



Week of Oct. 31-Nov. 4, 2011

Nation's Report Card: CA Schools' Struggle "Against a Riptide"

By UCLA IDEA

The Nation's Report Card was released this week and the scores don't look good for California. But first, how did the rest of the nation do?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, tested a sample of 4th and 8th graders from each state in reading and mathematics. This year, 40 percent of 4th graders and 35 percent of 8th graders scored proficient or above in math, and 34 percent of students in both grades scored proficient in reading. These scores reflect a 1- or 2-percentage point increase from 2009, the last year the tests were administered.

The slight increases continue a 20-year trend during which 4th graders have posted a 5-percent increase in proficiency. Mathematics scores in the past two decades have shown greater improvement with a 27-percent increase in 4th graders demonstrating proficiency.

The relatively modest progress and low proficiency rates on the NAEP contrast with performance on many state tests. Because NAEP's definitions for basic, proficient and advanced are different from various states' tests, students can be classified as "proficient" on state exams but fall to "basic" on NAEP (Washington Post). It is also the case that state tests have high-stakes consequences. These high-stakes consequences lead schools to target a limited set of skills and focus attention on test preparation, so state test scores might inch up at the expense of an overall high-quality education for students. Recent news of testing irregularities in Washington D.C., Atlanta and California also suggest that high stakes testing promotes an environment where scores are vulnerable to manipulation. Some believe that NAEP is a more reliable measure for judging state and federal policy because there are not consequences for individual students, teachers, or schools and only states are reported on and ranked.

Here in California, 34 percent of 4th graders and 25 percent of 8th graders were proficient in math. In reading, 25 percent of 4th graders and 24 percent of 8th graders were proficient (between 9 percent and 10 percent behind the nation). These figures reflect marginal improvement from 2009.

California has been near the bottom of NAEP rankings for a while now, in both reading and math. This time around it's worse with the state tied with Louisiana at 49th in 8th-grade reading, just one point above Mississippi.

Regardless of one's opinion of NAEP as a high-profile (if not high-stakes) test, it's clear that California public schools lag far behind the rest of the nation in promoting core skills in reading and mathematics. Of course, some progress is better than no progress, but the current *rate* of improvement means that more decades will pass by with large proportions of California students unable to demonstrate critical academic skills.

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IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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Perhaps mindful that some California schools are considering cutting another week from the school year to meet their budgets, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson said of the NAEP results:

“Our students are still making progress, even as they swim against a riptide of crowded classrooms and deep budget cuts to our schools. Asked to do more with less, students, teachers, school employees, and administrators have delivered. Imagine how much more they could accomplish—and how many more students would share in this progress—with the resources they deserve.”

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