

Charting a Course to 2030

SREB

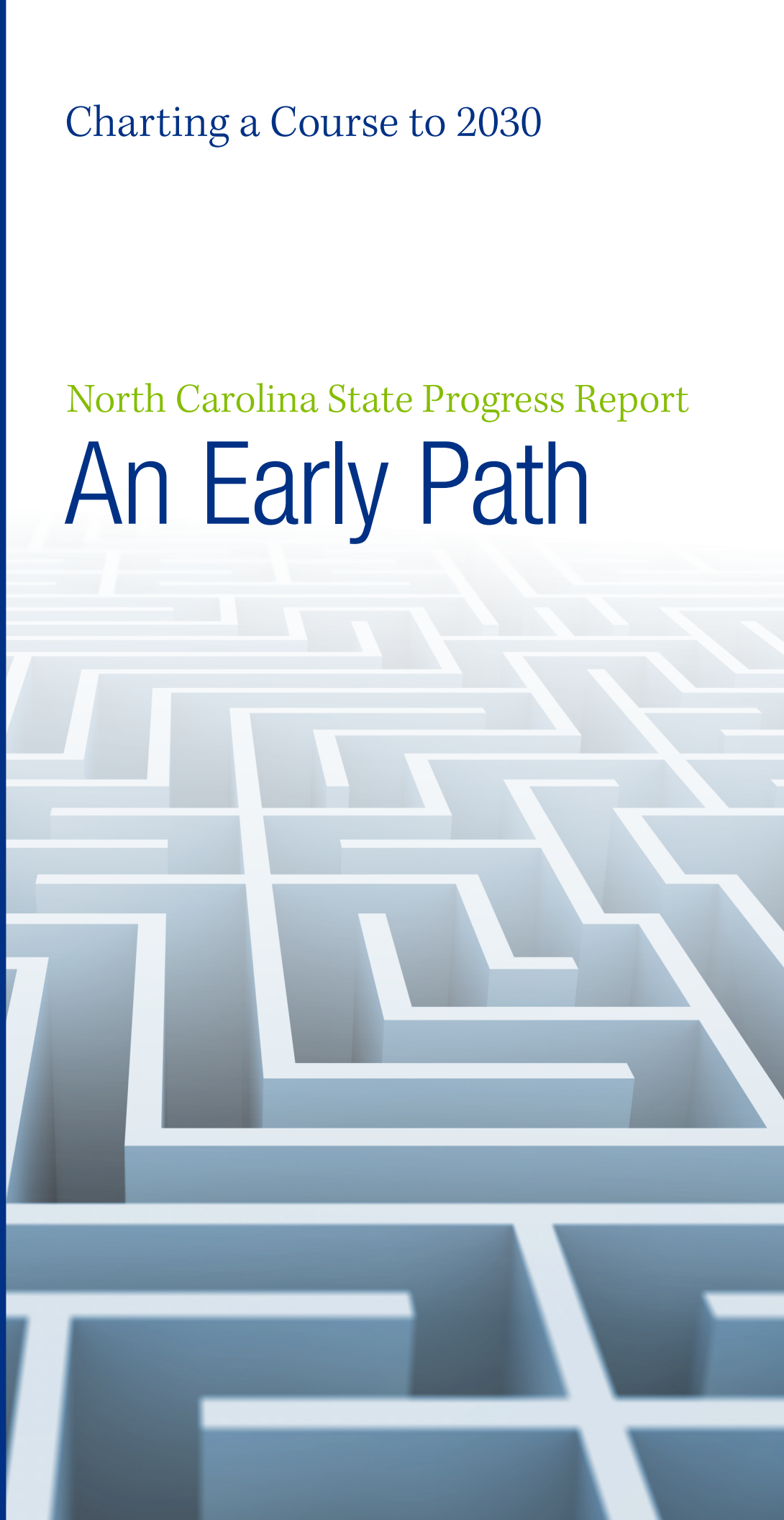
North Carolina State Progress Report

An Early Path

2023

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

SREB.org



SREB's
Challenge to Lead 2020
Goals for Education

All children **entering school** will exhibit the knowledge and the social and developmental skills needed for success in first grade.

Student achievement for all groups in the **early grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Student achievement for all groups in the **middle grades** will exceed state standards and national averages — at rates that close achievement gaps between groups.

Eighty percent of ninth graders will graduate from **high school** ready for college and career training. (This likely means more than 90% will need to graduate from high school and more than 80% will need to meet readiness standards for college and career training.)

Sixty percent of working-age adults will have a **postsecondary** credential: an associate or bachelor's degree, or a career certificate. Public postsecondary institutions will make it a top priority to help states meet state needs by increasing graduates, public service and research.

