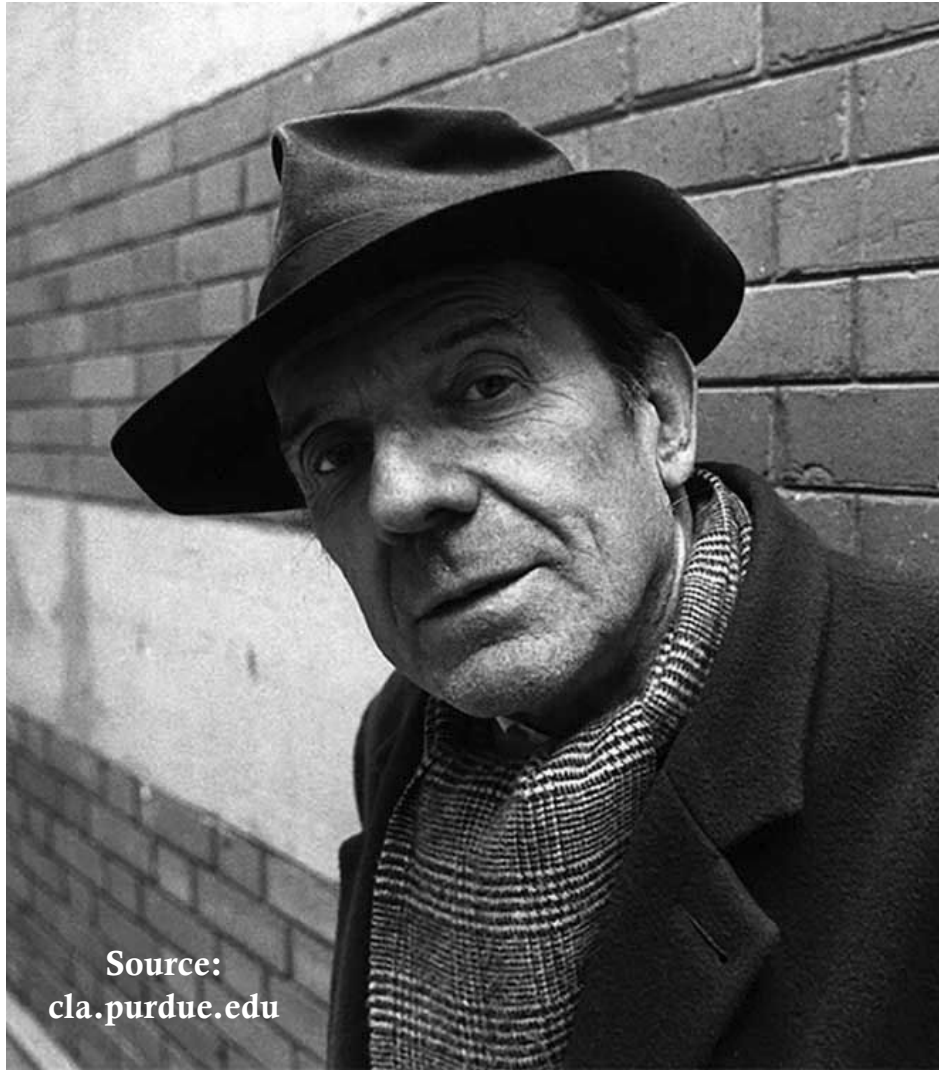

TROJAN HORSE EDUCATION REFORM: THE POLITICS OF MANUFACTURED CRISIS

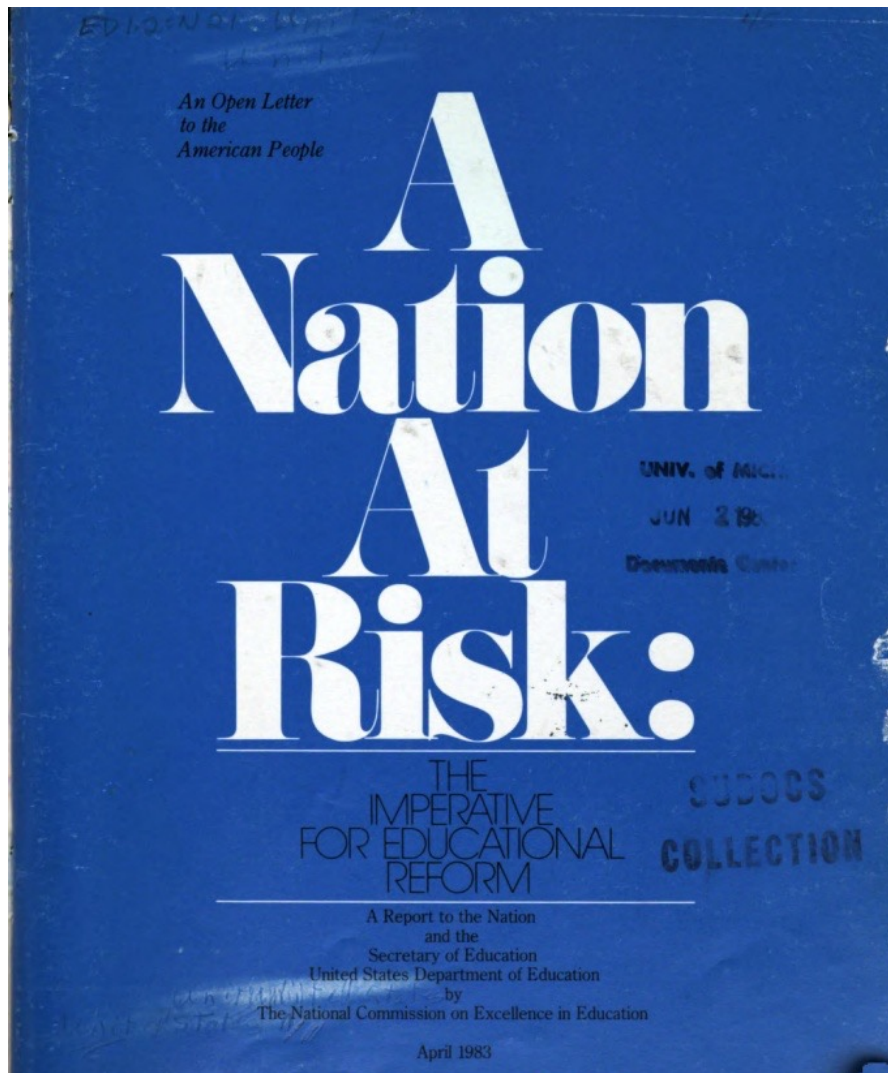
P.L. Thomas, Furman
University



Source:
cla.purdue.edu

GILLES DELEUZE, "POSTSCRIPT ON THE SOCIETIES OF CONTROL"

Never has it been clearer that education reform is industry: "The administrations in charge," writes Gilles Deleuze in *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, "never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms: to reform schools, to reform industries, hospitals, the armed forces, prisons" (p. 4).



A NATION AT RISK AND EDUCATION "CRISIS"

"And please abolish that abomination, the Department of Education," implored Ronald Reagan as he established his goals for the committee charged with producing *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Reagan sought to shift the public's support from public schools to school choice as well as, in his misguided words, return prayer to schools.

A NATION AT RISK AND EDUCATION “CRISIS”

The narrative created by A Nation at Risk has none the less some enduring elements that are uncritically supported by mainstream media (complicit in the Big Lie):

- Educational failure is grounded in the educational system itself, and thus, education reform has been *in-school-only reform policies*.
 - Identifying systemic societal, community, and home influences on measurable student learning is rejected as using poverty/inequity as an “excuse.”
 - Teachers are simultaneously the most important factor in education and the agents of failure due to poor training and/or low expectations for marginalized student populations.
 - The rhetoric is grounded in crisis/miracle binary and the primary evidence for those claims are standardized tests (mostly state-level accountability testing and NAEP).
 - Policies tend to be one-size-fits all solutions to overstated and unsupported problems.
-

A NATION AT RISK AND EDUCATION “CRISIS”

Edling (2015) has identified similar patterns grounded in media rhetoric resulting in education policy internationally:

- Viewing education as being in more or less permanent crisis
- Taking the role as a spokesperson for teachers and on behalf of the field of education
- Excluding the knowledge and experiences of teacher(s), educators and/or educational researchers in the public press
- Simplifying the notion of being a good teacher through stereotypes and dualistic frameworks that overlook task and relational complexity.

