

Is U.S. Schooling in a Liberal Politics Education Crisis?

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Are deep-red Republican states the new educational innovators and deep-blue Democratic states stuck in educational decline and rising inequality? So suggest politically conservative analysts writing in *Education Next* and at the Fordham Institute (Hartney and Peterson, 2025; Petrilli, 2025), and so argue journalists David Brooks (NYT, October 9, 2025), Nicholas Kristof (February 9, 2026), and, most recently, Sarah Mervosh, the *New York Times* education reporter in *The Daily* podcast (April 10, 2026), these last three focusing mainly on test score gains since 2013 in Mississippi and Louisiana. If the claims are correct and educational gains are indeed explained by something related to political party ideological structures (Democrats' close ties to teachers' unions, for example), this would have major implications for the politics of improving American education and for equalizing achievement gains between less and more advantaged groups.

Mississippi has, indeed, made very large National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test gains in 4th grade national reading and math scores and even 8th grade math since the 1990s (however, not in 8th grade NAEP reading scores). So has Louisiana. Both are Southern red states. Also, along with a couple of other Southern states, they have ridden out the achievement downturn of the Covid years better than most others. Policy-wise, most analysts attribute their success to a focus on early grade reading programs. Mississippi adopted Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013, and Louisiana followed suit with Act 108 in 2019. These programs focus on a phonics reading curriculum; training teachers to deliver that curriculum; better identifying and assisting students with reading deficiencies; and retaining those third graders who do not surpass threshold scores on an end-of-year reading assessment (Spencer, 2024; Patrinos, 2025; Mervosh, 2026).¹ It is not surprising that such classroom-based initiatives would have positive effects on student learning. Others attribute the gains to a broader approach that includes strengthened accountability systems (Breazeale, 2025, p. 7; Anderson, 2026). All these reforms deserve and are receiving close attention (Petrilli, 2025). It is also true that in the 2024 NAEP results, once test scores were adjusted for student social class differences among

¹ Although not central to the main discussion of this paper, there has been important controversy about the degree to which the 4th grade reading and math gains in Mississippi and Louisiana are affected by 3rd grade retention policies. Only about 3 percent of students were retained in Louisiana in the early 2020s, but the figure in Mississippi is much higher—9 percent. The latter might account for a relatively high fraction of the gains after 2013 (Columbia Statistical Modeling Blog, 2025).

states, Southern states as a region were greatly overrepresented in the top 10 NAEP performers in all but 8th grade reading.

These stylized facts have tempted journalists and conservative policy influencers to infer a pattern of educational gains rooted in political party and regional ideological differences—even to go as far as suggesting a conservative South’s takeover of traditionally liberal North’s educational improvement turf. But do the data show that this last decade of NAEP test scores was in fact a “Southern (red) Surge?” And is there evidence that such a surge was driven by a new Southern MAGA Republican consciousness of the importance of school quality and educational equity as implied in these analyses?

I contend that the data do not support this ideological/regional view, and I propose a very different interpretation of test scores’ rise and fall, in four parts:

- (1) A closer look at test scores over the past thirty years suggests that if there has been a Southern (red) Surge, it took shape well before 2013 during the era (the 1980s and 1990s) when Democrats had considerably more influence in large Southern states such as Texas, Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina, and were part of larger economic reforms such as those in Texas and North Carolina (Grissmer and Flanagan, 1998). This was followed by continued gains during the W. Bush years, when educational reforms and improving test scores were almost ubiquitous—that is, when rising test scores were features of *both* blue and red states.
- (2) Such a longer term look also shows that a significant part of Mississippi’s and Louisiana’s students’ steady climb from very low to much higher NAEP scores across grades and subjects also took place during that period and was part of those national educational reform efforts (for a similar interpretation by Mississippi researchers, see Breazeale, 2025). The implementation of literacy programs in both states may have been important in helping them make gains after 2013 while other states saw test score declines, but there are important questions about how much the 3rd grade retention element of such programs contributed to such gains.
- (3) Furthermore, as in most of the rest of the country, scores in the (by then) red larger enrollment Southern states flattened out and declined in the years before Covid (2013-2019). They continued to decrease during Covid, also as in most of the rest of the country, blue and red, Northern and Southern. The decline in Texas’ 8th grade math scores, for example, was so great that a 20-point difference between social class adjusted math scores of students in Texas and California in 2013 had shrunk to 4 points by 2024. The increase in numerical representation of Southern states in the top ten *social class-adjusted* NAEP scores since 2013 is therefore not a Southern surge, but essentially entirely the result of the rather unique rise of test scores in Mississippi and Louisiana during that period.

