

**Testimony of Jack Jennings,
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To The Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education,
Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Kildee and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on trends in student achievement and the No Child Left Behind Act. I am accompanied by Diane Stark Rentner, director of national programs at the Center, Nancy Kober, CEP's principal consultant, and Sunny Becker, principal staff scientist of the Human Resources Research Organization, CEP's contractor for this project.

The Center on Education Policy, a private non-profit organization, is an independent national advocate for effective public schools. We principally accomplish our mission by analyzing policies to determine whether they are in fact helping public schools to become better. A principal focus of our work for the last five years has been the No Child Left Behind Act, since that policy is so significant for public education. Since NCLB was enacted, we have monitored its effects and issued both comprehensive and special reports. Today, I will discuss our latest report which we released this Tuesday at the National Press Club.

Since 2002, NCLB has spurred far-reaching changes in elementary and secondary education, all aimed at accomplishing the same fundamental goal—to improve students' academic achievement. As the Congress prepares to reauthorize the Act, two related questions matter most:

1. Has student achievement in reading and math increased since NCLB was enacted?
2. Have achievement gaps between different subgroups of students narrowed since NCLB was enacted?

To answer these questions, the Center on Education Policy conducted the most comprehensive study of trends in state test scores since NCLB took effect. We carried out this study with advice from a panel of five nationally known experts in educational testing or policy research, and with extensive technical support from HumRRO. Although we collected data from all 50 states, not every state had enough consistent data to do a complete analysis of test score trends in reading and math before and after 2002. Based on the data that states did provide, we reached five main conclusions.

Main Conclusions

1. In most states with three or more years of comparable test data, student achievement in reading and math has gone up since 2002, the year NCLB was enacted.

2. There is more evidence of achievement gaps between groups of students narrowing since 2002 than of gaps widening. Still, the magnitude of the gaps is often substantial.
3. In 9 of the 13 states with sufficient data to determine pre- and post-NCLB trends, average yearly gains in test scores were greater after NCLB took effect than before.
4. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine the extent to which these trends in test results have occurred because of NCLB. Since 2002, states, school districts, and schools have simultaneously implemented many different but interconnected policies to raise achievement.
5. Although NCLB emphasizes public reporting of state test data, the data necessary to reach definitive conclusions about achievement were sometimes hard to find or unavailable, or had holes or discrepancies. More attention should be given to issues of the quality and transparency of state test data.

The study that produced these conclusions had several unique features, designed to address the limitations of past research on achievement since 2002. We went to great lengths to gather the most current results on state reading and mathematics tests from all 50 states and to have all states verify the accuracy of their data. Within each state, we limited our analyses to test results that were truly comparable from year to year—in other words, that had not been affected by such factors as the adoption of new tests or changes in the test score students must reach to be considered proficient. We also compared trends before and after 2002 to see whether the pace of improvement has sped up or slowed down since NCLB took effect. We supplemented our analyses of the percentage of students scoring at or above the proficient level—the “magic number” for NCLB accountability—with analyses of effect size, a statistical tool based on average (mean) test scores that addresses some of the problems with the percentage proficient measure. And we analyzed all of the data—which in a typical state included as many as 16,000 individual numbers—as objectively as possible, using a consistent set of rules that were developed without regard to whether they would lead to positive or negative findings.

The rest of this testimony summarizes the findings that led us to the five main conclusions. Further detail can be found in our full report which appears on our Web site, CEP-DC.org.

Gains in Reading and Math Since 2002

To reach national conclusions about reading and math achievement, we first determined the test score trends in each state, looking at both the percentages of students scoring proficient and effect sizes where available. The state trends were then aggregated into a national picture of achievement that included these and other findings:

- The number of states showing gains in test scores since 2002 is far greater than the number showing declines. For example, of the 24 states with percentage

proficient and effect size data for middle school reading, 11 demonstrated moderate-to-large gains (average gains of at least 1 percentage point per year) in middle school reading, and only one showed a moderate or larger decline.

- Five of the 22 states with both percentage proficient and effect size data at the elementary, middle, and high school levels made moderate-to-large gains in reading and math on both measures across all three grade spans. In other words, these five states showed gains according to all of the indicators collected for this study. In reading alone, seven states showed moderate-to-large increases across all three grade spans on both measures. In math alone, nine states showed similar gains across all three grade spans on both measures. The rest of the states had different trends at different grade spans.
- Elementary school math is the area in which the most states showed improvements. Of the 25 states with sufficient data, 22 demonstrated moderate-to-large math gains at the elementary level on both the percentage proficient and effect size measures, while none showed moderate or larger declines. Based on percentages proficient alone, 37 of the 41 states with trend data in elementary math demonstrated moderate-to-large gains, while none showed moderate or larger declines.
- More states showed declines in reading and math achievement at the high school level than at the elementary or middle school levels. Still, the number of states with test score gains in high school exceeded the number with declines.
- Analyses of changes in achievement using effect sizes generally produced the same findings as analyses using percentages proficient. But in some cases, the effect size analysis showed a different trend. In Nevada, for instance, the percentage proficient in high school math decreased, while the average test score increased. In New Jersey the percentage proficient in middle school reading rose slightly, while the average test score dropped.
- When the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on state tests is compared with the percentage scoring at the basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), states show more positive results on their own tests than on NAEP. Moreover, the states with the greatest gains on their own tests were usually not the same states that had the greatest gains on NAEP. The NAEP tests, however, are not aligned with a state's curriculum as state tests are, so NAEP should not be treated as a "gold standard" to invalidate state test results but as an additional source of information about achievement.

