

NEWS RELEASE

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Eighth-graders' U.S. history and geography scores decline; civics scores flat in new Nation's Report Cards

U.S. history scores were lower for most student groups since 2014; decreases in geography most evident for lower-performing students

WASHINGTON (April 23, 2020)—The U.S. history and geography scores of eighth-graders decreased between 2014 and 2018, according to results from The Nation's Report Card released today by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). There was no change in eighth-graders' civics average score.

"These assessments challenge students to show their knowledge and skills as they prepare to become full participants in American democracy," said Peggy G. Carr, the associate commissioner of assessment at NCES, which runs the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as The Nation's Report Card. "Our nation is experiencing a teachable moment with the current health crisis in terms of how important it is to understand historical forces, the role of our civic institutions, and the impact of geographical conditions of our interconnected world. The results provided here indicate that many students are struggling to understand and explain the importance of civic participation, how American government functions, the historical significance of events, and the need to grasp and apply core geographic concepts."

In U.S. history, there were declines since 2014 across all performance levels except for those at the top. Lower-performing students showed a decline in geography, while middle- and higher-performing students did not. This mirrors a pattern where scores for lower-performing students dropped in eighth-grade NAEP reading and mathematics over the most recent four years.

"These results are another indication that the achievement of already low performing students has been declining relative to higher-performing students," said Lynn Woodworth, commissioner of NCES. "This pattern raises another important issue for education researchers and policymakers to investigate as American school children are missing a considerable amount of classroom instruction this year, which is likely to have a larger impact on lower-performing students."

U.S. History

The NAEP U.S. history assessment measures students' knowledge and understanding of U.S. history in all its complexity—its major themes, periods, events, people, ideas, and turning points. The assessment examines students' understanding of historical chronology, differing perspectives across time, and their grasp of historical facts and contexts.

Eighth-graders' U.S. history score declined four points on the 0-500 scale, from 267 in 2014 to 263 in 2018, representing the first decrease when looking across the trend in scores in the subject. Scores were lower across all levels of performance except the very top-performing students—those at the 90th percentile—whose score did not change. Looking over the long term, however, the average U.S. history score in 2018 was still higher than the score in 1994, the first assessment year.

From 2014 to 2018, scores declined across all four themes of U.S. history assessed by NAEP. Those themes cover the change in continuity in American democracy (Democracy); gathering and interaction of people culture and ideas (Culture); economic and technological changes and their relation to society, ideas, and the environment (Technology); and, the changing role of America in the world (World Role).

In 2018, 15 percent of eighth-graders scored at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in U.S. history, meaning that about 15 percent of eighth-graders were able to explain the significance of people, places, events, ideas, and documents in American history; could understand and explain the opportunities, perspectives, and challenges associated with a diverse cultural population; and, could demonstrate knowledge of significant political ideas and institutions and cite evidence from historical sources to support conclusions.

Civics

The NAEP civics assessment measures students' knowledge of American government as well as their ability to participate in civic activities. Eighth-graders' performance did not change between 2014 and 2018. The score in 2018 was 153 on a 0-300 scale. The score was three points higher in 2018 than in 1998, the first civics assessment under this framework.

In 2018, about one in four eighth-graders (24 percent) scored at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level. Students performing at this level can understand and explain the purposes that governments serve, how and why legislative, executive, and judicial powers are separate, shared, and limited in American constitutional government, and the differences between government and civil society. In addition, students performing at this level can understand how the ideals expressed in the nation's core documents may differ from reality, and the efforts that have been made to address these discrepancies.

The NAEP civics assessment encompasses three central, interrelated components: (1) knowledge and understanding of key aspects of the American political system and the principles of American democracy; (2) the intellectual and participatory skills needed to apply civic knowledge for effective citizenship; and (3) civic dispositions, such as understanding the rights individuals have and the responsibilities of individuals to their community.

Geography

The NAEP geography assessment is framed around three content areas: Space and Place; Environment and Society; and Spatial Dynamics and Connections. In the eighth-grade assessment in 2018, students were assessed on their understanding of general characteristics of places, basic human and physical distribution patterns, and of the processes that create these patterns (Space and Place); how humans depend on their environment and how they adapt to and change those environments (Environment and Society); and, the causes and consequences of connections between places and regions at different scales (Spatial Dynamics and Connections).