Edling, S. (2015). [Between curriculum complexity and stereotypes: Exploring stereotypes of teachers and education in media as a question of structural violence](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.956796). *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(3), 399-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.956796>

A NATION AT RISK AND EDUCATION “CRISIS”

- Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1997). *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. Longman.
 - Bracey, G. W. (2003). [April foolishness: The 20th anniversary of A Nation at Risk](#). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(8), 616-621.
 - Edling, S. (2015). [Between curriculum complexity and stereotypes: Exploring stereotypes of teachers and education in media as a question of structural violence](#). *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(3), 399-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.956796>
 - Harvey, J. (2023, May 5). Gaslighting Americans about public schools: The truth about 'A Nation at Risk.' The Answer Sheet. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/04/26/how-nationatrisk-report-hurt-publicschools/>
 - Holton, G. (2003, April 25). [An insider's view of "A Nation at Risk" and why it still matters](#). *The Chronicle Review*, 49(33), B13.
 - Kamenetz, A. (2018, April 29). What 'A Nation At Risk' got wrong, and right, about U.S. schools. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/29/604986823/what-a-nation-at-risk-got-wrong-and-right-about-u-s-schools>
 - Thomas, P.L. (2015). Ignored under Obama: Word magic, crisis discourse, and utopian expectations. In P. R. Carr & B. J. Porfilio (Eds.), *The phenomenon of Obama and the agenda for education: Can hope (still) audaciously trump neoliberalism?* (pp. 45-68). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
 - [Forty Years of Failure: When Caricature Drives Education Reform in Post-Truth America](#)
-

CHARTER SCHOOLS AS TROJAN HORSE SCHOOL CHOICE

After a 7-year experiment, New Orleans is an all-charter district no more

In the wake of Katrina in 2005, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal (R) leveraged the natural disaster to begin the eventual shift of schools in New Orleans from traditional public schools (TPS) significantly staffed by a Black professional class of teachers to a charter school Recovery School District (RSD) run by Paul Vallas and often staffed by young, white, and affluent Teach for America (TFA) recruits.

This moment was acknowledged by some as disaster capitalism that had far more to do with politics than improving student achievement. The endgame was to entrench school choice schemes and create a cheaper although fluctuating teacher workforce (TFA).

BI-PARTISAN = CONSERVATIVE IN EDUCATION REFORM

Here, it is important to acknowledge that most education reform in the US over the past 40 years has been grounded in conservative ideology (even though the political support has been bi-partisan) and most of that reform is Trojan Horse reform—using a false veneer of reform to accomplish ideological and political agendas.

School choice schemes are not about student achievement but about publicly funding private education and “white flight” as public schools have become majority-minority populations of students.

TFA and organizations such as **National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)** are not designed to improve teacher quality or teacher preparation but about creating a cheap workforce and eradicating teacher professionalism to make way for teachers as mere monitors for scripted programs and computer-based instruction.

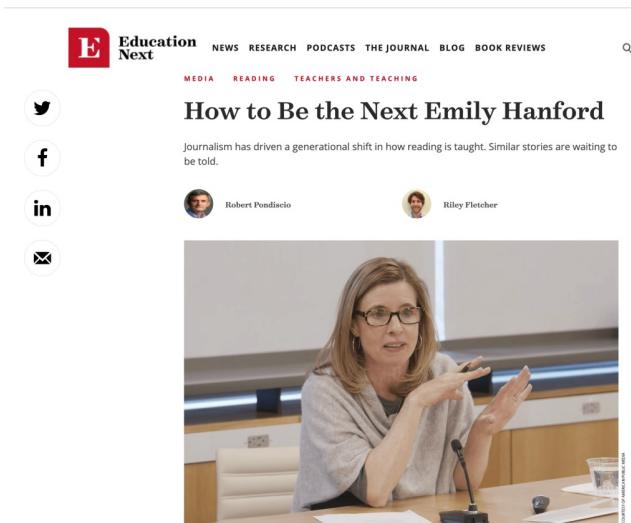
BI-PARTISAN = CONSERVATIVE IN EDUCATION REFORM

