Do You Know…

The *Latest Good News About American Education*?
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## The Latest Good News About American Education

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Summary—The Good News

U.S. public schools have improved in many ways since the movement to reform education by raising standards first took shape 20 years ago. Here are some positive trends in public education:

**SCHOOL PARTICIPATION AND COURSE-TAKING**

Indicator 1: More children are attending full-day kindergarten.
Indicator 2: Americans are becoming more educated.
Indicator 3: High school students are taking a more challenging curriculum.
Indicator 4: More high school students are completing advanced math and science courses.
Indicator 5: More high school students are taking AP courses and exams.
Indicator 6: More students with disabilities are being educated in regular classrooms.

**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Indicator 7: Student achievement has gone up in math.
Indicator 8: Younger students are showing gains in reading achievement.
Indicator 9: In other academic subjects, achievement has improved or stayed the same.
Indicator 10: Some achievement gaps are narrowing.
Indicator 11: SAT scores have gone up, even as many more students are taking the test.
Indicator 12: ACT scores have remained stable, even as the number of test-takers has surged.
Indicator 13: U.S. students outscore other countries in interpreting civic information.

**SCHOOL CLIMATE AND PUBLIC SUPPORT**

Indicator 14: Pupil-teacher ratios are falling.
Indicator 15: Almost all U.S. classrooms have Internet access.
Indicator 16: Students are safer at school.
Indicator 17: Parents would rather reform the current public education system than find an alternative system.
Indicator 18: Public school enrollments are growing faster than private school enrollments.

**TEACHERS**

Indicator 19: Public school teachers are better educated and more experienced than private school teachers.
Indicator 20: Fewer high school teachers are teaching outside their field of preparation.
Indicator 21: More public school teachers are participating in professional development.

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

Indicator 22: More students are going to college.
Indicator 23: More young adults are completing four-year college degrees.
Indicator 24: More women are earning college and graduate degrees.
Summary — The Work Ahead

Not all the news in education is good. More work is needed to raise educational quality for all students. Here are some areas that require more attention:

*To ensure students stay in school and take challenging courses*

The nation must focus on reducing dropout rates, especially among poor and minority youth. Special attention is needed to ensure that all students—including students of both genders, racial and ethnic minority students, low-income children, English language learners, and students with disabilities—receive high-quality instruction and complete a core academic curriculum.

*To improve achievement so that all students are effectively prepared for college or work*

The nation must continue intensive efforts to bring all students up to high standards of academic achievement and to close achievement gaps for racial and ethnic minority students, low-income children, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Greater priority should be placed on reforming high schools—the level of education where achievement tends to lag.

*To create positive, safe school environments for learning*

Educators, parents, policymakers, and other influential adults should address school, social, and economic factors that affect students’ motivation and readiness to learn. Citizens should continue efforts to reduce school violence, bullying, and youth substance abuse, and to foster positive student attitudes about learning. Policymakers should take steps to fix deteriorating or overcrowded school facilities. Other necessary steps include providing school districts with enough funding to meet current demands and reducing funding inequities among school districts.

*To ensure that all students are taught by well-qualified teachers*

States and school districts must make greater efforts to make sure that fully credentialed, effective teachers are assigned to schools with high poverty or high minority enrollments. States and districts should also take steps to attract new teachers and retain current ones, such as raising teacher salaries and improving teacher working conditions, especially in high-poverty schools.

*To ensure that more students finish postsecondary education*

Both higher education institutions and high schools should take steps to help better prepare students to succeed in college courses and complete postsecondary education. Soaring college costs are also keeping some students from completing college, so the nation must continue to seek ways to make college more affordable.
Spreading the Good News About Public Education

Criticism of public education has become so rampant that many Americans are left wondering whether anything is going right with public schools. Negative media reports about education, publicity about schools that don’t meet state standards or federal accountability requirements, and disparaging comments from critics of public education can contribute to the misimpression that public education is in worse shape than ever—and that’s just not the case.

It’s time to take a clear-headed look at the facts about our educational system. There is good news about public education, but it’s not always widely reported. U.S. public schools have improved in major ways since the mid-1980s, when states began taking steps to reform education by setting high standards for student learning. Today’s students are taking harder courses, achieving at higher levels, and earning more degrees, to note just a few improvements. Yet many people aren’t aware of these positive trends.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

To inform citizens and policymakers of the good news about public schools, the Center on Education Policy has published this report highlighting positive trends in education. By plainly stating the facts and graphing the numbers, we hope to dispel common misconceptions about public schools. We also hope to encourage citizens to become more informed participants in debates about the future of public education.

This report updates and expands on a report the Center published jointly in 2000 with the American Youth Policy Forum. Many of the positive trends included in our earlier report have continued, and encouraging new trends have emerged in other areas.

This report covers trends in five main categories:

- School participation and course-taking
- Student achievement
- School climate and public support
- Teachers
- Higher education

By emphasizing the positive, we don’t mean to ignore the problems. Clearly, public schools must improve, and some schools have a long way to go before they are providing a high-quality education to all students. In addition, some groups of students—such as racial or ethnic minority students or low-income students—have not benefited as much as they should from the overall progress in education. Recognizing these problems, we also discuss the not-so-good news about education in a segment called “The Work Ahead” at the end of each section of the report. Here we point out issues that require more work if we are to raise educational quality across the board.
As the good news described in this report demonstrates, the reform efforts of the past two decades have made a difference. By emphasizing the positive trends, we hope to encourage parents, educators, students, political leaders, and other citizens to continue their work to make public schools better for all students.

DATA USED IN THIS REPORT
This report draws on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. Department of Education and other national sources. We tried to look at trends over the past 20 years or so, beginning in 1984 (a time when school reform became a major national issue) and ending with the most recent year for which published data were available. The availability of data varies, however, depending on the issue and the source. For some indicators, the data do not go back as far as the 1980s, while for other indicators, data are not yet available for very recent years. Consequently, the starting and ending years of the trends shown in this report—as well as the years in between—are different for the various indicators.

