

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**

“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**

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.

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.