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National Standards and Education Reform Policy Proposal
Anastasia Aguas

Executive Summary

The following is a policy proposal designed to inform high-level decision makers on the urgency for high-quality national standards in education. The content of this proposal examines the history, rationale, and context that led to the current state of national standards in the U.S. Functionally, this proposal serves as a response to falling U.S. performance on international education assessments and inadequate implementation of state-wide standards reforms. I recommend a new set of high-quality national standards, built into the educational reform framework, that function as a national extension of the successful standards-based policy implemented in Louisiana's education system. Recommended policy actions would prospectively enable incentive-driven implementation, preserve educator independence, and return American educational standards of excellence to an internationally competitive level.

Introduction and Background

The objective of this paper is first to review relevant historical and current policies dealing with national standards and assessments. An evaluation of the current political and policy environment surrounding the issue will follow. The author then offers feasible policy alternatives for consideration, specifying policy recommendations in response to the problem. Conclusively, the paper proposes steps for efficient and effective implementation of policy recommendations. This paper is motivated by the demand for high-quality, nationwide academic standards that elevate U.S. K-12 education and foster stability. Additionally, the paper will address the underlying presupposition that holding all students to the same standard clashes with the American principles of democracy. This question will be explored in light of past efforts to introduce national standards, the national posture of educators, private citizens, policymakers, and key stakeholders on the matter, and the principal role of transparency and evidence-based reform around the proposed policy solution. For the purposes of this paper, standards will be interpreted as learning goals for what students ought to know at given grade levels, not curriculum for day-to-day teaching in the classroom.

Historically, "the educational logic behind national standards has always been strong," with politics as the fracturing point of most standard-based policies (Kahlenberg). In 1989, under the leadership of Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, President Bush introduced a series of national goals called "America 2000" to be achieved by its titular year, thus sparking an era of unprecedented collaboration (Barton 5). Although Ravitch's standards were more concerned with rigorous content than with standardized tests and accountability, voluntary standards in select subjects served as a starting point for many state-designed standards (Barton 5).

Out of Bush's America 2000 program emerged equity concerns (i.e. "opportunity to learn standards"), issues of choice, and a 1992 report from the National Council on Education Standards and Tests (NCEST) that recommended national content standards and assessments based on their analysis of desirability and feasibility. This established a precedent for national standards operating independently of federal oversight. The Clinton Administration carried the torch through the "creation of voluntary national tests in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math" and "developing a 'framework' to guide test construction and constructing actual test items" (Barton 6).

Over the last two decades, Race to the Top and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have significantly developed national standards. Achieve, a non-profit organization created by a

“joint endeavor among the nation’s governors, chief state school officers, and CEOs of large corporations,” has also had a dominant role in working with states to carry out a standards-based reform agenda (Barton 11). Responsible for the creation and roll-out of CCSS, “Achieve has made the longest collaborative effort, with the widest reach” (Barton 11). Alongside President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s Race to the Top initiative, Common Core has helped to elevate quality and ensure the permanence of national standards in the nationwide education conversation.

Presently, Common Core is the closest thing the United States has to a set of national standards. Designed to be adopted by states on a voluntary basis, CCSS has remained active since 2009. However, current national standards including CCSS have been tainted by political mismanagement. Failure to adequately communicate the goals and implications of nationwide state standards has resulted in political backlash from both sides of the aisle, “as some conservatives assert the importance of local control and some liberals oppose the testing that comes with strong standards” (Kahlenberg).

The development of national standards in education is imperative because recent U.S. student learning improvements have been marginal at best. The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP), a common measure of student achievement across the country, has shown minimal progress over the last decade. On the 2017 assessment for proficiency in reading amongst fourth graders, not a single state tested NAEP proficient in fourth grade reading assessment. Furthermore, the World Population Review’s Education Rankings by Country for 2019 found that “despite the United States having the second-best education system in the world, it consistently scores lower than many other countries in benchmarks such as math and science... The United States’ education rankings have been falling by international standards over the past three decades” (Education Ranking by Country Population).

Diane Ravitch, following her work on *America 2000*, wrote: “Almost all of America’s children are cheated by the current low expectations in our schools... On international tests they have performed poorly, revealing beyond doubt that they have not learned what their peers in other countries... have learned” (Ravitch). The United States needs a uniform set of high-quality national standards that create the environment for educational success our children deeply deserve. National standards are not merely an education question, but a question of ensuring the endurance of the American dream.

