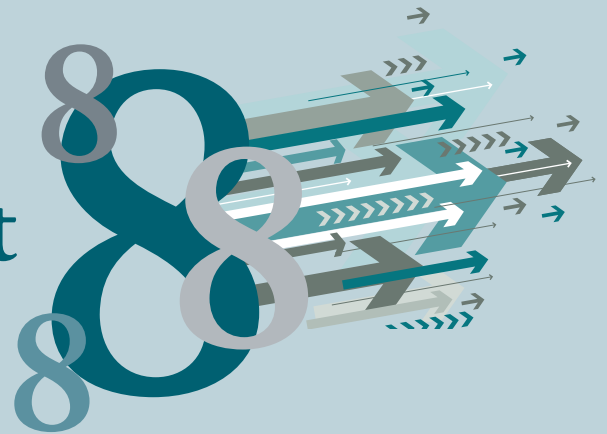


Summary

State Test Score Trends Through 2008-09, Part 3

Student Achievement at 8th Grade



Key Findings

Over the past few decades, concerns have escalated about the quality of education in the U.S. for students in the middle grades. Children entering adolescence have unique educational, social, and emotional needs. How effectively the nation is educating these students has long been a topic of research and debate.

This study by the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit organization, examines trends in the achievement of grade 8 students on the state reading and mathematics tests used for accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). We chose to analyze grade 8 data because states tend to have longer test trend lines for grade 8 than for grades 6 and 7, and grade 8 is the middle grade tested for other national and international assessments. We looked at trends from 2002 (or a more recent year in some states) through 2009 for students overall and for the major subgroups tracked for NCLB accountability purposes.

If students in the middle grades are doing poorly, as some analysts have charged, one might expect to see stagnant test scores and less progress relative to elementary or high schools. Our study found, however, that grade 8 students seem to be doing fairly well as gauged by solid progress on state tests, particularly in math, and by comparisons with grade 4 and the high school grade tested in each state for NCLB. But at the advanced level of achievement, we found a problem of widening achievement gaps.

Key findings from our study include the following:

- **Grade 8 gains.** Contrary to popular perception, student reading and math performance at grade 8 is not stagnating. Achievement at grade 8 has gone up on most state tests. Other assessments show a similar trend.
- **Comparisons with grades 4 and high school.** According to test results, grade 8 is not a weak point in the education system. More states showed gains at grade 8 than showed gains at grades 4 and high school. The percentages of 8th grade students reaching the basic, proficient, and advanced levels of achievement are on par with the other grades analyzed.

- **Widening gaps in advanced achievement.** A problem does exist at grade 8 for subgroups of students at the advanced achievement level. At this achievement level, gaps have widened in a majority of states between African American and white students, Latino and white students, and Native American and white students, as well as between low-income and non-low-income students. In reading, gaps have also widened at the advanced level between male and female students, with female students performing at higher levels. In most cases, these racial, ethnic, and gender gaps have widened even though achievement has increased for both groups, but it has increased more slowly for the lower-performing group.
- **Asian American performance at the advanced level.** At the advanced level at grade 8, the Asian American subgroup outperformed white students by a notable margin and other racial/ethnic groups by a wide margin. Asian American students have also improved at a faster rate than other groups at the advanced level, so gaps at this level have widened.

The full report, *State Test Score Trends Through 2008-09, Part 3: Student Achievement at the 8th Grade*, is available on the CEP Web site (www.cep-dc.org) and can be downloaded free-of-charge.



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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. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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