Education reform in the US primarily creates **churn**—new standards, new programs, new materials, new teacher training, etc.—that serves the needs of the market, not parents or their children. That churn is promoted by education reform influencers who only gain if schools, teachers, and students are perpetually viewed as failing—**permanent crisis**.

Lurking underneath education reforms during **George W. Bush's tenure as governor of Texas** and president of the US was the lure of scripted curriculum that shifted authority away from the teacher and to the state and primarily commercial products.

Although Bush's reform agendas flourished with bi-partisan support, scripted curriculum and de-professionalizing teachers (see also the value-added methods schemes and the “bad teacher” attacks under Michelle Rhee) mostly lost favor and lay dormant post-Obama (even as the Obama administration double-down on most of the conservative elements established by Bush's administration).

“SCIENCE OF” MOVEMENTS AS TROJAN HORSE EDUCATION REFORM



“SCIENCE OF” MOVEMENTS AS TROJAN HORSE EDUCATION REFORM

And now, the mask is coming off with the [announcement](#) of the Evidence Advocacy Center:

“In the [EAC’s plan](#) for the transformation of the profession into an evidence-based system, **educators will relinquish certain freedoms** — notably the leeway to employ ineffective practices — but will gain guidance that empowers them to fulfill their original purpose by profoundly impacting the future of students, families and communities. The alternative is to continue rearranging the deck chairs under the guise of education reform.”

“SCIENCE OF” MOVEMENTS AS TROJAN HORSE EDUCATION REFORM

First, directly from the [International Dyslexia Association](#):

“The term ‘Structured Literacy’ is not designed to replace Orton Gillingham, Multi-Sensory, or other terms in common use. It is an umbrella term designed to describe all of the programs that teach reading in essentially the same way. In our marketing, this term will help us simplify our message and connect our successes. ‘Structured Literacy’ will help us sell what we do so well.”

And then from the [Education Writers Association](#):

Control the Narrative Responsibly

Hanford encouraged reporters not to write stories two years from now with a simple narrative of whether science of reading failed, if test scores don't suddenly skyrocket. Changing systems is hard, she said.

