



The Campaign for
**GRADE-LEVEL
READING**

CHAPTER 3

**THE NATION'S
REPORT CARD**

A CALL TO ACTION FOR RAISING
ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING GAPS

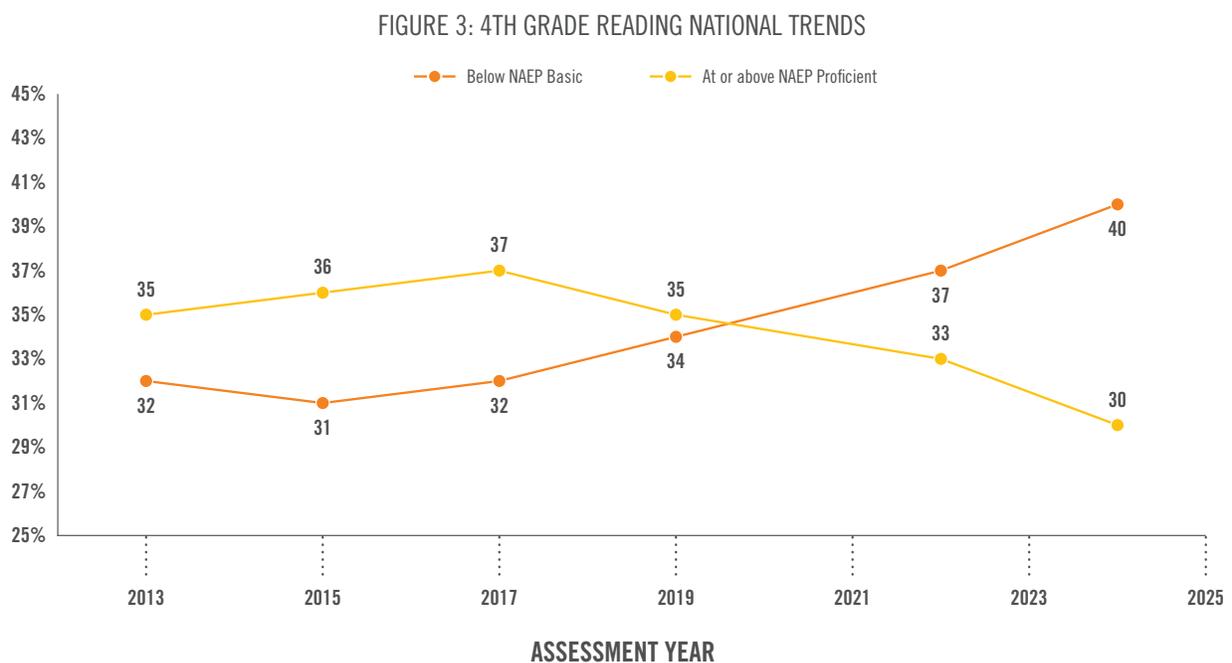


CHAPTER 3

SUCCESSSES 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.

