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2009 NAEP Reading Results

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The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as “the Nation’s Report Card,” is a national assessment of what students in each state know in various subjects. The grade 4 and 8 mathematics and reading portions of the NAEP were administered in 2009. We highlighted the math results, which were released last fall, in the 2009 Arkansas Report Card (http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/report_cards/2009_Report_Card.pdf). The 2009 reading scores were released at the end of March, 2010. This policy brief highlights the recent NAEP reading results and demonstrates, bluntly, that growth has stagnated both in the U.S. and Arkansas.

This policy brief will include several sections. We begin by discussing Arkansas’ results over time compared to the nation. We take a deeper look at Arkansas’ results by presenting data on reading performance for student subgroups (race and free/reduced lunch, or FRL status). We also present results for Arkansas students next to the scores of students in adjacent states. Finally, we conclude by considering the implications of these new results, in both the U.S. and Arkansas.

ARKANSAS RESULTS

The release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was met with little excitement both nationally and in Arkansas. Reading scores for Arkansas’ fourth and eighth grade students were flat in comparison with the reading exam two years ago. Since 1998, the percent of fourth grade students at proficient or advanced in reading has increased six points and the eighth grade reading scores have increased four points.

In Arkansas, 29% of fourth graders scored proficient or advanced in 2009, compared to the average 33% nationwide. Arkansas fourth- graders ranked 35th in the U.S. on this measure.

At the 8th grade level, 27% of Arkansas students performed at the proficient or advanced level in 2009, compared to 32% nationally. This ranks Arkansas 36th in the U.S.

In a press release, Arkansas Commissioner of Education Tom Kimbrell stated, “While we are pleased that we maintained our performance in reading on the NAEP assessment at these two grade levels, we will continue to look for ways to improve performance.”

An overview of Arkansas NAEP reading performance as compared to performance across the U.S. over time is

highlighted in Table 1 (4th grade), and Table 2 (8th grade) below.

Table 1: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading % Proficient/Advanced, 2009

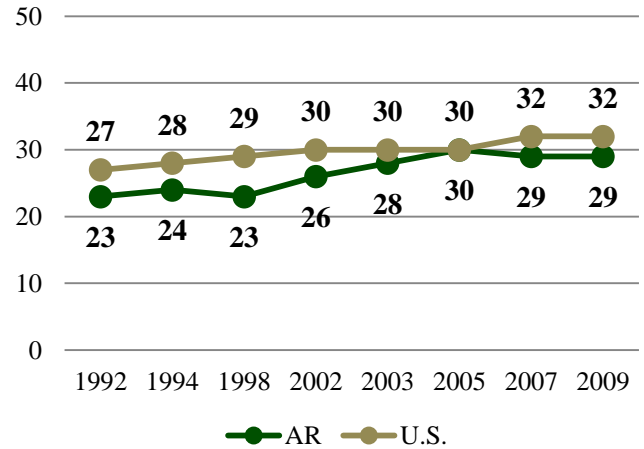
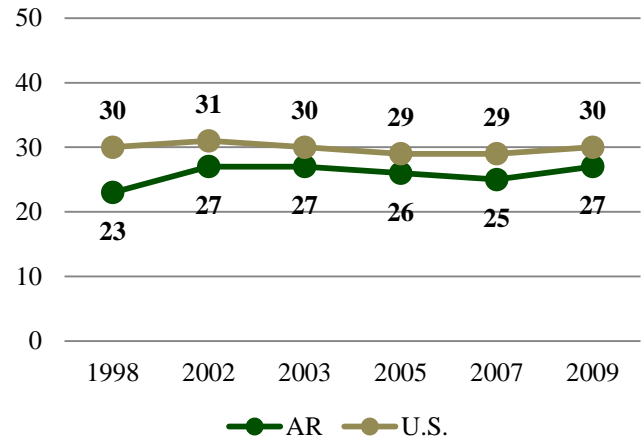


Table 2: Eighth Grade NAEP Reading % Proficient/Advanced, 2009



SUBGROUP PERFORMANCES IN ARKANSAS

Achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students persist in Arkansas as they do nationwide. The subgroups we highlight here include: white, black, and Hispanic students (to examine the racial gap), as well as student eligibility for the free/reduced lunch program (to examine the poverty gap).

