

What the NAEP results reveal

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The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows a slowdown in student progress over the past decade, but Mississippi's recent results are a cause for optimism.

The annual release of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is for educators what the World Series is for baseball . . . except it is a lot less fun and nobody gets to eat hot dogs and drink beer. Each year, students in all 50 states and two jurisdictions (the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense schools) take the NAEP assessment. How U.S. students score on the NAEP, often referred to as the nation's report card, is seen as a key indicator of whether a state or district is educating its students to a high standard of learning.

Educators take the NAEP very seriously, and there is a very real sense of competition among states and districts about which will show the most progress. A state or district with higher-than-average NAEP scores will be showered with attention and be seen as a beacon of hope for others

trying to improve student performance. That may not be on par with a World Series trophy or a parade through downtown Washington, but for underappreciated, often maligned educators, it can mean a great deal.

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Along with the release of NAEP scores also comes an insufferable amount of analysis and conjecture about what the scores mean, don't mean, and/or could potentially mean. But no matter how deftly politicians and pundits try to spin any kind of rise or dip in NAEP scores to suit their interests, most of the year-to-year changes are not terribly significant. A particular state or district may outshine everyone for one year, but the real stories tend to come from looking at NAEP trend data. Because every state has participated in the NAEP since 2003, the long-term trend data provide a valuable perspective on how improvement efforts progress (or don't) over time. This year, the NAEP results presented us with some sobering news about literacy and the stubborn persistence of achievement gaps.

Fewer gains, bigger gaps

Let's start by looking broadly across the years 2003 to 2019. Over these 16 years, the NAEP shows U.S. students in grades 4 and 8 making gains in both reading and math, with one exception: Students made virtually no gains in 8th-grade reading. That is not good news, but what is worse is that most of the progress students made in math happened from 2003 to 2009. The last decade showed very little progress for U.S. students. Instead, we see what the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) calls a "divergence in growth" between the lowest- and highest-achieving students in both subjects. This means that low-performing students are doing worse and higher-achieving students are doing better. The disturbing trend spans student groups across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Several theories might explain why student performance on the NAEP stalled after 2009. Many experts believe that the Great Recession, which began at the end of 2007, had a lasting and consequential impact on schools and communities. Researchers Kenneth Shores and Matthew Steinberg (2017) used achievement data from the Stanford Education Data Archive to estimate the effect of the Great Recession on U.S. students in grades 3-8 in both math and English language arts (ELA). In the paper's abstract the authors explain:

The onset of the Great Recession significantly reduced student math and ELA achievement. Moreover, the recessionary effect on student achievement was concentrated among school districts serving more economically disadvantaged and minority students, indicating that the adverse effects of the recession were not distributed equally among the population of U.S. students.

The authors go on to say that the recession had the greatest impact on those school districts that were forced to reduce their teaching staff, thus demonstrating how the recession had very real negative consequences for the most important of all school resources, teachers.

It comes as no surprise that the effects of economic hardship tend to converge on the poorest among us, but this year's drop in performance among low-income students is particularly depressing because these students had been making progress from 2000 to 2009. Some have suggested that No Child Left Behind's accountability requirements for student subgroups (many of whom are low income) may have been responsible for those gains, and the stagnation we are seeing now is the result of the looser, less rigorous accountability requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), not the Great Recession. NAEP results alone can't resolve disputes like this, and, in the end, does it really matter? We have more than ample evidence to show that income and resource inequalities have grown in this country over the last decade. It would be foolish to think students and schools would not be affected by the growing divide.

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Signs of progress

Although the performance of low-income students casts a long shadow over this year's results, there are some examples of progress being made at the state and district levels. Massachusetts, a state that performs like Tom Brady when it comes to testing, remained a top performer, but this year it had to share the spotlight with Mississippi, a state that is usually not lauded for academic improvement. Mississippi's star turn came because, for the first time in NAEP history, 4th graders in the state scored above the national average in math and at the national average in reading. Eighth graders in the state also made progress in math and held steady in reading, even though many other states lost ground. It was a kind of "Little Engine that Could" moment for the state, with most experts giving the credit to Mississippi's bold early literacy program.

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Mississippi's efforts to improve early literacy started in 2013 with the state's Literacy Based Promotion Act, which requires all 3rd-grade students to read at a certain level before they can be promoted to 4th grade. This requirement, although controversial because so many students are held back, seems to have made a difference. Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant clearly believes that blindly promoting students who do not have even the most basic command of reading does them no good in the long run. That point is hard to disagree with, unless you offer the students held back no additional support or instruction to help them meet the higher bar. State leaders in Mississippi wisely changed the curriculum to allow more time for dedicated reading instruction and provided additional resources to students that are held back. This year's NAEP results is their reward for a job well done.

NAEP punditry

In Washington, experts and pundits continue to push out their views on what this year's NAEP results mean for education and the country. In a response that surprised absolutely no one, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos used this year's dip in reading performance to promote her school choice agenda, touting the administration's "transformational plan to help America's forgotten students escape failing schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). She offered not a word about the details of that plan nor explained how a choice agenda would better support the learning needs of low-income students, but we will leave that for another day, another column.

In all fairness, DeVos is not the first secretary of education to use the NAEP to promote and further their administration's agenda. In 2010, then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan used NAEP scores to push for common standards and better data systems. And who could forget 1999, when then-Vice President Al Gore shocked everyone by appearing at the press conference announcing the NAEP results? Much to the dismay of those who have always tried to maintain the NAEP's nonpartisan standing, Gore credited the Clinton administration's education agenda with the rising scores reported that year. Suffice to say, it did not go over well.

Despite all the drama, competition, and occasional incidents of "misNAEPery" (when NAEP scores are incorrectly used to substantiate some theory), the NAEP remains an important part of the nation's educational identity. For education leaders, it is a high bar to aim for. For those of us in Washington, it is something to talk about after the real World Series is over. So until next year's results, Go Mississippi! Go Nats!

References

Shores, K. & Steinberg, M. (2017). *The impact of the Great Recession on student achievement: Evidence from population data*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3026151>

U.S. Department of Education. (2019, October 30). *Statement from Secretary DeVos on 2019 NAEP results* [Press release]. www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/statement-secretary-devos-2019-naep-results