Research

Existing academic work and thought on national standards is heavily influenced by educational reform and the impact of CCSS. Educational reform raises questions of accountability, teacher performance, student achievement, and proper standards of student learning. Each of these facets shapes the discussion on national standards, which has become increasingly polarized. With buzzwords like “Common Core” serving in place of meaningful discourse, the political intensity of the debate has continued to rise. Presently, the rhetoric and support behind the potential benefits and positive impact of national standards on the education system are strong. As one of the highest stakeholders in national standards and assessments, educators have an authoritative voice on the issue. Educators for High Standards, a teacher motivated organization, recently published a piece that echoes the posture of the organization and teachers on elevating standards:

The benefits of setting and maintaining high expectations for student learning aligned to quality academic standards go beyond a single assignment, or even a single school year, and outweigh any initial discomfort for teachers or students... The learning that occurs as

a result of rigor and critical thinking creates students who use their knowledge and wisdom to build deep insight and mastery (Bilbrey).

Opposition to national standards is based on two primary motivators: the failures of past policy and the risks of holding students to a single national academic standard. Jay Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, argues that “standards drive testing, which in turn will affect what content is covered, as well as how and when... having a national set of standards only makes sense if there was a single way for all students to learn” (Hassard). Those who oppose having high national standards are concerned about the loss of experimentation and inquiry in the curriculum creation process, uniformity on how children learn, accountability of a nationalized educational system, ineffectiveness of high-stakes testing for student achievement, and the slippery slope of federal overreach into state-controlled education systems. A RAND response piece to past recommendations of NCEST elaborates on this position, noting that they lacked “serious research on the quality and effects of new performance assessments; an investigation of costs, including non-financial and indirect costs; and building of an infrastructure capable of supporting new assessment systems” (Koretz, et al.). RAND also identified the need for an independent, non-partisan body to evaluate any new standards and assessments.

The creation of Achieve and the introduction of CCSS ameliorated many of these apprehensions. Common Core played a key role in filling the research gap left by former national standards programs like the NCEST recommendations. While CCSS adjusted for many of the criticisms highlighted by pieces like RAND’s response, it developed its own unique political controversy. Frederick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, has been a prominent commentator on the complicated nature of the situation. While Hess says the standards themselves emerged from an “absolutely privately and state-led” effort, “proponents of the academic benchmarks shot themselves in the foot and didn't do enough to drive a public conversation about what the standards were and why people should get on board” (Bidwell). Failure to control the public and political discourse on CCSS had debilitating effects on the successful integration of the standards into state and local schools. Hess explained that no one was aware of what CCSS entailed: “This was unusual in that it wasn't at all debated, even though it was big and national in scope...” (Bidwell). Hess went on to state: “Frankly, I think the fact that Common Core became so controversial is pretty much a direct result of how ineptly the advocates went ahead pushing this thing” (Bidwell). This highlighted the impact of their failure to be transparent and open with the American public. In order to approach national standards with a feasible plan for success, efforts must be careful to avoid the “perfect storm of problems that transformed the Common Core standards into a political football: a lack of communication, a fear of federal overreach and an oversight of practical problems that would stem from the standards” (Bidwell).

A recent Brookings publication on the complex politics of national standards optimistically affirms:

Even though the Common Core ‘brand’ has been damaged, surveys show that support for the idea of national standards remains strong among teachers and the general public. As a result, if the misconceptions about the Core can be cleared up—and the argument for why it is a good thing for American education communicated more effectively—much of the opposition is likely to dissipate (McGuinn).

Louisiana and Tennessee are both shining examples of the potential for elevating education through well-implemented standards-based reform. Under the leadership of State

Superintendent John White, Louisiana’s historically challenged education system has seen marked improvement. This was largely achieved through their “actions encouraged by federal accountability legislation to emphasize the importance of high-quality curricula and other instructional resources to support standards and accountability” (Kaufman, et al.). With strong education policy leaders like Jamie Woodson at the forefront of Tennessee’s work to raise student achievement, Tennessee was the “first to the top” in the Race to the Top program. Through Jamie’s work as the executive chairman and CEO of the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), “she has led collaboration on education policy and practice, work that has supported Tennessee’s success as the fastest improving state in the nation in K-12 student achievement” (Crisis In Democracy 181). With promising examples of the success of standards-based reform, the primary question remains: Can we create a national system of standards and assessments that builds upon the successful models of standards-based reform in Louisiana and Tennessee?

