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A Look at the Education Crisis: Tests, Standards, and the Future of American Education

By Ulrich Boser, Perpetual Baffour, and Steph Vela January 2016



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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 6 An education crisis spanning centuries**
- 8 The success of standards-based reform**
- 9 How serious is the nation's education problem?**
- 13 Recommendations**
- 16 Conclusion**
- 17 About the authors and acknowledgments**
- 18 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

In many ways standards-based school reform is at a crossroads. On one side, the movement has made tremendous strides. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, known simply as Common Core, is now strongly established in more than 40 states.¹ Many teachers believe that the new, higher academic standards have helped them improve instruction.² And, most importantly, a solid body of data demonstrates that the standards-based reform movement has shown success in raising student outcomes.³

In some areas, outcome indicators are on the rise. Over the past two decades, for instance, the number of students of color performing at grade level in reading and math has more than doubled in elementary and middle school.⁴ Meanwhile, high school graduation rates are the highest they have ever been: 81 percent of the class of 2013 received their diploma within four years.⁵

But clearly much work remains. Achievement gaps in many subject areas remain large. For example, only 21 percent of low-income fourth-grade students achieved proficiency on the 2015 NAEP reading test compared to 52 percent of nonpoor students.⁶ And if students of color graduated at the same rate as their white peers, they would receive nearly two hundred thousand more diplomas each year.⁷

In a way, the question for education advocates boils down to: What's next? For a few vocal observers, the answer to this question is—surprisingly—anything but standards-based reform. In other words, these observers believe that the standards-based reform effort—and its associated assessments and accountability efforts—have been a total failure. In a policy memo released last year, Kevin Welner and William Mathis of the National Education Policy Center argued that “we as a nation have devoted enormous amounts of time and money to the focused goal of increasing test scores, and we have almost nothing to show for it.”⁸

Some, such as blogger Anthony Cody, argue that policymakers should not really even focus on raising standards or improving tests or reforming accountability systems. Instead, Cody believes that policy leaders should aim to create a “healthy ecosystem” for students.⁹ From this perspective, resources would be better invested in improving prenatal care and child nutrition than in reforming public schools.¹⁰

One of the most vocal proponents of this view is education historian Diane Ravitch. Although Ravitch was once a leading advocate of national standards, the former U.S. assistant secretary of education has shifted her position dramatically in recent years.¹¹ In interviews, Ravitch is adamant that “the current sense of crisis about our nation’s public schools is exaggerated.”¹² She criticizes the Common Core as “blind faith in the standardization of tests and curriculum.”¹³ Or, as Ravitch argues, “We have a national policy that is a theory based on an assumption grounded in hope.”¹⁴

The argument over the scope and nature of the education problem in the United States is particularly important to the political debate over the Common Core. In some parts of the country, there has been a backlash against the standards. For instance, almost 60,000 students in Washington state opted out of Common Core tests.¹⁵ In some affluent Washington municipalities more than 90 percent of high schoolers opted out of the math tests.¹⁶

Other states, such as Oklahoma, have simply backed out of the standards.¹⁷ And for some political leaders, such as former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R), the new standards are a classic example of government overreach.¹⁸ While others, including former Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R), see them as part of a grand conspiracy.¹⁹

Part of the reason for the backlash against Common Core is the belief that schools are actually doing pretty well—particularly in affluent areas. In fact, many parents give high grades to the schools in their communities, regardless of the school’s location or background. According to a 2014 PDK/Gallup poll, around 50 percent of parents gave their child’s school an A or B grade.²⁰

This sort of optimism about the state of public schools has led some parents to crusade against the new standards, arguing that the Common Core is simply too difficult. “To me we are setting our kids up to fail,” one parent told CNN.²¹ “The reading passages are three levels above the child’s current grade level.”²²

To look more deeply at the state of our education system—and the state of standards-based reform—the authors of this report analyzed the latest data from two national assessments: NAEP and the Trial Urban District Assessment, or TUDA.

