The Fall to 48th

Documenting Oklahoma's Educational Decline

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February 2026

About this Study

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Executive Summary

In 2025, a WalletHub ranking that placed Oklahoma's K–12 education system 50th in the nation surprised few Oklahomans. Public opinion has long reflected deep concern about the state's schools. Yet rankings from media outlets and advocacy groups often blend dozens of inputs, including funding, class size, credentials, poverty rate, and safety into composite scores that can obscure the central question: How well are students learning?

This report cuts through that noise by focusing squarely on student outcomes as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), widely regarded as the nation's most credible yardstick of academic achievement. Using NAEP data from 1990 through 2024, the report constructs a pooled measure of 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading performance, referred to here as "NAEP Core." By standardizing and combining these assessments, the analysis provides a stable, long-term view of how Oklahoma's students perform in relation to peers across the country and within the region.

The findings are stark.

First, Oklahoma's educational outcomes do indeed rank among the worst in the nation. In 2024, Oklahoma ranked 48th nationally on the NAEP Core measure, placing it ahead of only three jurisdictions (Figure ES.1). This low standing is consistent across subjects and grades. Oklahoma ranks near the bottom nationally in 4th grade and 8th grade reading and math, indicating systemic, not isolated, weakness.

Figure ES.1. Oklahoma's educational decline is no myth.
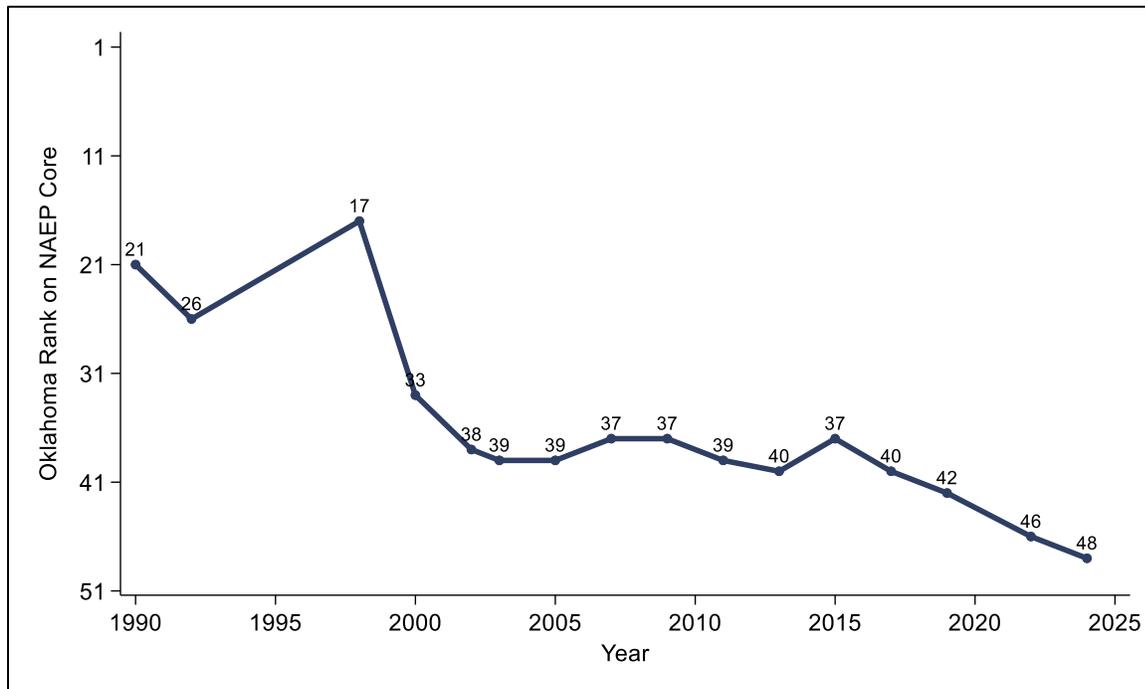
Note: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) ranks are based on NAEP Core (i.e., 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading) data from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks are for combined grades and subjects and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and subjects. Ranks in years 1994 to 2002 are three-period moving averages with rank adjustment to account for the fact that not all states participated in these years. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Second, Oklahoma's educational outcomes are the worst in the region. Among the 12 states with a university whose athletic teams participate in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Oklahoma ranks last overall. States with similar demographics and economic profiles—including Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee—now substantially outperform Oklahoma on the same NAEP measures.

Third, Oklahoma's racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups all perform below average, with the exception of Native American students, who rank highly. With one notable exception, every major student group in the state performs below the national average compared with similar students in other states. Oklahoma's White, Black, Hispanic, multiracial, and economically advantaged students all rank near the bottom nationally and last or nearly last in the region. The exception is Oklahoma's Native American student population, which ranks first nationally among states with sufficient data. This pattern indicates that Oklahoma's overall standing reflects broad underperformance across groups rather than the composition of the student population.

Fourth, Oklahoma's educational outcomes once ranked above average nationally before falling to their low levels today. This report documents what can only be described as Oklahoma's "fall to 48th" (Figure ES.1). In the 1990s, Oklahoma generally

ranked at or above the national average on the NAEP Core measure.[1] Since the late 1990s, however, the state's relative standing has declined steadily. The trend is gradual but persistent, accelerating after 2015. By 2024, Oklahoma had fallen almost to the bottom of the national rankings.

This long-term decline is especially pronounced in reading, where Oklahoma once ranked above the national average but now posts its worst scores—and ranking—on record. Math performance rose through the early 2010s before declining and failing to recover.

Fifth, Oklahoma's decline occurred while some other low-performing states in the region improved. Until 2013, Oklahoma had consistently outperformed Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. In recent years, however, those states have experienced what some observers have referred to as the "Southern Surge." Through sustained efforts focused on reading instruction, curriculum alignment, accountability, teacher development, and strategic investment, these states improved their outcomes and rose in the national rankings as Oklahoma fell. Mississippi's rise is particularly notable; long ranked near the bottom, it now sits in the middle of the national distribution.

The contrast is instructive. Oklahoma's downward trajectory is not part of a regional pattern. It is a divergence from it.

These findings carry important implications.

Claims that Oklahoma's schools rank poorly are well supported by the nation's most credible academic data. At the same time, history shows that Oklahoma once performed far better than it does today. There is nothing inherent in the state's geography, economy, or demographics that requires it to rank near the bottom. Other states with similar challenges have reversed course.

Oklahoma's history and the experiences of neighboring states demonstrate that Oklahoma's poor educational performance is not inevitable. Improvement is possible through sustained, evidence-based policies.

Oklahoma has mounted comebacks before. The data suggest that there is no reason it cannot do so again.

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Introduction

When a report from the financial website WalletHub ranked Oklahoma's K–12 education system 50th in the nation in the summer of 2025, not many Oklahomans were caught by surprise.[2] The idea that Oklahoma's schools are, by and large, not delivering for the state's students was already conventional wisdom in the state. For example, a spring 2025 survey found that a majority (54 percent) of Oklahomans would assign a grade of a D or an F to the state's schools and that just 5 percent would give Oklahoma schools an A.[3]

Still, a few Oklahomans have genuinely questioned whether a little-known website such as WalletHub should really be trusted to grade Oklahoma's—or the nation's—schools, and many of those who agree about Oklahoma's low educational status still wonder how we got here.

Of course, educational performance is not a simple, unidimensional quality, and there are many ways to judge educational quality. A 2024 National Education Association (NEA) report provides a range of data that illustrate the challenge of ranking a state's education system.[4] The report ranks Oklahoma 25th on average daily attendance but 49th on school revenue receipts per student. It ranks the state 34th on average salary of instructional staff members but 14th on the number of students per teacher. The NEA report goes on to include numerous additional rankings, whereas the WalletHub report includes measures of "performance, funding, safety, class size and instructor credentials."[5] Other state education rankings include data on child poverty,[6] schooling options,[7] average college degree attainment,[8] and many other factors.

