

September 2005

Commentary: From Confusion to Coherence

If you are confused about whether our high schools are getting better or worse, or just standing still, you're not alone. Test scores from the few national indicators show mixed improvement. In July, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term trend report showed no measurable improvement in the average reading or math scores of high school students since the 1970s, despite significant gains for younger students over the same time period. The ACT hasn't reported much improvement in any subject on its college entrance exam since 2000. In contrast, the 2005 SAT math test results were at an all-time high -- up 14 points in the past decade -- although verbal scores have been largely flat.

Turning to state test results won't clear up the picture either. In results released over the summer, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Massachusetts and Ohio, among others, showed improved scores on their high school math tests, while Georgia, Maryland and Michigan showed no gains or slight declines on their tests.

How can we make sense of these seemingly discrepant findings? What do they tell us about whether recent efforts at high school reform are beginning to pay off?

Let's start by noting that we lack a coherent system of high school assessments at both the national and state levels. We have a patchwork quilt of tests that measure different knowledge and skills, are used for different purposes, and vary in their levels of rigor. Most states' high school tests are given in the 10th or 11th grade and often measure 9th and 10th grade content, if not lower. In half of the states, students have to pass the tests to graduate; in the rest, there are no incentives for students to try hard, but the adults in the system are held accountable.

News Clips

Click on the links below to view articles of interest from the past month. Some publications require free registration to read articles.

1. **Making cents of education reform.** In an [op-ed](#), Intel CEO Craig Barrett applauds Pennsylvania's new Project 720, citing the critical need to transform high schools so that corporations are not forced to look to other countries for highly skilled workers. Countries such as China and India are investing more in education and reaping the rewards. Pennsylvania's governor has found a way, in a local control state, to encourage districts to raise high school graduation requirements -- a plan that will add rigor and help young people succeed.
2. **Making the diploma more valuable.** States continue to make significant progress toward raising graduation requirements and ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and work. [Illinois](#) recently raised its graduation requirements in English, math, science and writing for the first time in 21 years, and [Oregon](#) has passed similar legislation for English and math. In [Pennsylvania](#), Gov. Ed Rendell's new plan will simultaneously help districts increase math requirements for graduation and provide support for students.
3. **AP skyrockets in Arkansas.** When given the chance to take more challenging courses, [Arkansas](#) high school students leaped at the opportunity. Last

In contrast, the SAT and ACT are thought to be more rigorous than state tests. They are used for college admissions and placement decisions, and they clearly command the attention of many students (and their parents). Unlike state tests, however, the ACT and SAT are not taken by all students -- only those planning to apply to college -- so results on these tests do not reflect the entire student population.

It's not clear, then, what to make of the different trend lines on each set of tests. What is clear is that we need a more coherent approach to high school testing in this country. If you believe, as Achieve does, that the job of high schools is to prepare all young people to meet rigorous college- and work-ready standards so that they graduate with real choices and opportunities rather than dead ends, you won't be satisfied until all of the tests students take in high school measure what matters to young people's futures and are better aligned with each other. This not only will make educators' jobs easier, but it also will send a much clearer set of signals to the students themselves.

Twenty-two states have now joined with Achieve in the American Diploma Project Network to tackle this challenge. To inform their work, Achieve is conducting a study of the ACT, the SAT and the most commonly used college placement tests to better understand what they measure and how they compare to high school tests and expectations. Later this year, we will launch a similar analysis of tests used by the business community to measure employees' math skills. We also are completing a report to the National Assessment Governing Board with recommendations for making the 12th grade NAEP a better measure of college and work readiness.

These efforts, coupled with states' commitment to implement college- and work-ready assessments, should help transform the confusing patchwork into a more streamlined, coherent, transparent system. Stay tuned.

Related Resources

View results for the [ACT](#) online. Or download a PDF of results for the:

- [National Assessment of Educational](#)

year, the state enacted legislation requiring all public high schools to provide Advanced Placement (AP) courses in English, math, science and social studies. This year, more than two times as many students took at least one AP exam.

