



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

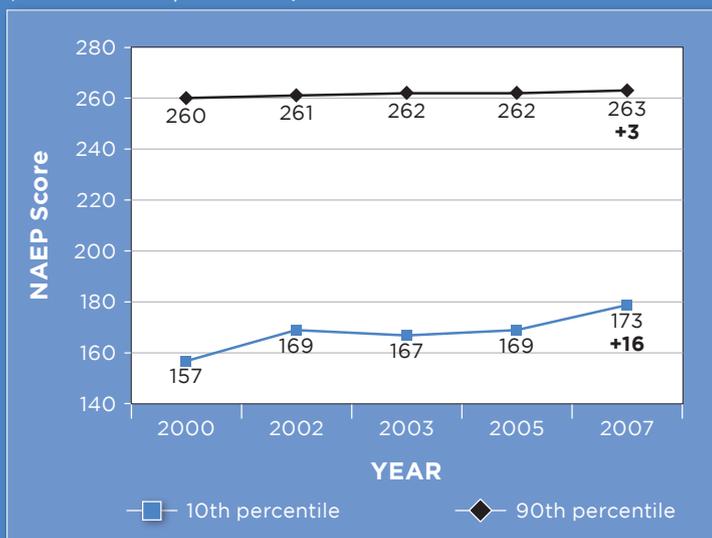
This publication reports the results of the first two (of five) studies of a multifaceted research investigation of the state of high-achieving students in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era. *Part I: An Analysis of NAEP Data*, authored by Brookings Institution scholar Tom Loveless, examines achievement trends for high-achieving students (defined, like low-achieving students, by their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP) since the early 1990s and, in more detail, since 2000.

Part II: Results from a National Teacher Survey, authored by Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett of Farkas Duffett Research Group, reports on teachers' own views of how schools are serving high-achieving pupils in the NCLB era.

Here are the key findings:

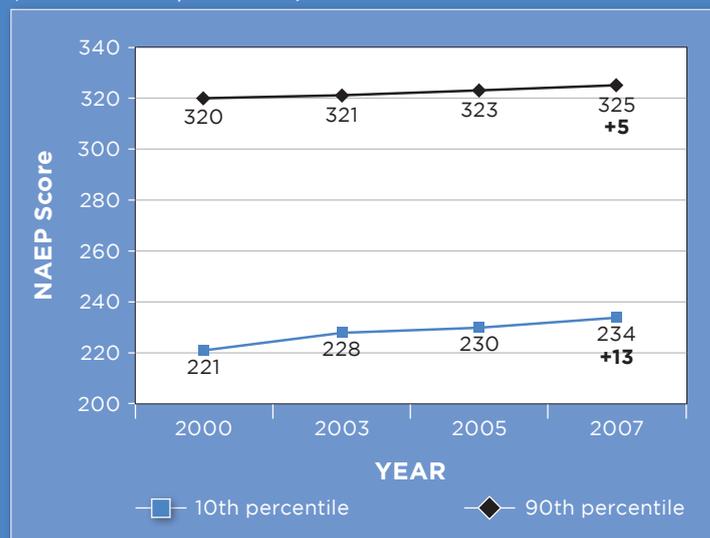
- **While the nation's lowest-achieving youngsters made rapid gains from 2000 to 2007, the performance of top students was languid.** Children at the tenth percentile of achievement (the bottom 10 percent of students) have shown solid progress in fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade math since 2000, but those at the 90th percentile (the top 10 percent) have made minimal gains.
- **This pattern—big gains for low achievers and lesser ones for high achievers—is associated with the introduction of accountability systems in general, not just NCLB.** An analysis of NAEP data from the 1990s shows that states that adopted testing and accountability regimes before NCLB saw similar patterns before NCLB: stronger progress for low achievers than for high achievers.