With the myriad sources of data on schools, a focus on student outcomes is an approach that can cut through much of the noise. Inputs into the educational process—such as the effectiveness of teachers, the availability of educational options, or per pupil spending—are certainly important, but their importance is largely determined by their impact on student learning. Much can be discovered by focusing on student learning outcomes in school.

This report explains how Oklahoma ranks against other states in such outcomes, and it also describes those outcomes over time to determine the extent to which a low ranking for the state's schools is inevitable, a product of Oklahoma's status as a relatively low-GDP, largely rural state.[9] The report also examines outcomes for Oklahoma's largest student populations by race and socioeconomic status to shed light on how the state's demographics shape our outcomes and whether Oklahoma schools are serving some groups of students better than others. Oklahoma's educational trajectory is also described from a regional comparison perspective, before the report turns to implications of the findings.

Specifically, the report addresses four research questions:

1) Where do Oklahoma's schools rank in math and reading achievement, nationally and regionally?
2) How have Oklahoma's academic achievement rankings changed over the past three decades?
3) How do Oklahoma's largest student groups rank in academic achievement?
4) How have the achievement rankings of Oklahoma's regional competitors changed in recent decades?

To answer these research questions, the report leverages data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card. The NAEP is widely believed to be the most accurate national yardstick of school performance. In short, the report finds that Oklahoma does have some of the worst K–12 educational outcomes in the country but that this has not always been the case. Documenting Oklahoma's "fall to 48th," this report shows that the state was once a strong performer on educational outcomes but has been surpassed by almost all of its regional rivals in recent years.

Data and Methods

This report uses descriptive analysis to analyze publicly available state-level data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics' NAEP Data Explorer.

Data

Analyses in this report cover the NAEP's main assessments in mathematics and reading in grades 4 and 8 from 1990 through 2024. These grades and subjects are assessed regularly and provide the most reliable long-term trend data for comparing states. Results are reported for all participating states and the District of Columbia.

The primary unit of analysis is the NAEP score for each state in each year, subject, and grade, and values represent the averages for public school students in each state.[10] NAEP values flagged as suppressed or unavailable are treated as missing and are excluded from analysis. In rare cases when multiple observations exist for the same state, year, and student group, unflagged values are retained when available. After cleaning, the analytic dataset includes nearly 20,000 observations spanning math and reading achievement over more than three decades.

Analytic Approach

Because NAEP scale scores are not directly comparable across grades or subjects, scores are standardized within each subject, grade, and student group. These standardized scores indicate how far above or below the overall national average during this period a state performed, expressed in standard deviation units. To summarize

performance more broadly, the report constructs pooled measures that average standardized scores across subjects, grades, or both. Pooling provides a more stable indicator of overall academic performance and reduces sensitivity to year-to-year fluctuations in individual assessments. Throughout the report, the aggregated performance on 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading is referred to as "NAEP Core."

State rankings are calculated separately for each year, subject, grade, and student group based on the standardized scores. Rankings based on pooled measures reflect average standardized performance across the relevant components. Because subgroup data are not available for all states in all years, rankings for some subgroups include fewer than 51 jurisdictions, as noted in the relevant figures and tables. For additional details about this report's methodology, see *Technical Appendix*.

The Nation's Report Card

The NAEP is also known as The Nation's Report Card—and for good reason. The NAEP is independently governed, carefully designed, and explicitly insulated from state accountability pressures.[11]

Notably, the NAEP's credibility extends even to critics of standardized testing. Education historian Diane Ravitch, who is one of the nation's most prominent skeptics of test-based accountability, has described the NAEP as the only test she considers to be "a valid measure" of student achievement.[12] That rare consensus underscores why the NAEP serves as the backbone of this report and why its results deserve serious attention from policymakers and the public alike.

Oklahoma's Low National Rank

Against this national backdrop, the academic achievement of Oklahoma's students is concerning, as many national rankings place the state toward the bottom of the national distribution.

Finding 1: Oklahoma's educational outcomes rank among the worst in the nation.

According to the NAEP, it is clear that Oklahoma's poor standing on national assessments is broad, consistent, and difficult to dismiss as an artifact of measurement. According to 2024 NAEP Core data, the state does not rank last on any single NAEP measure, but it falls within the bottom seven jurisdictions on every major indicator of academic achievement (Table 1).[13] When performance is summarized across subjects and grades, Oklahoma ranks 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, ahead of only West Virginia (49th), Alaska (50th), and New Mexico (51st).

This pattern holds across math and reading and across both tested grade levels. In 4th grade and 8th grade reading, Oklahoma ranks 47th and 48th, respectively. In mathematics,

the state's rankings are only marginally better, with the state ranking 44th in 4th grade and 45th in 8th grade. The consistency of these results across subjects and grades suggests that Oklahoma's low standing is not driven by a single weak cohort or assessment; rather, it reflects a systemic pattern of low academic performance.

Table 1. Oklahoma ranks poorly in all 2024 NAEP achievement measures.

SUBJECT(S)	GRADE(S)	OKLAHOMA'S NATIONAL RANK
Math	4th	#44
	8th	#45
	4th and 8th	#44
Reading	4th	#47
	8th	#48
	4th and 8th	#48
Math and Reading	4th	#47
	8th	#46
	4th and 8th	#48

Note: NAEP ranks based on 2024 data from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks for combined grades and subjects are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Finding 2: Oklahoma's educational outcomes are the worst in the region.

Oklahoma's poor national ranking cannot be explained by geography or regional context. In fact, the state's performance looks even worse when compared with its regional peers. Among the 12 states with a university whose athletic teams participate in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Oklahoma ranks last overall in combined math and reading achievement (Table 2).

Several states in the region that share demographic and economic characteristics with Oklahoma perform substantially better. Tennessee and Kentucky rank 1st and 2nd regionally, respectively, and both place in the top half of states nationally. Even states often perceived as academic underperformers, such as Mississippi and Louisiana, strongly outperform Oklahoma on the NAEP Core measures.

Table 2. Oklahoma's educational outcomes are the worst among "SEC states."

STATE	REGIONAL RANK	NATIONAL RANK
Tennessee	#1	#17
Kentucky	#2	#21
Florida	#3	#27
Mississippi	#4	#28
Georgia	#5	#30
Louisiana	#6	#34
South Carolina	#7	#35
Texas	#8	#36
Missouri	#9	#37
Arkansas	#10	#43
Alabama	#11	#44
Oklahoma	#12	#48

Note: NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for the NAEP Core (i.e., math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade) from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks are for combined grades and subjects and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and subjects. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Breaking the regional rankings out by subject and grade further substantiates the claim that Oklahoma's academic performance is low. As shown in Table 3, Oklahoma ranks last or second-to-last in the region on every measure. In reading, the state ranks last among SEC states in both 4th grade and 8th grade. In mathematics, Oklahoma ranks near the bottom across grades and pooled measures.

Table 3. Oklahoma's educational outcomes are near the bottom of the region on every measure.

SUBJECT(S)	GRADE(S)	OKLAHOMA'S REGIONAL RANK	WORSE THAN OKLAHOMA
Math	4th	#11	Arkansas
	8th	#11	Alabama
	4th and 8th	#11	Arkansas
Reading	4th	#12	None
	8th	#12	None
	4th and 8th	#12	None
Math and Reading	4th	#12	None
	8th	#11	Alabama
	4th and 8th	#12	None

Note: NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for the NAEP Core (i.e., math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade) from 12 jurisdictions (the 12 states that have a university whose athletic teams participate in the SEC). Ranks for combined grades and subjects are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. Red highlighted rows are those in which Oklahoma's rank is worst in the region. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Below-average performance for Oklahoma's student groups

Finding 3: Oklahoma's racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups all perform below average, with the exception of Native American students, who rank highly.

