

National Assessment of Educational Progress
The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010

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Today, I am releasing the results of the NAEP 2010 Civics assessment. This is the first NAEP civics assessment since 2006. The civics assessment measures students' knowledge of the American constitutional system and of the workings of our civil society. It also requires them to demonstrate a range of intellectual skills—identifying and describing important information, explaining and analyzing it, and evaluating information and defending positions with appropriate evidence and careful reasoning.

The assessment was administered in early 2010. We have national results for grades 4, 8, and 12, but no state or urban district results. Our sample consisted of approximately 7,100 fourth-graders, 9,600 8th graders and 9,900 12th graders.

Overall results are based on the performance of both public and private school students. At grades 4 and 12, participation rate standards for separate reporting of private school students were not met, so we only have private school results at grade 8 for 2010.

In our reports, student performance is presented in two ways—as average scale scores, with separate 0-300 scales for each grade, and as percents of students at various achievement levels for each grade. The NAEP achievement levels—*Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*—are set by the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP. NAEP scale scores tell us what students know and can do, while the NAEP achievement levels provide standards for what students should know and be able to do.

For both scale scores and achievement level performance, we will be making comparisons to previous assessments in 1998 and 2006. When making these comparisons, we must remember that all NAEP results are based on samples. This means that there is a margin of error associated with every score and percentage. When discussing differences or changes in student performance—either increases or decreases—we only discuss those that are statistically significant, that is, those that are larger than the margin of error. In the tables and figures that are in the report, asterisks are used to indicate statistically significant differences, comparing scores in 1998 and 2006 to 2010.

At each grade, students were asked questions in five areas of civic knowledge; the emphasis on the individual content areas varied from grade to grade. The five areas are civic life, politics, and government; foundations of the American political system; the U.S. Constitution and the principles of American democracy; the United States and world affairs; and the roles of citizens in American Democracy.

In addition to civic knowledge, the assessment also measured a broad range of students' intellectual skills, which are inseparable from knowledge. Again, the degree of emphasis varied from grade to grade. The intellectual skills featured in the assessment include identifying and describing; explaining and analyzing; and evaluating, taking, and defending a position. Each question on the assessment measured both civic knowledge and intellectual skills.

Participatory skills and civic dispositions are also important parts of civic education. These skills and dispositions were measured by a portion of the questions on the assessment. Participatory skills include interacting, monitoring politics and government, and influencing their processes. Civic dispositions include a variety of activities relating to an individual becoming an independent member of a democratic society and functioning as an active participant in that society.

To introduce the results, I will begin with 4th grade. The average score at grade 4 was 157 in 2010, which was higher than in either 1998 or 2006.

To get a more detailed picture of student performance, we will look at scores by percentile—those for lower-performing students at the 10th and 25th percentiles, those in the middle at the 50th percentile, and those for the higher-performing students at the 75th and 90th percentiles.

At grade 4, scores in 2010 were higher than in 1998 for all of these groups except those at the 90th percentile. In addition, the increases at the 10th and 25th percentiles were larger than the increase at the 75th percentile, suggesting that the increase in the overall score is in part due to an increase among the lower-performing students.

When we compare 2010 with 2006, we see an increase for students at the 25th percentile only.

The achievement level results for grade 4 students include the percentages of fourth-graders below *Basic*, at *Basic*, at *Proficient*, and at *Advanced*. In 2010, the percentage of fourth-graders at *Basic* was 50 percent, higher than the 46 percent shown for 1998. The percentage at *Proficient*, in 2010, 25 percent, was also higher than in 1998 (21 percent). The percentage of students who were below *Basic* in 2010—23 percent—was lower than in either previous assessment year.

Students at the *Proficient* and *Advanced* levels were likely to be able to answer questions that, for example, asked them to:

- identify the purpose of the U.S. Constitution;
- identify a way to express an opinion on a public policy issue; and
- evaluate the concept of democracy as presented in an article.

When we examine achievement level results separately for White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, we observe increases from 1998 to 2010 in the percentage at *Proficient* for all four groups (results for American Indian/Alaska Native students are available in 2006 and 2010 only). For example, the percentage at *Proficient* for White students increased from 27 percent in 1998 to 35 percent in 2010. Comparing 2006 to 2010, there were no statistically significant changes at any of the achievement levels for the five racial/ethnic groups.

