



# Top 10 Myths & Misconceptions Surrounding Alaska's K-12 Reading Crisis

TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL 111

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**Myth 1: ALL research indicates students should ALWAYS be socially promoted, even if they are far below expected proficiency in reading in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.**

On page three are 15 studies showing benefits of performance-based promotion systems for several states which use the Florida model reading intervention program, including the intervention strategy of having a minimum 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading standard for promotion.

Most studies critical of retention as an intervention strategy assume a child will simply repeat a year of the same coursework with the same or similar teacher. Few retention-critical studies account for programs with comprehensive reading interventions before and after the retention decision. Most of the studies I've reviewed that are critical of retention also agree that retention employed at younger ages has fewer harmful effects

## .15 Studies Showing Positive Effects of Performance-Based Promotion Policies

1. The Costs and Benefits of Test-Based Promotion

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3222671](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3222671)

2. The effects of test-based retention on student outcomes over time: Regression discontinuity

evidence from Florida <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S004727271730097X>

3. The Benefits of Florida's Test-Based Promotion System

<https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/benefits-floridas-test-based-promotion-system-5850.html>

4. Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG894.html>

5. Revisiting Grade Retention: An Evaluation of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy

<https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/edfp.2007.2.4.319>

6. Third Grade Retention Policy Leading to Better Student Performance Statewide

<http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/pdf/0666rpt.pdf>

7. Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind

[https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/cr\\_49.pdf](https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/cr_49.pdf)

8. State Highlights: K-3 Comprehensive Reading Programs

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.K3Reading.ImpactStudies.Summaries.August2017-1.pdf>

9. MISSISSIPPI'S LITERACY-BASED PROMOTION ACT: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ExcelinEd.MSGatewaytoSuccess.March2019.pdf>

10. INDIANA PUBLIC LAW 109: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ExcelinEd.IndianaPublicLaw109.ImpactStudy.October2018.pdf>

11. NEVADA READ BY GRADE THREE: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.NevadaReadbyGradeThree.ImpactStudy.July2017.pdf>

12. SOUTH CAROLINA READ TO SUCCEED: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.SouthCarolinaReadtoSucceed.ImpactStudy.March2017.pdf>

13. NORTH CAROLINA READ TO ACHIEVE: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.NorthCarolinaReadtoAchieve.ImpactStudy.January2017.pdf>

14. MICHIGAN'S READ BY GRADE THREE LAW: An Inside Look

[https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ExcelinEd.MI\\_ReadbyGradeThreeLaw.August2019.pdf](https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ExcelinEd.MI_ReadbyGradeThreeLaw.August2019.pdf)

