

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly From Our Nation's Report Card

Every couple years, the U.S. Department of Education evaluates how well American education serves its students. The Department uses a test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – often dubbed the “Nation’s Report Card.” This year’s report, which was [released](#) late last month, evaluates fourth and eighth grade students’ proficiency in reading and math. The test offers some encouragement but ample opportunity for improvement.

The Good: Student Performance Improves

Across reading and math in both fourth and eighth grades, student performance is up since the 1990s. In Math, eighth-grade students [scored](#) 19 points higher on average than they did in 1990 and fourth-grade students scored 27 points higher. In Reading, eighth-grade students [scored](#) three points more than they did in 1992 on average and fourth grade students scored four points more.

In addition to better scores, the NAEP suggests that student proficiency is increasing. The test breaks scores into three achievement categories: basic – students show partial mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills; proficient – students [demonstrate](#) competency over challenging subject matter; and advanced – students demonstrate superior performance.

In 1990, only 13 percent of students [scored](#) proficient in math. In 2009 that number increased to 39 percent, and this

year 41 percent of students scored proficient or above. Similarly, in 1990 only 29 percent of fourth graders [scored](#) at or above NAEP proficient in reading. But in 2009 that number increased to 33 percent and in 2019 it increased again to 35 percent. Eighth grade [math](#) and [reading](#) scores follow a similar, though less pronounced trajectory. These trends suggest that education is helping students to succeed, albeit slowly.

The Bad: More Students Struggle to Read

Even though student performance is trending upward over time, student reading performance remains low and has decreased since 2017.

In the past two years, fourth-grade reading scores have [decreased](#) in 17 states and eighth-grade scores decreased in 31 states. On average, nearly two-out-of-three students in the fourth and eighth grades have not mastered fundamental literacy skills. In some states, even fewer children are reading. In New Mexico for example, 77 percent of students [failed](#) to achieve NAEP reading proficiency.

This is particularly problematic because research suggests that children who fail to achieve reading competency by the fourth grade are more likely to struggle throughout their lives. One study [found](#) that 16 percent of children who do not read proficiently by the end of the third grade will not graduate from high school on time. Another study [found](#) that reading and math achievement by age seven had a substantial and positive association with adult socio-economic status, more so than socio-economic status at birth or intelligence.

These findings make sense when we consider that up through third grade, students are learning to read. After that, students read to learn other subjects such as math, science,

history, and civics. Therefore, as more students struggle to read, more students will likely struggle to continue learning.

The Ugly: We're Paying More

Americans [spend](#) more on education than almost any other country in the world, only to achieve marginal improvement in the past thirty years and worse reading performance in the past few years.

Most of us don't even realize the extent of K-12 education funding. A 2019 EdChoice [survey](#), found that three out of four respondents (76 percent) thought public per-pupil spending was \$10,000 or less. Nearly one-third of the public (30 percent) and teachers (31 percent) believed it was \$2,000 or less.

Actually, public K-12 spending has [grown](#) from an average of \$4,720 per student in 1966 to \$13,847 per student in 2016. Many states spend even more. New York, for example, [spent](#) \$23,091 per elementary and secondary student in 2017 and Washington, DC spent \$21,974.

By way of comparison, average in-state college tuition [costs](#) only \$10,116, nearly \$4,000 less than average per-student funding in K-12 education, and less than half of what New York or Washington, DC spends.

Why then, aren't we seeing better results? One possibility is that we don't [know](#) where education dollars go. Complex funding formulas make it difficult for families, citizens, and educators to track where and how education funding is spent and whether it truly achieves a good return on investment. Perhaps more importantly, not all students thrive in the same education [environment](#). To truly empower students to succeed, states should consider school choice programs such as [as Education Savings Accounts](#) or [voucher programs](#) which allow parents to use state education dollars to tailor their children's education to their unique needs.

NAEP scores suggest that American education is not beyond repair, but it is backsliding at great cost. Time to move toward greater accountability, more choice, and better outcomes.

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