

US test scores decline in history, civics, reading and math

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As the school year resumes, educators face huge challenges from “learning loss” among students arising from the ongoing trauma of the pandemic and years of chronic underfunding of public education. With the ending of federal COVID-19 relief funding, many of the already limited tutoring programs and supplemental resources have now evaporated, compounding the problem.

Earlier this summer, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the results from its two national standardized tests, the Long-Term Trend (LTT) in reading and mathematics conducted among 13-year-old children and the National Assessment of Education Progress “Report Card” tests for history and civics among eighth grade students. Both tests showed a decline in all four subjects over the last decade.

The 2022-2023 LTT assessment of 13-year-old students showed average test scores dropped 4 points in reading and 9 points in mathematics, compared to the last assessment in 2019-2020. Scores dropped significantly during the pandemic, which both political parties blamed on the shift to remote learning. The report showed, however, that the decline began before the pandemic in 2012. That year witnessed an acceleration of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top campaign promoting charter schools and a deepening attack on educators, as exhibited in the school closures and mass layoffs that occurred after the Chicago Teachers Union’s betrayal of the 2012 strike.

While standardized test results are inherently problematic and have been used as a political weapon to attack public education, there is little doubt that American education is being increasingly bifurcated along class lines. Children of the working class are increasingly subjected to oversized classrooms, the lack of up-to-date facilities or even books and few cultural enrichments. Increasingly, they are slotted into for-profit charter schools or under-resourced public ones.

Moreover, studies have long shown that educational achievement is highly correlated with a family’s socio-economic status. A few statistics on the escalating growth of social inequality can provide a small indication of the social catastrophe occurring in the population, a disaster exponentially compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the bipartisan prioritization of the stock market and predatory wars over

public health and the needs of society. Children face enormous obstacles in their educational attainment.

- In 2023, among the 74 million children living in the United States, 11 million live in official poverty. This includes one in six children under five (3 million children), the highest rate of any age group. Almost half (47 percent) of all children in poverty live in severe or **extreme** poverty, a number which rose from 4.5 million before the pandemic to 5.5 million in 2021.

- The current “unwinding” of Medicaid is expected to cut some 22 million people from healthcare, including up to 7.3 million children, thousands of which have already lost coverage.

- In February 2022, Democratic President Joe Biden reduced food stamps across the board affecting 42 million Americans, all of them poor and many of them children. The average per capita payment fell to \$6.10 a day, or about \$2 a meal.

- In 2021, Democratic President Joe Biden ended the expanded Child Tax Credits, measures throwing some 30 million families into poverty.

- The government’s criminal disregard for the health and safety of the population during the pandemic has resulted in some 359,486 children losing a parent or primary caregiver; hundreds of thousands more suffer from the loss of other relatives and friends.

- With over 96.3 percent of US children having had COVID-19 at least once, the far-ranging issues associated with Long COVID, including the alarming dangers of COVID-19 brain damage are unknown.

The combined effect of poverty, illness and death upon children is literally incalculable. The continued fall in education levels across the board is the inevitable outcome of such socially regressive measures.

The LTT scores in reading and math declined across all performance percentiles, though the largest declines were among the lowest performing students. Scores among students in the bottom 25th and 10th percentiles declined 5 and 7 points, respectively, while they declined by 3 and 4 points for students in the 90th and 75th percentiles, respectively. Math scores declined even more sharply.

NCES commissioner Peggy Carr emphasized that the lack of “basic skills” is “troubling.” Compared to the first LTT

assessment in 1971, reading scores for the lowest 10th percentile have decreased by 6 points and by 1 point for the 25th percentile, while scores for the 50th, 75th and 90th percentiles have eked up by only 1, 3 and 5 points, respectively.

In May, the NCES also released results of its 2022 NAEP “Report Card” tests in history and civics among eighth grade students. Those results showed that average scores in history decreased by 5 points compared to 2018 and 9 points compared to 2014, bringing the average score back to the 1994 level when the test was first introduced. By the NCES standards, only 13 percent of eighth grade students are “proficient” in history, while 40 percent are below “basic” level.

In addition to the scores themselves, student surveys conducted alongside the tests show that fewer eighth grade students reported taking a class devoted to US history than in 2018. The percentage of 13-year-olds reporting that they read every day for fun has declined precipitously, a fall of 13 percentage points compared to 2012.

While the two tests administered by the NCES, the LTT and the Report Cards, are methodologically different and not directly comparable, the common backward trend highlights the serious consequences of decades of bipartisan attacks against public education. The scores indicate that in more than 50 years—two generations—the literacy of 13-year-old children has not significantly improved.

In addition to the worrying trends in basic literacy and numeracy skills, the declines in civics and history are particularly significant. Carr stated that “too many of our students are struggling to understand and explain the importance of civic participation, how American government works and the historical significance of events.” As one example, 55 percent of students incorrectly answered a question which tested understanding of the electoral college in a presidential election.

In another example, only 6 percent of students completed a two-part question on the following portion of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963: “In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a [promise] to which every American was to fall heir.”

The students were asked to first: “Identify two ideas from the Constitution and/or the Declaration of Independence that King might have been referring to in his speech.” Next the students were asked to “Explain why King might have referred to ideas from the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in his speech.”

The failure to identify King’s references to the egalitarian concepts in the founding documents of the US, including “all men are created equal,” is highly significant. Every major American city has a street and school named after King yet his

signature speech is not known or understood enough to garner a response from 94 percent of those who took the national test.

The inability of students to respond to such questions also reflects the damaging impact of the distortions of American history and attacks on historical truth coming from all sides of the political establishment.

This includes the 1619 Project, launched in 2019 by the *New York Times* in line with the Democratic Party, which sought to re-write American history through the prism of a supposed unending racial struggle. Tellingly, the 1619 Project did not even refer to Martin Luther King Jr. Seeking to capitalize on the flagrant lies, distortions and omissions of “The 1619 Project,” the far right, centered around the former Trump administration, put forward its fascist 1776 Report. Both documents in their own ways sought to excise the democratic and revolutionary content from the American Revolution and the Civil War and in doing so disorient and disarm the present struggles of the working class for social equality.

Just as occurred last year when the LTT assessments among 9-year-olds showed a decline in reading and math, the political establishment and corporate media have used the results to insist there will be no more school closures despite the continuing spread of COVID-19. However, commenting on reports published last year, Carr noted, “There’s nothing in this data that tells us that there is a measurable difference in the performance between states and districts based solely on how long schools were closed.”

The attacks against public education, public health and historical truth are all indications of the massive social and cultural retrogression at the hands of world capitalism, centered in the United States.

The fight to abolish illiteracy, eradicate disease and defend democratic rights requires a fight for socialism led by the working class.



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