achievement gaps appear to be flattening out. (Mullis et al., p. 151; U.S. Department of Education, *The Educational Progress of Black Students*, p. 3; and U.S. Department of Education, *The Educational Progress of Hispanic Students*, p. 5.)
- A wide disparity also exists between the performance of students who attend schools located in “advantaged” communities — those with high proportions of parents in professional and managerial jobs — and children from schools in “disadvantaged” areas — those with high proportions of parents on welfare or who are not regularly employed. This is true in reading, math, and science at all three ages. On the 1992 mathematics assessment, for example, 13-year-olds attending schools in disadvantaged areas scored about the same as 9-year-olds from schools in advantaged areas. (Mullis et al., pp. 42, 86, and 142; National Assessment of Educational Progress, *1992 Mathematics Report Card*, p. 118.)





The SAT and International Comparisons

In this document, we have chosen not to include SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) data or international comparisons of student achievement because of the inherent problems in using these indicators as measures of student academic performance.

SAT. Critics of schools point to any decline in the SAT scores as an indication that public schools are failing, and so it is tempting to use recent gains in SAT scores to defend the public schools. However, the SAT was not designed as an indicator of how well American schools and students are doing. Therefore, using SAT data to support generalizations about the overall U.S. student population is a misapplication of the data. The SAT is not a test of what is taught in any particular school. Rather, it is designed only to be a predictor of college success. It is not a general measure of achievement. The test-takers are not a representative sample of students in the United States. And the proportion of high school seniors sitting for the exam varies widely among the states. Finally, the year-to-year changes of student performance on the SAT mean very little because they are small fluctuations and result from student responses on a very small number of test questions.

International Comparisons. A popular question in recent years is how the achievement of U.S. students compares with the achievement of students from other nations. Several reports have been issued drawing international comparisons, but all international assessments have built-in flaws. These flaws include problems with accurately translating test questions into several languages, variations in the ages when students study specific topics, and differences in how representative the test-takers are of the general student populations in different countries. Even when the wording of test questions can be accurately translated, different meanings may be conveyed because of cultural differences.

General Findings About Student Achievement

The data suggest that U.S. student achievement is a “mixed bag.” From all appearances, the negative achievement trends of the late 1970s and early 1980s have been reversed, and American students are doing about the same as they were in the early 1970s. African-American and Hispanic

students are doing much better, but substantial achievement gaps exist between white students and their African-American and Hispanic counterparts and between students from advantaged and disadvantaged communities.

While the data indicate that no great progress has been made in moving student achievement beyond the levels of the 1970s, it should be recognized that the students of the 1990s are far different from the students of the early 1970s. Education research has shown that children who live in poverty have much lower achievement levels than children in more advantaged communities. In 1970, 15% of all children under the age of 18 lived in poverty; by 1993 that number had increased to 22% — or one in five children. (U.S. Department of Education, 1995 Digest of Education Statistics, p. 28.)

Furthermore, the nation saw one its largest waves of immigration during the 1980s. This influx of immigrants means that many children are coming to school with limited proficiency in English. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of children who had difficulty speaking English increased 27%, from 1.9 million to 2.4 million. (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 1995*, p. xi.)

Many school systems are facing much greater challenges in the 1990s than in previous decades. Therefore, perhaps the fact that student achievement levels today are comparable to those of the early 1970s should be viewed as good news.

Conclusion

The record of American public education over the past several decades shows that U.S. schools are doing a better job overall than their critics and much of the news media imply. Americans have made some real headway in increasing course taking, reducing dropout rates, raising school completion rates, and boosting funding for elementary and secondary schools. But there is much more to be done, especially because achievement has increased only marginally.

However, America's commitment to excellence may be as much in question as the condition of the public schools. For example, the mixed record of American students' scores on achievement tests also may be attributable in part to parents' attitudes toward high achievement. On a recent survey of public attitudes, 62% of the parents surveyed said they would be satisfied with a B average for their child. Only 16% said they wanted their children to get mostly A's. And almost one parent in four (23%) said they would be unconcerned if their child had lots of friends and participated in many social activities but was only a C-average student. (*Public Agenda*, p. 32.)

Previously we also noted that American students do not spend as much time on core subjects as do students in other countries. Taking these points together seems to lead to the conclusion that greater efforts by students and higher expectations on the part of parents and schools all will be necessary if we are to reach excellence in our public schools.

The recent history of education shows that where there is a national will to change — such as in

providing widespread access to higher education and encouraging students to take more rigorous courses — improvements can be made. Thus, if we want to raise student achievement significantly, the nation must place a much higher priority on that goal. Doing so will require a concerted effort not only from schools but also from parents, students, citizens, communities, and governments.

Boosting student achievement will require changes in both our classrooms and our culture. Schools must institute high academic standards and increase the amount of time devoted to academic subjects. Parents must set high academic expectations for their children and become involved with the schools. And the larger community must place a high value on education.

But let us also celebrate the good that our schools have accomplished, even as we devote ourselves to solving our problems. Our children and our nation deserve at least this much.

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