Some performance gaps narrowed between 1998 and 2010. The score gap separating White and Hispanic students narrowed from 35 points in 1998 to 27 points in 2010. Although scores improved for White students since 1998, the 17-point increase for Hispanic students was larger.

We see similar results when looking at the gap between White and Black students—a 28-point gap in 1998 narrowed to a 24-point gap in 2010, due to a 13-point increase for Black students.

Next, we compare average scores for male and female fourth-graders. In both 1998 and 2006, the 2-point difference in scores was not statistically significant. However, from 2006 to 2010, scores for female students increased 5 points while scores for males did not increase. The 7-point score gap in 2010 was statistically significant, and is the first gender score gap at grade 4 seen in civics in the past three assessments.

When we assess students on NAEP, we also ask questions of their teachers. In 2010 we asked the teachers of the fourth-grade students participating in NAEP about the coverage they gave to various civics topics: politics and government, foundations of U.S. democracy, the U.S. Constitution, world affairs, and roles of citizens in U.S. democracy. We asked if they covered a specific topic to a small, moderate, or large extent, or if they gave no coverage at all. For this discussion, we've combined these results into two categories—students whose teachers said they didn't cover a specific topic at all, or who said they covered it at least to a small extent.

At least 70 percent of 4th-graders had teachers who said they covered the five civic knowledge content areas. When we examine the average scores for these students, we see that, for four of the five content areas, students whose teachers said they covered the topic at least to small extent had a higher average score for the entire assessment than students whose teachers said they didn't cover the topic at all. The one exception was for the topic of world affairs in which the average scores were the same.

As an example of the type of questions 4th-graders were asked, students were given a paraphrase of the introduction of the Declaration of Independence to read, which included the statement “to protect these rights, governments are created that get their powers from the consent of the governed...”

Fifty-two percent of students were able to recognize that this idea was summarized by the answer choice that states, “people in the United States should have some control over the government.”

Next we'll look at results for eighth-grade students.

At grade 8, the score of 151 for the 2010 assessment showed no significant difference when compared to either earlier assessment. This is true when we look at student performance by percentile as well—no changes were seen at any level.

When looking at achievement level results for grade 8 students, we observe that the percentage of students scoring in the *Basic* range increased from 48 percent in 1998 to 50 percent in 2010. This was the only statistically significant change in achievement level percentages for grade 8 for the past three assessments.

Twenty-two percent of 8th-graders scored at *Proficient* or *Advanced* in 2010. These students would be likely to be able to answer correctly questions that asked them to:

- identify an action the U.S. can do to influence other countries in a foreign policy issue;
- analyze the message in a political cartoon; and
- recognize a role performed by the Supreme Court.

At 8th grade, the White-Hispanic gap narrowed to 23 points, smaller than it had been in either 1998 or 2006. The narrowing of this gap, as in 4th grade, was spurred by the score increase for Hispanic students of 6 points from the 2006 assessment while scores for White students did not change significantly from either of the previous assessments.

The White-Black score gap in 2010 was 25 points. Scores for both White and Black students did not change significantly in comparison to either of the prior assessments, and neither did the gap between them.

NAEP reports results according to student eligibility for the National School Lunch program. We produce results for three groups, ranked according to family income level: those students eligible for free lunches, those eligible for reduced price lunches, and those whose family income is too high to make them eligible for this program. Because of changes in the availability of data, we only report comparisons back to 2006.

The results show that scores varied according to student family income level, with lower-income students having lower scores. All three groups showed an increase in scores from 2006 to 2010, even though there was no statistically significant increase in the overall grade 8 score.

We also asked students about the kinds of topics they studied in civics, listing nine different topics. For any given topic, the percentage who said they studied the topic was at least 33 percent in 2010, and in most cases the percentage was 62 percent or higher.

When we compare the percentages of students who reported studying the nine topics in 1998 and 2010, we see increases for three topics—President and cabinet; the court system; and political parties, elections, and voting. For the other six topics, there were no significant changes.

The only significant change from 2006 to 2010, was an increase in the percentage of students who reported studying international organizations.

As an example of a question to measure how students could interpret political discourse, students were asked to interpret the main message of a political cartoon. The cartoon, reprinted in the full report, shows a van labeled “Small Business” that has wrecked itself while struggling to navigate through a forest of confusing signs symbolizing federal regulation. Given four alternatives, 52 percent of students were able to select “there should be less federal regulation of small business” as the main message of the cartoon.

