

# Math, reading scores slip for nation's kids

By JENNIFER C. KERR  
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WASHINGTON — Results from national math and reading tests show slipping or stagnant scores for the nation's schoolkids.

Math scores were down for fourth and eighth graders over the last two years. And reading grades were not much better: flat for fourth graders and lower for eighth graders, according to 2015 results released Wednesday for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam.

The falling mathematics scores for fourth and eighth graders mark the first declines in math since 1990.

The results suggest students have a ways to go to demonstrate a solid grasp or mastery in reading and math.

Only about a third of the nation's eighth-graders were at proficient or above in math and reading. Among fourth graders, the results were slightly better in reading and in math, about two in five scored proficient or above.

The report also found a continuing achievement gap between white and black students.

There were a few bright spots: the District of Columbia and Mississippi both saw substantial reading and math gains.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan urged parents, teachers, and others not to panic about the scores as states embrace higher academic standards, such as Common Core.

## Oregon scores unchanged on test

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon fourth- and eighth-graders performed about as well as they did two years ago on a national math and reading test, even as nationwide scores dipped, according to results of the National Assessment of Education Progress released Wednesday.

On math and fourth-grade reading, Oregon students performed about as well as their peers nationally. On eighth-grade reading, Oregon's scores were above the national average. Only four states had scores in that category that were statistically higher than Oregon's.

None of the differences between Oregon's 2013 and 2015 scores was statistically significant. Thirty-four percent of Oregon students scored at or above the "proficient" level in 2015, and 67 percent performed at or above the "basic" level. Oregon's average score was statistically on par with scores in 23 other states, higher than scores in eight states and lower than 20.

White and Asian students significantly outperformed their Hispanic and American Indian peers. Scores for Hispanic students were 25 points lower than white students' scores. Scores for black students were not reported.

"We should expect scores in this period to bounce around some, and I think that 'implementation dip' is part of what we're seeing here," Duncan said in a phone call with reporters. "I would caution everyone to be careful about drawing conclusions."

Chris Minnich, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, echoed Duncan.

"One year does not make a trend," Minnich said at a panel discussion Wednesday. "We set this new goal for the country of college and career readiness for all kids. Clearly, these results today show we're not quite there yet and we have some work to do."

The Common Core standards were developed by the states with the support of the

administration. They spell out what students should know in English and math at each grade level, with a focus on critical thinking and less of an emphasis on memorization. But they have become a rallying point for critics who want a smaller federal role in education and some parents confounded by some of the new concepts being taught.

The NAEP tests, also known as the "nation's report card," don't align completely with Common Core, but NAEP officials said there was "quite a bit" of overlap between the tests and the college-ready standards.

Among the findings:  
• 36 percent of fourth graders were at or above the proficient level in reading, about the same

as 2013. Only 34 percent of eighth-grade students were proficient or better in reading, a two-point drop. Both measures were sharply higher than 1990 results.

• 40 percent of fourth-grade students were at or above proficiency in math this year. That's down two points from 2013, and marks the first decline for that measure since 1990. For eighth graders, only 33 percent of students were proficient or better in math, also a two-point decline.

• Fourth-grade math scores were higher in the District of Columbia and Mississippi — up three points for each. In 16 states, scores dropped. They were flat in the rest. In eighth-grade math, there were no gains across the states, and 22 states had lower scores than in 2013.

• For reading, scores were higher for fourth-graders in 13 states and jurisdictions, including the District of Columbia — up seven points. Mississippi and Louisiana were also higher, both states up six points. At the eighth-grade level, reading improved only in West Virginia, up three points.

• There were no significant changes in the achievement gap for reading between white students and their black and Hispanic peers. But for math, there was a small narrowing in the gap between white fourth graders and their black peers. The average score for white students was 24 points higher, slightly smaller than the 26-point gap in 2013.



AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster  
Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., flanked by Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., left, and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Calif., speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday after a Special GOP Leadership Election.

# Fresh starts as GOP taps new speaker

WASHINGTON — (AP) House Republicans embraced a new leader Wednesday and prepared to get behind a crisis-averting budget-and-debt deal in a day of dramatic fresh starts at the Capitol after years of division and disarray.

Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, the 2012 GOP vice presidential candidate and a telegenic spokesman for conservative priorities, was nominated by his colleagues in a secret-ballot election to serve as speaker of the House, second in line to the presidency. The full House will confirm that choice on Thursday.