We also focused on the trends we felt were most meaningful and informative. If an important aspect of education has been left out, that doesn’t necessarily mean the trends are negative. In some areas, trends are generally positive but not definitive enough to celebrate as good news. In other areas, such as science achievement, trends vary by age group, are flat, or do not show a clear pattern.

The main sources of data for this publication are two reports issued annually by the National Center for Education Statistics: Digest of Education Statistics and The Condition of Education. Recent editions of these reports are available on the NCES Web site at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/ and http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/. In addition, most of the data on student achievement cited here are from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federal effort within NCES to track U.S. student achievement in core academic subjects. NAEP reports can be accessed at http://www.nationsreportcard.gov. References for sources other than these NCES documents are included in the main text or in the source line at the end of each indicator.

Some of the material in this report previously appeared in “What’s Good About Public Schools,” an article by Jack Jennings and Madlene Hamilton of the Center on Education Policy. The article was published in the April/May 2004 issue of Our Children, a magazine of the National PTA.
INDICATOR 1

More Children Are Attending Full-Day Kindergarten

In the early 1980s, half-day kindergarten was more common than full-day kindergarten—just under one-third of kindergarteners went to school a full day in 1983. Since then, a shift has occurred. Now more than 60% of kindergarteners attend for a full day. This is good news because recent research from NCES suggests that children in full-day kindergarten learn more early reading and math skills during the year than those in half-day kindergarten (J. Walston & J. West, Full-day and Half-day Kindergarten in the United States, 2004, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/we/2004078.asp).

INDICATOR 2

Americans Are Becoming More Educated

Between 1985 and 2002, the percentage of adults age 25 and older who had completed high school rose from 74% to 84%. During the same time span, the proportion of adults who had attained at least a bachelor’s degree increased from 19% to 27%.

According to 1999 data from the G8 countries—which include our main European economic competitors, along with Canada and Japan—the U.S. had the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 64 who had completed at least an upper secondary education. The U.S. also had the highest completion rate for a first university degree (J. Sherman et al., Comparative Indicators of Education in the United States and Other G8 Countries, NCES, 2003).

INDICATOR 3
High School Students Are Taking a More Challenging Curriculum

Many education reforms of the past two decades have encouraged students to take more challenging academic courses so they will be better prepared for higher education and work. These efforts have paid off. The percentage of high school graduates completing a core academic curriculum—including four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies—\textit{quadrupled} between 1982 and 2000, from 14% to 57%.

Steady improvements in academic course completion have occurred for nearly all racial-ethnic groups. African American students have made notable strides. In 2000, 62% of African American graduates had completed a core curriculum—higher than for any other group.

In addition to earning more credits in academic subjects, students are also earning more credits overall—an average of 26.2 credits in 2000, compared with 23.6 in 1990 (R. Perkins et al., \textit{The High School Transcript Study}, 2004, http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/hst/).

\textbf{PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES COMPLETING A CORE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{core-curriculum-percentage.png}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Note}: The “core curriculum” consists of four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies.

INDICATOR 4

More High School Students Are Completing Advanced Math and Science Courses

Students are much more likely to be successful in college if they take higher-level math and science courses in high school, such as trigonometry, pre-calculus, calculus, chemistry, and physics. The percentage of high school graduates completing advanced math courses (any course more challenging than algebra II or geometry) climbed from 26% in 1982 to 45% in 2000. During the same period, the percentage completing advanced science courses (any course more challenging than general biology) rose from 35% to 63%.

Advanced course-taking in math and science has increased across all racial/ethnic groups, with major gains for black, Hispanic, and Asian students (NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2002, Table 141). And the gender gap of past decades, when fewer girls than boys took advanced math and science courses, has almost disappeared—in fact, girls are enrolling at higher rates than boys in such courses as algebra II, pre-calculus, AP/honors biology, and chemistry (C. Freeman, Trends in Educational Equity of Girls & Women 2004, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/equity/).

PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES COMPLETING ADVANCED MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE COURSES

Note: Advanced math courses are those classified as more challenging than algebra II and geometry I. Advanced science courses are those classified as more challenging than general biology, including chemistry I or II, physics I or II, or advanced biology.

**INDICATOR 5**

**More High School Students Are Taking AP Courses and Exams**

Enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams has skyrocketed since the early 1980s. AP courses are college-level courses taught in local high schools. Students who take these courses can receive college credit if they pass an AP exam. Research shows that students who take AP courses and exams are better prepared for success in college and are much more likely than their peers to complete a bachelor’s degree in four years or fewer (College Board, *Value of AP to Colleges and Universities*, http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/article/0,3045,154-179-0-36726,00.html).

Between school years 1983-84 and 2003-04, the number of students taking AP exams rose from more than 177,000 to more than 1.1 million. At the same time, the number of AP exams taken grew from almost 240,000 to more than 1.8 million. (Some students take exams in more than one subject.)


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**TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE AP PROGRAM**

- 1983-84: 177,406
- 1988-89: 314,686
- 1993-94: 458,945
- 1998-99: 704,298
- 2003-04: 1,101,802

**NUMBER OF AP EXAMS TAKEN**

- 1983-84: 239,666
- 1988-89: 463,664
- 1993-94: 701,108
- 1998-99: 1,149,515
- 2003-04: 1,887,770

INDICATOR 6

More Students with Disabilities Are Being Educated in Regular Classrooms

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires children with disabilities to be educated in the “least restrictive environment” and encourages them to be educated alongside other students in the regular classroom setting, with appropriate services and supports. When students with disabilities are included in regular classes with non-disabled students, they are often held to higher expectations for learning and have greater opportunities to study the same curriculum as their peers. Non-disabled children benefit, too, by breaking down damaging stereotypes about people with disabilities and understanding how much all people have in common.