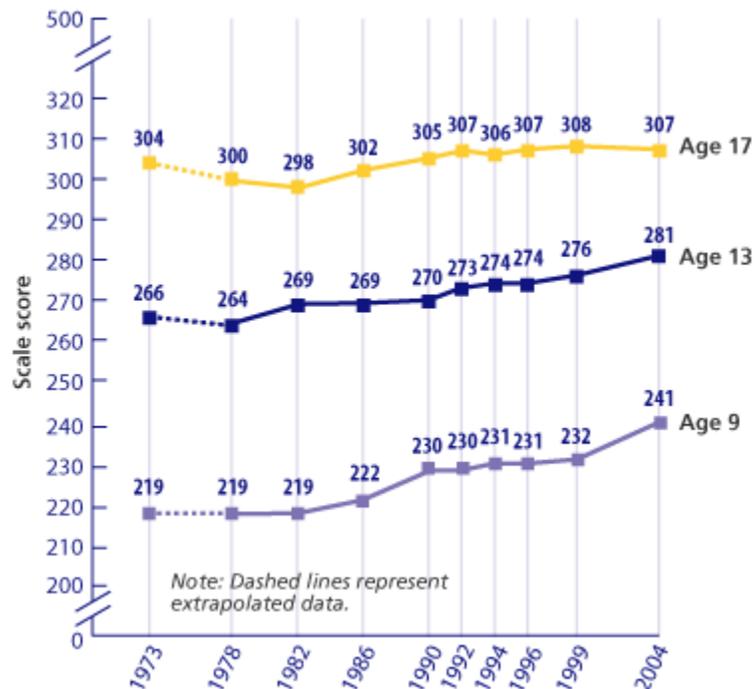
4. **Closing the exit exam loophole.** After months of effort, [New Jersey](#)'s commissioner of education has succeeded in closing a loophole that allowed a significant number of students to take an alternative, easier test to graduate.
5. **Raising college aspirations.** [Maine](#) may replace its standardized high school exam, the Maine Educational Assessment, with the SAT to ensure that graduates are prepared for college. Michigan is considering whether to make a similar move, replacing its high school test with either the SAT or ACT. If states move in this direction, they need to ensure the tests align with their standards, which could require augmentation.
6. **Acting locally, thinking statewide.** [Massachusetts](#) has seen much success in its education reform efforts, but for struggling schools, a coalition of civic groups has come up with an innovative proposal: Create a statewide district of the 100 or more lowest-performing schools.

- [Progress](#)
[SAT](#)

Did You Know?

Younger Students Improve on NAEP Math Test, But Results for 17-Year-Olds Remain Flat

Trends in Average Mathematics Scale Scores for Students Ages 9, 13 and 17: 1973-2004



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), selected years, 1973-2004 Long-Term Trend Mathematics Assessments.

Since the National Assessment of Educational Progress was first given in the early 1970s, elementary and middle school students have seen dramatic improvement in math scores, but once students hit high school the results show achievement leveling off. The progress of the earlier years is not translating into higher achievement in high school, but renewed focus on reforming high schools will hopefully change these patterns.

New Resources

- To address the increasingly urgent concerns about the declining number of U.S. college students earning degrees in math and science and the resulting impact on our nation's economy, 15 leading business organizations have joined together in a bold new initiative to double the numbers of science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates by 2015. The initiative's comprehensive action plan, [Tapping America's Potential: The Education for Innovation Initiative](#), focuses on several areas, from providing incentives to motivate students and adults to enter those fields to upgrading elementary and secondary teaching in math and science to

reforming immigration.

- A report from the National Association of Manufacturers, [***The Looming Workforce Crisis: Preparing American Workers for 21st Century Competition***](#), echoes the concerns that sparked the Business Roundtable initiative and calls on business, government and the American public to take immediate action by developing a national workforce strategy. A key recommendation is to expand Achieve's American Diploma Project and other programs that encourage high school students to take rigorous academic courses (including at least three years of both math and science) to ensure readiness for the workplace and/or higher education.
- The Center on Education Policy's fourth annual report, [***States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist: High School Exit Exams 2005***](#), provides a good overview of state exit exam policies and practices. This year, the report has an additional focus on the testing of English language learners (ELLs) and highlights policies that states are enacting to help these and other students pass the exams. However, according to the report, states still face significant challenges in helping ELL students meet the standards. One promising finding is that in New York and California, ELL students who master English perform well on the tests -- and often better than native English speakers.
- Two new polls highlight the public's sense of urgency about the need for high school reform and overwhelming support for making high school more rigorous. In its survey, the [***Alliance for Excellence in Education***](#) found that adults do not believe that high schools are currently preparing students for college or the workforce and that this problem is hurting our ability to compete in the global marketplace. The report also underscores the importance of getting out the message about states' efforts -- 85 percent of respondents said they have not heard their governor announce a high school reform agenda, and 57 percent said they don't believe policymakers are paying enough attention to the problem. A poll by the [***Horatio Alger Association***](#) showed that nearly three-quarters of the teenagers surveyed are in favor of requiring four years of math and science in high school and that more than eight in 10 support exit exam requirements. These findings reinforce results of [***Achieve's poll***](#) of recent high school graduates, the majority of whom said that they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them.
- An article by Harvard lecturer S. Paul Reville in the summer edition of the Annenberg Institute's *Voices in Urban Education*, [***"Reinventing High School Accountability: Authenticity, Pressure, and Support"***](#), provides a different perspective on accountability at the high school level. The author suggests that an accountability system, which is critical to the success of high school reform efforts, cannot be approached in the same way as traditional K-8 accountability policies. The article explores the unique needs and missions of high schools and provides basic principles to guide accountability plans that will shed light on student performance while providing pressure for reform.

New from Achieve

- **ADP Network continues to grow. Colorado, Delaware, Idaho and Maryland** are the latest states to become part of the [***ADP Network***](#), joining 18 other states that have committed to raising the rigor of their high school standards, assessments and curriculum to better align them with the demands of postsecondary education and

work and to holding high schools and colleges accountable for student success.

- **Achieve welcomes new board members.** Achieve is pleased to announce that Gov. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota and Gov. Michael F. Easley of North Carolina have recently joined its board of directors. In addition, Gov. Edward Rendell of Pennsylvania recently assumed the position of vice co-chair.

Perspective is sent to you monthly by Achieve, a bipartisan, non-profit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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