Increasing percentages of **adults** without high school or postsecondary credentials will pursue opportunities to earn high school alternative certificates, college degrees or career certificates.

North Carolina

An Early Path

2023 State Progress Report
on the Challenge to Lead 2020
Goals for Education

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A Message From the President of SREB

The Southern Regional Education Board has played a critical role in helping states improve education and strengthen the economy across the South for over 75 years.

For the last 20 years, SREB's state progress reports have helped policymakers gauge their state's performance in relation to other SREB states, the region and the nation on a common set of adopted goals and key indicators that span pre-K through the workforce. The 2023 progress report details each state's progress and challenges on a host of indicators from pre-K to middle school that will impact college- and career-readiness into the next decade.

In a recent report from the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, researcher Anthony P. Carnevale juxtaposes his concerns about "the growing doubt about the value of a college degree" with the reality that "postsecondary education and training has become the threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings. It is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class jobs; it is increasingly the only pathway."

I could not agree more that postsecondary credentials or degrees are critical to viability in a Southern workforce.

As SREB pointed out five years ago in *Unprepared and Unaware*, 18 million adults across SREB states could be unemployable by 2030 due to the rapid increase in automation and artificial intelligence. Many of the new jobs created out of this fourth industrial revolution will require some postsecondary credential. Georgetown estimates that by 2031, 72% of jobs will require some postsecondary education or training, and 42% of all jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree.

The pandemic may be in the rearview mirror, but the data in this report highlights the resulting challenges we must grapple with immediately. For the first time since SREB began monitoring National Assessment of Educational Progress data, greater percentages of eighth graders performed at the Proficient and Basic levels in Reading than fourth graders. Why? It is not because eighth graders made greater improvement. Eighth graders received their literacy foundation in the school years before the pandemic. Fourth graders who took the NAEP in 2022, on the other hand, were in second and third grade during the pandemic.

As a result of the pandemic, we can see that greater percentages of fourth graders in 2022 performed below Basic in reading across all student groups when compared to fourth grade students in 2019:

- 41% of all students (up from 37% in 2019)
- 54% of students from low-income families (up from 48% in 2019)
- 52% of Hispanic students (up from 46% in 2019)
- 57% of Black students (up from 52% in 2019)
- 68% of English Language Learners (up from 62% in 2019)
- 74% of students with disabilities (up from 71% in 2019)
- 29% of white students (up from 25% in 2019)



If we do not provide sufficient support to them, thousands of students may not be prepared to succeed in the workforce in the next decade.

A Message From the President of SREB (continued)

The NAEP definition of Basic performance is partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at the grade level assessed. In other words, students whose performance meets the Basic level on NAEP in reading are not on grade level. This also means that students who were below Basic on NAEP are well below grade level. Below grade level performance should be a matter of great concern for all of us as we look ahead to the next decade. Lower reading performance is accompanied by lower comprehension and critical thinking.

SREB is committed to helping states identify the policies and programs that will ensure a sound educational and economic future for our states and their residents. Considering the impact and demands of automation and artificial intelligence on the workforce over the next decade, we must act immediately.

Performance in the areas of literacy, math and science are not simply about performance on a state or federal test. Rather, performance is about ensuring that all students are adequately prepared for a rapidly changing workforce, so they can pursue the education and training they need to succeed. Accordingly, SREB states must use the best research and adopt the best practices to support schools, teachers and students.

SREB is approaching the critical work of improving the vitality of the South by thinking about the entire system of education, from kindergarten through the workforce. SREB believes that students, parents, policymakers and educators must see public education as a system that affects people throughout their entire lives, from beginning through adulthood. For students and their families, the path should be clear from the start.

The Challenge to Excel Goals 2030 were designed around a single-system focus. We will be looking for connections across the education-to-workforce continuum to ensure that state efforts support a brighter future for all our students.



Stephen Pruitt

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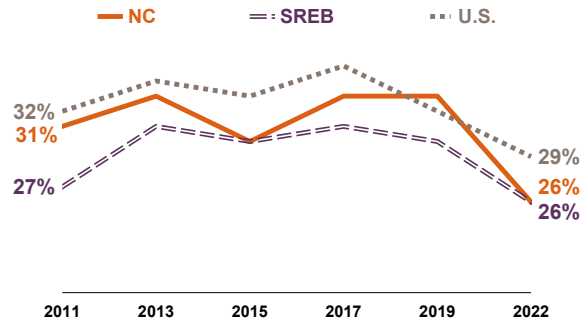
Middle Grades

The National Assessment of Educational Progress — also known as the Nation’s Report Card — measures student achievement every two years, most recently in 2022 (2021 data pushed back due to the COVID-19 pandemic). The NAEP **Basic** level indicates that a student demonstrates *partial* mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills. The **Proficient** level is most closely associated with college and career readiness. The term “benchmark” in this text refers to the percentage of students performing *at or above* a given level.

