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## N • E • W • S R • E • L • E • A • S • E

### **Alaska students on par with nation's students** *U.S. Department of Education releases national assessment results*

Alaska's fourth-graders and eighth-graders performed on par with the national average in three out of four tests on the National Assessment of Educational Progress conducted last winter.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics today released the national and state results for 2005 in what it calls the nation's report card.

Samples of fourth-graders and eighth-graders in each state were tested in reading and math. Their scores are reported by state average so states can be compared with each other and the nation as a whole. Scores also are reported for each state and nationally in four levels of achievement: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. Scores are not available for individual schools or students.

Alaska's average scores for grades four and eight in math and for grade eight in reading were statistically the same as the national average. But Alaska's fourth-graders scored below the national average in reading.

Education officials in the Murkowski administration have been saying for three years that too many children leave the elementary grades without strong reading skills.

"We have several initiatives aimed at increasing student reading proficiency," said Education Commissioner Roger Sampson. "They include Reading First, the Alaska Reading Program, Pre-K Now, and teacher mentoring. Far too many Alaska students leave grade four reading below grade level. Research shows that a very small percentage of these students ever catch up, even with the help of remedial programs."

The scale scores for Alaska and the nation in the 2005 assessment follow. Scale scores allow comparisons among states and the nation as a whole. Small differences in the numbers are not statistically significant.

Fourth-grade reading: Nation 217, Alaska 211.

Eighth-grade reading: Nation 260, Alaska 259.

Fourth-grade math: Nation 236, Alaska 237.

Eighth-grade math: Nation 278, Alaska 279.

The Alaska scores in 2005 are very similar to its scores in 2003, the previous administration of the test. In contrast, Alaska students have improved since 2003 in their performance on state standards-based assessments, which are used to calculate adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Although the National Assessment of Educational Progress is useful in calling attention to the continuing need for improvement in our schools, it has some limitations. Because it tests samples of students, not the whole student body, it provides only estimates of statewide student performance. Furthermore, each student takes only part of the test.

In contrast, Alaska's standards-based assessments test a much larger percentage of students, often at least 95 percent, and in more grades -- three through nine. The state also tests in more subjects -- writing as well as reading and math. Furthermore, the state's exams have been rigorously reviewed to match state academic standards and to be understandable and relevant to students of all our ethnicities.

In considering Alaska's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, bear in mind also that states may differ in their percentage of tested students who typically struggle academically, such as students with learning disabilities or limited proficiency in English.

Alaska has a much higher percentage of students classified as limited English proficient than the national average. On the fourth-grade reading test, 18 percent of Alaskans were limited English proficient compared to 9 percent nationally. On the eighth-grade reading test, 14 percent of Alaskans were limited English proficient compared to 5 percent nationally.

Additionally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress allows schools to exclude from the test some students who are limited English proficient or have disabilities. Alaska excludes a smaller percentage of those students than some states do and than the national average. Alaska excluded 2 percent of the students initially selected for the assessment, while the nation as a whole excluded 5 percent.

In all, about 10,000 Alaska students took the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2005. They represent roughly half the state's fourth-graders and eighth-graders.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress selects schools to participate based on the state's demographics. The students tested are chosen at random, but schools may exclude some students with disabilities and limited English proficiency.

For more information on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, see: [www.nationsreportcard.gov](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov).

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