



NEWS RELEASE

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## **NAEP Report Shows Small Gains for Fourth- and Eighth-Graders in Vocabulary Skills Needed for Reading Comprehension** *Improvements for Hispanic eighth-graders narrow achievement gap*

WASHINGTON — The nation’s fourth- and eighth-grade students made small gains from 2011 to 2013 in how well they use words to gain meaning from the passages they read, according to a newly released report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation’s Report Card. The report, *Vocabulary Results From the 2013 NAEP Reading Assessment*, also shows that one of the biggest gains in vocabulary knowledge was made by eighth-grade Hispanic students, whose improvements have narrowed the achievement gap with white students at that grade level since 2009.

Rather than presenting words in isolation, NAEP’s focus on vocabulary acknowledges that key distinctions and nuances of word meaning arise in the context of particular reading passages. Each vocabulary question asks how a particular word contributes meaning to the reading passage in which it appears.

NAEP scores and reports the reading comprehension results on the NAEP reading assessment independently from the vocabulary results, but the 2013 results confirm a strong correlation between the two: Students who had the highest vocabulary scores were the same ones performing above the 75th percentile in reading comprehension; students who had the lowest vocabulary scores were at or below the 25th percentile in comprehension.

“A strong vocabulary helps students learn in all school subjects and will help them throughout their lives outside the classroom,” said Terry Mazany, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP. “The level of detail in the assessment’s findings, including results on how well students interpret specific words, can assist educators in their efforts to improve students’ ability to understand whatever they are reading.”

According to the NAEP assessment schedule, fourth- and eighth-graders are tested in reading every two years, while 12th-graders are tested every four years. (Twelfth-graders were not tested in 2011, so their 2013 scores can be compared only with the 2009 results.) Vocabulary results from the 2013 reading assessment are based on nationally representative samples of 190,400 fourth-graders, 171,800 eighth-graders and 45,900 12th-graders. Although vocabulary results cannot be reported in terms of the NAEP achievement levels (*Basic, Proficient and Advanced*), scores can show

patterns in results for students performing at lower (10th and 25th), middle (50th) and higher (75th and 90th) percentiles.

The 2013 results showed a 1-point gain in the average score in vocabulary since 2011 for the nation’s fourth-graders, to 219 on the assessment’s 500-point scale, and a 1-point gain for eighth-graders, from 265 in 2011, to 266 in 2013. The average score for 12th-graders, of 295, remained flat compared with the last time 12th-graders were assessed, in 2009.

Hispanic eighth-graders made relatively large gains since 2009. Their 2013 average score of 252 was 3 points higher than in 2011, and 5 points higher than in 2009. Over the same time period, the average score for white students at grade 8 — the highest-performing group — stayed the same, at 276. As a result, the gap in achievement between eighth-grade Hispanic and white students narrowed from 30 points in 2009 to 24 points in 2013.

All vocabulary questions in the assessment ask about a word’s meaning in the context of passages that students read. For example, in the 2013 assessment, fourth-grade students were asked to interpret the meaning of the word “just” after reading a passage from the story “The Gardener and the Nightingale.”

*On page 2, when the man talks about “a **just** punishment” for the nightingale, he means that*

- A. the nightingale will be in the cage for only a short time*
- B. he had never punished a nightingale before*
- C. only this one nightingale should be put in a cage*
- D. the nightingale deserved the punishment she received*

Forty-six percent of fourth-graders correctly selected option D. Forty-five percent chose either option A or option C, which reflect different uses of the word, not its meaning in the story. Nine percent chose option B — a misinterpretation of the context in which the word appears.

As with other vocabulary questions, the percentage of students who answered correctly are reported by race/ethnicity, gender, National School Lunch Program eligibility, type of school, school location, disability status, English language learner status and parental education level at grades 8 and 12.

Sample vocabulary words from the 2013 assessment and the percentage of students at each grade that recognized their meaning are shown in this chart:

	4th GRADE	8th GRADE	12th GRADE
<p><b>75%</b> or more of students recognized the meaning of these words</p>	<p>accidentally fascinating</p>	<p>accidentally encounter fascinating initiation insistence intently observe</p>	<p>assimilate precedent puritans</p>
<p>Between <b>51% and 74%</b> of students recognized the meaning of these words</p>	<p>encounter gratitude intently pride touched</p>	<p>complete confinement puritans</p>	<p>formidable malleable perils reverently subjugated</p>
<p><b>50%</b> or less of students recognized the meaning of these words</p>	<p>brilliant just knowingly parched</p>	<p>reverently</p>	<p>novel</p>

## Additional Highlights

- § The average score for black eighth-graders rose 2 points, from 247 in 2009 to 249 in 2013. That narrowed the achievement gap with white eighth-graders by 2 points, to 28. There was no significant change, however, in black students' average scores at grades 4 and 12 since 2009.
- § The average score for eighth-grade students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was up 2 points from 2011 and 3 points from 2009. The score for students in grade 4 who were eligible for the NSLP also improved — 1 point higher than in 2009 and 2011.
- § For grade 4, the 1-point score increase from 2011 was reflected in gains for middle- and higher-performing students at the 50th, 75th and 90th percentiles. Scores did not improve for the lower-performing students (10th and 25th percentiles).
- § For grade 8, the 1-point score increase from 2011 was reflected in gains for lower-performing students at the 10th and 25th percentiles. Scores at the middle and higher percentiles did not change.
- § While the average score for 12th-graders remained the same overall since 2009, the score for higher-performing students declined. That drop was 2 points for students at the 75th percentile and 3 points for students at the 90th percentile.
- § The gender gap widened: Female fourth-graders scored 4 points higher than their male counterparts in 2013 (compared with 2 points in 2011) and female eighth-graders scored 5 points higher than their male counterparts (up from 3). As in 2009, however, there was not a significant gender gap at grade 12 in 2013.

“The ability to apply vocabulary in reading is critical for every boy and girl, regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic background,” said Susan Pimentel, the Governing

Board's vice chair. "To that end, we are encouraged by the gains for Hispanic, black and low-income eighth-graders. Nonetheless, the results also show educators, policymakers and the public that there is more work to be done to improve vocabulary and comprehension for everyone."

Visit [www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2013/vocabulary/#](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2013/vocabulary/#) for more detailed information on nationwide results.

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*The National Assessment of Educational Progress is a continuing and nationally representative measure of trends in academic achievement of U.S. elementary and secondary students in various subjects. Since 1969, NAEP assessments have been conducted periodically in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and other subjects at grades 4, 8, and 12. Through The Nation's Report Card, NAEP informs the public about what American students know and can do in various subject areas and compares achievement among states, large urban districts, and various student demographic groups. NAEP is a congressionally authorized project of the National Center for Education Statistics within the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. The Commissioner of Education Statistics is responsible for carrying out the NAEP project. The National Assessment Governing Board oversees and sets policy for NAEP.*

*The National Assessment Governing Board is an independent, nonpartisan board whose members include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives, and members of the general public. Congress created the 26-member Governing Board in 1988 to set policy for NAEP.*