

U.S. Students Remain Poor at History, Tests Show

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American students are less proficient in their nation's history than in any other subject, according to results of a nationwide test released on Tuesday, with most fourth graders unable to say why Abraham Lincoln was an important figure and few high school seniors able to identify China as the North Korean ally that fought American troops during the Korean War.

Over all, 20 percent of fourth graders, 17 percent of eighth graders and 12 percent of high school seniors demonstrated proficiency on the exam, the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#). Federal officials said they were encouraged by a slight increase in eighth-grade scores since the last administration of the history test, in 2006. But even those gains offered little to celebrate, because, for example, fewer than a third of eighth graders could answer even a "seemingly easy question" asking them to identify an important advantage American forces had over the British during the Revolution, the government's statement on the results said.

Diane Ravitch, an education historian who was invited by the national assessment's governing board to review the results, said she was particularly disturbed by the fact that only 2 percent of 12th graders correctly answered a question concerning [Brown v. Board of Education](#), which she called "very likely the most important decision" of the United States Supreme Court in the past seven decades.

Students were given an excerpt including the passage "We conclude that in the field of public education, separate but equal has no place, separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," and were asked what social problem the 1954 ruling was supposed to correct.

"The answer was right in front of them," Ms. Ravitch said. "This is alarming." The tests were given last spring to a representative sample of 7,000 fourth graders, 11,800 eighth graders and 12,400 12th graders nationwide. History is one of eight subjects — the others are math, reading, science, writing, civics, geography and economics — covered by the assessment program, which is also known as the Nation's Report Card. The board that oversees the program defines three achievement levels for each test: "basic" denotes partial mastery of a subject; "proficient" represents solid academic performance and a demonstration of competency over challenging subject matter; and "advanced" means superior performance.

If history is American students' worst subject, economics is their best: 42 percent of high school seniors were deemed proficient in the 2006 economics test, a larger proportion than in any other subject over the last decade. But Jack Buckley, commissioner of the statistical center at the [Department of Education](#) that carries out the tests, said on Monday that because the assessments in each subject were prepared and administered independently, it was not really fair to compare results across subjects.

On the 2010 history test, the proportion of students scoring at or above proficiency rose among fourth graders to 20 percent from 18 percent in 2006, held at 17 percent among eighth graders, and fell to 12 from 13 percent among high school seniors.

On the test's 500-point scale, average fourth- and eighth-grade scores each increased three points since 2006. But officials said only the eighth-grade increase, to 266 in 2010 from 263 in 2006, was statistically significant. Average 12th-grade scores dropped, to 288 in 2010 from 290 in 2006.

While changes in the overall averages were microscopic, there was significant upward movement among the lowest-performing students — those in the 10th percentile — in fourth and eighth grades and a narrowing of the racial achievement gap at all levels. On average, for instance, white eighth-grade students scored 274 on the latest test, 21 points higher than Hispanic students and 23 points above black students; in 2006, white students outperformed Hispanic students by 23 points and black students by 29 points.

History advocates contend that students' poor showing on the tests underlines neglect shown the subject by federal and state policy makers, especially since the 2002 [No Child Left Behind Act](#) began requiring schools to raise scores in math and reading but in no other subject. The federal accountability law, the advocates say, has given schools and teachers an incentive to spend less time on history and other subjects.

"History is very much being shortchanged," said Linda K. Salvucci, a history professor in San Antonio who is chairwoman-elect of the National Council for History Education. Many teacher-education programs, she said, also contribute to the problem by encouraging aspiring teachers to seek certification in social studies, rather than in history. "They think they'll be more versatile, that they can teach civics, government, whatever," she said. "But they're not prepared to teach history."