



Introduction:

The recent release of the [National Assessment for Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) 2024 report was sobering evidence of comprehensive decay in the American education system. The cost being our children's future.

This bleak report card solidified that America is not only facing an educational crisis but, more importantly, that the problem is throughout the system and disproportionately harming the most disadvantaged students. The 2024 NAEP report indicated the disparity between the academic haves and have-nots is the widest it's been in the test's history.

Thesis Statement (Position):

Although the latest NAEP data clearly showcases abysmal student achievement, most demonstrably in reading and math, Freedom In Education (FIE) contends that this is a reflection of a pervasive failure within American education— one that is so ingrained within every aspect of the system that the only remedy is an action-oriented, multi-faceted and comprehensive approach to address the challenges in each and every aspect of the system.

Context:

Much of the press related to the NAEP scores this year has focused on the further deterioration of reading scores. This is an appropriate conclusion; however, it severely undersells the problem. For instance, NAEP math scores held ground and increased in places, but U.S. math scores have been grim when reviewed on a global scale. The United States routinely ranks below average in math compared to other countries in the world. More specifically, in 2022, the U.S. ranked 28th out of 37 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of mostly highly developed, democratic nations. So, "holding ground" in NAEP math scores remains a dire problem. If we look at other subjects, the results are essentially the same to varying effects. Over a 20 year period of mandatory testing, it is hard to find any improvement of aggregate results, despite spending inordinate amounts of money.

Additionally, it is key to note that the pervasiveness of the failure in American education is larger than merely addressing the breadth of academic subject matters. There's a myriad of aspects of education— both large and small— that need to be confronted, whether it be the federal role in education, school choice, standards and curriculum, professional development, assessments, parental rights and more. With a problem across all states that is this extensive and widespread, just addressing one, two or three of these aspects at a time is not sufficient.

Change needs to occur at the detail level in all areas. FIE believes the top priorities must include a return to rigorous, knowledge-based standards and curricula that equip students with the foundational skills necessary for academic success, and to accommodate that effort, there needs to be significant improvements in professional development programs for teachers, administrators, and school board members to redirect education to the basics, with more content and better practical applications. At the same time, parental rights, including school

choice, need to be restored and promoted so parents can be more active participants in their children's education when they want to be.

In doing so, along with other changes, we can create a more competitive and effective education system that ensures many more students are adequately prepared for the modern world. It is time for a concerted effort to put students' needs first, hold the entire educational system and each individual in it accountable, and champion academic excellence as the cornerstone of common-sense education.

Supporting Evidence:

NAEP Scores Defined

To better understand the complete miss in education over the past 20 years, it is important to understand how NAEP scores are defined. NAEP is the largest nationally representative, continuing evaluation of the condition of education in the United States. It has served as a self-proclaimed national yardstick of student achievement since 1969, when they administered their first exam.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and then the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Congress requires all states to participate in the NAEP reading and mathematics assessments at the fourth and eighth grades every two years as a condition for receiving federal aid. From roughly 1969 to 2001, NAEP was adjusting their process until they were ready to move forward and began administering their math and reading assessment every other year once the legislation passed.

NAEP student achievement levels are performance standards that describe what students should know and be able to do. Results are reported as percentages of students performing at or above four NAEP achievement levels (from lowest to highest): NAEP Below-Basic, NAEP Basic, NAEP Proficient, and NAEP Advanced. The following are the descriptions as provided by [NAEP](#):

Below Basic: Represents the lowest level of achievement, indicating students lack foundational skills needed for even basic performance at the grade level.

Basic: Shows partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills, considered a foundational level before reaching proficiency.

Proficient: Considered the target level, signifying students have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including applying knowledge to real-world situations.

Advanced: Represents the highest level of achievement, indicating superior performance beyond the proficient level.

It should be noted that the NAEP Proficient achievement level does not represent grade level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards, including state or district assessments. As a result, state rates and NAEP rates can be, and are, different.