"This begins a new day in the House of Representatives," Ryan, 45, said after the vote. "We are turning the page."

Immediately after choosing Ryan to chart a new course for their fractured party, Republicans trooped onto the House floor to begin casting votes on a huge two-year budget deal struck in recent days between President Barack Obama and leaders of both parties.

The agreement would raise the government's borrowing limit through March of 2017, averting an unprecedented default just days away. It would also set the budget of the federal government for the next two years, lifting onerous spending caps and steering away from the brinkmanship and shutdown threats that have haunted Congress for years.

Outgoing Speaker John Boehner of Ohio announced his resignation last month after a quarter-century in Congress and nearly five years in the speaker's chair, beset by the intractable divisions between the party's pragmatists and purists that now will be Ryan's to resolve. Ryan sounded an optimistic note.

"We are not going to have a House that looks like it looked the last two years," he said after Wednesday's vote. "We are going to move forward, we are going to unify. Our party has lost its vision, and we are going to replace it with a vision."

Earlier, inside the ornate Ways and Means Committee room where the vote occurred, Ryan asked lawmakers to pray for him, and pray for each other.

He easily dispatched his sole opponent, Florida Rep. Daniel Webster, the choice of a group of hard-core conservatives, winning 200 votes to Webster's 43. He still must prevail in a vote of the full House on Thursday, when Democrats will have a say, too, and will back the minority leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California.

Still, the only real suspense surrounds Ryan's margin of victory, as he is certain to draw the support of the vast majority of Republicans, including some who supported Webster but pledged to vote for their party's nominee on the House floor.

Wednesday's budget bill makes good on Boehner's promise to "clean the barn" for Ryan on the way out, removing the most contentious issues that would have confronted him immediately upon becoming speaker. Conservatives loudly protested the price tag and a secretive, back-room process, and farm-state Republicans raised alarms about cuts to federal crop insurance programs.

The accord also became a punching bag for GOP presi-

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— Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House

dential candidates, including Sens. Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and Rand Paul, all of whom denounced it ahead of a Wednesday night presidential debate.

But the House appeared likely to approve the legislation and send it to the Senate, relying on a majority of Democratic votes, a feature of a number of significant deals cut under Boehner's leadership.

"The outgoing speaker of the House has partnered with Democrats and Senate leadership to craft a monstrosity of a budget deal," one hard-liner, Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina, complained, calling on candidates for speaker to reject the bill.

Ryan did not oblige. He criticized the process used to reach the bill, saying that it "stinks," but issued a statement announcing he would be voting for the deal because it "will go a long way toward relieving the uncertainty hanging over us."

Indeed Ryan could ask for no better parting gift from Boehner at a moment when GOP leaders are fretting about the deep Republican divisions on display in Congress and the presidential campaign, where outsider candidates are leading established politicians.

Dealing with the debt limit and winning a budget agreement would almost certainly have forced Ryan into the same types of compromises with Obama and the Democrats that conservatives routinely denounced in Boehner. Now he will have a freer hand, though he faces his own challenges, including the need to pass a package of spending bills by Dec. 11 to fill in the broad budget outlines in this week's deal.

That exercise could bring its own mess of troubles, including fights over everything from Planned Parenthood to the environment as conservatives try to attach favored policy provisions to must-pass legislation. But Boehner got the toughest votes out of the way.

A reluctant candidate for speaker, Ryan was drafted by party leaders only after Boehner's heir apparent, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, took himself out of the running. Ryan had preferred to stay as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, his dream job, and was also concerned about the impact on his wife and three school-age children in Janesville, Wisconsin.

Though he's a 17-year House veteran, Ryan will be the youngest House speaker since Rep. James Blaine, R-Maine, who was 39 when he was speaker in 1869.

Some Democrats said Ryan is a Republican they can do business with. At the same time they pointed to strong policy differences as shown in a budget he produced in 2011 that contained plans to cut social programs as well as turn Medicare into a voucher-like program and Medicaid into block grants to states.

Said Pelosi: "We welcome the debate."

# Insurgents vs mainstream: Debate highlights GOP's 2 tracks

By JULIE PACE  
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BOULDER, Colo. — Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio fought for control of the Republican's establishment wing in Wednesday night's third GOP debate, as insurgent outsiders Donald Trump and Ben Carson defended the seriousness of their White House bids, underscoring the volatile two-track fight for the party's presidential nomination.

