The Campaign for GRADE-LEVEL READING

THE NATION'S REPORT CARD

A CALL TO ACTION FOR RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING GAPS

CONTENTS

PREFACE

By Ralph Smith

**Founding Managing Director,
Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR)**

This report takes up the audacious task of capturing the musings, observations, and recommendations of four dozen leading thought, research, policy, and practice leaders in the education arena. They accepted our invitation to share their varying (sometimes aligned, sometimes conflicting) perspectives on the role and significance of what so many of us recognize as "the Nation's Report Card" — the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). No doubt, the fact that we were not seeking to forge even a fragile consensus helped spur the affirmative decision from almost every person invited.

The "Decoding NAEP" conversations occurred amidst fierce disagreement over the appropriate federal role in education generally. The backdrop was one of noise, tumult, and turbulence. Even so, we are delighted to note and the transcripts will attest to the fact that the participants in "Decoding NAEP" embraced and modeled the aspiration to "disagree better" and to view slivers of agreement as possibilities to build common ground.

So what could be even more audacious than the report itself? Our hope, expectation, and determination that the takeaways from this report will fuel the continuation of the conversation and will engage more thought, policy, research, and practice leaders as well as an even larger audience than the 1,072 individuals who attended one or more of the webinars and the 2,783 who registered to get access to the recordings.

What undergirds this audacity is the consensus we did not seek but found anyway. The consensus is that NAEP, albeit imperfect, has a continuing role to play as an increasingly efficient, effective and reliable federal accountability metric for the whole nation — all states, all school districts, all schools, all students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across **nine webinars hosted by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading,** 50 education thought leaders — including distinguished policymakers, advocates, researchers, and educators from across the ideological spectrum — came together throughout 2025 to reflect on what the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tells us about the state of student achievement and promising routes to improvement.

The "Decoding NAEP" series was sparked by the 2024 NAEP results, which, following the troubling 2022 findings, underscored the opportunity to renew focus on increasing achievement — especially among students from economically fragile families and historically marginalized communities.

Though views differed, a shared conviction emerged: **NAEP remains the nation's benchmark of student achievement,** the one consistent instrument capable of showing both how far we've come and how far we have to go.

As a follow-up to the webinars, *The Nation's Report Card* is not a verdict with iron-clad findings. Instead, it's a call to broaden the discussion further; to draw more thought, research, policy, and practice leaders toward open-ended curiosity about how we will boost student achievement; and, beyond dialogue, to prompt the kind of bold, sustained action that will improve outcomes for our children.

The panelists in this series challenge us all to approach NAEP as a catalyst for problem-solving rather than a scoreboard of disappointment. For this Executive Summary, we call out six persistent themes of the webinar dialogues, curated to continue the conversation:

> "Mississippi is seventh in the country in fourth-grade reading; they were 49th not very long ago. This is a movable, changeable situation." — **Kevin Huffman, CEO of Accelerate and the former Tennessee state education chief**

1. Progress Is Possible

From the 1990s through the mid-2000s, NAEP data tracked real national gains and narrowing gaps. More recently, Mississippi, Alabama, and cities such as Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles have shown that serious gains in student performance can be made when policy, focus, leadership, and execution are aligned. The shared message: The tools to raise student achievement for all children already exist — what's needed is the will to use them relentlessly. "The question becomes, how do we keep the main thing the main thing," Margaret Spellings, former U.S. Secretary of Education, reminded webinar attendees.

2. NAEP = Accountability Trigger

Panelists captured NAEP's strengths as both compass and mirror: a compass that helps states stay oriented toward student achievement, and a mirror that reflects uncomfortable truths about what is and isn't working. Its consistency offers a rare anchor of accountability in an era of rapid shifts in policy, culture, and expectation. The call was to use that stability to steer action, not to assign blame.

> "That's point number one I will stand on the rooftop and share: NAEP matters."
> — **Katie Jenner, Indiana Secretary of Education**

3. Beyond Averages, Real Insights

Broad averages conceal the complexity — and the hope — within NAEP results and other research data that NAEP spurs. Disaggregating by income, race, family makeup, and local context reveals wide variation and clearer lessons about what drives success. Panelists urged a commitment to further research and deep analysis so that states, districts, individual educators, parents, and policymakers alike can act on what the data truly shows rather than what headlines imply.

> "If I could do anything, I'd blow up that we just keep using averages when we talk about NAEP." — **Aimee Rogstad Guidera, Secretary of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia**

4. States Must Lead

Governors, legislators, and education chiefs hold the authority and budget to turn NAEP results into action by setting clear goals, especially for reducing "Below Basic" rates, and tracking them transparently. Districts and schools can innovate, but states must lead the way — pushing reforms down through policy, funding, and expectation. The invitation to policymakers: treat NAEP not as a report card, but as a governing tool and feedback loop connecting states, districts, and communities in pursuit of higher achievement for every student.

> "The states that get results are willing to make school districts do things. They are willing to drive change from the state down to the local level." — **Kevin Huffman, CEO of Accelerate and former Tennessee state education chief**

Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic: What Do the Labels Really Mean?

When NAEP results make headlines, the terms "Proficient," "Basic," and "Below Basic" drive much of the conversation. But what do these performance levels actually represent?

NAEP Proficient: An Ambitious Standard

The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) provides descriptors for each level, and NAEP Proficient represents a relatively high benchmark. For fourth-grade reading, NAEP Proficient students can integrate and interpret texts, make connections between ideas, and demonstrate understanding of an author's craft and purpose. "A lot of thought has gone into these proficiency levels and their meanings," Morgan Scott Polikoff, Professor at USC's Rossier School of Education, said. "The NAEP Proficient threshold is higher than the proficiency threshold in just about any state."

NAEP Basic: Below Most State "Proficient" Standards

NAEP Basic falls between state proficiency cuts and NAEP's higher proficiency bar. For fourth-grade mathematics, for example, Basic students "should be able to estimate and use basic facts and perform simple computations with whole numbers, show some understanding of fractions and decimals, and solve some simple real-world problems."

Below Basic: Not Illiterate, But Struggling

A crucial clarification emerged during the webinar: Below Basic doesn't mean illiterate. It refers to students who may not be able to locate explicit details from a text, or make a simple inference about characters' actions or understand the meaning of familiar words, or restate a problem presented in a section of a text. As Polikoff explained, "It doesn't mean that kids can't read or that they're illiterate. It means that they're lacking some skill that NAGB thinks is required for you to be labeled as Basic."

The Comprehension Connection

Munro Richardson from Read Charlotte highlighted a critical insight: "As early as second grade, children's listening comprehension skills are the biggest predictor of their reading comprehension." Since NAEP fundamentally measures comprehension, this connection between oral and written understanding offers important clues for intervention strategies.

> "We know what works, who needs help, and how to help them. It's now on implementation." — **Margaret Spellings, former U.S. Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush**

5. Implementation Is the Difference Maker

Even strong policies to improve student achievement falter in execution. Panelists emphasized the importance of monitoring whether new curricula are actually taught as designed, whether professional development changes classroom practice, and whether interventions reach the intended students. Implementation, many argued, is where reform lives or dies — and where optimism becomes operational.

> "I am heartbroken about how little you hear about educational outcomes from our leaders. That's both sides of the aisle. That's federal and state." — **John King, Jr., Ed.D., the Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama and now Chancellor of SUNY**

6. Choosing Progress Over Fatalism

NAEP's value lies not in confirming despair but in rekindling belief. Panelists warned that cynicism about public education can be fueled by declining average NAEP scores and become self-fulfilling. "We can't let this powerful tool of accountability become a sledgehammer assisting a teardown," the report concludes. The mindset that fuels progress — a confidence that all students can achieve — must be restored. Keeping the faith that NAEP and other data, used wisely, can drive better outcomes is key to choosing progress.

As the next NAEP results approach, the work of interpretation and action must continue. The leaders in this series began important work that others — state officials, funders, researchers, advocates, parents, and educators — are invited to carry forward. How can more states turn NAEP from a report card into a tool that drives policy and practice? What systems or partnerships can surface student achievement and other data in real-time to anticipate and improve the 2026 NAEP results rather than react to them? How will we replace fatalism with confidence so that each new NAEP release becomes a moment to recommit to making gains?

The Nation's Report Card is intended not to close that conversation but to widen it, ensuring that NAEP remains a catalyst for collaboration, accountability, and renewed belief in what American students can achieve.

INTRODUCTION

By John Gomperts, Executive Fellow to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The NAEP release of student achievement results in January has been arguably one of the most consequential education stories of 2025. The results gave us clear evidence that we are not doing as well as we want with student achievement, and especially with respect to the growing gap between high performers and those who are testing at NAEP's "Below Basic" level.

Because of the importance of NAEP and these results, and the context in which all of this is happening, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) from February through September 2025 devoted a great deal of time to understanding what these NAEP results do and don't tell us, and what we need to do to get back on track in terms of increasing student achievement — particularly among students from economically fragile families and historically marginalized communities. Under the umbrella of "Decoding NAEP," we held a series of nine, 90-minute webinars that brought together 50 leading educators, policymakers, and researchers as panelists and attracted 1,072 attendees to one or multiple sessions.

Given the rich content and valuable insights that our sessions yielded, we decided to pull together this report to memorialize what we heard and learned about NAEP and the most recent NAEP results, and to underscore the strong takeaways about where we need to focus going forward. *The Nation's Report Card* reflects CGLR's historic role as a platform where leaders meet, connect, and share insights about student achievement and school accountability.

CHAPTER 1 draws on our panelists' historical perspective to affirm NAEP's importance as "the Nation's Report Card" and recount how NAEP has played a critical role in past improvements in student achievement — and can do so again.

CHAPTER 2 synthesizes our panelists' expertise into seven time-tested lessons for interpreting and acting on NAEP results every two years in a way that harnesses NAEP's power as an engine for improving student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and combating the fatalism that stands in the way of progress.

CHAPTER 3 reflects our panelists' detailed analyses of the 2024 NAEP results. It spotlights the specific success stories that show that positive change is possible when we refuse to accept anything less than increasing achievement. In closing, the report outlines the actions that NAEP 2024 points us toward and includes my own observations about what I heard and how we move forward.

We hope you find this to be a valuable resource that helps us to ready ourselves for future NAEP results, and to strengthen our collective resolve to prioritize student achievement in a way that will drive real progress.

CHAPTER I

PROGRESS ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IS NON-NEGOTIABLE, AND HISTORY TELLS US THAT PROGRESS BEGINS WITH NAEP

The 2024 NAEP results landed with devastating clarity. Nearly 40% of fourth graders read "Below Basic" and children from historically marginalized communities showed achievement declines at all ages compared to 2022's results, which were themselves alarming.

"We're presenting leading indicators of incredible, incredible problems," is how webinar panelist Mark Schneider, the former head of the two agencies that control and execute NAEP, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), summarized results released in January 2025.

Across CGLR's "Decoding NAEP" series, 50 expert panelists consistently confirmed the value of the NAEP. To these panelists, **student achievement is America's academic North Star,** and NAEP is a key benchmark that keeps us honest about progress toward that North Star across states and time.

What many panelists agreed is that **NAEP serves as an essential starting point — an attention-getter, narrative-setter, and accountability trigger that forces honest conversation about student achievement.** Like the report cards parents receive about their children, NAEP gives us not a complete picture but a vital signal that demands deeper investigation.

Especially in an era when schools are buffeted by culture wars and are dealing with rapid change in the forms of artificial intelligence and new educational technology, NAEP represents a rarity — **a stable and reliable benchmark with a unique ability to prompt comprehensive analysis, reforms, and interventions.** It is the beginning of the conversation about student achievement, not the end. But it is an essential beginning that no other national moment is as well positioned to provide.

Katie Jenner, Indiana Secretary of Education, perhaps captured the consensus best.

> "NAEP really matters for our country. Having an assessment like that — a Nation's Report Card — and holding ourselves accountable across our country. So **that's point number one that I will stand on the rooftop and share: NAEP matters.**"

NAEP matters, explained former Department of Education Secretary John King, because of the steady guidance its results provide to educators and policymakers, particularly at the state level.

> "We want at least once a year, like a checkup at the doctor, to find out how we're doing. The tests have to be good, and we have to invest in them. **We talk about the Mississippi Miracle — we wouldn't know about it without NAEP data.** We also need NAEP to know where we're stalling most so we can intervene. Some states don't have the level of [testing] resources they need."

NAEP is hardly perfect. There are sincere and important efforts to modernize and improve what NAEP tests, the way the test is administered, and how the data is collected and analyzed. But any improvements should not alter the assessment's fundamental role and significance. (See *"Why NAEP May Be Flawed and Yet Invaluable" on* page 12.)

NAEP achieves a critical spotlighting effect through **unchangingly rigorous standards across a constantly shifting landscape of assessments in 50 states and 15,000 school districts.** The "Basic" and "Proficient" levels have long set higher bars for our children's achievement than state assessments. Fourth-grade Basic measures not only simple literacy, but whether students can comprehend and compute well enough to solve real-world problems that any parent would want their 9- or 10-year-old to be able to solve. When 2 in 5 of our students are "Below Basic," the implications for America's equality, economic competitiveness, and democracy are undeniable.

Those who know NAEP's history (and many of our panelists have played key roles in that history) understand that NAEP also matters because it tells the too often forgotten story of how public schooling in America can succeed.

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Why NAEP May Be Flawed and Yet Invaluable

Why is upholding NAEP as a national report card and using its results intentionally and accurately so key to lifting student achievement for all students? Here are eight reasons mentioned by our panelists.

1 **NAEP alone is a consistent nationwide benchmark across diverse educational landscapes.** It's "the only measure that gives us apples-to-apples comparisons between states," said Charlie Barone, Senior Director of Innovation at the National Parents Union. It alone compares performance in public and private schools nationwide.

2 **NAEP's methodology is efficient, rigorous, and time-tested.** Its random sampling of 100 schools per grade per state, with roughly 50 students per sampled school, yields approximately 5,000 student assessments per state. "For most states, even a mean difference of a couple of points will be statistically significant," said Munro Richardson.

3 **The standards themselves set a higher bar than most state assessments.** "Proficient" represents a more demanding benchmark than nearly any state uses, while "Basic" goes far beyond literacy to measure comprehension and foundational skills — distinctions with implications for the health of the nation's democracy and workforce when growing numbers of students are falling "Below Basic."

4 **NAEP focuses everyone on equity** because it tracks scores by economic, racial, and other broad categories, shining a light on inequity often masked by state assessments. Panelists emphasized that this focus on equity extends beyond measurement to action — NAEP gives historically marginalized communities a powerful tool to demand accountability and keep their voices central in national education conversations.

5 **Its relatively stable scoring allows for meaningful trend analysis across decades,** something impossible with constantly shifting state assessments. Because NAEP infrequently changes its standards and methodology, by design it provides a time-lapse picture of American education.