- (4) Neither is it accurate for Brooks, Kristof, and Mervosh to depict educational policy strategies to increase test scores in Mississippi and Louisiana—state government curricular interventions, test accountability, and teacher technical support—as representative of MAGA educational strategies in red states. In the post-2013 period, red states as a group were much more likely to have focused on subsidizing private education, mainly religious schools, through vouchers and tax credit schemes—that is, to use accountability systems to promote parent choice of private over traditional public education than to foster government intervention to improve curriculum and teaching in public schools.

My proposed alternative view concludes that the rise and stagnation of test scores were/are the result of *national* trends marked by variation that occurred mainly independent of region and state political ideologies. These trends may have been influenced by the strength of accountability systems in each state, but other factors almost certainly played an important role, especially since the same trends are observed internationally in many other developed countries. In addition, the reasons being bandied about for why test scores declined in some states but not others since 2013 are largely speculative. Whatever evidence is presented to support these claims is the product of very crude *correlational*, not *causal*, analysis.

Building the Covid/post-Covid Red State Myth

The notion that red states are the new educational reform leaders began with the Hartney-Peterson analysis in *Education Next* (February 13, 2025), a conservative-leaning education journal published by Stanford’s Hoover Institution. The authors divided U.S. states into the 16 most red states defined by the percentage of the vote for president in 2024, the 17 next most red states (purple states), and the 16 most Democratic (blue) vote states. The authors used the Urban Institute’s ongoing estimates of state test score trends adjusted for socio-economic class differences² to show that in 2019-2022, pre- to post-Covid, 4th and 8th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics scores adjusted for SES differences, declined more in blue states than red, and in all but 4th grade math, scores in red states recovered or leveled off after Covid somewhat more than in blue states. Their estimates also show that the adjusted reading and math scores of students in red states were lower in 2019 than those of students in blue states, but by 2024, they were higher in all but 8th grade reading. Thus, in response to Covid and in the recovery from Covid, the analysis contends that educational policies in red states were more effective than in blue states in maintaining student learning rates

There is a major problem in deriving even implicit policy conclusions from the definitions of “red/blue/purple state” in this article. The group of 16 red states has a total

² <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/states-demographically-adjusted-performance-2024-national-assessment>

population of only 50 million, 3 million people per state, and doesn't include the four relatively largest consistently red states of Texas, Florida, South Carolina, and Ohio—with Republican controlled legislatures and governors and with a combined population of 70 million. Reallocating them from the purple to the red states would reduce the estimated red state score recovery from 2022 to 2024 and would make the case for red states as significantly different from blue hinge largely on 4th grade scores, and possibly only on 4th grade math scores. Further, even in the 4th grade, and taking the red-blue state definitions at face value, students in the red states gained a relatively small 0.07-0.10 standard deviations of NAEP score—not enough to meaningfully change these children's lives, except that more of them would be able to read better. This is a worthwhile goal, but not the underlying message of the article.

Several months later, a Fordham Institute article suggested that blue states had been more likely to abandon NCLB accountability testing after 2015, and with it, a “commitment to educational reform” (Petrilli, 2025). It argued that except for Maryland and Rhode Island, blue states and many red states stopped reporting school ratings based on data collected through testing and other forms of evaluation—effectively, schools’ “quality” in those states were no longer held up to the harsh light of how well they performed.

That said, Hartney and Peterson's presentation of the NAEP scores and Petrilli's rough assessment of states' “reform efforts” had just enough validity to get people's attention and to give red states *en masse* a mantle of educational respectability that they had not had earlier in the 21st century when test scores were rising in all states, inspired by Democratic-led southern state reforms.³ Hartney and Peterson's data also allowed them to feed a long-held conservative belief that the greater drop in blue states' 4th grade test scores over the Covid period was related to longer school closures and those, in turn, were related to more powerful teachers' unions getting their way on these states' school closures. This is certainly a possible explanation for what occurred, but it would take a lot more research to get convincing evidence for it.