Between school years 1985-86 and 2003-04, the percentage of students with disabilities educated in regular classrooms with non-disabled students for most of the school day grew substantially, from 26% to 50%. The percentage of students with disabilities served in resource rooms or separate classrooms for most of the school day declined from 68% to 46% during this period. The percentage served in separate facilities—including separate public or private schools, residential facilities, and hospitals—also decreased.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AGES 6-12 BEING EDUCATED IN VARIOUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Regular education classroom</th>
<th>Resource room or separate classroom</th>
<th>Separate facilities/hospitals/homebound</th>
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<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Note: Students are counted as being served in regular classrooms if they spend less than 21% of the school day outside regular classrooms. Separate facilities include separate public or private schools or residential facilities.

THE WORK AHEAD—
SCHOOL PARTICIPATION AND COURSE-TAKING

Despite overall increases in educational participation, too many students still leave school without a diploma. Dropping out has serious consequences—high school dropouts earn less money than other workers and have a lower quality of life by several measures. Many students who do get a diploma are still not well-prepared for college or work. Issues of participation and course-taking that deserve attention include the following:

- **Improve high school graduation rates.** Although high school completion rates improved during the 1980s, they have stagnated in recent years. It’s difficult to know how many students are not finishing high school because federal data on dropout and school completion rates have been criticized as unreliable and misleading. For example, while NCES puts the high school completion rate at just over 86%, other analyses show that only 68% to 71% of all students who enter ninth grade graduate from twelfth grade “on time” four years later. The number of youth earning a GED instead of a regular diploma has also increased in recent years—a slightly troubling trend because GED holders earn less, are less likely to land a job, and are less likely to finish college than high graduates with a regular diploma.

- **Reduce dropout rates, especially for poor and minority youth.** Young people from families in the bottom fifth of income drop out of school at a rate six times higher than that of youth from families in the top fifth of income. Although data on dropout rates broken out for minority students have the same problems as overall dropout data, several measures show that dropout rates are especially high for minority youth. By some estimates, only slightly more than half of all African American, Hispanic, or Native American students graduate on time with a regular diploma.

- **Increase educational equity for all students.** Special attention is needed to ensure that all students—including racial/ethnic minority students, low-income children, English language learners, and students with disabilities—receive high-quality instruction, access to a challenging curriculum, and access to postsecondary education opportunities.

- **Encourage more students, especially minority students, to complete higher-level math and science courses.** One-third of students do not take algebra II and 38% do not take chemistry. Racial/ethnic gaps persist in enrollments in higher-level courses.

- **Encourage progress for boys as well as girls.** Although gender gaps are shrinking, the job is far from done. While girls have been doing better by several measures, boys have fallen behind in some areas. Boys are more likely than girls to repeat a grade in school and to drop out, and are also more likely to engage in drug use and violent behavior. Boys have fallen behind in their enrollments in some higher-level math and science courses, and girls still have some catching up to do in physics and calculus.

- **Improve teaching and learning in academic courses.** Many students who take an academic curriculum are still not prepared for college because they have not learned enough in these courses. Among ACT test-takers in the high school class of 2004, only 40% met ACT’s “college readiness benchmark” in math, meaning that they performed well enough to be ready for a college math class. Only 26% met the readiness benchmark in biology, while 68% met the benchmark in English.

INDICATOR 7

Student Achievement Has Gone Up in Math

U.S. students ages 9 and 13 are scoring better than ever in math, according to the long-term trend tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These special tests, which are different from the regular NAEP assessments in that they change very little over time, have been given since the early 1970s to a representative national sample of students at ages 9, 13, and 17. The trend assessments remain the best source of national data on long-term changes in student achievement.

Both 9- and 13-year-olds scored significantly higher in 2004 than they had in 1982—in fact, students at these ages posted their best scores since the NAEP tests were introduced more than 30 years ago. Gains have been particularly dramatic for 9-year-olds: average scores for this age group jumped from 219 in 1982 to 241 in 2004, with much of the improvement occurring since 1999. For 13-year-olds, average scores rose from 269 in 1982 to 281 in 2004. All major racial/ethnic groups have shown progress, with both African American and Hispanic students making noteworthy strides. Similar upward trends in math for students in grades 4 and 8 can be seen on the regular NAEP assessments, which have comparable data going back to 1990.

Although the average math score for 17-year-olds on the NAEP trend test was higher in 2004 than in 1982, scores for this age group have stayed relatively flat since 1990.

Another bit of good news about public school math achievement came from a recent study that compared math scores on the regular NAEP test for public and private school students in grades 4 and 8. Researchers at the University of Illinois found that public school students outperform private school students in math, after the researchers accounted for the fact that private schools draw students from wealthier and better educated families (S.T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, A new look at public and private schools: Student background and mathematics achievement, Phi Delta Kappan, May 2005, pp. 696–699).
**Student Achievement**

**Do You Know…**

**NAEP LONG-TERM TREND MATH ASSESSMENTS—AVERAGE SCALE SCORES**

**AGE 9, BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

- Black
- Hispanic
- White

* Results are significantly different from 2004.

**Note:** NAEP long-term trend assessments use a scale of 0-500. Students who score at level 200 in math have beginning skills and understanding; for example, they can add two-digit numbers, know some basic multiplication and division facts, can read some information from charts and graphs, and are developing some reasoning skills. Students who score at level 250 can perform numerical operations and do beginning problem solving; for example, they can apply addition and subtraction skills to one-step word problems and can compare information from graphs. Those who score at level 300 can perform moderately complex procedures and reasoning, such as computing with decimals, simple fractions, and common percentages; calculating areas of rectangles; and solving simple linear equations.

INDICATOR 8
Younger Students Are Showing Gains in Reading Achievement

Reading achievement has gone up for 9-year-olds in recent years, according to the long-term trend data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 2004, the average reading score reached a high-water mark of 219, the highest score since NAEP began testing reading in 1971. And most of these gains have occurred since 1999.

All three major racial-ethnic groups have made progress in reading among 9-year-olds. Since 1999, African American and Hispanic students have posted especially impressive gains.