We have presented data for Arkansas only, but nationally achievement gaps remain substantial and unmoved as well.

Table 3: NAEP Reading % Proficient/Advanced by Race in Arkansas, 2009

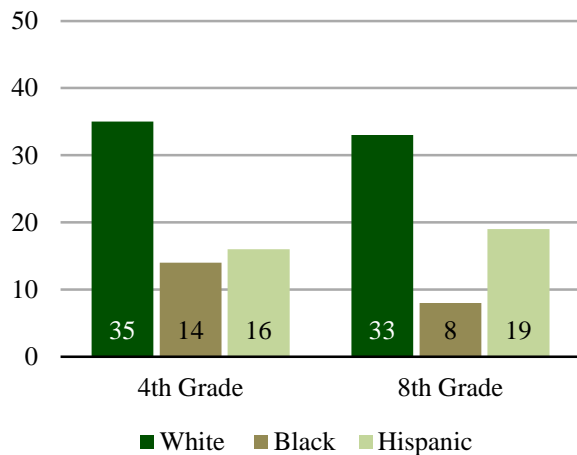
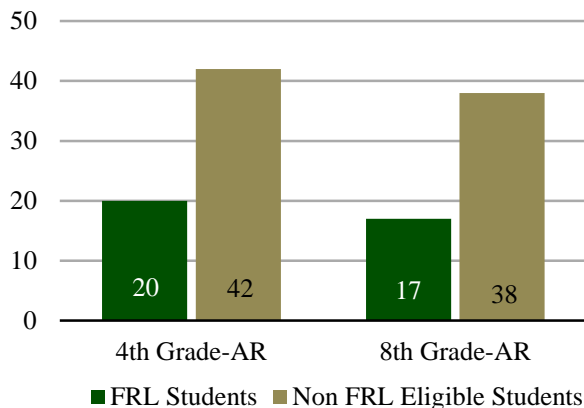


Table 4: NAEP Reading % Proficient/Advanced by Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility in Arkansas, 2009



Arkansas Highlight: English Language Learners

There was, however, a bright spot in the Arkansas test results. Students identified as English Language Learners (ELL) performed at a higher level than ELL students nationally. Nine percent of ELL learners in Arkansas were proficient and advanced compared to six percent in the U.S.

NAEP allows states to exclude English Language Learners as well as students with disabilities. Arkansas has the most restrictive requirements, meaning the majority of identified students are tested. Ninety-seven and 91 percent of ELL students in Arkansas were tested in fourth and eighth grades respectively, compared to 84 percent and 76 percent nationally. Therefore, we can be pleased that Arkansas ELL students outperformed other

states in this area even though a higher proportion of our ELL students were assessed.

ARKANSAS AND SURROUNDING STATES

When compared with neighboring states, Arkansas had mixed results. The average scale score for Arkansas' 4th grade students was lower than that for every other state in the south-central U.S. with the exception of Louisiana. However, as Table 5 illustrates, Arkansas students outperformed their peers from all states but Missouri with respect to earning scores at the proficient or advanced level.

Table 5: 4th Grade NAEP Scores for South-Central States % Proficient/Advanced and Mean Scale Score