David Brooks was inspired by the *Education Next* data and Fordham Institute argument (and the Urban Institute's longer-term social-class adjusted test scores by state) to fashion a story very much in line with Petrilli's about educational trends in red and blue states and the changing policy landscape that produced them. Brooks is a great storyteller, no question. So, for those who love a good story, here, in short form, is what he laid out. Democrats were once the good guys, trying and succeeding in making America a more equal place by working with Republicans to pass national accountability reforms such as President Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act* that increased test scores and equalized them between black and white and lower and higher social class students in America's schools, especially in blue states. It wasn't just schools that

³ The three most “famous” and influential educational reforms in the 1980s and 1990s were in the South—Texas and North Carolina (Grissmer, 1998), dominated by Democratic legislatures, and South Carolina, under Democratic Governor Richard Riley. Riley became Bill Clinton's Secretary of Education and presided over that administration's national accountability reform.

contributed to greater equality. Child poverty rates, according to Brooks, decreased between the mid 1980s and 2010 and incomes became more equal (at best, doubtful claims). Then, in 2013, the country—still struggling to emerge from the financial crisis of 2008—backed away from accountability reforms, and test scores began to fall, especially for disadvantaged students. Test score inequality therefore increased, and it increased the most in the most politically liberal states. The pandemic only accentuated a trend that had started years before, in 2013.

The villains of Brooks' story are many. The first is smartphones, which he says are killing reading, and, worse, seem to be having a bigger effect in the U.S. than in other developed countries. The second is that the “American political center collapsed,” pitting both populist Republicans and progressive Democrats against the very accountability reforms that had been so effective in raising and equalizing school outcomes. The third villain is the Democratic-run states that replaced accountability reforms with equity reforms, watering down standards and efforts to meet those standards.

The heroes of the story for Brooks are—not surprisingly—Republican officials in Southern states. It is Hartney and Peterson's red (and some purple) states that are saving the day. A group of “surging” Southern states are “kicking Democrats in the butt,” bringing back the old accountability reforms and focusing on early grade reading programs, all with very positive results. They are not only raising test scores but equalizing them between disadvantaged groups and better off White students.

Nicholas Kristof and Sarah Mervosh's reporting supports this story. They both went “to ground” in Alabama and Mississippi (Kristof) and Mississippi (Mervosh) to observe firsthand the steps these states are taking to reduce absenteeism, high school dropout prevention, and early grade reading programs. Their reporting is inspirational and convincing. And, as we show below, Mississippi's fourth grade reading scores are going up, while many other states' scores are, indeed, going down. Kristof also features Alabama's fight against student absenteeism. But Mervosh and Kristof can't help themselves from placing their local Mississippi and Alabama factual reporting into the context of Brooks' and *Education Next* and Fordham Institute's broader conclusions about the red states/blue states dichotomy. For Mervosh, as for Brooks and conservative education policy thinkers, the early primary reading reform, which includes holding third graders who can't pass a minimum reading competency test back a year, is indicative of a national trend of students in red states making big gains while students in blue states languish. She also ends up giving a nudge to the conservative arguments—which at this date have little or no evidence behind them—that (a) the red state reforms such as Mississippi's are relatively costless, and (b) blue states are held back from making similar reforms because of resistant teachers' unions.

Does the Red State Story Hold Up?

Let's examine some of the claims that form the basis of this “trending” story. Table 1a shows that only three states show a positive gain in 4th grade reading scores since 2013, and only

Mississippi and Louisiana (with a combined enrollment of about one million students) have significant positive gains. South Carolina’s 4th graders increased their scores by one point, which is better than the negative gains registered by other Republican-run (much larger enrollment) Southern states.⁴ Also, the losses in 2019-24 (Covid and post-Covid) are not higher in many Northern blue states (Pennsylvania is Northern but with a Republican legislature during most of this period) than in most Southern red states. Table 1b shows the unadjusted score trends for 4th grade math, and these suggest a better case for Southern improvement after 2013 than in 4th grade reading. Yet, this “better case” is mainly that Alabama, in addition to Mississippi and Louisiana, made “large” math gains after 2013. Overall, except for Minnesota, students in the larger Northern states had not very different test score declines from large Southern states.

Other than early reading and math, the most meaningful example of what has happened to test scores since the 1990s is in 8th grade mathematics. This level of math is important because it is more difficult to teach than 4th grade math, and it is a good predictor of students’ ultimate educational attainment. Tables 2a and 2b report scores for a group of Southern red states and a group of Northern blue states (again, keep in mind the political identity of the Pennsylvania case). These data show that aside from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee, the pattern of gains in three time periods—1992-2013, 2013-19, and 2019-24—appear to be essentially the same in the South and the North, and in both Democratic and Republican-run states.

This also applies to the differences in gains for Whites and Blacks. David Brooks’ story is that until the Obama administration gave up on making states accountable for improving achievement, test scores equalized between advantaged and disadvantaged in Democratic states, and that since, the opposite has happened: inequality has increased. In contrast, Brooks suggests that Southern (red) states have in recent years become the great equalizers.

