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**STATEMENT ON RESULTS FROM
*THE NATION'S REPORT CARD: READING 2007™***

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The results of the 2007 NAEP mathematics assessment clearly demonstrate the effects of long-term commitment to achievement. I believe this is true for reading as well. Yet, the NAEP data for 2007—and indeed over the past 15 years—suggest that substantial improvement in reading achievement is still eluding us as a nation.

I do not for a moment doubt that reading is as high a priority in our schools as mathematics. I know the dedication of my colleagues in reading and language arts. For some subgroups and in some states, there have been noteworthy gains on the NAEP reading assessment, especially at grade 4. Yet, none of these gains in reading have been as substantial or consistent as the gains in math, and the gaps in reading achievement persist—by race, by income level, and by gender.

When I, as a teacher of English and literacy, consider these patterns, I am prompted to wonder, where is progress being made, why is it less robust in reading than in math, and why are the results more mixed than many of us would like to see?

Does it have something to do with the nature of reading itself? Is this set of interwoven skills so unique and complex that our commitment to reading achievement must express itself in different and more far-reaching ways than what we have already attempted?

Looking closely at the results for 2007, I do see some heartening signs of progress that may be obscured by the comparatively modest gains for the nation as a whole. One of these is the increase in the percentage of students performing at or above the *Basic* achievement level from 1992 to 2007 in both 4th- and 8th-grades. To me, this suggests

that more students can, to quote the description of *Basic* achievement “demonstrate understanding of the overall meaning of what they read” and even “make simple inferences.” Since 2000, there have been substantial increases among the lower-performing 4th-grade readers—those at the 10th and 25th percentiles. This achievement should not be discounted.

As a reading teacher in middle school, I assess a student’s grade level in reading as an interaction between the reader and a text. On the assessment we use, like NAEP, students must work independently and respond to questions based on a printed passage. If too many of the words are unfamiliar, if the sentence structure is too complex, or if ideas are presented in a way that is too indirect, the student is simply unable to derive much meaning from that text. In essence, the student is locked out of the passage, as well as from the ideas and knowledge it might impart.

When that happens, we say that the student’s relationship with that text is one of “frustration,” an apt term that applies not only to a reading experience but also, too often, to a school experience. As the old adage states, “Learn to read and then read to learn.” A student scoring at *Basic* or above is a reader who can learn from text, and so I applaud efforts, like the ones in my state of Colorado and in many others, to provide remediation to the weakest readers and give them the foundational skills for becoming independent learners.

Specifically, what does the 2007 NAEP assessment tell us about what students *can* do in reading? As a teacher, I am drawn to the individual passages and their associated items. Here I see encouraging evidence that students are able to find explicitly stated information and make simple inferences.

To illustrate, one multiple-choice question for the 4th-grade passage “Dishpan Ducks” asked students to infer Rosa’s reasons for tiptoeing toward the ducks and whispering to them. Eighty-one percent of the students, including some of those who scored below *Basic*, chose the correct response that she thinks something is wrong. Even when confronted with a constructed-response item on Rosa’s reasons for visiting the ducks, one that required students to write out an inference about the character’s motivation, 54 percent received a “Full comprehension” score.

Similarly, 8th-grade students responding to the nonfiction article “Kid Fights Cheater Meters and Wins!” were able to locate factual information and use it to support an idea. For example, 90 percent correctly identified the purchase of 2,000 new parking meters as the city of Berkeley’s reaction to Ellie’s findings, and 88 percent could use information in the text to explain in writing why Ellie’s project attracted so much attention. These high percentages of correct responses tell me that, at least for these passages, a strong majority of the students were able to comprehend and respond meaningfully to the texts.

But on other questions that require more complex explanations, performance was not so strong, and we certainly should not be satisfied with the 2007 results. The gaps in

achievement among different racial and ethnic groups, between students at higher- and lower-income levels, and between male and female students, persist at both grade levels. And while they are not widening, most of these gaps have failed to narrow appreciably over the past 15 years.

For example, the gap in average scores between 4th-grade White and Black students is 27 points, down just 5 points from 1992. The White-Black gap at grade 8 is also 27 points, down just 2 points over 15 years, which is not statistically significant. The average for 4th-grade Hispanic students remains 26 points behind White students, while the White-Hispanic gap at 8th-grade is 25 points—both gaps are about the same since 1992. Likewise, female 4th-graders continue to score 7 points higher than male 4th-graders, a gap that has not changed significantly since 1992. At 8th-grade, male students have gained 3 more points than females over the past 15 years, but are still 10 points behind, and the difference is not statistically significant from 1992.

If reading is not only an essential key for unlocking ideas conveyed in text but also a primary means for accessing the broader curriculum, especially in secondary school, such gaps are seriously troubling; to me they signal the existence of fundamental barriers to learning and to success in high school and beyond.

Some suggest that the expectations in the NAEP reading framework and reflected in the achievement levels are too high, but when I look at the 8th-grade items and the item map from the perspective of a secondary school teacher and a citizen, I am convinced that the reading skills reflected in the questions at the *Proficient* level are those that all students—not just those at the 75th percentile—will need to fully engage in learning and in life.

Some of these skills are the ability to understand and judge characters based on their actions, to read and comprehend information in complex and detailed articles, and to perceive themes and patterns in human societies from historical texts.

When I asked the students in my 8th-grade classes why they read, they replied with expansive answers: for enjoyment, to gain knowledge, to understand the perspectives of other people and cultures, to be informed about what is happening in their lives and in the world, and to widen the scope of their imaginations. The purposes articulated by my students remind me that reading is not merely a set of skills for school success. It is a tool for making sense of the human experience as expressed in the writings of several millennia, from the classics of antiquity to the Web pages of today. Until all students can read at this higher level, many will be barred from full participation not only in education but also in the wider experiences of life, and our nation will be diminished for want of their contributing voices.

Although I serve on the National Assessment Governing Board, I am primarily an educator, not a legislator or policy-maker. I do not pretend to have all the answers. However, I, like many of you, have read of declines in reading performance on the SAT, of the need for remediation in reading for so many students when they arrive at college,

and of the widely divergent demands between secondary school textbooks and the kinds of reading students must do in college. Clearly, the results of the 2007 NAEP assessment in reading are not the only indication that high achievement in reading for all students is a goal not yet realized.

The gains, particularly at grade 4, and the improvements reported among lower-performing students offer hope that literacy support and intervention can make a difference. The question for me is, how will we build on this start? How can we reach all readers, not just in the elementary years, and not just in English or reading class? Do we as educators and as a society possess the will to nurture reading across all aspects of school and even outside its walls? A long-term commitment to the complex set of skills we call reading requires much more of us all. Are we ready to commit?