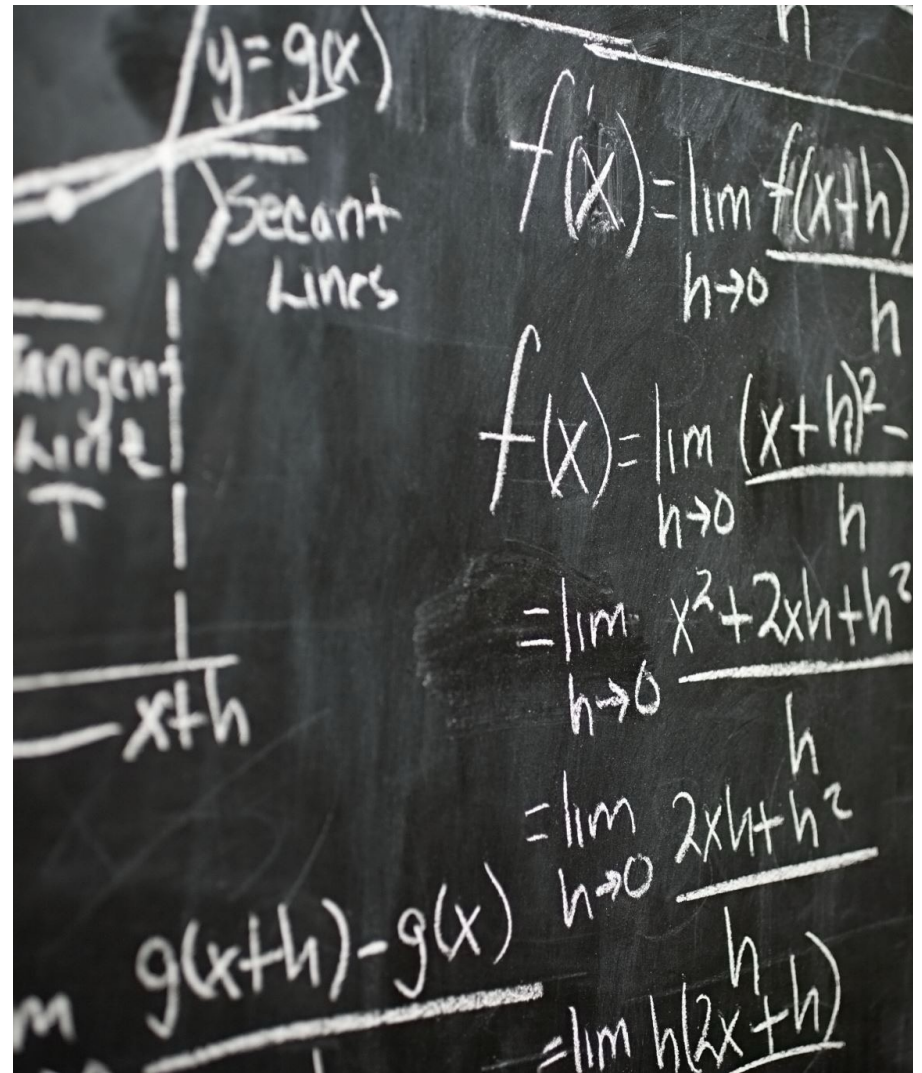
Journalists, she said, have control over the narrative.

“Keep your eyes on this one, and don't let this one go,” Hanford said. “Reporters did, I think, largely turn away from how kids learn to read. And I think that's part of how we ended up in the situation we're in now. We get to be the watchdogs. We get to be the ones who can contribute to what happens.”

RETURN OF THE “BAD TEACHER” MYTH

That is, lay dormant until the [“bad teacher” myth](#) was resurrected by Emily Hanford and the “science of reading” (SOR) movement:

- Teachers do not know how to teach reading (80% elementary teachers are women)
- Teacher educators willfully do not teach the “science” (Overwhelming majority of teacher educators are women)