Oklahoma's low overall ranking largely mirrors the performance of its major student groups. With one notable exception, every racial/ethnic and socioeconomic group in the state performs below the national average (Table 4).

Students from less affluent households rank below average nationally, but more strikingly, Oklahoma's more affluent students perform even worse on a relative basis—i.e., when compared with similar students from other states. Oklahoma's more affluent students rank 44th nationally when math and reading are combined.

A similar pattern appears across racial and ethnic groups. Oklahoma's White students rank 48th nationally when math and reading are combined, placing them near the bottom of the national distribution. Black, Hispanic, and multiracial students also rank well below average compared with their peers in other states. These results do not indicate that Oklahoma's low overall standing is driven by the performance of a single subgroup but rather reflect weak outcomes across most of the student population.

The one exception to this pattern of low performance compared with peers in other states is Oklahoma's Native American student population. As shown in Table 4, Native American students in Oklahoma rank 1st nationally in math, reading, and combined achievement among the states with sufficient data to report scores.[14]

Table 4. Oklahoma's Native American students outperform their counterparts in all other states, but most student groups in Oklahoma place far below average.

STUDENT GROUP		MATH	READING	MATH AND READING
Socioeconomic Status	Less Affluent	#28 out of 51	#40 out of 51	#36 out of 51
	More Affluent	#43 out of 51	#44 out of 51	#44 out of 51
Race/Ethnicity	Native American	#1 out of 14	#1 out of 14	#1 out of 14
	Black	#37 out of 41	#38 out of 41	#39 out of 41
	Hispanic	#39 out of 48	#46 out of 49	#46 out of 49
	Multiracial	#46 out of 48	#44 out of 49	#48 out of 50
	White	#47 out of 51	#48 out of 51	#48 out of 51

Note: NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for 4th grade and 8th grade from as many as 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia), depending on data availability. Not all states have a sufficient population of each student group to be ranked, and Oklahoma is not ranked for Asian and Pacific Islander students in this year. Blue highlighted row is that in which Oklahoma's rank is best in the nation. Ranks for combined grades and subjects are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Still, Oklahoma's subgroup performance is generally poor, and it looks even worse when viewed through a regional lens. As shown in Table 5, most of Oklahoma's student groups rank last among SEC states. This includes Black students, Hispanic students, students of two or more races, White students, and relatively affluent students.

The consistency of these results is striking. For nearly every major student group, Oklahoma's outcomes trail those of all other states in the region.[15]

Table 5. Most of Oklahoma's student groups—including Black students, Hispanic students, students of two or more races, White students, and relatively affluent students—post the worst performance in the region for their group.

STUDENT GROUP		OKLAHOMA'S REGIONAL RANK	WORSE THAN OKLAHOMA
Socioeconomic Status	Less Affluent	#10 out of 12	Missouri and Alabama
	More Affluent	#12 out of 12	None
Race/Ethnicity	Native American	#1 out of 1	Not Applicable
	Black	#12 out of 12	None
	Hispanic	#12 out of 12	None
	Multiracial	#12 out of 12	None
	White	#12 out of 12	None

Note: NAEP ranks based on 2024 data for the NAEP Core (i.e., math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade) from as many as 12 jurisdictions (the 12 states with a university whose athletic teams participate in the SEC), depending on data availability. Ranks for combined grades and subjects are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and/or subjects. Highlighted rows are those in which Oklahoma's rank is worst in the region. No other state in the region produced NAEP Core scores for Native American students in this year. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Oklahoma's low academic standing is not the product of its demographic composition. Instead, the state's education system appears to be underperforming across nearly all student groups when compared with both national and regional peers.

America's Post-Pandemic Slump

The sharp decline in student achievement following the COVID-19 pandemic occurred against the backdrop of extraordinary disruption to schooling nationwide. Between 2020 and 2022, schools across the country faced prolonged closures, widespread shifts to remote or hybrid instruction, staffing shortages, elevated teacher turnover, and historically high rates of student absenteeism. At the same time, federal, state, and local governments directed unprecedented levels of funding to K–12 education, most notably through pandemic relief packages intended to stabilize school systems and accelerate academic recovery.[16]

Despite unprecedented spending on public schools, student achievement fell across the country. Figure S.1 shows national average NAEP scores in math and reading for 4th graders and 8th graders over time, including periods both before and after the pandemic.

Declining performance is visible in all grades and subjects. Average 8th grade math scores fell by 9 points from 2017 to 2022, and those scores remained just as low in 2024. Fourth grade math scores followed a similar pattern, declining by 5 points from their 2019 peak and only recovering by 1 point from 2022 to 2024. Reading scores also declined dramatically across both grades, erasing the progress from earlier decades.

Figure S.1. Student achievement had been rising, especially in math, before falling in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
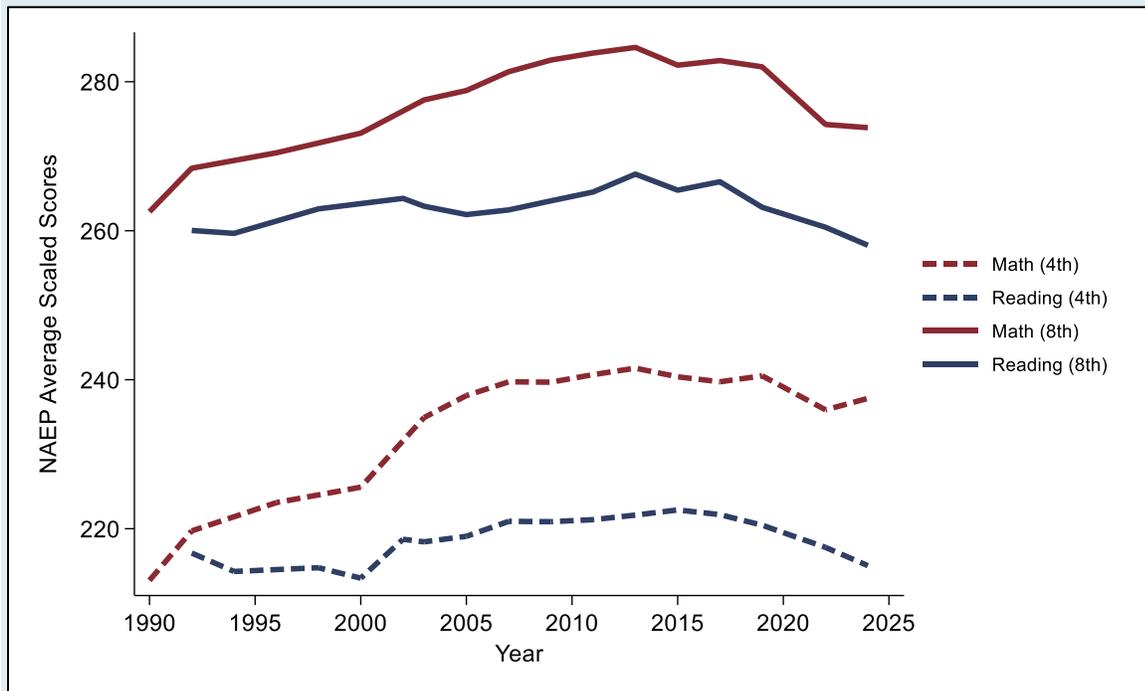
Note: NAEP average scaled score data. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Although early commentary on pandemic learning loss often emphasized its unequal effects, the national NAEP data indicate that achievement declines were broad-based and not confined to students from less affluent backgrounds. Figure S.2 shows that declines among more affluent students largely parallel those of their less affluent peers. In 4th grade reading, for example, more affluent students even experienced a slightly larger decline in average scores between 2019 and 2024 (6.7 points) than less affluent students (6.2 points).[17]