Is this what happened? We analyze equalization using two measures: (a) 4th grade reading gains by Black and White students in southern red and northern blue states in 2003-2013, 2013-19, and during/after Covid, in 2019-24; and (b) 4th-8th grade mathematics “value-added” cohort gains by Black and White students in 2003-13, 2011-19, and two “quasi-cohort” gains in 2017-22 and 2019-24. We call them quasi cohorts because there was no test in 2021 or 2023, so we cannot estimate the four-year gains of the 2017 and 2019 4th grade cohorts. Rather, we observe the gains from 2017-22 and 2019-24 (thus, we assume that the 2017 4th grade scores would have been similar to the 2018 4th grade scores and the 2020 4th grade scores would have been similar to the 2019 scores had the Pandemic not occurred).

The data in Table 3 on 4th grade reading gains suggest that Brooks is correct in reporting Black students made larger increases in scores than White students in the years 2003-13. This pattern did not just characterize Northern blue states—it was similar in Southern red states.

⁴ It is worth noting that Mississippi’s big gain in 4th grade reading and math scores in 2013-19 (but not after 2019) and Louisiana’s gains in 2019-24 (but not from 2013-19) are consistent with the timing of their enactments of reading programs (and 3rd grade retention).

However, Brooks is not correct concerning the period after 2013. Some states in the red South were able to equalize or at least not increase inequality between Black and White students' reading scores. But the same was true in the blue North. Thus, overall, in early reading, there was a strong tendency before 2013 for 4th grade reading scores to equalize between Black and White students in both blue and red states, and, since 2013, for test score inequality to increase—again, in both blue and red states, including Mississippi and Louisiana.

The second way we look at changing test score inequality is to estimate the gains by state in math test scores of 4th grade cohorts, beginning in 2003, four years later when they reach the 8th grade (Table 4). We can compare the average gain of the four cohorts from 2003 4th graders (2003-2007) to 2009 4th graders (2009-2013) to the average gains of the three cohorts between 2011 4th graders (2011-2015) to 2015 4th graders (2015-2019). We also show the gains of the two quasi cohorts, 2017-2022, and 2019-24. The results in Table 4 do not show any tendency to equalization in Black-White student middle school test scores in any of the three periods covered. In many Northern and Southern states, the two Covid cohorts were characterized by increased Black-White inequality in value added compared to earlier cohort gains. Consistent with Brooks' claims, there is a group of initially (2003-2013) high gain Democratic states that had large declines in value added after 2013 for both White and Black students. Yet, the same can be said for a group of large red states (Texas and Florida, for example). Brooks is also probably correct that Black students fell farther behind White students in middle school math in the early 2020s. But this also did not conform to a South/North divide. To the contrary, the main trends we observe by this way of looking at learning rates are that middle school value added in math fell significantly since the 2003-2013 period for both White and Black students and that Black students have made smaller middle school gains in math than White students during and after the heyday of accountability.

In thinking about red state and blue state education, we also need to keep in mind that almost 40 percent of all K-12 public school students in the U.S. are enrolled in only five (large) states—California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. Three of them are blue states and two, red states. The two big red states made greater gains in 8th grade math in 1992-2013 than the three big blue states, but greater declines after 2013, including during Covid. The results in 4th grade reading and math are somewhat more favorable to Texas and Florida than to the Northern states, but the differences in test score trajectories are relatively small. Yet, when states are rated by scores adjusted for socioeconomic differences (Urban Institute), Florida and Texas are in the top 10 scoring states in 4th grade reading and math, and only Illinois and Texas are in the top 10 scoring states in 8th grade reading and math.

Taken together, these data suggest that Brooks' characterization of past learning gains (pre-2013) as the result of Democratic Party or joint Dem/Rep reforms is certainly not wrong. There is also some evidence that the learning gains from such reforms may have benefitted Black students more than White students, although the value-added math results show Black students making significantly lower gains in middle school pre-2013 than White students in both red and

blue states. However, Brooks' characterization of post-2013 trajectories as favoring the red states *is simply not true*. Florida and Texas students did as badly or worse than the large blue states after 2013. Furthermore, the White-minority divide did not increase more in the large blue states than in the large red states after 2013 aside from the anomalous decline of Black student scores in California (Black students are a relatively low 6 percent of California public school enrollment).

Are the Mississippi and Louisiana Curriculum and Accountability Interventions Representative of Red State Education Policies?

