

NAEP Gains Follow State's Efforts To Improve Student Achievement

Over the past dozen years, Mississippi students have posted consistent gains in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card. Mississippi is one of the top leaders in score improvement in fourth-grade reading between 2005 and 2017.¹

While Mississippi students still score below the national average on NAEP, student achievement in the state has been improving on NAEP across grades and subject areas for years.

"The progress we've made on NAEP has made a significant difference in how education is viewed in Mississippi," said Carey Wright, the state superintendent of education. "It has given a lot of people hope."

Education, policy, and business leaders in Mississippi attribute the student achievement

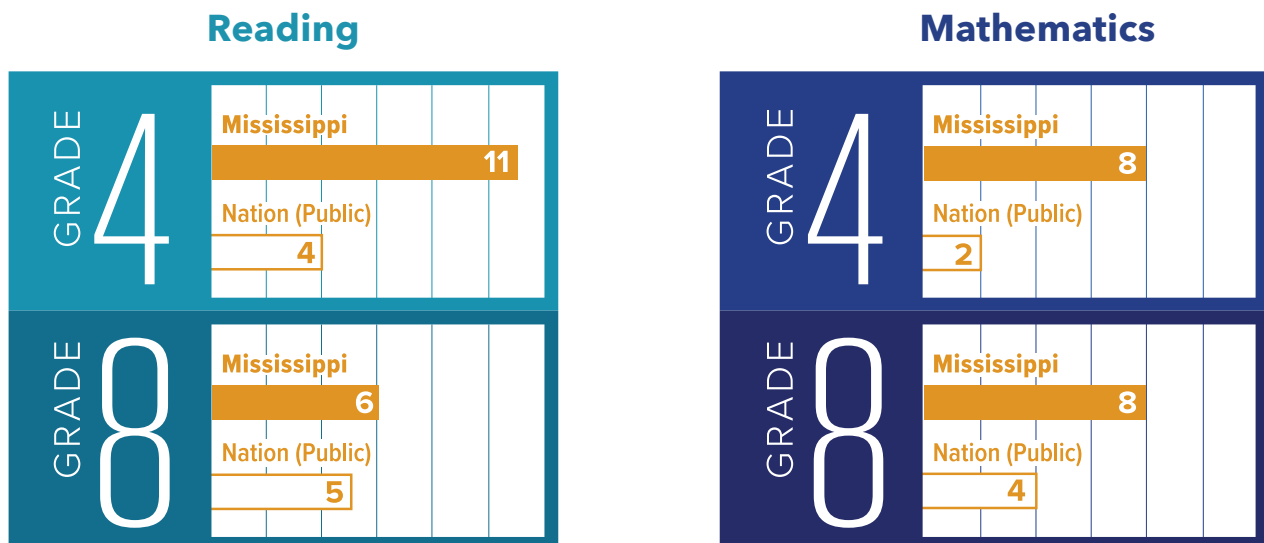
gains to higher academic standards; a coordinated, statewide focus on improving literacy; and greater professional support for teachers. And state leaders have been using NAEP to measure progress and identify areas for growth along the way.

"When you have an external measure like NAEP that further validates that reforms are taking root, that's really important," said Kim Benton, the former chief academic officer of Mississippi Department of Education.

THE WAKE-UP CALL

In 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released *Leaders & Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*, which ranked states' education standards on indicators including a measure of how well

Score-Point Increases on NAEP 2005-2017



U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

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their state assessments’ proficiency measures aligned with NAEP’s. The report gave Mississippi a “D” in “Truth in Advertising” for the substantial gap between the proportion of students the state judged to be proficient and the state’s NAEP results.

The report showed a 71-point gap between the percentage of fourth graders identified as proficient or above on the state’s 2005 reading assessment and the percentage who scored *Proficient* or above on the 2005 NAEP Reading Assessment.

The report was a catalyst for change, said Benton.

“Sometimes, you have to confront the brutal reality of where you are and then start working towards making things better for students in our state,” she said.

“This told me that we had very low bars to show proficiency, for whatever reasons,” Sen. Gray Tollison, chair of the Mississippi State Senate Education Committee, said. “It wasn’t doing a service to the children if by the national standard they were not determined to be proficient.”

NAEP uses three achievement levels to characterize student performance: *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*. Students whose performance is determined to be *Proficient* on NAEP have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including application of such knowledge to real-world situations and analytical skills.

In contrast, each state sets its own definition of proficiency for its state assessments.

Mississippi’s governor and state leaders gathered to figure out how to address the issues the U.S. Chamber of Commerce report highlighted, expressing concern that the gap between state proficiency rates and NAEP’s findings was putting Mississippi students at a disadvantage. One of the outcomes of the discussions was a consensus on the need for a new state assessment.

“We knew if we were designing a new assessment, we could not have that gap,” Benton said. “It wasn’t being honest and transparent with our consumers and stakeholders.”

RAISING THE BAR

The Mississippi Department of Education revised the state assessment in 2015, after changing the standards for what students are expected to know in various subjects at each grade level. While the revision process was lengthy, Benton said, it allowed the department to develop a more rigorous assessment.

