

**Voluntary National Tests in Reading and Math
A Strategy to Master the Basics and Reach High Standards**

Tonight, I issue a challenge to the nation: Every state should adopt high national standards, and by 1999, every state should test every 4th grader in reading and every 8th grader in math to make sure these standards are met.

President Clinton, State of the Union Address, February 4, 1997

STRONG SCHOOLS WITH CLEAR STANDARDS OF ACHIEVEMENT AND DISCIPLINE ARE ESSENTIAL TO OUR CHILDREN AND SOCIETY. These standards are needed to help instill the skills, American values, and encouragement for hard work that our children need to succeed in school and in life. Toward that end we must establish meaningful standards for what students should be expected to learn and achieve in the basic subjects of reading and mathematics.

A CHALLENGE TO PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOLS TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERY STUDENT MASTERS THE BASICS IN READING AND MATHEMATICS.

Reading well by grade 4 and mastering mathematics -- including the foundations of algebra and geometry -- by grade 8 are the gateways for further learning and achievement. Research shows that students who fail to learn to read English well by the end of grade 3 are at greater risk of dropping out and facing diminished success in school and life. Students who fail to master the basics of mathematics by the end of grade 8 do not have the foundation to take tough mathematics and science courses in high school which in turn prepare them for college and better jobs.

While our students have been making progress in reading and mathematics, we are not yet where we need to be as a nation. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 40 percent of our 4th grade students do not reach the "basic" achievement level. In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), U.S. 4th graders score above average in math and science. However, our 8th graders score below the international average in mathematics, and only 5 percent of U.S. eighth grade students score in the top 10 percent internationally.

RIGOROUS VOLUNTARY NATIONAL TESTS IN 4TH GRADE READING AND 8TH GRADE MATHEMATICS. Parents need to know that students have mastered the basics no matter where they live or move in this country. And they have the right to know how well their children are doing compared with students in other schools, states, and countries. To help give parents this information, the U.S. Department of Education is offering every state and school district the opportunity to use voluntary national tests of 4th grade reading and 8th grade mathematics, beginning in 1999. These rigorous tests will provide parents, for the first time, scores for individual students, measured against widely accepted national and international standards of excellence. They will give states, local communities, teachers and parents the kind of accurate information they need to help students master basic and advanced skills and strengthen academic performance.

NATIONAL EFFORT TO IMPROVE THE ODDS FOR STUDENTS. Schools and communities are already working hard at educational improvement; they are committed to parent involvement, getting technology into the classroom, and ensuring a trained and dedicated teacher in every classroom. The federal government provides funding to states and communities to support these efforts. But these efforts cannot be fully effective unless parents, schools and communities are aiming at clear, high standards of achievement. That is why these national tests are already spurring a renewed nation-wide effort to support school improvement and strengthen student achievement in these core subjects. Reading and literacy groups are coming together to improve reading. The mathematics and science community, engineers and business leaders are working to improve mathematics teaching and learning. To assist parents, teachers, principals and communities in using the tests effectively, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation and others are developing a tool chest that includes information for parents and teachers on how to prepare to meet these high standards, how to use test results to improve education, and what high standards in reading and mathematics look like. As part of this effort, every year the entire test (along with answers, scoring guides, and other materials) will be released to the public and available on the Internet so that students, parents, and teachers can know what is expected for students to reach standards of excellence.

TESTS BASED ON WIDELY RECOGNIZED NATIONAL STANDARDS. The tests will be modeled on the NAEP in 4th grade reading and 8th grade mathematics. The NAEP tests are based on widely accepted standards developed by parents, teachers, reading and mathematics specialists, curriculum specialists, and researchers. The NAEP standards reflect a national consensus of what students should know and be able to do when they reach these crucial stages of learning.

TOOLS FOR PARENTS; GUIDES FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES. The current NAEP is designed to assess how well a sample of students across the entire nation and individual states perform in reading and mathematics. A very small percentage of students participate in NAEP, and no parents know how their own children do on this test. In contrast, the voluntary national tests will provide students, parents, and teachers with meaningful scores to compare individual student performance to widely accepted national and international standards and to identify students and schools that need extra help. These standard measures of excellence will help parents hold schools accountable for improved performance, help teachers and principals improve curriculum and instruction, and give students a guide for charting their own progress.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE TESTS. The U.S. Department of Education will contract with independent test developers to produce the new tests, which will be available for the first time in the spring of 1999 and updated each year. Guidance for test development will come from the most successful mathematics and reading teachers, parents, governors, and local and state education, civic and business leaders. Interested test publishers, states, and local school districts will be licensed to administer the tests each year. Individual test scores will *not* be collected by the federal government; state and local school districts will decide how to use the data. Each test will require approximately 90 minutes of total testing time. States and school districts can administer the tests as part of their local testing programs.

For more information, visit our web site at <http://www.ed.gov/nationaltests>

Mastering the Basics: Reaching for High Standards in Reading & Math

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A CHALLENGE TO EVERY STATE: MAKE SURE EVERY STUDENT MASTERS THE BASICS IN READING AND MATH. Every student should be able to read well and independently by the end of 3rd grade. And every student should understand the basics of math, including algebra and even some geometry, by the end of 8th grade. Reading and math skills provide the foundation for future learning. Research shows that students who fail to read English well by the end of grade 3 have a greater likelihood of dropping out and risk a diminished chance of success in school and in life. Students who master the basics of math, including the essentials of algebra and even some geometry, by the end of grade 8 have the foundation to take tough math and science courses in high school to prepare for college and high-skills jobs.

