



NAEP Trends:

# **A Decade of Divergent Scores and What They Mean for 2022 NAEP Results**

## Background

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, is the only source of nationally representative data on student learning. It is the only assessment that allows comparisons across the 50 states, 3 jurisdictions, and 27 urban districts. Education leaders and policymakers rely on NAEP to inform effective policies to improve student outcomes.

Congress created the independent, nonpartisan National Assessment Governing Board in 1988 to set policy for NAEP. The 26 members of the Governing Board include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives, and members of the general public. The National Center for Education Statistics, a principal agency of the U.S. Federal Statistical System, is the statistical center of the U.S. Department of Education and the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations, including administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

## What NAEP Says About the State of Education Today

Before evaluating the impact of the pandemic on student learning, it is imperative for leaders first to understand the trajectory of student achievement pre-pandemic. NAEP shows that there were growing challenges prior to COVID, particularly for our nation's lowest-performing students.

### Key findings from NAEP:

1. **The divide between our nation's highest- and lowest-performing students has widened in multiple grades and subjects.** As seen in Figure 1, between 2009 to 2019, NAEP scores for lower-performing students across grades 4, 8 and 12 and multiple subjects declined while scores for higher-performing students improved. These diverging trends were particularly striking in grades 4 and 8 mathematics and reading, which showed no change in the average scores between 2009 and 2019 but clear patterns of divergence between lower- and higher-performers.

Figure 1: Changes in average and selected percentile scores, by assessment: 2009-2019

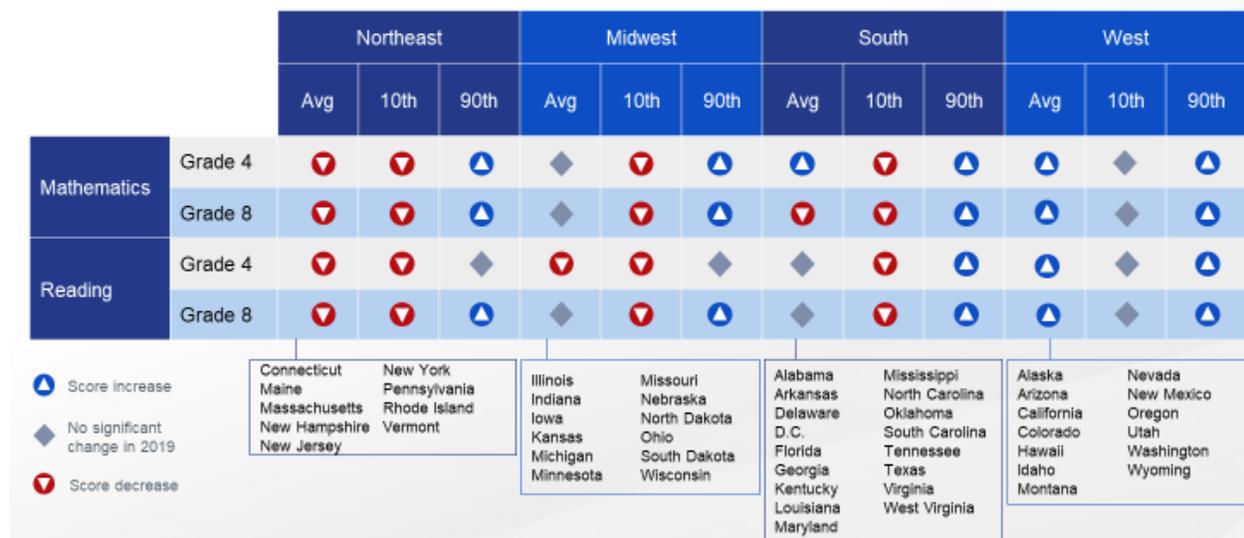
		Percentile score					
		Avg	10th	25th	50th	75th	90th
Mathematics	Grade 4	◆	▼	◆	◆	▲	▲
	Grade 8	◆	▼	▼	▼	◆	▲
	Grade 12	▼	▼	▼	▼	◆	◆
Reading	Grade 4	◆	▼	▼	▲	▲	▲
	Grade 8	◆	▼	▼	◆	▲	▲
	Grade 12	▼	▼	▼	▼	◆	◆
Science	Grade 4	▲	◆	◆	◆	▲	▲
	Grade 8	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
	Grade 12	◆	▼	◆	◆	◆	◆

▲ Score increase    
 ◆ No significant change in 2019    
 ▼ Score decrease

2. **This trend first emerged at the national level but can be seen in many jurisdictions.** Breaking down the data by region of the country, we see a similar pattern of divergent trends between the highest-performers and the lowest-performers, with some important nuances from region to region. The Western states demonstrate the most positive trends, with higher-performing students showing increases over the decade and lower-performing students remaining steady. Conversely, in all other regions, lower-performing students showed statistically significant declines in reading and math at both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades from 2009 to 2019.