It is also misleading to tout Mississippi and Louisiana reforms as representative of red state governments' educational policies. For example, many red states, such as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia—have focused much of their educational policy on tax-credit-funded, voucher-like scholarships to cover private school tuition. Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio have implemented large voucher programs in the past decade. In 2025, Texas passed a state-wide voucher program available to students of all income levels, including those already attending private schools. These programs are designed to promote private (often religious) education and to increase parent choice beyond the public sector. Even Louisiana passed the “LA Gator Scholarship Program” in 2024—it gives large subsidies to families for private school tuition. The “theory” behind these red state policies is that market accountability (competition, parent choice) is much more effective in delivering good quality education than parents want than government interventions in public schools, such as scripted curriculum, improved teacher preparation, testing programs, and reducing student absences—the very reforms associated with gains in student test scores in Mississippi and Louisiana, and those touted by Brooks, Kristof, and Mervosh.

Since the focus of “school choice” programs is parent choice, including choosing religious private education, rather than trying to raise reading and mathematics scores directly, it shouldn't be surprising that this movement toward subsidizing private and “quasi-private” (charter) schools over the past more than two decades shows little evidence of improving test scores (for a summary of the literature, see Carnoy, 2024; Epple et al, 2017). Although charter schools were less likely to close for long periods during the Pandemic, in part because their teachers are much younger (less Covid-vulnerable) than those in traditional public schools, states with a high proportion of charter schools (or private schools) did not, as a group, maintain test scores better in 2019-2022 than other states.

We Have a Broader Problem, So Need a Different Analysis

The issue of declining and more unequal test scores is therefore not a blue state issue, but a *national* issue. A recent report (Dewey et al, 2026) takes a similar position: the vast majority of students studying in U.S. schools in 2024 and even in 2019 were scoring lower in 4th and 8th grade reading and math than they did in 2013. The report calls this an “educational recession,”

seriously accentuated by the Pandemic, but not necessarily associated with South/North or red/blue dichotomies. A few southern states—notably, Mississippi and Louisiana—have bucked the post-2013 declines in 4th grade reading and math, but much less so at the 8th grade level. Although many of the states that have recently adopted reading reforms to begin making gains again are in the South, it is an exaggeration to call this a Southern Surge or to read into it some Republican educational renaissance or Democratic educational collapse. Rather, the report identifies several possible reasons for the decline (aside from the Pandemic and school closings), but none of them is rooted in region or political party ideology.

It is interesting how uncritically some of our most insightful journalists accepted the conservative argument that this new, unfavorable direction in student performance resulted from Democrats' rejection of NCLB-style accountability. I'm an early fan of strong accountability (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002), so don't need to be convinced that it can raise test scores. Nevertheless, educationally, a lot went on in the second decade of the 2000s that makes it difficult to pin blame on *liberal states'* abandonment of accountability. For one, many conservative states also rejected school ratings after 2015. Secondly, as we showed above, even large red states such as Texas, Florida, and North Carolina, that according to Petrilli continued to use school rating as an accountability measure, could not avoid large declines in test scores. It is also difficult to argue that red states were more likely than blue states to adhere to the more liberal, centralized NCLB version of accountability after 2013 since they were more likely to reject the federal government's attempt to raise curriculum standards through the Common Core. It was precisely the Common Core that became a major source of controversy in that period and greatly disrupted what was taught, especially in mathematics. The *Harvard School of Education Magazine's* Elaine McArdle wrote in 2014:

Today, the Common Core is not only on the public radar, but the focus of a growing nationwide resistance from an unusual coalition of right-wingers, liberals, teachers, and parents, for a variety of very different reasons. The Tea Party, dubbing the standards as "Obamacore," paints them as an intolerable intrusion of the federal government into local control of schools. Parents sick of the testing culture are drawing a line with the new Core assessments, and some states are balking at the increased time and costs of these tests. Teachers' unions are split: Some local groups, including the Chicago Teachers Union and the New York State United Teachers, oppose the new standards entirely, while the two national unions — the National Educators Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) — support the Core but want delays in implementation (McArdle, 2014).

And, although many blue states expanded charter schools during the Obama era (D.C. has the highest percentage of charter school students in the U.S.), shifting emphasis to parent choice rather than improving public schools directly, it was in red states that parent choice movements took full bloom. This resulted in the expansion of voucher and tax-credit schemes that, other than for special-education vouchers, were not a policy pushed by blue states.