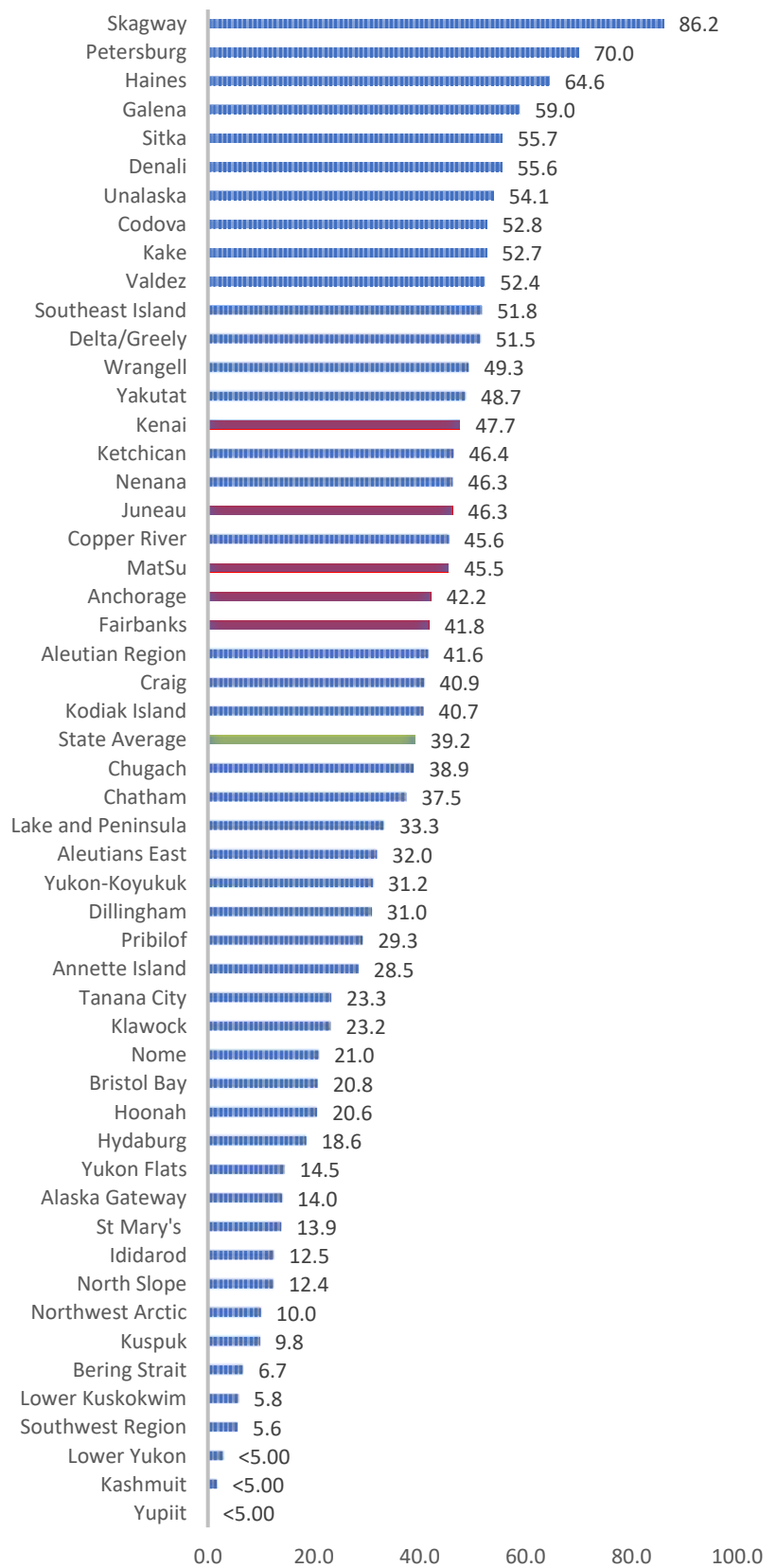
15. Test-Based Promotion and Student Performance in Florida and Arizona

<https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/test-based-promotion-student-performance-florida-arizona-MW.pdf>

**Myth 2: We don't need a minimum reading standard for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade promotion because urban students in Alaska have reading scores that are above average.** (Implying that rural schools are responsible for dragging our scores down dramatically).

Reality: PEAKS testing data shows the top performing districts in Alaska in English/language Arts (ELA) proficiency were all rural districts, led by Skagway at 86% proficiency in ELA. The three largest districts were (representing about half of the students in the state) ranked 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> out of 54 districts, scoring only slightly above the state average.