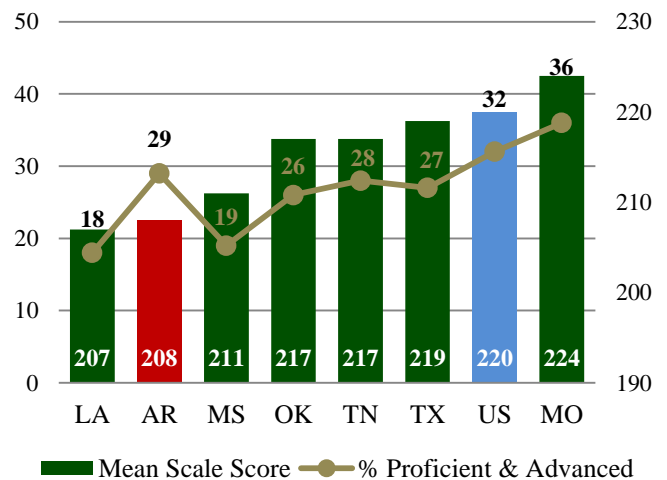
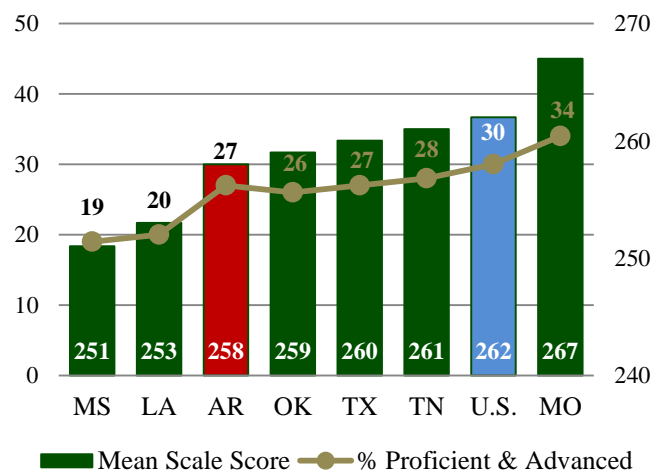


Table 6: 8th Grade NAEP for South-Central States % Proficient/Advanced and Mean Scale Score



The story is similar for eighth grade. The average scale score for eighth graders in Arkansas is higher than the score in only two of the south-central states – Louisiana and Mississippi. Once again, the percentage of Arkansas students scoring proficient and advanced is comparable and even higher than scores in most neighboring states. Thus, it is important to consider both scale scores and percent proficient and advanced, as they can tell slightly different stories.

CONCLUSION

Many expressed disappointment regarding the inert scores after efforts to improve the reading skills of students at both a state and national level. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan responded to the results with, “Today’s results once again show that the achievement of American students isn’t growing fast enough...The achievement gap didn’t narrow by a statistically significant amount in either grade.” He reiterated his concern by saying, “We shouldn’t be satisfied with these results. By this and many other measures, our students aren’t on a path to graduate high school ready to succeed in college and the workplace.”

“Arkansas ELL students outperformed other states in this area even though a higher proportion of our ELL students were assessed.”

Despite reasonable concerns by many in the education world, there remains cause for optimism when one digs deeper into the data. There was significant progress. According to Tom Loveless, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, the greater gains by the lowest performing students could be a testament to the effectiveness of accountability systems. “It’s consistent with a story that says accountability systems are doing what they’re designed to do, boosting the lowest achievers,” comments Loveless. Indeed, he also accurately pointed out, “All the progress in reading is being made at the bottom. Our worst readers are getting better, but our best readers are staying about the same.”

There is more work to be done in Arkansas. In the early part of the past decade, Arkansas students had shown substantial growth. Indeed, by 2005, fourth grade students scored at the national average in reading. However, our NAEP scores have started to plateau since

2005 and in some cases have even declined. Students have demonstrated consistent growth on the Arkansas Benchmark, but that growth is not mirrored by the performance of our students on the NAEP, in math or reading.

Our policymakers are to be praised the implementation of reforms such as the Smart Curriculum, Arkansas Curriculum Frameworks, and the development of a sophisticated data system. Perhaps these reforms in the early 2000s enabled Arkansas to experience some improvements in student performance. But the stagnant growth in recent years suggests that our educational leaders may need to develop new strategies and undertake more innovative reforms if our students are to continue to move forward.

Summary of 2009 NAEP Reading Results

	AR % Prof & Adv	US % Prof & Adv	AR Mean Scale Score	US Mean Scale Score
4th Grade				
Total Population	29	31	216	220
Not FRL Eligible	42	45	230	232
FRL Eligible	20	17	207	206
ELL	9	6	191	188
White	35	41	224	229
Black	14	15	199	204
Hispanic	16	16	202	204
Male	25	28	211	216
Female	33	35	222	223
8th Grade				
Total Population	27	30	258	262
Not FRL Eligible	38	41	269	273
FRL Eligible	17	16	248	249
ELL	7	3	236	219
White	33	39	266	271
Black	8	13	234	245
Hispanic	19	16	249	248
Male	23	26	254	258
Female	30	35	262	267

For more information about this policy brief, please contact the Office for Education Policy at oepp@uark.edu