



The Campaign for
**GRADE-LEVEL
READING**

CHAPTER 1

**THE NATION'S
REPORT CARD**

A CALL TO ACTION FOR RAISING
ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING GAPS



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 6](#).)

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.

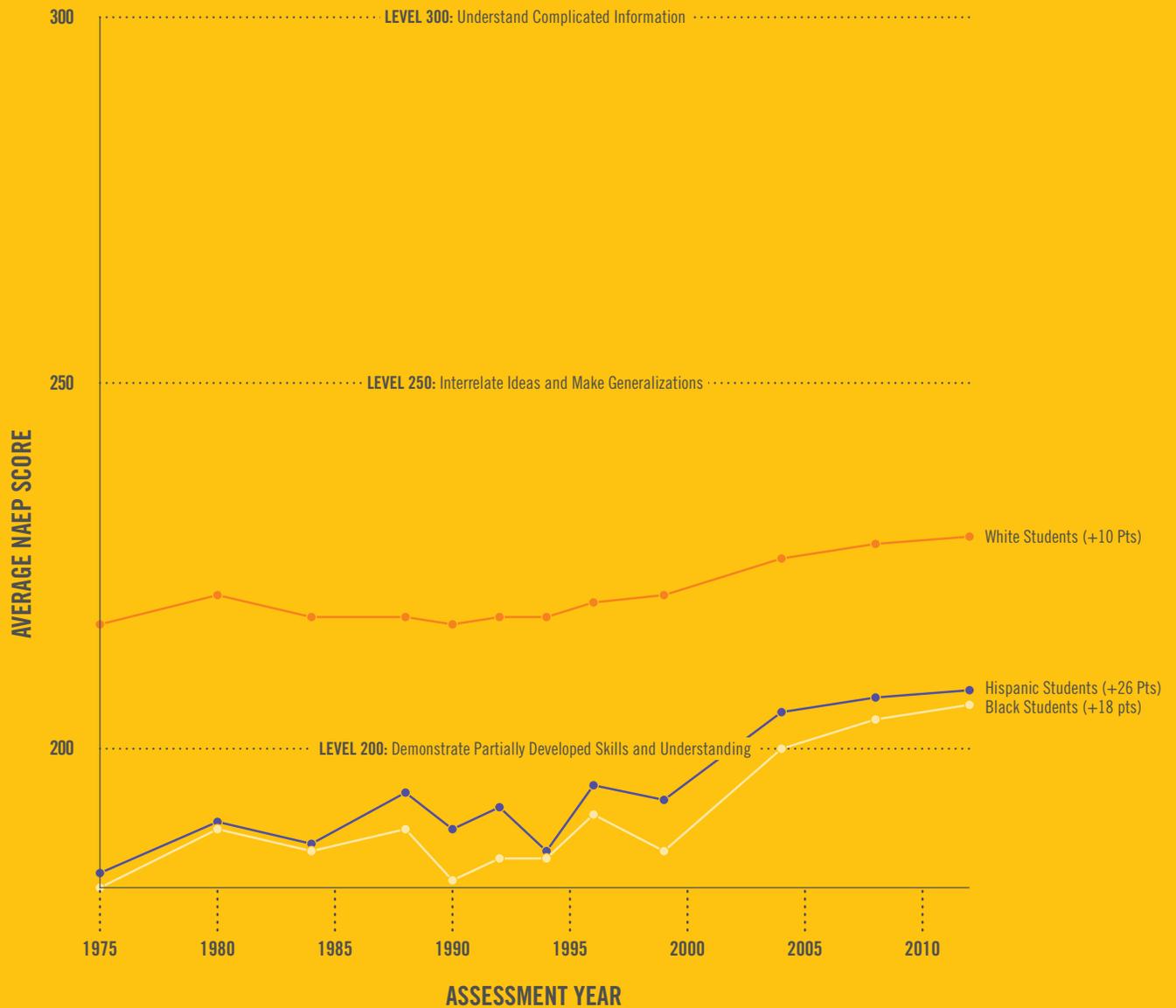
We've Pursued These Strategies Before, With Success

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.”