Naturally, it is also difficult to decipher vague phrases such as “partial mastery” or more fully, “partial mastery of *prerequisite* knowledge and skills.” To help gain context, we’ve included some sample questions below. NAEP has more detail on their website.

The following Grade 8 Math question below is an example question. Less than half of children were able to answer it correctly. Please also note that there is a decline from 50% in 2019 to 44% in 2022.

Grade 8 Sample Math Question:

Solve problem using division	Number operations	50%	44%	-7	HIDE ▲
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Andrea works in a flower shop and is making bows.
 Each bow requires a 4-foot piece of ribbon.
 She has 158 feet of ribbon on a roll.
 What is the greatest number of these bows Andrea can make from the roll of ribbon?

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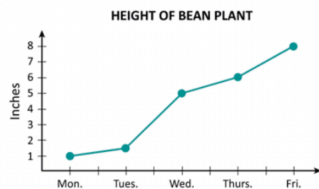
When we look at the Grade 4 sample math questions, the following is an example. It shows only 1/3 of students were able to correctly identify the right answer.

Grade 4 Sample Math Question:

Question	Subtopic	Percentage correct		Change	HIDE ▲
		2019	2022		
Read and interpret a line-graph	Data representation	36%	34%	-2	

Each day at noon, the fourth-grade class measured the height of a bean plant in their classroom.

They began their measurements on Monday.



In which time period did the bean plant grow the most?

- A Monday to Tuesday
- B Tuesday to Wednesday
- C Wednesday to Thursday
- D Thursday to Friday

[Clear Answer](#)

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Hopefully, this provides additional context. We could show more, but in conjunction with the definitions, we hope this provides context for the data below. If you would like to see more sample questions, please go to the NAEP website link above.

What the data shows

The NAEP report shows that not a single state had over 50% of their students score proficient or advanced (hereafter “proficient or better”) in 8th grade reading.

It also shows that not a single state had over 50% of their students score proficient or better in 8th grade math.

Similarly, it revealed that not a single state had over 50% of their students score proficient or better in 4th grade reading.

In 4th grade math, however, there was one single state that scored over 50% proficient or better, and that was Massachusetts with 51% proficient or better in 4th grade math.

There is not a single other state in the country that has over 50% of students proficient or better in fundamental subjects like math and reading for fourth and eighth grade level.

This is a pervasive problem.

In the Appendix, we provide a list of the top and bottom five states based on the percent proficient or better by subject and grade. For 8th grade reading, the range of states includes Massachusetts as the best-performing state with 39% proficient or better; meanwhile, the lowest performing states include New Mexico with only 19% proficient or better. For 8th grade Math, New Mexico also came in at 14% proficient or better as the lowest performer. For the top achiever in 8th Grade Math, it was Wisconsin at 37% proficient or better.

To present this data in a different manner, it means that in the US, the best performing states have over 60% of students performing at the Basic and Below Basic level, below the NAEP target level of Proficient. In the worst performing states, over 80% are below the target level.

Similarly, for 4th grade reading, the range of states includes Massachusetts as the best-performing state with 40% proficient or better; meanwhile, the lowest performing states include New Mexico with only 20% proficient or better. For 4th grade Math, New Mexico also came in at 23% proficient or better as the lowest performer. For the top achiever in 4th Grade Math, we saw Massachusetts with the aforementioned 51% proficient or better.

Once again, with even the leading states only showcasing a mere 40% to 50% of their students at proficient or better, on average this leaves 50% to 60%, but in many cases closer to 80% of the student body not hitting the target of proficiency.

If proficiency is the target, we are missing by a lot. And, most of this is not new. Whatever we are doing is not working.

The Gap Widens As More Children Are Left Behind

Results released from NAEP also clearly show that while scores are stagnating or even increasing for many students who already do well, struggling students have plateaued or even fallen further behind their counterparts. Although many believe this disparity was a result of the educational policies ushered in during COVID-19, that only made what’s over a decade-long

problem even more striking. The data shows that this trend actually began over 10 years ago, and has continued to worsen.