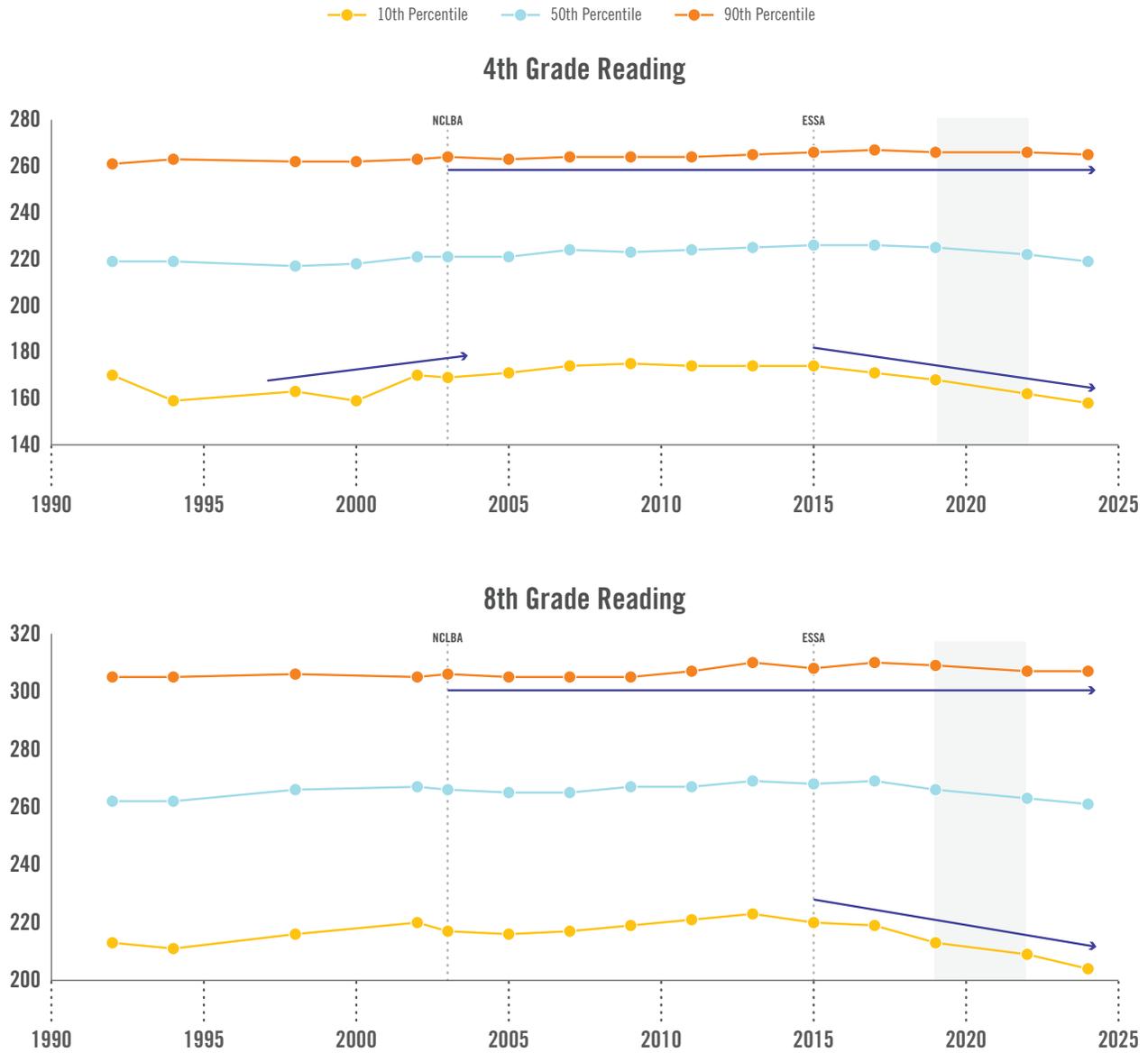
It only takes one chart to reveal the broad negatives. Mark Schneider called the result “the scissor effect.” Meaning, he said, “Those who are doing well [at the 90th percentile of performance] are doing better while those who are doing less well are doing worse and worse.” Charlie Barone, Senior Director 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.



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.



