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STUDENT SCORES ARE UP – THREE REASONS WHY

A Look into the Results of the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called “the nation’s report card,” is designed to show students’ results over time, and has been in place since 1971. Each year NAEP assesses the proficiency of a representative sample of U.S. students in fourth, eighth and twelfth grades, against what they should know and be able to do at each level. Whereas most standardized tests compare students to one another, NAEP compares them to where they should be as determined by standards adopted with widespread consultation across the education sector. Thus, it tends to be a more realistic appraisal of student performance. Over the years, this “nation’s report card” has become the barometer for assessing if U.S. students are meeting expected levels of performance.

On July 14, 2005 The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) released the “NAEP 2004 Long-Term Trends in Academic Progress” report. For the first time in recent memory, the results were positive. In the past five years, students throughout the country have made significant progress in reading and math. According to *The Economist*, “This year’s report contained two striking results. The first is that America’s nine-year-olds posted their best scores in reading and math since the tests were introduced (in 1971 in reading and 1973 in math). The second is that the gap between white students and minorities is narrowing. The nine-year-olds who made the biggest gains of all were blacks, traditionally the most educationally deprived group in American society.”

These improvements are laudable, but the real question for policymakers is: Why? A look at the record on education reform over the last decade provides a glimpse.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The push for real educational accountability – holding schools, teachers, and administrators responsible for educational results, has taken off in the country. Starting with state standards and assessments with consequences in the early 90s, to a more recent push and connection to state accountability systems in the landmark No Child Left Behind Act. Schools have never before been so pressured to show results. Parents have access to more data in this new era and are provided the ability to do something about the data in some cases. State efforts send a national push clearly combined to create enormous opportunities for learning as indicated by the recent NAEP longitudinal data.

COMPETITION

Economists and academics continue to report that when conventional public schools are faced with outside competition, their performance increases. University of California-Berkeley professor Eric Rofes reports that 25 percent of schools faced with competition changed their practices because of the pressure to show better results. Harvard professor Martin West found similar results in Florida. Conventional schools in the state of Florida exposed to school choice post higher academic gains than schools without the competitive edge. During the time of dramatic increases on the NAEP, the number of charter schools in operation in the U.S. increased by 41 percent. This growth and the addition of other forms of competition positively altered academic outcomes and the education landscape. Similar results can be seen in Arizona, Michigan and Wisconsin by Caroline Hoxby, another economist and professor at Harvard University. According to Hoxby's data, students exposed to school choice, in the form of vouchers or charter schools, increased their test scores by up to 6 times that of their counterparts in unaffected schools

TEACHERS

More than any other factor besides the family, a quality teacher can mean the difference between success and failure for a child. A quality teacher can mitigate at-risk factors and prior failure; quality teachers over time directly affect student success. In the last six years, several new teacher initiatives have put the guardians of the teaching profession on notice that simply having a certificate is no longer acceptable. From NCLB regulations guiding what it means to be highly qualified, to a larger local focus on ensuring higher pay for the best teachers, the past half-decade or so has seen numerous programs aimed at providing all students the best teachers regardless of income or geography. Programs like The New Teacher Project, Resources for Indispensable Schools and Educators and The Teacher Advancement Program help schools attract and retain high quality educators by offering professional growth opportunities through strategies like performance-based pay and ongoing teacher recruitment from other areas of expertise.

THE NEXT TEN YEARS

For more than ten years, education reformers across the country have been conveying the same consistent messages; real education accountability will bring positive change, competition will benefit all school children and highly qualified teachers make a world of difference. These tenets can no longer be so easily dismissed by those who fight against the rising tide of change in America's classrooms. The 2004 NAEP results point to real growth in America's students that can be tied directly to reform efforts across the country – and it's just getting started.