6 **NAEP has been insulated from political influence** through National Assessment Governing Board governance and is not susceptible to the pressures of state accountability systems. As more than one panelist noted, having a report card accepted by both parties has helped moderate national education politics and historically kept the federal role in education consistent in scope.

7 **NAEP demystifies education** for parents, reporters, educators, and policymakers alike. It becomes a key instrument for advocacy and school improvement efforts. Kalyn Belsha, who has covered NAEP for Chalkbeat, shared a powerful example:

> **"I got a really moving email from a mom of a struggling eighth grader talking to me about why her daughter was struggling in math. She really connected some of the national data to what she was seeing in her own child."**

8 **NAEP triggers important investigations and research** about why trends are happening and how to fix problems. When scores decline or gaps widen in a state, region, or the nation, NAEP data prompts deeper inquiry into root causes and potential solutions.

All told, NAEP's results serve as a data storytelling moment every two years to focus the nation on student achievement, equity, data, evidence-based responses, and the quality of implementation.

NAEP's Shortcomings

Despite its essential role, NAEP's imperfections were a preoccupation of many panelists, who called on NAEP to be modernized and expanded in its scope to continue to effectively serve as a driver of debate, research, and reform. Among the concerns:

1 **NAEP doesn't start young enough:** The idea of a first-grade assessment is appealing to dissect achievement trends that are building far earlier than fourth grade.

2 **Limited subject focus:** NAEP's emphasis on reading and mathematics can signal that other subjects don't matter. Ian Rowe, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, argued that replacing science and social studies with more English Language Arts — as some states now do due to NAEP's focus on reading — may actually harm literacy. "The science of reading says a lot about background knowledge. If we're creating perverse incentives to eliminate content-rich curriculum, that's contributing to these low reading outcomes."

3 **Limited relevance for local improvement efforts:** Although statistically robust at the state level, NAEP's sampling doesn't provide reliable data for individual districts or schools beyond the 26 large urban school districts covered by NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment.

4 **Long lag time:** Waiting two years between assessments can feel like an eternity for educators and policymakers seeking timely feedback. And the gap between test administration and the release of results — often 6–9 months — further limits NAEP's usefulness.

5 **Meaninglessness to students:** NAEP has no consequences for students, schools, or districts. Some critics argue that this "low-stakes" environment diminishes motivation, depresses results, and leads to underestimating students' true capabilities when performing under meaningful conditions.

6 **Lack of innovation:** NAEP's consistency can also be a weakness. The assessment has been slower to incorporate new forms of assessment, technology enhancements, or measures of 21st-century skills that many educators consider essential.

7 **Biased against diversity:** While NAEP highlights achievement gaps, some argue it doesn't account for the diverse ways students from different backgrounds demonstrate knowledge and skills, potentially perpetuating biases inherent in traditional standardized testing.

Many Americans have become fatalistic about public schools, but that wasn't the sentiment of our 50 invited panelists. They have seen in NAEP's results countless success stories in student achievement. They have seen those successes replicated widely. Though they have served in administrations from both parties at both the state and federal levels and hail from red, blue, and purple states, many of them know from hard experience that the final word in the full NAEP title — progress — is attainable across locations, organizations, and demographics.

As important, our panelists addressed how to reverse the recent slides. This is not a consensus document, but certain themes emerged as predominant. **We will return to these pillars throughout this report because they have some application to any policymaker, educator, community leader, academic, and advocate invested in our children's future:**

1. We must be **accountable for student achievement** above all other concerns. That means prioritizing it over other issues and holding every level of the system accountable for delivering.

2. At both the highest and most granular levels, **high-quality data** is essential to carry through on this accountability to student achievement.

3. It's only with a serious commitment to **evidence-based responses** that communities and schools can make sufficient and sustainable progress.

4. **Implementation** must be high-quality, closely monitored, supported by leaders, resources, and communities — and not be allowed to fall through the cracks.

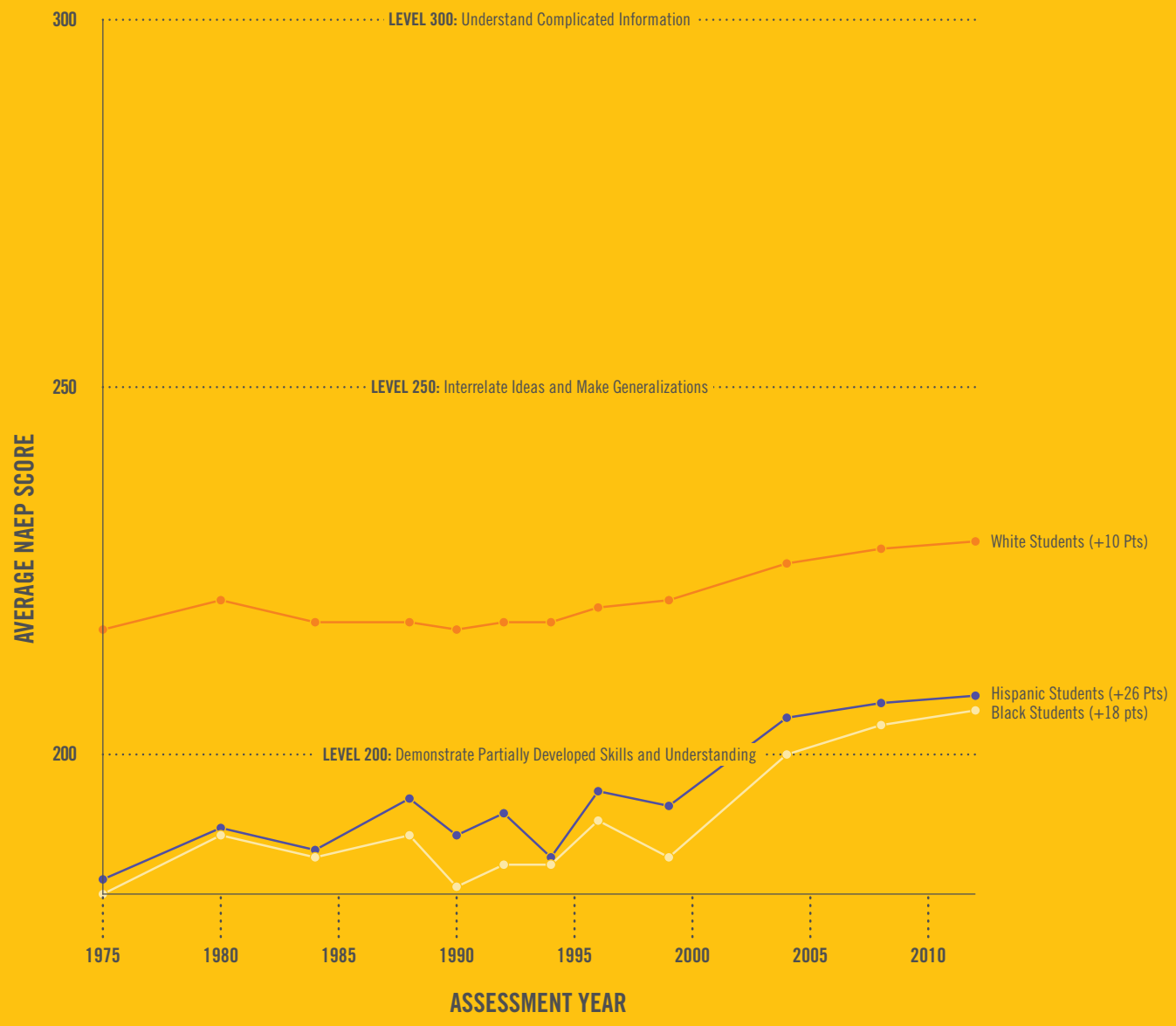
We've Pursued These Strategies Before, With Success

Founded in 1969, NAEP first entered the national spotlight after the explosive 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* led to bipartisan calls for a national measuring stick. As the assessment began to be branded and viewed as "the Nation's Report Card," NAEP helped support advocacy for higher standards that produced the landmark 2002 bill, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB helped to get the nation behind a 100% Proficiency goal for American students, and gains followed.

When he was the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics under President George W. Bush, Mark Schneider managed the release of NAEP through three sets of results. Each showed

This chart from 2012 showed rising scores and narrowing gaps in fourth-grade reading

FIGURE 1: NAEP READING TREND, 1984–2012



Source: Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University

achievement gaps closing between the top and bottom performers and also improved average scores, he recalled. "**Scores went up a couple points — three, four points.** I was standing up and saying the nation's making progress, this is great. It all felt good."

The gains across reading and math stemmed from many sources, but NAEP's statistical heft was critical. It put the responsibility of lifting achievement for all students, including those furthest from opportunity, directly on states. **NAEP shed light on state testing programs that were masking low achievement.** Some legislatures and state education departments reformed their assessments to better mirror NAEP's rigor and to raise performance district by district. Meanwhile, NAEP's state-by-state comparisons and international benchmarks through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) kept educational achievement at the center of national policy debates. As a creator of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation, Micheal Petrilli, now President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, recalled:

> "We saw high school graduation rates go way up, college going and completion rates up. That's something hard for K–12 systems to game. It was very real."

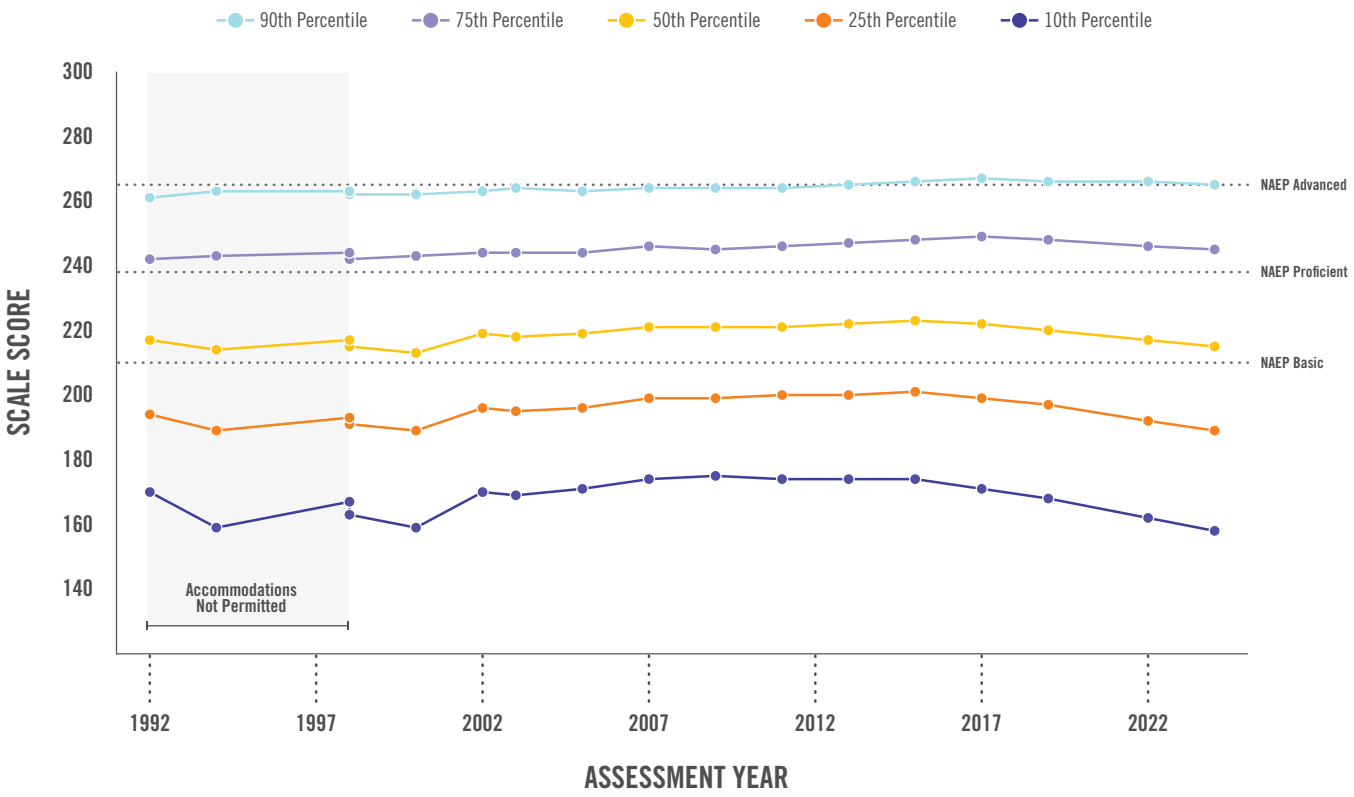
But during the 2010s, scores flattened out, gaps stopped closing, and just when the nation was making big progress on both achievement and equity, the nation lost the plot. By 2012, the Common Core Standards movement — intended to strengthen the standards that would drive curricula, professional development, and assessment — had fizzled. As Petrilli reflected:

> "**The zeitgeist all over the place changed where suddenly raising achievement and closing achievement gaps wasn't job number one.** It's now been many election cycles where the politicians on both sides are encouraged to pay most attention to their base. And guess what? We haven't been raising achievement and closing achievement gaps."

"Look at the NAEP data from the 16-year period from Bush through Obama," added Margaret Spellings, President and CEO of the Bipartisan Policy Center and former U.S. Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush from 2005 to 2009:

> "We were going in the right direction. Was it perfect? No. But even before COVID, we took our foot off the gas. We got lax around the fine print: defining the academic year in ways that allow kids to get out, exemptions on test days, watered-down standards for curriculum. We embraced local control. **I'm a big local control person, but folks, we know how to do it in smarter ways using federal investments, a federal role, and the federal bully pulpit.**"

FIGURE 2: 4TH GRADE READING PERCENTILE TRENDS



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind, but by then overall NAEP scores were dropping. Students at the bottom of the distribution were headed down fastest. Said Aimee Rogstad Guidera, Secretary of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia:

> "**The sad story of NAEP is that we took our eye off the ball** and we continued not to be focused on high expectations for every child. And the bottom line is we know what works, and it's when we put our mind to doing what works for every child that we will get the results that every child deserves in this country."

Embedded in Guidera's comment and frequently mentioned throughout the webinars is an insight reinforcing panelists' sense of purpose: **The problem of low achievement is malleable.** NAEP results in many states and eras prove it. So does CGLR's local work. Even during the 2010s, in communities in the CGLR Network committed to closing achievement gaps, a large number of school districts used school readiness, attendance, summer learning, and public housing initiatives (plus new tech platforms to support them all) to raise student achievement among vulnerable populations.

The point: Overall student achievement can be improved and achievement gaps can be closed when performance is tracked and challenges are effectively responded to. And NAEP is the best national forcing function we have.

