

## National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Frequently Asked Questions

*In October 2015, Gov. Bill Haslam announced that over the past four years Tennessee has been the fastest-improving state in the country when it comes to education – a testament to the hard work of students and educators. His announcement followed the release of results from the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measured how fourth and eighth graders across the country were performing in math and reading.*

### **1. What is NAEP? Why is it important to take it?**

NAEP produces the Nation's Report Card and is considered the gold standard for large-scale assessment. It is the largest nationally representative assessment of what American students know and can do in key subjects, which allows for Tennesseans to see how our students are performing compared to their peers in other states.

NAEP assessments began in 1969 and are sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. They are conducted periodically in reading, math, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and other subjects. Tennessee has participated in the state assessments since 1992. In October 2015, we learned how Tennessee and the nation performed on the 2015 math and reading assessments, which was taken by students in fourth and eighth grade.

The results, especially on the math and reading assessments that are given every two years, are widely reported, and they are an integral part of our nation's evaluation of the condition and progress of education. NAEP is a big picture test. It gives us a good sense of the direction the nation is moving and provides critical long-term trending data.

### **2. How did Tennessee do on the 2015 NAEP math and reading tests?**

Tennessee remains the fastest-improving state in education over the past four years on the Nation's Report Card. In 2015, a new set of fourth and eighth graders proved the gains Tennessee has made are real, and that confirms Tennessee's students and educators are on the right track. We hit the goal we made four years ago to be the fastest improving state in the nation, and no state has had comparable growth – not by a long shot.

Tennessee's national ranking improved both in 2013 and 2015, with Tennessee now rising to 35th in the nation – jumping past nine states in those four years. Our students are on track to meet our ambitious new goal: for Tennessee to be in the top half of all states in all subjects on NAEP by 2019.

Tennessee's rankings also increased in three out of the four tested areas. In a year where states nationwide struggled with fourth grade math, Tennessee's students stayed the

course, improving the state's overall ranking to 25th in that area, up 12 spots from 2013 and putting Tennessee in the top of half of states for the first time in any subject or grade.

The results note key areas for improvement: lower literacy scores for fourth grade reading and persistent achievement gaps. Encouragingly, students with disabilities showed growth in three out of four areas, and in the other – also fourth grade reading – scores remained constant; they did not decrease.

Most importantly, these results highlight that the hard work of Tennessee's school leaders, teachers and students is paying off.

### **3. How did other states do?**

Nationally, states struggled in math, but Tennessee's students bucked the trend and held steady. Tennessee is among the 18 states that did not have a significant decline in any grade or subject; 32 states did.

Our ranking is based relative to other states. So while the national story does impact our ranking, Tennessee's story is different. In Tennessee, we are excited that these results show that what we are doing is working.

### **4. How are Tennessee state leaders using these results? How should educators, parents and students respond?**

Like any assessment, we want to learn from these results. Formal assessments provide one window into how our students are performing, but there are additional key methods through which we can all check to make sure students are on track to be successful.

These results give us a reason to celebrate but underscore the importance of continuing on the path we are on, especially of strengthening literacy skills and focusing on improving education for all students in all subgroups. The education department announced a [new strategic plan](#) earlier in October that outlined strategies in five priority areas, including early foundations and literacy as well as all means all.

The best way we can respond is by acknowledging – and celebrating – the work we have accomplished and using that as a motivation to recommit ourselves every day to helping our students do well. Here in our state, the Tennessee State Standards will help us to hold high expectations for every child and give us all a unified goal of college- and career-readiness, and TNReady and TCAP tests will help us to make sure we are on track. Staying the course on those will be the best way to make sure our kids are ready.

### **5. Which students took NAEP? Do all students take it?**

NAEP uses only a sample of students from a sample of public schools. Schools that receive federal Title I funding are required by law to participate. To ensure the validity of the results, states, districts, and schools are not allowed to pick the schools or students who are assessed. In Tennessee this year, about 12,000 students in about 200 schools took one of the four paper and pencil NAEP tests (fourth grade math, fourth grade reading, eighth grade math, or eighth grade reading).

The National Center for Education Statistics, which administers NAEP, ensures that a representative set of students is assessed, and it selects a sample of schools that reflect the varying demographics of each state. Within each selected school and grade, students are chosen at random. *Every student has the same chance of being chosen*—regardless of race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, status as an English language learner, or any other factors.