Overall, the percentages of eighth graders in both the nation and SREB region scoring at or above the NAEP Basic level were lower in 2022 than in 2011. In **reading**, these rates dropped by 8.3 points for the nation and 5.4 points for the region. In **math**, they dropped by 11.8 points and 12.8 points.

8th Grade NAEP Reading

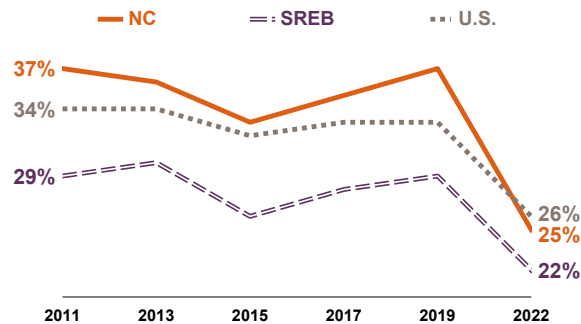
Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

8th Grade NAEP Math

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Fewer percentages of eighth graders performed at or above the Proficient level in 2022 than in 2011. In **reading**, this group of eighth graders declined by 2 points in the nation and 3.1 points in the SREB region; in **math**, it declined by 8 points in the nation and 7.6 points in the region. Together, these changes mean that the group of eighth graders performing at the Basic level or below in 2021 grew compared to 2011.

8th Grade NAEP Reading and Math

Change in the Percentage of Students at Each Level, 2011 to 2022



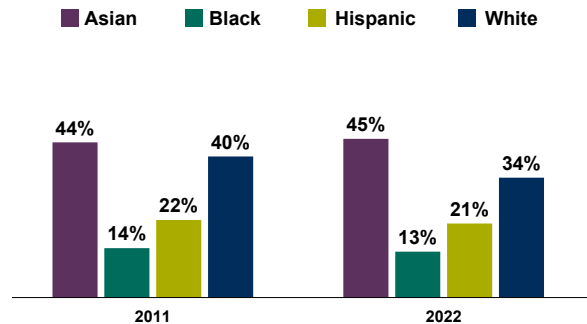
Note: Arrows and state count indicate change of 0.1 percentage points or more.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Each state in the SREB region experienced declining reading and math performance from 2011 to 2022, which follows the national trend as well. The *Challenge to Lead 2020* goal for middle schoolers emphasizes the need for SREB states to close NAEP performance gaps between student groups. Differences in the percentages of two different groups of students performing at a given level on NAEP are an indicator of how well — or poorly — states are doing at supporting students who face additional barriers to learning.

8th Grade NAEP Reading

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



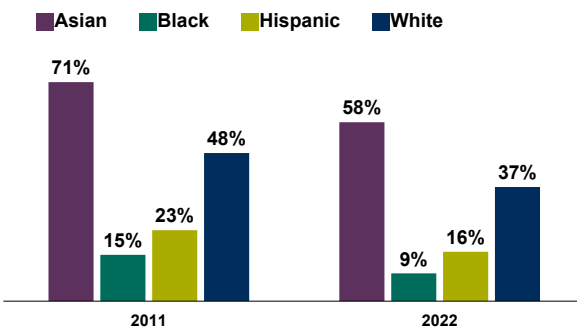
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Middle Grades

In 2022, Asian eighth graders in the SREB region outperformed their peers on NAEP. White eighth graders outperformed their Black and Hispanic peers. In **reading**, the gap between the percentage of white students in SREB states and their Black peers meeting the Proficient benchmark fell between 2011 and 2022; however, all racial groups experienced declines. The gap shrank slightly between white eighth graders and their Hispanic peers. In **math**, gaps decreased between white and Black eighth graders but increased between white and Hispanic eighth graders performing at Proficient or above. The gap between Asian and white students grew from 2011 to 2022.