Analysis of Findings

Evidence supports the theory that some states have experienced progressive success through the implementation of high standards in relationship with Common Core. Research on the effects of such standards is limited, with little rigorous empirical evidence on the standards’ impact on student learning. One recent study, conducted by the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction and Learning, a federally funded research center, found that “states that changed their standards most dramatically by adopting the Common Core didn’t outpace other states on federal NAEP exams” (Barnum). However, the study was careful to note that the data was far from complete and that interpretation ought to be conducted with great caution, stating: “Studying the effects of Common Core is challenging, since the changes reached so many students nationwide at the same time — so there is a good deal of uncertainty in determining whether the standards were successful” (Barnum).

The study also concluded that the switch to career and college ready standards widely found in Common Core affected individual states differently, based on the state’s level of academic rigor prior to implementing CCSS. This postulation is supported by the outstanding progress made in Tennessee and Louisiana, two states that have historically had dismal education systems. The lack of success observed elsewhere is hard to pin solely on implementation due to a lack of uniformity in roll out and inadequate support for states that adopted the standards. There has also been a relatively short window of just ten years since the introduction of CCSS, meaning researchers have limited capacity to assess the long-term impacts of an effectively national standards system. However, while causes have been difficult to determine, most data from outside Tennessee and Louisiana point to the fact that Common Core was not successful in achieving its ambitious goals. A new approach to standards reforms is required, as Common Core has proven insufficient in its efforts to create surges in student learning and educational excellence that the U.S. needs.

Based on the available data on Common Core, in close relationship with the critiques on former approaches to national standards and model state successes, I have developed the following set of criteria for national high-quality, standards-based reform policy:

- Development team comprised of successful state leaders in standards-based educational reform, educators, and state representative policymakers
- Creation of high-quality national K-12 standards including corresponding assessments on literacy, mathematics, and American history

- A coherent environment for instruction and routine transparent communication with state and local decision makers
- Standards aligned with instructional resources being utilized at a high rate, demonstration of an accurate understanding of the standards and approaches, and undertaking of more professional development activities for teachers that align with the standards
- Strong incentives on the state level to drive adoption and integration of high-quality standards and curriculum recommendations
- Grace period of 15 years to allow for student and teacher adjustment to high standards, before assessments can be integrated into pay-for-performance models.
- State-by-state data analysis of student assessments conducted annually at the conclusion of the academic year
- Annual state-by-state surveys of teacher reception and in-class experience with standards
- Clear communications campaign to raise awareness of the policy objectives, projected impact, and demonstrated success in other states
- Pre-implementation survey to assess the receptiveness of states, educators, policymakers, parents, and other key stakeholders to the incoming standards

Policy Options

Based on the aforementioned policy guiding criteria, there are several policy options to consider. Each policy will be assessed on feasibility, the relative benefits and caveats, anticipated political impact, and potential reservations.

The most feasible policy option would be to maintain voluntary standards system provided by Common Core. Although the issue of national standards is one of pressing importance, there is an argument to be made for the insufficient time window in which we have assessed the success and/or failure of CCSS. With only ten years having elapsed since the system's roll-out, long term impact and current success has been difficult to determine. Allowing Common Core to remain the national standard would also alleviate the prospective challenges that would accompany switching states to a new standards system. The caveats of leaving Common Core in place as the nation's system of standards are the risks of leaving an ineffective system in motion, jeopardizing the quality of education for children across the United States, and allowing a politically charged target for standards to remain the national education policy. This would maintain a program that was rolled out with an insufficient supply of resources, a lack of means to assess the system's success, and a myriad of other unanticipated complications that have hampered the program's ability to succeed at a uniform, national level. Although there is an argument to be made for reinforcing the existing CCSS system with an enhanced flow of resources, the political burdens and inadequate systematic infrastructure presents a serious challenge to elevating the current system.

