

Tennessee

NAEP Results Inspire Statewide Effort to Improve Schools

In 2009, the state of Tennessee quietly embarked on an education revolution.

Working in harmony with policymakers and business leaders, educators raised the state's academic standards and aligned classroom lesson plans to match, overhauled assessments, and improved teacher evaluations. Parents, students, and community members rallied around the raised expectations. Those involved in the changes also agree that partisan politics took a backseat to comprehensive reform.

The result: From 2011 to 2015, Tennessee became the fastest-improving state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments, with students showing more growth over that time than students in any other state in the nation.

Observers there say that one of the factors that helped galvanize Tennessee's efforts to change its approach to education was to compare results from NAEP, known as The Nation's Report Card, with Tennessee's own data on student performance.

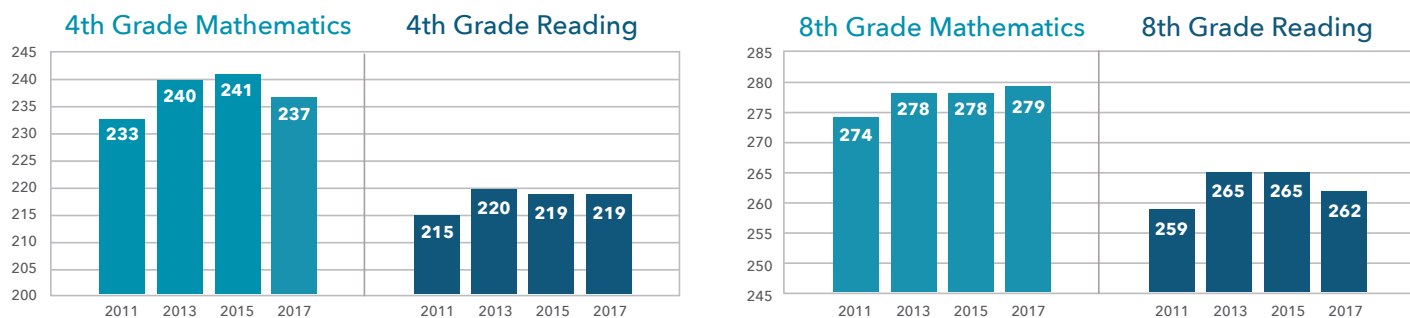
"The data that NAEP shares helps us be more honest," says Jamie Woodson, the executive chair and CEO of the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). "It certainly helps us make changes in policy and practice to improve systems for students and student outcomes."

CONFRONTING HARD FACTS

In 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched a national effort to use data to determine which states were leading in educational performance and which were falling behind. The resulting report, *Leaders & Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*, ranked states on nine indicators, including "Truth in Advertising"—a check on how well state-level measures of student proficiency aligned with NAEP's expectations.

Tennessee's Truth in Advertising grade that year: F.

TENNESSEE NAEP SCORE IMPROVEMENT 2011-2017



Indeed, the differences between Tennessee’s measures and national expectations were stark. At the time, Tennessee rated 87 percent of eighth-graders as proficient or advanced in math based on the state’s standardized test results. On NAEP, however, only 23 percent of eighth-graders were Proficient or above.

Similar divergences were cited in other subjects, such as reading.

News of the NAEP results rippled through education, advocacy, business, and policy circles. Leaders were stunned at the large gap between its state-level results and the Volunteer State’s results on NAEP.

“The difference was immense, and we didn’t know why,” says Fielding Rolston, the former chairman of the Tennessee Board of Education and a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP. “So, we started to ask a lot of questions. We wanted to know what the reason was for this. We had been lying to kids. We weren’t telling them the truth.”

Tennessee educators recognized the importance and credibility of NAEP – the largest nationally representative, continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do – and opted to heed the warning inherent in such a wide gulf between state and national measures of achievement.

“What this highlighted was the fact that we had very inflated proficiency rates and poor college and career readiness,” says Woodson. “We were setting them up to fail.”

Which is why that failing grade from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce “served as a rallying cry,” says Margaret Horn, who was a senior education policy advisor to former Gov. Phil Bredesen.

“We had to face facts,” she says. “Tennessee had set the academic bar too low and our state standardized tests were unambitious. So, we embraced the F, using it to bring attention to the issue and really start making change.”

THE CHANGE PROCESS

State education leaders point to Gov. Bredesen as a driving force behind Tennessee’s educational reforms in the wake of the Chamber’s report—and a reason the state continued to make gains even after he left office in 2011.

In addition to consulting the state’s best and brightest minds in education, the governor prodded the business community for support and buy-in, understanding that successful students today would become productive workers for Tennessee’s businesses tomorrow. At the recommendation of advisors, Gov. Bredesen also linked Tennessee to the American Diploma Project, an initiative of Achieve, a Washington-based nonprofit that helps states make college and career readiness a priority for all students.

