

Understanding NAEP and Educational Funding

Prepared for Alaska Task Force on the National Assessment of
Education Progress (NAEP)

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National Assessment of Educational Progress

- National Center for Education Statistics
- Random sampling, tested about every 2 years in math and reading
- Major Changes Coming to the NAEP Reading Assessment, Tom Loveless

Media Misinformation on NAEP

- “One of the most bearish statistics for the future of the United States is this: Two-thirds of fourth graders in the United States are not proficient in reading,” wrote Nicholas Kristof in The New York Times.
- Kristof’s piece in 2023 can be traced back to a similar claim by Emily Hanford in 2018: “More than 60 percent of American fourth-graders are not proficient readers, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and it’s been that way since testing began in the 1990s.”

NAEP Achievement Levels

Achievement levels such as “basic” and “proficient,” used in NAEP for reading, are misleading and complicated for most people not familiar with technical terminology.

NAEP “basic” is approximately grade level (although even that claim is problematic since no standard exists in the US for “proficient” or “grade level”), and “proficient” on NAEP is high.

But how rigorous are the NAEP standards for proficient?¹⁰ Very rigorous indeed. A few states’ proficiency standards come close, but NAEP’s surpass them all.¹¹

Table 4. Percentile Ranks of the Proficient and the Advanced Levels on the Most Recent NAEP

(Grades 4 & 8 – 2003; Grade 12 Reading – 2002; Grade 12 Math – 2000)

Grade	Proficient		Advanced	
	Reading	Mathematics	Reading	Mathematics
4	69	68	92	96
8	68	71	97	95
12	64	83	95	98

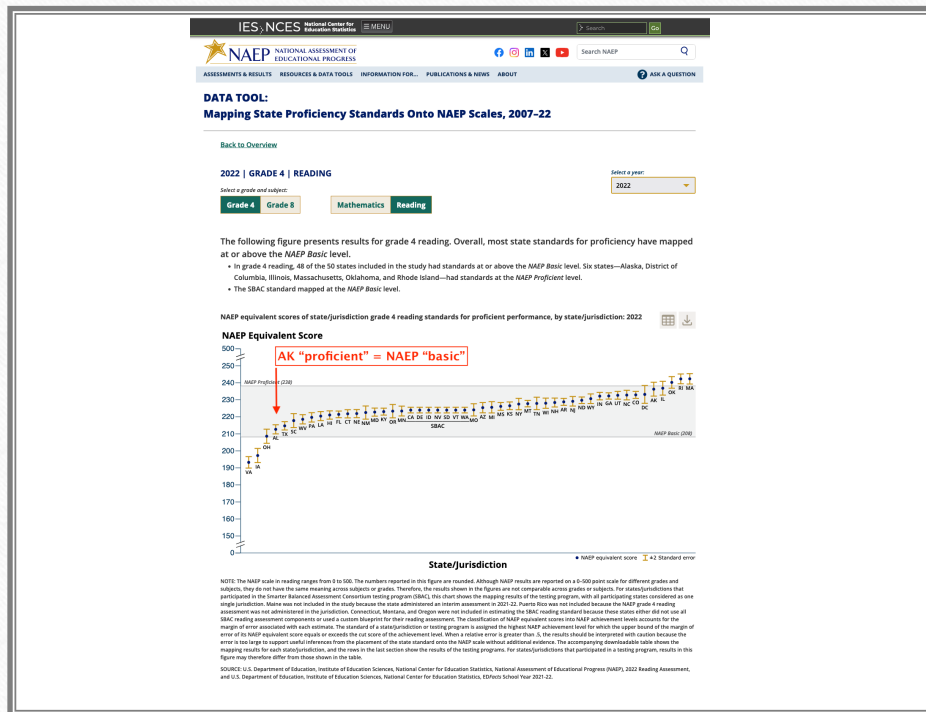
Source: Robert L. Linn, “Assessing Student Achievement: Requirements and Consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” paper presented at the University of California at Davis, Feb. 23, 2004; see also, Robert L. Linn, “Accountability: Responsibility and Reasonable Expectations,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 7 (October 2003): pp. 3-13, p. 5, Table 1.

