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Children's Reading Scores Stalled in Major States, Bush Administration claims, "All across America, test scores are rising"

Background. Debate persists over the efficacy of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" school reforms, including possible effects on student achievement. The Administration has begun to claim that the NCLB reforms are indeed raising children's test scores.¹

New state data. Governors and state school chiefs, since late summer, have released new test score results, stemming from exams taken by students last spring. How states define student proficiency levels has been changing to conform to federal categories, making it difficult to compare children's performance across years in some states.

Yet trend data are now available in 15 of the nation's largest states – from education departments that have tracked changes in third or fourth-grade reading scores over the past three years, since Congress approved NCLB. Researchers based at Stanford and the University of California compiled these new results, along with earlier trend data over the 1990s. The research team concluded that "no consistent pattern of gains in children's reading skills can yet be detected since passage of the 'No Child Left Behind' reforms."

¹ Mr. Bush in his weekly radio address said, "We have recently received test results that show America's children are making progress." On the campaign trail in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania [September 22nd], Bush said, "We're making great progress. We're closing the achievement gap." Education secretary Rod Paige, speaking to Republican delegates in New York, said, "All across America, test scores are rising, students are learning, the achievement gap is closing." Speaking at the National Press Club [September 24th] Paige said, "NCLB has made a huge difference... Our students see a powerful, positive difference."

Sources: The president's radio address," January 3, 2004, The White House. Mr. Paige's convention speech appears on the web: <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/08/31/gop.paige.transcript/>. King of Prussia speech cited by *Education Week*, September 29th edition.

In 11 of the 15 major states surveyed, youngsters' reading scores were flat or have declined since the Bush reforms were enacted. "Important gains in children's reading skills were earlier seen, throughout the 1990s, as many governors advanced their own accountability measures," said Aimee Scribner, spokesperson for the research team. "But children in few states have yet to respond to the 'No Child' reforms with stronger reading scores."

Detailed trends for each participating state appear in the enclosed table. Education remains a pivotal worry among independent voters, especially suburban women and moderates, according to recent polls.²

A related issue is that several states are now reporting that more of their schools meet federal growth targets ("adequate yearly progress"), compared to past years. Yet this does not necessarily mean that test scores are rising. Virginia, for example, announced in August that 69% of its schools now meet federal targets, compared to 58% in the prior year. But the percentage of Virginia students passing the reading and language arts test did not improve appreciably over the period.³

Experts available to comment. This compilation of trend data has been reviewed by testing experts and education policy analysts:

- Joan Herman – Associate Director, UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Testing (310.206.1532).
- Luis Huerta – Assistant Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University (212.531.1638).
- Robert Linn – Professor of Education, University of Colorado (303.492.8280).

Data table available at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRU/articles/EPRU-0410-75-OWI-data.pdf>

² The CBS-New York Times poll, conducted September 12-16, found that education was tied in fourth place as the most important issue on voters' minds, following jobs and the economy, Iraq, and health care worries.

³ Virginia data appear on the web:
<http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/NewHome/pressreleases/2004/aug19.html>
www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/src/vasrc-rm.shtml