DISAGGREGATION FINDING 1

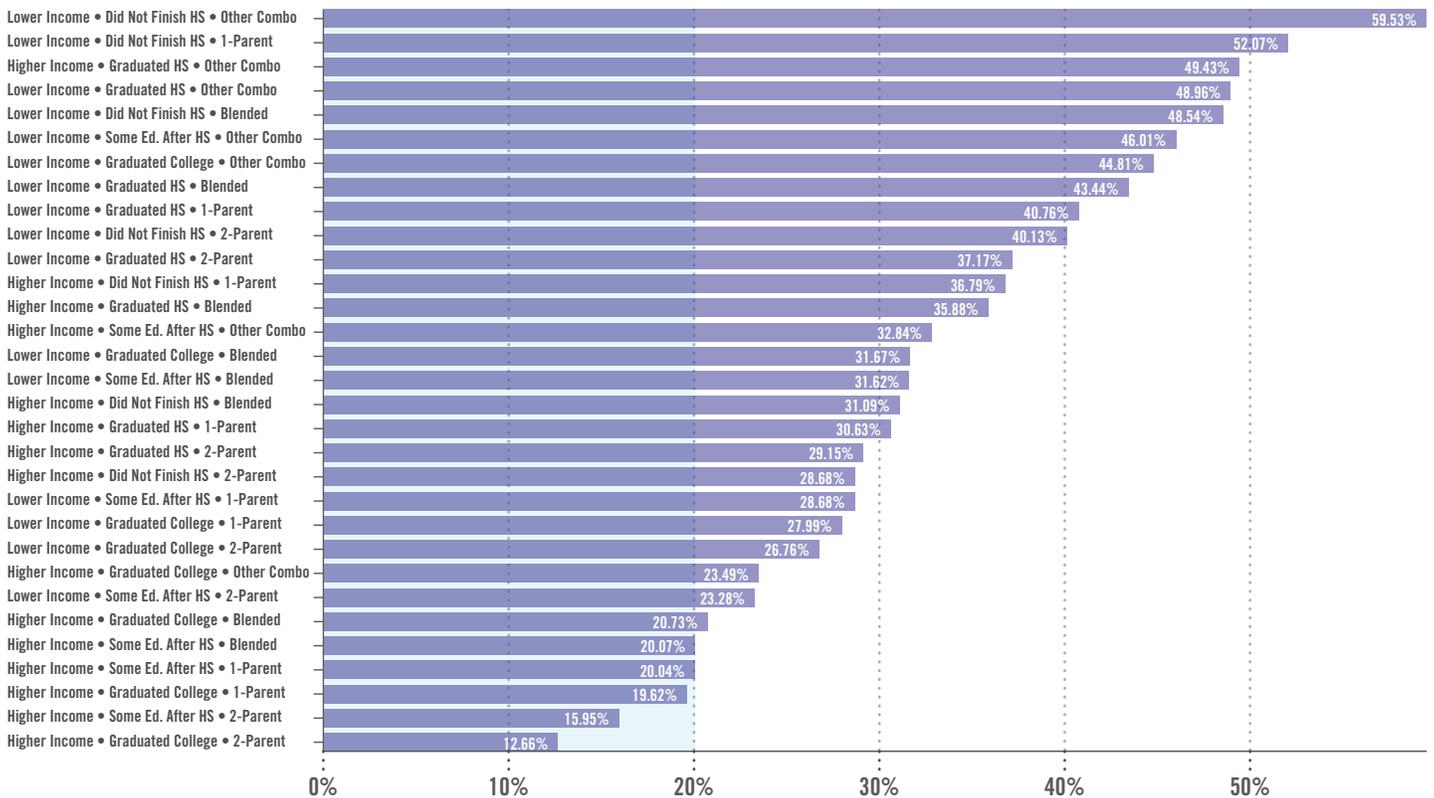
GROWING GAPS, ADDED MYSTERIES

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:

