

Did No Child Left Behind Work?



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Are we about to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? For the first time in more than a decade, Congress is moving forward on reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*—known in its previous iteration as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Voices on both sides of the aisle have proposed major changes, including tossing the annual testing requirement for kids in grades 3 through 8, as well as repealing the accountability measures that have allowed the federal government to require states to address failing schools and yawning achievement gaps. There is no doubt that NCLB has problems that should be addressed in a new reauthorization. But before we throw out NCLB and rewind to the policies of the 1990s, we should examine what, if any, effect the era of accountability ushered in by President George W. Bush, late Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), then-Congressman (now Speaker) John Boehner (R-OH), and retired Congressman George Miller (D-CA) has had on student achievement.

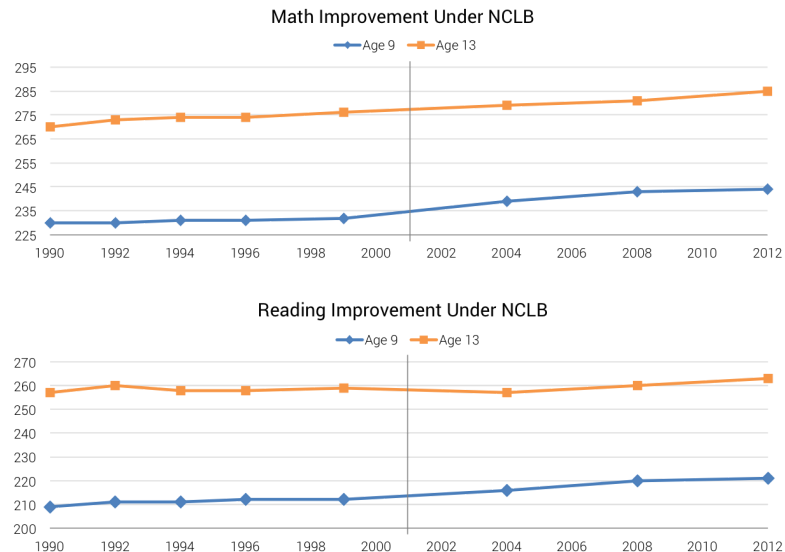
As we outline below, even a cursory look at the data makes clear that after decades of stagnant scores, the last 15 years of accountability have brought measurable gains for students

across the board, and the biggest gains during the NCLB era have been concentrated among the kids who needed them the most. While there are still serious problems to confront and inequities to overcome, for the first time in decades we are on a path towards addressing them. In fact, if another government program was achieving these kinds of results, you would hardly expect to hear discussion of dismantling it.

1. Increasing Performance among All Students

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment in the country, the score of an average 9 year old inclined up only 4 points in reading during the three decades prior to the passage of NCLB.¹ That works out to a glacial gain of approximately 0.1 point per year. By contrast, from 1999 (the last scores available before NCLB was enacted) to 2012, our country's 9 year olds have gained 9 points in reading—or an average of 7 times as much annual growth. Reading scores for 13 year olds increased by the same amount between 1999 and 2012 as they had from 1971 to 1999—meaning we made the same gains in less than half the pre-NCLB timeframe.

In math, American students made progress in the 1980s, but by the 1990s that growth had fizzled. The average 9 year old in 1990 scored a 230 on the NAEP in math, and that number was up only 2 points by 1999 (annual growth of 0.2). That score significantly increased in the NCLB era, shooting up to 244 by 2012—a gain of a full point per year. A similar story is told by the data for 13 year olds in math, who went from a 276 in 1999 to a 285 in 2012—an increase of 9 points in a dozen years. And while NCLB cynics contend that the emphasis on reading and math has detracted from other subjects, a widely-cited study from the National Bureau of Educational Research found that there was no adverse impact on student performance in science after the NCLB accountability measures were put into place.²

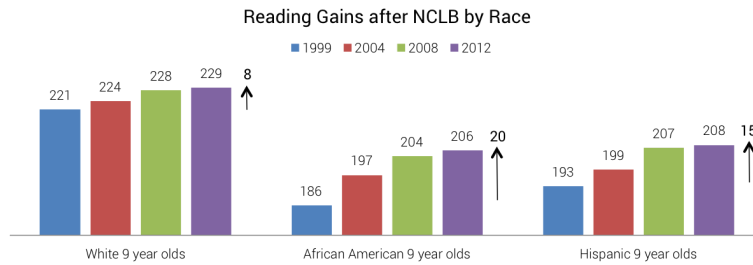


While there is much work left to be done to ensure that every American child receives an education that sets them up for success in life, it is clear that our once stagnant scores are now moving in the right direction.