The NAEP assessment, long known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” was administered for the first time in 1969.²³ NAEP exams in math and reading are given every two years to a random sample of schools and students in each state and almost two dozen urban districts.²⁴

While NAEP assesses student progress at the national and state level, TUDA is used to report the performance of large urban districts.²⁵ The TUDA test was first administered in 2002 and served as a way to “focus attention on urban education” by providing district-level NAEP exams.²⁶ In 2002, there were only six participating urban districts; that number has since increased to 21 districts.

Using data from TUDA and NAEP, this report estimates the absolute number of students at or above proficient for each disaggregated group. We started with the overall percentages of students scoring proficient or above or scoring advanced or above on each NAEP exam in 2015. We then compared these data with estimates of the total school-age population for each group.²⁷ To our knowledge, this is the first time that such an analysis has been done.

Consider, for example, Cleveland, Ohio, where 6 percent of African American students who took the NAEP eighth-grade math test scored at the proficient level or above. However, only a subset of the district’s students actually took the NAEP.²⁸ We estimated that, if all the African American students in the district had actually taken the test, 6 percent of the approximately 1,340 such students—or approximately 80 total—would have scored proficient or above.²⁹ For this report, the authors rounded these totals to the nearest ten for the city-specific data because the results were approximations of the exact figure. For the state-level data, we rounded to the nearest hundred, thousand, or tens of thousands.

We looked at proficiency rates for several groups of students, including students of color and students with disabilities. We used these rates to estimate the total number of students in each group that were performing at the proficient or advanced level.

Our research revealed several key findings:

Some states and districts are making clear gains

In Massachusetts, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring proficient or above in math jumped from 41 percent in 2003 to 54 percent in 2013.³⁰ In other words, about 7,000 more fourth-graders in Massachusetts are reaching proficiency now than they were 10 years ago.³¹ In other states, such as Florida, the same rate rose from 31 percent to 42 percent, meaning around 22,000 more fourth-graders are scoring at grade level in math than they were 10 years ago.³²

Many districts have also made clear gains. Since 2002, thousands more students of color in the nation's cities have scored proficient or above on the reading and math NAEP exams.³³ In Boston, for instance, nearly 1,000 more Hispanic fourth- and eighth-graders are now proficient in math.³⁴ Similarly, the District of Columbia has also seen about 1,000 more fourth-graders scoring proficient or above in math and reading.³⁵ In Charlotte, at least 2,000 more fourth graders can now do math at grade level.³⁶

The state and local policy environment matters

Many of the cities and states that have embraced standards-based reform have seen clear gains. The District of Columbia, for instance, has been a national leader in the reform movement, and high school graduation rates and other student outcomes have been jumped upwards in the city.³⁷ Or take Charlotte, North Carolina. The district has long been strong on using accountability systems and data-driven decision-making to bolster achievement and narrow achievement gaps.³⁸

Perhaps the best example is Massachusetts, where there is a clear link between the state's standard-based reform efforts and a large jump in student outcomes.³⁹ Over the past decade, low-income students in the Bay State have seen a 12-point increase in scores on the fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP exams. Today, low-income students in Massachusetts are among the nation's highest performing.⁴⁰

While a rigorous analysis of the policy context in each city is far beyond the scope of this report, some reform-oriented areas have shown clear results.

In many locations, students of color and students living in poverty still have extraordinarily low achievement

According to our analysis, an estimated 120 black students in fourth grade score proficient or above on the NAEP mathematics assessment in Detroit. This is not a misprint: A reliable, high-quality exam shows that just a little more than 100 African American fourth-graders are performing grade-level work in math in the city.⁴¹

Students in other cities have similarly low results. In Atlanta, a depressing total of around 60 Hispanic fourth-graders score proficient or above on the reading NAEP exam. The numbers are even worse in Cleveland, where based on our estimates, only some 30 Latino eighth-graders would be considered proficient in math.⁴²

While this report calculated absolute numbers to highlight the dramatic extent of the education problem, the percentage outcomes for each of these cities is just as shocking. In fourth-grade reading, only 13 percent of Hispanic students in Cleveland reached proficiency. In fourth-grade math, only 11 percent of African American students in Atlanta reached proficiency. In Fresno, California, only 7 percent of low-income eighth-graders can read at grade level.⁴³