Can we again, as we did 25 years ago, center ourselves on the North Star of academic performance? What will it take to embrace NAEP's accountability and turn the educational narrative back toward student achievement for all?

For advocates who have long fought for educational equity, the answer is unwavering focus. Denise Forte, President and CEO of The Education Trust, used four familiar words from the civil rights era to describe her intention. "Our coalitions," she said, "are going to have their **eyes on the prize,** which is about increasing student achievement across the country."

That prize, a few panelists argued, could use a numerical representation: A national NAEP goal. Schneider called for a national campaign to reduce "Below Basic" performance from 40% of students to 20% of students in five years. "Without concrete action and a specific goal," he cautioned, "we're just going to flit away the next five years." Meanwhile, Robin Lake, Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, doubled down on CGLR's mission, calling for "a national campaign on literacy to get every kid reading by the end of third grade." Said Lake:

> "That [third-grade reading] goal feels like something that the feds could agree on, communities could agree on. Burning [education] down isn't going to get us to where we need to be for our kids. We need to have a plan. We could just get going, and say how we're going to get it done."

Yet even short of a single nationwide goal, or strong federal leadership, several panelists stressed that every stakeholder — at the state, district, civic, and community levels — can and must step up. Roberto J. Rodriguez, who served as Assistant Secretary at the Department of Education until 2024, said the recent NAEP results were "an even clearer call to redouble our efforts for acceleration in reading and in math, on all fronts, for all students, and particularly for those that are the furthest behind."

This commitment to student achievement as the one central goal that matters most was echoed across the political spectrum. Several panelists called for the rebuilding of partnerships that drove bipartisan initiatives to make schools accountable to academic achievement and equity in the past. Said John King, the Secretary of Education under President Obama from 2015 to 2017 and now Chancellor of SUNY, the U.S.'s largest higher education system:

> "The education reform coalition was in many ways anchored by unlikely bedfellows, bringing together the civil rights community and the business community. **That partnership at federal and state levels was incredibly powerful, able to speak to legislators on both sides of the aisle,** and command public attention on performance gaps and what to do to close them."

Agreed Spellings, who was Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush: "We need to re-create that coalition — that's what you're doing here at the Campaign, and John [King] and I are glad to be part of it. When we focus like a laser on priorities like reading and we campaign for research-based practices, **we can move the needle for all students. And we have.**"

The chapters that follow capture how NAEP results can catalyze sustained, evidence-based practice. They show how to analyze NAEP results with rigor and connect national benchmarks to local action. They also spotlight how communities and states are already proving that dramatic improvement is possible.

Will we accept that 40% of fourth graders scoring "Below Basic" on NAEP is simply the reality of American education? **NAEP's history tells us we can choose a different future.** We've lifted academic achievement and closed achievement gaps before. In the next two chapters, our panelists articulate how we can do it again.

CHAPTER 2

HOW TO RESPOND TO NAEP RESULTS IN A WAY THAT HELPS LIFT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL

Handled wisely, each release of NAEP results can be a lever for communities and educators to drive achievement through high-quality data, evidence-based responses, and well-executed implementation. Handled poorly, each can be a missed opportunity — or even worse, cause for despair and new fodder to feed a fatalistic narrative. This section is a guide to preparing for all future NAEP releases.

The declines revealed by the 2022 and 2024 NAEP reports have created an almost irresistible urge to jump to convenient conclusions about why the bottom keeps falling out and how to fix (or abandon) public schools. For those long focused on achievement, **the temptation to leap past careful analysis and dive straight into remedies is strong**.

But some panelists stressed that urgency without nuance doesn't work. Racing to reactions and solutions without deeper analysis doesn't lead to lasting results. The NAEP dialectic requires real understanding, informed action, and the determination to make the action truly effective.

Several experts exemplified how to be curious about each NAEP rather than react with preset conclusions. Munro Richardson, Executive Director of Read Charlotte, pressed for deeper analysis of the states with excitingly successful results. "Did the state do something different — or were there only some districts that did something different there?" Sara Randazzo, the influential Wall Street Journal education reporter, was eager to "dig more into the research around why the lower-performing students have gone down more. There's a lot of theories out there," none of them simple or proven or necessarily correct.

"I just exercise caution in trying to go from NAEP results in a particular jurisdiction to my preferred policy solution," said Morgan Polikoff, professor at USC's Rossier School of Education. "That's the trend a lot of us fall victim to."

Panelists called on one real-world example after another to describe the lessons they've learned to bring to NAEP every two years. If we could sum that mindset up, it would include this insistence on painstaking analysis rather than leaping to conclusions; an openness to learn and share information; and the gritty resolve to catalyze those around you to act.

LESSON 1

NAEP IS ONLY A BEGINNING OF INSIGHT, ANALYSIS, AND CHANGE

For all its value, NAEP data doesn't provide detailed enough disaggregation to drive serious education policy on its own. When it releases the NAEP results, IES includes few insights about what the findings mean for educators or policymakers. "When we think about those instructional changes that need to happen in the classroom, we need very targeted data to do that," said Kristen Huff of Curriculum Associates, a 50+ year educational consulting firm known for sharpening school practices. **"That's not going to come from NAEP."**

To take full advantage of NAEP to drive student achievement, far more data work, from many different sources, is required.

One example: The Education Recovery Scorecard (ERS) — a mid-pandemic project of Thomas Kane, Professor of Economics at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Sean Reardon of Stanford Graduate School of Education — has marshalled local test results from roughly 11,000 school districts across 43 states[1]. By making everything comparable to the NAEP threshold, ERS has given educators the first-ever view of "achievement across state lines but also for a given district over time," said Kane, a webinar panelist.

Data dives post-NAEP are critical because NAEP only provides results by state and for 26 major cities. **While NAEPs over time identify macro trends (only two states have improved in both math and reading since 2019), ERS reveals micro trends (over 100 districts outperformed pre-pandemic levels in both subjects).** Though it has yet to capture scores for all third to eighth graders, ERS has already spurred an important new line of inquiry by detailing, said Kane, "the magnitude of the improvements in districts like Birmingham and Los Angeles, Compton, and DC."

The **Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA)** also provides a more useful and granular view than the state-by-state NAEP. An expansion of NAEP, TUDA tracks student performance in 26 urban school districts, including those in Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles, allowing researchers and policymakers to dig locally into achievement gaps and tailor responses to the district's particulars, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions. TUDA provides the data that ERS turns into some of its findings and into key questions like: **Which practices from high-performing urban districts offer the most promising models for communities still struggling with learning loss?**

[1] ERS researchers excluded data from states that did not post sufficiently detailed data, changed their state tests between 2015 and 2023, or had fewer than 95% of students take the state assessment. As a result, a total of eight states were excluded from the analysis leaving a total of 42 states and the District of Columbia.

LESSON 2

MOVE QUICKLY BEYOND NATIONAL OR STATE AVERAGES

Not only are NAEP results insufficient for policy decisions by themselves, but overemphasis on the assessment's broad national and state averages can lead to genuinely damaging outcomes. Said Virginia Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera:

> "When I arrived in this role and said we're going to restore excellence to education for every child in Virginia, I was met with, 'How dare you? This is Virginia. We have excellence everywhere.' And I said, 'Have you disaggregated your data? Good luck telling some of these families that their kids are getting a great education.' And it's because broad data masks everything."

The problem is that surface-level NAEP numbers mask the realities that must guide *effective* action. As Maryland State Superintendent Carey Wright, who led Mississippi's remarkable reading transformation, put it: "Behind every data point is a face. And if you don't know who that face is, you're not going to be able to figure out what that child needs." Guidera warned:

> "We all fall into the lull of averages. **If I could do anything, I'd blow up that we just keep using averages when we talk about NAEP.** Until we start really talking about all kids in a way that we see every child, it's too easy to ignore the kids who need the most. We don't actually see what's happening."

Effective insight and solutions require deeper disaggregation by race, income, geography, English learner status, disability, and many other factors. The difference between surface-level and deeper analysis is stark. Munro Richardson from Read Charlotte revealed what would have happened to the ubiquitous 2025 headlines proclaiming "40% of Fourth Graders Score Below Basic on Reading" if we had simply factored in socioeconomic data (SES).

In fact, Richardson reported, **among low SES students, almost 60% were "Below Basic."** Meanwhile, among high-SES students, 60% were "Proficient." This rudimentary disaggregation exposes what Richardson called "two entirely different worlds" within the averages that have been the basis of news coverage. With even this minor disaggregation, the national narrative shifts from "American students are struggling" to "low-SES students are being failed while high-SES students maintain proficiency."

The stakes of deeper analysis extend beyond statistical precision — they shape whether we identify the right problems for the right students. Going back to 2018, for example, Brookings analyzed NAEP achievement gaps. NAEP data back then still showed gaps narrowing or static by race and also the standard measure of poverty — free/reduced-price lunch qualifiers. But Brookings revealed how the addition of better data, in this case Sean Reardon's far more detailed family income-based data, found that achievement gaps between students in the 10th and 90th percentiles of family income were actually exploding. This critical finding, the authors noted, was "outside of NAEP's view."

This anecdote is not an outlier. **It's independent research based on additional investigations that reveals what's truly happening beneath NAEP's big-picture gaze.** In this case, the lowest-income children were falling behind much faster at just the moment that growing U.S. income inequality was leading more children to be categorized as very low income. Based on Reardon's data, it was impossible not to see that responses tailored to America's youngest and most economically challenged students were critically needed. (Examples: national pre-K, wraparound services, high-dosage tutoring, afterschool programs.) Relying only on NAEP metrics and broad averages had failed to specify the correct takeaway.

Charles Barone, Senior Director of the Center of Innovation at the National Parents Union, worried during one webinar that the same situation is occurring today in New Jersey, where he lives. New Jersey scored in the top five states across all age groups in the 2024 NAEP. Yet the state, he said, is "resting on its laurels" and failing to respond to the extreme needs under the surface of the broad brush of averages.

> "There's lots of kids who you saw dipping. We're not helping them. So if you care about equity, you want to pay attention not just to the average achieving student, but where those already at the bottom are losing ground."

Webinar panelist Kevin Mahnken, reporter from The 74, the education-focused website, demonstrated the power of deeper disaggregation to raise key questions. Most racial groups in NAEP 2024 tracked the same pattern in which top-performing cohorts held steady while low performers fell dramatically. But he discovered that the pattern among one group, Latino eighth graders, was starkly different and would require deeper analysis.

> "The Hispanic eighth grader reading drop [over two years] was such a thoroughgoing decline. You saw declines for reading at the 25th percentile, so the low performers. But also at the 50th percentile, the average Hispanic eighth grader dropped significantly. And also at the 75th percentile. So even the comparatively high-performing students did fall."

Granular disaggregation by sub-subgroups produces findings that are less easy to sum up and require more exploration. Katharine Stevens, Founder and President of the Center on Child and Family Policy, gave an example:

> "When you disaggregate Black students by not only income but maternal education and family structure, there's gigantic variation by those subgroups — ranging from 17% scoring 'Below Basic' to 64% scoring 'Below Basic.'"

A 47-percentage-point spread within a single broad demographic group fundamentally challenges simplistic narratives about student achievement. It reveals that race alone explains far less than we might assume, and that family structure, educational background, and economic stability are correlated with dramatic differences in outcomes even within the same racial category. These insights are invisible when we only examine broad racial categories or even income cohorts, said Ian Rowe, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute:

> "NAEP as everyone knows is the scorekeeper, not the entity that's trying to say why these results are coming forth. But **because NAEP reports data through race, class, and gender, what I call the usual suspects, those tend to suck the energy out of the room for any other explanations that could be transcendent."**

The sub-subgroup approach forces us beyond comfortable generalizations toward analysis that can actually drive improvement. It reveals bright spots within demographics and communities often written off as uniformly struggling. This complexity shouldn't paralyze action — it can focus it. Rather than implementing broad programs based on surface-level demographic patterns, deep disaggregation allows for tailored responses that speak to the specific combinations of factors that drive strong or poor performance.

LESSON 3

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXTS THAT NAEP CAN'T CAPTURE MUST BE UNDERSTOOD

Applying the NAEP report card successfully to help any school requires factoring in the context outside its boundary. Because look at what that boundary might be: a chain-link fence, a packed city sidewalk, a rustic stone wall, or a grassy sports field. All so different, all reflecting different community environments. That was a message repeated by many speakers: NAEP analysis and resulting responses must make sense for the specific families, communities, and kids they're meant to help.

Almost 15 years ago, just as NAEP averages stopped rising, Matthew Di Carlo, a researcher at the Albert Shanker Institute in Washington, D.C., made **two points about the "answer" to declining NAEP scores: 1. It's not one answer; 2. A lot of the answers lie outside of school.** He wrote:

> "Discernible trends in NAEP test score data are almost certainly due to a combination of factors, and it's unlikely that one policy or set of policies is dominant enough to be identified as 'the one.'
>
> [Yet] people involved with these speculative arguments seem a bit too willing to assume that schooling factors — rather than changes in cohorts' **circumstances outside of school** — are the primary driver of NAEP trends."

Experience has certainly re-taught us again and again that it is a **myth to think of schools as simple instruction centers.** Those interpreting NAEP's results and acting to lift them in historically marginalized communities must consider the community context that helped produce the scores — or their responses will risk ineffectiveness.

Three such contexts came up repeatedly for panelists. Each profoundly impacts how well children learn, think, and score collectively on NAEP. Yet improving them is mostly beyond the control of individual classroom tactics and entails shifting the entire ecosystem in which children live and learn — a worthy goal but one that requires community-based responses.

ATTENDANCE: Getting from home to the school

Attendance came up repeatedly as the central blocker of academic success. Hedy Chang, Founder and Executive Director of Attendance Works, set the national context: Chronic absenteeism has doubled since the pandemic, with two-thirds of schools now reporting rates above 20%. Lori Masseur, Early Learning Director at Read On Arizona, connected the dots between those rates and achievement: "For every 1% we improved attendance, proficiency rose 1.5 points."

The frequently made point: **Schools can only establish instruction at a level that lifts achievement if students are predictably present.** Negative outcomes, said Chang, speed up "every year that you're chronically absent, particularly in these early grades. That's when you're building the foundational supports for student success, when learning is scaffolded and habit forming." Poverty in turn appears closely correlated with attendance slides. **Historical research shows that children from economically challenged families are four times more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten than their peers from higher-income families.**

TEACHER MORALE

Kevin Mahnken of The 74 identified a pattern in data released by NAEP: Teachers of high-performing students were more likely than teachers of low-performing students to be satisfied working in their school. (NAEP conducts a survey parallel to the exam in which students and teachers answer questions covering everything from who lives at home to reading interest to instructional practices — another source with which to disaggregate NAEP scores.)