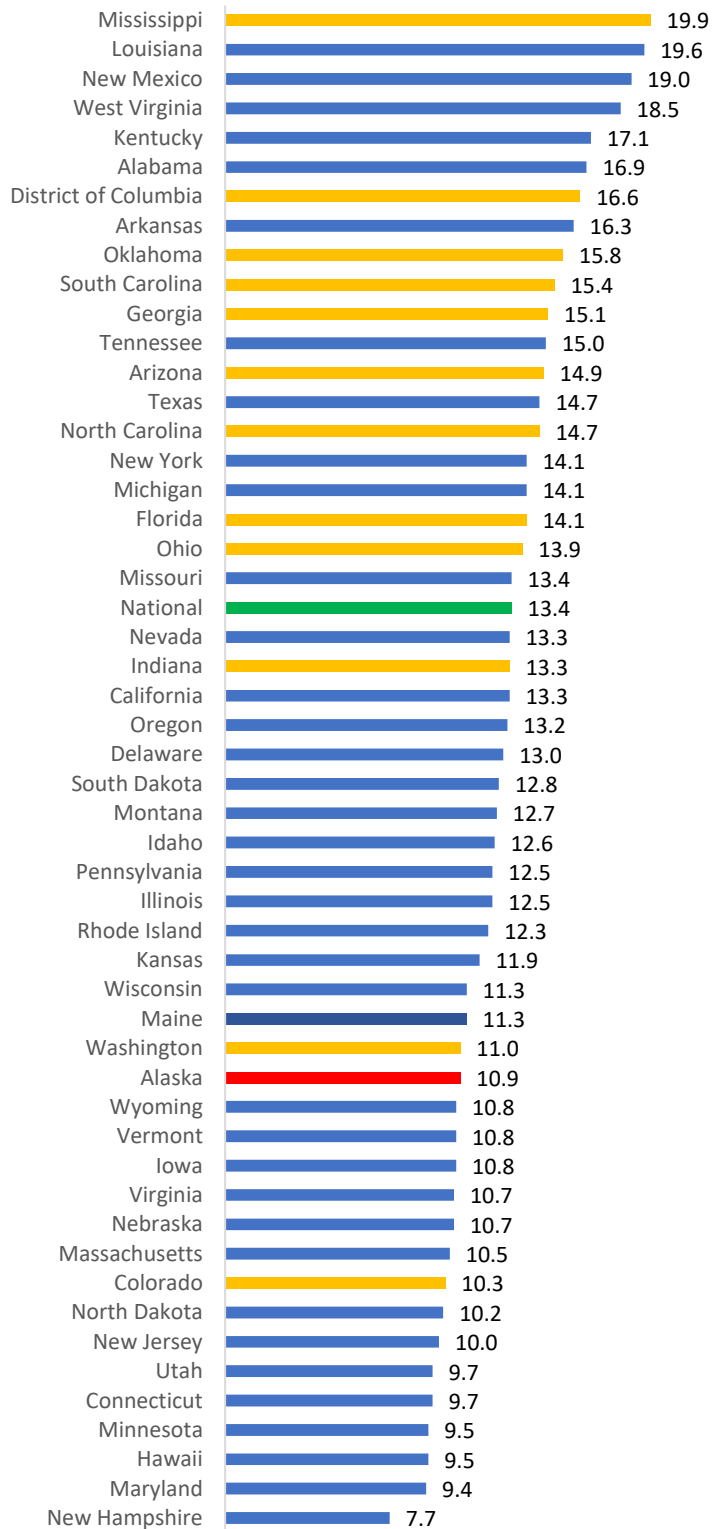
**FIGURE 2  
ALASKA SCHOOL DISTRICTS  
ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS PROFICIENCY  
PEAKS 2019**



**Myth 3: Poverty is the key contributor to Alaska scoring dead last in the NAEP US 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading for low-income and upper/middle-income students.**

Reality: Alaska has a poverty rate significantly below the US average (Figure 3). Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation, (81% higher than Alaska) and was 3<sup>rd</sup> in the US in low-income NAEP reading scores 2019. Mississippi’s reading rank was 44<sup>th</sup> in the US the year they started their comprehensive reading policy in 2013.