When it comes to students performing at the advanced level, outcomes are also rock bottom

In the entire United States, only about 123,000 eighth-graders—or 3 percent—scored at the advanced level in reading on the NAEP exams. Again, this is not a misprint: Just around 120,000 eighth graders are doing excellent work in middle school English language arts in the whole country.⁴⁴

In some states, the issue is also dire when it comes to high-level work, and only a few hundred students have reached the advanced level in some grades. Around 410 eighth-graders in Mississippi, for instance, are reading at the advanced level; in New Mexico, there are approximately 230 eighth-graders achieving at that level. In West Virginia, only about 610 eighth-graders are considered advanced in math.⁴⁵

While there has been substantial progress over the past decade—particularly in cities and states that have embraced standards-based reform—the nation still faces a pressing education crisis, particularly when it comes to students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. The sooner that the American public takes action, the better prepared the nation will be for the future.

An education crisis spanning centuries

The history of decrying the state of American education may be as old as the nation itself. As far back as the 1800s, critics have complained that the nation's school system was dysfunctional.⁴⁶ No doubt, the nation has had some clear education victories over the past two centuries. The United States can boast, for instance, about having some of the best colleges in the world.⁴⁷ Recent reforms in K-12 education have also paid off: Over the past 15 years, the high school graduation rate has increased steadily from 71 percent to more than 80 percent.⁴⁸

But over recent years, two things have changed that dramatically shifted the debate about the nature of the education crisis. First, there is the issue of technology: Workers—particularly blue-collar and service workers—are increasingly being replaced by machines.⁴⁹ According to a recent cover article in *The Atlantic*, the United States should prepare itself to “cry robot” given the degree to which technology is taking away jobs.⁵⁰ Positions such as truckers, cashiers, and salespeople will soon be a thing of the past. In many areas—including banking and grocery stores—this transition has already occurred.

In other words, a high school diploma is simply not enough for people to succeed in the new economy.⁵¹ In order to be successful, people need much richer skills and knowledge. However, the U.S. education system is struggling to keep up with this change. Currently, there is a large gap between the skills and credentials that employers want and the skills and credentials that job candidates actually have. More and more jobs are requiring a bachelor's degree, for instance, while only about one-third of workers actually hold one.⁵²

What's more, many students who have high school diplomas are not prepared for higher education. Consider that approximately 20 percent of first-year college students take some sort of remedial course.⁵³ In other words, a large percentage of students land a high school diploma that is essentially meaningless. The document might indicate that the students are ready for college, but in reality, the students simply do not have the necessary skills or knowledge.⁵⁴

There is a second issue that highlights the scope of the education crisis: the persistent low achievement of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. For many years, states and districts have largely ignored the needs of such students, and many students of color and students in poverty have attended schools with far fewer opportunities.⁵⁵

Closing achievement gaps has become a bipartisan issue in recent years, however, and federal initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, or NCLB—which required disaggregation of scores based on race, gender, and socioeconomic class, among other things—uncovered large disparities in achievement.⁵⁶ In 2011, President Barack Obama declared closing the achievement gap as one of his goals and education as the “civil rights issue of our time.”⁵⁷

The success of standards-based reform

The history of standards-based reform is well documented.⁵⁸ As many have noted, the hallmark of the movement is to set high, content-rich academic expectations for students and then measure students and schools against those expectations. Under the standards-based approach, instruction often becomes more cumulative, and students who were previously neglected or overlooked in the classroom are held to the same high standard as their more privileged peers. The reform movement also typically includes some form of data-driven remediation for schools and classrooms, which do not show clear results on student assessments and other indicators of performance.

In recent years, a number of papers have demonstrated the power of the reform model, and researchers have noted higher outcomes in states with high-quality standards-based systems.⁵⁹ At the same time, there is also now clear evidence that large school districts that reform their systems can post clear improvements.⁶⁰ As the recent TUDA results show, thousands more students are now reaching proficiency in core academic subjects than they did some years ago.