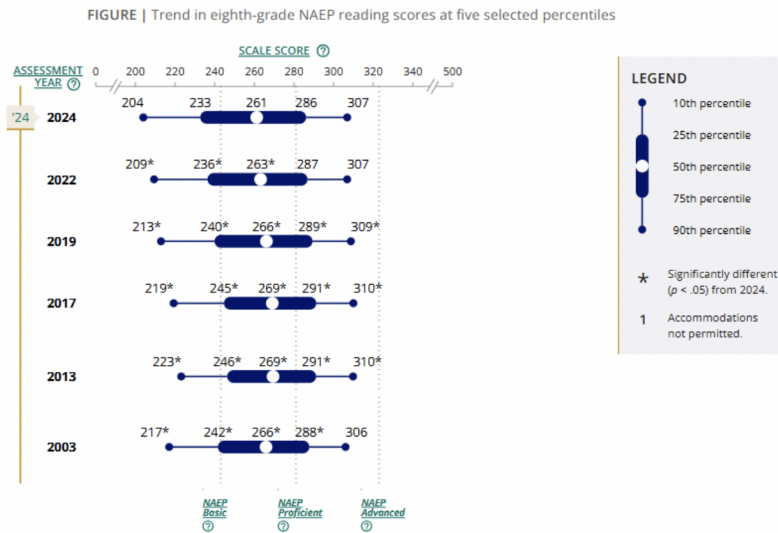


Figure 4. 8th Grade Reading NAEP Scores

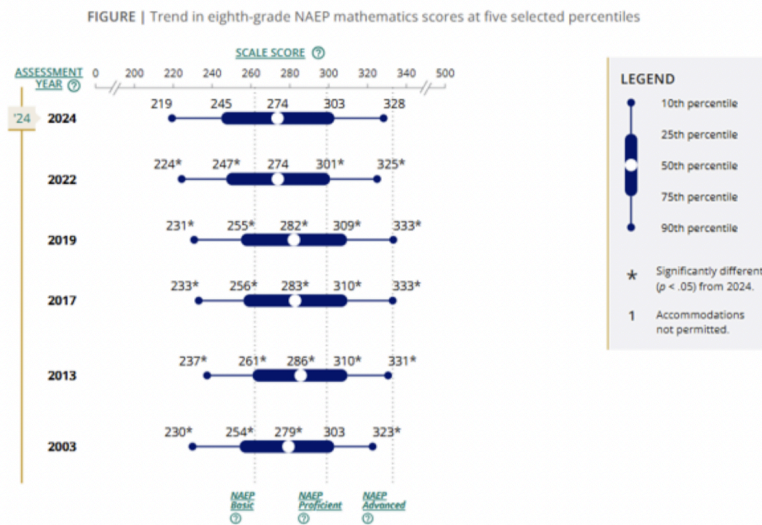


Figure 3. 8th Grade Math NAEP Scores

**It should be noted that for the purposes of this position paper, DODA data was excluded from graphs, charts and data analysis– as this was specifically looking at the individual states education system.*

These graphs highlight the lowest performing students in the bottom 25th percentile as compared to the median student and the higher performing students in the top 75th percentile for 8th grade math and 8th grade reading. As you can see, the higher performing students generally remained steady, however, the lowest 25th percentile students saw losses. More specifically, in 8th grade math the lower 25th percentile students went down from a 255 scale score in 2019 to a 245 scale score in 2024. In reading, they went from a scale score of 240 to 233.

This divide is historic: lower-performing fourth and eighth graders posted the worst reading scores in over 30 years. In eighth grade math, the gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students was the widest in the test's history.

A multi-prong approach

Given the fact that our educational system has been slowly decaying from the inside-out, the only honest way to face the overwhelming and complex challenges it now presents is to do so by addressing every single component of the system with real solutions that create change.

In the same way that there is not one particular aspect of education to blame for its inherent failure, there is not one singular solution– or one particular entity– that can remedy it in its entirety. Instead, mending education requires a myriad of solutions implemented over-time. More than sweeping broad strokes and semantics, these insufficiencies demand getting down to the intricacies of education and understanding that complex problems need targeted solutions.