Figure S.2: Declines in test scores are similar for students from more affluent families and students from less affluent families.
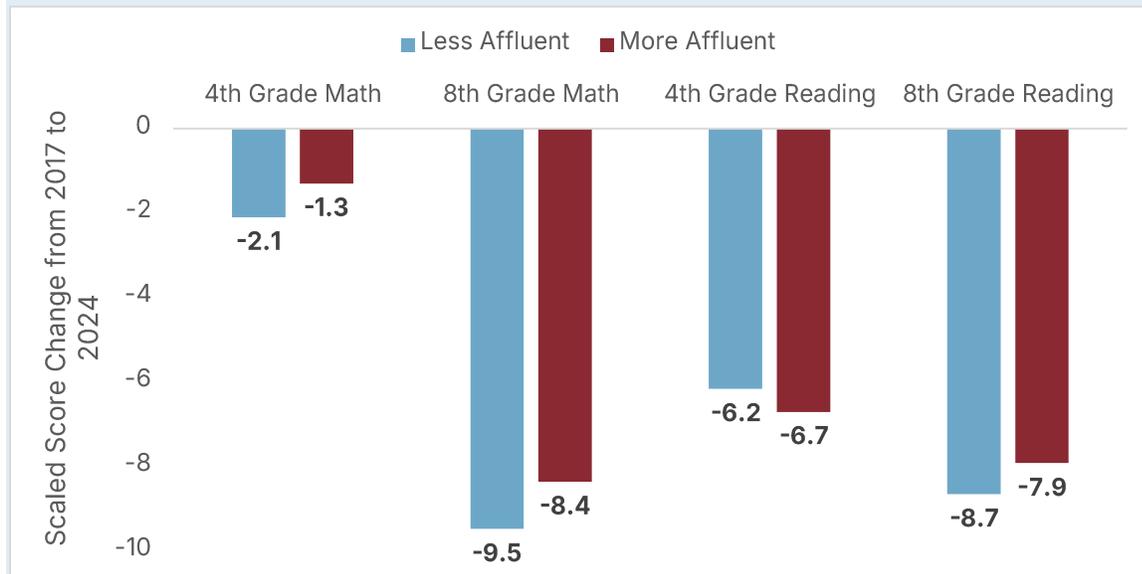
Note: NAEP average scaled score data from 2017 and 2024. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Oklahoma's Long-Term Educational Decline

Oklahoma's troubling education ranking is no myth, but a broader perspective on the data shows that it is neither inevitable nor long-standing. To visualize changes in Oklahoma's educational rankings, we examine NAEP Core (i.e., math and reading in 4th grade and 8th grade) data going back to the early 1990s.

Finding 4: Oklahoma's educational outcomes once ranked above average nationally before falling to their low levels today.

The long-term trend is striking. In the 1990s, Oklahoma's academic performance was average or better by national standards. For example, when national reading scores for 1998 were released, Oklahoma placed above the national average in both 4th grade and 8th grade and ahead of every Southern state and every neighboring state except Kansas.

Since the late 1990s, however, Oklahoma's standing has declined steadily. By the early 2000s, the state had slipped into the bottom half of states. Over the next two decades, that decline continued gradually but persistently. Since 2015, Oklahoma's position has been in steady decline, falling 11 places. As discussed above, by 2024, Oklahoma ranked 48th nationally, ahead of only three jurisdictions.

Figure 1 illustrates this trajectory. The figure plots Oklahoma's national rank on the combined NAEP Core measure over time. The downward trend is not abrupt, nor is it driven by a single cohort or assessment. Instead, it reflects a long-running erosion of relative performance, one that has unfolded over many years and accelerated over the past decade.

Figure 1. Oklahoma's educational outcomes were once above average, but since the late 1990s, these outcomes have fallen dramatically compared with the outcomes of other states.
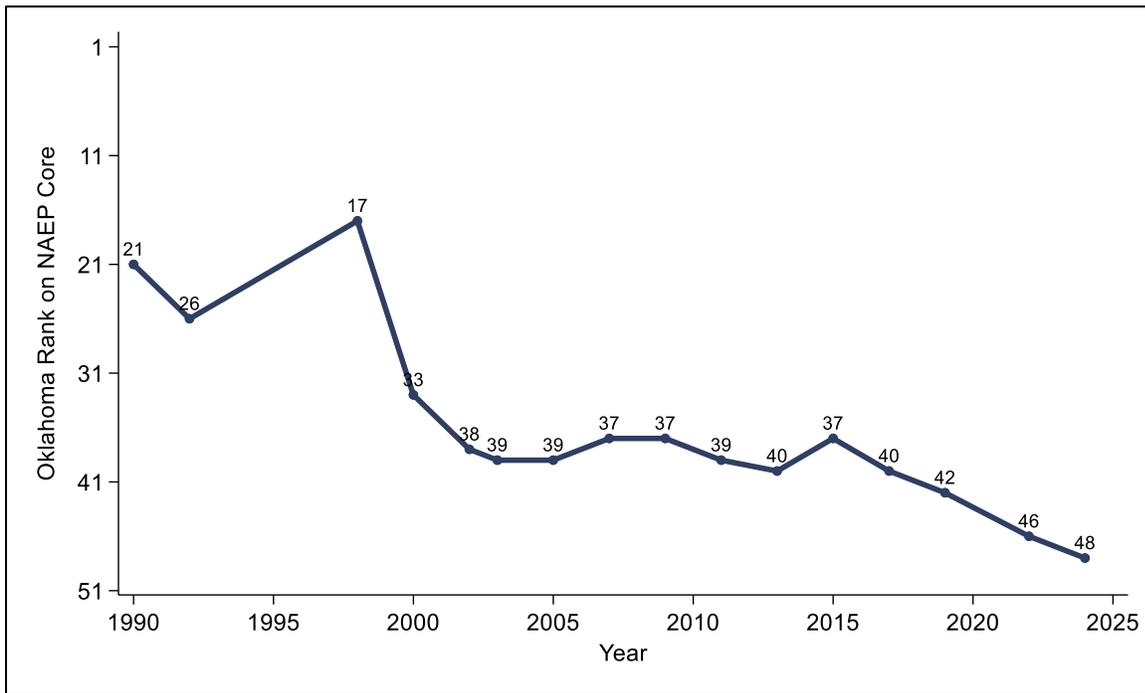
Note: NAEP ranks based on NAEP Core (i.e., 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading) data from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks are for combined grades and subjects and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades and subjects. Ranks in years 1992 to 2002 are three-period moving averages with rank adjustment to account for the fact that not all states participated in these years. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

The overall decline in Oklahoma's rank is visible in both mathematics and reading, though the timing and pace differ somewhat by subject.

In mathematics, Oklahoma's relative standing has eroded gradually over time (Figure 2). In the early 1990s, the state ranked near the national average. By the early 2000s, it had slipped into the bottom third of states. Since then, Oklahoma's math ranking has remained persistently low, with little evidence of sustained recovery. In 2024, Oklahoma ranked 44th nationally in math, after briefly falling as low as 47th in 2022.