For middle and high school students, the NAEP trend data are less encouraging. Average scores for 13-year-olds have remained flat since 1980, and for 17-year-olds, the average score was somewhat lower in 2004 than in 1984.

Other positive news about both reading and math achievement is emerging from the state and local levels. As part of our national study of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Center on Education Policy asked states and school districts whether achievement on the state reading and math tests used for NCLB was improving, declining, or staying the same. Of the 49 states responding to our survey, 73% said that achievement was rising on state tests and 16% said it was remaining about the same. Of the school districts participating in our nationally representative survey, 72% reported that achievement on state tests was increasing, while 22% said it was staying the same (Center on Education Policy, From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act, March 2005, http://www.cep-dc.org/pubs/nclby3/).
* Results are significantly different from 2004.

**Note:** NAEP long-term trend assessments use a scale of 0-500. Students who score at level 150 in reading can perform simple, discrete reading tasks, such as following brief written directions or selecting words, phrases, or sentences to describe a simple picture. Students who score at level 200 demonstrate partially developed skills and understanding; for example, they can locate and identify facts from simple informational paragraphs and can combine ideas and make inferences based on short, uncomplicated passages.

INDICATOR 9
In Other Academic Subjects, Achievement Has Improved or Stayed the Same

Although the long-term NAEP tests measure reading and math only, the regular NAEP assessments produce data on recent achievement trends in a variety of academic subjects. Since the 1990s, NAEP scores have gone up for students in grades 4 and 8 in writing, history, and geography. In writing, for instance, the average NAEP score in grade 4 rose from 150 to 154 between 1998 and 2002. In U.S. history, the average NAEP score in grade 8 increased from 259 to 262 between 1994 and 2001. (NAEP tests different subjects in different years.)

Science achievement remained about the same between 1996 and 2000 in grades 4 and 8. Civics has not been tested since 1998.

* Significantly different from 2002

**Note:** Scores in writing for both 1998 and 2002 are based on testing procedures that permitted accommodations for students with disabilities.

**Note:** NAEP uses a scale of 0-500. In writing, the average 2002 scale scores for grades 4 and 8 are well above NAEP’s Basic level of achievement but somewhat below the Proficient level.

Fourth graders performing at the Basic level can, among other skills, respond appropriately to a writing task in form, content, and language; use some supporting details; and show sufficient command of spelling, grammar, and other conventions to communicate to the reader. Fourth graders achieving at the Proficient level should be able to create an effective response to a writing task in form, content, and language; demonstrate awareness of the intended audience; and use sufficient elaboration to clarify and enhance the central idea, among other skills.

Eighth graders writing at the Basic level should respond appropriately to the task; use some supporting details; and demonstrate organization appropriate to the task, among other things. Eighth graders writing at the Proficient level should be able to express analytical, critical, and creative thinking; demonstrate an awareness of the purpose and intended audience; and use a variety of word choice and sentence structure appropriate to the task, to cite some examples.
Do You Know…
The Latest Good News About American Education?

**NAEP SCIENCE—AVERAGE SCALE SCORES, GRADES 4 AND 8**

**1996**

**150**

**2000**

**150**

**Grade 4**

**Grade 8**

**Note:** Scores shown in science for 1996 and 2000 are based on testing procedures without accommodations for students with disabilities.

**Note:** NAEP uses a scale of 0-500. In science, the average 2000 scale scores for grades 4 and 8 are somewhat above NAEP’s Basic level of achievement but well below the Proficient level.

Fourth graders who perform at the Basic level demonstrate some of the knowledge and reasoning required for understanding earth, physical, and life sciences at a level appropriate to their grade. For example, they can carry out simple investigations and read uncomplicated graphs and diagrams. They also show a beginning understanding of classification, simple relationships, and energy.

Eighth graders who achieve at the Basic level demonstrate some of the knowledge and reasoning required for understanding earth, physical, and life sciences at a level appropriate to their grade. For example, they can carry out investigations and obtain information from graphs, diagrams, and tables. They also demonstrate some understanding of concepts relating to the solar system and relative motion and have a beginning understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

**NAEP U.S. HISTORY—AVERAGE SCALE SCORES, GRADES 4 AND 8**

**1994**

**205**

**209**

**Grade 4**

**Grade 8**

**2001**

**259**

**262**
* Significantly different from 2001.

**Note:** Scores shown in history for 1994 and 2001 are based on testing procedures without accommodations for students with disabilities.

**Note:** NAEP uses a scale of 0-500. In U.S. history, the average 2001 scale scores for grades 4 and 8 are somewhat above NAEP's Basic level of achievement but well below the Proficient level.

Fourth graders achieving at the Basic level should be able to identify and describe a few of the most familiar people, places, events, ideas, and documents in American history. They should be able to explain the reasons for celebrating national holidays and be able to express in writing a few ideas about a familiar theme in American history, among other skills.

Eighth graders performing at the Basic level should be able to identify and place in context a range of historical people, places, events, ideas, and documents; they should also be able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. They should have a beginning understanding of the fundamental political ideas and institutions of American life and their historical origins and be able to explain the significance of some major historical events, among other knowledge.

**NAEP GEOGRAPHY—AVERAGE SCALE SCORES, GRADES 4 AND 8**

* Significantly different from 2001

**Note:** Scores shown in geography for 1994 and 2001 are based on testing procedures without accommodations for students with disabilities.

**Note:** NAEP uses a scale of 0-500. In geography, the average 2001 scale scores for grades 4 and 8 fall roughly midway between NAEP's Basic and Proficient levels of achievement.

Fourth graders who achieve at the Basic level should be able to identify major geographic features on globes and maps and be able to use words and diagrams to define basic geography vocabulary, among other skills. Fourth graders who achieve at the Proficient level should be able to describe an environmental or cultural issue from more than one perspective; read and interpret information from tools such as maps, photographs, globes, and aerial images; and use number and letter grids to plot specific locations, among other skills.