When writing the new assessment, the Mississippi Department of Education looked at NAEP frameworks—the blueprints for the content and design of each assessment—to ensure that the new state assessment mirrored expectations on The Nation’s Report Card.

“There were some things addressed in NAEP’s fourth-grade assessments that we weren’t teaching until the fifth or sixth grade,” said Nathan Oakley, Mississippi’s chief academic officer.

By 2017, the gap between the percentage of fourth-graders identified as proficient or above on Mississippi’s reading assessment and the percentage who scored *Proficient* or

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above on the NAEP reading assessment had shrunk to four percentage points—a 67-point decrease from the 2005 gap.

“It was very important to me that when our test results come out and when NAEP results come out that they show very close percentages of proficiency,” said Wright, the state superintendent of education. “NAEP is the only measure that we can [use] to compare [Mississippi achievement] to other states. Knowing that it’s the gold standard, you have to pay attention to where you are on NAEP.”

FOCUSING ON LITERACY

While raising standards and creating a new assessment was a start to providing a more honest perspective on student achievement, the state’s education leaders knew they had to do more.

“You can set the standards, you can [revise] the assessment, but it’s the strategies that support teachers, students, and families that make the difference,” Benton noted.

While Mississippi has tackled multiple education reforms since 2007, state education leaders credit one policy in particular for improving student achievement: The Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which was passed in 2013. The act focuses on ensuring that every student reads at or above grade level by the end of third grade, as determined by performance on the state’s reading assessment. Children who do not meet a certain standard cannot be promoted to fourth grade unless they qualify for an exemption.

“There was a lot of gnashing of teeth over the third-grade test being a measure of whether a child is ready to be promoted [to fourth grade],” said Scott Waller, the president and CEO of the Mississippi Economic Council, an association of business leaders that has helped advance many of the state’s education reforms. “[But now,] when students get to the fourth grade, they’re reading at a fourth-grade level.”

The act employs many strategies to improve literacy, including increasing resources to the Mississippi Department of Education so all teachers in grades K-3 and all principals go through literacy trainings.

Implementing the act has been a focused, statewide, bipartisan effort “from the state department of education to schools to students and parents,” state Sen. Tollison noted.

The act provided resources for the Mississippi Department of Education to build a statewide network of nearly 80 literacy coaches who assist teachers with reading instruction, lesson planning, and understanding and measuring student progress.

The Literacy-Based Promotion Act also promotes reading comprehension skills through literacy lessons across subject areas. As part of these efforts, the state department of education worked with the Southern Regional Education Board to bring its interdisciplinary literacy curriculum trainings to select schools.

Robert Sanders, who is now an assistant superintendent in the Simpson County School



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District, was principal of Mendenhall High School when the school’s staff participated in the trainings.

“Teachers began to create literacy units across grade levels and curricula,” Sanders said of the changes at his former high school. “It was really exciting to watch teachers transform their general practice into something that would support students improving their reading level.”

Under the act, the state education department also created family success guides and reading plans to help parents develop their children’s reading skills through activities at home.

At the same time, Benton said, the department began to look at its role differently, expanding professional development services beyond literacy trainings and creating an on-demand resource that allows administrators to request on-site training around standards, content, and assessment results.

“We are more than a compliance and regulatory agency,” Benton said, “we are also a service agency.”

CELEBRATING RESULTS AND CONTINUING FORWARD

In 2013, 21 percent of fourth-graders in Mississippi were at or above *Proficient* on the NAEP reading assessment. In 2015, that percentage rose to 26—the largest growth in the state’s fourth-grade NAEP reading performance at or above *Proficient* since 1992.² Wright said the state’s growth on NAEP suggests that strategies like the Literacy-Based Promotion Act are working.

“When you have very rigorous standards and you have an assessment aligned to those standards, you can be proud that those results are real,” she said.

Wright said the student achievement growth in Mississippi is what drives her work every day.

“It’s exciting work, [and it took] the leadership team in this department and the hard work of everybody to make this happen,” Wright said. “I can’t say enough about the hard work of our teachers and principals around the state.”

Benton acknowledged that while student achievement is progressing in Mississippi, the state is not where it needs to be. The challenge now, she said, is taking the progress that has been made and moving forward—a challenge she believes Mississippi students and educators are ready for.

“We’ve made real progress,” said Waller of the Mississippi Economic Council. “When you look at NAEP, everybody is judged on an equal playing field. That’s the thing that’s most encouraging.”

1. D.C. participating as a state had the largest overall score increase from 2005-2017 (23 points). Mississippi’s 11-point score increase from 2005-2017 was not statistically larger than 11 other states with increases from 2005-2017.

2. Mississippi’s 5-point significant increase for percentage at or above *Proficient* from 2013-2015 was numerically the largest compared to all other changes in percentage at or above *Proficient* from 1992-2017.

For more information, visit nagb.gov and nationsreportcard.gov.