8th Grade NAEP Math

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina

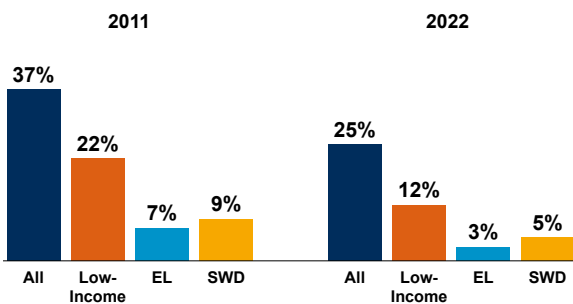


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

In 2022, smaller percentages of eighth graders from low-income families in SREB states met either benchmark in **reading** or **math** than their national peers. In the SREB region, the gap in performance on NAEP between students from low-income families and their peers

8th Grade NAEP Math Gaps

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics
EL = English Learners
SWD = Students With Disabilities

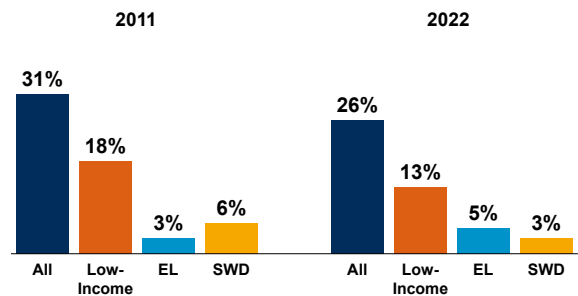
remained constant in **reading** at the Proficient benchmark and grew in **math** at both the Basic and Proficient benchmarks.

English learners in SREB states no longer outperformed their national eighth grade peers in **reading** at both performance benchmarks in 2022. They met the Proficient benchmark at about the same rate as their national peers in **math** and met the Basic benchmark at a slightly lower rate. The gap between ELs and their peers in SREB states fell significantly between 2011 and 2022 in both subjects and at both performance benchmarks; however, declines across the board may explain this narrowing gap.

Eighth graders with disabilities in SREB states did not do as well as their national peers on NAEP in 2022. The percentages of eighth graders with disabilities meeting Basic and Proficient benchmarks on NAEP in **reading** and **math** declined from 2011 to 2022. The gaps between these students and their peers fell at the Proficient benchmark in both subjects due to falling test scores nationally.

8th Grade NAEP Reading Gaps

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics
EL = English Learners
SWD = Students With Disabilities

Gaps between student groups remained in all 16 SREB states in 2022. Policies that help *all* students meet standards and reach higher academic levels are crucial. States should keep in mind that the roots of academic problems in the middle grades often extend back to children's first years in school. Support that begins there and continues into the middle grades ensures that more students are prepared to move into high school.

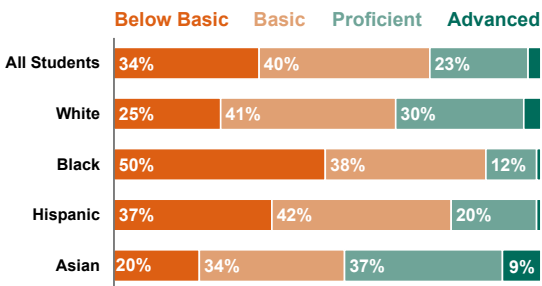
Middle Grades

Understanding a state’s challenges in moving more students to higher levels on NAEP requires a closer look at *all* the data. Helping students rise from Basic to Proficient on NAEP is critical, but it often first requires helping them improve from below Basic to Basic.

While 26% of eighth graders in the median SREB state performed at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in **reading** in 2022, another 35% fell **below Basic**. These students did not demonstrate even partial mastery of grade-level skills. They are far from being prepared for high-school level subjects and are likely to struggle, even with extra support.

8th Grade NAEP Reading

Results by Performance Level in North Carolina, 2022

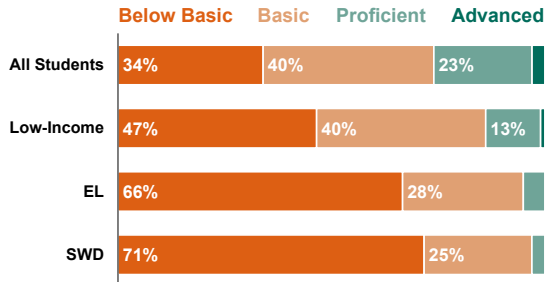


Note: Percentages below 8% are not labeled. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

8th Grade NAEP Reading

Results by Performance Level in North Carolina, 2022



Note: Percentages below 10% are not labeled. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. EL = English Learner; SWD = Students With Disabilities

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Overall percentages of eighth graders performing below Basic on NAEP obscure large gaps between student groups. In 2022, much larger proportions of Black and Hispanic eighth graders fell below the Basic benchmark on NAEP in **reading** than their white and Asian peers. Gaps were also large between students from low-income families, English learners and students with disabilities and their peers. These large differences in performance should motivate states and schools to better support all students in the middle grades, and especially those most at risk of academic struggles.