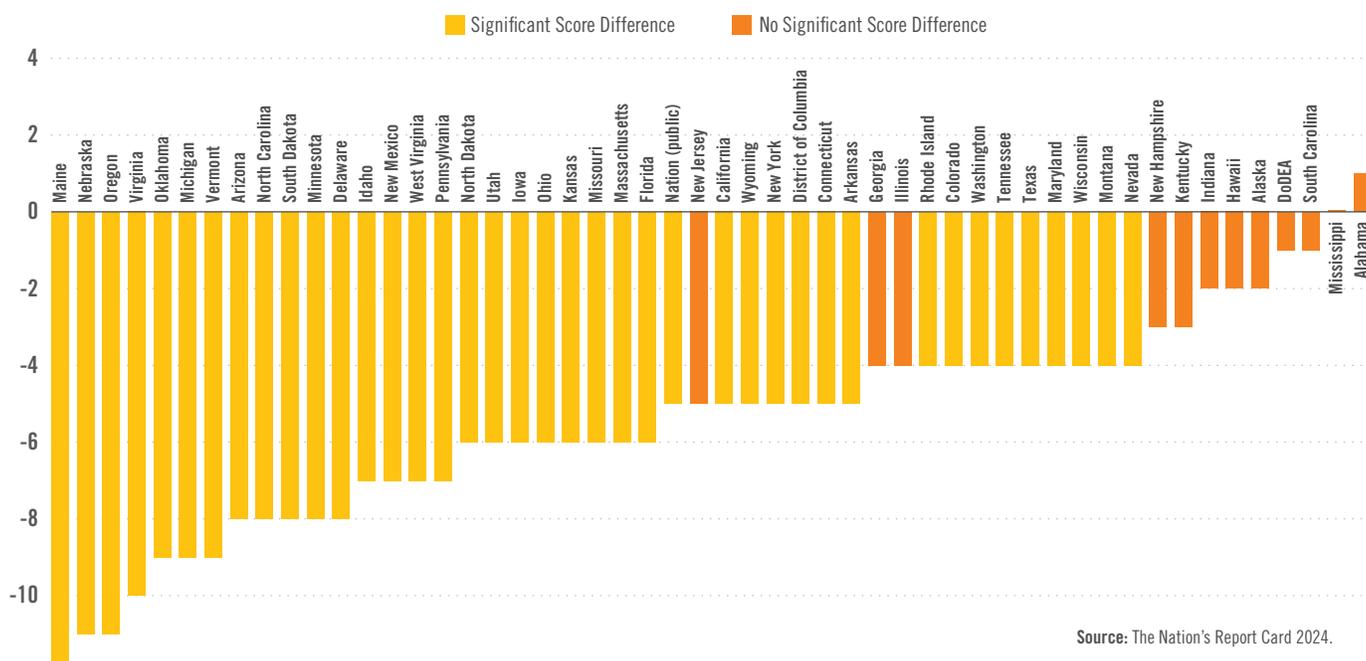
PROGRESS IS DEFINITELY HAPPENING

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.**”

