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Sluggish Results Seen in U.S. Math Scores

By [SAM DILLON](#)

Scores on the most important nationwide math test increased only marginally for eighth graders and not at all for fourth graders, continuing a six-year trend of sluggish results that suggest the nation will not come close to bringing all children to proficiency by 2014, a central goal of the Bush-era federal education law, [No Child Left Behind](#).

Thirty-nine percent of fourth graders and 34 percent of eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level on the test, administered this spring.

“The trend is flat; it’s a plateau. Scores are not going anywhere, at least nowhere important,” said [Chester E. Finn, Jr.](#), president of the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#), a research organization in Washington. “That means that eight years after enactment of [No Child Left Behind](#), the problems it set out to solve are not being solved, and now we’re five years from the deadline and we’re still far, far from the goal.”

The test, known as the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), was given to 329,000 fourth- and eighth-grade students. Results in reading are to be released next year, officials said.

“This is the first time in 19 years that fourth-grade math scores are flat,” said Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#). “We’ve got to get better faster.”

The latest scores were especially disappointing because score gaps between white and minority students did not diminish at all since the last time the math test was administered, in 2007. On average, the nation’s fourth graders scored 240 on a 500-point scale, just as they did in 2007. White fourth graders, on average, scored 248, Hispanics scored 227 and blacks scored 222.

Eighth graders, on average, scored 283 on the same scale, up from 281 in 2007. White eighth graders, on average, scored 293, while Hispanics scored 266 and black eighth graders scored 261.

The gap of 32 points separating average black and white eighth graders represents about three years’ worth of math learning.

The No Child Left Behind law, which President [George W. Bush](#) signed in 2001, raised the importance of the National Assessment, requiring the [Department of Education](#) to increase the frequency of its administration in math and reading to once every two years, to help Americans monitor progress toward the goals of universal proficiency and the elimination of the achievement gap.

The federal law's enactment followed a decade dominated by a standards and accountability movement that brought deep changes to public schools across the nation. Educators and policy makers, in nearly every state, often led by governors, including Mr. Bush when he was the Texas governor, laid out standards as to what students were expected to know in each grade and subject, and required schools to use those standards to guide instruction.

Nearly every state established standardized testing regimes during the 1990s, intended to measure whether students were meeting the standards, with the intent of holding schools accountable for student achievement.

The No Child Left Behind law, proposed by President Bush and passed by bipartisan majorities in Congress in his first year in office, sought to build on the standards and accountability movement with many new federal rules, including a requirement that states administer reading and math tests to every student every year in all elementary and middle schools, and once in students' high school careers.

It also required that schools publish test scores not just as averages, but broken down by students' race, sex and other groups, a rule that most educators agree has focused nationwide attention on narrowing achievement gaps.

The law also for the first time made it a national goal to bring every student to proficiency in those subjects by 2014.

With the latest test results, it is possible to trace student achievement growth over the years before the law's passage, when states were dominant in education policy, and over the years since, when the federal law has become a powerful force in classrooms.

They show that scores grew faster during the seven years before the federal law's enactment. During those years, average fourth-grade math scores grew by 11 points, to 235 in 2003 from 224 in 1996, and eighth-grade scores grew by eight points, to 278 in 2003 from 270 in 1996. In the six years since the law took effect, fourth-grade scores have risen by five points, to 240 from 235. Eighth-grade scores have risen by an equal amount, to 283 from 278.

"If we look at the gains between 1996 and 2003, which is the era preceding the No Child law, when states were enacting accountability and standards, the gains were larger than during the No Child era that began in 2003 and has run to 2009," said Mark Schneider, who from 2005 to 2008 was commissioner of the arm of the Department of Education that oversees the National Assessment. "Either the standards movement has played out, or the No Child law failed to build on its momentum. Whatever momentum we had, however, is gone."

[William Schmidt](#), an education professor at [Michigan State University](#), also called the results disappointing.

"We're just inching upwards, and we've only got about a third of our students proficient," Professor Schmidt said.

The large variation in average scores by state, he said, should be a focus of national analysis. In Massachusetts, for instance, where educators have sharply raised math scores in recent years by carefully reworking standards and instruction, 57 percent of fourth graders scored at or above proficient on the latest test. That compares with Mississippi, where only 16 percent of students scored at proficient.

“How can we as a nation allow such disparity?” Professor Schmidt asked.

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