But in an economic policy-focused debate, Trump and Carson at times faded to the background during the two-hour contest.

Bush, once seen as the top Republican contender, entered the debate in the midst of the most difficult stretch of his White House campaign. He quickly targeted Rubio for his spotty voting record on Capitol Hill, signaling that he sees the Florida senator as the candidate most likely to block his political path.

"Marco, when you signed up for this, this was a 6-year term and you should be showing up for work," said Bush, who is struggling to right his campaign after being forced to slash spending in response to slower fundraising. "You can campaign, or just resign and let someone else take the job."

Rubio, who has had a close relationship with Bush, responded sharply: "The only reason you're doing it is that we're running for the same position and someone has convinced you that attacking me will help you."

Three months before primary voting begins, the Republican contest remains crowded and unwieldy. Yet the contours of the race have been clarified, with outsiders capitalizing on voter frustration with Washington and candidates with political experience hoping the race ultimately turns their way.

Trump, the brash real estate mogul, has dominated the Republican race for months, but was a less of a factor Wednesday night than in the previous two debates. He largely refrained from personal attacks on his rivals, which has been a signature of his campaign, even taking a light touch with Carson, who has overtaken him in recent Iowa polls.

Carson, the soft-spoken retired neurosurgeon who came into the debate with a burst of momentum, stuck to his low-key style. He sought to explain his vague tax policy, which he has compared to tithing, in which families donate the same portion of their income to their church regardless of how much they make.

And he insisted he had no involvement with supplement maker Mannatech, although he acknowledged using its product and giving paid speeches for the company, which has faced a legal challenge over health



AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill  
Donald Trump, second from right, speaks, as Jeb Bush, left, Marco Rubio, second from left, and Ben Carson look on during the CNBC Republican presidential debate at the University of Colorado, Wednesday.

"We are on the verge of perhaps picking someone who cannot do this job."

— Ohio Gov. John Kasich,

On unorthodox Republicans atop early polls

claims for its products.

Carson said it was absurd to allege he's connected to the company. "If someone put me on their home page, they did it without permission," he said.

Trump bristled when asked by a debate moderator if his policy proposals, including building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and deporting everyone who is in the U.S. illegally, amounted to a "comic book" campaign. And he defended his record in the private sector despite having to declare bankruptcy, casting it as a business technique.

"I've used that to my advantage as a businessman," Trump said. "I used the laws of the country to my benefit."

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz has been circling Trump for months, seeking to position himself as the heir to the businessman's supporters if he fades. While Cruz holds office in the U.S. Senate, he's cast himself as anti-establishment and a thorn in the side of GOP leaders.

Cruz garnered enthusiastic applause when he criticized debate moderators for trying to stir up fights among the candidates, casting it as a sign of media bias against Republicans — a popular line with GOP voters.

The jumbled GOP field is a stark contrast to the Democratic contest, where Hillary Rodham Clinton is strengthening her front-runner status over Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. Campaigning in New Hampshire ahead of the GOP debate, Clinton said the Republican contests are like a "reality TV show but the cast of characters are out of touch with actual reality."

Wednesday's debate in Colorado, an important general election state, focused on economic policy, including taxes and job growth.

Rubio turned questions about his personal financial struggles, including recently liquidating his retirement account, into an opportunity to tout his compelling personal story. The son of Cuban immigrants, Rubio said he didn't inherit money from his family and knows what it's like to struggle to pay loans and afford to raise a family.

"I know what it's like to owe that money," Rubio said. "I'm not worried about my finances. I'm worried about the finances of everyday Americans."

Ohio Gov. John Kasich and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie have each sought to break through with more mainstream voters. Kasich in particular was aggressive from the start in bemoaning the unexpected strength of unorthodox candidates.

"We are on the verge of perhaps picking someone who cannot do this job," Kasich said.

Also on stage were former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul and former technology executive Carly Fiorina, the star of the second GOP debate. Fiorina, the former Hewlett Packard CEO, has struggled to capitalize on that strong performance and has faded toward the back of the pack.

The four lowest-polling candidates participated in an earlier undercard event: South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and former New York Gov. George Pataki. None has gotten close to breaking into the upper tier of candidates.