

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Spinning America's Report Card

The latest education test scores don't match the White House rhetoric.

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Nov. 7, 2013 6:14 p.m. ET

[ObamaCare](#) isn't the only thing the Obama administration is spinning these days. In education, too, accomplishments on the ground don't match the rhetoric coming out of Washington. That's the main take-away from the latest results on student performance in math and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which the Education Department released on Thursday after some delay.

According to administration officials, the NAEP results are cause for celebration. Talking to reporters, Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#) enthused: "The fact that we're seeing the strongest performance in the history of the NAEP is . . . just a tremendous testament to the courage and leadership of our teachers and school leaders and the tremendous hard work of our students themselves." The headline of the department's news release about the nation's report card echoed the secretary's spirit, announcing that such substantial progress is being made that the "percentage of students in grades 4 and 8 scoring proficient . . . [is] higher than in the 1990s."

What you won't hear from the Education Department is that most of these student gains happened under the Bush administration thanks to the enforcement of the federal accountability law No Child Left Behind, as well as various other state accountability systems.

From 2009-2013, fourth-graders, who have had the full "benefit" of the Obama administration's nonenforcement of No Child Left Behind, improved by two points in math and just one point in reading. During those four years, eighth-graders moved up one point in math and three points in reading. Overall, those gains average out to less than a half point per year.

Compare that with the previous decade (2000-09), during which average annual gains in the two subjects at both grade levels were twice as large as those registered in the last four years. In fourth-grade math, for example, scores climbed by 14 points between 2000 and 2009, whereas over the past four years they rose just two points.



U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan *Getty Images*

None of this should come as a surprise to those who have observed this White House's fitful stops and starts in education. Instead of working with a divided Congress, as President Bush did to enact No Child Left Behind in 2002, the Obama administration has submitted the vaguest of legislative plans. The administration declined to renew or strengthen Mr. Bush's law and stopped enforcing most of it, instead dumping more than \$100 billion dollars from the 2009 and 2010 stimulus packages into an inefficient, stagnant education system. Washington has now granted waivers to 37 states exempting them from nearly all of the provisions of No Child Left Behind.

The administration's most concerted attempt at school reform has been a potpourri of "Race to the Top" initiatives. These efforts require states to promise much in the way of school reform, but leave the department without the legal tools necessary to make sure those promises will be fulfilled. The administration-backed call for Common Core State Standards, which establish national benchmarks for each grade level, is most notable for setting a new set of utopian goals: All students are to reach the highest international standards.

What level of proficiency students will be expected to attain and by what deadline remain unknown. The most immediate consequence of the Common Core has been to give teachers unions an opportunity to insist upon a lengthy accountability moratorium. California has already passed a law putting such a moratorium into effect.

Our research shows that the improvements made under the high accountability years of Mr. Bush kept American students within reach of their international competitors. Now, when a gain of one point is celebrated as progress, there is a real possibility that the U.S. will drop further in the international rankings when the next test results are released in December.

The white-black test score gap—which during the previous decade had narrowed by 10 points in reading and six points in math among fourth-graders—has over the past four years not budged an inch closer in reading and has actually opened by a point in math to 26 points. At the eighth-grade level, the gap remains 25 points wide in reading and 31 points wide in math, within a point or two of where it was in 2009. This is the record of an administration that promised to promote education equality for all.

Among Hispanics, fourth-grade test score gains under the Obama administration have been just one point in math and two points in reading. Only at the eighth grade level do we see some signs of the progress: In both reading and math, test scores have improved by six points.

School accountability is not a cure-all that can transform American education on its own. Yet students had been showing modest progress when a federal accountability system was being enforced. Contrary to what the White House claims, progress for American children came to a halt when the Obama administration stopped focusing on student test scores and effectively gutted No Child Left Behind.

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