

US students test poorly in history

Naomi Spencer
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Fewer than one in eight American high school seniors are “proficient” in their knowledge of history, nationwide test scores indicate.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which released its annual Nation’s Report Card on Tuesday, found similarly low levels of historical awareness among eighth graders and fourth graders during the 2010 school year. The tests were administered last spring to 12,400 seniors, 11,800 eighth graders, and 7,000 fourth graders across the country.

Students were found to have poor knowledge of democracy, economic changes, and the international role of the United States in historical and current events.

Overall, schoolchildren were found less capable in US history than in any other subject. The results reflect the decline in the cultural level and intellectual life in the US over the past several decades.

The cultural decline has been exacerbated by education policies emphasizing vocational and technical training over the teaching of science, arts, civics and history. The No Child Left Behind Act implemented under George W. Bush and the Obama administration’s Race to the Top Act heavily tie school funding to student performance on standardized tests that do not take up these basic subjects. As a result, most fourth grade students have no more than two hours per week of social studies in-class instruction.

The NAEP’s definition for “proficiency” requires that students “have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-

world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.”

Only 12 percent of high school seniors, 17 percent of eighth graders, and 20 percent of fourth graders met these criteria. Fifty-five percent of high school seniors failed to meet even the “basic” level of history knowledge, meaning that they could not interpret a short text excerpted for multiple-choice questions.

Fewer than 10 percent of fourth graders were able to explain why Abraham Lincoln was a significant historical figure; 56 percent did not know that the building of the canal system increased trade in the US. Only 19 percent were able to put in chronological order Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, the founding of Jamestown, the drafting of the US Constitution, and Abraham Lincoln’s announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Fewer than one third of eighth grade students could identify an advantage of American forces over the British in the Revolutionary War. Only 6 percent could explain the difference between slave-worked plantations and small-scale free-labor farming.

Under a quarter of seniors identified China as an ally of North Korea during the Korean War. Only 2 percent of 12th graders were able to answer a question regarding racial integration of public schools.

Beyond the gaping absence of historical understanding, the results also suggest a tragically high level of functional illiteracy among young people.

Education is a prime target of austerity measures at the federal and state levels. In the past two years, bankrupt school districts have been compelled to

compete for Race to the Top funds by cutting their operating expenses, shuttering schools, privatizing services, and axing teaching positions. At the same time, states have cut billions of dollars from per-pupil funding levels, plunging districts further into deficit.

Seeking to cut still more, school districts have singled out subjects including history, art, and science as “non-essential.” State and federal funding for arts and culture, long inadequate, is likewise being slashed. The federal Department of Education recently announced on its web site that its Teaching American History grant program had been frozen due to budget cuts, meaning no grants would be issued in the next year.

Poor test scores express something of the worsening social conditions of public schoolchildren and young people. The most recent data from the Department of Education indicate that in 2009, one in five school-aged children were in families living in poverty (19 percent). This is an increase of 5 percent over 2000.

Also rising is the number of “high-poverty schools,” where more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. In 2008-2009, 22 percent of elementary schoolchildren and 8 percent of secondary school students attended high-poverty schools. This is up from 20 percent and 6 percent, respectively, from only one year before.

Nationally, one quarter of public high school students in the US do not graduate on time, and one in ten drop out. In some distressed school districts, the dropout rate exceeds 50 percent. Even among those students who graduate and continue to college, however, more than one in three must take remedial courses in basic subjects.

Children are increasingly coming to school hungry, living in unstable housing arrangements, and contending with other problems that have a major impact on their ability to learn. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of teachers and support staff have been fired, leaving fewer teachers to manage more students.



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