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Achievement in US Education

Based on the work of Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson

“What We Know About Our Schools,” an essay by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson, includes an examination of the trends in student achievement in the United States over the past several decades. The authors analyze data from various standardized tests to provide a comprehensive picture of academic performance across different demographics and time periods.

Key Points on Achievement

1. The US National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and two international agencies regularly issue reports on trends in student achievement in the United States.
2. For the years 1970–2015, student achievement increased substantially, with larger gains in math (0.95 standard deviations or about three years’ worth of learning) than in reading (about two-thirds of a year of learning).
3. Racial and ethnic test-score gaps have diminished since the early 1970s. The Black–White and Hispanic–White test-score gaps narrowed by about half between 1970 and 2015.
4. Socioeconomic achievement gaps also shrank between 1970 and 2015, especially in elementary schools. However, the gaps remain significant, particularly at higher grade levels.
5. After 2010, achievement progress in both math and reading stalled. Academic achievement deteriorated further with the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2019 and 2022, NAEP math achievement fell by a half-year’s worth of learning in fourth grade and two-thirds of a year in eighth grade. Reading losses were less severe, about a quarter of a year, at both grade levels.
6. A major increase in chronic student absenteeism occurred in the aftermath of the pandemic.
7. The federal government responded to the pandemic by granting states and districts nearly \$200 billion for K–12 education, nearly four times more than the \$56 billion it spent in the 2019–20 school year.

Based on “What We Know About Our Schools,” by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson,
at www.hoover.org/fact-based-policy-program.



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