Narrowing Achievement Gaps

We analyzed trends in test score gaps for major racial-ethnic subgroups of students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and limited-English-proficient (LEP) students.

We looked at both percentages proficient and effect size data where available; effect size data were harder to come by for subgroups than for students overall. We considered a narrowing or widening of the achievement gap to be a trend for a specific subgroup if it occurred in the same subject (reading or math) across all three grade spans (elementary, middle, and high school). We compiled trends from the 50 states to arrive at these and other national findings:

- Among the states with sufficient data to discern trends by subgroup, the number of states in which gaps in percentages proficient have narrowed since 2002 far exceeds the number of states in which gaps widened.
- For the African-American subgroup, 14 of the 38 states with the necessary data showed evidence that gaps have narrowed in reading across all three grade spans analyzed, while no state had evidence that gaps have widened. In mathematics, 12 states showed these gaps narrowing, while only one state showed the gaps widening. Results were similar for the Hispanic and low-income subgroups.
- As with the percentage proficient, the states in which effect size gaps have narrowed outnumbered the states in which effect size gaps have widened. However, for states with both types of data, there were a number of instances where gap closings in terms of percentages proficient were not confirmed by effect size. Effect sizes seem to give a less rosy picture of achievement gap trends.
- Even for subgroups that showed evidence of gaps narrowing, the gaps in percentages proficient often amounted to 20 percentage points or more, suggesting that it will take a concerted, long-term effort to close them.

Gains Before and After NCLB

Many states had reforms well underway before NCLB, so it is useful to know whether the pace of improvement has picked up since NCLB took effect. Only 13 states supplied enough years of data to make this determination—too few to know whether the findings for this sample represent a true national trend. In nine of these states, test results improved at a greater average yearly rate after 2002 than before. In the other four states, the pre-NCLB rate of gain outstripped the post-NCLB rate.

Difficulty of Attributing Causes for Gains

This report focuses on whether test scores have gone up since the enactment of NCLB. We cannot say to what extent test scores have gone up because of NCLB. It is always difficult to tease out a cause-and-effect relationship between test score trends and any specific education policy or program. With all of the federal, state, and local reforms that have been implemented simultaneously since 2002, it becomes nearly impossible to sort out which policy or combination of policies is responsible for test score gains, and to what degree. In a similar vein, this report does not take a position on how well specific components of NCLB are working or whether the requirements in the current law are the most effective means to raise achievement and close test score gaps.

One more caveat should be emphasized: test scores are not the same thing as achievement. Although tests are often viewed as precise and objective, they are imperfect and incomplete measures of how much students have learned. Still, state tests are the primary measure of achievement used in NCLB and are the best available standardized measures of the curriculum taught in classrooms.

Need for More Transparency in Test Data

The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to report a massive amount of test data and attaches serious consequences to these data for districts, schools, and educators. But the data on which so much rests are not easy to access in some states and are sometimes inconsistent, outdated, or incomplete. Moreover, the data needed to calculate effect sizes or determine which subgroups were small or rapidly changing were unavailable in some states, even though these data are integral to all testing systems. Reasons for these shortcomings include overburdened state departments of education, ongoing corrections in test data, and technical or contractual issues with test contractors. These shortcomings are not necessarily the fault of state officials—who were generally cooperative in providing or verifying data when asked—but these problems complicated our efforts to reach definitive conclusions about student achievement.

It took many months of effort to gather all the data needed for this study and have state officials verify their accuracy. Our experience suggests how difficult it would be for the average citizen to get information about test score trends in some states, and points to the need for greater transparency in state test data. States could improve transparency by taking the following steps:

- Posting test data in an easy-to-find place on state Web sites
- Providing clear information and cautions about breaks in the comparability of test data caused by new tests or changes in testing systems
- Reporting standard deviations, mean scale scores, numbers of test-takers, and other important information listed in chapter 7 of our report.

State-By-State Achievement Trends on the Web

The trends highlighted in this testimony and in our report have been drawn from an extensive set of data on each state. Complete profiles of test results and other information for individual states can be accessed on the CEP Web site at www.cep-dc.org/pubs/stateassessment. We encourage anyone who is interested in trends for a specific state to visit the Web site and find that state's profile.

Future Phases of This Study

This report describes the findings from phase I of what will be a three-phase study of student achievement. Phase II, which will be completed this summer, involves on-site interviews with state officials in 22 states. Phase II investigates in more detail the trends uncovered during phase I of the study and the factors that affect comparability or availability of test data; it also reports information from state officials about how well

specific requirements of NCLB are working and how the law could be improved. Phase III, which will be carried out in the fall and winter of 2006-08, examines student achievement at the school district level in three states.

Thank you, Chairman Kildee, and we are available to answer any questions.