An alternative policy approach would be a top-down high-standards system that would be implemented on a national level, disseminated to the states. These high-quality standards would be paired with nationally uniform assessments at each grade level on literacy, mathematics, and American History (basic U.S. government assessments beginning in Grade 9). Additionally, the system would consist of a curated compilation of curricula guidelines to facilitate teaching and learning to standard levels. The standards would require mandatory adoption to be eligible for any federal funding to state education programs. This program would ensure uniform adoption of standards at a national level, provide a clear means of assessing student learning, create stability

for children in an increasingly mobile society, and offer teachers a structured framework to facilitate a strong understanding and high-utilization rate of standards-based materials in the classroom. Some caveats of this policy include limiting educator creativity on curriculum and minimizing state-specific flexibility on standards and assessments. The level of federal involvement would also incite political backlash over the increased role of federal accountability in state education policy and the loss of teacher independence in the choice of curriculum. The political backlash would have to be compensated by additional legwork on the part of the communications and planning team, who would be responsible for managing media and informing the public. This system would also require advanced support teams to facilitate the teacher training element and the curriculum introduction at state levels. This policy would establish a new precedent for the role of the federal government in overseeing the nation's success in education. The tradeoff of state-specific choices would be a firmer guarantee of increased K-12 proficiency to high-quality standards across the board of all fifty states.

A third policy alternative would be a system of high-quality national standards, built into the educational reform framework, that would effectively be designed as a national extension of the successful policy points of Louisiana's standards-based reform. This policy would mandate that states utilize standards, assessments, and accountability measures to clearly define and broadly communicate a high nation-wide bar of what is expected of students and schools. Educators would be provided with a strong stream of resources and would be given distinct clarity on which materials could be considered high-quality and which ones could not. States would be provided with an increased supply of high-quality materials, buttressed by curriculum-specific professional development options. The program would be incentivized through the provision of funding, contingent upon the use of approved high-quality curricula, implementation of professional development, and correct and consistent use of assessments. An active communications team would be critical in directing the public discourse and educational dialogue around the new standards, heavily emphasizing the policy's success points in Louisiana. The caveat of this system is that it would likely face criticisms for being too closely associated with Common Core. The close association could breed challenges in persuading states to embrace new standards in favor of longer standing, community integrated standards. The benefits of this system are that it maintains the national objective of creating a nation-wide rise in student learning and classroom performance without surrendering the elements of voluntary choice and teacher influence.

Recommendations

The recommendation of this proposal is the third policy alternative: high-quality national standards built into the educational reform framework, effectively designed as a national extension of the successful policy points of Louisiana's standards-based reform. Based on my research, I have concluded that an ideal policy is one that promotes change in a natural and reformative way that builds on pre-existing successful policy elements. This policy will include a mandatory component, on which uniformity, gathering of reliable data, and successful implementation of the new standards system will rely. Mandating the use of standards and assessments will ensure this without infringing on curricula. Ample resources also play a key role in this policy. You cannot ask educators and students to perform to high standards without providing the resources necessary to empower and enable them. The resource provision phase of the process is also the sphere in which teachers will be able to retain independent creativity but will be equipped to make educated choices on high-quality materials available to them. Incentives were a key element of what gave Common Core its success in voluntary state

adoption. Incentives in this program will be tied to the use of high-quality curricula, chosen by instructors, the additional use of professional development tools, and the paired assessments to track student learning. Communication and planning are the final elements, and perhaps the most critical. Common Core's failure in the realm of politics and public opinion was massively attributed to the failure to communicate what Common Core meant for children, schools, teachers, and states. That misconception caused a near devastating political drop in support for the system. Politics is a key piece in policymaking: navigating the national conversation surrounding any proposed change is crucial to its success.

One potential pitfall for this policy is that Louisiana's system and successes may not translate to the significantly larger national scale. Further, it is possible that Louisiana's system contains long term issues that have yet to come to light, given the short window of research and observation discussed already. Many of the policy components require dramatic change, and Louisiana is still in the implementation process in some parts of the state. Thus, the findings from their reform can only be considered early evidence. However, in spite of these limitations, Louisiana's policies are demonstrating real change and generating improvements in high-quality teaching and learning.