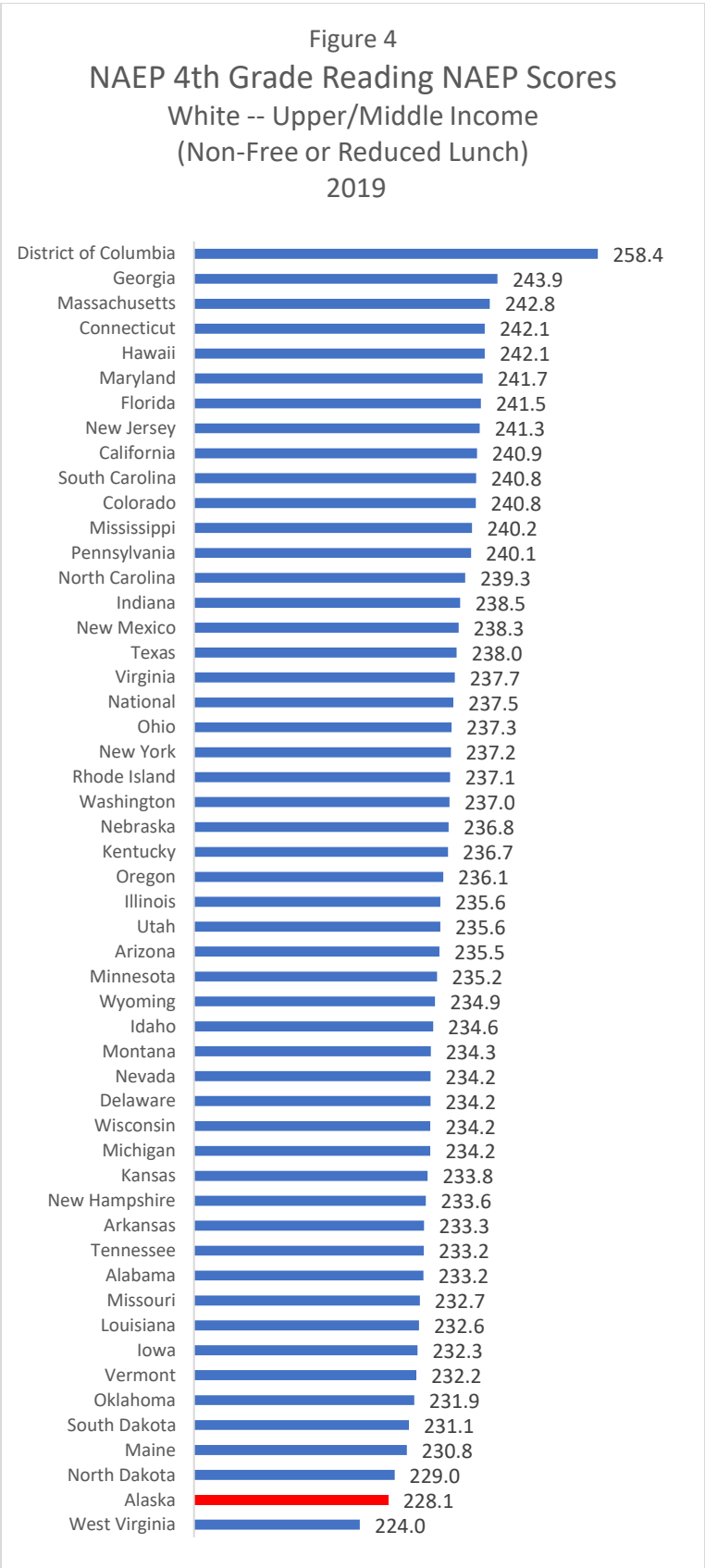
Figure 3  
2018 State Poverty Rates



**Myth 4: Ethnic minorities are primarily responsible for our low NAEP scores and white Alaskan students score above average.**

Reality: This is an offensive narrative that was promoted by some in the media. The truth is that white upper/middle-income students in Alaska had reading scores that were second to last in the US in 2019 – significantly below the US average for that group. (Figure 4)

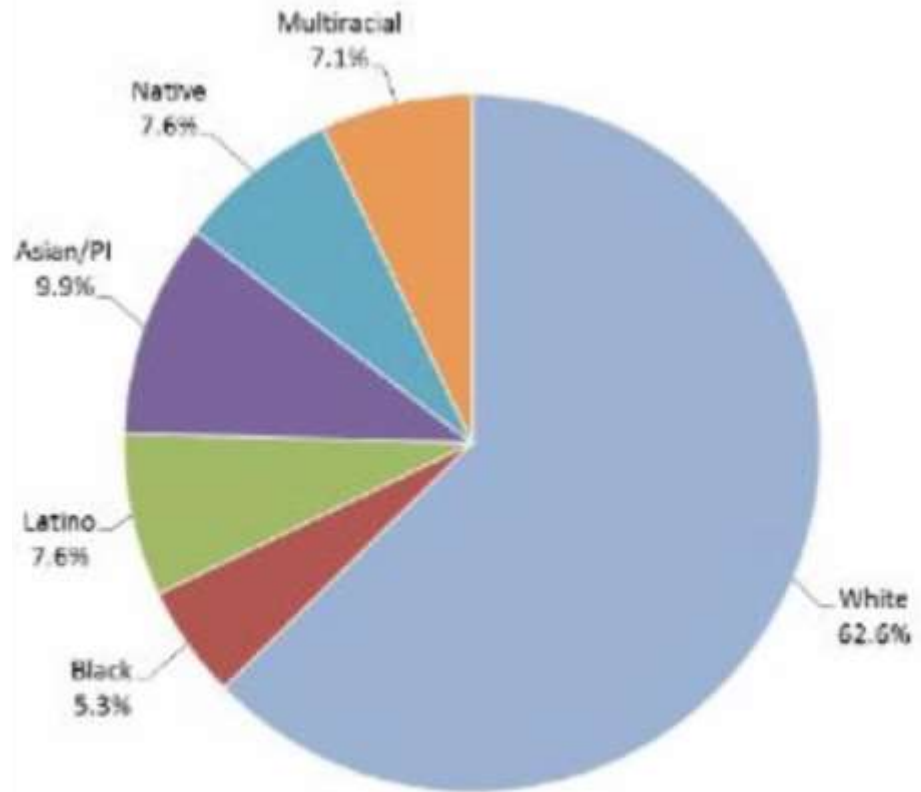
In 2019 NAEP reading scores for white upper/middle-income Alaskan 4<sup>th</sup> graders were statistically indistinguishable from scores posted by Miami-Dade Public Schools (MDPS) 4<sup>th</sup> graders. MDPS is a very large urban district with a student body of around 350,000 that is comprised of 93% ethnic minorities, 66% free or reduced lunch and 60% of their students come from homes where English is not the only language spoken.