Case study: Kenton County School District

Kenton County School District in Kentucky was one of the earliest implementers of the Common Core in the nation. The teachers in this suburban, low-to-mid poverty district* began to pilot the Common Core shortly after the state adopted the standards in 2010, according to a report by the D.C.-based Fordham Foundation.⁶¹ The district also moved aggressively to align standards, assessments, and instruction. By 2013, all of Kenton County's middle and secondary schools were using a common curriculum.

Now in its fourth year of Common Core implementation, the Kenton County School District has seen the results of its investment: Under the state's new accountability system, the district's overall

accountability scores have jumped approximately 11 points.⁶² Today, Kenton County places in the 89th percentile among all school districts in Kentucky.

Kenton County School District also significantly exceeds the state average in proficiency rates for all tested subjects, and about 60 percent of Kenton's elementary school students are proficient in math.⁶³ By comparison, the statewide average for elementary school math is 49 percent. Furthermore, under Kentucky's state accountability system, most of Kenton County's schools are now in the proficient or progressing categories. Put simply, the district's efforts at change have produced real results.

**Correction, February 2, 2016: This report has been corrected to accurately describe Kenyon County School District as a suburban, low-to-mid poverty district.*

How serious is the nation's education problem?

Despite significant reform efforts, the nation's education system still has deep and persistent issues. According to the ACT, only around 40 percent of high school students are clearly prepared for college-level work.⁶⁴ And of those students who enter college, only around 60 percent graduate within six years.⁶⁵

Data on the achievement gap is also startling. In fourth grade, black students scored 26 points lower on the NAEP in reading than their white counterparts, while Hispanics scored 24 points lower.⁶⁶ This is a difference of about two grade levels. Hispanic high school seniors also scored some 20 points lower than white students on the 2013 NAEP math exam for 12th grade.⁶⁷

Graduation rates for black students are also substantially lower than those of white students. During the 2013–2014 school year, 87 percent of white students graduated from high school on time. In contrast, only 73 percent of black students earned a high school diploma.⁶⁸ Hispanic students fare somewhat better, posting a 76 percent graduation rate.⁶⁹

Our research findings add to this long list of dispiriting data, again underscoring the depth of the education crisis. In Atlanta, for instance, we estimate that just 40 Hispanic eighth-graders would score proficient on NAEP's reading exam, while Cleveland would only have around 40 Hispanic eighth-graders score proficient or above. In Baltimore, just an estimated 60 or so Hispanic fourth-grade students are doing grade-level work in reading. While these cities have relatively small Hispanic populations, the overall proficiency rates are still jarring: In all three cities, Hispanic pass rates are all less than 20 percent.⁷⁰

Overall percentages remain low as well—both nationally and in urban areas. In 2015, only 20 percent of Philadelphia eighth-graders scored at or above proficient on the mathematics NAEP assessment. In addition, only an estimated 220 students out of more than 3,000 eighth-graders in Detroit are likely to be reading at grade level.⁷¹ Our table below presents an overview of eighth-grade reading performance in urban districts. Simply put, the education crisis is real.

TABLE 1

Eighth-grade reading performance in urban districts

Number of students reaching proficiency on NAEP eighth-grade reading exam, by urban district

Jurisdiction	Estimated number of eighth-graders	Percent of students at or above proficient in eighth-grade reading	Estimated number of students at or above proficient in eighth-grade reading
Albuquerque, NM	7,000	19	1,350
Atlanta, GA	3,000	20	610
Austin, TX	5,000	33	1,630
Baltimore City, MD	5,000	13	650
Boston, MA	4,000	28	1,120
Charlotte, NC	11,000	33	3,650
Chicago, IL	26,000	24	6,230
Cleveland, OH	2,000	11	210
Dallas, TX	10,000	17	1,700
Detroit, MI	3,000	7	220
District of Columbia	3,000	19	570
Duval County, FL	9,000	31	2,760
Fresno, CA	5,000	13	640
Hillsborough County, FL	16,000	29	4,620
Houston, TX	13,000	20	2,630
Jefferson County, KY	7,000	31	2,170
Los Angeles, CA	39,000	20	7,660
Miami-Dade County, FL	24,000	32	7,600
New York City, NY	68,000	27	18,100
Philadelphia, PA	8,000	16	1,280
San Diego, CA	7,000	32	2,250