With all these changes happening at once and the lack of hard evidence that states that stopped rating schools had greater test score declines than those that didn't (as Petrilli, 2025 implies), arguments that blame the *liberal* move away from test-based, school rating accountability for the *national* decline in test scores are not convincing. Neither is the argument that the reforms in two (small enrollment) state exceptions to the larger direction of educational performance in this period necessarily represent the solution for turning student reading and math scores around in the large states. Devoting resources and energy to better teaching of early reading should logically raise 4th grade test scores and is worth doing if it, and not 3rd grade retention, is shown to be responsible for higher test scores. Yet, we should consider whether implementing reading reform in small enrollment states such as Mississippi (140 total school districts) or Louisiana (75 total school districts) can be as effective in California's 1000+ school districts or in Texas' 1,200 school districts.

Let me throw one more wrench into the gears of conservative explanations of U.S. test score declines. Significantly, the decline is also an *international* issue, if the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores (of tested 15-year-olds) are a fair indication of what is happening educationally in the rest of the world. PISA scores of students in almost all the OECD countries, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic and Switzerland have declined since 2012-15, well before Covid, just as we observe in state NAEP scores in the U.S. (OECD PISA, Volume 1, 2023, p. 27).⁵

To sum up, looking for answers to this problem in two small Southern states or in Southern red states more generally is not likely to do the job. There are many other possible explanations for why student scores declined on the NAEP where they did and hence many possible directions educational policies might take to reverse the trend (Dewey et al, 2026). The first is centered on the national accountability story: many higher scoring states such as Massachusetts, New Jersey, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas have seen large declines, possibly because the states able to have successfully used strong accountability to produce the largest gains also had the greatest losses when their accountability systems softened. If states are willing politically to go back to strong, test-based accountability, this may work to begin restoring gains. A second explanation is increased student absenteeism—largely a post-Covid phenomenon, but probably a major impediment to post-Covid test score recovery. Focusing on that problem might go far to

⁵ Furthermore, and ironically (given the handwringing over NAEP reading scores), the latest PISA results (2022) show that U.S. students scored 10th out of 80 countries in the reading test, higher than all but Estonia, Canada, and Ireland and six Asian cities/countries. The U.S. also did relatively well in the science test, well above the OECD average. It is in the realm of PISA math scores where the U.S. performs relatively most poorly on the PISA test and suffered a similar decline as in other OECD nations since 2009-12 (OECD, PISA, 2023).

improve student learning across all states. A third explanation is Brooks' point about the onset of ubiquitous smart phone use. It is appealing because smart phone addiction is an international phenomenon and therefore might help explain similar test score declines in other countries. Banning cell phones in school is the tip of the iceberg, and that policy alone seems to be having positive effects on student engagement while in classes, but empirical evidence is mixed that reducing smart phone use in schools has a positive effect on test scores (Allcott et al, 2026).

The bottom line is that it's not easy to find causal explanations for these long-term test score increases and declines (Morsey et al, 2018), and although magic bullets and ideological conditions such as those claimed to explain general test score declines and Mississippi and Louisiana gains are appealing, the real insights and answers are much more complex.

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Tables

Table 1a. Fourth grade (unadjusted) reading scores, by state, 2013-2024 (scale scores)

	<i>Change 2003-13</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change 2013-19</i>	<i>Change 2019-24</i>
National	4	222	223	222	220	217	215	-2	-5
Southern Red State Examples									
Alabama	11	219	217	216	212	213	213	-7	1
Florida	9	227	227	228	225	225	218	-2	-7
Mississippi	3	209	214	215	219	217	219	10	0
Texas	2	217	218	215	216	214	212	-1	-4
Louisiana	5	210	216	212	210	212	216	0	6
Georgia	8	222	222	220	218	216	214	4	-4
Tennessee	8	220	219	219	219	214	215	-1	-4
Arkansas	5	219	218	216	215	212	210	-4	-5
North Carolina	1	222	226	224	221	216	213	-1	-8
Oklahoma	3	217	222	217	216	208	207	-1	-9
South Carolina	-1	214	218	213	216	216	215	2	-1
Northern Blue State Examples									
California	7	213	213	215	216	214	212	4	-5
New Jersey	4	229	229	233	227	223	222	-2	-5
Illinois	6	222	219	220	218	218	214	-4	-4
Massachusetts	4	232	235	236	231	227	225	-1	-6
Minnesota	4	227	223	225	222	215	214	-5	-8
New York	2	224	223	222	220	214	215	-4	-5
Pennsylvania*	7	226	227	225	223	219	216	-4	-7

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool. Note: *Northern but governor Democrat and state Senate & Assembly largely Republican controlled during this period.