Implementation and Next Steps

Implementation of a policy of this scale and magnitude could not be conducted without rigorous research and development. The first step would be to compose a planning and communications team that could respond to and manage potential political backlash against the new policy. The second step would be to create a collaborative team of proven state leaders in standards based educational reform, educators, and state representative policymakers to inform the development of the policy itself. The third step would be to recruit a team of researchers to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the shortcomings and successes of past national standards efforts and cross-reference them with the system in place in Louisiana. Preliminary buy-in of state leaders would be another step to take in this period, with heavy emphasis on evidence-based findings, the urgency of the policy, and the incentives available for states. Following the rollout of the policy, states would be granted a 15-year grace period to improve to their standards. This period would have annual milestone goals for schools and students to show gradual improvement. If a given state was failing to meet the milestones, a support team would be commissioned to work closely with the State Superintendent to diagnose and mitigate challenges, with provisions for enhanced teacher training, communications, and smooth integration of standards, curricula, and assessment. At the expiration of the 15-year grace period, a report would be compiled on the student learning outcomes over the past 15 years. If 65% of states have not reached standard proficient levels by the end of the grace period, a new collaborative policy design team would be composed to reevaluate the goals, methods, and findings of the standards reform.

Conclusion

“The issue of national standards will recur because standards are essential both for excellence and for equal opportunity.” - Diane Ravitch

The keys to success for future generations of Americans - excellence and opportunity - are intertwined with the issue of national standards. For young Americans to thrive academically and make their mark on the world, they require an education system that encourages nationwide excellence through cohesive standards. The pride of America is not only our past successes, but our bright future. Delivering opportunities through high reaching standards of learning is not only the promise of an education in America, it is the future of America itself. Education is a

defining feature of the United States' international reputation, the sustainability of our future, and most of all, opportunity for our children. This proposal's recommendation offers a pathway to achieve these goals while preserving the traditional freedoms and integrity of the U.S. educational system.

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Figures (Sourced from Nation's Report Card)