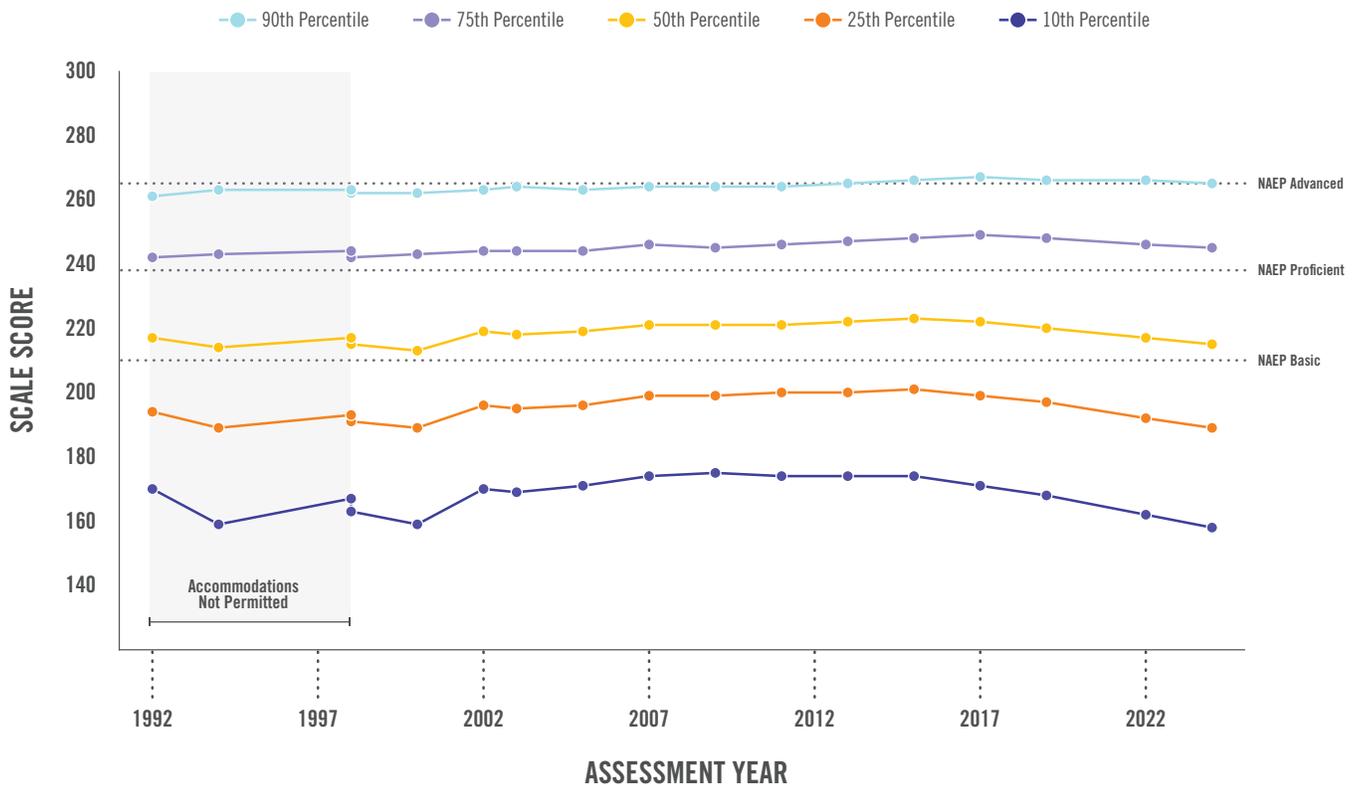
But during the 2010s, scores flattened out, gaps stopped closing, and just when the nation was making big progress on both achievement and equity, the nation lost the plot. By 2012, the Common Core Standards movement — intended to strengthen the standards that would drive curricula, professional development,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



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