Evidence is strong that **discouraged teachers disproportionately impact schools serving historically marginalized communities** where poverty, absenteeism, low achievement, and teacher turnover are highest. Arthur Everett, a high school social studies teacher in Brooklyn, New York, and winner of the Empire State Excellence in Teaching Award, testified that insufficient support for reforms and funding contribute to teacher discouragement, **but that low morale at its core is due to runaway community expectations of teachers.**

> "Teachers are maybe locked into some performative or administrative things — old ways of being. **But there needs to be more recognition that the system is not working and that it should not be on the back of individual teachers to uphold it.** We romanticize in movies and human interest stories the superhuman teacher who did above and beyond for their 30 kids, but the system shouldn't be built on the idea that you have to break your back in order to be considered a good teacher."

Evan Stone, CEO of Educators for Excellence (E4E), which represents 40,000 teacher-advocates across the country, reported that E4E's survey of teachers found that only 19% of them recommend the profession to others and only 16% say the profession is sustainable. **"NAEP tells us that our student achievement is in crisis. I would say the teaching profession is also in a state of crisis, and we need transformation for both."**

CRISIS AND TRAUMA

Community realities often create learning obstacles that register in NAEP data as academic deficits rather than what they actually represent: how stress, fear, and instability harm developing minds. Panelists testified that when students arrive at school carrying the weight of housing or food insecurity, family trauma, or community violence, their academic performance can reflect their mental state rather than their teachers' effectiveness or the school's instruction.

Jean-Claude Brizard, CEO of Digital Promise, urged policymakers to recognize **that students may score "Below Basic" because trauma literally drains cognitive resources and rewires developing brains.** "Psychological stress, such as fear among undocumented families, impacts how children learn," Brizard said.

LESSON 4

STATE AND DISTRICT DATA IS WHERE ACCOUNTABILITY MUST BEGIN

If a state or city is surprised by NAEP results, something is fundamentally wrong with their data systems. NAEP's perpetually looming benchmark should motivate school systems to track student achievement much more frequently — ideally in real-time. The message to educators from many panelists: Don't wait for the next warning, get ahead of it.

The tools exist to create educational systems that operate like the National Hurricane Center's Cone of Uncertainty, alerting vulnerable populations in time to escape from harm's way. The question isn't whether we can build such systems, but whether we will.

At the state level, NAEP's biennial results, particularly the percentage of "Below Basic," must be viewed as a recurring opportunity for recalibration of state tests and standards. States that continue to let their own proficiency standard lag far behind NAEP's should close the differences. Carey Wright, Maryland State Superintendent of Schools, revealed that while NAEP 2024 showed Maryland moving from 40th to 20th in fourth-grade reading over just two years, her state's assessment was failing to capture the shifts with enough depth. "We just issued an RFP yesterday for **a brand new statewide assessment that we're aligning more to the rigor of NAEP.** That's critical."

Alabama State Superintendent Eric Mackey also stressed commitment to assessment integrity: "Fifteen years ago, we were showing 85% to 90% of our kids proficient on our state test, and NAEP did not show the same. So we adopted a test that's much more rigorous — because it gives parents real results about what's honestly happening with their students." Five years ago, the state adapted further by remaking its assessment again. "**We want the results we're seeing on our state test verified by the NAEP,**" Mackey explained.

Multiple panelists, particularly state school chiefs, described how achievement data can be used to fight for state reforms, and encouraged all states to build a data-to-difference-making pipeline. Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner described how her state used data to trigger improvements in reading performance. "For four years in a row, since the pandemic, we've had [legislative] bills that just put all the attention on reading. You have got to talk about it. When you're tired of talking about it, you should talk about it more."

Margaret Spellings, who led the federal Department of Education during much of the Bush administration, during which states became more accountable and student scores improved, said:

> "When we focus on every kid, measure (yes, that's testing) and report that data, hold it up and learn from it, and make it a central part of what we invest in, we go in the right direction."

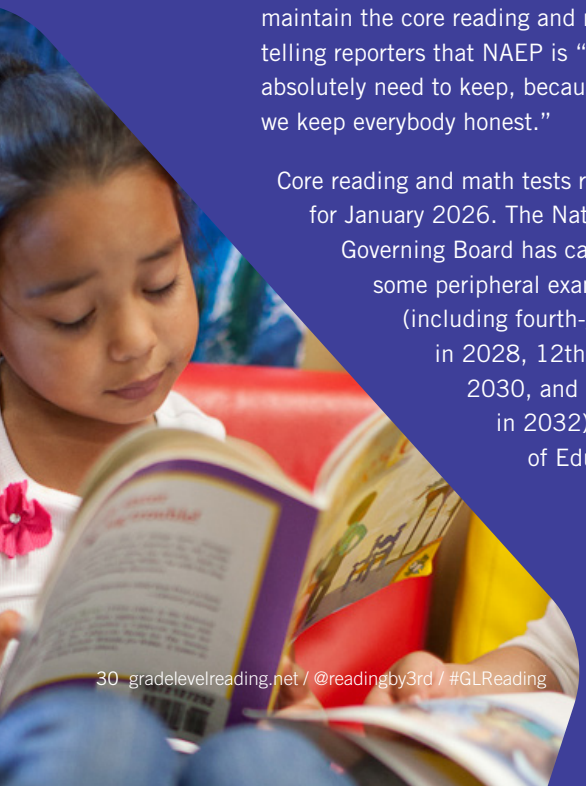
NAEP's Status at the Time of Publication

NAEP remains in place despite significant upheaval at the federal level in 2025. Education Secretary Linda McMahon has pledged to maintain the core reading and math exams, telling reporters that NAEP is "something we absolutely need to keep, because it's a way that we keep everybody honest."

Core reading and math tests remain on schedule for January 2026. The National Assessment Governing Board has canceled or deferred some peripheral exams to save costs (including fourth-grade science in 2028, 12th grade history in 2030, and all writing tests in 2032). The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which oversee the program, have few remaining staff members.

"I'm worried about the health of the NAEP," said former U.S. Secretary of Education John King, "the defunding of IES, and our ability to have good information about where we're succeeding and where we're struggling."

Even so, Fordham Institute President Michael Petrilli, who helped create the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement and is an enthusiastic consumer of data from NCES, pointed out that the agency recently brought in a respected researcher to help redesign IES. "Just a little bit of optimism there: They seem to understand the value of it."



How Leading Districts Use Data to Accelerate Progress

The highest-achieving systems have learned to make data work for students in real-time. The School District of Indian River County has consistently improved achievement, moving from 38th to fifth among Florida school districts in the past seven years; the district is now ranked second in third-grade reading proficiency. Superintendent David Moore testified that much of the rise stems from the innovative use of data. He summed up Indian River's approach as: **"One clean real-time data system aligned to our district strategic plan."**

Included in Indian River's data system are not only individual student assessments, but also which organizations and agencies are working with which kids, what instructional coaching has occurred, specific challenges faced by principals and teachers, what instructional strategies yield the biggest improvements, how well those who provide each intervention are doing their jobs, and classroom observational research.

> "It's data in real-time that forces the conversation around: What does good instruction look like? How fast can we make decisions that are as close to kids as possible? I think **some of the outcomes we've been able to realize have been solely about making an instructional shift based on our data as quickly as possible.** Rather than waiting three weeks or four weeks, we're able to evaluate the things that matter the most to determine where we need to make an instructional shift or professional development evaluation that improves outcomes — moving as fast as possible."

In truth, most districts struggle to stay ahead of annual state assessments and the biennial NAEP report card. That means parents, who need transparent information about their children's education to make informed decisions, are often not aware of their school or student's assessments. "School performance data," reported Ashara Baker, New York State Director for National Parents Union, "tell it how it is. Whether it hurts or not, we have to know how poorly these schools are performing."

Baker discovered this firsthand when she started having conversations with families across New York in her role. "The biggest thing that stuck out was families really didn't know how students were performing." The scope of this information blackout was worrisome to her.

> "New York's NAEP results show that only 31% of fourth and eighth graders are 'Proficient' in reading. [Using state assessments,] there are 15% of Rochester third graders and 4% of eighth graders who are proficient in reading. But when I give this report to a parent in Rochester, they don't know what that means. They don't know how bad their schools are doing."

John Johnson, a parent leader with the National Parents Union Leadership Council on Assessment and Accountability, described a similar information gap in Colorado. "I don't think that's even close to being adequate," Johnson said about the limited data parents receive at twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences. He emphasized the deeper problem: "They just feel like they're not being informed. I hear, 'oh, they're doing fine. We're not concerned.' But that doesn't really spell out what the issue is or if there is an issue." Johnson noted that by the time concrete data appears in fourth-grade NAEP results, critical learning gaps have already formed in earlier grades when parents received vague reassurances instead of actionable information.

This isn't just a communication problem — it's a barrier to educational equity that rolls up into growing achievement gaps on NAEP. Parents who don't understand how their schools are performing can't advocate for better resources or demand improvements. The consequences ripple through entire communities, trapping families in systems that are failing their children without transparency about how those systems are performing.

Given NAEP's long lead time, state and local assessments must take on the job of charting student achievement trajectories, particularly for at-risk populations. This data needs to reach families, teachers, principals, voters, and legislators with clarity and urgency.

Experts from the National Parents Union (NPU), the network of 1,800+ parent organizations representing more than 1.7 million parents and caregivers, testified to the power and necessity of robust data systems. When data flows effectively to parents and communities, transformation accelerates, said Keri Rodrigues, the organization's founder, describing how transparent information has helped mobilize NPU's parent-led advocacy groups:

> "It's wonderful to watch parents harness this data, make it actionable, and call for change — literally creating their own reports so they can hold systems accountable and demand evidence-supported solutions. This is the power of schools giving parents information instead of being paralyzed by fear that bad news will make parents angry."

Without NAEP, policymakers, educators, and parent groups would lack the external benchmarks needed to make informed decisions about resource allocation, intervention strategies, and systemwide reforms. (See *"NAEP's Status at the Time of Publication" on* page 30.)

LESSON 5

NAEP AS LEVERAGE FOR EVIDENCE-BACKED RESPONSES

The latest NAEP results underscore a reality in the current landscape: States possess unprecedented power and resources to lift achievement, yet outcomes vary dramatically based on how they leverage these capabilities. Observed Kevin Huffman, former Tennessee state education chief and current CEO of Accelerate, a national initiative to embed high-impact tutoring in public schools:

> "For 10 years, states have had a fair amount of autonomy and ability to step up, define their plan, define what they need, and then execute strategies. To the extent people were waiting for central guidance from the federal Department of Education on what's our big plan to help kids — that's not happening. **Some states have really taken advantage of their autonomy. Some have not.**"

Mississippi's fourth-grade reading gains over the past decade produced **an especially compelling set of best practices that state leaders can master, mimic, and spread**, said Indiana State Superintendent Katie Jenner. Beyond sustained political commitment across multiple election cycles, Mississippi used specific literacy reforms, teacher training approaches, and instructional materials adoption to guide the way. "A lot of the solutions that we've deployed in reading, we've copied straight off the playbook of Mississippi," Jenner testified. Indiana fourth-grade reading is nearly back to where it was before the pandemic.

NAEP results can trigger state education leaders to research what their state's outstanding districts and schools are doing that others might emulate. "Take deep dives with these educators," advised Kristen Huff, Vice President of Assessment and Research at Curriculum Associates.

> "There are educators out there knocking it out of the park — getting students who are behind grade level onto grade level, getting students who don't know how to read to learn how, getting students who don't know how to be fluent with their math counting to be fluent."

Every NAEP release, added Colorado Commissioner of Education Susana Córdova, is an opportunity for state leaders to focus more sharply on what works to help children from challenging circumstances. Even as her state scored above the national average overall in 2024, she said, "about a third of our fourth graders are 'Below Basic' on NAEP. We know if kids aren't on grade level in third grade, so many other things are going to be challenging for them."

> "I just left the room where our statewide data, our statewide plans, and our entry points, particularly for the most struggling schools, are posted all over the wall. Our internal Colorado priorities are to move with urgency for the most struggling schools."

Spreading actionable solutions is critical for a state that seeks to make districts accountable to higher student performance. That's because **without models to adopt, a state's top-down demand for improvement will breed resentment rather than results**. As John King emphasized:

> "One of the greatest threats to accountability is people feeling like they don't know how to improve. Because if people feel like they don't know how to improve, then they start to resent the accountability. It feels like a 'Gotcha.'"

This tension between those who establish accountability yardsticks and those on the ground who are responsible for improvements highlights the vital role of research partnerships. Rice University professor Ruth López Turley, Director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and former member of the National Board for Education Sciences, emphasized the critical importance of school districts drawing on best-practice researchers when they seek improvement.

As an example, Turley described her work with the Houston Education Research Consortium, in which national research that overwhelmingly points toward the effectiveness of full-day pre-K programs in improving student achievement only gained traction with local policymakers after it was validated by Houston-specific data and experience.

"Connecting national evidence with local evidence — they can really reinforce one another," she said, going on to advise:

> "The use of data [by researchers or advocates] can be off-putting to school districts because it can be weaponized, used as a gotcha moment to embarrass them. But if there's a close partnership with school districts where the [researchers'] goal is 'We're not trying to point fingers at anybody, we're just trying to improve student outcomes,' then **really strong relationships of trust can work on really challenging problems together in a constructive manner. Beautiful things can happen.**"

These evidence-based solutions — literacy reforms, tutoring models, community partnerships — all depend on the kind of innovative data systems discussed in the previous lesson. Take the Mississippi example of dramatic reading improvements. Adam Gamoran, President of the William T. Grant Foundation, described how important federally supported data initiatives were to the state's turnaround, referencing "NAEP scores that showed the dire situation for decades, research on strategies to improve reading, evaluation studies showing us where efforts succeed, fail, and need improvement. Talk to people in the Mississippi state government about how they did it, and they point to IES's Southeast Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) that did a lot of that work."

When states lack that infrastructure or federal help (REL Southeast has been sharply cut back in 2025, Gamoran noted), they cannot track whether their responses work or defend effective programs from cuts. Maryland's experience, as described by Pascale Small, Deputy Director of Impact and Engagement for the National Parents Union, shows what happens when that data foundation is missing.

> "We asked for data about wraparound services in Maryland's 600 Community Schools so we could protect these programs from budget cuts, but we couldn't get it. Without reliable, timely, and actionable data, I can't advocate for children or my community. This creates a cycle where no one gets the resources they need."

The data gap extends beyond timeliness to basic inclusion. Tiara Thomas, a member of the Piscataway Conoy tribe who serves on the National Parents Union Leadership Council on Assessment and Accountability, described how Maryland's Indigenous students often don't appear in achievement data at all. Without data showing which students need services, her district — the only one in Maryland still maintaining an Indian education program — struggles to justify federal funding. The invisibility creates a catch-22: "How do we put that data in the grant if we don't have the data?" When schools cite privacy concerns as reasons not to share information with small populations, Thomas pushed back directly: "I'm always going to be the smallest community. So if I took that answer all the time, I'd never have information to do anything."