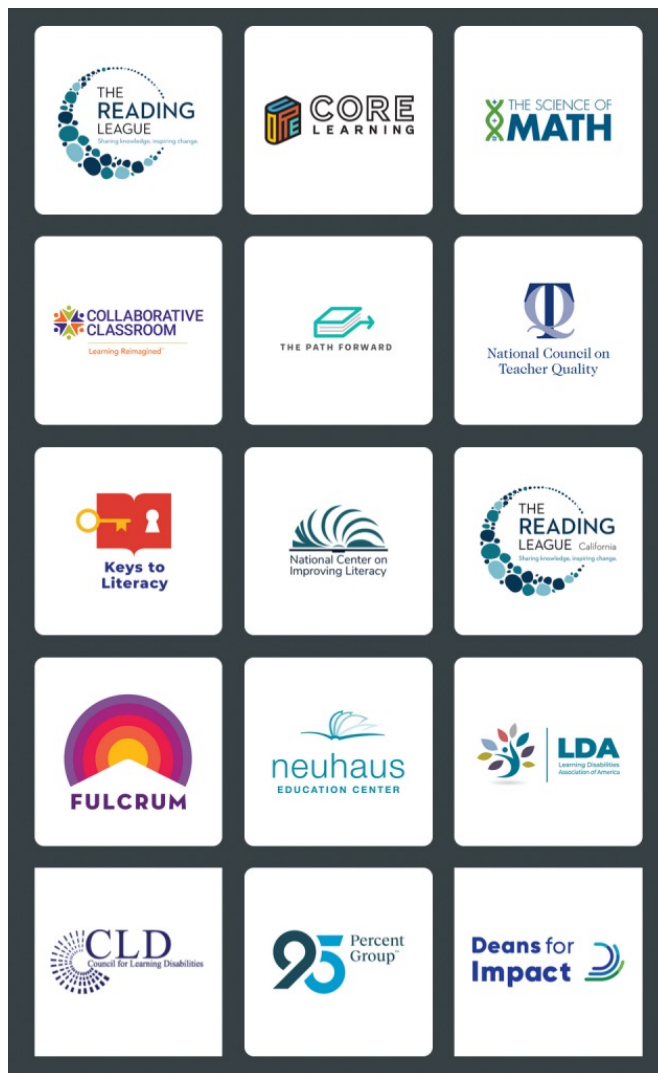


THE MISLEADING STORY

From how much of the media tells it ⁴, a war rages in the field of early literacy instruction. The story is frequently some version of a conflict narrative relying on the following problematic suppositions:

- a) science has proved that there is just one way of teaching reading effectively to all kids – using a systematic, highly structured approach to teaching phonics;
- b) most teachers rely instead on an approach called *balanced literacy*, spurred on by shoddy teacher education programs;
- c) therefore, teachers incorporate very little phonics and encourage kids to guess at words;
- d) balanced literacy and teacher education are thus at fault for large numbers of children not learning to read well.

Aukerman, M. (2022, November 23). The science of reading and the media: Is reporting biased? Literacy Research Association. <https://literacyresearchassociation.org/stories/the-science-of-reading-and-the-media-is-reporting-biased/>



WHO BENEFITS?

Many of these groups are **fundamentally conservative**, but even a modicum of interrogating the Who and Why behind this agenda reveals some chilling concerns.

NCTQ was founded by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank dedicated to school choice/charter schools and market forces. Note that there is a distinct contradiction between advocating for “science” in education practices and citing NCTQ, which has never produced any scientifically valid “reports.”

The leadership of EAC includes several connections to the University of Oregon, home of **DIBELS®**, a phonics-centric program that was revitalized by the SOR movement.

Other leaders include **Louisa Moats**, creator of **LETRS**, which is being mandated across the US to retrain teachers in SOR even though, again, the program is not supported by science.

The Reading League has its own market connections, endorsing practices not supported by the science (decodable texts, notably).

The 95 Percent Group is also based on an *aspirational* claim not grounded in settled science, as one analysis concludes about the 95% claim: “This all said, it does seem there is some level of support for 96% being a *benchmark goal* [emphasis added], for reading proficiency rates.”

MEDIA
MISINFORMATION
ON NAEP AND
READING

State Performance Compared to the Nation: Data Table

Reading, Grade 4
Difference in average scale scores, percentage at or above Basic, percentage at or above Proficient, between all jurisdictions and National public, for All students [TOTAL], 2024

Click on column headers to sort data by scores for a student group or score differences

CHANGE TABLE FORMAT OPTIONS

JURISDICTION	AVERAGE SCORE (0 - 500)		ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL PERCENTAGES	
	Score	Difference from National public (NP)	At or above Basic	At or above Proficient
DoDEA	234	20	79	48
Massachusetts	225	11	68	40
Wyoming	222	8	68	36
New Jersey	222	7	66	38
New Hampshire	221	7	67	36
Colorado	221	7	65	36
Indiana	220	6	65	34
Utah	219	5	64	36
Connecticut	219	5	63	36
Mississippi	219	4	65	32
Florida	218	4	62	33
Kentucky	218	4	62	33
Montana	217	3	62	32

MEDIA MISINFORMATION ON NAEP AND READING

State Performance Compared to the Nation: Data Table

Reading, Grade 8
Difference in average scale scores, percentage at or above Basic, percentage at or above Proficient, between all jurisdictions and National public, for All students [TOTAL], 2024

Click on column headers to sort data by scores for a student group or score differences

CHANGE TABLE FORMAT OPTIONS

JURISDICTION	AVERAGE SCORE (0 - 500)		ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL PERCENTAGES	
	Score	Difference from National public (NP)	At or above Basic	At or above Proficient
DoDEA	282	25	90	53
Massachusetts	268	11	75	40
New Jersey	266	9	73	38
Colorado	265	8	74	35
New Hampshire	264	7	74	34
Connecticut	263	6	70	35
Indiana	262	5	69	33
Illinois	262	5	70	33
Utah	261	5	72	31
Idaho	261	4	71	32
Iowa	261	4	72	31
Montana	261	4	70	31

