Background on the Nation's Report Card

Referred to as "The Nation's Report Card", the biennial National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) is a comprehensive measurement of students' performance in Math and Reading in fourth and eighth grades. The data, broken down on a macroscopic nationwide and state-to-state level, as well as on microscopic racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic levels, represents the progress made (or lack thereof) by states and districts in achieving stronger educational outcomes for their students. The NAEP examination is the only standardized national examination given to a representative sample of fourth and eighth graders across demographic groups in each state to track their proficiency levels. NAEP data serves as a catalyst for important education policy conversations and can often present the potential for implementing more equitable practices to close opportunity and achievement gaps.

Overview and Significance

Barring a one-point increase in fourth grade Math proficiency scores between 2017 and 2019, national 2019 NAEP data shows a regression in students' proficiency levels in both Math and Reading in fourth and eighth grades. Students across all ethnic groups posted lower results, with low proficiency levels particularly affecting students from low-income families, African American students and Hispanic students. Data show an overall decrease in both the number of proficient readers and basic readers in both fourth and eighth grade, revealing a widening gap between the nation's highest- and lowest-performing students.

Close examination of the data also exposes a **persistent gap between racial and ethnic groups in both Math and Reading**. Nationally, on a scale from 0-500, white students scored 32 points higher (292) on the 2019 eighth grade Math assessment than African American students (260). White students also scored 24 points higher than Hispanic students (268) on the same assessment. On the fourth grade Reading assessment for 2019, White students (230) scored 26 points higher than African American students (204), and 21 points higher than Hispanic students (209). Among all students, the average eighth grade Math score on the 2019 assessment was 281, a slight decrease from 282 in 2017 and well above the average scores for African American and Hispanic students. The average 2019 fourth grade Reading score among all students was 219, a slight drop from 221 in 2017 and also higher than the averages posted by African American and Hispanic students.

In addition to disparities between racial and ethnic groups, **gaps continue to exist between students who are eligible and ineligible for the National School Lunch Program** (NSLP), a key indicator of poverty and the subsequent opportunity gaps it perpetuates. Nationally, students who are NSLP-eligible scored an average of 208 on the 2017 fourth grade Reading assessment and 207 on the 2019 assessment, while students who are NSLP-ineligible scored a 236 and 235, respectively. Score gaps revealed by the eighth grade Math assessment are

similarly troubling. Nationally, students who are NSLP-eligible scored an average of 267 in 2017 and 266 in 2019 on the eighth grade Math assessment; students who are NSLP-ineligible posted an average within three points of proficiency (297) in 2017 and dropped one point, to 296, in 2019.

An extensive amount of research exists about how to effectively teach reading strategies to instill basic reading skills in students and reverse current trends of poor performance; however, the perpetual backslide in reading performance at critical stages in a child's educational career - the culmination of elementary school and middle school, respectively - is one piece of evidence pointing to the glaring gap of research-based professional development for Reading teachers. A 1986 study, The Simple View of Reading, confirmed the key roles of two overarching skills in measuring reading proficiency: accuracy and fluency, and comprehension. Cited numerous times by scholars in curricular and instructional development since its release over three decades ago, the same study continues to maintain relevance as a definitive authority on reading science. The data reveal states' immediate prerogative to begin paying greater attention to the science behind teaching reading by taking into account the research available and, in turn, equipping educators with the skills necessary to implement the practices outlined in the research.

Conversely, trend lines show more promising outcomes in Math than in Reading. Since the first year of NAEP in 1990, a slow but steady improvement in fourth and eighth grade Math scores presents an opportunity for more intentional instructional practices to push students toward proficiency. There has been a tremendous amount of focus on math instruction in the United States, and state and national NAEP results in recent iterations of the assessment's administration have shown improvement that may be rooted in both the increased emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) courses and improved professional development for teachers. The next step, and arguably the most important to demonstrate sustained improvement, will be recognizing the inextricable link between Reading and Math, and working to bridge the gap in non-proficient students' knowledge in both subject areas by placing more emphasis on high-quality Reading instruction in various academic courses and contexts.

Southern Analysis

Compared to the rest of the nation, a majority of Southern states continue to struggle with providing children with a quality public education. NAEP data from 2017 paints a bleak picture of fourth and eighth grade Reading and Math outcomes for students across the South. While the average fourth grade Reading score in **2017 for all public school students nationwide was 221**, 10 out of 17, or **59% of Southern states, were below the national average** for fourth grade Reading in 2017. Much more alarmingly, while the average eighth grade Math score in

2017 for all public school students nationwide was 282, 14 out of 17, or **82% of Southern states, were below the national average** for eighth grade Math in 2017.

2019 data portray an equally grim state of affairs for Southern schools. While the average fourth grade Reading score in **2019 for all public school students nationwide was 219,** 10 out of 17, or **59% of Southern states, were below the national average** for fourth grade Reading in 2019**.** Similarly, while the average eighth grade Math score in **2019 for all public school students nationwide was 281,** 14 out of 17, or **82% of Southern states, were below the national average** for eighth grade Math in 2019.

