

NAEP Results: Our Urgent Call to Action

On October 30, 2019, NAEP released new national and state results for fourth and eighth graders in math and reading. After reviewing the results and observing the performance of students, we want to express the urgency that we see with the faltering reading results and dispiriting stagnant math results. As organizations that advocate for high academic standards and high-quality assessments, it is our obligation to ensure that learning conditions are improved so that every student can succeed.

The results also show that achievement gaps have widened. The decline among low-performing students in reading means that not all students have access to a quality education. For example, over the last decade, the gap in fourth grade reading between the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent of students widened by nine points. The continued improvement of high performers is to be celebrated, but with equity at the forefront of all we do, we must prioritize supports for high-quality reading instruction in the classrooms, schools, and districts that serve students in historically underserved communities.

Individually, we have set forth action plans that address student performance and measurement, as well as accountability for states. Today, however, we are jointly urging an agenda that addresses five critical areas for action. We call on education officials, policymakers, advocates, and the entire education community to embrace the science of reading, push for use of high-quality, standards-aligned materials, advance the capacity of teachers in teaching literacy, and assist organizations and communities in their efforts to strengthen reading strategies for their students.

Our organizations commit to a national effort to improve conditions for mastering reading:

1. Embrace what we know about the science of reading and the importance of strong reading habits.

Instruction in early reading, in particular, has the most solid research behind it of anything in education. We've known for more than two decades—at least since the report of the [National Reading Panel](#)—that the successful instruction of almost all beginning readers must include [phonics, phonemic awareness](#), fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension instruction. Yet, that isn't what's happening in many American schools. For example, as Emily Hanford notes in [APM Reports](#), some literacy strategies that are rooted in flawed theory continue to be used in elementary school teaching practices.

2. Push for all states, districts and schools to use only high-quality, standards-aligned, content-rich curriculum.

States like Mississippi, which had positive NAEP reading results, illustrate what's possible when these strategies are implemented patiently and effectively. Research has also shown that building knowledge is essential to [improve reading comprehension](#). Unfortunately, surveys of classroom teachers like [Reading and Writing Instruction in America's Schools](#) show that there is still a strong need to address deficits in content-knowledge.

3. Advance the capacity of teachers and school leaders to effectively teach and implement literacy strategies through preparation.

A 2018 report from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a nonprofit organization that prioritizes teacher effectiveness, found that only **37%** of elementary and special education teacher preparation programs included evidence-based methods of reading instruction. As discussed in the International Literacy Association and National Council of Teachers of English report *Literacy Teacher Preparation*, ongoing teacher development that encourages self-critique and analytical thinking is one of only four critical elements for teacher growth (teacher development is joined by application of knowledge within authentic contexts, knowledge development and ongoing assessments). Mississippi is an example of a state that requires elementary education candidates to pass a rigorous test that shows they can effectively teach reading. As noted above, Mississippi illustrates what is possible when there is a focus on how teachers teach literacy to their students. Teacher preparation programs must ensure teachers and literacy coaches are highly competent in scientifically based reading instruction.

4. Assist organizations and communities in their efforts to increase daily reading strategies and practices for families and students.

We recommend expanding opportunities for students, while also better supporting families as stakeholders and assets in their children's success in reading. Knowing that there is a summer reading loss with many students, we want to prioritize strategies that keep them reading throughout the whole year, not just when they are in school. Students should have access to high-quality reading materials by diverse authors. Therefore, we call on states to mobilize community partnerships to increase access to publicly available educational resources.

5. Increase the federal investment in literacy.

While the primary responsibility for teaching children to read and write lies at the state and local level, this national challenge warrants federal support. Congress should increase funding for evidence-based, comprehensive literacy efforts for children from birth through 12th grade.

It is vital for all students to have the literacy instruction that will prepare them for the future. The NAEP results are a clarion call for change. In the coming months, we (the undersigned) are committed to supporting states and districts in making these changes and strengthening the opportunities we provide to our students. We owe it to our students, particularly those that have been historically underserved.