Eighth graders performing at the Basic level should be able to solve fundamental questions of location using latitude and longitude; interpret simple maps and scales; and find a wide range of information using an atlas or almanac, among other skills. Eighth graders performing at the Proficient level should be able to solve questions of location that require integration of information from two or more sources, such as an atlas or globe; identify a wide range of physical and cultural features and describe regional patterns; and explain how places change due to human activities, among other skills.

Some Achievement Gaps Are Narrowing

At a time when U.S. schools are becoming more diverse, eliminating the “gaps” in test scores between students of different racial/ethnic groups and between low-income and more advantaged students is a particularly critical goal. Many education reforms over the past several years have sought to eliminate achievement gaps. These efforts appear to be making a difference for African American and Hispanic students in some subjects and for some age groups, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

On the NAEP long-term trend assessments in math and reading, test score gaps between white and minority students have tapered to the smallest margins in three decades. The black-white gap in average math scale scores for 9-year-olds shrank from 29 points in 1982 to 23 points in 2004, with some ups and downs in between. A similar narrowing occurred in math for African American 13-year-olds. For Hispanic students, the math achievement gap grew wider between 1982 and 1994 but has narrowed significantly during the past decade for 9-year-olds. For Hispanic 13-year-olds, however, the gap has changed very little over the past two decades.

Racial/ethnic gaps in reading achievement have also shrunk among 9-year-olds, according to the NAEP long-term trend assessments. The white-Hispanic gap in average reading scale scores was 21 points in 2004, a notable improvement over the 32-point gap that existed in 1994. The white-black gap in reading has narrowed significantly since 1999 among 9-year-olds and remains smaller than in 1984. Among 13-year-olds, the gaps in reading scores have narrowed for both black and Hispanic students since 1994, although for Hispanic students this narrowing merely restored the gap to about where it stood in 1984.

Data from the regular NAEP assessments in writing also show a reduction in the black-white gap in average scale scores at grade 4, from 26 points in 1998 to 21 points in 2000.

It’s worth noting that these gaps have shrunk even as scores have gone up for all three racial/ethnic groups. In other words, white students have improved, but African American and Hispanic students have gained at a somewhat faster rate.

To track the status of the gap between non-poor and poor students, one must turn to the regular NAEP assessments. Data from these tests show that achievement gaps have narrowed for low-income students in grade 4. In math, the gap in average scale scores between non-poor and poor students shrank from 27 points in 2000 to 20 points in 2003. In reading, this gap narrowed from 33 points in 2000 to 28 in 2003.

In some subjects analyzed by NAEP, achievement gaps have not changed significantly, and in a few cases they have widened, such as for black fourth graders in U.S. history and geography.
Do You Know…

MATH ACHIEVEMENT GAP, NAEP LONG-TERM TREND ASSESSMENT, AGE 9

White Average Score Minus Black Average Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White Average Score Minus Hispanic Average Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MATH ACHIEVEMENT GAP, NAEP LONG-TERM TREND ASSESSMENT, AGE 13

White Average Score Minus Black Average Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White Average Score Minus Hispanic Average Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do You Know…

The Latest Good News About American Education?

Reading Achievement Gap, NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment, Age 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White Average Score Minus Black Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading Achievement Gap, NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment, Age 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White Average Score Minus Black Average Score</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White Average Score Minus Hispanic Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significantly different from 2004.

Note: Score gaps are calculated based on differences between average scale scores on NAEP long-term trend assessments.

INDICATOR 11

SAT Scores Have Gone Up, Even As Many More Students Are Taking the Test

Scores on the SAT college entrance exam are higher than they were 10 or 20 years ago. The average SAT math score of 518 for the entering freshman class of 2004 is 14 points higher than the average for 1994, and an impressive 21 points higher than the average for 1984. The differences in verbal scores are not as great but are still noteworthy. The average SAT verbal score of 508 for the class of 2004 is 9 points higher than the average for 1994 and 4 points higher than the average for 1984. Over the past decade, SAT scores have gone up for nearly all racial and ethnic groups.

The gains of the past two decades are especially encouraging because the number of test-takers has grown tremendously, reaching an all-time high in 2004 of more than 1.4 million students. The group of SAT test-takers has also become more racially and ethnically diverse than it was 20 years ago. Some 37% of SAT test-takers in the class of 2004 were minority students, compared with 31% of test-takers in the class of 1994.

Note: The SAT uses a scale of 200-800.

Note: The SAT was “recentered” in 1995 so that mean scores would be at or near the midpoint of 500. The scores shown above for years before 1996 have been adjusted by the College Board so they are comparable to scores on the new scale.

Do You Know…

Student Achievement

INDICATOR 12

ACT Test Scores Have Remained Stable, Even As the Number of Test-Takers Has Surged

The ACT is the primary college entrance exam in some states, and is taken by high school students who are considering college. During the past decade, the average composite score on the ACT exam has changed very little. For the high school class of 2004, the average composite score of 20.9 is slightly higher than the score of 20.8 for 1994 and just below the 1999 record score of 21.0.

These stable scores are good news because the number of test-takers has grown from about 1.0 million in 1994 to 1.2 million in 2004. ACT test-takers now include a greater share of students who don’t plan to go to college, because for the past three years, the states of Illinois and Colorado have administered the ACT to virtually all their eleventh grade public school students, even those who are not college-bound.

NATIONAL AVERAGE ACT COMPOSITE SCORES

Note: The ACT uses a scale of 1-36.

Note: In 1990, a new version of the ACT was introduced, and scores from prior years were not comparable to the new scores unless adjusted. The average scores shown for 1982 and 1989 are adjusted scores, intended to be an estimate of what the score from that year would have been if the new version of the ACT had been given.

INDICATOR 13
U.S. Students Outscore Other Countries in Interpreting Civic Information

In an international test of civic knowledge, U.S. students performed better than students in most of the 27 participating countries.