Figure A—4th Grade Reading NAEP Scores, 2000-2007
(90th and 10th percentiles)



Note: National means: 2000= 215, 2007=222, a change of +7
Source: Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

Figure B—8th Grade Math NAEP Scores, 2000-2007
(90th and 10th percentiles)



Note: National means: 2000 =274 and 2007= 281, a change of +7
Source: Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

Table i—90th and 10th Percentile Gains, States with Accountability vs. States without Accountability (Pre-NCLB)

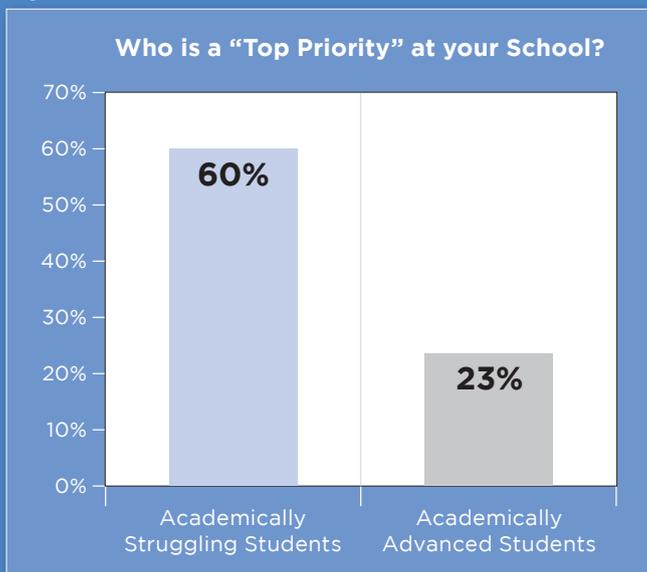
1996-2000 4th Grade NAEP Math (state sample)		
	90th	10th
Accountability n=16	1.6	5.7
Non-accountability n=20	2.5	1.9

Note—This means, for example, that states with accountability systems in the 1990s saw their lowest-achieving students (the 10th percentile) outpace their highest-achieving students (the 90th percentile), gaining 5.7 points versus 1.6 points. In non-accountability states the pattern was reversed, as high achievers slightly outpaced low achievers.

Source: Tom Loveless's calculations from main NAEP data explorer, State NAEP sample. All data are in scale score points.

- **Teachers are much more likely to indicate that struggling students, not advanced students, are their top priority.** Asked about the needs of struggling students, 60 percent of teachers say they are a “top priority” at their school. Asked a similar question about “academically advanced” students, only 23 percent of teachers say they are a top priority. (They could give multiple answers to this question.)

Figure C:

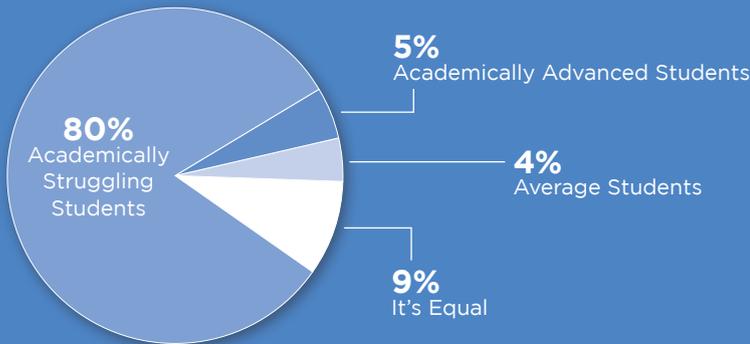


Source: FDR National Teacher Survey, Questions 3 and 4

- **Low-achieving students receive dramatically more attention from teachers.** Asked “Who is most likely to get one-on-one attention from teachers?” 81 percent of teacher named “struggling students” while only 5 percent named “advanced students.”
- **Still, teachers believe that all students deserve an equal share of attention.** Teachers were given the following choice: “For the public schools to help the U.S. live up to its ideals of justice and equality, do you think it’s more important that they (A) focus on raising the achievement of disadvantaged students who are struggling academically OR (B) focus equally on all students, regardless of their backgrounds or achievement levels?” Only 11 percent chose the former, while 86 percent chose the latter.
- **Low-income, black, and Hispanic high achievers (on the 2005 eighth-grade math NAEP) were more likely than low achievers to be taught by experienced teachers.** These disadvantaged high achievers—termed “NCLB-HA” in the study—were also as likely as other high-achieving students to have teachers who had majored or minored in math.

Figure D:

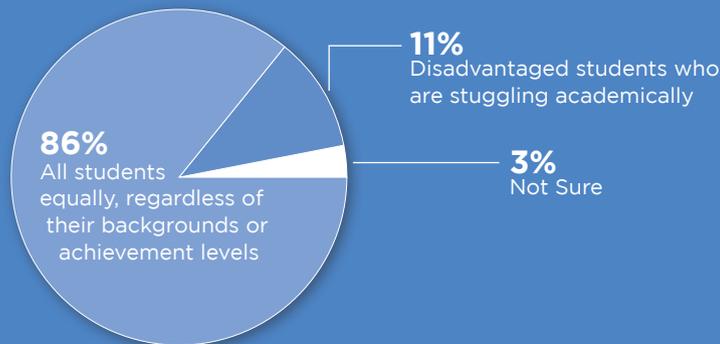
Who is Most Likely to Get One-on-One Attention from Teachers?