Table 1b. Fourth grade (unadjusted) mathematics scores, by state, 2013-2024 (scale scores)

	<i>Change 2003-2013</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change 2013-19</i>	<i>Change 2019-24</i>
National	7	242	240	240	241	236	237	-1	-4
Southern Red State Examples									
Alabama	10	233	231	232	230	230	236	-3	7
Florida	8	242	243	246	246	241	243	4	-3
Mississippi	8	231	234	235	241	234	239	10	-2
Texas	5	242	244	241	244	239	241	2	-3
Louisiana	5	231	234	229	231	229	235	0	3
Georgia	10	240	236	236	238	235	236	-2	-2
Tennessee	12	240	241	237	240	236	240	0	0
Arkansas	11	240	235	234	233	228	230	-7	-3
North Carolina	3	245	244	241	241	236	239	-3	-3
Oklahoma	10	239	240	237	237	229	233	-1	-5
South Carolina	1	237	237	234	237	234	238	0	1
Northern Blue State Examples									
California	6	234	232	232	235	230	233	1	-2
New Jersey	8	247	245	248	246	239	240	-1	-6
Illinois	6	239	237	238	237	237	236	-2	-1
Massachusetts	11	253	251	249	247	242	246	-6	-1
Minnesota	12	253	250	249	248	239	241	-5	-8
New York	4	240	237	236	237	227	234	-3	-3
Pennsylvania*	8	244	243	242	244	238	238	0	-6

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool. Note: *Northern but governor Democrat and state Senate & Assembly largely Republican controlled during this period.

Figure 2a. Eighth grade NAEP mathematics scores, by red southern state, 2013-2024 (scale scores)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Alabama</i>	<i>Florida</i>	<i>Georgia</i>	<i>Louisiana</i>	<i>Mississippi</i>	<i>Texas</i>	<i>Tennessee</i>	<i>Arkansas</i>	<i>N. Carolina</i>	<i>S. Carolina</i>	<i>Oklahoma</i>
1990	253	255	259	246		258		256	250	—	263
1992	252	260	259	250	246	265	259	256	258	261	268
1996	257	264	262	252	250	270	263	262	268	261	269
2000	264	268	265	259	254	273	262	257	276	265	270
2003	262	271	270	266	261	277	268	266	281	277	272
2005	262	274	272	268	262	281	271	272	282	281	271
2007	266	277	275	272	265	286	274	274	284	282	275
2009	269	279	278	272	265	287	275	276	284	280	276
2011	269	278	278	273	269	290	274	279	286	281	279
2013	269	281	279	273	271	288	278	278	286	280	276
2015	267	275	279	268	271	284	278	275	281	276	275
2017	268	279	281	267	271	282	279	274	282	275	275
2019	269	279	279	272	274	280	280	274	284	276	276
2022	264	271	271	266	266	273	272	267	274	269	264
2024	262	267	269	267	269	269	276	266	276	268	264
Change 2019-24	-7	-11	-11	-5	-5	-10	-4	-8	-8	-8	-12
Change 2013-19	0	-3	0	-1	3	-9	2	-4	-2	-4	-1
Change 1992-2013	17	21	20	23	25	24	19	22	27	19	7

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool.

Figure 2b. Eighth grade NAEP mathematics scores, by blue state, 2013-2024 (scale scores)

<i>Year</i>	<i>California</i>	<i>Illinois</i>	<i>Massachusetts</i>	<i>New Jersey</i>	<i>Minnesota</i>	<i>New York</i>	<i>Pennsylvania*</i>
1990	256	261		270	275	261	266
1992	261	264	273	272	282	266	271
1996	263	269	278	275	284	270	274
2000	260	275	279	278	287	271	277
2003	267	277	287	281	291	280	279
2005	269	278	292	284	290	280	281
2007	270	280	298	289	292	280	286
2009	270	282	299	293	294	283	288
2011	273	283	299	294	295	280	286
2013	276	285	301	296	295	282	290
2015	275	282	297	293	294	280	284
2017	277	282	297	292	294	282	286
2019	276	283	294	292	291	280	285
2022	270	275	284	281	280	274	274
2024	269	277	283	282	282	271	276
Change 2019-24	-7	-5	-11	-10	-9	-9	-9
Change 2013-19	0	-2	-6	-4	-4	-2	-4
Change 1992-2013	15	21	28	24	12	16	18

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool. Note: *Northern but governor was Democrat and state Senate and Assembly largely controlled by Republicans during this period.