Related SREB Publications

A New Mission for the Middle Grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World (2011)

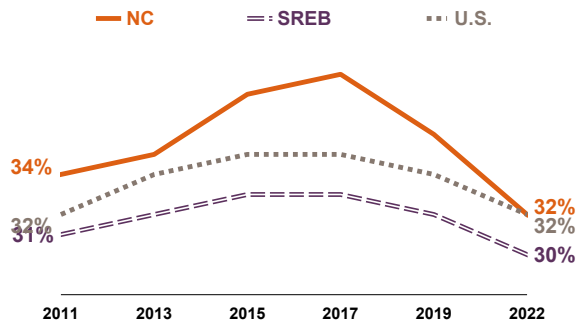
Improved Middle Grades Schools for Improved High School Readiness: Ten Best Practices in the Middle Grades (2012)

Early Grades

The National Assessment of Educational Progress — also known as the Nation’s Report Card — measures student achievement every two years, most recently in 2022. The NAEP **Basic** level indicates that a student demonstrates *partial* mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills. The **Proficient** level is most closely associated with college and career readiness. The term “benchmark” in this text refers to the percentage of students performing *at or above* a given level.

4th Grade NAEP Reading

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina

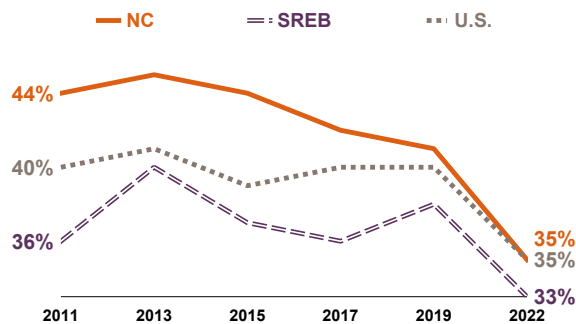


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Smaller percentages of fourth graders scored at or above the NAEP Basic level in 2022 than in 2011 in both the nation and SREB region. In **reading**, these figures dropped by 5.0 points for the nation and 5.7 points for the region; in **math**, they dropped by 8.1 points and 8.7 points.

4th Grade NAEP Math

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The percentages of fourth graders performing at or above Proficient also fell over the same period — by 0.3 points for the nation and 0.4 points for SREB states in reading, and by 4.6 points for the nation and 3.5 points for the region in math.

Together, these changes mean that the group of fourth graders performing at the Basic level in 2022 shrank compared to 2011, while the gaps between students based on income, English-language ability and race/ethnicity increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4th Grade NAEP Reading and Math

Change in Student Achievement at Each Level from 2011 to 2022



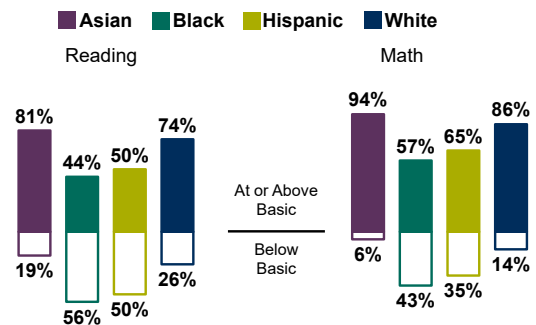
Note: Arrows and state count indicate change of 0.1 percentage points or more.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The *Challenge to Lead 2020* early grades goal emphasizes the need for SREB states to close NAEP performance gaps between students of racial and ethnic groups, between students from low-income households and those whose families earn higher incomes, and between English learners and their peers. Performance gaps are an indicator of how well — or poorly — states are doing at supporting students who face additional barriers to learning.

4th Grade NAEP Reading and Math

Performance Percentages in North Carolina in 2022



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Early Grades

In 2022, Asian fourth graders in the SREB region outperformed their peers on NAEP. White fourth graders outperformed their Black and Hispanic peers. In **reading**, the gaps between the percentages of white and Asian students in SREB states and their peers meeting the Proficient benchmark grew between 2011 and 2022. In math, the gap between white and Black students shrank although still large, but it grew between white and Hispanic and white and Asian students.