Arizona	254	-2	65	25
South Carolina	254	-3	64	26
Mississippi	253	-3	64	23
Nevada	253	-3	62	26
Florida	253	-4	63	25
Texas	252	-4	61	25
District of Columbia	251	-5	58	25
Alabama	250	-7	59	21
Delaware	249	-7	59	23
Oklahoma	249	-8	59	20
West Virginia	247	-9	58	21
Alaska	246	-10	57	22
New Mexico	245	-12	54	19
Puerto Rico	—	↑	—	—

↑

◆

↓

GRADE RETENTION: MISSISSIPPI

The following [data from Mississippi](#) on reading proficiency and grade retention exposes that these claims are misleading or possibly false:

2014-2015 – 3064 (grade 3) – 12,224 K-3 retained/ 32.2% proficiency

2015-2016 – 2307 (grade 3) – 11,310 K-3 retained/ 32.3% proficiency

2016-2017 – 1505 (grade 3) – 9834 K-3 retained / 36.1 % proficiency

2017-2018 – 1285 (grade 3) – 8902 K-3 retained / 44.7% proficiency

2018-2019 – 3379 (grade 3) – 11,034 K-3 retained / 48.3% proficiency

2021-2022 – 2958 (grade 3) – 10,388 K-3 retained / 46.4% proficiency

2022-2023 – 2287 (grade 3) – 9,525 K-3 retained/ 51.6% proficiency

2023-2024 – 2033 (grade 3) – 9,121 K-3 retained/ 57.7% proficiency

MANUFACTURED “MIRACLES”

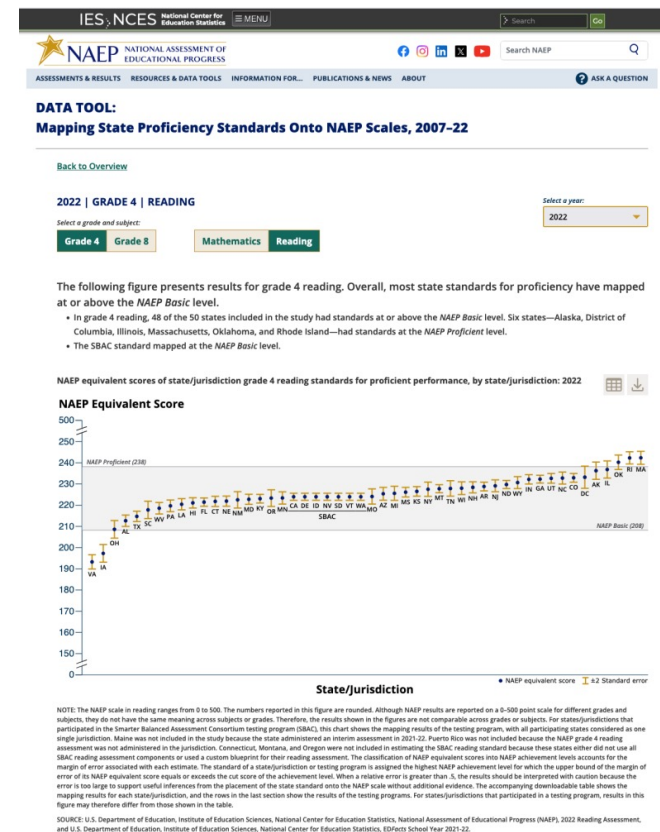
Westall and Cummings concluded in a [report](#) on reading policy: “[S]tates whose policies mandate third-grade retention see significant and persistent increases in high-stakes reading scores in all cohorts.... **[T]here is no consistent evidence that high-stakes reading scores increase in states without a retention component [emphasis added].**”

[DoDEA](#) school reading achievement is a testament to what [research](#) has shown for decades about student achievement:

“Almost 63% of the variance in test performance was explained by social capital family income variables....The influence of family social capital variables manifests itself in standardized test results..”