### **6. How were those schools selected? How can we be sure they are representative of Tennessee?**

The National Center for Education Statistics uses a systematic process to ensure the sample of public school students represents our state's unique demographics. They first look at all of the public schools in a specific state; sort those schools based on location, racial and ethnic diversity, and student achievement; and select a representative sample. Schools with large enrollments are more likely to be selected because their students represent a larger proportion of the state's overall student population.

In each sampled school, a list is compiled of all students within the grade to be assessed. From this list, a sample of students is randomly selected by NCES. Every student in a sampled school has an equal chance of being selected. After the sample is drawn, students are assigned a single subject area in which to answer questions. NAEP staff members work with the school to verify the accuracy of student demographic information.

### **7. My child took NAEP. Can I see how he or she performed?**

NAEP is *not* designed to show individual results. Since the first NAEP assessment in 1969, students' names have been kept completely confidential. After students complete the assessment, their names are physically removed from the booklets and never leave their schools. Instead of reporting individual scores, NAEP reports overall results for the nation, the states, and for demographic groups of students.

### **8. Is NAEP given online?**

In 2015, NAEP began to transition the math, reading, and science assessments from paper and pencil to technology-based assessments. Some schools took the traditional paper and pencil assessment, while other schools took a pilot technology-based assessment on tablets. All NAEP assessments are scheduled to be on digital devices by 2017.

This year, results were only released from paper and pencil assessments. Each student took NAEP in one format and one subject only.

### **9. How long does NAEP take to complete?**

Students spend up to 90 minutes on most NAEP assessments. This includes setting up, taking the assessment (up to 60 minutes), and getting back to instructional activities. Some specialized assessments, such as hands-on science tasks or computer-based tests, may require up to 120 minutes from beginning to end. Students are assessed in only one subject area.

NAEP is designed to be minimally disruptive. For the 2015 NAEP math and reading tests in fourth and eighth grade, schools had a window that spanned from late January to early March 2015 in which they could choose when to have their students complete the assessment. Teachers do not need to specially prepare their students, and NAEP representatives work with the designated coordinator in each school to organize assessment activities.

### **10. How does NAEP compare to TNReady?**

NAEP is a big picture test. It gives us a good sense of the direction the nation is moving in education and provides critical long-term trending data.

But only a small subset of students in Tennessee take NAEP, only within certain grades, and only in certain years. Because just a group of students take it and only some schools participate, it is not possible to see individual student performance or to know school-level or even district outcomes – which we can do with TNReady. NAEP only gives an overview of state achievement and performance among larger subgroups. Most students will never take a NAEP test.

While NAEP is seen as one of the most rigorous assessments, it is not necessarily aligned with our state's standards for what students should know by a specific year – so performance on NAEP cannot necessarily be translated to how students will perform on state assessments. NAEP assessments also look at cumulative knowledge, not what students have learned in a specific course. For example, when fourth graders take the NAEP assessment in math, the test covers all the math knowledge that a fourth grader could have learned up to that point, not necessarily what they learned that year in class.

TNReady, on the other hand, is aligned with the Tennessee State Standards. It lets students show what they learned over the course of the year, based on Tennessee's expectations for what students need to know and be able to do to be college- and career-ready. TNReady is able to share how individual students perform as well as how students at a specific school are performing, which will help us know where we may need to target additional support –

or where we can learn from what is going right. It helps us make sure every single student is on track to be successful when they leave school.

NAEP questions will feel similar to TNReady in their style and rigor, though, so TNReady will be more like NAEP than the old TCAP tests. On NAEP and TNReady, questions drive toward deeper understanding and critical problem-solving skills. The transition to an online TNReady should also be an advantage for Tennessee students moving forward, since NAEP is transitioning to digital-based assessments by 2017.

Together, NAEP and TNReady help us make sure our students are ready to be successful on whatever path they choose to pursue in life – whether that be here in Tennessee or across the nation.

#### **11. Can I see the NAEP questions?**

After each assessment, NAEP releases dozens of sample questions to the public — more than 3,000 questions are currently available. They can be found through the main NAEP [website: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

#### **12. Where can I learn more about NAEP?**

There is a wealth of additional information and answers at [nationsreportcard.gov](http://nationsreportcard.gov).