Embargoed, Hold For Release Until:
Tuesday, April 28, 2009 at 10 a.m. EDT

STATEMENT ON *THE NATION'S REPORT CARD: NAEP 2008 TRENDS IN ACADEMIC PROGRESS*

DARVIN M. WINICK
Chairman, National Assessment Governing Board

While we are pleased to present the long term trend results today, it may also be instructive to consider the accumulated results of the several national assessments completed over recent years. In addition to the long term trend results, we have available national, state, and district assessment findings from the main NAEP, as well as high school transcript and several international achievement studies. Although it is natural to focus on the latest findings, we should, from time to time, consider what we have learned from the full set of NAEP and related results. For instance, what results seem to be consistent across student groups and assessment topics? What general conclusions may be suggested? What have we learned about group performance?

National, state, and urban district assessment results have generally shown improvements across groups in reading and mathematics in grade four, some improvements in grade eight, and less improvement among 12th-grade students. It is interesting that, while there are differences, this performance pattern is generally the same for different assessment forms, student groups, and jurisdictions. It is also important to point out that similar patterns of performance have been reported in science, history, and writing.

While differences in achievement between student groups, states, and urban districts remain, there is no clear pattern of overemphasis on one subject at the expense of another. The claim that pressure for improvement in reading and mathematics causes declines in performance in other subjects appears to need further review. Perhaps, an alternate hypothesis – that gains in students' reading and math abilities increases the possibility that they will do well in other subjects – should be looked at more closely. Common sense might suggest that students

who do not read well may have trouble mastering other subjects. Even though performance in some subjects may not match expectations, such as in science and history, spending less time on basic reading and math skills to improve achievement in other subjects is a strategy without data support.

The frequently stated belief that the recent emphasis on reading and mathematics has resulted in elimination of other subjects from the curriculum and caused a drop in student achievement in other subjects is not supported. Within group differences, there is a belief by some observers that emphasis on accountability for student performance has encouraged educators to game the measurement system by focusing only on satisfying narrow accountability benchmarks. For instance, they charge that educators work with only those few students who are close to proficient in reading or mathematics and who, with a little effort, could be brought up to raise the passing percentage for a school or district. This strategy would in effect ignore students at the bottom and at the top of the performance distribution and slight subjects other than reading or mathematics. However, for the most part, regardless of location or subject matter, strong achievement gains in NAEP assessments are shown for the very lowest performing students and gains or consistent performance tend to be present across the board.

The existence of a widespread, mischievous, selective student instructional system is not supported. Although some progress in reducing the magnitude of the differences in achievement between racial and ethnic groups has occurred, challenges in reducing differences obviously remain. There are a variety of beliefs about the effect of school location, school financial conditions, and school and class size on student achievement. Since national assessments are not currently designed to produce results beyond those for the nation, individual states, and selected large urban districts, the potential for analysis of these beliefs using NAEP data is limited. This is especially true for 12th-grade achievement, since until this year it has only been sampled at the national level. Nevertheless, it is hard to sort existing assessment data without showing large demographic differences in performance.

Some observers believe that conditional factors may control student achievement and reduce or eliminate group differences. The thought being that more inputs will produce better outputs. These beliefs, often based on average results between states or districts that have very different student demographic makeup, should be taken cautiously. Reform ideas based on average results of large groups can be misguided. Real differences in achievement between demographic groups that need to be addressed may be lost when aggregated into overall results and may not be the result of input quantity.

Recent international comparisons of student performance illustrate the analysis challenge when only overall averages are considered. Concerns about the performance of students in the United States compared to those in other

countries are important and relevant to our position in the world. However, observations of performance which suggest that the U.S. students are well behind those in selected countries tend to change when similar student groups are compared. For instance, Asian-American students' 8th-grade math scores are not too different from the scores of Asian students featured in recent international comparisons, and in some cases, Asian-American scores are higher. In another widely publicized international study, White-American 4th-grade students score as well or better in reading than most European students. It is not clear from existing data that answers to group differences in achievement will be found by traveling abroad.

Both national and international data suggest that factors other than simple conditional ones have controlling effects on student performance. There is no clear evidence that other countries have found the means to educate the range of students that are sampled by the NAEP in the United States. The differences between the achievement of White and Asian-American and Hispanic and Black students are a consistent finding across grade levels, subjects, school conditions, and geographic locations. How to reduce differences between racial and ethnic groups continues to be a vexing and important challenge.

Lack of consistent achievement gains for 12th graders is a continuing national assessment result. Long term trend results reported today for 17-year-old students reinforce this finding. While an analysis of high school transcripts and completion reports show that students are taking more advanced content courses and appear to remain in school longer, commensurate achievement gains do not seem to follow. Reports that many high school graduates are not prepared to continue education or training after high school are common with high rates of reported post-high school remediation in reading and mathematics.

Certainly the demographic character of high school students in the United States has changed over time and some observers argue that change in the makeup of the high school population is the major cause of mostly flat performance. High school students of all demographic groups who would have been in the workforce in times past are now in school, and their attendance may increase the instructional efforts required to achieve academic successes. Others argue that reforms in the early grades have not been in place long enough to impact high school performance. Have patience, they say, and the good students will eventually show up. Similarly, it is suggested that the more recent movement to increase graduation requirements will improve academic performance, although analyses of high school reading comprehension levels and course content may be appropriate to confirm that academic expectations are in fact increasing.

Sticking to the NAEP and high school transcript data that we have, however, concerns about the high school student achievement and the quality of high school course content seem warranted. A related concern about the quality of preparation in middle school is suggested as well. Increased attention to high

school academics may show in future assessments, and the planned addition of state level 12th-grade assessments should provide important new information.

NAEP assessment results continue to raise questions about the level of high school achievement and its relation to success beyond high school. Awareness of national assessment results continues to grow. Policymakers, educators, and the public are interested in knowing how well their schools are performing. This interest is good, but, as we frequently note, the national assessment program is designed to inform the public on what is happening with student achievement, not why it is happening. NAEP assessments provide a series of standardized snapshots of student achievement. The NAEP focus is on measuring learning outcomes, not determining why learning is or is not occurring.

We are keenly aware of the fact that all we expect from our schools cannot be measured by the national assessments. However, we hope that what can be measured will help inform parents and other taxpayers about the academic performance of our schools and, in addition, generate the questions about achievement that will help shape public interest and involvement and provide guidance for policy makers, educators, and researchers as they search for the changes that will improve performance.