Figure 2: Changes in selected percentile scores, by region and assessment: 2009–2019

## Changes in selected percentile scores on NAEP, by region and assessment: 2009–2019



3. **The nation’s lowest-performing students cut across race, ethnicity, and parent educational backgrounds, challenging our assumptions about low-performers.** Taking a closer look at who comprises the lower-performing student group reveals surprising diversity, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. This is not a phenomenon that adheres to typical expectations.

Figure 3: Selected demographic characteristics of students who performed below the 25th percentile in NAEP grade 8 reading: 2019

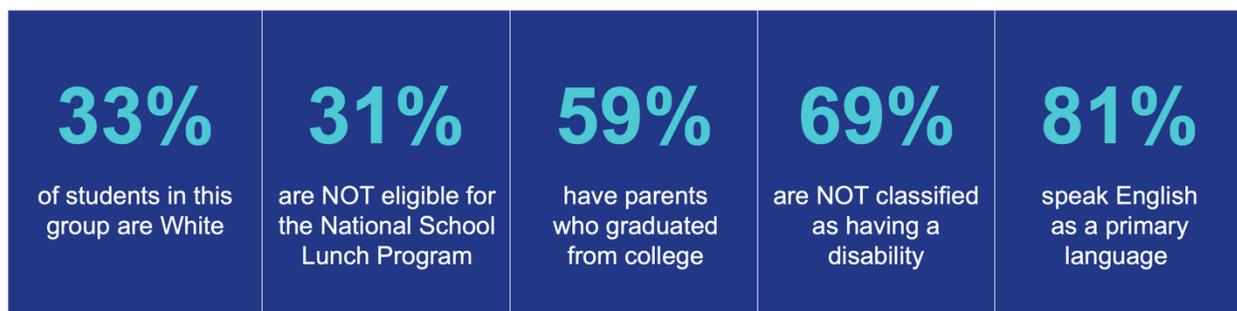
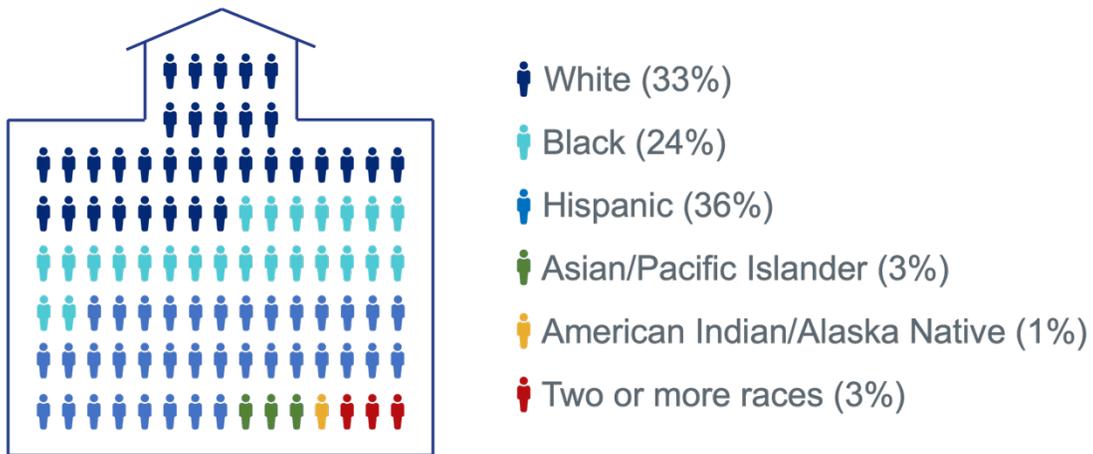


Figure 4: Racial/ethnic composition of students who performed below the 25th percentile in NAEP grade 8 reading: 2019



### What's Next

These NAEP trend data provide critical context about student achievement before the pandemic and for NAEP 2022 results in reading and math.

The next NAEP results will be released in fall 2022. Given evidence to date on state and other assessments, NAEP may see steeper declines than usual across subjects and in all grades. Instinctively, audiences will interpret these results as attributable solely to the impact of COVID, dwelling on school closures and the effects of remote learning. But, without a discussion of pre-pandemic trends, those conversations will omit the critically important understanding that challenges surfaced prior to COVID and that COVID may have merely compounded the problem. Understanding the results more completely will lead to better informed policy decisions and more efficient resource allocation to address the substantial academic challenges that face the nation, states, and districts.

For more information, please visit The Nation's Report Card state profiles page at: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2019R3>.