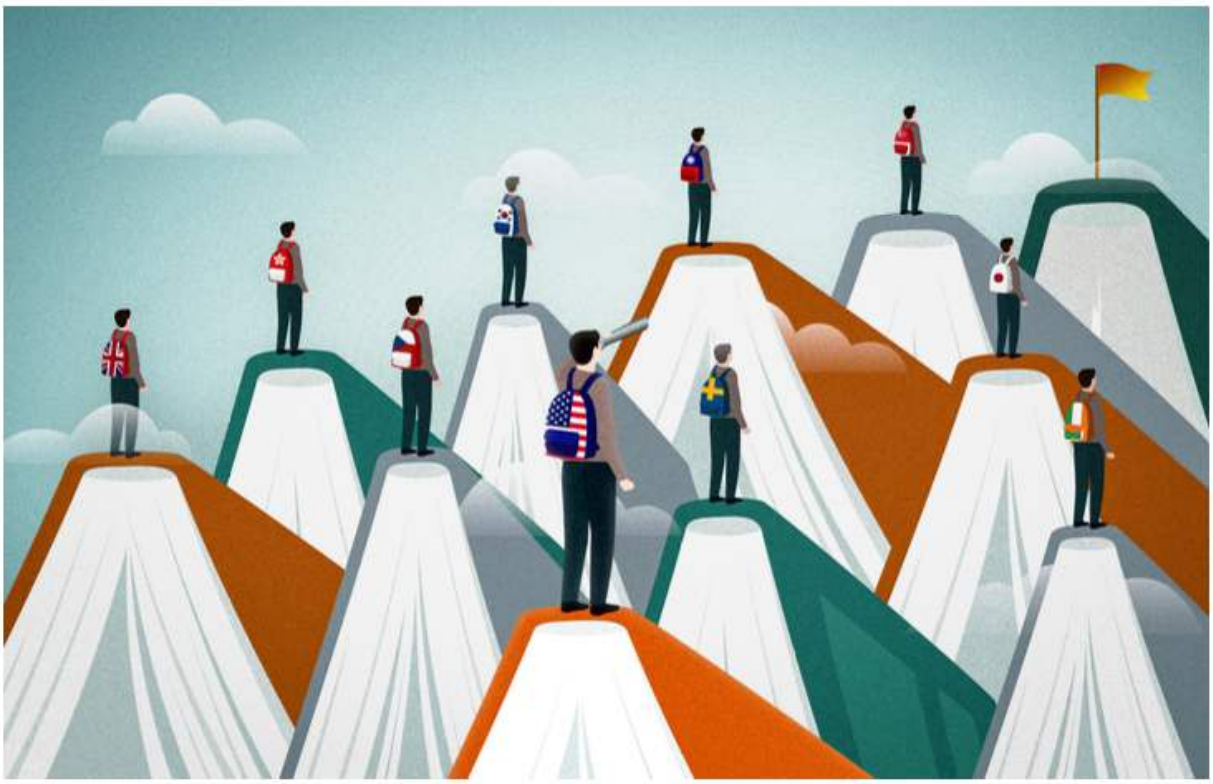


Illustration by The Epoch Times, Getty Images

By Aaron Gifford | March 18, 2025 Updated: March 19, 2025

Plummeting reading and math scores are often blamed on COVID-19, but negative trends in U.S. public school performance compared with that of other developed countries predate the pandemic.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported at least six years of steady decline in reading and math scores on domestic standardized tests leading up to the 2024 results.

Sixty-nine percent of fourth graders scored below grade level in reading last year, and the rate was 70 percent for eighth-grade students.

NAEP's 2024 math results were equally disappointing: 60 percent of fourth-grade students and 72 percent of eighth graders scored below

their respective grade levels.

Martin West, vice chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP, said student skills have eroded for more than a decade.

He attributed the downward spiral to two significant events: a softening of public school accountability and a new era of "screen-based childhood," in which students spend far more time on smartphones and social media than on schoolwork.

"'Sobering' would be a good word for it," West said during a February panel discussion with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Education policy experts identify three significant barriers to catching up to higher-performing nations in classroom performance: lack of accountability, relaxed standards, and lack of engagement.

On the global stage, the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study assessment ranked the United States 22nd out of 44

nations.

On average, American eighth graders scored more than 120 points below their peers in Singapore and Taiwan.

The 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds in math, science, and reading proficiency, ranked the United States 18th out of 80 nations.

It finished ninth in reading, 16th in science, and 34th in math. The next PISA exams take place this spring.

