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# Trends in U.S. High School Students' Average Reading Scores on NCES Large-Scale Assessments: 1998–2022

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This consolidated review of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) high school student assessment data presents trends in average test scores across multiple NCES studies. This report extends [our analyses](#) of U.S. students' grade 4 and grade 8 average test scores on math, reading, and science assessments between 1998 and 2024. As reported in that study, for both grade 4 and grade 8 average math and reading scores, generally, we observe score increases from about 2000 through the first half of the 2010s. Scores largely hold steady or decrease in the second half of the 2010s, and most scores in the 2020s are either lower than or not measurably different from the scores from about 2000.

In this analysis, we report U.S. high school students' average test scores in reading<sup>1</sup> between 1998 and 2022. These findings document student performance on NCES-sponsored large-scale assessments<sup>2</sup> during the last quarter century, a period marked at the beginning by an increased focus on accountability ushered in by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and at the end by the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Our team intended to conduct the same analyses for high school students that we conducted for students in elementary and middle school (e.g., math, reading, and science). However, due to a lack of comparable math and science data for high school students, we were only able to present findings for reading scores.

<sup>2</sup> Assessments include the National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend ([NAEP-LTT], 17-year-old students), NAEP (students in grade 12), and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (15-year-old-students).

The figure presented here uses publicly available data from national and international assessments. Our analyses build on work conducted by NCES and its contracting partners.

## Key findings

1. We observe that U.S. high schoolers' average reading scores generally decreased in the first half of the 2000s. Thereafter, no consistent pattern emerges.
2. NCES high school math and science assessment data come from data collection years that are not comparable to each other. Therefore, we lack sufficient comparable data to analyze and report key findings for high school students in these subjects.

## Implications for research and practice

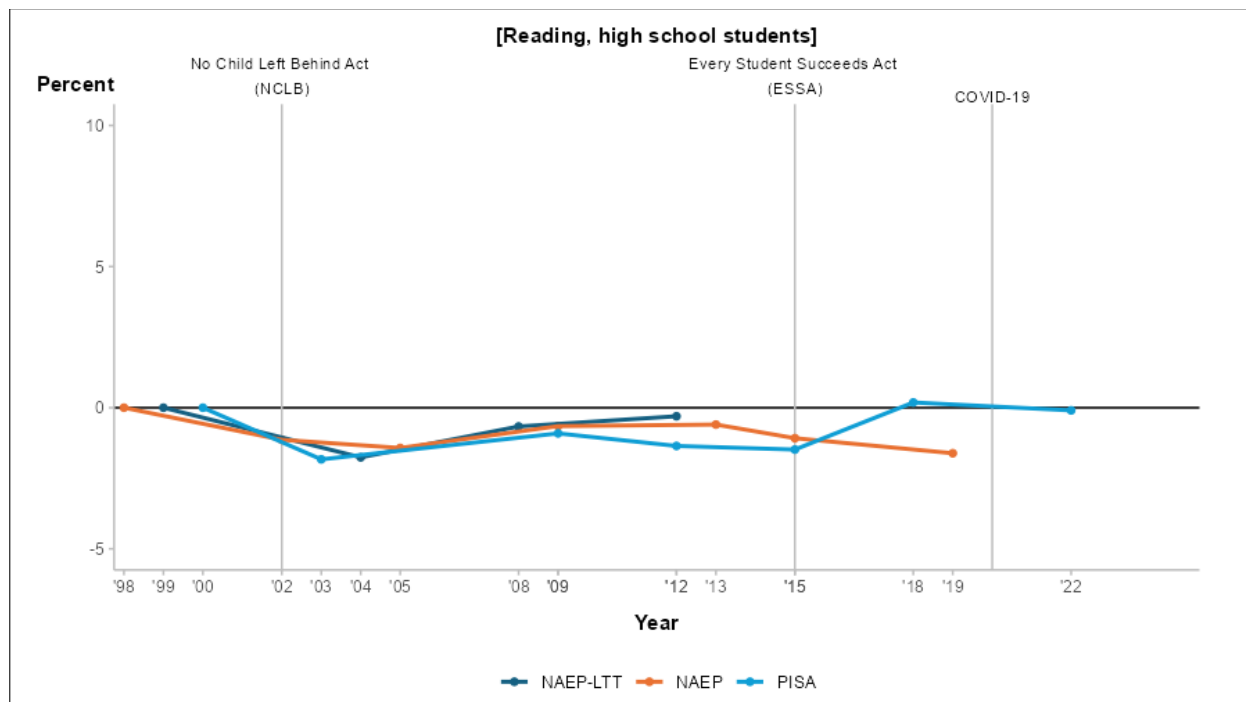
Our analysis highlights the difficulty in comparing high school scores across large-scale assessments because current assessments rely on different data collection schedules and assess students of different ages. Over the last 24 years, the federal government has placed a smaller emphasis on gathering trend data on the performance of high school students than it has on gathering similar data on elementary and middle school students. Unfortunately, limited data points for high school students hinder accurate trend analysis, particularly for math and science and, to a lesser extent, reading. Recent plans to reduce the frequency of the National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend (NAEP-LTT)<sup>3</sup> assessment suggest that federal efforts to evaluate high school student performance will become even more limited in future years.

The full report, *Trends in U.S. High School Students' Average Reading Scores on NCES Large-Scale Assessments: 1998–2002*, is available for [download](#).

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<sup>3</sup> The NAEP assessment calendar is available at <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/calendar.aspx>.

Figure 1. Percentage change in average reading scale scores for National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend (NAEP-LTT, age 17), NAEP (grade 12), and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA, age 15), relative to earliest presented year: 1998 through 2022



NOTE: For each survey, each value is the percentage change between the respective scale score and the overall average scale score for the first data collection that is presented in the figure. The first year presented for NAEP-LTT is 1999; for NAEP, it is 1998; and for PISA, it is 2000. Not all apparent differences between estimates are statistically significant. For detailed information, including the results of statistical testing and findings on the individual assessments, please see the full report.

## Authorship

**Steven Bahr:** Formal analysis (supporting); Validation (supporting). **Nancy Collins:** Formal analysis (lead); Methodology (equal). **Kimberly Curtis:** Writing – original draft and editing (equal). **Jane Hall:** Writing – original draft and editing (equal). **Robbie Kaplan:** Project coordination (supporting); Web publication (lead). **Mark Low:** Validation (lead); Methodology (equal). **Kathleen Mulvaney-Panjwani:** Validation (supporting). **Tim Oltman:** Data curation (lead); Visualization (lead). **Melissa Patton:** Formal analysis (supporting); Validation (supporting).

## About Activate



Activate Research, Inc. is a woman-owned small business that provides expert social science consulting services and works with government agencies and private-sector clients to conduct rigorous research and data analysis. Its program evaluation, quantitative and qualitative data collection, and technical assistance services help clients make informed decisions and meet their strategic goals. Activate delivers high-quality solutions tailored to clients' unique needs by emphasizing technical accuracy, compliance with standards, and a commitment to impactful, actionable insights.