Figure 2. Oklahoma's national rank in mathematics has declined steadily over time.
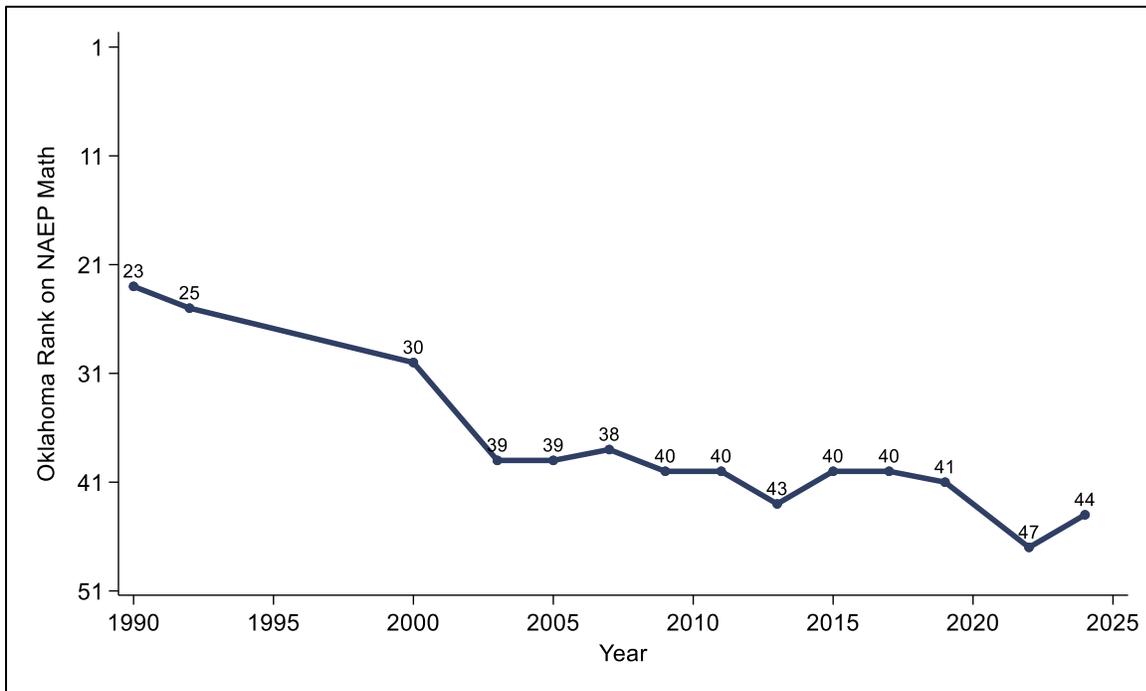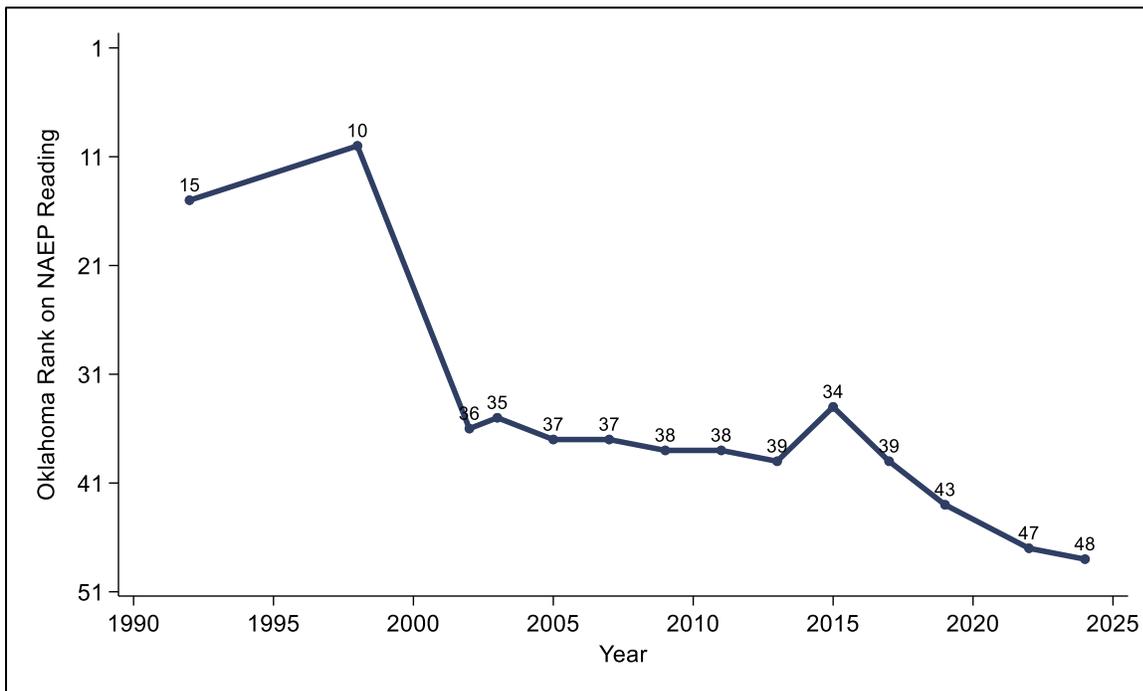

Note: NAEP ranks based on NAEP Core (i.e., 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading) data from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks are for combined grades and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades. Ranks in years 1990 to 2002 are three-period moving averages with rank adjustment to account for the fact that not all states participated in these years. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Oklahoma's decline in reading has been sharper and more pronounced (Figure 3). During the 1990s, Oklahoma was a relatively high-performing state in reading, with scores above the national average. Beginning around 2000, however, the state's reading rank fell rapidly. By the mid-2000s, Oklahoma was below average, and since then, its relative position has continued to deteriorate, particularly since 2015. In 2024, Oklahoma ranked 48th nationally in reading, claiming its worst performance on record.

Figure 3. Oklahoma's national rank in reading fell sharply after the 1990s and has continued to decline, especially since 2015.


Note: NAEP ranks based on NAEP Core (i.e., 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading) data from 51 jurisdictions (the 50 states and the District of Columbia). Ranks are for combined grades and are produced by standardizing the scaled score measures and averaging across grades. Ranks in years 1992 to 2002 are three-period moving averages with rank adjustment to account for the fact that not all states participated in these years. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

Nationally, student performance had been generally rising prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, after which we've seen falling achievement (see *America's Post-Pandemic Slump*), and it is within that context that Oklahoma's rankings have shifted. Although rankings are an important metric showing how Oklahoma compares nationally and regionally, it is also valuable to look at Oklahoma's academic performance in absolute terms using data directly describing the state's average NAEP scaled scores.

Figure 4 shows Oklahoma's scores on each NAEP Core assessment. In both subjects and grades, achievement has generally declined over the past decade, but the recent declines in reading are astounding. Oklahoma's reading scores in both 4th grade and 8th grade are the worst on record, and scores in both grades have been in sharp decline since 2015.

Oklahoma's math achievement was generally on the rise from the 1990s until the mid-2010s. Math scores in 8th grade peaked in 2013, and 4th grade scores peaked in 2015. Both grades' math scores saw small upticks from 2022 to 2024, but the 2024 scores were still lower than any other scores since the 4th graders of 2003 or the 8th graders of 1990, respectively.