Source: FDR National Teacher Survey, Question 11

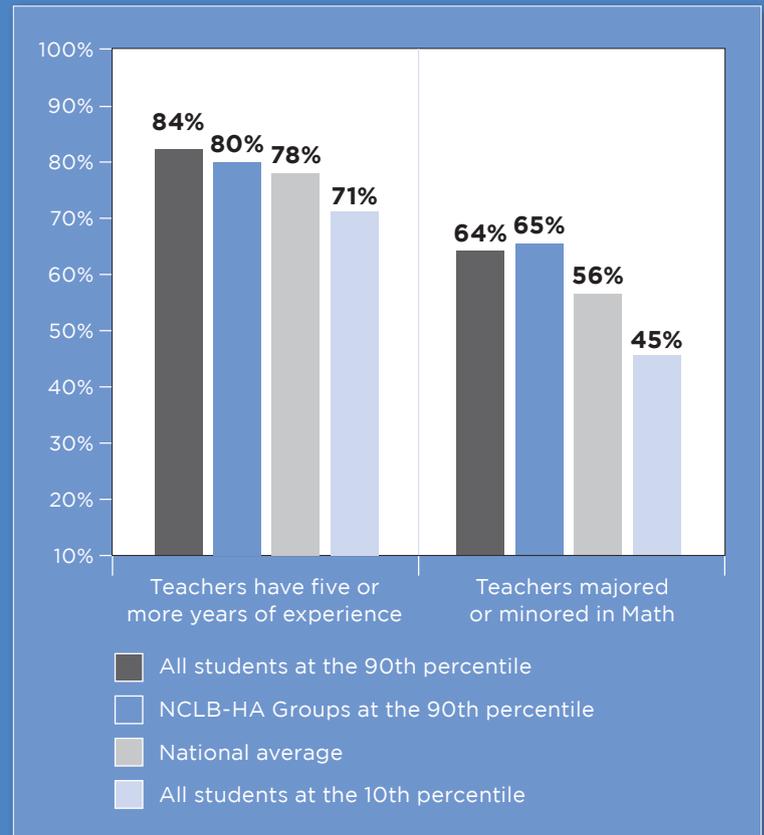
Figure E: Teachers' Definition of "Justice and Equality"

For the public schools to help the U.S. live up to its ideals of justice and equality, do you think it's more important that they focus on:



Source: FDR National Teacher Survey, Question 26

Figure F: Teacher Characteristics: High-Achieving Disadvantaged Students and Comparison Groups
(Drawn from the 2005 8th-Grade Math NAEP)



Note: This means, for example, that NCLB-HA students (high-achieving low-income, African-American, and/or Hispanic students) are just as likely as all high achievers to have teachers who majored or minored in math, and almost as likely to have teachers with five or more years of experience. They are much more likely than low-achieving students to have teachers with these attributes.

Source: Tom Loveless's calculations from restricted-use NAEP data.

IMPLICATIONS

Neither of these studies sought a causal link between the No Child Left Behind Act and the performance of high-achieving students. We cannot say that NCLB “caused” the performance of the nation’s top students to stagnate any more than it “caused” the achievement of our lowest-performing pupils to rise dramatically. All we know is that the acceleration in achievement gains by low-performing students is associated with the introduction of NCLB (and, earlier, with state accountability systems). Neither can we be sure from these data that teacher quality explains why some low-income, African-American, and Hispanic students were able to score in the top 10 percent on the 2005 eighth-grade math NAEP, though there does appear to be a relationship between the experience and education of math teachers and their students’ performance.

The national survey findings show that most teachers, at this point in our nation’s history, feel pressure to focus on their lowest-achieving students. Whether that’s because of NCLB we do not know (though teachers are certainly willing to blame the federal law). What’s perhaps most interesting about the teachers’ responses, however, is how committed they are to the principle that all students (regardless of performance level) deserve their fair share of attention and challenges. Were Congress to accept teachers’ views about what it means to create a “just” education system—i.e., one that challenges all students to fulfill their potential, rather than just focus on raising the performance of students who have been “left behind”—then the next version of NCLB would be dramatically different than today’s.