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CONTACT: Chloe Louvouezo, 301-656-0348, or [\[clouvouezo@thehatchergroup.com\]](mailto:clouvouezo@thehatchergroup.com)

Student Achievement Rises Since 2005 on State Tests and State-Level NAEP, New Analysis by Center on Education Policy Finds

Results Provide Evidence of Greater Mastery in Reading and Math

WASHINGTON, D.C.—[September 15]—A new study of states with five years of comparable test data finds that student achievement in reading and math rose between 2005 and 2009 on state tests as well as on the highly regarded National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). The report, released by the Center on Education Policy, also finds overlapping achievement gains in state test and state-level NAEP scores in most of these states, providing stronger evidence that students are mastering higher levels of knowledge and skills in reading and math.

The study, *State Test Trends through 2008-09, Part 1: Rising Scores on State Tests and NAEP*, focused on the 23 states with comparable proficiency test data for 2005 through 2009 on the state tests used for accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act. Overall, the research found more agreement than is commonly acknowledged between trends on state tests and NAEP, which is overseen by the U.S. Department of Education and is often referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card.”

The CEP study found that of the 21 states with sufficient data in grade 8 reading, 20 posted gains in the percentage reaching the proficient level on their state test, and 17 showed gains in the percentage reaching the basic level on NAEP. In grade 4 math, 18 of 19 states improved the percentage scoring proficient on state tests and 15 showed gains in the percentage at basic on NAEP. Because of fundamental differences between NAEP and most state tests in the concept of proficiency, the study’s researchers conclude that it is most appropriate to compare trends in students reaching the proficient level on state tests with those reaching the basic level on NAEP.

The analysis found that these upward trends overlapped on the state tests and NAEP in most of these states. The greatest agreement was in grade 8, where 19 of 21 states showed gains in math on the state tests and on NAEP while 16 of 21 states showed gains in reading on both assessments. In grade 4, 15 of 19 states showed upward trends on both assessments in math and the same was true for 13 of 21 states in reading.

“Increases in state test scores have sometimes been dismissed as misleading because the same results were supposedly not seen in NAEP tests,” said Jack Jennings, President and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. “This study shows this concern is misplaced in many states. Two important indicators suggest that students are learning more math and reading, at least as measured by tests. The job of raising student achievement is in no way complete, but there is progress.”

CEP also analyzed achievement on state tests and NAEP using mean, or average, test scores, which do not depend on where a particular state sets the bar for proficient performance. The mean score analysis showed even greater agreement in the direction of trends on the two assessments.

“When trends on state tests and NAEP have both moved upward in the same state, the base of evidence is stronger that students have actually mastered higher levels of knowledge and skills,” Jennings added.

CEP also found that achievement gains on state tests tended to be larger than gains on NAEP. In some instances, however, NAEP gains were greater than state test score gains—most notably in grade 4 reading, where six out of 19 states had greater gains at the basic level on NAEP than they did at the proficient level on their own tests.

The report suggests possible explanations for the trends. For example, greater gains on state scores could be the result of instruction that is more closely aligned to state content standards than to NAEP. A less optimistic explanation is that state scores may have become inflated due to inappropriate teaching to the test. Ultimately, students may be more motivated to perform well on state assessments, which often have high stakes for teachers and students and get more local attention than NAEP.

The states studied in the report are: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. Two more states, Delaware and Oregon, have mean test scores at a few grades but lack comparable proficiency data. The remaining states were not included because they changed their tests or passing scores so that the results could not validly be compared from year to year. The NAEP data are comparable for this period for all states.

The report includes tables with performance trends and comparisons by state as well as more detailed overviews of the findings. It is available for free online at www.cep-dc.org.

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