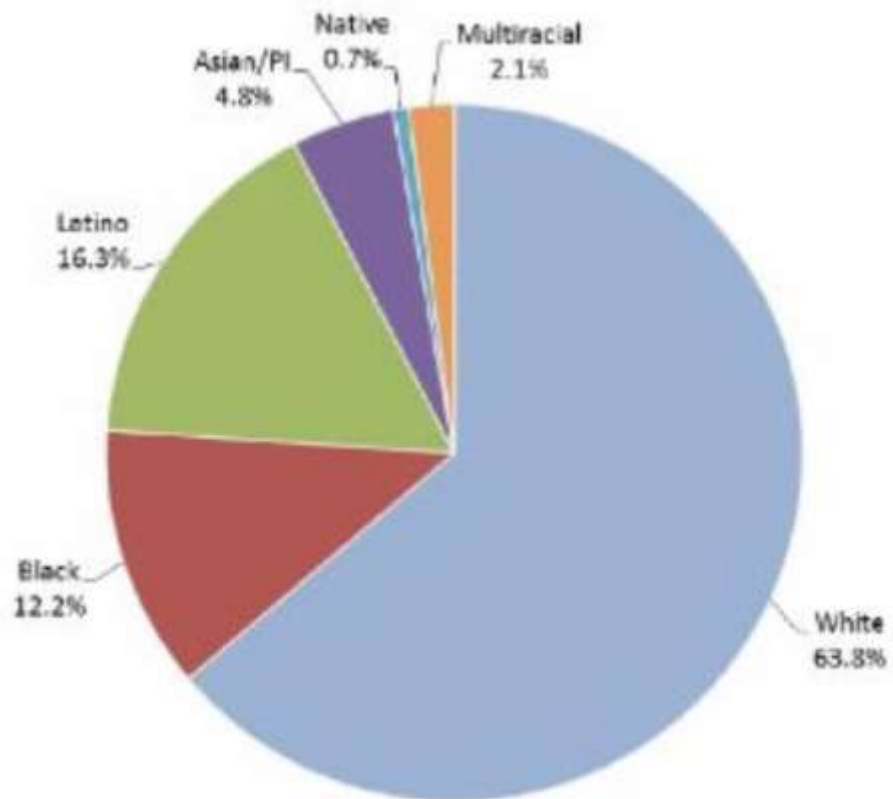
**Myth 5: Alaska's unusually high ethnic and linguistic diversity greatly contribute to reading test scores far below average.**

Reality: Alaskan public officials have frequently cited a 2015 paper from one UAA professor that concluded his hometown of Anchorage was one of the most diverse cities in the US. A quite different conclusion came from a 2021 collaborative investigation by a team of six PhDs from Penn State, Miami University, Kansas State, University of Akron, Brandman University and Boston University. In their collective assessment, Anchorage ranked 126<sup>th</sup> in ethnic diversity and 182<sup>nd</sup> in linguistic diversity among cities in the US.