Figure 1: NAEP Grade 8 Reading Assessment

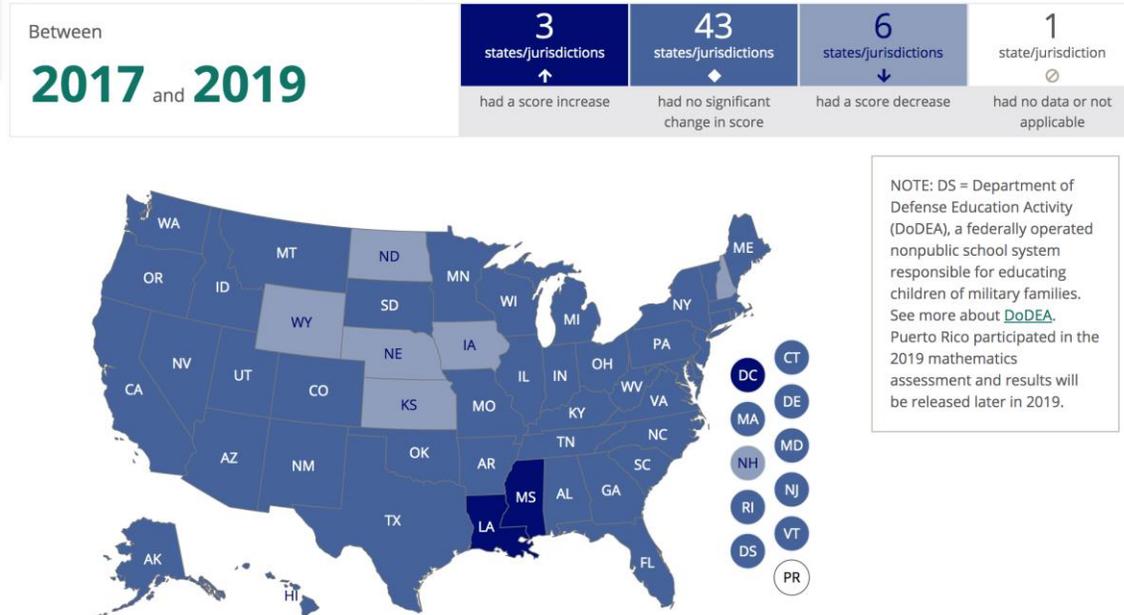


Figure 2: NAEP Grade 8 Mathematics Assessment

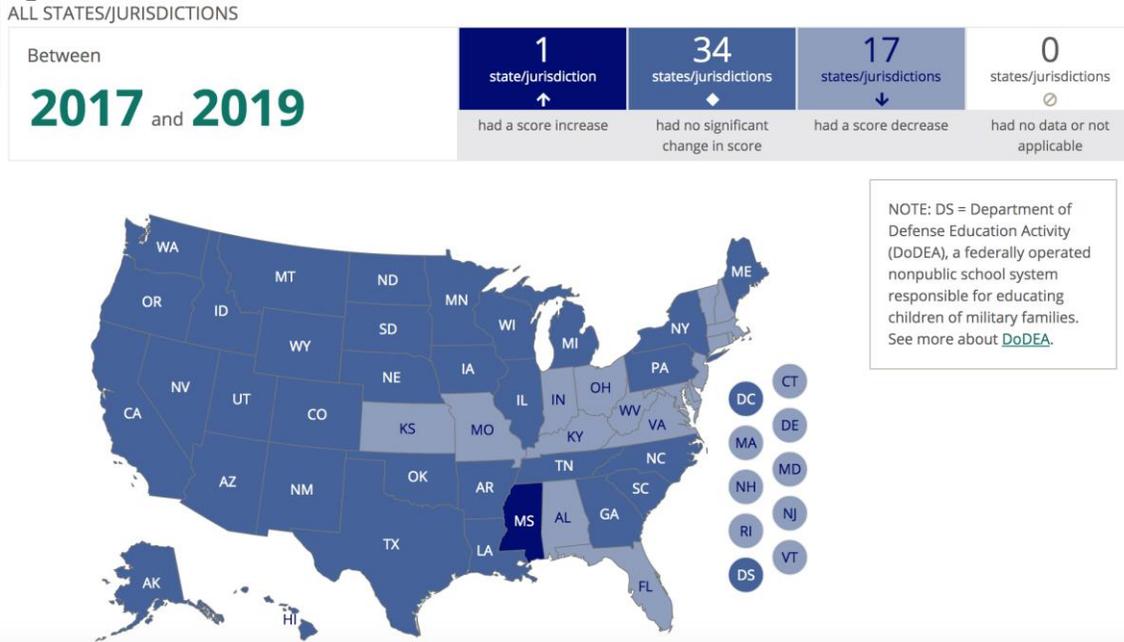


Figure 3: NAEP National and State Average Reading Scores 1992-2019
NATIONAL AND STATE AVERAGE SCORES

Lower reading scores at both grades in 2019 than in 2017

Score decreases differ by gender nationally and across states

Trend in NAEP reading average scores, by grade

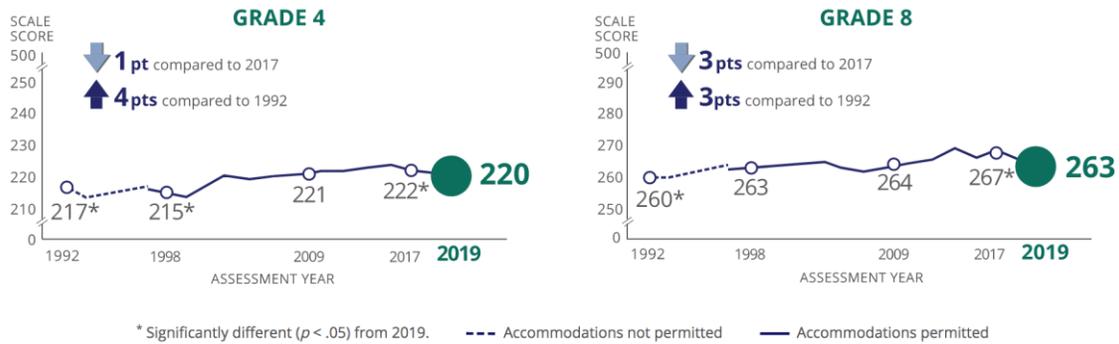


Figure 4: NAEP Student Reading Performance 2019
How Did Students Perform in Reading?

In 2019, average reading scores were lower for both fourth- and eighth-grade students compared to 2017: scores were lower by 1 point at fourth grade and lower by 3 points at eighth grade. Average scores were higher at both grades compared to the first reading assessment in 1992.