The Civic Education Study of 1999 measured the performance of 14-year-olds (ninth graders in the U.S.) in two areas: civic skills, which include the interpretive skills needed to make sense of civic-related information such as a newspaper article; and civic content, which includes knowledge of civic principles or ideas such as what constitutes a democracy. The test also yielded an overall score for total civic knowledge.

In the civic skills area, U.S. students posted an average score of 114, the highest of any participating nation. In the civic content area, the U.S. average score was slightly above the mean but significantly lower than that of six other countries. In total civic knowledge, U.S. students achieved an average score of 106, significantly above the international average and better than students in England, Germany, Russia, and Switzerland, among others. Although some nations had higher scores on total civic knowledge, the differences with the U.S. were not significant.
Do You Know…

Student Achievement

Do You Know…The Latest Good News About American Education?

* Not significantly different from U.S. score.

**Note:** The international mean scale score for this study was set at 100.

**Note:** Other countries not shown scored at the statistically same level as the United States or lower.

THE WORK AHEAD—
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Although student achievement is rising in some subjects and grade levels, the gains have not been consistent for all groups or rapid enough to ensure that all students are well-educated. More work needs to be done to improve achievement in the following areas:

- **Focus more on the achievement of high school students.** NAEP also tests students in grade 12, and in recent years, scores at this grade have stayed the same or gone down in most subjects. Some researchers, including a government-convened panel of experts, have questioned the accuracy of these twelfth grade scores because a lower percentage of students participate in NAEP at grade 12 than in other grades and because those who do participate may not try very hard on the test, since it doesn’t “count” toward their future. Even so, various studies have found lagging performance among high school students, and more work needs to be done to improve achievement at this level.

- **Raise achievement in math and science to internationally competitive levels.** New international assessments in math and science suggest that U.S. students are not keeping pace with their international peers. On the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), U.S. eighth graders scored above the international average in math and science and made significant gains over students in many other countries but were still outperformed by several other nations. U.S. fourth graders scored above the TIMSS international average in math and science but had not improved since the last TIMSS test in 1995. Because students in other countries had made significant gains since 1995, U.S. fourth graders dropped in the international standings. Another study by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) looked at how well 15-year-olds could apply the math they have learned to practical situations. The results were discouraging, with U.S. students ranking 24th out of 29 nations.

- **Close achievement gaps and boost achievement for all students.** Although NAEP scores for inner-city and low-income students have gone up measurably since 1996 in grades 4 and 8, these students are still achieving far below average in all subjects. And although scores for African American and Hispanic students have generally gone up during the past decade, an achievement gap remains for many minority students. Achievement gaps also persist for English language learners and students with disabilities. Efforts to close achievement gaps must be accompanied by efforts to raise performance to proficient levels for all students.

Sources: National Assessment of Educational Progress (http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard); P. Gonzales et al., Highlights from the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003 (http://nces.ed.gov/TIMSS/Results03.asp); and M. Lemke et al., International Outcomes of Learning in Mathematics Literacy and Problem Solving: PISA 2003 Results from the U.S. Perspective (http://nces.ed.gov/Surveys/PISA/).
INDICATOR 14

Pupil–Teacher Ratios Are Falling

Smaller pupil–teacher ratios are often valued because they allow students to receive more personalized attention from teachers and can help reduce classroom management problems. Moreover, research has found that small classes can have a positive influence on student achievement.

Pupil–teacher ratios have been declining over the past several years. In 1987, there were 17.9 pupils per public school teacher; by 2001, this ratio had dropped to 16.3 pupils per public school teacher. (These teacher totals include other professional staff, such as curriculum supervisors and school counselors, so the pupil–teacher ratios shown below are smaller than the actual ratios of teachers to students in a classroom.)

Another way of analyzing this issue is to look at class size—the average number of pupils per class rather than per teacher. For elementary teachers who are not “departmentalized” (in other words, who teach a variety of subjects instead of specializing in one subject area), class sizes have decreased from 25 pupils in 1981 to 21 pupils in 2001. For secondary and departmentalized elementary teachers, class sizes have gone up during this period from 23 pupils to 28 pupils, but the number of pupils taught by these teachers per day has dropped considerably—from 118 in 1981 to 86 in 2001.

PUPIL–TEACHER RATIOS IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Note: Pupil-teacher ratios are based on numbers reported by states of schools that reported both enrollment and teacher data. Teacher data include other professional staff.

INDICATOR 15

Almost All U.S. Classrooms Have Internet Access

The number of public schools and classrooms with access to the Internet has gone up dramatically during the past decade. Virtually all public schools (99%) have Internet access, an increase from just 35% in 1994. A better statistic for determining whether students can use the Internet for learning purposes is the number of instructional rooms with Internet access. From this perspective, growth has been striking: the percentage of instructional rooms with Internet access has climbed from just 3% in 1994 to 93% in 2003.

**INDICATOR 16**

**Students Are Safer at School**

Rates of crime and violence at school, or on the way to and from school, fell by half during the past decade. In 2002, there were 64 non-fatal, school-associated crimes per 1,000 students ages 12 to 18—less than half as many as the 144 crimes per 1,000 students in 1992. The most common crime at school is theft, rather than violent crime.

School safety has improved by other measures, as well. During the past several years, the percentages of students who carried a weapon on school property, were involved in a physical fight at school, or felt unsafe at school or traveling to or from school have also decreased significantly.

Although school shootings periodically remind the nation that violent death or injury at school is intolerable no matter how rare, children are safer at school than in the community or at home. In each school year between 1992 and 2000, the rate of homicides of youth ages 5 to 19 occurring away from school was at least 70 times that of homicides at school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Theft</th>
<th>All violent crime</th>
<th>Serious violent crime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Serious violent crimes include rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. All violent crimes include the above crimes, plus simple assault.

**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2005*, Table 30-1.
INDICATOR 17
Parents Would Rather Reform the Current Public Education System Than Find an Alternative System

Despite problems in public education, citizens are still generally satisfied with their public schools. According to the annual public opinion polls by Phi Delta Kappa and the Gallup organization, a large majority of public school parents and a majority of the general public have consistently agreed that the nation should focus on improving the existing system of public education instead of finding an alternative system. In fact, the percentage of public school parents who prefer to reform the existing system has grown from 60% in 2000 to 72% in 2004.