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP Data Explorer: 2015 Reading Assessment," available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx> (last accessed November 2015). Author's calculations based on population data from National Center for Education Statistics, "2015 Mathematics and Reading TUDA Assessment Report Card: Summary Data Tables for District Sample Sizes, Participation Rates, and Proportions of SD and ELL Students Identified: M_G4&8_Sample Size" (2015), available at http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/files/Technical_Appendix_2015_Reading_TUDA.pdf.

Papering over the problem

One of the central, motivating ideas behind the Common Core was to raise standards across the United States and create more effective ways to address the nation's pressing education issues. To date, more than 40 states have adopted the Common Core state standards, meaning that the majority of students will be expected to meet these higher expectations.⁷² The standards are internationally benchmarked, and many believe that they will help improve national competitiveness.⁷³

In many ways, the new standards were an effort to stop the papering over of low student test scores. Before the Common Core, many states had low standards and weak assessments. In other words, the states set the bar low so that more students appeared to be performing at grade level than actually were.⁷⁴ The Georgia state tests, for instance, claimed that more than 90 percent of their fourth-grade students were at or above proficient in reading, but only 34 percent of students scored proficient or above on the NAEP—a 60-point difference between Georgia's claim and the national assessment.⁷⁵

This problem was widespread. According to one report by the educational non-profit Achieve, more than half of states once had a 30-point differential between the reported proficiency in their state test results and the NAEP results.⁷⁶ Inflated test scores might look good on paper, but they mislead students, parents, and teachers alike.

The Common Core-aligned tests

There is some concern about how the public will respond to the results of the new Common Core-aligned tests. Many fear that the drop in test scores will fuel a backlash against the standards, and there is no doubt that test scores will indeed drop in many areas. Many states have already released their scores, and the results are clearly much lower. In Kentucky, for instance, prior to implementing the Common Core standards, 73 percent of elementary students were proficient in math; in 2012, that figure fell to 40 percent because of the higher Common Core standards.⁷⁷

But the potential pushback from anti-reformers should not deter states from honestly assessing their students' learning, and Common Core standards can help provide a true glimpse into student achievement. The Common Core-aligned tests aim to make sure that all stakeholders—parents, teachers and students—will

be able to easily compare test performance across state and district lines. In other words, the promise of these next-generation exams is that people will be able to compare the results of a student in a rural farm town in Nebraska to the results of a student in San Francisco, thus allowing states, districts, and schools to better align policy and practice as well as resources.

Recommendations

The plain fact is that the U.S. education crisis is real. The country needs to move beyond the debate over the scope of the problems we face and instead look to solutions. CAP recommends the following:

Implement the higher Common Core standards

There is a massive divide between what the K-12 system expects of students and what the world of work expects of the nation's students. The Common Core is an attempt to bridge that divide, and the standards are intended to increase the level of rigor in schools. The standards also offer consistency and shared expectations. As a result, the authors believe that the new Common Core standards will go a long way to promote equity and excellence among all students.

The Common Core will also give students the critical thinking skills that they need.⁷⁸ Put differently, the new standards do not just raise expectations of students—they also promote the type of thinking students will use in college and in careers. And when it comes to addressing the nation's education crisis, there is a clear consensus that higher standards can help drive up achievement.⁷⁹

Promote transparency and high-quality data, including the aligned Common Core assessments

When it comes to education, transparency is key. Educators, policymakers, and the public all need to understand how students are doing in school. Transparency is especially crucial for disenfranchised populations. Without paying particular attention to major subgroups, such as low-income students, schools might pursue strategies that benefit overall performance but leave some students behind.