LESSON 6

DON'T SLEEP ON IMPLEMENTATION (UNDERSTANDING THAT GOOD POLICIES ALONE ARE NOT ENOUGH TO LIFT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT)

States and districts regularly announce new reading initiatives, math curricula, or teacher training programs, but the execution — how consistently and effectively these changes reach students — often remains incomplete, unmeasured, and under analyzed. This gap between intention and reality is often why even proven practices can fail to move NAEP scores.

Implementation begins with matching the specific model of a broad response like high-impact tutoring to a specific community. Said Adam Gamoran, President of the William T. Grant Foundation: "We have specific research that details not only that tutoring is effective, but **how to implement it properly — what types of dosages are available, what characteristics of tutors are needed, how much coordination is needed between tutors and teachers.**"

The trick, Gamoran explained, is for local educators and communities to find the correct version to implement within their local context.

> "We have a lot of knowledge. But to put findings into practice and evaluate them, we need partnerships between the researchers in tutoring models and the communities or school districts. Educators and district leaders don't just say, 'I need tutoring. I'll go to the research.' They say, **'What tutoring programs have worked in districts like mine, with communities like mine?'**"

Once a response has been kicked off, implementation tracking requires different metrics than outcome tracking. Rather than waiting for the next state assessment or NAEP result, states and districts must actively monitor whether teachers are using new curricula as designed, whether professional development is changing classroom practice, and whether tutoring programs are reaching the intended students with the right intensity and duration.

Many of the implementation difficulties raised by panelists concern teacher training, particularly in the science of reading. **States that have invested heavily in professional development in science of reading practices now need to make sure the training is effective and reaches kids.** Indiana created an excellent best-practices teacher training program, called Indiana Literacy Cadre, that Secretary of Education Katie Jenner said produced increases in scores that were 12.5 times higher in schools that participated compared to schools that did not. Even this successful intervention, however, with data to back up effectiveness, isn't being fully implemented because schools were given an out. "Those schools that are not participating — that's unacceptable," Jenner said.

Meanwhile, new teachers come into schools unaware of the science of reading because education schools and teacher preparation programs don't teach it. As John King observed: "**It's not necessarily popular to say to every teacher prep program in the state, 'You're going to need to change your syllabi to reflect the science of reading.** You're going to need some faculty to deepen their expertise.'"

The challenge of inconsistent teacher preparation extends beyond individual programs to entire state systems. Maryland was funded by the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to push high-dosage tutoring that emphasized the science of reading. "But the problem," said Carey Wright, Maryland State Superintendent and former head of Mississippi's schools, "was that **there was no standardization around what professional learning of the science of reading looked like.** And so it varied by district." The state has since stepped in, giving everyone "the same high-quality professional learning."

The implementation challenge becomes even more complex for multilingual learners. Melissa Castillo, former senior advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education, described how Arizona addressed this: "We have legislation that's made very clear the types of training that teachers have to take, but unfortunately, we didn't explicitly speak to what that means for English learners. So the state had to not only provide guidance, and support around the science of reading, but training that spoke to what that means if you're learning how to read in Spanish, not in English."

Like implementation difficulties, **implementation victories are often hidden away in institutional decision-making.** Yet these must be celebrated and replicated when possible. Joan Dabrowski, Baltimore City Schools Chief Academic Officer, described how real-time sharing of classroom information in recent years helped drive the district's noteworthy student achievement improvements. The sharing came about because the district's Principal Supervision team underwent a shift in department. "We think joining them and my Academics team into one team was a game-changer for us," Dabrowski explained.

> "As our Academics team is developing curriculum and supporting professional learning development, we have Principal Supervisors and math and literacy specialists inside each school getting on-the-ground data about what's working. We come together with them every week. We hear in real-time that, 'Wow, there's this particular curriculum unit that is really tripping people up.' Or, 'it's taking longer than we expected.' Then our team can push out updates and additions. **We're trying to interrupt these silos that are very common across districts.**"

Every NAEP release also brings a wave of what Polikoff long ago coined "Mis-NAEPery," incidents when NAEP results are presented inaccurately, out of context, or for purposes other than lifting achievement in the classroom. Those committed to student achievement must be prepared to counter these uses with the speed and analytical rigor NAEP deserves, Polikoff told panelists:

> "I'm very concerned about people misusing NAEP for political gain. You see folks who are real strong advocates of dismantling public education saying, 'Oh well, public schools aren't working.'"

The most common form of Mis-NAEPery involves cherry-picking statistics. One commentator said the most recent NAEP showed that "an astonishing 69% of fourth-graders and 70% of eighth-graders scored at or below Basic in reading" — slyly adding the Basic cohort into the Below Basic group to gin up what the commentator called "troubling reality" to advance a pre-existing policy preference.

Converting NAEP-driven statistical snapshots into blanket condemnation is unsettling to those inside schools, said Karyn Lewis, Vice President of Research and Policy Partnerships at the education consulting firm NWEA. "The worst aspect I worry about is how it lands with teachers and school leaders that have just been killing themselves over the last four years to try and respond to this crisis and support learners. It must be so heartbreaking."

Mis-NAEPery isn't always about attacking public education — it can also involve premature celebration that masks deeper problems, including rising achievement gaps. As Keri Rodrigues of the National Parents Union observed about Massachusetts: "Boy, was my governor excited to tell everybody about the NAEP scores and how we were number one and King of the Hill. But when you take a closer look at those numbers, it didn't seem like there was a lot to be celebrating there." **Scores among Black children in Massachusetts** continued to fall sharply.

It may seem to be thankless advocacy work to perpetually counter Mis-NAEPery — to publicly demand more rigorous analysis, call statistics-based political theater what it is, and insist that NAEP results be used to strengthen rather than abandon our schools. But there's a battle of narratives afoot and NAEP results are a big part of it. **We can't let this powerful tool of accountability become a sledgehammer assisting a teardown.** Margaret Spellings argued that education advocates must prioritize substantive discussions about student achievement in today's "wildly competitive, AI-innovating world."

> "As we engage with policymakers, talk about the data. How are we doing? Are we going in the right direction? Where do we lag and in what subjects? We have to keep reminding people what's at stake and where we are. We can't do it enough."

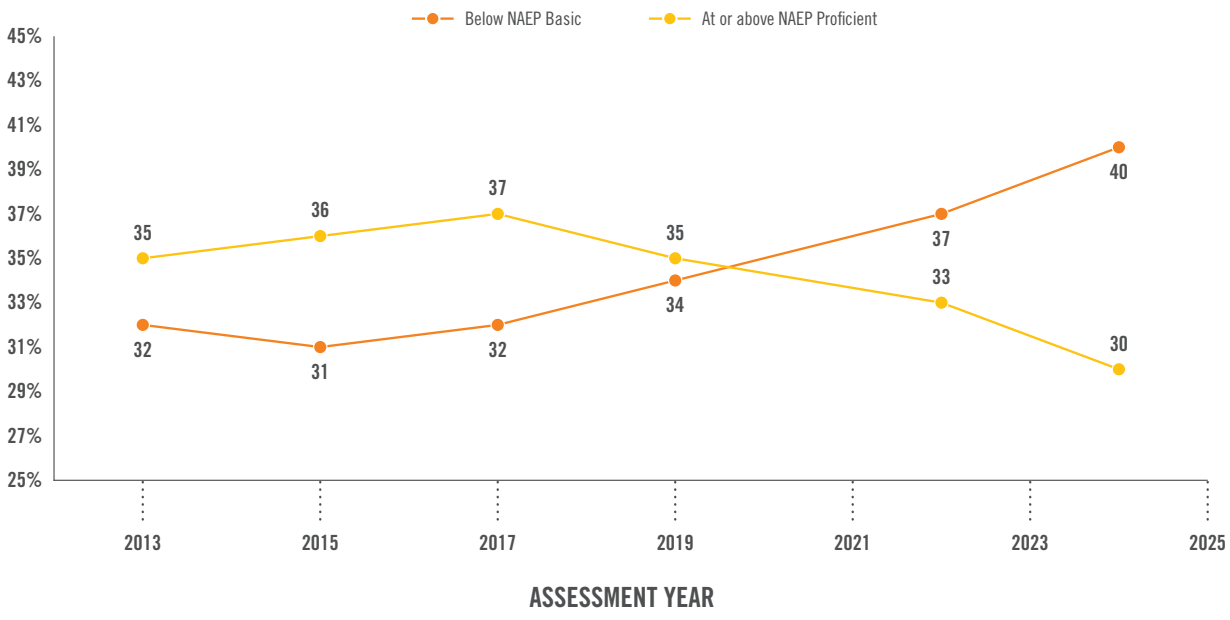
CHAPTER 3

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES REVEALED BY THE 2024 NAEP RESULTS

The 2024 NAEP results indeed delivered a statistical gut punch: Average overall achievement levels declined almost across the board, with students from historically marginalized communities falling furthest behind. This chapter surveys the results, both aggregated and disaggregated, and then focuses on the notable successes that guide the way forward.

It only takes one chart to reveal the broad negatives. Mark Schneider called the result "the scissor effect." Meaning, he said, "Those who are doing well [at the 90th percentile of performance] are doing better while those who are doing less well are doing worse and worse." Charlie Barone, Senior Director of Innovation at the National Parents Union, was also stark: "**Our higher achievers are treading water, but our lowest achievers are still losing ground**" — a pattern that began before the pandemic and continues today.

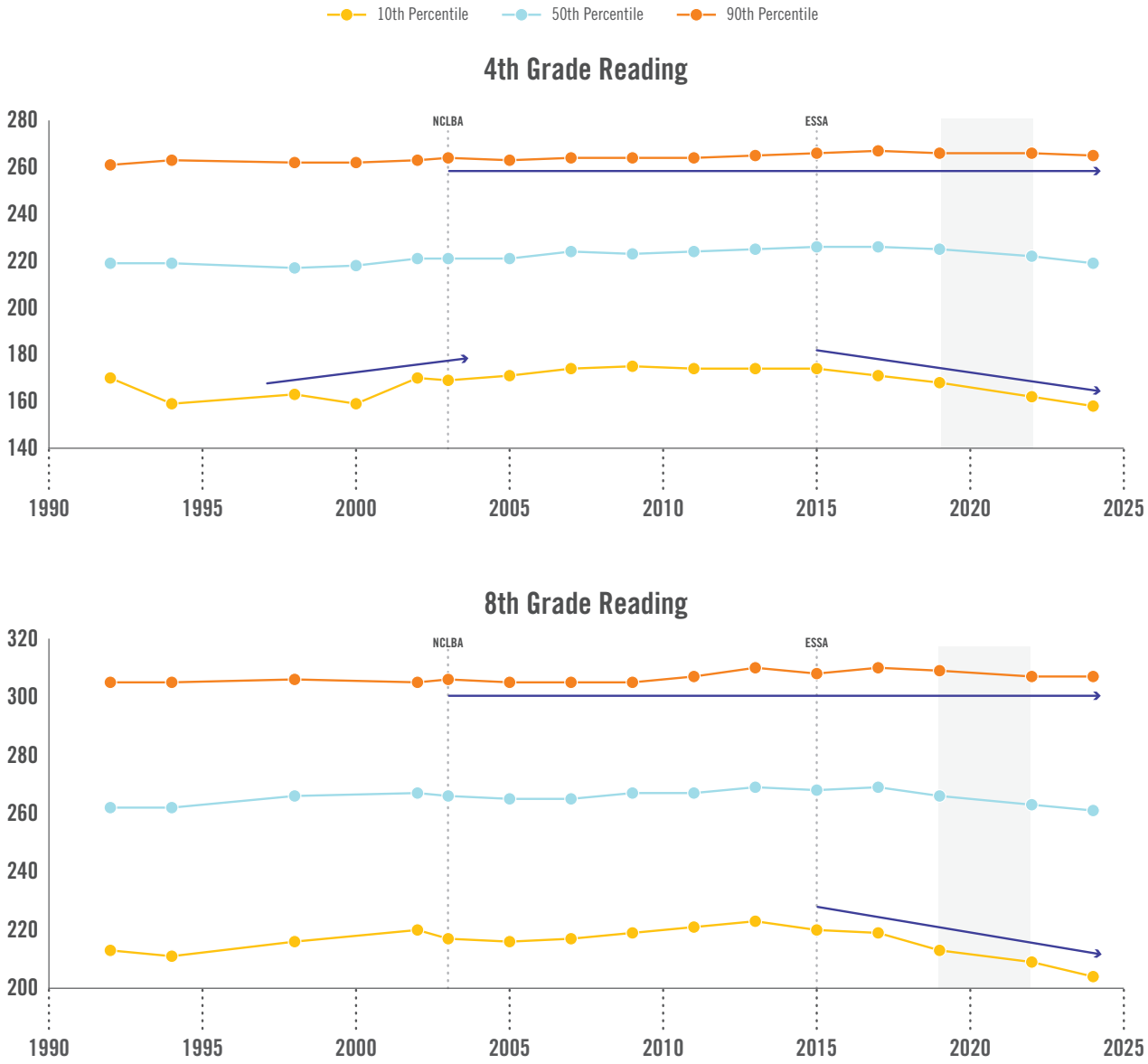
FIGURE 3: 4TH GRADE READING NATIONAL TRENDS



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Provided by American Enterprise Institute.

This aggregated picture is of national decline for all but the highest performers — with the steepest declines coming among those at the bottom of the performance scale. "Below Basic" increases that began back in 2015 accelerated through the pandemic until 2024. Average reading scores in 2024 dropped 2 points from 2022, meaning they've dropped 5 points since 2019. As Kalyn Belsha, National Reporter at Chalkbeat, observed, "**The kids who were reading at the lowest levels are now reading at the lowest level in 30 years.**"

FIGURE 4: STRUGGLING READERS CONTINUE DECLINE



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1992, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022, and 2024 Reading Assessments.
Provided by Education Recovery Scorecard.