The Racial and Socioeconomic Opportunity Gap in the South

Southern schools continue to recover from a legacy of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation, and Math and Reading assessment data reflect the quantitative manifestations of this continued struggle. **SEF's independent analysis found that on average, African American students in all 17 Southern states scored 25 points lower on the 2019 NAEP fourth grade Reading assessment than their White peers.** The greatest fourth grade Reading score disparity between White and African American students was present in **South Carolina**, where White students scored 30 points higher (229) than African American students (199). The smallest score fourth grade Reading score disparity between White and African American students was present in West Virginia, where White students (214) scored 14 points higher than African American students (200). States where the gap between White students and African American students appears to be growing larger are **Alabama, Delaware, and Kentucky,** where African American students' scores are dropping while White students' scores are either staying the same or rising. In **Mississippi,** however, the gap appears to be shrinking, as the average score for African American students (209) rose between 2017 and 2019 while White students remained at the same level.

Eighth grade Math results from 2019 are more troubling from an equity standpoint. **SEF's independent analysis of NAEP data found that on average, African American students in all 17 Southern states scored 28.6 points lower on the 2019 NAEP eighth grade Math assessment than their White peers.** The most pronounced disparity in Math scores between White and African American eighth graders was in **Maryland,** where African American students scored 39 points lower (261) than their White peers (300). Again, the smallest gap between White and African American students was in **West Virginia**, where the difference in average eighth grade Math scores between the two groups was 12 points (273 for White students, versus 261 for African American students). The racial achievement gap in eighth grade Math scores appears to be increasing in Louisiana, where White students' average scores improved between 2017 and 2019 while African American students' scores remained the same.

In the vast majority of Southern states, students from low-income families do not fare much better in Math or Reading assessments. **SEF's independent analysis found that NSLP-eligible fourth graders scored, on average, 26 points lower on the Reading assessment than their NSLP-ineligible peers.** Eligible and ineligible fourth graders posted lower Reading scores in 2019 than in 2017 in **Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Tennessee and West Virginia.** The disparity between each socioeconomic group widened in **Georgia,** as NSLP-ineligible students posted gains while NSLP-eligible students posted lower scores. Overall, fourth graders in Georgia experienced the largest gap, with NSLP-eligible fourth graders scoring 33 points lower than their higher income peers on the NAEP Reading assessment (207 versus 240, respectively).

SEF's analysis also found that similar disparities exist in eighth grade Math assessment scores. On this particular assessment, **students who are NSLP-eligible scored 27 points lower than their more affluent peers among all Southern states.** Particularly concerning were results from **Georgia** and **Maryland,** where low-income students scored 35 points lower than middle- and high-income students on the eighth grade Math assessment. In **Arkansas,** the gap between the two groups grew between 2017 and 2019, while in **West Virginia,** both groups' scores fell during that same period. Scores increased across the board in **Mississippi,** and NSLP-eligible students remained stagnant in **Louisiana** while NSLP-ineligible students posted gains.

Bright Spots in the South

While many states across the South saw slides or stagnation in students' scores, some states posted encouraging results that could qualify as a success story borne out of more responsive instructional practices and policy decisions. Fourth grade reading scores dropped in all states nationwide and in the South, with one notable exception. In **Mississippi,** 2019 NAEP data revealed that students are making big gains in both reading and math. Mississippi was the only state to make significant improvements on the fourth grade Reading assessment, putting their students at the national average despite the state's disproportionately high poverty rate and pervasive opportunity gaps. In an illuminating story from American Public Media, reporters revealed that Mississippi is the only state that is making a serious effort to teach educators the science behind how children gain literacy skills - a practice that other states have been reluctant to adopt. By spending millions of dollars in professional development for teachers, Mississippi has positioned their educators to lead 21st century classrooms and deliver the type of high-quality instruction necessary for students to demonstrate measurable growth.

The state's deliberate effort to prepare its teachers adequately may also be paying dividends in closing the racial achievement gap; while white students in Mississippi continue to score higher than African American and Hispanic students, the gap shrunk in the fourth grade Math and Reading and eighth grade Reading assessments. Additionally, African American and Hispanic

fourth graders in Mississippi outperformed their peers nationally in both tested subject areas. On average, NSLP-ineligible African American students in Mississippi outscored their peers nationwide by 22 points, while NSLP-eligible Hispanic students bested their peers nationwide by 15 points.

Mississippi's western neighbor **Louisiana** also experienced noticeable growth, albeit in the category of eighth grade Math. The state's gains in this area are the nation's most pronounced, and put Louisiana closer to reaching the national average in the Grade 8 Math assessment. Louisiana's African American students also outperformed African American students nationally in eighth grade Reading and Math and fourth grade Math. **Tennessee**'s results, while relatively stagnant, remain consistent with the national average in both subject areas and place the state toward the top of the field when compared to its Southern neighbors.