For instance, the de-federalization of education has been touted as a sweeping solution to challenges the American education system is currently facing; and we believe less federal involvement is an improvement. However, that policy pushes the issues back to the states– and the problems already exist there in all their complexities. When you add defederalization with other targeted approaches, you may start to make more headway.

Another widely discussed proposed solution is school choice, and while this is a bedrock of a successful education model, this is not sufficient to correct our educational crisis either. In many ways, this transition is already underway with 11 states having universal school choice and 20+ states having some type of choice. This is a good start. School choice will accelerate market forces, but adoption will take significant time and adjustment. Any reasonable estimate of the transition time will leave another generation of students behind, so we need to pursue additional activities now. And in the end, education is likely to never be a truly open and free market as long as most revenue generation is through tax dollars. The additional changes will be necessary then as well.

These two ideas, defederalization and school choice, are key components of the litany of solutions education needs to course correct. But much more needs to be done. To improve the education system for the long-term throughout the country, we also need to implement more rigorous knowledge-based standards and curricula, better professional development programs for teachers, administrators, and school board members with more content and better practical applications, and more effective parental rights. The needs that cascade from improving standards include curricula and professional development as well as changing assessments, accreditations and certifications. Very quickly, it becomes apparent that everything needs to change.

How do you change everything? Return to basics. Many schools today have strayed from their primary purpose of actually educating and have instead put emphasis in other places, such as social emotional learning and mental health. The results are as seen in the NAEP scores. Why would we entrust our children's social and emotional development to schools, when those very same schools cannot even teach the children to read and do math? Why would we entrust our children's mental health to schools when they not only have difficulty teaching reading and arithmetic, but also have a significant ethical conflict in regard to counseling for mental health. In order to return rigor and results to the classroom, we need to go back to basics in most everything.

We provide two examples below.

First, to improve student learning, it is important to reset expectations. Accordingly, state standards need to change. The results indicate that Common Core has failed. It was meant to improve results. It has not. Similarly, in science, the Next Generation Science Standards have failed. They are unclear, low in content, politicized and not improving results.

Standards matter. They set the expectation. An unfortunate reality in American education is that the majority of state standards are simply not holding students to an appropriate *standard* and low expectations disproportionately hurt disadvantaged students. Moreover, the standards are often unclear, making it hard for teachers to know what they are supposed to teach and even harder for students to know what they are supposed to learn.

To help, FIE partnered with the National Association of Scholars (NAS) to co-author new Science and Math standards that are focused on depoliticized, clear, content driven expectations. They are also targeted to teaching content early so that students have knowledge on which to build further knowledge and skills. Much more needs to be done though to enable changes of this type to ripple through the system and we welcome anyone who would like to join us in effectuating change anywhere along the line from standards through professional development and assessments.

The second example is parental rights. Ensuring and enshrining parental rights is important but simply not enough. Parents need to not only have their rights, they need to know exactly how to use them. In order for a parent to effectively advocate for their child, they need to be fully-equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources to navigate this highly complex system. Only once their rights are fully understood, will parents be fully empowered to act when necessary.

FIE spends a lot of time working with parents and while there is a selection bias, most are in a quandary. Our experience is that most parents do not know where to start when engaging with their child's school system as the education system can be more opaque than navigating the health care system. In many instances, parents are left with delays and roadblocks once they begin. For the parent of a middle school child who wants to engage with their school system, the delays can be long enough that their child moves on to high school before the middle school issues are resolved. If you are a single parent trying to pursue information or an issue, scheduling can be nearly impossible. This needs to change.

For all the money spent– and the U.S. spends more than anyone– we get not only below target performance, but also below cable company parent service levels as the service mentality of the school systems is generally poor.

These are just two examples; but there are cracks everywhere in the system and that includes fractures in the foundation as well. We need to fix all of it. This will take a concerted effort by many organizations working together and in parallel for a long period of time. There are no quick fixes so long term collaborative efforts are necessary.