Star
Twinkle

DISAGGREGATION FINDING 1

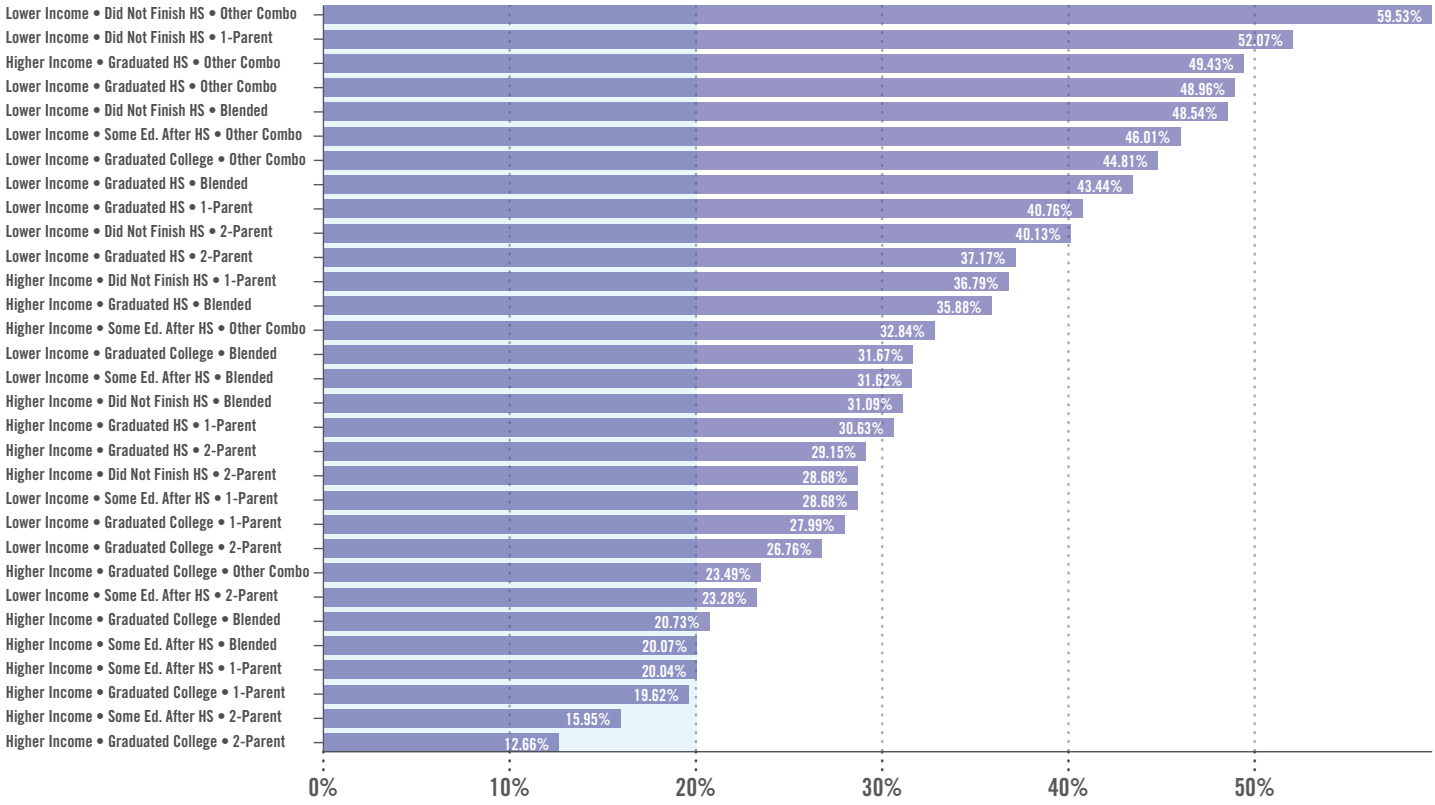
GROWING GAPS, ADDED MYSTERIES

The achievement gaps shown by NAEP 2024 are significant and growing on average across every broad dimension that the assessment measures: between white students and their Black and Latino peers; between affluent students and peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; between both English learners and students with disabilities and the rest of students.

But further disaggregation revealed that **demography remains very far from destiny.** Some telling examples from the data:

White eighth graders, lumped into a whole, achieved Mark Schneider's proposed national goal of 20% of students reading "Below Basic" (18%). But following that vertical 20% line down this chart reveals that average is misleading. Achievement gaps by income, family structure, and parental education actually are growing among white students too. Webinar panelist Katharine Stevens, Founder and President of the Center on Child and Family Policy, has charted the end result: In many of the granular eighth-grade cohorts she aggregated, more than 30% of white students scored "Below Basic." Similar achievement gaps by income, family structure, and parental education grew among students from each racial group measured.

FIGURE 5: % OF WHITE 8TH GRADERS SCORING BELOW BASIC REVEALS SIGNIFICANT VARIETY



Source: Katharine B. Stevens. Beyond Race and Income: The Critical Role of Family Factors in Identifying Students at Risk. Center on Child and Family Policy, forthcoming.

When measured by grade level, the **average student's reading achievement is a half a grade lower than it was five years ago.** Recent disaggregation of that data by ERS, however, revealed how localized the grade-level losses have been. The reading grade level of the average child in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, for example, is 1.5 grades lower than five years ago, while those in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., have not dropped at all. The distribution in reading loss across states also sharply varied, though less widely.

NAEP 2024 made it even more evident how chronic absenteeism has undermined classroom learning for millions of students. Hedy Chang provided the devastating scope: "**Before the pandemic, maybe 25% of all high-poverty schools had 30% or more levels of chronic absence. That rose to nearly 60% in 2022–23.**" The picture she presented showed:

- Chronic absenteeism in high-poverty schools remains nearly twice as high as before the pandemic.
- NAEP results continued to worsen in high-poverty schools.
- The chronic absenteeism crisis has damaged the ability of tremendous numbers of schools to improve student achievement.
- Kindergarten absence rates are particularly concerning; millions of students thus enter the pipeline that NAEP measures already disconnected from school and academically behind their peers who attend consistently.

FIGURE 6: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS		
	2017-18	2021-22	2022-23
Number of schools with 30% or more students chronically absent	3,550	19,828	15,714
Number of schools with 20% or more students chronically absent	9,233	31,362	28,796

Source: Attendance Works, Continued High Levels of Chronic Absence, With Some Improvements, Require Action, January 16, 2025.

Yet even the most obvious-seeming correlations from NAEP 2024 findings should be carefully stated. The complexity of interactions between factors that are related to achievement cannot be exaggerated. After a distinguished career as a leader in understanding achievement factors, the 2024 NAEP results left Katharine Stevens stating bluntly:

> "The major cause of schools' ongoing failure to raise persistently low achievement is **our inadequate understanding of both which children are most at risk and why.**"

This essential ignorance makes predictive modeling to drive early interventions for at-risk students much harder to do. If 17% of Black fourth graders in certain family configurations score "Below Basic" while 64% in other configurations do, the work inherently becomes much more community-focused — working on local conditions inside families and communities, as well as inside schools, to produce better outcomes.

DISAGGREGATION FINDING 2:

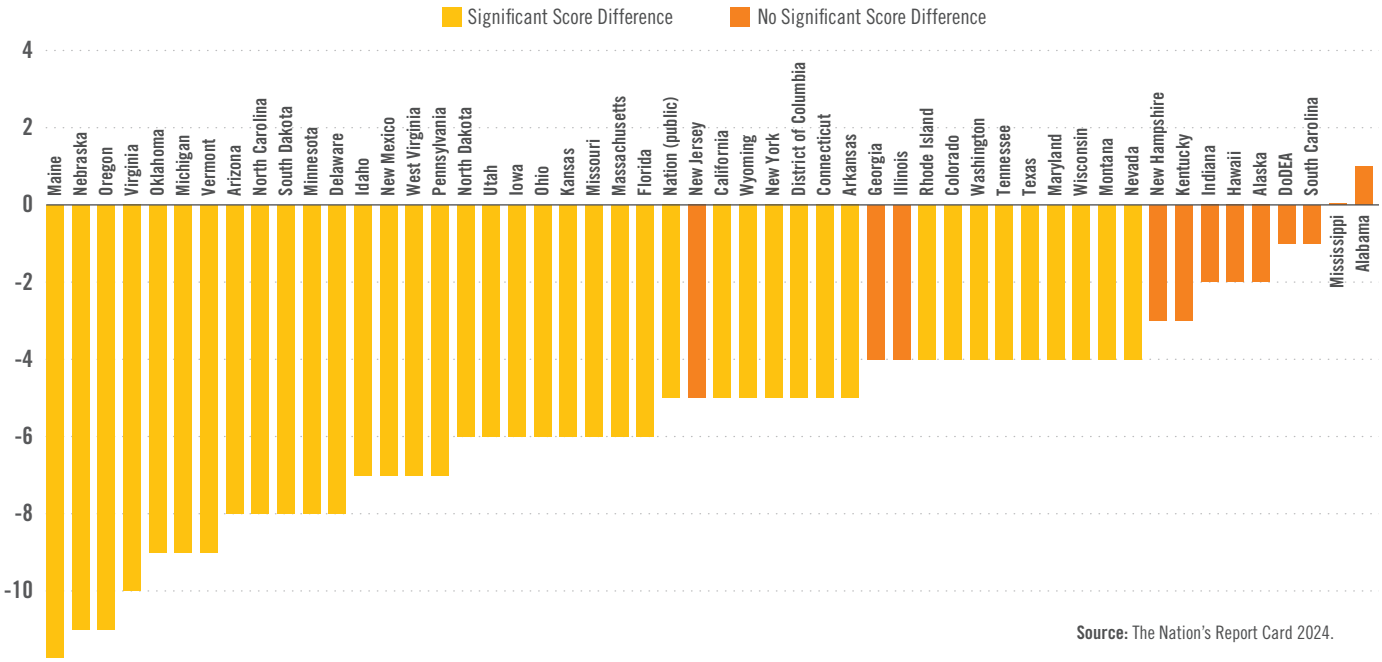
PROGRESS IS DEFINITELY HAPPENING

Crucially, NAEP 2024 also revealed vivid proof points that sustained responses are working. Take Alabama, one of only two states showing growth in both reading and math since the pandemic. State Superintendent Eric Mackey immediately dove into the weeds about how the successes came about, spotlighting (among other things) the "remarkable growth" in achievement attained by his state's cohort of special education students. He credited their gains to "specific work we have done with literacy — making sure that all of our teachers are highly trained in the science of reading."

Many other successes emerged from the data and reconfirmed that declining performance and growing achievement gaps are reversible trends, Kevin Huffman said. He went on:

> "When you look at what's happened in Mississippi in reading and in math, in Louisiana in reading, in the last NAEP test in D.C., and in reading and in math in Tennessee, there are places that have made real progress based on state and local level plans and leadership. **Mississippi is seventh in the country in fourth-grade reading; they were 49th not very long ago. This is a movable, changeable situation.**"

FIGURE 7: GRADE 4 READING SCORE POINT DIFFERENCE FROM 2019 TO 2024 BY STATE JURISDICTION

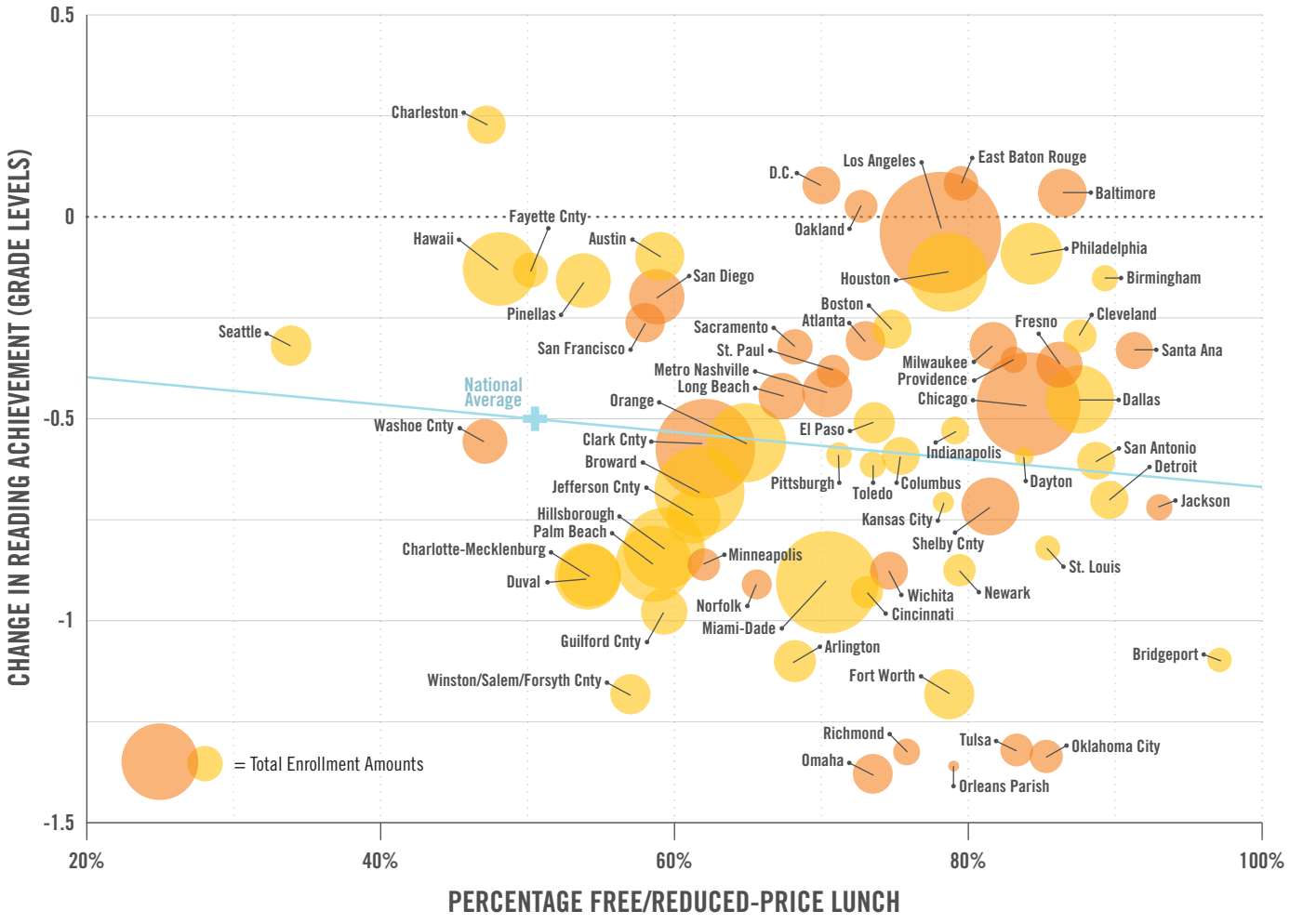


Source: The Nation's Report Card 2024.

Mississippi's rise over the years in fourth-grade reading drove state education departments across the country to follow its lead, and the 2024 NAEP results offered encouragement to some of them. Reported Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner: "Our 10th and 25th percentile in fourth-grade reading really, really shot up." The state now ranks sixth in the lowest reading loss levels and is back to its fourth-grade achievement of 2019.

Cities where students are making significant progress, in some cases recovering fully from the pandemic losses, include Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Baltimore, Greensboro, and Birmingham. Some urban districts saw growth in mathematics; some in reading for specific student groups; and many reversed trends for lower-performing students at the 25th percentile, which made those districts positive outliers nationally. Thomas Kane, Professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-project leader of the Education Recovery Scorecard, reported: "District of Columbia is back above 2019 levels in reading. Los Angeles [the nation's second largest] is back above 2019 levels in math."