As Table 4 shows, the proficient level on NAEP for grade 4 and 8 reading is set at almost the 70th percentile, while for grade 12, it’s at the slightly less rigorous 64th percentile. The proficiency levels for grade 8 and 12 math are even more challenging. Note, too, the extreme rigor of NAEP’s

Rosenberg, B. (2004, May). *What’s proficient? The No Child Left Behind Act and the many meanings of proficiency*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497886.pdf>

State Proficiency v. NAEP

State accountability testing is measuring individual achievement, and states tend to use “proficient” as a measure that falls in the “basic” range of NAEP, suggesting that state-level proficient is “grade level” approximate or at least what most student should be able to achieve at that grade.



Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales

Bracey on Test Data

Principle: Standardized norm-referenced tests will ignore and obscure anything that is unique about a school.

Principle: Rising test scores do not necessarily mean rising achievement.

Principle: Do not use a test for something other than what it was designed for without taking care to ensure it is appropriate for the other purpose.

Principle: Do not make important decisions about individuals or groups on the basis of a single test.

Understanding NAEP Data: Alaska

Student Economic Status

RESULTS FOR STUDENT GROUPS IN 2024

REPORTING GROUPS	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS	AVG. SCORE	PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE NAEP BASIC	PERCENTAGE AT NAEP PROFICIENT	PERCENTAGE AT NAEP ADVANCED	#
Race/ethnicity						
American Indian/Alaska Native	24	215	27	6		1
Asian	7	252	63	22		1
Black	2	‡	‡	‡		‡
Hispanic	8	252	65	19		1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4	‡	‡	‡		‡
Two or More Races	13	250	59	21		1
White	42	262	71	32		3
Gender						
Male	52	240	51	17		1
Female	48	253	63	26		3
Economically disadvantaged status						
Economically disadvantaged	46	235	45	14		1
Not economically disadvantaged	53	257	68	28		3

Rounds to zero.
‡ Reporting standards not met.
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the Economically Disadvantaged Status is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

Economic Gap Trend

SCORE GAPS FOR STUDENT GROUPS

- Data are not reported for Black students in 2024, because reporting standards were not met.
- In 2024, Hispanic students had an average score that was 9 points lower than that for White students. This performance gap was narrower than that in 2003 (21 points).
- In 2024, male students in Alaska had an average score that was lower than that for female students by 12 points.
- In 2024, students who were identified as economically disadvantaged had an average score that was 22 points lower than that for students who were identified as not economically disadvantaged. This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 2003 (24 points).

The Pernicious Predictability of State-Mandated Tests of Academic Achievement in the United States, Maroun and Tienken (2024)

- “Almost 63% of the variance in test performance was explained by social capital family income variables that influence the development of background knowledge. Background knowledge is a known predictor of standardized test results. Family income variables are immutable by schools. Only public policies, outside the control of school personnel, can influence family income.”

The Pernicious Predictability of State-Mandated Tests of Academic Achievement in the United States, Maroun and Tienken (2024)

- “Policy makers and education leaders should rethink the current reliance on standardized test results as the deciding factor to make decisions about student achievement, teacher quality, school effectiveness, and school leader quality. In effect, policies that use standardized test results to evaluate, reward, and sanction students and school personnel are doing nothing more than rewarding schools that serve advantaged students and punishing schools that serve disadvantaged students.”

References

Media Misrepresentations of NAEP

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- Kristof, N. (2023b, February 11). Two-thirds of kids struggle to read, and we know how to fix it. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/11/opinion/reading-kids-phonics.html>

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- [White Paper to Provide Context for NAEP Achievement Levels by Reviewing State and International Practices](#), Behuniak and Way (Feb 2022)
- [A History of NAEP Achievement Levels: Issues, Implementation, and Impact 1989–2009](#), Mary Lyn Bourque (Mar 2009)
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- Thomas, P.L. (2025, July 28). There is no literacy crisis in the U.S. Here's what's really happening. *The Washington Post*. <https://wapo.st/474758>