**NEWS RELEASE**

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**States Setting Higher Benchmarks for “Proficient” Performance**

***NCES study shows states’ standards are becoming more alike over time***

(WASHINGTON, D.C., May 31, 2018)—States are setting higher proficiency standards and the difference between the states with the highest and lowest standards is narrowing, according to a new report released today by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

In the report, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scale,* NCES researchers used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale as a common metric to demonstrate where each state sets its proficiency standard. The analysis found that states raised the bar for what is expected to be proficient performance between 2013 and 2015. NCES also found that, as states increase expectations, the difference between states with the highest and lowest expectations was smaller in 2015 than in 2013 or in previous editions of the report dating back to 2005.

“This study shows that states are raising the bar for what they mean by ‘proficient’ performance, and, in doing so, there is less variation among states’ proficiency benchmarks,” said NCES Associate Commissioner Dr. Peggy G. Carr. “We’ve seen this change in state expectations since the first version of the report based on 2005 data, but the change accelerated between 2013 and 2015.”

Because NAEP is the only large-scale assessment given to representative samples of fourth- and eighth-graders in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, its scale provides a comparison tool for states’ expectations in their performance standards for their own assessments.

For each state, NCES calculates a NAEP scale score equivalent to where a state sets its expectation of proficient. NCES also estimates the NAEP scale equivalent scores for the achievement standards of ACT Aspire, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced)—all of which were used by more than one state in 2014–15.

In addition to providing the NAEP equivalent score for each state, the report provides additional context by identifying where states’ proficiency benchmarks are in relation to NAEP’s achievement levels of *Basic* and *Proficient*, which are set along the NAEP scale for each grade and subject. NAEP’s *Proficient* level is defined as mastery over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge, and analytical skills, while NAEP’s *Basic* level represents partial mastery of fundamental skills.

NCES found that the majority of states in the study set their standards in NAEP’s *Basic* range, and an increasing number of states expect students to meet standards that are in the NAEP *Proficient* range. Not all states were included in the 2015 report because data were not available. In grade 4 reading and mathematics, the analyses included 47 states. In grade 8, 44 states were included for reading and 33 for math.

In 2015, all states set mathematics proficiency standards at either NAEP *Basic* or NAEP *Proficient* in fourth and eighth grade.

The number of states with fourth-grade standards at the NAEP *Proficient* level increased from four to 12, and the number of states that mapped to that level in eighth grade rose from one to nine. The proficiency standards for the PARCC mathematics assessment were mapped within the NAEP *Proficient* level in both fourth and eighth grade. The standards for ACT Aspire and Smarter Balanced were at NAEP *Basic* level*.* At both grades, the Smarter Balanced standards mapped slightly below NAEP *Proficient*, by four points in fourth grade and five points in eighth grade. ACT Aspire was 13 points below NAEP *Proficient* in fourth grade and nine points below in eighth grade. The total difference between *Proficient* and *Basic* is 35 points in fourth grade and 37 points in eighth grade.

In reading, the majority of states set standards at NAEP’s *Basic* level. In 2015, four states set standards below NAEP’s *Basic* level for fourth-grade reading, compared to 23 states in 2013. In eighth-grade reading, the number of state standards placed below *Basic* dropped from nine in 2013 to one in 2015. ACT Aspire, PARCC, and Smarter Balanced had reading standards at the NAEP *Basic* level in both fourth and eighth grade.

The National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the NAEP program, is required by law to set the achievement levels, and has set an aspirational goal that all students be able to perform at the *Proficient* achievement level. States set proficiency standards for reporting student achievement to the public as part of their accountability systems for schools.

In the report, the states that used ACT Aspire, PARCC, and Smarter Balanced were treated as three large jurisdictions, each of which had its own place on the NAEP scale. Results are reported for reading and mathematics at fourth and eighth grade for the 2014–2015 school year.

The full text of the report is available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/statemapping/>.

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*The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a principal agency of the U.S. Federal Statistical System, is the statistical center of the U.S. Department of Education and the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations. A part of the Institute of Education Sciences, NCES fulfills a congressional mandate to collect, collate, analyze, and report complete statistics on the condition of American education; conduct and publish reports; and review and report on education activities internationally.*