Figure 4: Oklahoma's math performance has seen ups and downs, but reading performance has never been lower.
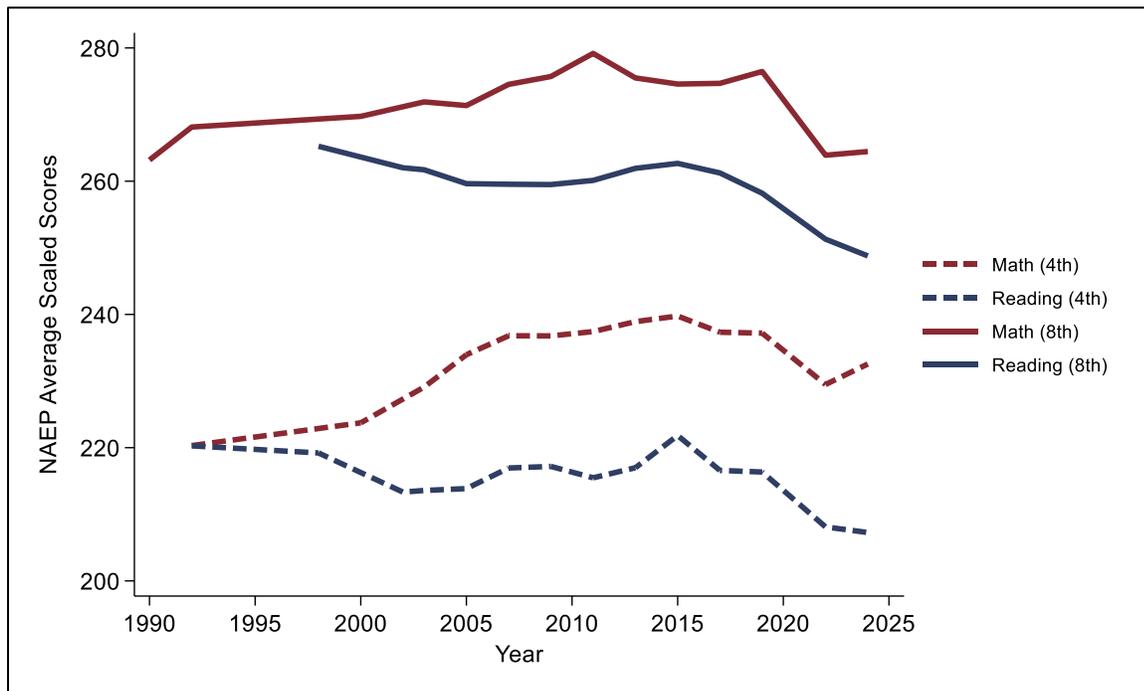
Note: NAEP average scaled score data. See *Data and Methods* for more information.

The Counterexamples

In every year of NAEP Core data until 2013, Oklahoma's education system ranked higher than those of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. At the time, those states were often viewed as chronic underperformers, especially Mississippi, which ranked near the bottom nationally for nearly two decades (Figure 5).

Yet in recent years, the "Southern Surge" has lifted these states and several others in the region.[18] Tennessee was the first of these states to pull ahead of Oklahoma, overtaking it in 2013. Mississippi followed in 2019, and then Louisiana passed Oklahoma in 2022.

Finding 5: Oklahoma's decline occurred while some other low-performing states in the region improved.

Figure 5 illustrates this divergence. While Oklahoma's rank has drifted steadily downward over the past two decades, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi have all moved in the opposite direction. The contrast is especially stark in Mississippi's case. After ranking last or nearly last in almost every NAEP administration from the early 1990s through 2013, Mississippi rose sharply in the late 2010s and early 2020s, and the state's 2024 results placed it 28th out of 51 nationally.[19]

Figure 5. The "Southern Surge" has lifted some states in region, but not Oklahoma.
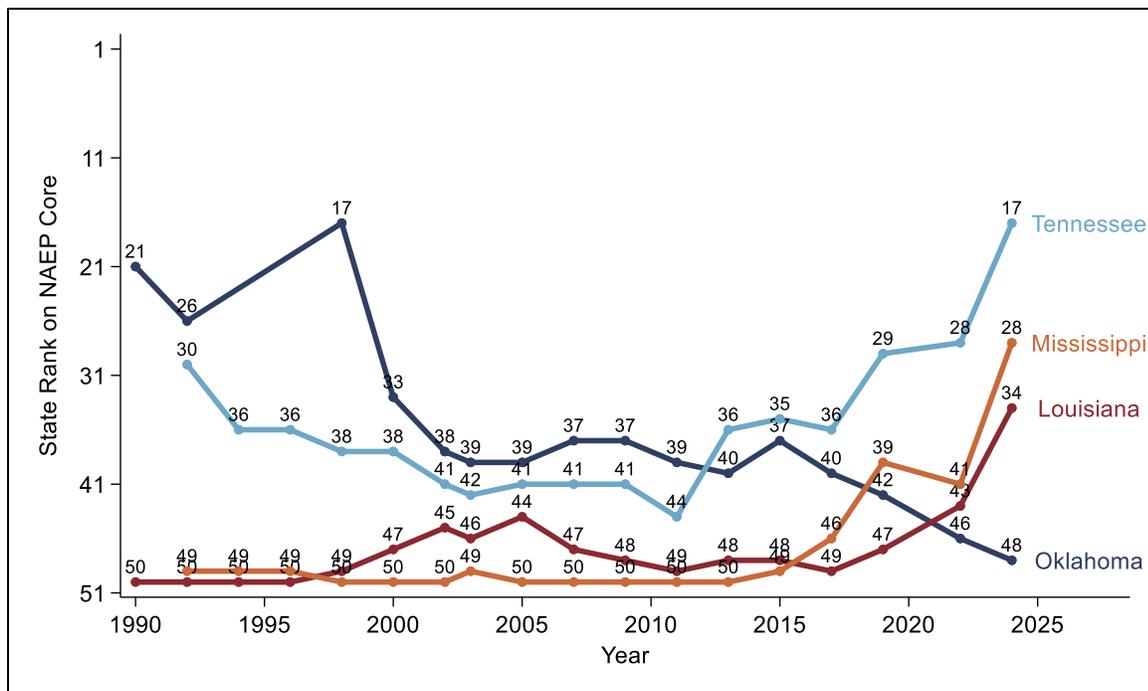
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Tennessee's trajectory is similarly instructive. Tennessee's ranking was slightly lower than Oklahoma's from the 1990s until the 2010s. After 2011, the state's ranking began to improve steadily, and the Volunteer State now ranks in the top third nationally. Louisiana's gains have been more gradual but nonetheless meaningful, particularly in recent years. During a time when states across the country have been struggling with increased absenteeism, falling student engagement, and historic learning loss in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Louisiana and Mississippi are the only states in the country to have improved their average test scores over the past decade.[20] In contrast, Oklahoma's relative position has deteriorated during the same period, leaving the state behind those regional peers that it once outperformed.

More research is needed to isolate the causal mechanisms behind the so-called "Southern Surge," but those ranking improvements appear to reflect deliberate efforts to improve instruction and accountability within those states.[21] Reforms included renewed emphasis on evidence-based reading instruction,[22] changes to curricula and standards,[23] and investments in teacher support[24] and high-quality professional development.[25] Experts in those states often emphasize that their efforts were not one-time initiatives but part of multiyear strategies focused on systemic improvement.[26]

Implications

The key findings of this report should be read as a diagnosis, not a prescription. These data show Oklahoma's persistently declining educational rankings, pointing to undeniable problems in the state's education system, but they cannot dictate any single solution.

Still, several broad implications are apparent.

First, **claims of Oklahoma's poor educational standing have a valid basis in Oklahoma's educational outcomes**, according to the most well-regarded education data available. Oklahoma's NAEP rank of 48th in the nation—and last in the region—sadly dovetails with other measures of young people's outcomes, including rankings in the infamous WalletHub report (Oklahoma's rank: 50th),[27] *U.S. News & World Report* (42nd),[28] and the 2025 Kids Count Data Book for education (48th).[29] With the notable exception of the state's Native American student population, Oklahoma's largest student groups all compare poorly with other states and rank last or nearly last in the region, suggesting deep and systemic challenges.

Second, **Oklahoma's educational outcomes were once near or above the national average**. In the 1990s, Oklahoma's rank on the NAEP was around the national average. In the years since, the state has maintained a below-average position, but it only fell into the bottom 10 states in reading after 2019 and has only ranked in the bottom five states in math and reading in 2022 and 2024. This dramatic decline in relative state performance implies not only that Oklahoma's failures are recent but also that there is nothing inevitable about Oklahoma's low ranking. There is no reason that the state cannot perform much better than present data indicate it performs.