The new Common Core standards offer a lot of potential in this regard. For one, they keep states from papering over low performance for some subgroups. For another, the standards will allow educators to compare performance across state and district lines. Policymakers should promote and use thoughtful assessment programs such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARC, and Smarter Balance, which have committed to making their data comparable across state and district lines.⁸⁰

Invest in rigorous curricula and high-quality instructional material

In order for students to glean the benefits of better standards, schools need to invest in excellent curricula. Exposure to challenging classes plays a key role in allowing students to achieve their potential, and the intensity of a student's high school academic experience is a good indicator of whether or not they'll complete a bachelor's degree.⁸¹

The Common Core is far from the only solution to this problem, and states and districts should invest in other ways to promote better curricula, such as Advanced Placement, or AP, and International Baccalaureate, or IB, programs. Unfortunately, there are large deficits in student access to such advanced-level coursework.⁸² Blacks and Latinos make up 37 percent of the nation's high school students but only 27 percent of those enrolled in an AP course.⁸³ There are severe equity gaps based on income level as well. For instance, although low-income students make up over 70 percent of Mississippi's high school population, less than a third of them participated in an AP exam.⁸⁴

Some states have been trying to address these discrepancies by paying for AP programs in low-income areas.⁸⁵ Texas, for instance, has been funding an AP incentive program in low-income districts and districts with high proportions of students of color, which has seen some success. The program has boosted the number of Black and Latino students participating in AP or IB exams, as well as increased the number of students of color matriculating into colleges.⁸⁶

Ensure students have access to high-quality teachers

Effective teaching is the key to student learning. High-quality teachers can alter a student's trajectory drastically. In one study led by researcher Bill Sanders in Tennessee schools, children who were placed with three consecutive low-quality teachers starting in third grade scored in the 44th percentile on their statewide mathematics assessment.⁸⁷ However, students who were placed with three consecutive high-quality teachers scored in the 96th percentile on the same assessment.

To improve the quality of the nation's teaching force, systemic changes must be made to all aspects of the teacher pipeline, including increasing efforts to recruit those with great potential into the profession—and providing teachers with better support and improved working conditions once they are in the classroom. If teaching were considered a highly respected profession—and the institutions established to train teachers were redesigned with student learning in mind—outcomes for students would undoubtedly soar.

Promote fiscal equity

Poverty can have a serious and damaging effect on a student's education and, while the federal government has long sent additional money to states and districts to support the educational needs of economically disadvantaged students, it is clearly not enough. In 23 states, districts with more low-income students actually receive less per-pupil funding than schools with more affluent students.⁸⁸

In real terms, shortchanging low-income students means that they are much less likely to have access to effective teachers, rigorous coursework, and extracurricular activities. These inequities are not only unfair but also contribute significantly to race- and class-based achievement gaps.

To boost student achievement and close gaps, states and districts need to distribute more money to schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged students. Whether through a new funding formula, weighted student funding, or some other means, it is clear that states and districts must undertake serious efforts to promote fiscal equity and ensure that all students receive the educational supports they need to achieve their potential.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that there is a real education crisis in the United States. Many jobs require skills that young adults do not have. Achievement gaps persist, leaving students already disadvantaged by poverty even further behind. And too few students of color are on track to meet today's higher standards.

While some observers push misleading political agendas that suggest all is fine in the nation's schools, the numbers tell a clear story: Far too few students are performing at grade level— particularly students of color and children from low-income families. Put differently, if only a few dozen fourth-graders in your community can read at grade level, then there is a crisis.

The Common Core standards hold the promise of leveling the playing field so that all students can succeed, but that will not be enough to bring all students to proficiency and beyond. Americans need to respond with the urgency this crisis deserves and reform all aspects of the nation's education system—from how schools are funded to ensuring that strong teachers are placed in the schools with the greatest needs.

About the authors

Ulrich Boser is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he analyzes education, criminal justice, and other social policy issues. Prior to joining the Center, Boser was a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report*. His writings have appeared in many publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. He is currently working on a book on learning.

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