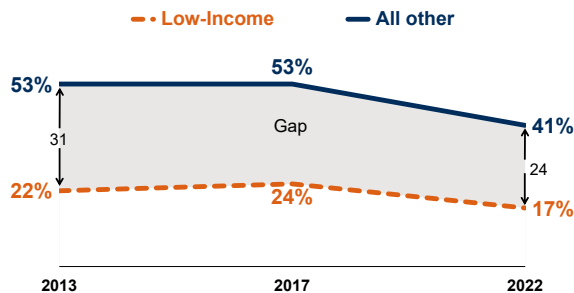
At or Above Proficient on 4th Grade NAEP
North Carolina, 2022

	Reading	Math
All Students	32% ↓	35% ↓
Asian	56% ↑	73% ↑
Black	17% ↑	16% ↓
Hispanic	21% ↑	19% ↓
White	44% ↓	49% ↓

Note: Arrows indicate change of 0.1 percentage points or more since 2011.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

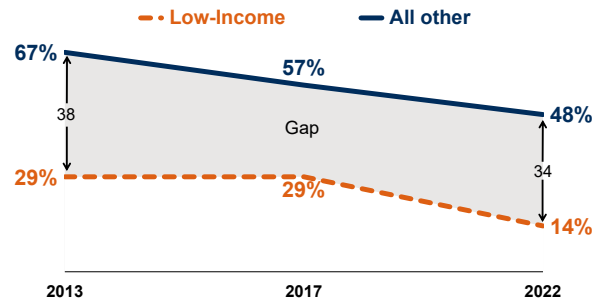
Academic outcomes related to household income contribute to some of the largest and most pervasive achievement gaps across the nation and SREB region. In 2022, fourth graders from low-income families in SREB states performed at or above the Basic and Proficient benchmarks at lower rates than their national peers in both **reading** and **math**. The gap in performance on NAEP between these two groups grew in both subjects and for both benchmarks.

4th Grade NAEP Reading Gap
Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

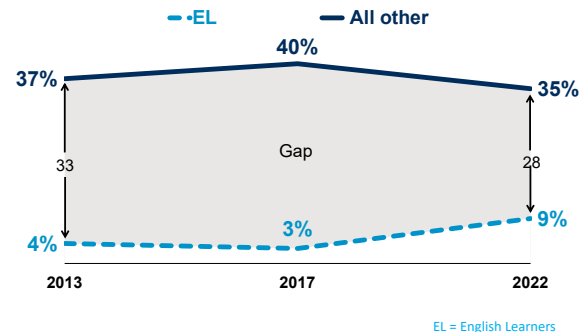
4th Grade NAEP Math Gap
Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

English learners often enter school with little to no exposure to the English language and struggle in U.S. classrooms, especially in subjects that are reading-dependent. This group is projected to account for an increasing proportion of enrollments in SREB states in the immediate future. In 2022, ELs in SREB states met the Basic benchmark at a slightly higher rate than their national peers in **reading**. They also outperformed their national peers in **math** at the Basic level and above. The gap between ELs and their peers in SREB states grew between 2011 and 2022 in reading and for both performance benchmarks, but the gap narrowed in math only at the Basic level.

4th Grade NAEP Reading Gap
Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina

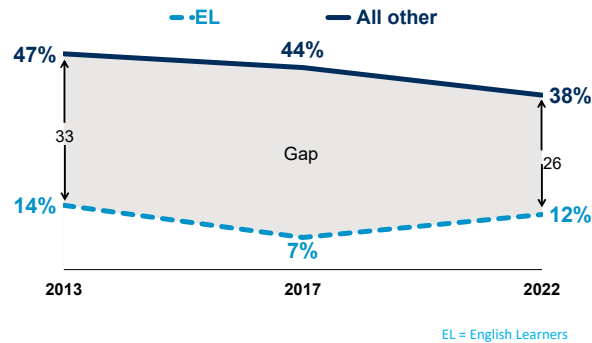


Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Early Grades

4th Grade NAEP Math Gap

Percentage Scoring At or Above Proficient in North Carolina



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Despite growing enrollments, demographic changes and the persistence of achievement gaps, some SREB states made promising gains in reading and math achievement between 2011 and 2022. Fourth graders in Mississippi and Florida made significant progress in both subjects and at both benchmark levels. Louisiana and Tennessee also saw gains in both subjects and for both benchmarks. But too few fourth graders in all SREB states are meeting benchmarks that put them on track for successful academic careers.

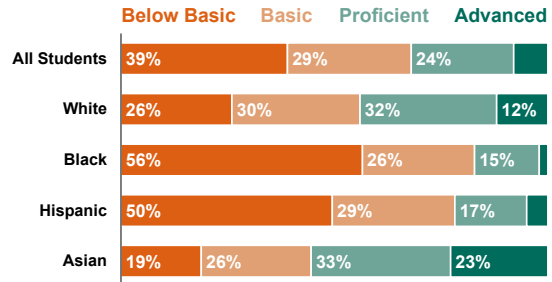
Understanding a state's challenges in moving more students to higher levels on NAEP requires a closer look at *all* the data. Helping students rise from Basic to Proficient on NAEP is critical, but a preliminary step is helping them improve from below Basic to Basic.