Eighth-graders' geography score in 2018—258 on a 0 to 500-point-scale—was three points lower than the score in 2014 (261). The average geography score in 2018 was not significantly different compared with 1994, the first assessment year for geography. The decline in geography scores between 2014 and 2018 coincided with decreases among the lower-performing students—those at the 10th and 25th percentiles.

Scores in geography have been relatively flat with no significant changes in scores between administrations except for the decrease in the 2018 score compared to that in 2014.

Performance among the three content areas differed. While the average scores declined in both Space and Place and Environment and Society between 2014 and 2018, the average score in Spatial Dynamics and Connections did not change significantly.

In 2018, 25 percent of eighth-grade students scored at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in geography. This means that about one in four students had an understanding of geography's analytical concepts and the ability to describe the physical and cultural characteristics of places and explain how places change due to human activity. In addition, students performing at this level demonstrate the ability to use

information from maps to describe the role that regions play in influencing trade, migration patterns, and cultural and political interactions.

KEY FINDINGS

2018 U.S. History Results

- Eighth-graders' average U.S. history score in 2018 (263) was four points lower compared to 2014 (267), but the 2018 score was four points higher than eighth-graders' average U.S. history score in 1994 (259), the first assessment year for U.S. history.
- The decline in eighth-graders' average U.S. history score in 2018 was mirrored by declines for students at almost all performance levels. Scores declined for students at the 10th, 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles between 2014 and 2018. Scores for students at the 90th percentile in 2018 were not significantly different compared to 2014.
- Fifteen percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in U.S. history in 2018. This was lower than in 2014, when 18 percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in U.S. history. In 1994, 14 percent of students performed at or above *NAEP Proficient*, which was not significantly different compared to 2018.
- From 2014 to 2018, average scores for White, Black, and Hispanic students declined. The score for White students declined from 277 to 272; the score for Black students declined from 251 to 246; and the score for Hispanic students declined from 257 to 253.
- Scores were lower across all four U.S. history themes: Democracy, Culture, Technology, and World Role. The average score in the Democracy theme declined from 269 in 2014 to 265 in 2018; the average score in Culture declined from 269 in 2014 to 263 in 2018; the average score in Technology declined from 260 in 2014 to 256 in 2018; and the average score in World Role declined from 270 in 2014 to 266 in 2018.
- This is the first assessment year in which the average U.S. history score declined.

2018 Civics Results

- Eighth-graders' average score for civics in 2018 (153) was not significantly different compared to 2014 (154). Overall, performance was higher than the original assessment year (1998) score of 150.
- Compared to 2014, there was no change in the average score for students in any racial/ethnic group that NAEP reports on, nor did average scores change for students at any of the selected percentile levels (10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th). In 2018, students at the 10th and 25th percentile made improvements compared to 1998, the first assessment year.
- Average civics scores for White, Black, and Hispanic students were higher in 2018 compared to 1998.
- Twenty-four percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in civics in 2018, which was not significantly different compared to either 2014 (23 percent), or 1998 (22 percent).

2018 Geography Results

- Eighth-graders' average geography score in 2018 (258) was three points lower compared to 2014, when the average score was 261; overall performance was not significantly different from performance in the first assessment year (1994), when the average score was 260.
- Scores for the lower-performing students declined between 2014 and 2018, contributing to the decline in the overall average score in geography. The score for students at the 10th percentile declined from 220 to 215, and the score for students at the 25th percentile declined from 242 to 237. There were no significant changes in the scores for students at the 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles.

- Average scores for White and Black students decreased since 2014. The score for White students declined from 273 to 270, and the score for Black students declined from 240 to 235. There was no significant change in the average score for Hispanic students between 2014 and 2018.
- Twenty-five percent of students performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in geography in 2018. There was no significant change compared to 2014. However, the percentage of students performing at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level in 2018 was lower than in 1994, when 28 percent of students performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level.
- The average scores were lower since 2014 in two out of three geography content areas: Space and Place; and Environment and Society. The average score in Space and Place declined from 262 in 2014 to 259 in 2018, and the average score in Environment and Society declined from 263 in 2014 to 258 in 2018. There were no significant changes in the third content area, Spatial Dynamics and Connections, between 2014 and 2018.