Conclusion:

It's clear at this point that the myriad of issues plaguing American education are pervasive and wide-spread, and the only solution to such is a comprehensive approach that addresses all aspects of modern-day education. Promoting parental rights, and going back to the basics in the classroom, as well as strengthening educational freedom are some solutions that should be adopted.

We focus heavily on rebuilding education through standards, curriculum, professional development and parental rights, but as noted this problem is bigger than any of us individually. As state, district, and school leaders seek to improve student learning in the years ahead, Freedom In Education hereby extends an invitation to work alongside any others seeking to return to the basics, ensure and empower parental rights, and ultimately restore academic excellency across the nation.

Appendix:

**4th Grade 2024 National Proficiency Scores
MATH**

		4th Grade Math 2024 Proficiency Scores Top 5 States				
Year	States	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	Wyoming	243	17	38	37	9
2024	Massachusetts	246	18	31	36	15
2024	Utah	242	21	34	35	10
2024	North Dakota	241	19	38	35	8
2024	South Dakota	240	21	37	35	8

Figure 1. TOP 5 HIGHEST PERFORMING STATES

		4th Grade Math 2024 Proficiency Scores Bottom 5 States				
Year	States	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	New Mexico	224	38	39	20	4
2024	District of Columbia	231	35	32	22	11
2024	Alaska	226	36	34	24	6
2024	Oregon	229	33	36	25	6
2024	Arkansas	230	30	39	26	6

Figure 2. TOP 5 LOWEST PERFORMING STATES

**4th Grade 2024 National Proficiency Scores
READING**

		4th Grade Reading 2024 Proficiency Scores Top 5 States				
Year	States	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	Massachusetts	225	32	28	26	15
2024	New Jersey	222	34	28	25	13
2024	Utah	219	36	28	26	10
2024	New Hampshire	221	33	31	26	10
2024	Connecticut	219	37	27	24	12

Figure 1. TOP 5 HIGHEST PERFORMING STATES

		4th Grade Reading 2024 Proficiency Scores Bottom 5 States				
Year	States	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	New Mexico	201	53	27	16	4
2024	Alaska	202	53	26	17	5
2024	District of Columbia	209	48	22	19	11
2024	Oklahoma	207	46	31	19	4
2024	Arizona	208	47	27	19	7

Figure 2. TOP 5 LOWEST PERFORMING STATES

8th Grade 2024 National Proficiency Scores MATH

		8th Grade Math 2024 Proficiency Scores Top 5 States				
Year	State	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	Utah	282	30	35	27	8
2024	Wisconsin	283	31	33	27	10
2024	South Dakota	281	29	38	26	7
2024	Minnesota	282	29	36	25	9
2024	Montana	279	32	36	25	7

Figure 1. TOP 5 HIGHEST PERFORMING STATES

		8th Grade Math 2024 Proficiency Scores Bottom 5 States				
Year	State	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	New Mexico	256	58	28	11	3
2024	District of Columbia	262	54	25	13	8
2024	Oklahoma	264	47	36	14	3
2024	West Virginia	261	52	31	14	3
2024	Nevada	265	48	32	15	5

Figure 2. TOP 5 LOWEST PERFORMING STATES

8th Grade 2024 National Proficiency Scores READING

		8th Grade Reading 2024 Proficiency Scores Bottom 5 States				
Year	State	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	New Mexico	245	46	35	17	2
2024	Oklahoma	249	41	39	19	1
2024	West Virginia	247	42	37	19	2
2024	Alabama	250	41	38	19	2
2024	District of Columbia	251	42	33	20	5

Figure 1. TOP 5 HIGHEST PERFORMING STATES

		8th Grade Reading 2024 Proficiency Scores Top 5 States				
Year	State	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
2024	Massachusetts	268	25	36	33	6
2024	New Jersey	266	27	34	31	7
2024	Colorado	265	26	39	31	4
2024	New Hampshire	264	26	40	30	4
2024	Connecticut	263	30	34	29	6

Figure 2. TOP 5 LOWEST PERFORMING STATES