FIGURE 8: CHANGE IN READING ACHIEVEMENT 2019–2024 BY FREE/REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH



Source: Education Recovery Scorecard, by Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University and Stanford Education Data Archive, Stanford University. For details on the methodology see https://edopportunity.org/methods.

Bigger city schools in many cases improved scores from the 2022 NAEP. Raymond Hart, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, reported that fourth-grade reading scores in its 81 urban school districts matched those of two years before. Meanwhile, fourth-grade math scores improved 4 points on average, even among students at the 25th percentile of performance.

Among those gains, **Washington, D.C., stood out as a case study in how attendance strategies tailored to children from marginalized communities translated directly into higher achievement.** Chancellor Lewis Ferebee described how the District drove up both attendance and achievement with citywide initiatives like Everyday Labs (where 12,000 students a year receive tailored attendance-driven appeals) and the "Every Day Counts" task force.

The city's results confirmed that absenteeism is less a school problem than a community challenge — and when tackled systemically, achievement rises. Kari Sullivan Custer, who leads attendance and engagement efforts at the Connecticut State Department of Education, explained that "relationships drive attendance," pointing to family engagement and home visiting programs as more effective than punitive measures. "Connecticut's momentum on attendance is no accident," Custer said. "It's the result of a coordinated proactive approach that began even before the pandemic."

Louisiana took a similar comprehensive approach to help drive its dramatic reading gains. Ernise Singleton, Assistant Superintendent of the Office of Career and College Readiness in the Louisiana Department of Education, described how the state created an attendance alliance with Louisiana State University, reinstated child welfare and attendance officers, and launched targeted interventions. "We partnered with Attendance Works to provide training to school systems on looking at data and using that data to inform them to make sure that those students were in school," Singleton explained. The state even hired staff to locate over 1,200 students who hadn't returned after the pandemic, determining whether they'd moved, enrolled in private schools, or were being homeschooled.

Districts whose scores recovered most in the TUDA data often got that result by using the same strategies that Mississippi and other locations have succeeded with and that CGLR has identified as worthy "big bets." They include: high-impact tutoring; summer and afterschool learning; real-time teacher prep and coaching; perpetually improving instructional materials and curriculum; and a focus on the lowest-performing students in concentrated poverty.

Guilford County Public Schools in Greensboro, N.C., recruited university students as tutors and created learning hubs for students to stay after school for tutoring and other support. In Baltimore City, targeted investments in instructional materials, evidence-based teacher prep, and a cadre of teacher coaches with subject-matter expertise led to strong results. **Four in five students in Baltimore City's schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; over the past five years, reading scores have increased.**

Baltimore's system of instructional coaching had played a critical role in the district's gains, testified Joan Dabrowski, the district's Chief Academic Officer.

> "We have a lot of early career teachers in Baltimore City, and they really benefit from that in-house, just-in-time professional support right down the hall as they're making their way through a very complex curriculum. It's in real-time. It's sitting there during planning time, helping unpack exactly the right pace and the right focus of lessons. Very granular support is part of the everyday experience."

The same recipe that worked in urban schools likely translated to rural schools that improved on NAEP, said Melissa Sadorf, Executive Director of the National Rural Education Association. "Rural and urban schools have more in common than people realize. Often we look to urban areas for the solutions — things that are working and might be scaled or replicated."

According to Alabama State Superintendent Eric Mackey, Crossville High School in rural DeKalb County, Alabama, exemplified the best practices that he believes correlate with improved NAEP results. More than 80% of Crossville's students are Latino and many are first-generation English learners, yet Mackey said they are seeing "unbelievable growth."

> "In Alabama, we've found with traditionally low-achieving populations two things: **One, get a coach or multiple coaches in that school to help the teachers implement really good PD. Two, create outside learning activities, whether intercessions, after school, before school, summer school.** At Crossville, we put both a really good math coach and a really good literacy coach in that school to help the teachers think about the best way to work with these students. And they're seeing remarkable growth."

Rural schools come with distinctive advantages despite having difficulty recruiting teachers and higher absenteeism (due to longer trips to school and how agricultural cycles impact family life), Sadorf explained. Because they are smaller and often deeply connected to their towns, she said:

> "Rural schools are where the culture happens, where society meets civic action — activities take place. Often they foster strong relationships between students and teachers. Early interventions can be more personalized and immediate. You've got intergenerational learning, apprenticeships with local businesses or agriculture programs, partnerships with universities or community colleges."

DISAGGREGATION FINDING 3

LEARNING FROM CATHOLIC, CHARTER, AND DODEA SUCCESSES

NAEP 2024 successes weren't reserved to traditional public schools. The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), with its 161 schools, ranked as the nation's top-performing school system. Students attending Catholic schools scored an average of two grades ahead of children in traditional public schools or charter schools when the schools studied had similar low-income demographics. In charter schools, which 8% of U.S. public school children attend, Black and Latino students scored better than their traditional public school peers.

Webinar panelists who described DoDEA, Catholic, and charter schools' relative success on NAEP credited each system's flexibility and school culture. Each system or school type was described as more able to set clear priorities around learning.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: "What is it about Catholic schools or other schools that are beating the odds?" asked Kathleen Porter-Magee, Managing Partner of the nonprofit Leadership Roundtable and former Superintendent of Catholic elementary schools serving economically challenged neighborhoods. Citing past case studies of schools with high achievement, Porter-Magee answered her own question:

> "**Successful schools had a really clearly articulated mission, vision, and purpose that drove everything that happened in the school community and aligned everybody.** All of the adults who were working there were in the same boat, facing the same direction, and rowing together. For us at Catholic schools, obviously, our mission was faith based, but it didn't have to be. A vision that drove all of your decision-making and animated all of the adults in the building — that is what had an outsized impact on student learning."

CHARTER SCHOOLS: Average 2025 NAEP scores for charter and traditional public schools were equal. But Drew Jacobs, Senior Director at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said that "digging beneath the average, we actually see a different story emerging" — one where students recently less well-served by public schools found more success in charter school environments.

Students attend charter schools because "parents are looking for better choices for their kids" after negative experiences elsewhere, Jacobs explained. Facing fewer constraints from district administrators than traditional public school leaders, charter school educators can "hyper focus" on achievement, accountability, curriculum, staffing, and scheduling to serve their specific communities. The result in 2025: **Charter school students slightly outperformed their traditional public school peers when controlling for ethnicity and family income.**

DoDEA SCHOOLS: Every two years when NAEP scores come out, **DoDEA routinely ranks first, representing the pinnacle of shared mission and what's possible achievement-wise.** But DoDEA is also a reminder of how far removed most communities are from the conditions that enable such excellence. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, the former School Superintendent in Hartford, Conn., who now heads DoDEA, described how 67,000 military children across 11 countries have sustained pre-pandemic performance on NAEP. She also acknowledged the uniqueness of her district model.

> "We have a dual mission in DoDEA. Of course it is to ensure that our students have a world-class education. But we serve families who are out defending the nation, and we contribute to military readiness. Our parents cannot be worried about the kind of education that their children are receiving." The result: A sense of mission so concrete that it creates what she called "incredible support so then we can focus on what matters most for teaching and learning."

Before coming to DoDEA, Schiavino-Narvaez was superintendent of Hartford schools, and she remembers how Hartford's schools grappled with deep poverty, unstable housing, and fractured supports. In contrast, DoDEA operates in what Schiavino-Narvaez described as "kind of a built-in community schools model" where "education is highly valued" and "like a family." She continued: "At least one parent is employed. They have health care on the installation. They have access to many other things, including before- and after-school activities, after-school care. **Inherently, the system provides wraparound support to families.**" Teachers live in the same community, often with housing provided. Families move every few years, but usually with a relatively seamless transition to another DoDEA school.

The DoDEA model isn't easily replicable, but it remains an example of what's possible when everyone involved unites around student success.

WHERE NAEP 2024 RESULTS POINT US

Observations From Series Moderator John Gomperts

John Gomperts, a longtime leader in nonprofits and government organizations, was President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance from 2012–2022, Director of AmeriCorps in the Obama administration, and now serves as an Executive Fellow to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

It was my great pleasure to moderate this series of nine discussions in the wake of the release of the 2024 NAEP results. I learned a tremendous amount from our panelists, from our conversations, and from the comments and questions offered by members of the audience. For me, and I hope for all who participated as guests or listeners, this series was at once vividly clarifying and also gave rise to new questions and curiosities.

We put together *The Nation's Report Card* to document the key insights that emerged. We hope it can also be a resource for people who are looking for information about the role and importance of NAEP, the 2024 results, and future NAEP releases to inform deeper data dives and effective implementation of what works to lift student achievement.

I come away from this series of conversations with five big takeaways. Each is deeply consistent with the historic work of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

The importance of making student achievement the top priority, and the role of NAEP in making that true

Successful systems prioritize student outcomes above all other considerations and sustain that focus through budget battles, election cycles, and institutional resistance. As Margaret Spellings put it, "**The question becomes how do we keep the main thing the main thing.** For the moment, let's focus on student achievement and everything that means for our country."

For the foreseeable future, this commitment to academic performance must start with state-level leadership, because as Robin Lake, Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, said, "What surprised me the most was there still really is no plan for improving student achievement in the U.S." State officials control the vast bulk of taxpayer dollars devoted to K–12 education. **The vision, leadership, and authority of state leaders are essential to drive the ambitious responses needed.**

Kevin Huffman, who led the state department of education in Tennessee, captured this onus on the states precisely:

> "It's important for all of us in the field and on the ground to put pressure on the states that are not delivering outcomes for kids. The states that get results are willing to make school districts do things. They are willing to drive change from the state down to the local level. **You can't tell me you're 'a local control state' — as if somehow Mississippi does not believe in local district control.** And yet Mississippi was able to take a central vision for reading and drive it down through districts into the classroom."

Mississippi succeeded because state leaders and superintendents refused to accept political or institutional hesitance as permanent constraints. What's required is straightforward: Governors and state education chiefs must personally guide and track their state's measures and progress toward reducing "Below Basic" percentages. At every level, education leaders and local coalitions need the same focus and resolve with regard to student achievement.

Specifically, communities can organize around a third-grade reading goal, making student achievement a shared priority and directly tackling issues like school readiness, chronic absenteeism, and summer learning loss. **Playbooks exist from communities that have already mapped ecosystems of support around struggling readers.** We need district leaders and principals monitoring whether programs balance fidelity to evidence-based practices with flexibility to respond to local conditions. We need community leaders and advocates marshalling data and persuasive skills to turn research into reality inside classrooms.

The role of data in supporting the prioritization of student achievement, and the central importance of federal data collection and reporting, in the form of NAEP

Like any serious report card, NAEP provides necessary but at times unflattering feedback that drives improvement. Without this external accountability, states, districts, and the public can too easily lose sight of whether their efforts are actually generating progress for students. As Margaret Spellings emphasized, "It's not comfortable to call people out and say, 'You're not good enough, you need to up your game.' It makes people squirm. But it sure has worked for kids."

Success stories in NAEP 2024 were powered by data systems built on investments in technology and reporting infrastructure, and also buy-in inside school districts, as Florida's Indian River County has demonstrated. Today, we can capture, analyze, and act on data on everything from individual performance to instructional quality, attendance trends, and wraparound services children receive. All of that can point toward creating feedback loops that help educators improve academic performance for individual students and across classrooms, districts, and states.

States can drive the adoption of those feedback loops while district superintendents can closely manage data collection and use within schools. And community leaders can use the data to guide their advocacy and support.

The ways in which NAEP results can help leaders identify and then lean into evidence-based responses that will drive student achievement

We are falling short for far too many students to stand pat. Effective responses are abundant — the challenge is bringing the right ones to life. At this point, hundreds if not thousands of educators, community members, city officials, and nonprofit staffers have helped create the programs that led to success stories captured by NAEP and state assessments. These committed people know how to deliver early literacy interventions, high-dosage tutoring, instructional coaching, absenteeism prevention, and out-of-school time learning — and they're ready to share their knowledge.

Raymond Hart of the Council of the Great City Schools, after describing how cities like Los Angeles and Baltimore improved scores on NAEP, reported: "**We've already begun the process of having some of those successful districts share with their peers.** 'Here's what we did. Here's how we did it.'"

The need to emphasize not only the adoption of evidence-based responses, but also to pay close attention to the quality of implementation

It is one thing to tick off and even adopt the responses we need: high-dosage tutoring, quality curriculum, teachers who are prepared and supported, attendance efforts that allow every kid to show up at school ready to learn. But if we don't implement the responses well, it's not going to matter enough. As Margaret Spellings observed, **"We know what works, who needs help, and how to help them. It's now on implementation."**

High-quality implementation of programs and initiatives is hard, especially in resource-constrained times and when the demand for fast results is so great. Further, absent scandal or gross negligence, implementation is a particularly hard story for reporters to write about or academics to research. But it may be the most important story in driving up achievement in reading. By now, over 30 states have enacted science of reading-based laws and initiatives. As John King said: "The proof will be in the pudding of whether the science of reading work happens in classrooms. If I'm a teacher with good training and high-quality materials in front of me, then I have hope that when test scores aren't where I want, I can do something about it."

The power of narrative and the need for confidence in progress over despair

Declining test scores can give new fuel to the fatalistic narrative that poor performance is inevitable, inexorable, and unfixable. When NAEP results become self-fulfilling prophecies of failure, that dynamic can drain resources, turn away talented educators, and discourage the needed commitment by leaders to put themselves out there and drive reforms shown to help students.

As John King reflected:

> "I am heartbroken about how little you hear about educational outcomes from our leaders. That's both sides of the aisle. That's federal and state. Today we really need our leadership to step up and restore the sense that improving educational outcomes is a national imperative."

Margaret Spellings added urgency to this call: "In a time when the workforce is changing, arguably more than ever in the history of the world through AI, this is the time when we should be stepping up our game to the maximum extent possible — not thinking, 'Who cares?'"

The success stories revealed in NAEP 2024 and previous NAEP reports communicate the opposite of "who cares?" Simply by acting with relentless optimism and confidence in the knowledge that public schools can deliver higher achievement, the leaders, educators, and communities involved, over many years, were able to combat fatalism and build a feedback loop of action in which expecting excellence created the conditions that produced it.

This narrative, one driven by a combination of cold-eyed realism and determined optimism, has been proven to drive achievement across diverse contexts. Michael Petrilli, who helped create the lifts in student performance in the 2000s as part of the U.S. Department of Education, listed the examples offhand:

> "Mississippi and the Southern surge; New Orleans has been in the news with the Katrina anniversary; Denver had an incredible run; charter schools in Tennessee are getting strong results after the pandemic; Washington, D.C., after all these years is still doing incredibly well. So this stuff still works, we can still point to places where it's working."

