

Black students in Louisiana continue to rank behind peers on education tests, new report shows

by Will Sentell

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Despite some gains, black students in Louisiana and nationally continue to score below their peers on key education tests, according to a national report issued Thursday.

The 40-page study was done by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, a nonprofit affiliate of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce.

“It is easy to look at this report and despair,” the report says. “It puts front and center the fact that too many of our nation’s young people are failing to achieve their potential and that African-American students are disproportionately impacted by the shortcomings in our education system.”

Black students make up 45.5 percent of Louisiana’s public school enrollment, behind only Mississippi.

The report says how black students fared nationally this year in reading and math on a test called the nation’s report card is alarming, and scores in Louisiana are even worse.

Among the findings:

- 16 percent of black fourth-graders in Louisiana scored proficient or higher in math compared to 19 percent of African-American students nationally and 40 percent among all students.
- 17 percent of black fourth-graders in Louisiana scored proficient or better in reading versus 18 percent nationally and 36 percent among all students.
- In eighth-grade math, 7 percent of Louisiana black students were proficient compared to 12 percent nationally and 33 percent among all students nationwide.
- In eighth-grade reading, 12 percent of black students in Louisiana were proficient or better compared to 15 percent nationally and 34 percent among all students.

Despite the bleak numbers, the report says, scores are up since the early 1990s.

At that time only 8 percent of fourth-graders were proficient in reading and 1 percent in math,

Cheryl Oldham, vice-president of education and workforce for the foundation, said Wednesday Louisiana and other states can better tackle low test scores through new flexibility under the revamped No Child Left Behind Act, now the Every Student Succeeds Act, which won final congressional approval Thursday.

Oldham said policymakers need to see what the new leeway means for states and school districts “and how do we take this to ensure that all kids, regardless of economic circumstances, their color of skin, have an opportunity for a great education.”

State Superintendent of Education John White said the state has made gains in recent years.

In a prepared statement, White said 40 percent more black students earned a college-going score on the [ACT](#) — which tests college readiness — since 2012.

He said the most recent results on the nation’s report card showed black students narrowed the gap in fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade reading.

“The plan is working,” White said of recent steps to revamp school operations.

Another problem, according to the study, is a mismatch between black high school graduation rates and college readiness.

While 66 percent of black students in Louisiana graduated from high school, only 4 percent — among the lowest in the nation — showed they were ready for all four subjects tested on the ACT in 2015.

Just 1.8 percent of black students here passed an Advanced Placement exam, which allows high school students to earn college credit.

Only Mississippi had a lower rate.

[Eric Lewis](#), former executive director of the Louisiana Black Alliance for Educational Options, said years of low academic expectations are part of the problem.

Lewis, who is the founder of a Baton Rouge charter school set to open in August, said Common Core will help narrow the gap between scores for black students and others.

“My expectation is that over time we will begin to see that gap close,” he said.

State Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, said black students often flourish where there are resources for after-school programs and year-round schools.

“We are strapped in Louisiana and other states, as well,” said Smith, an eight-year veteran of the House who also served 13 years on the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board.

Senate Education Committee Chairman [Conrad Appel](#), R-Metairie, said the report points up decades of education neglect.

“It is really sad news for Louisiana and the country as a whole,” Appel said.

Appel, who has backed many of the sweeping changes in public schools enacted in recent years, said the state needs to keep on the same track.

“It may take one or two generations of hard work to turn that ship around,” he said.

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