David Steiner, director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University, said U.S. results in the PISA global assessments were respectable but not ideal.

U.S. standardized tests are more difficult for kids raised on social media because they are less visual than the PISA questions and require longer reading passages.

President Donald Trump has already initiated reforms that he says will improve classroom performance and global rankings for the United States' 50 million K–12 public school students.

They include shrinking the Department of Education and streamlining its funding with state block grants, outlawing curricula based on progressive ideologies, and promoting universal school choice.

The United States leads the world in education spending despite its poor test results.

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that U.S. per-pupil spending exceeds $15,500 (local, state, and federal total), which is 38 percent higher than the average of 79 other developed countries.

Lack of Accountability

Public schools are required to participate in standardized tests as a condition of federal funding, but any results, good or bad, satisfy that requirement.

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama tried to incentivize improved test scores via the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top programs, but school communities resisted and complained about increased pressure.

Under President Joe Biden's administration, $190 billion in post-COVID-19 emergency funding was quickly and unconditionally allocated to help schools reopen safely after the pandemic and accelerate learning recovery.

Most states have, or are in the process of, decoupling teacher evaluation and tenure decisions from students' scores on standardized tests, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Many districts used their grants for athletic facilities, capital projects, and staffing unrelated to academics as scores continued to drop, according to the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University.

Today, most states have decoupled or are in the process of decoupling teacher evaluation and tenure decisions from students' scores on standardized tests, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Instead, teacher unions and district leaders negotiate alternative metrics, such as student grades and teacher observations.

In Texas, several districts filed lawsuits against the state education agency in 2023 and 2024 to prevent it from releasing the results of its school accountability system that grades districts based on standardized test scores and other metrics. The Travis County Court has yet to issue a final ruling to release and continue the accountability reporting.

Catrin Wigfall, a former charter school teacher in Arizona and now an education policy fellow at the Minnesota-based Center for the American Experiment think tank, told The Epoch Times that this opposition to standardized tests as school and teacher assessment tools indicates that teacher unions, not school boards or state education leaders, are in control of a "top-down system."

Declines in math and reading have been pervasive since 2013, after the National Assessment Governing Board reported big gains in both subjects across all grade levels from 1994 through 2010.

"It was driven by gains for the low-achieving students, but still not up to the expectations of No Child Left Behind," West said.

"There was bipartisan [support] for standard-based reform and accountability measures. I do think we've seen a softening of accountability."

Relaxed Standards

The Golden State's report card notes that less than half of California public school students in grades three through eight met or exceeded grade-level standards for English Language Arts, and only about one in three students met or exceeded math standards.

Still, its high school graduation rate was 87 percent, the highest in six years, and its chronic absenteeism rate has declined since 2021.

Most states, in fact, don't require diploma candidates to pass a final high school assessment, which is more common in other countries, Steiner said during a Feb. 7 panel discussion.

"If we stop measuring, the idea seems to be that the kids will stop doing poorly," he said. "I don't know where this mania for retreat from using a thermometer comes from. It strikes me as rather dangerous."

Without that thermometer, Steiner said, students can slip through the cracks.



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David Steiner, director, Institute for Education Policy, Johns Hopkins University

Last year, a student who could not read or write graduated from high school in Hartford, Connecticut, and was admitted to the University of Connecticut–Hartford.

The student, Aleysha Ortiz, is now suing the school district.

Her lawsuit notes that she was served by a team of case managers and special education teachers during her entire academic career as a special education student.

She completed assignments using a talk-to-text function on her smartphone because she didn't understand the words in front of her.

Carol Gale, president of the Hartford Federation of Teachers union, previously told The Epoch Times that the district doesn't police its chronic absenteeism policy and has lowered student expectations to improve the high school graduation rate, which was below 70 percent the year before Ortiz was awarded her diploma.

In a March 7 email response to The Epoch Times, Hartford Public Schools declined to comment on the Ortiz case.

"While Hartford Public Schools cannot comment on pending litigation, we remain deeply committed to meeting the full range of needs our students bring with them when they enter our schools—and helping them reach their full potential," it reads.

In 2024, there were 41 states that no longer required high school seniors to pass an exit exam before receiving a diploma. In 2002, most states required that exam, according to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Wigfall of the Center for the American Experiment said the public school graduation rate in the Great Lakes State was 80 percent in 2013. Minnesota eliminated the exit exam in 2013, and a decade later, the graduation rate increased to 83.3 percent.

Oregon suspended its reading and writing proficiency assessment requirements for graduating high school seniors through the spring of 2028 to address achievement gaps by race and income, according to the 2022 state Senate report that proposed the assessment suspension.