While 30% of fourth graders in the median SREB state performed at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading in 2022, another 41% fell **below Basic**. These students did not demonstrate even partial mastery of grade-level skills. They are far from the target reading benchmark and are likely to struggle in future grades even if they receive extra support. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated struggles amongst this group, while Proficient and Advanced students are not as affected.

Overall percentages of fourth graders performing below Basic on NAEP hide large gaps between student groups. In 2022, much larger proportions of Black and Hispanic fourth graders fell below the Basic benchmark on NAEP in reading than their white and Asian peers. Gaps were

4th Grade NAEP Reading

Results by Performance Level in North Carolina, 2022

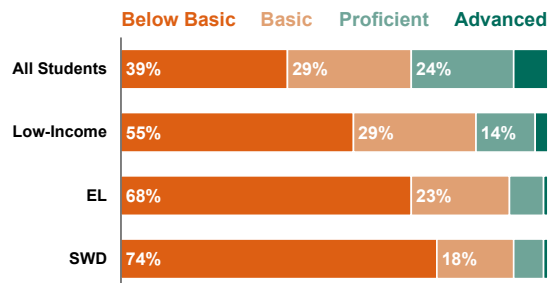


Note: Percentages below 10% are not labeled. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

4th Grade NAEP Reading

Results by Performance Level in North Carolina, 2022



Note: Percentages below 10% are not labeled. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. EL = English Learner; SWD = Students With Disabilities

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

also large between students from low-income families, English learners and students with disabilities compared to their peers. These large performance gaps should compel states and schools to do more to support all students in the early grades, and especially those most at risk of academic struggles.

Related SREB Publications

Ready to Read, Ready to Succeed: State Policies That Support Fourth-Grade Reading Success (2017)

Dyslexia Policies in SREB States: Addressing the Needs of Struggling Young Readers (2018)

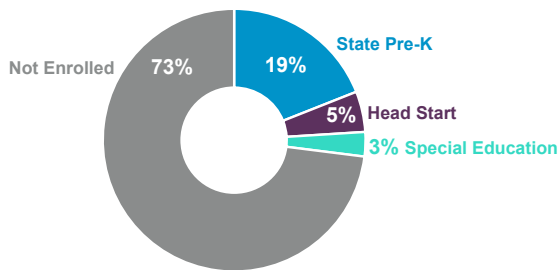
Early Math Matters: Factoring in Teacher Knowledge and Practice (2019)

Early Learning

The Challenge to Lead 2020 goals call for all children entering school to exhibit the knowledge and skills needed for success in first grade. This goal can be achieved by increasing access to pre-K and kindergarten and ensuring the quality of these programs. If young children experience high-quality early learning programs, they are more likely to enter first grade ready to learn, and their chances for success throughout school are greatly improved.

The SREB region has historically led the nation in pre-K access for 4-year-olds. However, between 2012 and 2022, the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in state-funded pre-K rose in only three SREB states. Ten states had declining enrollment of 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K during the 2021-22 school year. Nationally, 32% of 4-year-olds were enrolled that year.

Enrollment in Publicly Funded Pre-K Programs
4-Year-Olds in North Carolina, 2021-22



Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

States in the SREB region still face the challenge of providing earlier access to pre-K programs. Research underscores the importance of two years of pre-K for children at risk of struggling in school.

While access to pre-K is important, quality is the key to achieving lasting gains for young children. The National Institute for Early Education Research, or NIEER, has identified 10 standards of quality for pre-K programs. Aspects of *structural quality* include class size limits, low child-to-staff ratios and state monitoring requirements. NIEER has also identified aspects of *process quality*, which include learning standards aligned through grade **three**, regular classroom observations and well-qualified teachers who receive ongoing coaching.

Alabama and Mississippi are two of only four states nationwide that met all 10 of NIEER's standards in the 2021-22 school year; another four programs in SREB states met nine of these standards.

The 2020 goals emphasize strong teacher qualifications and continues professional development for early learning teachers. Research shows that students with pre-K teachers who have a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education tend to have better outcomes.

In North Carolina in 2021-22:

4-year-old pre-K enrollment:



in publicly funded programs

state-funded pre-K **unchanged** since 2011-12

The state-funded pre-K program met

8 out of 10



standards of quality including

2 out of 4

teacher standards

Ongoing, hands-on professional development — at least 15 hours per year — and coaching are also important for all classroom teachers. Four of the 10 NIEER standards of quality spell out minimum requirements in these areas. Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi were among just five states in the nation that met the four NIEER teacher qualification standards in 2021-22.