Figure 5: NAEP Student Mathematics Performance 2019
How Did Students Perform in Mathematics?

In 2019, average mathematics scores for the nation were higher by 1-point at fourth-grade and lower by 1-point at eighth-grade compared to scores in 2017. Average scores were higher at both grades compared to the first assessment in 1990.

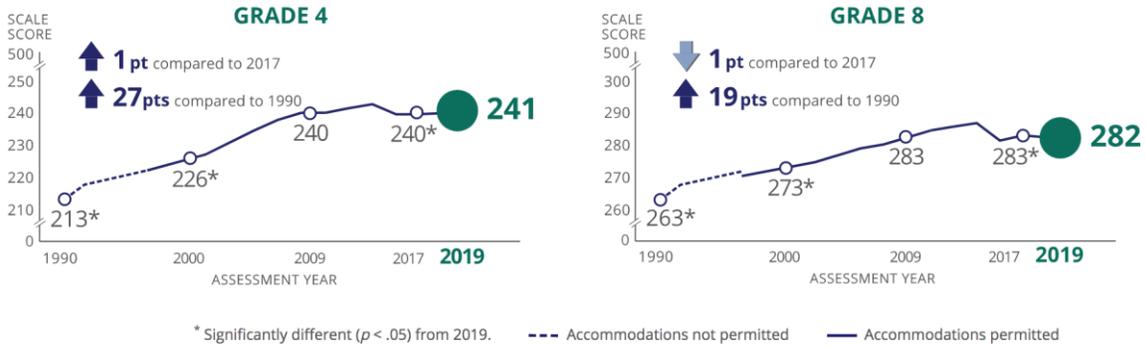


Figure 6: NAEP Fourth-Grade Mathematics Average Score Trend
 Trend in fourth-grade NAEP mathematics average scores

DISPLAY AS GRAPH | [TABLE](#)

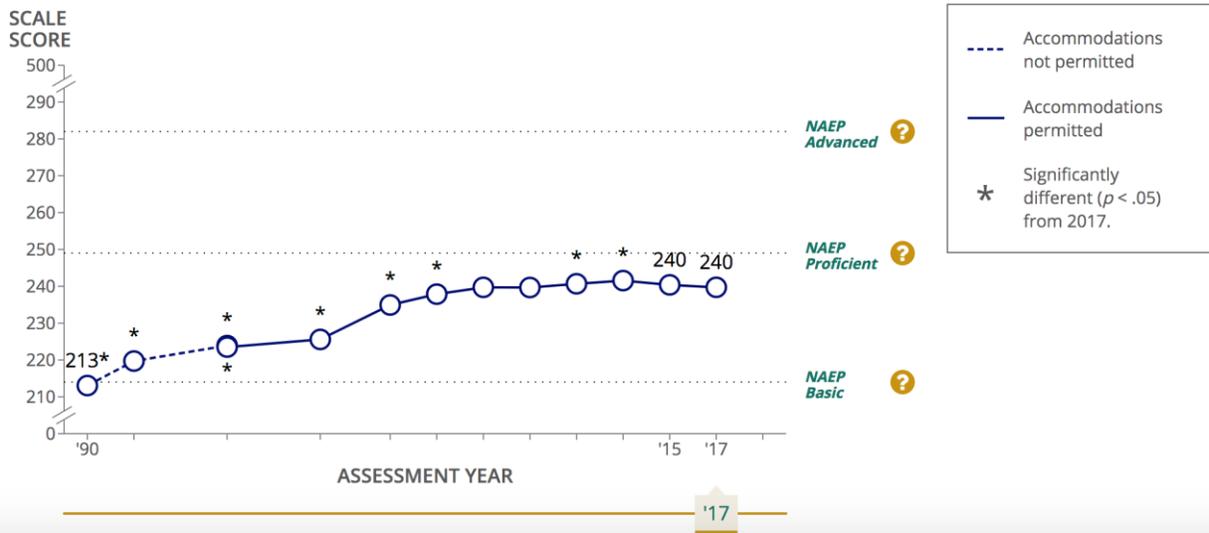


Figure 7: NAEP Fourth-Grade Reading Average Score Trend
Trend in fourth-grade NAEP reading average scores

DISPLAY AS GRAPH | [TABLE](#)