NATIONAL TESTS IN 4TH GRADE READING AND 8TH GRADE MATH. Parents need to know that students have mastered essential skills. The U.S. Department of Education will give every state, school district, and parent the opportunity to use voluntary national tests of 4th grade reading and 8th grade math, beginning in 1999. These rigorous tests will provide scores for individual students, measured against widely accepted national and international standards, that show whether students have mastered critical basic skills. **This will be the first time rigorous tests of reading skills at grade 4 and math knowledge and skills at grade 8, tied to national standards, are available to measure individual student and school performance throughout the nation.**

Every parent has the right to know how well his or her child is doing compared with students in other schools, states, and countries. These tests will help states and local communities raise standards of excellence for teaching and learning in every classroom, and provide parents with accurate information about their children's academic performance.

WIDELY RECOGNIZED TESTS BASED ON WIDELY RECOGNIZED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS. These new tests will be based on existing widely accepted tests: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th grade reading and 8th grade math tests. In addition, the 8th grade math test will yield a predicted individual student score on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 8th grade math test. Currently, the NAEP and TIMSS tests are used to assess the overall performance of the nation as a whole or of interested states. In their current form, they cannot be used to measure the academic performance of individual students.

The NAEP reading and math tests are based on widely accepted content standards -- developed by local teachers, reading and math specialists, curriculum specialists, parents, and researchers -- reflecting a national consensus on what students should know and be able to do when they reach

the 4th grade in reading and the 8th grade in math. The NAEP math standards are highly consistent with the national math standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), which are used extensively by virtually every state.

The TIMSS test is also based on widely accepted content standards -- in this case developed by the representatives of the 41 participating countries -- reflecting an international consensus on what students should know and be able to do in mathematics by 8th grade.

A NEW GENERATION OF TESTS MEASURING INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AS WELL AS STATES. The current NAEP and TIMSS tests are designed to assess how the entire nation, or individual states, perform in reading and math. They do not show how individual students perform. The tests are administered to a sample of students in participating states or districts, rather than to all students. Each student in the sample takes only a portion of the total test questions. As a result, no student receives a score for these tests.

President Clinton's plan is to develop a new generation of the 4th grade reading and 8th grade math tests that can be given to all students in the appropriate grades, and which will provide meaningful scores comparing individual student performance to these widely accepted national and international standards. These new tests will be ready for use in schools by the spring of 1999.

THESE TESTS WILL BE RIGOROUS AND CHALLENGING. Though the focus is on basic skills, these tests are challenging, not low level. While many U.S. fourth graders perform well on the NAEP reading assessment, 40% of our students do not reach the "basic" achievement level. In TIMSS, the U.S. average score is below the international average, and only 5% of U.S. eighth grade students score in the top 10% internationally.

THESE TESTS WILL ASSIST TEACHERS, PARENTS, STUDENTS, AND LOCAL AND STATE LEADERS. While most states assess their students in reading and math, they generally set their proficiency levels lower than the challenging levels in the NAEP. (See chart). These voluntary national tests will give parents and communities reliable benchmarks for student performance which will show how well their students are progressing toward meeting challenging national standards of excellence. These new standard measures of excellence can help parents hold schools accountable for improved performance, can help teachers and principals improve curriculum and instruction, and can give students a guide for charting their own progress. They can identify students and schools that need extra help.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF THESE TESTS. The new tests will be based on NAEP and TIMSS, and will measure the performance of individual students and schools. The U.S. Department of Education will contract with independent test developers to produce the new tests, which will be available for the first time in the spring of 1999. The tests will be updated each year. Guidance for the test development will come from the most successful math and reading teachers from across the country, parents, governors, and local and state education, civic and business leaders. Interested test publishers, states, and local school districts will be licensed to administer the tests each year.

States and school districts can administer the test as part of their local testing program. After each test's administration, the entire test (along with answers, scoring guides, and other materials) will be released to the education community. At that time, the test along with supporting materials will be available on the Internet so that students, parents and teachers can know what is expected to reach standards of excellence in reading and math. A new test each year will keep the content of the tests current. These tests will help show who needs extra help, what changes schools need to make in teaching and the curriculum, and which schools need to be improved.

TESTING TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING. President Clinton challenges the nation not only to take these new rigorous tests of reading and math but also to do the hard work of preparing schools, teachers, and students to reach these high standards. We will work with schools, school districts and states as they move forward to meet this challenge and continue to strive for better academic standards in these core academic subjects.

The President's America Reads initiative will help mobilize an army of 1 million volunteer tutors to help children reach the basic level of performance on the NAEP reading test. In order to improve math education, the Department, in response to a directive issued March 6 by President Clinton, is reviewing all relevant programs that can contribute to the goal, working with the National Science Foundation and other agencies in an interagency task force. President Clinton's education budget -- with investments in teacher preparation, teaching the basics and advanced skills, technological literacy, choice and charter schools, and grass roots education reform -- will help improve teaching and learning in schools throughout the nation.