<https://wallethub.com/edu/cities-with-the-most-and-least-ethno-racial-and-linguistic-diversity/10264>



**Anchorage, 2010**



**United States, 2010**

**Myth 6: We don't have to worry about our 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP reading scores because Alaska has above average growth in NAEP reading scores between 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.**

Reality: Though Alaska does experience above average growth between 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, our 8<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP reading scores were still 49<sup>th</sup> out of 51 for upper/middle income students and 50<sup>th</sup> for low-income students, about one full school year behind the US average.

NAEP Test Results <b>Alaska</b>			2003	2019
Grade	Subject	Status	US Ranking	
4th	Reading	Free or Reduced Lunch	49 <sup>th</sup>	51 <sup>st</sup>
4th	Math	Free or Reduced Lunch	36 <sup>th</sup>	50 <sup>th</sup>
4th	Reading	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	44 <sup>th</sup>	51 <sup>st</sup>
4th	Math	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	39 <sup>th</sup>	49 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Reading	Free or Reduced Lunch	49 <sup>th</sup>	50 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Math	Free or Reduced Lunch	29 <sup>th*</sup>	46 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Reading	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	47 <sup>th</sup>	49 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Math	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	31 <sup>st*</sup>	45 <sup>th</sup>
Rankings are all 50 states and DC				
NAEP Test Results <b>Florida</b>			2003	2019
Grade	Subject	Status	US Ranking	
4th	Reading	Free or Reduced Lunch	28 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
4th	Math	Free or Reduced Lunch	30 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
4th	Reading	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	15 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
4th	Math	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	18 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Reading	Free or Reduced Lunch	38 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Math	Free or Reduced Lunch	40 <sup>th*</sup>	25 <sup>st</sup>
8th	Reading	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	40 <sup>th</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup>
8th	Math	Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	37 <sup>th*</sup>	31 <sup>th</sup>
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**Myth 7: High quality Pre-K improves NAEP scores more than comprehensive reading policies.**

Reality: Florida rose to #1 in the nation in low-income 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP scores *before* their first Pre-K students took the NAEP in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Florida added a comprehensive reading policy in 2002 that included performance-based promotion as an intervention strategy. In 2003 Florida was 28<sup>th</sup> in the US in NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores and rose rapidly to #1 in the US by 2009. Pre-K in Florida didn't come until 2005. The first Florida Pre-K cohort was still in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when Florida 4<sup>th</sup> graders were testing 1st in the nation in reading.

Alabama has had the highest quality Pre-K system in the US for the last 13 years according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Unfortunately, that investment in high quality has not seemed to pay off in NAEP scores. Over the last 13 years Alabama has fallen from 47<sup>th</sup> to 50<sup>th</sup> in low-income NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores. Alaska is the only state that scores lower.

<https://www.al.com/news/2019/04/alabama-pre-k-once-again-tops-nation-in-quality.html>

**Myth 8: States that use the Florida performance-based promotion 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading model saw their test scores increase in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading but didn't improve 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores or math scores.**