Third, **the data show that low-ranking states can turn themselves around**. The experiences of the "Southern Surge" states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee prove that poor rankings can be reversed. Indeed, Oklahoma should study the experiences of other states, not to copy them wholesale but to understand why some approaches are working and others are not. Other states in the region are already doing so. For example, in 2023, Arkansas, another chronically low-performing state, passed a package of education policy changes via the LEARNS Act, which, among other provisions, substantially raised minimum teacher salaries and enacted a slew of literacy reforms clearly inspired by Mississippi's experience.[30] Mississippi's new law funded literacy coaches, established new tutoring programs, upgraded data systems, and mandated retention for students who do not meet reading benchmarks, and some similar policies have recently been debated in Oklahoma.[31]

The path forward for Oklahoma will require sustained effort, openness to evidence, a willingness to learn from both successes and failures elsewhere, the courage to change, and better alignment of resources with what matters most in classrooms. But history offers reason for optimism. Oklahoma has mounted comebacks before, and with a seriousness of purpose, it can do so again.

Technical Appendix

This report examines how Oklahoma's K–12 academic performance compares with that of other states, how those rankings have changed over time, and how outcomes differ across major student subgroups. To do so, the report relies on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only assessment that allows for consistent, long-term, state-by-state comparisons of student achievement in the United States.

The report's analytical strategy is straightforward. First, it documents Oklahoma's standing in relation to other states in math and reading achievement at the 4th grade and 8th grade levels. Second, it examines how the state's relative position has shifted over the past three decades. Third, it explores whether Oklahoma's rankings differ meaningfully by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, shedding light on the role that demographics may play in shaping overall outcomes. Finally, it presents both subject-specific results and pooled measures that summarize performance across grades and subjects to provide a clear, high-level picture of how states compare.

Comparative rankings across states constitute the main focus of this report, not just raw scores. Rankings are often more intuitive for policymakers and the public, and here they allow readers to see clearly how Oklahoma stacked up against its peers, even in years when national performance rose or fell overall.

Data Source and Scope

All analyses are based on publicly available NAEP state-level data from 1990 to 2024, downloaded from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) NAEP Data Explorer (Table A1). The report uses the NAEP's main assessments in mathematics and reading for grade 4 and grade 8. These grades are tested regularly and provide the most reliable long-term trend data. The report includes results for all participating states, the District of Columbia, and, when applicable, national averages.

Table A1. NAEP reading and math score data are available for all states in all assessment years since 2003.

YEAR	READING		MATH	
	JURISDICTIONS INCLUDED	OKLAHOMA INCLUDED	JURISDICTIONS INCLUDED	OKLAHOMA INCLUDED
1990	0	No	37	Yes
1992	41	Yes	42	Yes
1994	40	No	0	No
1996	0	No	44	No
1998	40	Yes	0	No
2000	0	No	41	Yes
2002	44	Yes	0	No
2003	51	Yes	51	Yes
2005	51	Yes	51	Yes
2007	51	Yes	51	Yes
2009	51	Yes	51	Yes
2011	51	Yes	51	Yes
2013	51	Yes	51	Yes
2015	51	Yes	51	Yes
2017	51	Yes	51	Yes
2019	51	Yes	51	Yes
2022	51	Yes	51	Yes
2024	51	Yes	51	Yes

Note: Data only refer to NAEP reading and math scores in 4th grade and 8th grade (NAEP Core). "Jurisdictions" refers to the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

12th grade NAEP

Although NAEP also administers assessments at grade 12, the report excludes 12th grade data. Twelfth graders participate in the NAEP less frequently than younger students, and their results might be less indicative of school effectiveness, given weaker academic engagement near the end of high school. As researchers have noted, motivation is a significant concern for NAEP assessments at grade 12, as students have little reason to take the test seriously once graduation is imminent.[32] For these reasons, most state-level trend analyses focus on 4th grade and 8th grade, as does this report.

Student Groups

In addition to results for all students, the report analyzes NAEP outcomes by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Where data are available from NCES, we report results for Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Hispanic, and White students, as well as students identifying with two or more races. For the group NCES calls "Two or more races," the report uses "multiracial" for the sake of grammatical parallelism, and the group NCES calls "American Indian/Alaska Native" is referred to in the report as "Native American" for the sake of brevity.

The analysis uses the NAEP's indicator of economic disadvantage to define socioeconomic status, but the report calls students "more affluent" or "less affluent" rather than the more technical terms "not economically disadvantaged" and "economically disadvantaged," respectively.

When subgroup data are unavailable or suppressed for a given state-year—often because of small sample sizes—those observations are excluded from subgroup-specific analyses. As a result, rankings for some subgroups may include fewer than 51 jurisdictions, as reported in table notes throughout the report.

Data Preparation

In rare cases, NAEP files contain multiple records for the same state, year, and subgroup, typically reflecting flagged or revised values. In these instances, the unflagged observations are retained when available, and flagged values are included only when no unflagged value is available. After cleaning, the final dataset includes nearly 20,000 state-by-year-by-group observations spanning math and reading achievement from 1990 through 2024.

Pooled Outcomes

The NAEP reports achievement on subject-specific scale scores that are not directly comparable across grades or subjects. To allow for meaningful aggregation, these scores are converted into standardized scores (z-scores) within each subject, grade, and student group. This approach measures how far above or below the national average a state performs compared with the average of all states and years, expressed in standard deviation units.

Using these z-scores, several summary measures are constructed:

- Subject-pooled performance, which averages standardized math and reading results

- Grade-pooled performance, which averages standardized 4th grade and 8th grade results

- Fully pooled performance, which summarizes achievement across subjects (math and reading) and grades (4th and 8th)

Pooling provides a more stable indicator of overall academic performance than any single test result and reduces the influence of year-to-year fluctuations.

State Rankings and Rank Adjustment

State rankings are calculated separately for each year, subject, grade, and student group. States with higher standardized scores receive better (numerically lower) ranks. When pooled measures are used, rankings reflect average standardized performance across all relevant components.

The NAEP did not include all 50 states and the District of Columbia in every assessment administration during the early years of this analysis (Table A1), and some early administrations include results for only one core subject. These features complicate comparisons over time because (a) a pooled math-and-reading indicator cannot be formed in years when only one subject is available and (b) a state's ordinal rank depends on how many jurisdictions have valid scores in that year.

To improve comparability, the report uses a two-part approach, both of which are only used for outcomes prior to 2003, when the NAEP became universal: (1) a three-administration moving average for early pooled outcomes and (2) a rank rescaling that places ranks on a consistent 1–51 scale.

Three-administration moving averages

For each state, subgroup, grade, and subject (including pooled measures), NAEP scale scores are first converted to standardized scores (z-scores). For pooled analyses in the early period, the report then computes a three-administration moving average of the standardized scores using the prior test administration, the current test administration, and the next test administration. Because the NAEP is not administered annually, this moving average is defined across adjacent NAEP administrations (e.g., 1990–1992–1994), and each moving-average value is assigned to the middle administration year. (Values in 1990 represent a two-administration moving average, as there is no prior year to include.) This smoothing reduces volatility and allows the pooled series to incorporate information from surrounding administrations when a given year has limited subject coverage.

Rescaling ranks to a common 51-jurisdiction metric

Ranks are calculated within each year (and within each subject and grade as applicable) among jurisdictions with valid data. In years when fewer than 51 jurisdictions have valid scores, raw ranks are not directly comparable with later years with full participation. To address this, the report rescales ranks to the metric that would apply if all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (51 jurisdictions) were present, while preserving each state's position in the year-specific distribution:

$$Rank^{Adj} = \frac{Rank}{N_y} \times 51$$

where $Rank$ is the state's raw rank in that year and N_y is the number of jurisdictions with valid scores for that year and measure (i.e., the maximum rank observed). Adjusted ranks are rounded to the nearest integer.

For figures spanning the full 1990–2024 period, the report shows adjusted moving-average ranks for the early years (1992 to 2002), when participation and subject coverage are less consistent, and uses standard ranks for 2003 to 2024, when the NAEP provides complete state coverage in both math and reading at grades 4 and 8. In those

figures, data from the year 1990 are only used to formulate the 1992 moving average, as 1990 does not include a prior year on which to base a moving average.

