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

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For the first time since the NAEP long-term trend tests began, the results from the 2008 reading assessment show gains over the past four years at all three ages tested. Not only has early reading improved, as shown by gains at age 9, but since 2004 improvements at ages 13 and 17 are evident too.

It's clear that something positive is happening in the reading achievement of American students. But when these results are looked at more closely, a more troubling pattern is revealed. Since the NAEP series of assessments began almost 40 years ago, math scores have made *substantial* gains among 9-year-olds and encouraging gains at age 13. In comparison, the improvements in reading have lagged—a 12-point boost among 9-year-olds and a very modest 4-point gain for 13-year olds. And at age 17 there have been no significant gains in comparison to the first assessments in either reading or math.

What is the explanation for the difference in performance in reading and math? And why are younger students showing more gains than students in high school? While the national assessment can tell us where students stand, it does not tell us how they wound up there. In other words, while NAEP is an outstanding barometer of achievement, the tests themselves do not tell us why improvements have or have not occurred.

However, the NAEP anchor point performance descriptions—which are placed at 50-point intervals on the scale—reveal some critical clues about why high school students are failing to reach the upper ranges and what educators can do to improve reading comprehension as students move ahead in school. NAEP is a

test of reading comprehension, which is often portrayed simply as a set of discrete skills—locating information, identifying main ideas, making comparisons, etc. But full comprehension of any article or text is more than just a collection of particular strategies and skills. At its more demanding levels (NAEP anchor points 300 and 350), reading comprehension requires students to demonstrate the ability to “understand complicated literary and informational passages, including material about topics they study at school” and “extend and restructure the ideas in specialized and complex texts.”

It is at these complex levels of reading comprehension that progress has been slow and uneven, and that disparities between different groups of students are most pronounced. According to the 2008 NAEP long-term trend assessment, fewer than 40 percent of 17-year olds can read at the level of complexity described by the Level 300, even though most of them are juniors or seniors in high school. Yet it is precisely this deeper analytical reading ability that students need in order to thrive in a knowledge-based economy.

As someone who has been involved in the development of the college- and career-ready benchmarks for the American Diploma Project, I have listened to college faculty and employers from across the nation speak about how it is just not enough for students or workers to be able to summarize or analyze a text. They need to know how to summarize or analyze *various kinds of rigorous texts* in order to meet the varied demands—college, career, and civic—they will face after high school.

What the NAEP results suggest is that too many students are not being challenged to read rich, complex material as part of the school curriculum—and they certainly are not getting it from e-mail notes or Twitter.

I believe the failure to spell out the quality and complexity of what students should be reading as they move through K-12 is a central reason why the reading achievement of older students on NAEP has barely budged. It also begins to answer why, despite some progress, large achievement gaps persist between White students and those who are Black and Hispanic.

The prevailing crop of state standards offers extensive guidance on reading strategies, but they rarely mention a specific text or define in concrete ways what constitutes adequate complexity or appropriate topics of study. Moving forward, the question I think we need to address is what students need to learn in their K-12 careers so that they can understand complicated information and analyze specialized materials. We should describe in detail both the types of reading skills and the quality and complexity of the materials students need exposure to in order to comprehend and respond appropriately to the world they will face after graduation. These will range from newspaper stories on civic issues, booklets on policy debates, commentaries on world events, and articles on scientific advances to works of fiction and biography, memos from employers, and documents shown to juries in court—just to name a few examples.

The sample passages released in today's NAEP report illustrate the diversity of reading materials with which students should be familiar. They include passages drawn from social studies and science as well as from literature. For the different age groups tested, they vary in difficulty in vocabulary, organizational structure, and the development of ideas and the connections between them.

Perhaps this is where we should take a lesson from our international counterparts. Achieve, an independent, bipartisan, not-for-profit education reform organization, has been reviewing literacy standards from nine countries around the world, seven of which are also high performers on PISA, the Program in International Student Assessment.[1] The curriculum standards for all but one of these countries address what kinds of texts students should be reading. Most go so far as to prescribe titles or authors and base their assessments on those readings. The United States may be too large and diverse for that kind of prescriptive detail at a national level—although it already is part of voluntary nationwide programs such as Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate. But attending to the level of demand in what students read is a step that state standards need to take in order to be effective in raising reading achievement.

The gains recently shown on NAEP, particularly those for 9-year-olds, offer hope that with the right focus and support, student reading can improve. But this cannot be done just through reading instruction and English class alone. It must be part of a broader, more demanding curriculum. There are plans underway by several national groups to articulate a common core of standards in English/language arts in the coming months. For this effort to be productive, we must be prepared not only to identify the critical reading strategies students need but also to specify the quality and complexity of the reading expected. This can be done through samples or illustrations of literary and nonliterary works—or some other method—that not only reflect what students are studying in other subjects (such as science and social studies) but also target the types of reading they will be asked to do after high school.

The evidence is in and the solution is in sight. When students have a strong vocabulary and experience with adequately complex text, when they can use varied reading strategies and have an array of background knowledge, reading comprehension can soar. We need to provide the next generation of students not just with skills to interpret texts effectively, but with exposure to the range and complexity of reading materials that will develop their reading comprehension to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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[1] Achieve is reviewing the standards of Australia (New South Wales and Victoria), Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario), Finland, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom to determine what literacy demands they make of their students.