"PROFICIENCY" AS MANUFACTURED CRISIS

State accountability testing is measuring individual achievement, and states tend to use "proficient" as a measure that falls in the "basic" range of NAEP, suggesting that state-level proficient is "grade level" approximate or at least what most student should be able to achieve at that grade.



TROJAN HORSE EDUCATION REFORM: MAGA EDITION

- Project 2025
 - CRT >>> DEI attacks
 - Censorship and Curriculum Bans
 - Eliminate Department of Education = eliminate funding (Title I, Title IX, etc.) and the Office of Civil Rights
 - School Choice, vouchers
-

UNDERSTANDING NAEP AS MANUFACTURED CRISIS

- NAEP's achievement levels are designed to be confusing and support the manufactured education crisis (see [here](#)).
 - Using NAEP to [rank](#) and sort is misleading and doesn't support needed reform.
 - NAEP scores do offer some important facts related to achievement gaps and the pervasive influence of affluence and poverty on educational outcomes, but the media and political leaders choose to ignore those lessons.
 - Decades of NAEP reinforce this conclusion by [Maroun and Tienken](#): "Policy makers and education leaders should rethink the current reliance on standardized test results as the deciding factor to make decisions about student achievement, teacher quality, school effectiveness, and school leader quality. In effect, policies that use standardized test results to evaluate, reward, and sanction students and school personnel are doing nothing more than rewarding schools that serve advantaged students and punishing schools that serve disadvantaged students."
 - Media persist in focusing on only two stories about education: [Crisis](#) and [outliers](#); both of which serve the interests of anyone expect students and teachers.
-

REJECTING CRISIS/MIRACLE RHETORIC: A NEW STORY

- De-couple reform and instruction from universal or prescribed programs and center teaching children (not implementing programs with fidelity). Admit there is no one way to teach all students and provide the contexts that allow teachers to serve individual student needs.
 - Reform the national- and state-level testing. The US needs a standard metric for “proficient” and “age level” (instead of “grade level”) shared on NAEP and state tests in grades 3 and 8; and that achievement level needs to be achievable and not “aspirational” (such as is the case with NAEP currently). National and state testing must be age-based and not grade-based to better provide stable data on achievement.
 - End grade retention based on standardized testing. Retention is punitive, and it harms children while also distorting test data.
 - Monitor and guarantee vulnerable populations of students who are below “proficient” to insure they are provided experienced and certified teachers and assigned to classes with low student/teacher ratios.
 - Address teaching and learning conditions of schools, including teacher pay and autonomy.
 - Honor and serve students with special needs and multi-lingual learners.
-

RECOMMENDED

- [Education Journalism and Education Reform as Industry](#)
 - [What You See Is Not What You Get: Science of Reading Reforms As a Guise for Standardization, Centralization, and Privatization](#) | American Journal of Education, Elena Aydarova
 - [SOR Movement Maintains Conservative Assault on Teachers and Public Schools \[Updated\]](#)
 - [Politics of Phonics: How Power, Profit and Politics Guide Reading Policies](#)
 - Thomas, P.L. (2024, March). We teach English in times of perpetual crisis: The long (and tedious) history of reading crisis. *English Journal*, 113(4), 21-26. <https://publicationsncte.org/content/journals/10.58680/ej2024113421>
 - Thomas, P.L. (2024, May). Teaching English in the “science of reading” era: We teach English in times of perpetual crisis: Selling a story of reading. *English Journal*, 113(5), 16-22. <https://publicationsncte.org/content/journals/10.58680/ej2024113516>
 - Thomas, P.L. (2024, September). We teach English in times of perpetual crisis: The media continue to misread teaching reading and literacy. *English Journal*, 114(1), 14-19. <https://publicationsncte.org/content/journals/10.58680/ej2024114114>
 - Thomas, P.L. (2024, November). We teach English in times of perpetual crisis: For all ELA teachers, “the time is always now.” *English Journal*, 114(2), 21-26. <https://publicationsncte.org/content/journals/10.58680/ej2024114221>
-