Standards for educators in the classroom have also eroded.

Requirements for Minnesota's Tier 4 teaching license were relaxed ahead of the 2023–2024 academic year to address teacher shortages and diversity. Candidates no longer have to pass a basic skills exam to demonstrate competency in reading, writing, and math, according to the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board website.

In Texas, a record 34 percent of new teachers entered the classroom without certification last year, and turnover there continues to be a problem along with poor learning outcomes, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ).

Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath said most teachers hired within the past three years are uncertified, and about

30,000 of those hired annually are new to the profession.

Many of them don't last a year, and more experienced teachers get frustrated and quit as well, hurting students in the process.

"And certification is not the same thing as preparation," Morath told a panel of state lawmakers in February. "We are setting these folks up for a very rough ride."

The American Enterprise Institute, which launched an initiative to decrease chronic student absenteeism nationally, attributes poor attendance rates in the past four years to loosened school standards and norms when schools reopened after the pandemic.

The National Conference of State Legislatures reported that four-day school weeks are permitted in 24 states, with the number of schools in that category increasing from 650 in 2020 to 850 in 2023.

Texas recently reported the poor performance of its districts with four-day weeks.

"It's bad," Morath said. "The data is pretty unequivocal."

Teacher training programs are not keeping up with curriculum improvements.

Peske said math is an even bigger problem because teachers get certified to teach skills they haven't mastered themselves.

Peske added that American society takes illiteracy seriously, but educated American adults, unlike their peers in other nations, are allowed to struggle with numbers and equations.

"It's dismissed as, 'I'm not a math person,'" she said. "It's a cultural problem."

Success Assumed

Many U.S. public, charter, and private schools have implemented Singapore Math with hopes of eventually mirroring their Asian counterparts.

On its website, the curriculum maker says this approach is different from traditional U.S. instruction in that it "conceptualizes" depth that links concepts together in a building block fashion. This is compared with compartmentalizing units of instruction such that skills developed from each lesson are not continually tapped.

"An attitude that math is important and approachable is also essential. Students perform at a higher level when their potential for understanding and success is assumed," the website says.

"In typical U.S. math programs, students get a worked example, then solve problems that very closely follow that example, repeating all the same steps with different numbers.

> "In Singapore Math, students must think through concepts and apply them in new ways from the very start."
>
> Students in some Asian and European countries outperform our students because they are drilled harder and at a younger age, especially in math, Suzy Koontz, founding board member of the National Math Foundation, previously told The Epoch Times.

In the United States, that practice, also known as rote learning, is often discouraged other than for learning the alphabet because students become bored and disengaged, according to Koontz.

Consistency across grade levels is the other major problem for U.S. math instruction, Koontz noted. Curriculum changes with conflicting research and the never-ending search for better ways to engage students.

Wigfall said public schools in other nations are also free from curricula based on progressive ideologies that she said divide communities or distract from learning, such as DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), CRT (critical race theory), and SEL (social-emotional learning).

Minnesota's ethnic studies requirement for social studies instruction takes effect in the fall of 2026. Over the next decade, the curriculum is expected to be integrated into every subject area.

Wigfall said her state's ethnic studies curriculum is very controversial and similar to critical race theory, including by teaching that some races represent the oppressors and others the oppressed.

"Teach that at home if you want, but not at school," she said, adding that social-emotional learning expectations place additional burdens on teachers to teach students manners, help them manage emotions without acting out, and essentially act as a therapist or counselor instead of a teacher at times.

"We ask too much of our teachers, and there are only so many hours in a school day," Wigfall said.

Experts also caution against overreliance on screen-based learning, classroom technology, and artificial intelligence to improve classroom performance.

"What 12-year-old wouldn't rather read three sentences than three pages?" said Carol Jago, associate director of the California Reading and Literacy Project at the University of California–Los Angeles.

"And the student will tell you, 'I'm working smarter, not harder.' But working harder is part of what brings growth."

Teachers can create lesson plans quickly just by typing a prompt in Khanmigo, ChatGPT, or other generative-AI tools, but these methods often result in multiple-choice assignments and quizzes designed to save time and do little to engage students, according to Kristen DiCerbo, chief learning officer for Khan Academy.

DiCerbo, during a March 5 panel discussion hosted by AEI, noted that students also should not use gen-AI tools just for the sake of convenience. They still need repetition and the chance to learn problem-solving skills independently, she said.

“If you have an idea on how to solve the problem,” she said, “try that first.”