Limitations

This analysis is subject to several limitations. First, although the sample is large, the NAEP only assesses a sample of students, and because of this approach, estimates are subject to some sampling error. Second, subgroup results are unavailable for some states and years, limiting comparability in certain analyses. Third, rankings emphasize relative position rather than absolute performance; a state's rank can change even if its scores remain stable. Some of the analysis includes NAEP scores for additional context related to state ranks.

The state NAEP scores included in this report represent average values for students attending public schools (both traditional public schools and charter schools) in each state.

Despite those caveats, the NAEP remains the most rigorous and credible source for evaluating long-term, cross-state differences in academic achievement for students.

Endnotes

[1] This rank is approximated using rank adjustment, as all jurisdictions did not participate in all NAEP data collections prior to 2003. See *Technical Appendix* for details on how rank adjustment is performed.

[2] The WalletHub analysis and the present analysis include the District of Columbia in the rankings of 51 total jurisdictions. Adam McCann, "States With the Best & Worst School Systems," *WalletHub*, July 21, 2025, https://wallethub.com/edu/e/states-with-the-best-schools/5335.

[3] Daniel Hamlin, "Results of the 2025 Oklahoma Education Poll," *Oklahoma Education Journal* 3, no. 5 (May 12, 2025): 28–39, https://oej.scholasticahq.com/article/137077-results-of-the-2025-oklahoma-education-poll.

[4] National Education Association, *Rankings of the States 2024 and Estimates of School Statistics 2025* (Washington, DC: NEA Research, April 2025), https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2025_rankings_and_estimates_report.pdf.

[5] McCann, 2025.

[6] Annie E. Casey Foundation, *KIDS COUNT Data Book Interactive*, 2025, Annie E. Casey Foundation, https://www.aecf.org/interactive/databook.

[7] Center for Education Reform, *Parent Power Index*, 2025, interactive report, Center for Education Reform, https://parentpowerindex.edreform.com (accessed January 15, 2026).

[8] McCann, Adam, "Most & Least Educated States in America (2025)," *WalletHub*, February 10, 2025, https://wallethub.com/edu/e/most-educated-states/31075.

[9] "List of U.S. States and Territories by GDP," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._states_and_territories_by_GDP, accessed January 23, 2026.

[10] Sampling for NAEP Assessments," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed January 12, 2026, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/focus_on_naep/assessment_literacy/#/sampling.

[11] For a history of the NAEP, see Chester E. Finn Jr., *Assessing the Nation's Report Card* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021).

[12] Diane Ravitch, "Diane Ravitch on Education," *EconTalk*, April 12, 2010, https://www.econtalk.org/ravitch-on-education.

[13] The present report includes data from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

[14] The relatively high performance of Oklahoma's Native American students is consistent with their performance in previous years. Among the small number of states with Native American populations that are sufficiently large to be reported, Oklahoma's Native American students have ranked at or near the top nationally for more than three decades. Still, it is important to interpret such subgroup rankings carefully. Although Oklahoma's Native American students perform at a similar level to other students in the state, they are high-performing in relation to Native American students nationally, and at the same time, their average performance still falls below the national average for all students, reflecting Oklahoma's generally low achievement levels.

[15] The lone exception is Native American students, for whom Oklahoma is the only state in the region with reportable NAEP data in 2024.

[16] Dan Goldhaber and Grace Falken, *ESSER and Student Achievement: Assessing the Impacts of the Largest One-Time Federal Investment in K12 Schools*, CALDER Working Paper No. 301-0624 (American Institutes for Research, June 2024), ED662866, 61 pp., https://caldercenter.org/publications/esser-and-student-achievement-assessing-impacts-largest-one-time-federal-investment.

[17] Other research has shown that the decline in achievement has been largely driven by students near the bottom of the achievement distribution. See Scott J. Peters, Meredith Langi, Megan Kuhfeld, and Karyn Lewis, "Unequal Learning Loss: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Influenced the Academic Growth of Learners at the Tails of the Achievement Distribution," *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 48, no. 1 (2025): 25–47, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/01623532241301079. NAEP trends also show larger declines in test scores at the bottom of the distribution, e.g., https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/reading/scores-percentiles/?age=9.

[18] Christopher Huffaker, "New England Schools Are Failing — and 'Nobody Seems to Care,'" *The Boston Globe*, October 1, 2025, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/10/01/magazine/northern-nosedive-reading-math.

[19] Mississippi's 4th grade scores have risen especially fast in recent years, and the Magnolia State's 4th graders ranked 16th in math and 9th in reading in the most recent (2024) NAEP data administration. For some subgroups—such as Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students—Mississippi's rankings are even higher. "Mississippi's 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress," Mississippi Department of Education, January 15, 2025, https://mdek12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2025/01/NAEPRankings-OnePager-2025-0115-JC-v02.pdf.

[20] Averaging across 4th grade and 8th grade math and reading scores using the methodology in this report, all jurisdictions except Louisiana, Mississippi, and the District of Columbia experienced declining NAEP scores from 2013 to 2024. Although Tennessee's ranking has surged (see Figure 5), the Volunteer State's average NAEP scores have only improved relatively to other states during this period, and the state's scores are generally lower than they were a decade ago, especially in reading.

[21] Matt Barnum, "The 'Southern Surge' Offers Lessons for Student Learning — but We Don't Fully Understand It Yet," *Chalkbeat*, October 28, 2025, https://www.chalkbeat.org/2025/10/28/lessons-from-the-southern-surge-on-naep.

[22] Karen Vaites, "The Southern Surge: Understanding the Bright Spots in the Literacy Landscape," *School Yourself* (Substack), February 15, 2025, https://www.karenvaites.org/p/the-southern-surge-understanding.

[23] Natalie Wexler, "What's Really Behind the 'Southern Surge'?" *Minding the Gap* (Substack), October 7, 2025, https://nataliewexler.substack.com/p/whats-really-behind-the-southern.

[24] Louisiana Department of Education, *Let Teachers Teach: Recommendations*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Education, May 2024, https://doe.louisiana.gov/docs/default-source/newsroom/let-teachers-teach-recommendations.pdf?sfvrsn=bbfd6e18_3.

[25] Robert Pondiscio, "Exit Interview: Carey Wright, Mississippi's State Superintendent of Education," *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*, June 30, 2022,

https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/exit-interview-carey-wright-mississippis-state-superintendent-education.

[26] Devna Bose, "'Mississippi Marathon' Continues: 85% of Third-Graders Pass Reading Test," *Mississippi Today*, November 13, 2025, https://mississippitoday.org/2025/11/13/mississippi-marathon-85-percent-third-graders-pass-reading-test.

[27] McCann, 2025.

[28] "Best States Rankings," *U.S. News & World Report*, 2025, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings.

[29] Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025.

[30] *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, "What You Need to Know about the Arkansas LEARNS Act," March 10, 2023, https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2023/mar/10/what-you-need-to-know-about-arkansas-learns; Lauren Wagner, "4,200 Arkansas Teachers Will Get Up to $10K for High Performance, Student Scores," *The 74*, June 27, 2025, https://www.the74million.org/article/4200-arkansas-teachers-will-get-up-to-10k-for-high-performance-student-scores.

[31] Adam Tyner, "A retention program can help OK schools, but not by itself," *The Oklahoman*. December 10, 2025, https://www.oklahoman.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2025/12/10/studies-show-a-well-crafted-retention-program-can-improve-reading-scores/87660058007.

[32] Jere Brophy and Carole Ames, "NAEP Testing for Twelfth Graders: Motivational Issues" (paper, National Assessment Governing Board, September 2005), https://www.nagb.gov/content/dam/nagb/en/documents/publications/reports-papers/preparedness/naep-testing-motivational-issues.pdf.