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# STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
## *NAEP 2011 Mathematics and Reading*


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The year 2011 marks an important milestone for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We now have two decades of results from the main NAEP mathematics assessment in grades 4 and 8. This year also marks two decades in which NAEP has been able to report state-by-state results as well as data for the nation. And it marks two decades in which NAEP has reported results in terms of achievement levels, which are standards of what students should know and be able to do, as well as by scale scores and percentiles.

The NAEP mathematics framework, the state NAEP program, and the achievement levels of *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced* all began with the 1990 NAEP assessment. They were all ushered in by legislation passed by Congress on a large bipartisan vote in 1988, and they started an important new chapter in NAEP—and in education accountability more generally—that is still being played out today. Unfortunately, the chief sponsor of that legislation, Sen. Edward Kennedy, of Massachusetts, is no longer with us. But the new, more prominent NAEP that Ted Kennedy helped to create shows that major improvements in math achievement have indeed taken place over the past two decades.

In 1990, just 13 percent of fourth graders nationwide reached the *Proficient* achievement level in math. This year 40 percent reached *Proficient*. In 1990 the national average for fourth graders was 213. This year it has climbed to 241. That is a gain of 28 points, which is more than half of the 50-point difference between the average for fourth and eighth graders back in 1990. There is no data on how fifth, sixth, or seventh graders would actually score on NAEP, but it seems fair to say that a gain of more than half the distance between fourth and eighth grades means that the average fourth grader today may be performing about as well in math as the average sixth grader did two decades ago.

There have been major gains over the past two decades in eighth-grade math as well—from 15 percent to 35 percent reaching the *Proficient* achievement level, and a 21-point rise in the national

average. That increase in the eighth-grade national average is more than half the distance to the average 1990 score for 12th graders on the NAEP cross-grade scale. The cross-grade scale was discontinued for 12th grade after the year 2000 because of changes in the 12th grade NAEP exam, but it has been maintained at grades 4 and 8. But looking back at that scale shows that the gains at eighth-grade math over not too long a time have been very substantial.

Unfortunately, the gains over two decades in NAEP reading have been quite small—just 5 points in the percentage of students at or above *Proficient* at both fourth and eighth grades, compared to a gain of 20 and 27 percentage points at or above *Proficient* in NAEP math. And there has been an interesting flip. When the National Assessment Governing Board set the NAEP achievement levels around 1990, the percent at or above *Proficient* was far higher in reading than in math. This year the proportion reaching *Proficient* is higher in math.

The improvement in mathematics achievement undoubtedly reflects the success of math instruction in our schools because math is almost exclusively a school subject taught almost entirely in math classes—although Sudoku and some computer games may be helping. It is quite different for reading, where the achievement that NAEP measures also reflects how much children read outside of school and the reading demands across the curriculum, not just in reading classes or English language arts.

However, the improvements in math clearly have not been enough. Over the past eight years progress has slowed, particularly at grade 4 where it had been very rapid for more than a decade. The percentage of students below *Basic* has been reduced substantially, but it remains far too high—particularly at eighth grade for blacks and Hispanics. In public schools nationwide, 50 percent of black eighth graders and 40 percent of Hispanics score below the *Basic* achievement level. This means they still have difficulty doing basic arithmetic, using whole numbers, decimals, fractions, and percents. Unfortunately, students at this level probably will have difficulty with the algebra they need to put them on track for college or a well-paying job.

Also, the gaps between the races remain unacceptably wide. At eighth grade the gaps between white and black students and between whites and Hispanics have narrowed by about one-quarter compared to the year 2000, but they still are about as large as they were when the current NAEP math assessment was first given in 1990.

The two decades of state-by-state NAEP data show that while progress overall has been substantial, there have been very substantial differences in the gains in different states. In fourth-grade math since 1992, the average score in North Carolina has increased 32 points; in Maryland by 30; in Mississippi and Arkansas 28 points; and in Massachusetts and Louisiana 27. At the other end of the list of average score increases, Iowa and Maine have gained just 13 points, and Nebraska 14.

In eighth-grade math, the largest increases since 1992 have been in North Carolina, 28 points, and in Texas and Massachusetts, 26 points. Conversely, the smallest gains have been in Iowa, just 2 points; Nebraska, 6 points; and North Dakota and Utah, 9 points.

Clearly, NAEP shows that some states have moved ahead strongly over the past two decades. Others have gained much less than the nation as a whole, and their relative standing has slipped, which has become a concern of state leaders, particularly in Iowa.

The District of Columbia has made large gains in both fourth- and eighth-grade math but still ranks below all the states.

The first state NAEP assessments had a large number of states volunteering—37 plus D.C. in 1990, and 41 plus D.C. in 1992, but the roster was incomplete. Since 2003 all states have been required to participate in the NAEP assessments of mathematics and reading at both grades 4 and 8. Over the past eight years, the largest gains overall were in Maryland, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia—based on the increase in the percent reaching *Proficient* in math and reading for grades 4 and 8 combined. By the same accounting, several other states stood virtually still—notably, Iowa, New York, and West Virginia.

NAEP by itself cannot tell us why there have been gains or stagnation. But it does show us where to look, and where to delve into policies and practices that may have made a difference.

There is one important new feature in this year's NAEP Report Cards—a state-by-state listing of how well different jurisdictions met the Governing Board's goals for inclusion of students with disabilities (SD) and English language learners (ELL). As the maps at the back of the two reports show, almost all states met the target of including at least 95 percent of students selected for their samples in math, and more than three-quarters did so in reading. However, quite a few more states failed to meet the target of assessing at least 85 percent of the students identified as either SD or ELL.

The exclusion rates continued to drop, but they remain considerably greater for students with disabilities than for English language learners and larger in the reading assessment than in math. And where the exclusion rates are high, there continue to be questions about whether the reported results for SD and ELL students are fully representative.

For the next state NAEP assessments in 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics will begin to implement the new rules for accommodations and exclusions, adopted by the Governing Board last year. Hopefully, this will lead to more uniformity and more inclusion.

At today's release, if we were talking about only 2011 NAEP results, there wouldn't be much to say—a one-point rise since 2009 in the national average for math at both fourth and eighth grades. That's good news, of course, but nothing very startling or notable.

In reading, as you've been told, there's been a one-point rise in the national average at grade 8 and no change at grade 4, which is deeply disappointing because the fourth-grade reading scores have been flat now for four years.

Over the past two decades major gains have occurred in mathematics achievement, but only modest improvements in reading.

We must now find a way to regain the momentum in math and accelerate student progress in both subjects.