

Policy Brief: The 2022 NAEP Scores in US

History and Civics

May 12, 2023

Insights for What's Ahead:

New assessment data of US students reveal too few students are knowledgeable about significant historical events, the function of government, and civic participation, raising further concerns about K-12 learning deficiencies and loss, as well as more broad reaching concerns about the long-term health of our democracy. On May 3, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the 2022 results for the US history and civics assessment of eighth grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):

- Only [14 percent](#) of students scored proficient or higher in US history and [22 percent](#) scored at the level of proficiency or advanced in civics.
- These results mark the first decline in civics and a continued decline in history, adding concern to the [alarm raised last fall](#) when NCES data revealed historic declines in reading and math.
- The NAEP US history and civics assessment was administered to a nationally representative sample of eighth grade students across 410 schools.
- [NAEP US history scores](#) continued in a downward trajectory and now sit 9 points below the average score in 2014, when the decline began, and 1 point below the 1994 average, when the assessment was first given.
- [Average NAEP civics results](#) for 2022 matched 1998 scores, when the assessment was first administered, and decreased by 2 points since the prior assessment in 2018.
- On both exams, lower- and middle-performing students experienced a decline. Students at the 75th percentile experienced a decline in history but not in civics and eighth graders in the 90th percentile held steady on both exams.

The Nation's Report Card

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often considered the Nation's Report Card, has delivered a common measure of student achievement nationally on core subjects since 1969. Congress mandated the program in the [Education Sciences Reform Act \(P.L. 107-279\)](#); it is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the US Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. [NAEP policy](#) is established by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), an independent and bipartisan body appointed by the Secretary of Education.

NAEP assesses students in grades 4, 8, and 12 on a range of subjects including civics, economics, technology and engineering literacy, US history, reading, science, and math. The assessment is not intended to represent individual student or school achievement. Rather, it focuses on achievement for the nation, for states, and for selected urban districts based on participation in the [Trial Urban District Assessment \(TUDA\)](#). Results are delivered for different student subgroups, including students with disabilities, and include a breakdown by percentage of students at each achievement level. The

assessment also captures learning conditions and environments by including survey questionnaires for students, teachers, and schools. The surveys present optional questions that inquire about student learning opportunities in and outside of the classroom, technology use, socioeconomic status, teacher instructional practices, and school characteristics.

The NAEP US history assessment was first administered in 1994 and revised prior to the 2006 exam.

[Based on the revised framework](#), the 2022 exam measured understanding across four themes:

- Change and Continuity in American Democracy;
- The Gathering and Interactions of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas;
- Economic and Technological Changes and Their Relationship to Society, Ideas, and the Environment; and
- The Changing Role of America in the World.

The [exam covered](#) eight chronological periods and considered two dimensions of understanding—historical knowledge and perspective and historical analysis and interpretation.

NCES first assessed civics through the NAEP in 1998 using a [framework developed by subject matter expert committees](#). The NAEP civics exam framework identifies three aspects of the subject to be measured:

- knowledge about government and civil society;
- intellectual and participatory skills essential for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship; and
- civic dispositions that contribute to the political efficacy of the individual, the healthy functioning of the political system, a sense of dignity and worth, and the common good.

Student knowledge is measured using various question formats including multiple choice, matching, and open-ended. The exam [presents questions](#) centered around five overarching issues:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?

In 2022, students also received survey questions that inquired about their opportunities to learn about and engage with civics in and outside of school.

NAEP Scores Released in Civics and US History

On May 3, [NCES announced](#) the first-ever score decline in civics and a continuous decline in US history by eighth graders on the 2022 NAEP exam. The scores reveal that only 14 percent of 8th graders achieved proficiency or higher in U.S. history and 22 percent in civics. More than 85 percent of eighth graders were not able to describe the country's major themes, events, people, and ideas and nearly a third had not reached a basic understanding of civics. On specific questions, fewer than half of students were able to [identify components](#) of the Bill of Rights and [demonstrate understanding](#) of the Electoral College.

The results compound the feelings of dismay expressed across the country in the fall when NAEP results in [reading](#) and [math](#) declined for a majority of students. These results taken by students in 2022 are the first testing results to include the pandemic years and raised further concerns about learning loss for the

K-12 students impacted by the pandemic and how to recover from that loss. Yet, while the downturn in student performance may, in part, be attributed to COVID-19 disruptions, the pandemic is not solely responsible for these new declines. Based on student questionnaire responses that accompanied the exam, access to civics and US history courses is not standard across the country. Nearly [one-third of eighth graders](#) had not taken a course mainly focused on US history during the testing year. And [half of eighth graders](#) did not have access to a class mainly focused on civics.

Previous analyses of disconcerting student performance in history and civics have pointed to the constraints the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law placed on schools to improve student scores in reading and math. However, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) revised the mandates of NCLB and [granted states flexibility](#) to establish local goals and measurements of progress. The most recent NAEP assessment was the second to be administered after the change in law delivered long-sought flexibility and relief to state and local level education leaders. Still, the results do not reflect a shift in priorities to include more on civics and US history instruction. The CivXNow Coalition, a civics education advocacy group, reported last year that [38 states require a stand-alone civics course](#) to graduate high school and only seven states require civics in middle school.

Some experts have highlighted the correlation between reading proficiency and the ability of students to understand core subjects, including history and civics. In 2022, only [31 percent of eighth graders](#) were identified as proficient or advanced readers on the NAEP assessment. It stands to reason that the nearly two-thirds of eighth graders who struggle to read proficiently are also experiencing difficulty comprehending civics and US history instruction. A former member of the NAGB [recommends intermingling literacy, civics, and history lessons](#). The recommendation notes evidence that knowledge about the world supports reading comprehension and stronger comprehension skills allow students to understand more complex texts and become more knowledgeable about the world around them.

Conclusion

The success of democracy in the US relies on an informed and engaged American citizenry. US public schools play a significant role in preparing youth to become productive and active citizens. The recent NAEP US history and civics results are most concerning at a time when many young adults increasingly express discontent with government and other institutions, and political engagement has become highly polarized. A lack of basic understanding of government and civic participation only fuels disconnection and division. It remains to be seen how schools, education leaders, and other stakeholders will respond to the clarion call issued by the results, especially as they grapple with the myriad challenges and deficiencies the pandemic exacerbated for so many of our students.

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