Table 3. Fourth grade NAEP readings scores by state and race/ethnicity, 2013-2024 (scale scores)

	<i>Change 2003-13</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change 2013-19</i>	<i>Change 2019-24</i>
<u>Red State</u>									
<u>Examples</u>									
LA White	0	223	226	225	223	227	230	0	7
LA Black	9	198	204	198	195	197	198	-3	3
S.C. White	-2	224	230	225	229	230	228	5	-1
S.C. Black	-2	197	200	196	199	199	196	2	-3
MS White	1	222	227	229	230	230	231	8	1
MS Black	5	197	202	203	209	204	206	12	-3
TX White	6	235	233	231	232	228	226	-3	-6
TX Black	7	209	205	210	205	204	202	-4	-3
TX Hispanic	1	206	210	206	208	205	204	2	-4
AL. White	9	227	226	228	223	224	225	-4	2
AL. Black	14	202	204	202	195	197	197	-7	2
GA White	7	233	232	231	232	229	228	-1	-4
GA Black	10	209	212	206	205	202	203	-4	-2
NC White	1	232	236	235	232	229	225	0	-7
NC Black	7	210	214	211	208	198	199	-2	-9
FL White	7	236	235	239	233	234	227	-3	-6
FL Black	15	212	213	212	211	207	204	-1	-7
FL Hispanic	14	225	224	225	221	222	215	-4	-6
<u>Blue State</u>									
<u>Examples</u>									
CA White	8	232	231	231	234	231	226	2	-8
CA Hispanic	10	201	201	204	207	202	202	6	-5
CA Black	9	202	198	199	197	194	186	-5	-11
NJ White	2	238	239	243	238	231	235	0	-3
NJ Black	12	211	213	216	211	203	210	0	-1
IL White	3	231	233	232	228	228	224	-3	-4
IL Black	4	199	202	199	200	194	198	1	-2
NY White	-2	233	234	232	229	223	223	-4	-6
NY Black	8	211	208	208	203	194	200	-8	-3
MA White	6	241	242	243	239	235	233	-2	-6
MA Black	2	209	217	219	213	207	203	4	-10
PA* White	5	233	234	232	232	226	224	-1	-8
PA* Black	17	208	205	203	199	194	193	-9	-6

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool. Note: *Northern but governor was Democrat and state Senate and Assembly largely controlled by Republicans during this period. Note: Red indicates that in 2013-24, state is characterized by *increase* in inequality between minority and White student test scores; blue indicates *decrease* in inequality; black type indicates no increase or decrease in inequality.

Table 4. United States: Mean 4th to 8th grade point gain on NAEP mathematics test, by student race, and state, for cohorts 2003-2007 to 2015-2019 plus “quasi cohort” 2019-24.

<i>State</i>	<i>Mean Gain White Students 2003-13 (4 cohorts)</i>	<i>Mean Gain Black Students 2003-13 (4 cohorts)</i>	<i>Mean Gain White Students 2011-19 (3 cohorts)</i>	<i>Mean Gain Black Students 2011-19 (3 cohorts)</i>	<i>Gain White Students 2017-24 (2 quasi cohorts)</i>	<i>Gain Black Students 2017-24 (2 quasi cohorts)</i>	<i>Mean White 4th Grade Score 2003-19</i>	<i>Mean Black 4th Grade Score 2003-19</i>
<u><i>High Gain States (2003-13)</i></u>								
Massachusetts	52	43	45	37	38	28	255	231
New Jersey	50	44	48	38	38	25	253	227
Arizona	49	49	47	41	39	35	246	223
Colorado	51	44	42	37	38	31	251	223
Minnesota	49	41	44	31	33	30	254	224
Pennsylvania	48	40	43	33	33	27	248	221
Texas	49	44	42	34	31	26	253	230
<u><i>Middle Gain States (2003-13)</i></u>								
New York	44	39	45	38	40	32	247	223
North Carolina	44	41	41	33	37	27	252	227
California	44	38	44	33	38	29	247	219
Illinois	47	43	42	42	40	35	247	216
Wisconsin	47	40	45	35	44	28	249	213
Alabama	44	38	37	34	36	26	238	213
<u><i>Low Gain States (2003-13)</i></u>								
Mississippi	43	38	43	37	34	26	240	217
Arkansas	42	40	39	30	34	29	243	217
Louisiana	42	41	40	33	37	35	241	219
Oklahoma	43	42	37	34	28	22	242	220
West Virginia	40	35	37	33	27	22*	234	224
Florida	41	38	38	33	27	19	249	225

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP tool. *This figure represents only the 2019-24 quasi cohort gain.