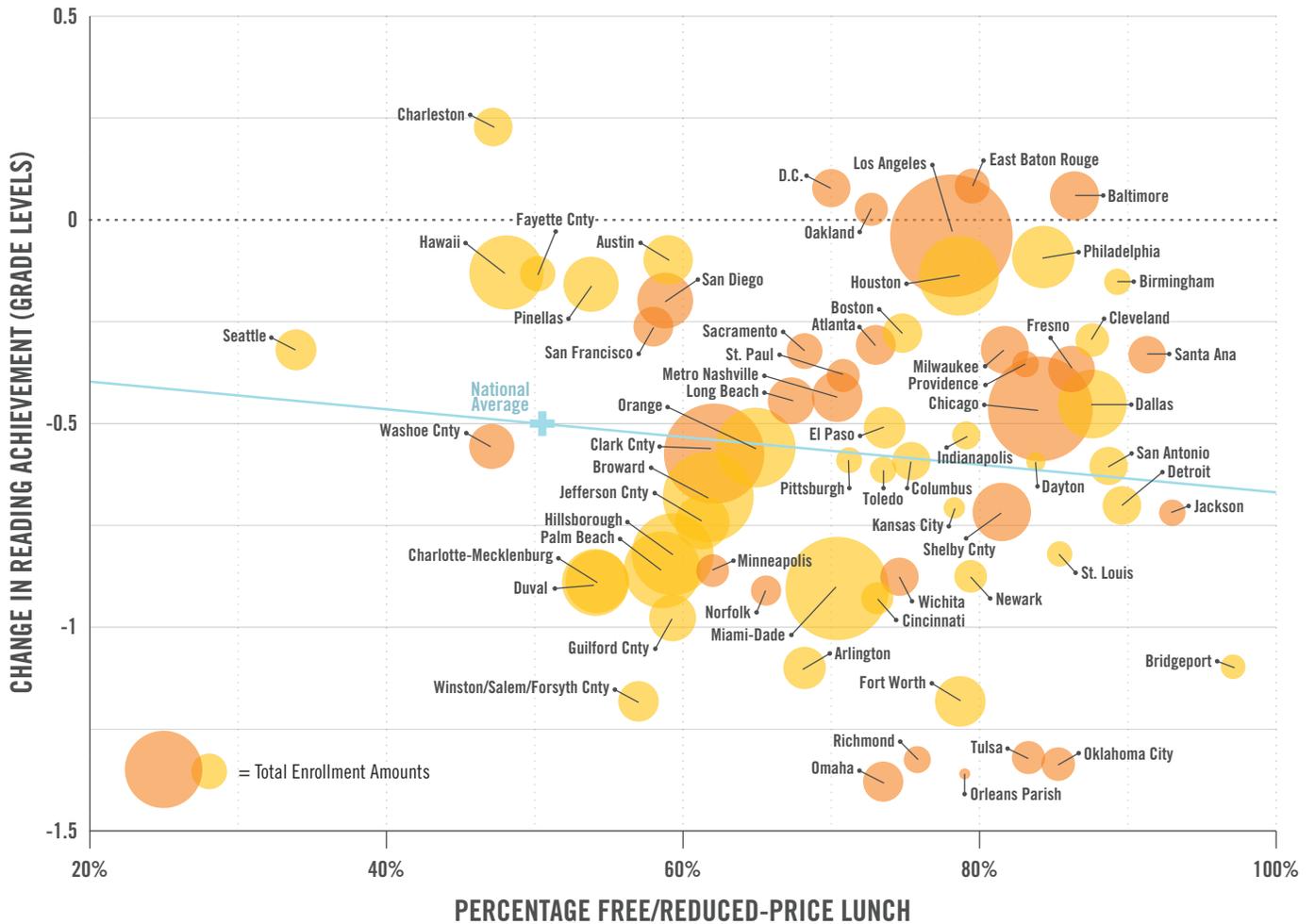
FIGURE 7: GRADE 4 READING SCORE POINT DIFFERENCE FROM 2019 TO 2024 BY STATE JURISDICTION



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.

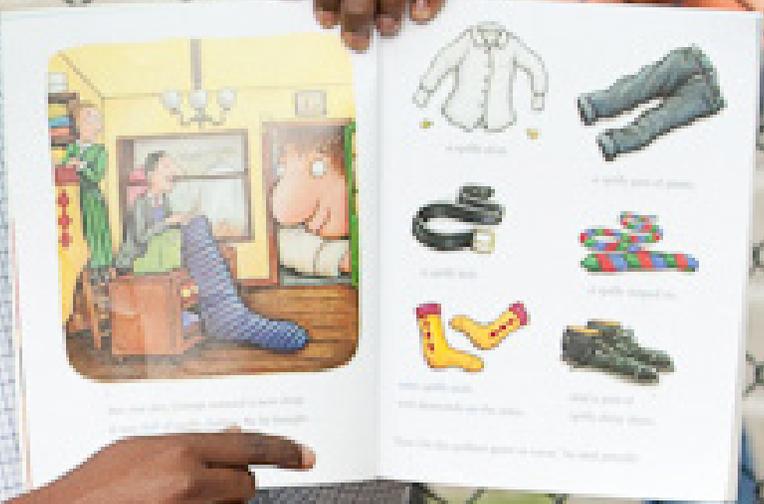
Students attend charter schools because “parents are looking for better choices for their kids” after negative experiences elsewhere, Jacobs explained. Facing fewer constraints from district administrators than traditional public school leaders, charter school educators can “hyper focus” on achievement, 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.



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