



STATEMENT ON *THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:*
2013 Mathematics and Reading, Grade 12

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The last year of high school is both exciting and important. It serves as a launching point for college and careers, and a useful gauge of a student's experience over the course of his or her education. Today's results give us much to consider regarding the progress of our high school seniors. The results should trouble educators, administrators, and the public at large, but at the same time they offer an opportunity to move forward purposefully in addressing the concerns they raise.

The first thing we see is that the scores and percentages of 12th graders reaching *Proficient* have not changed since 2009. At first glance, it seems that while we are not making progress, at least we are not going backward. However, the truth of the matter is that these scores and percentages are lower when compared with the same data from 1992. When we think about the push to make sure students are academically prepared for college and careers, this decline is troubling.

There are unsettling trends for African American performance in particular: The average reading score for African American students was 5 points lower in 2013 than in 1992. In addition, the score gap between white and black students in reading was 6 points wider in 2013 than in 1992. And in 2013, only 4 percent of students scoring at the 75th percentile were African American, yet African American students represent 14 percent of the population as a whole.

The news was equally unsettling for English language learners (ELLs): Their average reading score in 2013 was 3 points lower than in 2009 and 10 points lower than in 2005. Even more alarming was the 53-point gap in the 2013 results between ELL and non-ELL students.

What is happening to produce these results? In the case of ELL students, experts have long noted two intertwined practices that may very well be depressing achievement. The first is making learning the English language a bridge ELL students must first cross before they are allowed to attend other classes, where they have opportunities to study fields of genuine interest to them, such as science, history, and literature.

The second practice is a consequence of the first; left without the rich texts of academic disciplines to read, ELL students are provided instead with "mush," i.e., low-level texts that in the words of one ELL expert are "limited, restricted, and thin in meaning." These texts don't offer students the complex vocabulary, syntax, or concepts they need to learn to be successful in college and careers.

But the practices described above don't just trap ELL students in a vicious circle: Too often, African American and special education students also fall victim to this well-intentioned but deeply damaging approach to reading. Reading watered-down texts is quite common for "language minorities"—students

who know and speak English only but don't perform much better than ELL students, whose first language is not English. In the words of leading ELL expert Lily Wong Fillmore:

Language minority students find themselves increasingly segregated whether by schools or by classes, where the materials are pitched at a much lower level than materials meant for mainstream students. ... English learners, especially, are provided adapted texts—materials that are so greatly simplified that they provide virtually no exposure to the forms and structures of the language they should be learning. ... [There's] a lot of attention and energy focused on turning ELLs into English speakers, and not nearly enough on educating them. What ELLs and language minority students need are authentic and age-appropriate texts, which they work on with appropriate instructional support from teachers who know how to support language development.

The NAEP contextual variables offer several additional corroborating insights regarding why we may be seeing these trends:

- Students who strongly disagreed with the statement that “reading is enjoyable” had an average score that was *45 points lower* than those who strongly agreed with the claim, whereas the overwhelming majority (87 percent) of 12th graders scoring at the 75th percentile reported that reading is enjoyable.
- Students who strongly disagreed with the statement “When I read books, I learn a lot” scored *45 points lower* than students who strongly agreed with the statement.
- Students who reported never or hardly ever discussing their interpretations of reading in class had average scores *22 points lower* than those who reported doing these tasks every day or almost every day in class. Likewise, students who reported never or hardly ever being asked to explain what they read had average scores *28 points lower* than those who reported doing that every day or almost every day in class.

Simply put, there is a strong correlation between student performance on NAEP and both how students feel about reading (its enjoyment and usefulness) and how regularly they engage in close reading, when they are asked to draw evidence from meaningful texts to support their claims and conclusions. It is clear that concentrated practice matters.

It is also clear that acquiring more meaningful, high-level reading skills matters. It's instructive to look at the skills students are likely to demonstrate at each NAEP achievement level:

- At the *Advanced* level, students are likely to be able to *explain* the effectiveness of a persuasion strategy or the central purpose of speech with supporting ideas.
- At the *Proficient* level, students are likely to be able to *provide supporting ideas* for their interpretation of a historical speech and recognize the meaning of words in that speech.
- At the *Basic* level, students are likely to be able to *recognize an interpretation of an introductory sentence* in a historical speech.

The evidence is in. And while the picture presented in the 12th-grade report is troubling, a path forward is in sight. My hope is that this deeper look at possible reasons behind the results from the latest NAEP tests will provide teachers and other educators concrete ideas for next steps about how to improve students' performance on the next NAEP grade 12 assessment and, more important, how to better prepare them for the rigors of college and careers. Being able to read and cite evidence differentiates strong from weak student performance on NAEP. Being able to locate and deploy evidence from content-rich texts are also

hallmarks of college and workplace reading and writing. The data suggest that strengthening students' reading skills through daily practice of these tasks—asking 12th-grade students (and students of all ages) to write and talk regularly about the challenging texts they read—matters, and matters a lot.