Now we’ll look at the performance of grade 12 students.

The average score for grade 12 students in 2010 was 148, lower than in 2006, but not significantly different from 1998.

When we look at scores by percentiles, we see no significant change for students at the 10th, 25th, 50th and 90th percentiles. At the 75th percentile, however, scores were lower in 2010 than in either 2006 or 1998.

Examining achievement level results, the percentage at *Proficient* declined from 22 to 20 percent from 2006 to 2010. This was the only statistically significant change in achievement level results across the three assessment years.

Twenty-four percent of grade 12 students scored at or above *Proficient* in 2010 (20 percent at *Proficient* and 4 percent at *Advanced*). These students were likely to be able to answer questions that asked them to:

- identify a power granted to Congress by the Constitution;
- identify the effect of U.S. foreign policy on other nations; and
- identify a potential problem with the War Powers Act.

The White-Hispanic score gap narrowed at grade 12, as it did at both 4th and 8th grades. This narrowing was again a result of an increase in average scores for Hispanic students since 1998 which resulted in cutting the gap between the two groups of students from 25 points in 1998 to 19 points in 2010.

The scores for White and Black students over the three assessments have not changed significantly since 1998, and neither have the gaps.

In 2010, as in 1998 and 2006, we did not observe a gender gap. In 1998, female students had an average score of 152, higher than the score for male students. In 2010, the score for female students had fallen to 148, lower than in either previous assessment and not significantly different from the score for male students.

To get a better idea of what America's students are learning about civics, we asked students which civics topics they studied during the school year. In 2010, most grade 12 students reported they studied civics topics related to political systems in the United States, but in no case did all students say they studied a particular topic. The percentages of students who said they studied the governments of other countries or international organizations were 47 and 43 percent, respectively. These are the two topics with the lowest reported percentages studied by both 8th and 12th graders in 2010.

When we compare results for previous years, we see similar percentages for the most part. The percentage who said they studied the President and cabinet fell from 63 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in 2010, and the percentage who said they studied the U.S. Constitution fell from 72 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2010. Otherwise, there were no significant changes.

At grade 12, we asked a constructed response question, requiring a written explanation, in which students were asked to read a quotation from Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, describing how immigrants from all countries would blend into a single culture in the United States.

They were first asked to define the meaning given to the term "the Melting Pot" in Zangwill's play and then were asked "Do you think that the term "melting pot" is appropriate to describe the United States?"

Students' responses were rated as complete, partial, or unacceptable. Thirty-five percent of twelfth-graders received a "Complete" rating on this question, meaning that they answered both parts fully, showing a full understanding of terms relating to immigration and assimilation. An example of a student's complete response to the first part is

“America was often referred to as the “melting pot.” The meaning is that many different cultures live here, and will meld together in harmony.”

An example of a student’s complete response to the second part is:

“I do not believe ‘melting pot’ is an appropriate term. Though there are many cultures and beliefs here now, we have not all blended together to become one. We are still diverse and different.”

To summarize, here are the results for the three grades.

- At grade 4, the average score of 157 for 2010 was higher than in either 1998 or 2006.
- At grade 8, the score of 151 for 2010 showed no significant difference when compared to either earlier assessment.
- At grade 12, the score of 148 was lower in 2010 than in 2006 and not significantly different from 1998.
- Scores were higher in 2010 than in 1998 for White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students at grade 4.
- There were no significant differences for any of the five racial/ethnic groups between 2006 and 2010.
- At grade 8, there were increases for Hispanic students only, comparing 2010 results with those for both 1998 and 2006.
- At grade 12, only Hispanic students showed an increase, and only in comparison to 1998.

For American Indian/Alaska Native students, the sample in 1998 was too small to provide reliable results, so comparisons to that year are unavailable.

There is much more information in the 2010 Civics Report Card. In addition, the initial release website (<http://nationsreportcard.gov>) offers extensive information on the performance of students, access to released assessment questions through NAEP’s Questions Center (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/itmrlsx>), and the NAEP Data Explorer, our online data-analysis tool (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata>).

Finally, I would like to thank all the students and schools who participated in these assessments. Your time and effort to help make this assessment a success is greatly appreciated.