Southern state rankings for 2019 Grade 4 Reading score (national ranking in parentheses)

1) Florida (6)
2) Virginia (9)
3) North Carolina (19)
4) Kentucky (22)
5) Maryland (25)
6) Mississippi (29)
7) Tennessee (31)
8) Missouri (34)
9) Georgia (35)
10) Missouri (37)
11) Oklahoma (41)
12) Texas (42)
13) South Carolina (43)
14) Arkansas (45)
15) West Virginia (46)
16) Alabama (47)
17) Louisiana (48)

Southern state rankings for 2019 Grade 8 Math score (national ranking in parentheses)

1) Virginia (7)
2) North Carolina (21)
3) Missouri (26)
4) Maryland (29)
5) Tennessee (30)
6) Texas (32)
7) Georgia (34)
8) Florida (35)

9) Kentucky (36)
10) Delaware (37)
11) Oklahoma (38)
12) South Carolina (39)
13) Arkansas (43)
14) Mississippi (46)
15) West Virginia (47)
16) Louisiana (48)
17) Alabama (50)

State*	Grade 4 Reading Avg. Scaled Score - 2017**	Grade 4 Reading Avg. Scaled Score - 2019	Change, '17-'19	Grade 8 Math Avg. Scaled Score - 2017	Grade 8 Math Avg. Scaled Score - 2019	Change, '17-'19
AL	216	212	-4	268	269	+1
AR	216	215	-1	274	274	0
DE	221	218	-3	278	277	-1
FL	228	225	-3	279	279	0
GA	220	218	-2	281	279	-2

KY	224	221	-3	278	278	0
LA	212	210	-2	267	272	+5
MD	225	220	-5	281	280	-1
MS	215	219	+4	271	274	+3
MO	223	218	-5	281	281	0
NC	224	221	-3	282	284	+2
OK	217	216	-1	275	276	+1
SC	213	216	+3	275	276	+1

TN	219	219	0	279	280	+1
TX	215	216	+1	282	280	-2
VA	228	224	-4	290	287	-3
WV	217	213	-4	273	272	-1

*SEF compilation of fourth and eighth grade NAEP data for 17 Southern states. Source: https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=2&sub=MAT&sj=&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2019R3

**Average scaled scores are determined on a scale from 0-500.

Recommendations and Next Steps

A significant improvement in student outcomes in the core subject areas of Math and Reading will be heavily contingent on the widespread implementation of equity-minded policies. In order to accelerate student achievement and ensure that students from all socioeconomic, ethnic and racial backgrounds experience tangible and sustained improvement, SEF recommends implementing the following policies:

- **Increase funding on a weighted basis for more equitable allocation -** Many funding formulas currently in use, especially across the South, have been around for decades and do not properly account for the changing needs of a more diverse student population. SEF strongly urges states and districts to update and fully fund K-12 formulas using a weighted approach to match the costs of educating low-income students and students of color. States and districts should also allocate greater funds for highly-effective teachers and specific student support and enrichment programs.
- **Recruit more high-quality teachers of color -** Research indicates that teachers of color boost the academic performance of not just students of color, but of their White

peers as well. Teachers of color regularly oversee higher Reading and Math assessment scores and promote higher college attrition and high school graduation rates. SEF recommends that the federal and state governments should help teacher candidates of color subsidize the cost of preparation programs through more robust grant and loan forgiveness programs. In addition, teacher preparation programs should include research-supported practices for teaching Reading and Math to diverse student populations. Equipping teachers with the knowledge to practice culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms will inevitably lead to higher assessment scores for students of color.

- **Expand access to wraparound services and community schools -** Comprehensive wraparound services, including more student-centered accountability measures that address the specific needs of a struggling subgroup within a school, state or district, are vital to addressing opportunity-related obstacles to student achievement. Community schools, which are public schools that foster strong relationships with students' families and partner with families and community organizations to provide an array of opportunities for student success, improve student attendance, behavior, engagement and academic performance, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. Community schools provide access to tutoring, family mental health services, nutritional assistance, employment agencies, and early childhood education, among other critical services. SEF believes that community schools can close opportunity and achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color by focusing on integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices.
- **Expand access to affordable, high-quality early childhood and Pre-K programs -** As described in SEF's 2019 Public Policy Priorities, a wide body of research has long been the basis and rationale for advocacy efforts around affordable and highly accessible early childhood education. Students who had access to high-quality early childhood education in their younger years have stronger learning gains and educational outcomes during their K-12 years. Additionally, they are less likely to require public assistance programs, more likely to enter college and vastly more likely to break out of cycles of generational poverty. Ensuring widespread access to early childhood education requires more targeted funding for early childhood education professionals, strong state- and district-level supports to sustain a high-quality program, and a coordinated effort by stakeholders in a community's early childhood space to cater to a child's social, emotional and health-related needs.