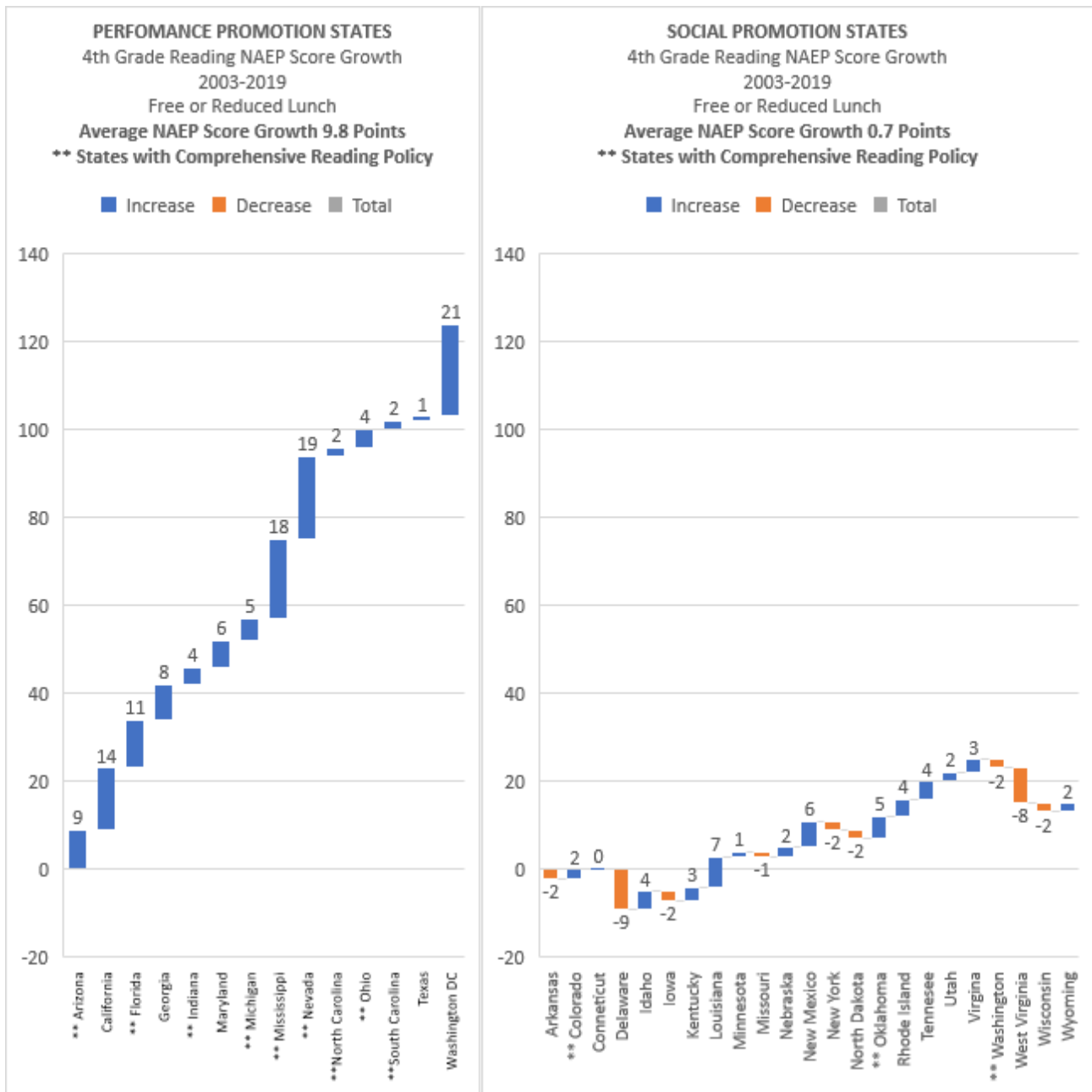
Reality: Scores for 8<sup>th</sup> graders take several years to materialize for a reading policy that's focused on K-3 reading. As the early leader in comprehensive reading policy, Florida is now starting to see dramatic improvement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP reading scores as well as NAEP math scores. In 2003, Florida ranked 38<sup>th</sup> in the US in low-income 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading NAEP scores -- by 2019 Florida was 5<sup>th</sup> in the US. In Florida 4<sup>th</sup> grade low-income NAEP math ranking went from 30<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> between 2003 and 2019. Low-income 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores in Florida went from 40<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>. Florida has seen substantial growth in all eight NAEP measurements since 2003.

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**Myth 9: With a comprehensive reading policy that socially promotes very weak readers, Alaska’s kids can still achieve NAEP scores near the US average in a few years.**

