

When failure is normalized



Lester W. Young, Jr.
Chancellor, Board of Regents

I recently read an opinion piece about the dramatic nationwide drop in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The article suggests that “in a year where millions of families were upended by job loss, hospitalization and death due to a global pandemic,” we should view the “small dip” in scores as “pretty good news.” I am writing to offer an alternate

viewpoint – and to explain why I believe we should all care about academic achievement results.

The Board of Regents has advanced three guiding principles to build our statewide strategy for all students:

- Fostering lifelong learning, academic success and improved outcomes.
- Promoting equity, excellence and access.
- Rebuilding NYSED’s capacity to serve the public.

The Regents and the State Education Department work to advance these guiding principles by always striving to improve the services we provide to the field, and by supporting all of New York’s school districts as they implement local policies and practices to ensure equity, excellence and access in their schools.

I have previously written about the Regents’ efforts to reimagine New York’s assessment strategy (see bit.ly/3VD0LQ8). The idea is to provide students with multiple, rigorous ways to demonstrate that they are

learning and developing new knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to be successful throughout the entire learning process. Logic dictates that a single examination, administered by pencil and paper on a single day, simply cannot capture the deeper and more meaningful learning we seek to provide all students.

Regardless of the weaknesses of large-scale assessments, NAEP provides a critical snapshot of student academic achievement and an objective measure to gauge their progress – or, in the case of the most recent results, their alarming lack of progress. NAEP is just one measure, but it is an important one.

So, what *does* the data tell us?

The average math scores for both fourth and eighth graders saw their steepest declines in more than a half-century of testing. Fourth graders lost the equivalent of two decades of progress in math and reading; math scores for eighth graders declined in 49 of 50 states.

Yet, curiously, this story made national news only for a day or two, and then it disappeared. This observation leads me to the troubling but inescapable conclusion that educational failure has become increasingly normalized. We have grown numb to the adverse academic outcomes of large segments of our national population.

But it gets worse. A deeper dive into the NAEP data reveals an even more disturbing reality. As described in a recent *New York Times* analysis, while the overall declines in student achievement were stark, the averages mask even more profound divergences between student groups. For example, Black and Hispanic students, who had started significantly behind white and Asian students in fourth-grade math, lost more ground than those groups during the pandemic. Similarly, the gap is growing between the country’s highest-achieving and low-performing students, who struggle the most.

While the pandemic affected all students, it did not affect all students equally. As the *Times* concluded in its analysis: “The students who had the greatest needs coming into the pandemic have the steepest challenge — and will need the most help — in the future.”

That is why the Regents and State Education Department are committed to:

- High quality, comprehensive early childhood education.
- The Blue-Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures.
- The Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Networks (PLAN) pilot.
- The Educational Opportunity Project with Stanford University.
- The P-20 Continuum policy goals.
- Teacher and Leader Quality Partnership programs.
- The Regents state aid proposal.

Visit www.NYSED.gov for more information about these efforts.

The renowned educator Dr. Ronald Edmonds famously said, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it or not must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not done it so far.”

Edmonds was, of course, correct. We *can* successfully teach all children. We know how to do it. Ultimately, it should make no difference *where* a student attends school; every child must have equal access to a high-quality education. As New York’s education leaders and policymakers, this is our collective challenge. Let us continue to work together to make this right for all of our students, our communities and our nation.



BoardDocs®

A DILIGENT BRAND

Transparency and continuity matter now more than ever.

Trust BoardDocs to help enable virtual board meetings for your community.



Learn more at:

learn.diligent.com/NYSSBA

