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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

EDUCATION | OCTOBER 15, 2009

U.S. Math Scores Hit a Wall

National Test Shows No Gains for Fourth-Graders, Slight Rise for Eighth-Graders

By [ROBERT TOMSHO](#)

Fewer than four of 10 fourth- and eighth-graders are proficient in mathematics, according to a highly regarded federal test given in early 2009, adding to recent evidence that the U.S. drive to become more economically competitive by overhauling public education may be falling short.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress -- often called the "nation's report card" -- found fourth-graders had made no learning gains since the last time the NAEP math test was given, in 2007. Previously, fourth-graders had made scoring gains on every NAEP math test given since 1990.

Significant scoring gaps between white students and their Hispanic and African-American peers also haven't changed much in recent years, the test results showed.

Policy makers and business leaders long have complained that too many U.S. students graduate without the math skills necessary to compete in an international economy that increasingly revolves around technology.

Last year, a national mathematics advisory panel appointed by President George W. Bush issued a report saying the nation's system of math education "is broken and must be fixed." In December, the U.S. and other nations released results of an international test, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, indicating that U.S. math students have made gains in recent years but still trail their peers in places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan.

Earlier this year, a report by ACT, the testing service, found that only about 42% of the U.S. high-school graduates it tested were ready for college-level math. The most recent results from the SAT college-entrance exam also showed no improvement in math.

While some educators cautioned against reading too much into a single round of NAEP testing, others said the latest results indicate a need for more drastic changes than those prompted by the federal No Child Left Behind Law and various state initiatives.

In a statement, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the NAEP results "unacceptable," and said they underscore the need for "reforms that will accelerate student achievement." While not focused specifically on math, the Obama administration's education strategy calls for adopting tougher measures, such as opening more charter schools and linking teacher pay to performance.

David Driscoll, chairman of the board that oversees the NAEP, said that while eighth-grade scores rose slightly, "the improvement is so modest that it just isn't going to do what our kids need." A former education commissioner for Massachusetts, Mr. Driscoll said the U.S. needs to extend the school year

and put more emphasis on training math teachers, many of whom aren't experts in the subject. "We have to take a leap," he said.

Overseen by the Department of Education, NAEP tests in math, reading and other subjects are given periodically to nationwide samplings of students. NAEP tests are widely seen as more demanding than annual state achievement tests.

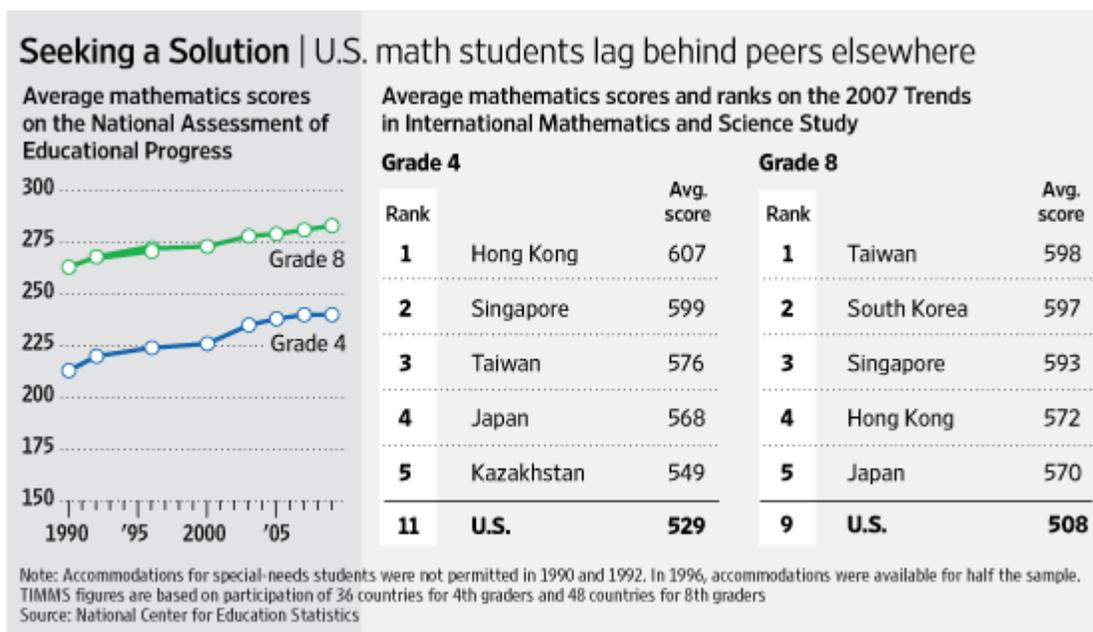
The latest NAEP math tests were given to about 330,000 students during the first three months of this year.

On a zero-to-500 point scale, fourth-graders scored an average of 240 points, unchanged from the 2007 math test. Educators were uncertain how to explain the flat results, and some said they don't point to a trend.

"I would be cautious not to make too much of it," said Kichoon Yang, executive director of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, a professional group.

The 240-point average would put most fourth-graders in NAEP's "basic" scoring range, meaning they probably could subtract a two-digit number from a three-digit number but not identify parallel and perpendicular lines in a geometry problem.

Eighth-graders, meanwhile, scored an average of 283 points, up two points from the 2007 test. That would also put most of them in the "basic" category, signifying that they likely would be able to read information from a graph but probably wouldn't be able to set up and solve an algebraic equation.



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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A3

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