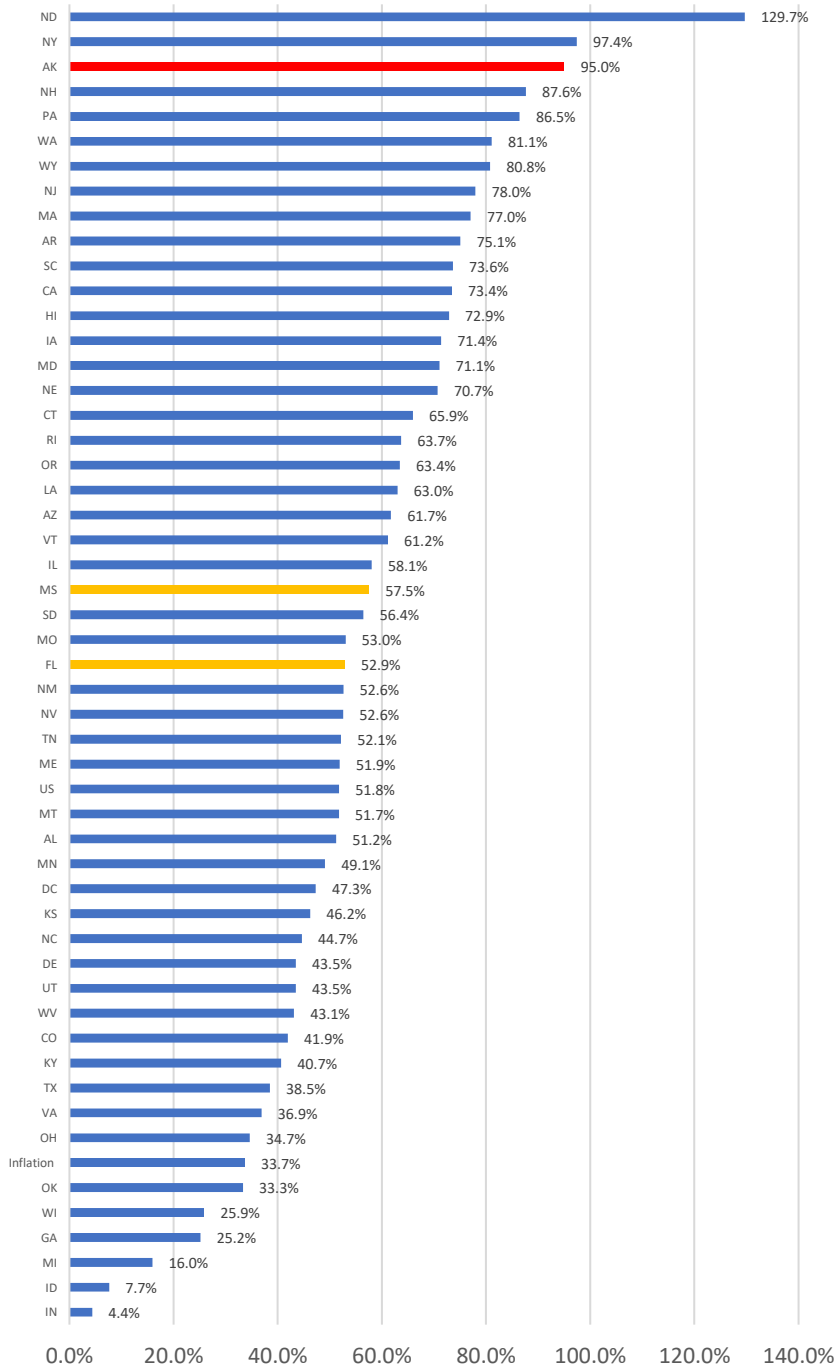
Reality: Of the 23 states with statewide reading policies that have used the approach of socially promoting very poor readers, the average low-income reading NAEP score increase was only 0.7 points over the last 16 years. In Alaska, low-income students were 18 points below the US average. Upper/middle-income Alaskan kids were 12 points below the US average. A 0.7-point increase would leave Alaska firmly at the bottom.

In the 14 states that have state reading policies and require at least minimal reading proficiency to be promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the average 4<sup>th</sup> grade low-income NAEP reading growth was 9.8 points over the last 16 years – or 14 times faster than states with social promotion.



**Figure 7**  
**2003-2018 Increase in K-12 Spending**  
**Per Student in Average Daily Attendance**

Source NEA Rankings and Estimates



**Myth 10: Florida and Mississippi dramatically increased their per student spending to add universal Pre-K and a comprehensive reading policy.**

Reality: According to NEA Rankings and Estimates, Florida increased per student expenditures about 52% and Mississippi about 57% between 2003 and 2018 – very close to the national average percentage increase for that period. In that same time period Alaska increased per student spending more than 90%. Florida and Mississippi recognized that early childhood literacy was the highest priority of their education system and reallocated resources from other programs to fund early childhood literacy efforts with very little additional revenue.

## Conclusion

Kids who haven't learned to read, can't read to learn and face dismal prospects in life. Despite favorable demographics and funding compared to other states, Alaska has slipped to the very bottom of NAEP reading scores across the spectrum of race and economic status.

Alaska's kids are just as bright, our education professionals are just as dedicated and our parents love their kids just as much as anywhere else. Alaska's kids can't afford another year of inaction on a comprehensive reading policy to address our childhood literacy crisis.