In the 2004 poll, 61% of public school parents also gave the schools in their community a grade of A or B—an increase over the 52% who gave these grades in 1998 (L. C. Rose & A. M. Gallup, The 36th and the 30th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Polls of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Reform existing system</th>
<th>Find an alternative system</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: L. C. Rose & A. M. Gallup, The 36th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools (Bloomington, IN: PDK International, 2004); and L. C. Rose & A.M. Gallup, The 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools (Bloomington, IN: PDK International, 1999).
Do You Know…
School Climate and Public Support
The Latest Good News About American Education?

INDICATOR 18

Public School Enrollments Are Growing Faster Than Private School Enrollments

Because private school vouchers and other private alternatives to public education have been topics of debate in recent years, many people do not realize that the overwhelming majority of Americans continue to send their children to public schools, as they have done for decades. Although both private and public school enrollments have grown in recent years, public school enrollments have grown at a faster rate—a 21% increase for public schools since 1985 versus a 12% increase for private schools. In 2001, almost 48 million children, or about 89% of the nation’s school children, attended public schools, while more than 6 million children, or about 11%, attended private schools.

ENROLLMENT GROWTH IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Fall enrollments

- Total enrollment
- Public school enrollment
- Private school enrollment

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2003, Table 2.
According to various measures, the climate in American public schools has improved, and public support for public education is relatively high. Still, more work must be done to create a better learning environment and build citizens’ confidence in their schools. Among the problems to be addressed are the following:

- **Improve student motivation and other factors that contribute to learning.** Among the most serious problems in schools, according to a 2000 survey of teachers, were students coming to school unprepared to learn (cited by 30% of teachers); lack of parent involvement (24% of teachers); student apathy (21%); and student disrespect for teacher (17%). Student motivation is a key factor in academic achievement; if students are not motivated to learn, other reforms will make little difference. Yet motivation decreases steadily as students move from the early elementary grades into high school.

- **Address socioeconomic factors that affect learning.** Census data show that the percentage of children under 18 living in poverty has gone up in recent years, from 16.2% in 2000 to 17.6% in 2003. This issue has educational relevance, because higher levels of poverty are associated with lower levels of achievement.

- **Continue steps to reduce school violence, bullying, and substance abuse.** News of periodic school shootings serves as a reminder that the nation must continue its efforts to make schools reliably safe learning environments, free of any violent crimes or deaths. Less dramatic types of school violence also warrant attention. According to the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, the problem of students being bullied at school has increased, rising from 5% of middle and high school students in 1999 to 7% in 2003. Measures of marijuana use, alcohol use, and drug distribution at school showed no consistent patterns of increase or decrease between 1993 and 2003.

- **Fix deteriorating or overcrowded school facilities.** Half the nation’s schools—and a higher percentage in center cities—reported in 1999 that their buildings were in less than adequate condition due to problems with roofs, foundations, windows, plumbing, heating, or other features. About one-fourth of the nation’s schools are overcrowded.

- **Reduce funding inequities among school districts.** Vast funding disparities persist among school districts. The most affluent school districts in the nation (those at the 95th percentile of revenues per student) received more than two and a half times as much funding per pupil than the poorest school districts (those at the 5th percentile)—an average of $16,286 per pupil for the most affluent districts versus $6,208 for the poorest.

- **Provide sufficient funding.** Through the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government is requiring states and school districts to raise achievement to proficient levels for nearly all students, improve teacher quality, and meet many other requirements. But according to estimates of the Act’s costs in several states, federal funds are inadequate to meet all these goals.

Do You Know…

Teachers

The Latest Good News About American Education?

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS ARE BETTER EDUCATED AND MORE EXPERIENCED THAN PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS

Public school teachers are more likely to have an advanced degree than private school teachers. In school year 1999-2000, a greater share of public school teachers (47%) than private school teachers (35%) held a master’s degree or higher.

Public school teachers are also more experienced than private school teachers on average. Only 13% of public school teachers have less than 3 years of experience, compared with almost 24% of private school teachers. Well over half of public school teachers (58%) have 10 or more years of experience, compared with just 45% of private school teachers.

HIGHEST DEGREE HELD BY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS, 1999-2000

Percentage of Teachers Holding Various Degrees

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE, 1999-2000

Percentage of Teachers by Years of Full-time Experience

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

INDICATOR 20

Fewer High School Teachers Are Teaching Outside Their Field of Preparation

Studies have found a link between students’ achievement and the qualifications of their teachers. One main way of measuring teacher qualifications is to look at whether teachers have a college major or minor in the subjects they are teaching or whether they are fully certified in their assigned subject.

Between 1987-88 and 1999-2000, the percentage of high school students enrolled in classes taught by an out-of-field teacher—one who lacked a major, minor, or certification in the subject being taught—decreased for most core academic subjects, including English, mathematics, history, and physical science. In physical science, for example, the percentage of high school students being taught by an out-of-field teacher dropped from 31% to less than 16% of students during this period. In English, this percentage declined from 13% to less than 6%. One exception was biology, which saw a slight increase in out-of-field teaching.

Note: Physical science includes chemistry, physics, and geology/earth/space science.

Do You Know…

Teachers

Do You Know…
The Latest Good News About American Education?

INDICATOR 21

More Public School Teachers Are Participating in Professional Development

Recognizing the link between well-qualified teachers and improved student learning, states, districts, and schools are placing greater emphasis on professional development to enhance teachers’ knowledge and skills. In 2001, more than three-fourths (77%) of public high school teachers participated during the school year in professional development activities sponsored by a school system. This is an increase over the 73% who participated in these activities in 1986. Especially notable is the growth in teachers participating in professional development during the summer, up from 15% in 1986 to 35% in 2001. Of course, more professional development does not guarantee that teachers will be well prepared to teach a rigorous curriculum—the quality of professional development is just as important as the quantity.

PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS PARTICIPATING IN SYSTEM-SPONSORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

High school (Grades 9-12)

During the school year

During the summer

THE WORK AHEAD—
TEACHERS

Over the past two decades, progress has been made in strengthening the knowledge and skills of public school teachers. These trends are likely to continue as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires all public school teachers of academic subjects to meet the law’s definition of “highly qualified” by 2005-06. To ensure that every class is taught by a qualified teacher, the nation must also reduce inequities in the distribution of highly qualified teachers and take steps to attract talented new teachers and retain current ones. Teacher issues that merit attention include the following:

- **Eliminate inequities in assignments of fully credentialed teachers.** Out-of-field teaching is more common in schools with high concentrations of poor or minority students. In 1999-2000, 16% of high school students in high-poverty schools had an out-of-field teacher in science, compared with just 5% of students in low-poverty schools. In math, the percentages of high school students being taught by an out-of-field teacher were 14% in high-poverty schools but just 7% in low-poverty schools. Similar disparities exist between schools with high and low enrollments of minority students.

- **Boost teacher salaries to attract and retain teachers.** Retaining teachers has reached a crisis point, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. One-third (33%) of new teachers leave the profession sometime during their first three years of teaching, and almost half (46%) of new teachers leave by the end of their fifth year of teaching. Inadequate salary is one reason why teachers leave; almost half (48%) of public school teachers who left teaching in 2000-01 cited too low a salary as a major source of dissatisfaction. Indeed, teacher salaries have barely increased at all over the past decade when adjusted for inflation, although the demands placed on teachers have multiplied. When inflation is factored in, the average teacher salary of $46,752 in 2003-04 was just 2.9% higher than the average salary of 1993-04, and in 15 states, the average salary has actually declined over the past decade when adjusted for inflation. Using mentors and coaches and professionalizing the field of teaching are strategies that could help to retain teachers.

- **Improve teacher working conditions, especially in high-poverty schools.** In addition to low salaries, the most common sources of dissatisfaction cited by teachers who left the profession were lack of planning time (reported by 60% of leavers), too heavy a teaching workload (51%), excessively large classes (50%), and student behavior problems (44%). Teachers in high-poverty schools are twice as likely to transfer to another school as those in low-poverty schools, so improving working conditions for this group is especially critical.

INDICATOR 22

More Students Are Going To College

The number of students enrolled in two- and four-year colleges has climbed steadily over the past two decades from 10,618,000 students in 1984 to 14,257,000 in 2002.

College enrollments have also risen as a percentage of recent high school graduates. In 1984, about 55% of high school graduates went to college right out of high school. By 2003, this percentage had increased to 64%. However, the current rate represents a dip from the peak year of 67% in 1997 (not shown).

College enrollment rates for African American and Hispanic students are higher than they were in 1984, although there have been some ups and downs in the interim years. Particularly impressive is the growth in the percentage of women high school graduates going on to college—from 55% in 1984 to 67% in 2003.

INDICATOR 23

More Young Adults Are Completing Four-year College Degrees

The proportion of young adults completing a bachelor’s degree or higher has climbed over the past two decades. In 2002, 29% of young adults ages 25-29 held a bachelor’s degree, compared with 22% in 1985. College completion rates have risen steadily for white and African American youth but have fluctuated for Hispanic youth.

PERCENTAGE OF 25- TO 29-YEAR-OLDS WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER

INDICATOR 24

More Women Are Earning College and Graduate Degrees

Since 1984, the percentage of college, graduate, and professional degrees earned by women has risen steadily. The share of degree holders who are women has increased in fields where women were once seriously underrepresented, such as medicine, dentistry, and law. For example, in 1984–85, only 30% of medical degrees were earned by women, but in 2000–01, this figure had increased to 43%.

THE WORK AHEAD—
HIGHER EDUCATION

Although more students are enrolling in college, many who start college do not finish. More must be done to encourage students to earn a college degree and to make college more affordable for all students. This includes attention to the following issues:

- **Ensure that students are better prepared to succeed in college.** Many students enter college unprepared for college work. Just 22% of high school students who took the ACT test met ACT’s college readiness benchmarks in English, algebra, and biology. In addition, more than 28% of entering college freshman enrolled in at least one remedial course to learn skills they should have learned in high school. This is discouraging news because the need for remedial reading is the most serious barrier that keeps students from completing a college degree.

- **Increase the rates of college completion.** Many students who start college do not finish. Among students who started at a four-year college in 1995-96, 35% had not completed any degree—including a certificate, associate’s degree, or bachelor’s degree—by 2001. Special attention is needed to ensure that young men complete college, because men are less likely than women either to enter college immediately after high school or to obtain a degree.

- **Make college more affordable.** Since the mid-1980s, college costs have gone up faster than consumer prices. In constant 2004 dollars, the average tuition and fees at a public four-year college or university rose 51% between 1994-95 and 2004-05, and the average tuition and fees at a private four-year college rose 36%. But less public financing has been available in recent years to help students pay for college.

Conclusion

American public schools are doing better in many key respects than they were 20 years ago, even though they often face difficult social and economic circumstances. Americans should be proud of these accomplishments.

This does not mean that all public schools are doing fine. In some communities, often the most economically ravaged ones, schools are not doing a good job. Much work remains to be done to eliminate inequities and close achievement gaps among different groups of students. The nation must also do more to raise student achievement to higher levels, so that all students leave school ready to become good citizens and productive workers. Schools around the country are working very hard to meet these goals, through the No Child Left Behind Act and other means.

Public schools are a valuable asset to our country, but a sometimes underappreciated one. Constructive debate and civil criticism can help identify ways to improve public schools, but broad-based attacks that ignore the good news about public education are harmful and irresponsible. If citizens are reasonable and objective in discussions about national issues, the nation has a better chance of achieving its goals.
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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.

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