A 2017 SREB policy report, *Ready to Read, Ready to Succeed: State Policies That Support Fourth-Grade Reading Success*, stresses that kindergarten is a critical link between early childhood and the early grades, especially for children at risk of academic struggles. As expectations for later grades have increased, so has the importance of kindergarten as a transition point to help young children build on pre-K education and be prepared for success in elementary school and beyond. Despite this, only 10 SREB states require kindergarten as children's first program of study in school.

Early Learning

Teacher Quality in State-Funded Pre-K

North Carolina, 2022

NIEER Standard	State Required
All lead teachers have a bachelor's degree**	✓
Lead teacher has specialized training in early childhood development	✓
Assistant teacher has the Child Development Associate credential or equivalent	
Teaching staff have individual professional development plans and receive ongoing coaching and at least 15 hours/year of PD	

**Note: The first standard for lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree indicates that the policy meets the benchmark, but it is not being implemented fully.

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

Research shows that children who attend full-day kindergarten programs, compared with half-day programs, make more academic progress during the kindergarten year, and are therefore better prepared for first grade. The minimum number of instructional hours for full-day kindergarten programs varies widely across SREB states — from as few as 680 annual hours to as many as 1,260.

Researchers also find benefits for smaller class sizes in the earliest school years. Policymakers in nearly every

SREB state have set class sizes or student-to-teacher ratio maximums for kindergarten classrooms. These maximums ranged from 18 to 30 students per kindergarten teacher in 2022. The median SREB state allowed no more than 22 kindergartners per teacher.

Developmentally appropriate assessment in kindergarten provides important information for teachers and for states. A readiness assessment at kindergarten entry helps teachers plan instruction that meets the needs of their students. As of spring 2022, 11 SREB states required a kindergarten entry assessment for all entering kindergartners.

In 2015, SREB's Commission on Early Childhood Education published *Building a Strong Foundation: State Policy for Early Childhood Education*. The report emphasized that pre-K and kindergarten provide the foundation for K-3 education, especially for at-risk children. It also urged SREB states to make early investments that prepare children for school so they can succeed in life. If states commit to the report's recommendations, they can ensure that children have the solid start they need for academic success.

Early Learning Policies in North Carolina

Policy Elements	Status	Comments
Minimum amount of instructional time for kindergarten		1,025 hours or at least 185 days per year
Maximum number of students per teacher in kindergarten classrooms	21	LEAs must maintain average class size of no more than 18 students per kindergarten teacher
Requires comprehensive early childhood learning and development assessment at kindergarten entry	✓	Requires <i>North Carolina Kindergarten Entry Assessment</i>
Requires screening for dyslexia in kindergarten	✓	Required reading screening assesses skills that can indicate dyslexia

Source: SREB analysis of state documents and Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes

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Standards vs. Curriculum

What's the difference?

Standards

are the goals for instruction.

Standards are developed at the **state** level.

Curriculum

is the content of instruction.

Curricula are selected **locally**.



Created and approved by **state departments of education** and **state boards of education**. Standards are usually based on best practices and recommendations from experts.

Standards go through an extensive process of review and rewriting until the creators and other stakeholders agree on their content and format.

May be created by **teachers, publishers, states** and **other stakeholders**. Curricula provide content and instructional approaches for student learning.

Anyone can contribute to curricula. Commercial publishers may contract with educators who have experience with a given subject.



Adopted by **state boards of education**. The public is invited to review the standards and weigh in.

Adopted by **local boards of education**. Teachers review them and ensure alignment with standards.



Standards are **short statements** that describe what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

*Example of a standard:
Understand subtraction as an unknown-addend problem. For example, subtract $10 - 8$ by finding the number that makes 10 when added to 8.*

A curriculum may include **activities, lesson and unit plans, textbooks, virtual tools** and other resources.

*Example of a curriculum resource:
Curricula might include practice problems such as the following: If Julie wants 10 apples but only has 8, how many more does she need?*



Teachers use standards to **guide instruction**. Standards provide **a goal or focus** for each lesson.

Teachers design instruction using one or more standards as the learning goal(s) for each lesson. If a student can do what a standard asks, that student has successfully met the lesson's learning goal.

Teachers use curricula to help students develop the **skills and understanding** required by each standard.

Teachers might begin a lesson by having students read a passage from the textbook, then compare that passage with one from a novel. Both the textbook and novel are elements of the curriculum.



States assess students' mastery of the standards starting in grade three using state-selected exams.

Curricula may include assessments that are only used at the **local** level.

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November 2023