2. Major Progress toward Closing Persistent Racial Gaps

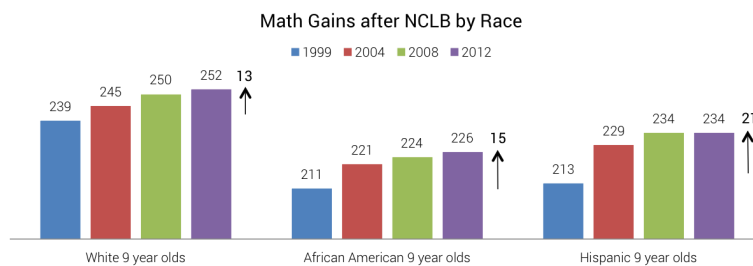
The NCLB era gains are even starker among the students of color.³ Looking at reading scores from 1999 to 2012:

- African American 9 year old students improved by a whopping 20 points (186 to 206)—nearly 2 points a year and twice the improvement made by white students of the same age (8 points, 221 to 229). Hispanic 9 year olds did almost as well, gaining 15 points (193 to 208) since NCLB was enacted.
- The gap between white and African American 9 year old students was reduced from 35 to 23 points—a 1 point decrease in the gap per year after decades of persistence.
- Among 13 year olds, white students gained 3 points (267 to 270), while African American students gained 9 points (238 to 247), and Hispanic students gained 5 (244 to 249), reducing the gap between white and African American students from 29 to 23 points.



In math scores:

- 9 year old white students gained 13 points from 1999 to 2012 (239 to 252), African American students of the same age improved by 15 points (211 to 226), and Hispanic 9 year olds gained a mammoth 21 points (213 to 234).
- The gap between white and Hispanic 9 year old students in math performance was reduced by 8 points in a dozen years.
- 65% of African American 4th graders were working below the basic level in math in 2000, and by 2013 that number was reduced to 34%. Among Latinos, 4th graders went from 59% to 27% below basic in math.
- Among 13 year olds, white students gained 10 points from 1999 to 2012 (283 to 293), African American students gained 13 points (251 to 264), and Hispanic students improved 12 points (259 to 271).



Evidence from a detailed study conducted in North Carolina from 2000 to 2008 confirmed these trends, finding that high-stakes accountability had positive effects on student test scores, especially for struggling schools. The study concluded that lower-performing schools had larger accountability-induced effects than schools at the margin or above targets, and that there were larger effects among

African American, Hispanic, and poor students in former weak accountability states than in former strong accountability states, meaning most gains were made in states that had weak accountability systems before NCLB.⁴

The data is consistent across age and subject: African American and Hispanic students saw remarkable gains in the era of NCLB, and though achievement gaps still persist, they have shrunk—some at an astonishing pace. While there are still yawning gaps that must be addressed, they would narrow considerably if we continued to see a similar rate of improvement over the next decade.

3. Steps Forward for Students with Disabilities & English Language Learners

Public school students with disabilities were invisible before NCLB, shuffled along from grade to grade without being assessed or educated among their peers. Because the success or failure of these students was not tracked, measured, or counted, little value was placed on teaching these children to learn. As a result, they were often confined to separate classrooms, where they were considered unworthy of quality learning time. For parents of children with disabilities, NCLB accountability not only allowed them to know whether their kids were getting a decent education, it also worked to undo the stigma associated with the belief that students with disabilities are unable to achieve high standards.⁵ And the results are in: since NCLB, more students with disabilities are scoring in the “proficient” or higher level on the NAEP in both reading and math, and they are also graduating at higher rates than in pre-NCLB years.⁶

The arc of gains for students with disabilities is harder to track because NAEP data is not available at all prior to 2004, so we cannot know where they stood before the passage of NCLB. But even in the short time between 2004 and 2012, students with disabilities have seen measurable improvement, with 9 year old students scoring 5 points higher on reading (178 to 183) and 7 points higher on math

(209 to 216) and 13 year old students gaining 8 points in reading (216 to 224) and 6 points in math (243 to 249). Much more needs to be done to address the needs of students with disabilities, but for the first time we can both identify the gaps and see that the scores are moving in the right direction.

The success of NCLB accountability for English language learners (ELL) is less clear-cut because of flaws (some of which are being addressed) in the types of assessments used with these groups. Yet the data we do have shows significant growth, with 4th grade ELL students gaining 20 points in reading between 2000 and 2013.⁷ And without NCLB-required testing, these students would disappear from the educational data landscape alongside many of their marginalized and traditionally underserved peers, and there would be little we could do to assess whether they were learning.

Conclusion

The results are in, and though NCLB does have problems that should be addressed in a new reauthorization bill, we should not abandon the annual testing that allows us to know what works, nor should we revert to a time when the federal government gave states \$25 billion in taxpayer money only to have no way to require action even if it was clear a school was failing students. American students have made great gains since NCLB was enacted—especially those who were most easily overlooked or shunted to the side in the past. There is still much to do to achieve educational equity and excellence in our nation’s schools, but for the first time in many decades, our path has a trajectory of progress. The next *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* must preserve the gains we’ve made and build upon them, not overreact to criticism about specific (and fixable) components of NCLB by gutting it entirely.

END NOTES

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