Students whose teachers had primary responsibility for teaching U.S. history and civics scored higher than students whose teachers did not

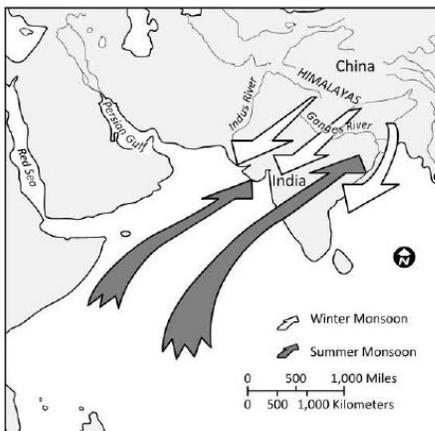
During the NAEP assessment, students, teachers, and school officials complete questionnaires designed to help us better understand the context in which students learn. One question asked teachers if teaching U.S. history, geography, or civics was their “primary responsibility.”

In 2018, sixty-two percent of eighth-grade students had teachers whose primary responsibility was teaching U.S. history. For civics and geography, that percentage was 22 and 17, respectively. Those students whose teachers’ primary responsibility was teaching civics and U.S. history scored higher than their counterparts whose teachers indicated this was not their primary responsibility. In geography, there was no significant difference in the scores of students whose teachers indicated their primary responsibility was teaching geography and students whose teachers did not.

Sample Student Question: Geography

The NAEP geography assessment measured students’ knowledge and ability to employ a broad range of critical thinking skills. The question below is from the Environment and Society content area. This area measures students’ knowledge of how people depend upon, adapt to, are affected by, and modify the natural environment. In this assessment question, eighth-graders were asked to identify the positive effect a monsoon may have on an economy. In 2018, sixty-one percent of students were able to select the correct answer D. Sample questions for all three subjects are available at [NAEP Questions Tool](#).

Questions 5 and 6 refer to the following map.



What major beneficial effect does the summer monsoon have on the economy of India?

- A It aids mineral extraction.
- B It is profitable for tourism.
- C It is profitable for the fishing industry.
- D It brings rain for the crops.

Clear Answer

How Results Are Reported

Student performance on the NAEP assessments is reported in two ways: scale scores and NAEP achievement levels.

Scale scores represent the average performance of students who took the U.S. history, civics, and geography assessments. Scores are reported at the nation level and for groups of students based on race/ethnicity, gender, eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, and other demographic characteristics.

Student performance on NAEP is also reported by the percentages of students reaching three NAEP achievement levels: *NAEP Basic*, *NAEP Proficient*, and *NAEP Advanced*. Students performing at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level on NAEP assessments demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter. The *NAEP Proficient* achievement level does not represent grade-level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards.

The NAEP achievement levels are set by the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the NAEP program. The NAEP achievement levels are used on a trial basis and, therefore, should be interpreted with care to ensure a proper understanding of performance.

About the Assessment

In 2018, NCES assessed 16,400 for U.S. history, 13,400 students for civics, and 12,900 for geography. Scale scores are reported on a 300-point scale for civics and a 500-point scale for U.S history and geography.

Visit <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/> to view the report.

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The National Center for Education Statistics, a principal agency of the U.S. Federal Statistical System, is the statistical center of the U.S. Department of Education and the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations. NCES fulfills a congressional mandate to collect, collate, analyze, and report complete statistics on the condition of American education; conduct and publish reports; and review and report on education activities internationally.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a congressionally authorized project sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The National Center for Education Statistics, within the Institute of Education Sciences, administers NAEP. The commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics is responsible by law for carrying out the NAEP project. Policy for the NAEP program is set by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), an independent, bipartisan board whose members include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives and members of the general public. Since 1990, NAGB has been developing achievement levels, which are being used on a trial basis.