

Are U.S. High School Seniors Prepared for Life After High School? What the Nation’s Report Card Can or Should Tell Us.

This white paper was prepared by the National Assessment Governing Board’s Executive Director Bill Bushaw, with staff support, as a thought piece to further the Governing Board’s deliberations on how best to accomplish its [Strategic Vision](#) priority to, “Develop new approaches to measure the complex skills required for transition to postsecondary education and careers.”

There are several important transitions for young people—from home to school, from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school. Historically though, the transition for seniors as they exit high school has received the most attention as a “rite of passage” when young Americans assume greater independence and responsibilities. While the K-12 education experience is relatively universal, upon graduating from high school, young adults will pursue many different paths—some attending college full- or part-time, others serving in the military, and still others pursuing careers immediately.

Given the increasing stakes and consequences tied to these pathways, and in the face of a rapidly changing economy fueled by technological innovation and globalization, it is surprising just how little we know if students have the academic skills and knowledge they need.

In this paper, we review the current 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment schedule and describe an important initiative already undertaken by the Governing Board that provided a more meaningful, but incomplete gauge of high school seniors' preparedness. We also explore the role that NAEP might play to better inform policy makers, educators, and the public about this critical transition for our nation’s youth by raising the question, “*Can NAEP more effectively assess and report the skills and knowledge that all 12th grade students will need when transitioning to postsecondary life after high school, regardless of which path they follow?*”.

What is NAEP?

NAEP assesses a representative sample of students across the nation who are enrolled in public, public charter, and private schools. Even though there are no individual student scores or results for individual schools, the NAEP results provide highly valuable data on the achievement of the nation’s students in various subjects, as well as the trends in achievement over time. Importantly, NAEP is the only nationally representative sample documenting student achievement.

NAEP 12th Grade Assessment Schedule

The National Assessment Governing Board establishes the [NAEP Assessment Schedule](#). The schedule is determined by multiple factors including: a) what is required by law, i.e., 4th and 8th grade assessments given every other year in reading and mathematics; b) the priorities established by the Board; and c) funding.

Not surprisingly, funding is a major driver. The Board, with data from its NAEP partner, the National Commission for Education Statistics (NCES), considers the costs for how many assessments can be administered, in which grades, and for how large a sample, i.e., enough to report representative results for national, state, and large urban districts. Those costs are projected several years into the future and the assessment schedule is based upon the three factors listed above.

Since the 1990s, NAEP has assessed 12th grade students' skills in several academic areas including reading, mathematics, writing, science, economics, U.S. history, geography, and civics. The [NAEP Assessment Schedule](#) was most recently approved by the Governing Board in 2015. The table below illustrates the current schedule for 12th grade NAEP assessments through the year 2024. All results will be reported at the national level only, and while there is a broad array of subject areas assessed, in some cases, the intervals between assessments are considerable.

NAEP Subject	Last Administered in Grade 12	Next Administration in Grade 12	Interval
Reading	2015	2019	4 Years
Mathematics	2015	2019	4 Years
Science	2015	2023	8 Years
Economics	2012	2022	10 Years
Writing	2011	2021	10 Years
U.S. History	2010	2022	12 Years
Civics	2010	2022	12 Years
Geography	2010	2022	12 Years
Technology & Engineering Literacy	N.A.	2022	N.A.

Measuring 12th Grade Academic Preparedness

In 2002, the Governing Board launched an effort, “to review the current purpose, strengths, and weaknesses of the 12th grade NAEP assessment,” by establishing a Blue Ribbon Panel. Based on the panel’s report, the [Governing Board commissioned a series of research studies](#).

One research strand established a linkage between the 12th grade NAEP reading and mathematics scores and the successful transition from high school to college without

remediation in those subjects. This research expanded the usefulness of NAEP's 12th grade reading and mathematics assessments by not only providing scale scores and achievement level percentages, i.e., basic, proficient and advanced, but also a new metric: the percentage of graduating high school seniors who are academically prepared for college, [approximately 37% in 2015](#).

Increasing the percentage of high school students prepared for college, and ultimately to graduate with a two- or four-year degree is an important goal. Yet in 2013, one third of high school graduates did not enroll in college in the fall immediately following high school completion—taking a different path toward careers. So while the transition from high school to college is important, the college academic preparedness measure does not inform the full range of pathways for high school seniors.

Recognizing this at the onset, the Governing Board [commissioned other research](#) to determine if 12th grade NAEP reading and mathematics results could provide an estimate of readiness for placement into one of five representative job training programs—without remediation. Unfortunately, researchers were unable to establish these relationships, frustrating the Governing Board's effort to provide achievement data not only for the transition to college but also for those students who take a different path following high school.

Improving Measures of Readiness for Life after High School

Throughout its history, the Governing Board has recognized that the skills students need in the future are continually evolving—demanding that NAEP evolve and innovate in response. This need affirms the Board's commitment to reviewing the NAEP assessment frameworks regularly and exploring other research options on how best to assess the nation's students.

In particular, building on the foundation of its preparedness research, the Governing Board could now consider new research that might identify a broader set of indicators to determine readiness for college and careers as students exit high school, consistent with its recently adopted Strategic Vision. Given this research commitment, we pose two questions.

- 1. Should the Governing Board embark on new research to determine if there is an assessment approach at the 12th grade that will provide a stronger metric for knowing what percentage of students are academically prepared to transition to postsecondary careers, regardless of the initial path they take toward career goals?*
- 2. Are the current 12th grade assessments—reading, mathematics, science, writing, civics, economics, U.S. history, geography, and technology and engineering literacy—all administered independently—the appropriate mix of student assessments that can provide this stronger metric? Is there a more effective, efficient and impactful approach*

to 12th grade student assessment? In other words, should the Board consider reorganizing, combining, or discontinuing current 12th grade assessments?

And there are related issues, i.e., what is the ideal periodicity for a national student assessment of 12th grade students; do the advantages of sampling a large enough student population to provide state and even urban district results outweigh the costs; and what's the best approach to report, and as needed increase, 12th grade student participation and engagement in the assessment?

Of course, we recognize at the onset that there are challenges in pursuing these investigations, and it is important to consider the potential impact and funding implications connected to significant policy or operational changes. However, we encourage the Board to not be restrained in identifying bold ambitions as it aims to improve the impact of The Nation's Report Card.