

**STATEMENT ON ACHIEVEMENT GAPS:
*How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform
in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of
Educational Progress***

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Good afternoon.

I am pleased to take part in the discussion today of the important new report on Hispanic-White achievement gaps that is being issued by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The report is based on almost two decades of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This program is referred to by the abbreviation N-A-E-P (which is pronounced Nape). Quite often it is called the Nation's Report Card.

As Commissioner Buckley explained, NAEP is the only continuing, representative-sample assessment of achievement in American schools. It gives information for all of the 50 states, based on a set of broad and rich common exams that are given under scrupulously uniform conditions by independent test administrators. These personnel are well-trained, and they are employed by the NAEP program itself, not by the schools and school districts being tested. Because of its richness and its uniformity and its independence, too, NAEP can be used to compare achievement in the different states and to look at trends over time in a way that our different state exams simply don't allow—no matter how good they may be in measuring what's taught in our schools.

NAEP is paid for and administered by the federal government. That, of course, makes it a federal program. But the policy decisions about the assessment are made by an independent bipartisan board, called the National Assessment Governing Board. I have been honored to serve on the Board for the past two years.

The Board decides on the content and design of the assessment and on the performance standards or achievement levels used in reporting its results. Board members also have an opportunity to comment on the results, which I am pleased to do today.

This new report is a compilation of data from many previous NAEP reports, but it is focused in an important new way on an issue that concerns us greatly—the achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students in our public schools. Of course, we don't need the National Assessment to tell us that these gaps are substantial. But the report makes vividly clear what has happened over the past two decades. Hispanic students have made significant achievement gains in both math and reading—and that means reading in English. Non-Hispanic white students have made gains too. So the overall gaps between the two groups have stayed about the same. However, these parallel gains have occurred while the Hispanic population has grown enormously—mainly through immigration, and a very high proportion of Hispanic students continue to come from low-income homes. In the most recent NAEP data for 2009, 77 percent of Hispanic students in grade 4 math were from families with income low enough to qualify for free or reduced price lunch, compared to just 29 percent of white students who came from low-income homes.

Some 37 percent of Hispanics in fourth grade math and 21 percent of those in grade 8 are designated by their schools as English language learners or limited English proficient, compared to 1 percent or less of non-Hispanic whites.

Those Hispanic students who are not English language learners closed the gap with whites quite substantially from the mid-1990s to 2003, though less rapidly in the past few years. But the large number with limited-English proficiency, which is replenished by continued immigration, has kept the overall national gaps wide.

As Commissioner Buckley has told you, my own state, Florida, has one of the largest numbers of Hispanic students in the country, and the proportion of fourth graders who are Hispanic has grown from 12 percent in 1992 to 25 percent in 2009. Many of these students are Cuban-American, as you know, but in recent years the state has also had a major influx of immigrants from other Spanish-speaking countries in Central and South America.

Florida also has one of the smallest Hispanic-white achievement gaps in both reading and mathematics at both grades 4 and 8. And, as the Hispanic population has grown, the achievement gaps have closed dramatically since the mid-1990s. This has happened not because the achievement of white students has declined. In Florida it is high and climbing. However, the achievement of Hispanic students in Florida has soared, particularly in fourth grade reading and mathematics, although in Florida, as elsewhere, the gains stalled from 2007 to 2009 in fourth grade mathematics.

As you can see in the bar charts in the report, white students still outperform Hispanics in Florida, but not by very much, and Florida has the smallest achievement gaps of any state with a large Hispanic population. In fourth grade reading Hispanic students in Florida match or exceed the average scores of white students in four states and score the same or better than the average for all students in 31 states.

Hispanic eighth graders have also made strong gains in reading and reduced the achievement gap with non-Hispanic whites. They exceed the average score of white students in one state (West Virginia) and score the same or better than the average for all students in 16 states.

These gains have been the result of an enormous amount of effort, a strong accountability system, and a very strong belief that all of our children can succeed.

Obviously, the journey to equal achievement and to high achievement is not over. Hispanic students still lag behind the national averages and behind non-Hispanic whites. And the national averages themselves are nothing to brag about. In the international assessments, the United States is generally mediocre--in the middle of the pack, not outstanding, where most Americans would like it to be.

The NAEP data show that gains can be made and have been made—that our efforts can make a difference. But, clearly, our work must continue.