Participation in the Diploma Project led to a handful of key findings, says Achieve President Michael Cohen, including that Tennessee needed to:

- **Make learning standards more rigorous**
- **Align its standards with post-secondary demands**
- **Require students to take courses based on the state’s more rigorous standards**
- **Ensure that assessments measure whether students have met the standards**

“Throughout the rest of [Bredesen’s] term, that really was the foundation for education reform in Tennessee,” Cohen says. “He set out to build support for those reforms at the policy level, in the business community, and in the education community.”

State education leaders at both the policy and practice levels sought early to get input and buy-in from teachers, so that the process was unifying, instead of changes being demoralizing, top-down edicts.

“It began with educators as partners,” says Woodson, who served as chair of the Senate Education Committee in the Tennessee General Assembly. “And, instead of pointing fingers, the approach was: ‘We all have a responsibility here.’ It has not been easy, but educators have leaned in and people have supported them.”

State leaders also looped in the higher education and business communities, which supported the efforts not just with funding, but with time, talent, and brainpower.

State leaders held business/higher education roundtables in the state’s five biggest media markets. They brought together marquee companies, university deans and faculty, the state’s education commissioner and commissioner of economic and community development, and the governor, to get on the same page about the need for higher standards. Horn called the growing support in the early days of the effort “a drumbeat.”

The business community embraced this work to help raise achievement levels in Tennessee’s 136 school systems. It funded and launched a high-profile public awareness campaign for parents and other residents, using newspaper commentaries, radio and television ads, and billboards with the saying, “Tennessee is raising the bar.”

“Higher ed said, ‘We want young people to come to our campuses more prepared,’” Horn says. “Businesses said, ‘We want students who are qualified to work for us, and we want them to stay here in Tennessee.’ This was an economic development initiative as much as it was an educational initiative.”

Local celebrities got in on the campaign. Patrick and Gina Neely, stars of the Food Network’s “Down Home With the Neelys” cooking show, did a public service announcement promoting the campaign. So did Pat Summitt, the former head coach of the University of Tennessee Lady Volunteers basketball team.

The collaboration continued even after a 2010 gubernatorial election where Gov. Bredesen—who was term-limited—was replaced by Gov. Bill Haslam, a Republican.

Some were concerned that a new governor—and one from an opposing party—would attempt to roll back some of the new standards and policies that had sparked so many gains.

Instead, thanks to Gov. Bredesen’s community outreach and the focused public relations campaign, “Governor Haslam really bought into the concept that we’ve been lying to kids and we’ve got to stop doing that,” Rolston says. “This is a real success story for both men. Bredesen may have started this process, but the results have all occurred in Haslam’s administration. Both governors have bragging rights.”

THE RESULTS

After a multi-year process to develop more rigorous expectations in the classroom, eventually the state began seeing significant upward movement in scores and national rankings on NAEP.

Between 2011 and 2015, Tennessee students went from:

- 46th in the country to 23rd in fourth-grade math
- 44th in eighth-grade math to 37th and
- 41st in eighth-grade reading to 29th

Eventually, the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) proficiency rates, which declined the first year the more rigorous test was given, improved in every tested subject, showing that the wide-reaching improvement effort hadn't just improved NAEP scores.

"We've had dramatic shifts in results since 2011 across diverse populations and multiple student groups," says Woodson of SCORE.

This also proved true for Tennessee's black and low-income students.

"What you find when states make improvements, what tends to happen is that the white kids and non-[poor] kids increase more than other students," says Cory Curl, the former policy director for the Tennessee Department of Education. "Everybody's getting better, but the gaps are getting worse."

Not so in Tennessee.

From 2009 to 2015, the proportion of African-American students scoring at or above Proficient on NAEP in fourth-grade math increased by 13 percent, compared with 12 percent for white students, Curl noted.

While the state's overall Proficient rates on NAEP are still below the national average, Tennessee is poised to see improved outcomes for students as implementation of reform efforts continue, a write-up on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Leaders and Laggards website says.

While Tennessee was among 10 states to see a slight drop in fourth-grade math scores in 2017 NAEP results, the state sustained its historic growth in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math.

"We always want to see improvement," Candice McQueen, the state education commissioner said of the 2017 results, "but we are encouraged to see Tennessee student growth so far [since 2013] has been sustained."

And it all started with NAEP.

"To have that kind of apples-to-apples comparison is invaluable" Woodson says. "We still have our own rigorous assessment, and we still strive to improve based on that, but NAEP has served as an important backstop in our efforts. NAEP helps us identify where we need to do more work to help students achieve success."



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