**NEWS RELEASE**

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**States Continue to Raise Benchmarks for “Proficient” Student Performance**

***NCES study shows less variation among states’ standards in mathematics and reading over time***

(WASHINGTON, D.C., August 21, 2019)—States are setting higher proficiency standards in mathematics and reading, and the difference between the states with the highest and lowest standards is narrowing, according to a new report released today by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

In the report, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales*,NCES researchers used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale as a common metric to demonstrate where each state sets its standard for proficiency in both mathematics and reading for students in grades 4 and 8. The analysis found that states raised their standards in both grades and subjects between 2007 and 2017. NCES also found that there was less variation among states’ standards, with the difference between states with the highest and lowest standards for proficiency notably smaller in 2017 than in 2007.

“States that were identified as having lower standards increased their expectations for students over the past decade,” said NCES Associate Commissioner Peggy G. Carr. “This is the reason for why proficiency standards have narrowed across states.”

NCES pioneered the methodology that allows for these comparisons of states’ expectations of their students’ performance on their own assessments. For each state, NCES calculates the NAEP score that corresponds to where the state sets its own benchmark for proficiency, also called the “NAEP-equivalent score.” NCES also estimates the NAEP-equivalent scores for the achievement standards in states that use ACT Aspire (ACT), the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced).

In addition to providing the NAEP-equivalent score for each state, the report provides context by identifying where states’ proficiency standards are in relation to two of NAEP’s achievement levels, *NAEP* *Basic* and *NAEP Proficient*, which are set on the NAEP scale for each grade and subject. The *NAEP* *Basic* level represents partial mastery of fundamental skills. The *NAEP* *Proficient* level represents mastery over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge, and analytical skills.

In 2017, the majority of states set their standards for both grades and subjects in the *NAEP* *Basic* range. In addition, the 2017 report documents the change in states’ proficiency standards compared to 2007. In mathematics, the number of states that set their proficiency standards at or above *NAEP Proficient* increased in both grades. In both grades in reading, the number of states where proficiency standards fell below the *NAEP Basic* level decreased.

“Of the states for which we have data for all three years, we are seeing a large decrease in the number that have set their standards below *NAEP Basic*,”said Dr. Carr.“Over half of the states were below *NAEP Basic* in grade 4 reading in 2007, and now there are only 3. The change in grade 8 reading was equally dramatic. Over a third of states were below *NAEP Basic* in 2007, and none of them were in 2017.”

The differences between states’ proficiency standards continued to narrow. There was a smaller difference between the highest and lowest NAEP equivalent scores in 2017 compared to 2015 for all grades and subjects except grade 8 mathematics. For states’ fourth-grade reading standards in 2017, there was a 34-point difference between the highest and lowest NAEP-equivalent scores, compared to a 48-point difference in 2015 and a 64-point difference in 2007. For eighth-grade reading, there was a 45-point difference in 2017, compared with a 48-point difference in 2015 and a 70-point difference in 2007.

For fourth-grade mathematics, there was a 33-point difference between the highest and lowest NAEP-equivalent scores in 2017, compared with a 37-point difference in 2015 and a 47-point difference in 2007. For eighth-grade mathematics, there was a 33-point difference in 2017, compared with a 27-point difference in 2015 and a 60-point difference in 2007.

To put these numbers in context, the difference between *NAEP Proficient* and *NAEP Basic* in grade 4 mathematics is 35 points.

The National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the NAEP program, is required by law to set and use achievement levels and has set an aspirational goal that all students be able to perform at the *NAEP Proficient* level. The NAEP achievement levels are used on a trial basis and are not meant to represent grade-level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards. States set proficiency standards for reporting student achievement to the public as part of their accountability systems for schools.

The full text of the report is available at <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/statemapping/>.

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*The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 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. A part of the Institute of Education Sciences, 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.*