Remarkably, the 15 hours of conversations about NAEP made me more eager for the next NAEP release. We have the tools to lift student achievement to greater prominence and then to raise student achievement itself.

Of course, I see and worry about the ways that NAEP results can be another log on the fire of despair about student achievement, especially for kids who are growing up in economically fragile families and in historically marginalized communities. But when we approach the next set of NAEP results (and the results in all future years) with curiosity and commitment, we will be able to use the results to catalyze and mobilize the whole country and every community to rededicate to the goal of real academic achievement for every young person in every community in every school.

JOHN GOMPERTS, a longtime leader in nonprofits and government organizations devoted to civic engagement and to creating greater opportunity for children and youth, serves as an executive fellow to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and moderated most of the webinars in this series. Gomperts served as president and CEO of America's Promise Alliance from 2012–2022 and as director of AmeriCorps in the Obama administration.

FEBRUARY 4

Decoding NAEP: Behind and Beyond the Headlines

KALYN BELSHA was a senior national reporter at Chalkbeat, a nonprofit, education-focused news organization, at the time of the webinar.

KRISTEN HUFF, ED.D., serves as head of measurement, assessment, and research at Curriculum Associates where she supports the development of online assessments such as i-Ready, integrated with personalized learning and teacher-led instruction.

KARYN LEWIS, PH.D., serves as vice president of research and policy partnerships at NWEA, a Division of HMH, where she leads a team dedicated to generating actionable, policy-relevant research that addresses critical challenges in K–12 education.

KEVIN MAHNKEN is a senior writer for The74, a nonprofit news organization covering America's education system from early childhood through college and career.

MORGAN SCOTT POLIKOFF, PH.D., is a professor at the University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education where he uses quantitative and mixed methods to study the design, implementation, and effects of curriculum, standards, assessment, and accountability policies.

SARA RANDAZZO was an education reporter with The Wall Street Journal at the time of the webinar, covering K–12 education nationally, with a focus on technology shaping the classroom, how school districts spend money to improve education, and parent advocacy.

MUNRO RICHARDSON, PH.D., serves as executive director of Read Charlotte, a community initiative that unites families, educators, and community partners with the goal of improving third-grade reading proficiency in North Carolina's Mecklenburg County to 80%. In this role, he uses research, data, and strategic funding to coordinate, integrate, and align the efforts of dozens of organizations across the region to support children's language and literacy development.

FEBRUARY 11

Decoding NAEP: Who's Below "Basic" and Why?

MELISSA CASTILLO, ED.D., served as a senior advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education under the Biden-Harris administration where she provided expert advice, guidance, and support on major initiatives focused on academic and linguistic equity for diverse learners.

IAN ROWE is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute where he focuses on education, upward mobility, family formation, and adoption. He is also co-founder of Vertex Partnership Academies, a virtues-based, International Baccalaureate high school in the Bronx.

MARK SCHNEIDER, PH.D., served in the U.S. Department of Education as the director of the Institute of Education Sciences from 2018–2024 and as commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics from 2005–2008. He is currently a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute where his work focuses on education research and development and higher education administration.

KATHARINE STEVENS, PH.D., is the founder and president of the Center on Child and Family Policy. Prior to launching CCFP, she served for more than six years as a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), leading AEI's early childhood program.

FEBRUARY 18

Decoding NAEP: Attendance Matters

HEDY CHANG is the founder and executive director of Attendance Works, a national and state-level initiative aimed at advancing student success by addressing chronic absence.

KARI SULLIVAN CUSTER serves as the lead for attendance and engagement at the Connecticut State Department of Education where she oversees the coordination of efforts across divisions within the Department and with other state agencies and community providers to address and remove non-academic barriers to student attendance, including those related to health, housing, and juvenile justice.

LEWIS FEREBEE, ED.D., has served as the Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) since 2018. Under his leadership, DCPS has been one of the fastest improving urban districts in the nation, making significant gains on fourth grade math on the 2024 National Assessment for Educational Progress.

THOMAS KANE, PH.D., is the Walter H. Gale Professor of Economics at Harvard Graduate School of Education. In 2023, Kane joined with Sean Reardon, Ed.D., at Stanford Graduate School of Education to launch the Education Recovery Scorecard, analyzing test scores from roughly 11,000 school districts across 45 states to measure the extent to which test scores changed in the wake of the pandemic.

LORI MASSEUR serves as early learning director at Read On Arizona, a statewide collaboration to advance the strategies, policies, and investments needed for all children to learn to read at grade level and be successful in school. In this role, Masseur leads the organization's work around school readiness, early literacy, and systems-building.

ERNISE SINGLETON, PH.D., is the assistant superintendent of the Office of Career and College Readiness in the Louisiana Department of Education.

FEBRUARY 25

Decoding NAEP: Different Contexts, Different Results?

RAYMOND C. HART, PH.D., serves as the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a network of 81 of the nation's largest urban public school systems focused on improving the education of children growing up in inner cities.

DREW JACOBS serves as senior director of policy, research, and evaluation at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the charter school movement.

KATHLEEN PORTER-MAGEE serves as managing partner of the Leadership Roundtable, a nonprofit organization in service to the Catholic Church. From 2014–2024, she was superintendent of Partnership Schools, a network of 11 Catholic elementary schools serving economically-challenged neighborhoods in New York City and Cleveland.

At the time of the webinar, MELISSA SADORF, ED.D., was serving as the executive director of the Arizona Rural Schools Association. In May 2025, she assumed the role of executive director of the National Rural Education Association where she is now focused on strengthening policy advocacy efforts, building leadership development pipelines, and amplifying innovative practices in rural education.

BETH SCHIAVINO-NARVAEZ, ED.D., serves as the director of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) which operates 161 schools in nine districts located in 11 foreign countries, seven states, and two territories, educating more than 67,000 military connected children.

MARCH 11

Decoding NAEP: What Families Know and What We Can Do?

ASHARA BAKER, MSL, serves as the New York State director for National Parents Union and the co-founder of the New York State Charter Parent Council, having spent more than a decade in education and family development and efforts to strengthen the state's education systems.

CHARLES BARONE, PH.D., is the senior director of the Center for Innovation at National Parents Union, a network of more than 1,800 affiliated parent organizations spanning all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico and representing more than 1.7 million parents and caregivers. Barone has been a central player in most major federal education reforms over the past 25 years, including President Obama's Race to the Top initiative and Every Student Succeeds Act and President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind.

JOHN JOHNSON serves as a parent leader with the National Parents Union Leadership Council on Assessment and Accountability and is a passionate parent advocate in addition to his professional role as a network engineer.

PASCALE SMALL serves as deputy director of impact and engagement with National Parents Union, a network of more than 1,800 affiliated parent organizations spanning all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico and representing more than 1.7 million parents and caregivers. In this role, Small works to expand opportunities for historically resilient communities by cultivating partnerships with mission-aligned organizations and people to increase collective impact and build the capacity of those closest to the issues.

TIARA THOMAS serves as a parent leader with the National Parents Union Leadership Council on Assessment and Accountability and is an American Indian educator, activist, and leader who advocates for the rights and recognition of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe and other Indigenous Nations.

KERI RODRIGUES is the founding president of National Parents Union, having co-founded this groundbreaking network of more than 1,800 affiliated parent organizations spanning all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico and representing more than 1.7 million parents and caregivers from diverse backgrounds.

MARCH 18

Decoding NAEP: The Perspectives of State Chiefs

SUSANA CÓRDOVA, ED.D., was named Colorado's 18th Commissioner of Education in June 2023 and is the first Latina to hold the state's top education position. Prior to this role, Córdova spent more than 30 years in education, including superintendent of Denver Public Schools, principal, chief academic officer, chief schools officer, and deputy superintendent.

AIMEE ROGSTAD GUIDERA was named Secretary of Education of the Commonwealth of Virginia by Governor Glenn Youngkin in December 2021 and now oversees education from Pre–K through Postsecondary. Prior to this role, Guidera had served as the president and CEO of the Data Quality Campaign, a national nonprofit advocacy organization leading the effort to ensure that students, parents, educators, and policymakers have the right information to guide their actions so that every student can succeed, and had also led a strategic consultancy focused on improving student learning and outcomes.

KATIE JENNER, ED.D., serves as the first Secretary of Education for the State of Indiana, leading the Indiana Department of Education and chairing the State Board of Education with a learner-centered, future-focused vision. In this role, she has secured and is implementing the state's largest-ever financial investment in literacy focused on the science of reading and is developing Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed (Indiana GPS), a performance dashboard that re-envisions how the state strategically measures school performance and student learning.

ERIC MACKEY, ED.D., has been serving as the Alabama State Superintendent of Education since 2018 where he has implemented the Alabama Literacy Act as well as several other innovative strategic initiatives. Prior to this role, he served as executive director of the School Superintendents of Alabama, having previously taught science in middle and high school.

CAREY M. WRIGHT, ED.D., was appointed Maryland State Superintendent of Schools by the Maryland State Board of Education in April 2024 having previously served as State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi where she is credited with elevating Mississippi to become a national leader in literacy instruction and outcomes during her nine-year term from 2013 to 2022. During her tenure, Mississippi's ranking for NAEP fourth-grade reading rose from 50th to 21st in the nation with economically disadvantaged fourth graders achieving higher NAEP reading and math scores than their peers, across racial and ethnic lines.

APRIL 8

Decoding NAEP: Frontline Educators Reflect on the Pace and Progress of Learning Recovery

PEGGY BROOKINS, NBCT, has served as the president and CEO of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards since November 2015, leading this independent nonprofit organization in its efforts to strengthen standards in teaching and professionalize the teaching workforce.

ARTHUR EVERETT is a high school social studies teacher at the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology in Brooklyn, New York and has received the 2016–2017 U.S. Department of Education Classroom Teacher Ambassador Fellowship and the 2018 Empire State Excellence in Teaching Award. Everett is also a member of the national board of Educators for Excellence.

JOAN DABROWSKI serves as the chief academic officer for Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland and has helped the district expand access to tutoring, extended day and summer learning programs, advanced academics, career and technical education programming, and professional learning.

DAVID K. MOORE, ED.D., has served as superintendent of schools for the School District of Indian River County in Florida since 2020, leading the district as it advanced in statewide rankings from 38 in 2018–2019 to 9 in 2023–2024. He was recognized as 2025 Florida Superintendent of the Year and National Superintendent of the Year Finalist.

EVAN STONE is the co-founder and CEO of Educators for Excellence (E4E), having launched the organization out of his classroom in 2010 and growing it to now represent nearly 40,000 teacher members across the country. E4E is a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering teachers to advocate for policies that improve their profession and student outcomes.

ROBERTO J. RODRIGUEZ is a nationally recognized leader in education policy with more than 20 years of experience in government and nonprofit sectors. He most recently served as Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning at the U.S. Department of Education under President Biden and previously served as CEO of Teach Plus, empowering teachers to drive policy change nationwide.

APRIL 22

Beyond the Ballot: Did Child Policy Predictions Hold True?

JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD is the CEO of Digital Promise, a global, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on accelerating innovation in education, having previously served as Senior Advisor and Deputy Director in US Programs at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and Superintendent of the Rochester City School District in New York.

DENISE FORTE is the president and CEO of The Education Trust, a nationwide nonprofit committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Her lifetime of public service includes 20 years in senior congressional staff roles, a stint in the U.S. Department of Education under the Obama administration, and leadership roles in various think tanks and nonprofits.

KEVIN HUFFMAN is the CEO of Accelerate, a national initiative launched in 2022 to embed high-impact tutoring and personalized learning in public schools. Previously, Huffman served as Commissioner of Education for the state of Tennessee from 2011 to 2015, leading the state to the greatest gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress while in office.

ROBIN LAKE is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a nonpartisan research and policy analysis organization at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University, where she leads the organization in researching and developing transformative, evidence-based solutions for K–12 public education.

MICHAEL J. PETRELLI is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, executive editor of Education Next, editor-in-chief of Education Gadfly Weekly, and host of the Education Gadfly Show podcast. An expert on charter schools, school accountability, evidence-based practices, and trends in test scores and other student outcomes, Petrilli helped to create the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement.

SEPTEMBER 2

Beyond Decoding NAEP: The Federal Role in Promoting Efficacy, Equity & Accountability

JOHN B. KING, JR., ED.D., is the 15th Chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY), the largest comprehensive system of public higher education in the United States. Before SUNY, King served as president of The Education Trust, a national civil rights nonprofit, and Professor of the Practice at the University of Maryland College Park. King also served in President Barack Obama's cabinet as the 10th U.S. Secretary of Education, 2015–2017.

MARGARET SPELLINGS is president and CEO of the Bipartisan Policy Center, having previously led Texas 2036, a bipartisan think tank. Spellings served in President George W. Bush's cabinet as the U.S. Secretary of Education, 2005–2009. Her extensive leadership experience in state and federal government also includes service as White House Chief Domestic Policy Advisor, Senior Policy Advisor to then-Governor George W. Bush, President of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, and President of the 17-institution University of North Carolina System.

ADAM GAMORAN, PH.D., is the president of the William T. Grant Foundation where he launched a new initiative to support research on reducing inequality in youth outcomes and has continued the Foundation's efforts to improve the use of research evidence in policy and practice decisions that affect young people. Gamoran previously held the John D. MacArthur Chair in Sociology and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, conducting research focused on educational inequality and school reform.

MICHAEL J. PETRILLI is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, executive editor of Education Next, editor in chief of the Education Gadfly, host of the Education Gadfly Show podcast, and a contributor at Forbes.com. An award-winning writer, he is the author of The Diverse Schools Dilemma, editor of Education for Upward Mobility, and co-editor of How to Educate an American and Follow the Science to School. He is an expert on charter schools, school accountability, evidence-based practices, and trends in test scores.

RUTH N. LÓPEZ TURLEY, PH.D., directs the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University, which brings together data, research, engagement, and action to improve lives. In 2011, she founded the Houston Education Research Consortium, a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute and 11 Houston area school districts. From 2022–2025, she was a presidential appointee to the National Board for Education Sciences, which advises and approves priorities for the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

SARAH TORIAN is the Chief Learning Officer for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, leading the organization's Learning and Engagement Opportunities (LEO) webinars. Since 2002, she has worked as an independent consultant for nonprofits and foundations, providing research, facilitation, communications, and project management services largely focused on children's early language and literacy development.

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QUOTES:

Quotations in this report are derived from the "Decoding NAEP" webinar series. Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity, brevity, and readability while preserving the speakers' intended meaning. In some instances, quotes may combine statements made at different points in a speaker's presentation.

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