



History Failure: Doomed to Repeat Itself?

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When the federal government released the nation's 2001 U.S. History report card, it tried to soften the blow to a concerned public by stressing that while "average scores of the nation's fourth, eighth and twelfth graders are low, [they] have shown improvements in the fourth and eighth grade from 1994." But the more glaring message, despite modest improvements in fourth and eighth grade, is that American students are in a haze about their nation's history, and just as they are preparing to graduate high school and become contributing citizens, that haze becomes a thick, impenetrable fog. **Grading** Each grade level of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) U.S. History Exam is scored in two ways – scaled numeric scores and achievement levels. It is the second type of score, the achievement levels, that shows where the problems lie. NAEP defines the levels as follows:

Basic: This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade. **Proficient:** This level represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter. (Note: The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) believes all students should be at this level.) **Advanced:** This level signifies superior performance. **Below Basic:** Though not listed as an official level of the NAEP grading framework, students can also achieve a rating. In fact, the average 12th grader scored "Below Basic" on the 2001 exam.

Each grade level score is based on a mix of questions covering time periods and themes that were determined to be appropriate for the grade. Based on these levels, U.S. students' history proficiency is clearly lacking:

4th Grade

Since 1994, three percent more fourth-graders performed at the basic level and one percent more scored at the proficient level. In fact, with only 18 percent of fourth-graders at proficiency or above, the nation is 82 percentage points short of full fourth-grade proficiency.

1994		2001	
Below Basic	36%	Below Basic	33%
Basic	47%	Basic	49%
Proficient	15%	Proficient	16%
Advanced	2%	Advanced	2%

8th Grade

The story here is similar to the one for fourth-graders, though the percentages are actually a little worse. Bottom Line: Only 17 percent of eighth-graders are at least proficient in their understanding of American history; 83



percentage points short of reaching NAGB's proficiency goal.

1994		2001	
Below Basic	39%	Below Basic	36%
Basic	48%	Basic	48%
Proficient	13%	Proficient	15%
Advanced	1%	Advanced	2%

12th Grade

Here's the really bad news: This was the worst performing grade in 1994 and 2001, and the only one that made no progress after 1994. With only 11 percent of test takers meeting NAEP's proficiency goal, and the average student scoring below basic, there's nothing here about which to be happy.

1994		2001	
Below Basic	57%	Below Basic	57%
Basic	32%	Basic	32%
Proficient	10%	Proficient	10%
Advanced	1%	Advanced	1%

Beyond the General Scores In addition to measuring overall achievement, the NAEP results have been disaggregated to compare numerous student subsets. **Scores by Gender** Scores here reveal nothing dramatic in terms of gains or deficiencies:

- In 1994, 4th grade boys outscored girls 206 to 203. In 2001 they both averaged 209.
- In 1994, 8th grade boys and girls both averaged raw scores of 259. In 2001 boys outpaced girls 264 to 261.
- In 1994, boys outscored girls 288 to 285. In 2001 that difference shrank by a point, with the average for girls rising to 286.

Scores by Race/Ethnicity The good news is that scores went up for most races in most grades. The bad news is that on the whole all scores were poor, and there continues to be a huge achievement gap. For example:

- With the exception of 12th grade white and 8th grade Hispanic students, all racial subsets saw their percentages at or above "basic" increase (the exceptions each saw a one percent drop).
- The White-Black achievement gap either decreased or remained unchanged in all grades.
- In all but grade 8 the White-Hispanic gap decreased, by a considerable 7 points in grade 12. In grade 8 the gap grew by 4 percent.
- The White-Black achievement gap was between 24 and 31 percentage points depending on grade level, and the White-Hispanic gap ranged from 19 to 33 percentage points.

Interesting note: In 1994 whites had the highest averages in all grades. In 2001 Asian/Pacific Islanders took the top spot in grade 12. **Public Schools vs. Non-Public Schools** Students in non-public schools significantly outpaced their public school peers, but the differences narrowed from 1994. Bottom Line: Even the groups with the best scores - non-public eighth-graders - saw only 31 percent of students achieve proficiency.



At or Above "Basic"

Public Schools		Non-Public Schools	
4 th Graders	65%	4 th Graders	85%
8 th Graders	62%	8 th Graders	84%
12 th Graders	42%	12 th Graders	42%

A Stark Trend While alarming, these results should not surprise anyone. For instance, college students have recently demonstrated a similarly shallow grasp of history. A 1999 test given to seniors at 55 top U.S. colleges (including Ivy League institutions) found that nearly 80 percent of the test-takers got a "D" or an "F" when asked basic multiple choice questions ranging from the general time period of the Civil War to identifying the Magna Carta. Indeed, as far back as 1986, when NAEP administered its first U.S. History exam, less than 40 percent of high school seniors knew the period in which the Civil War was fought. **Finding a Solution** With this latest set of frightening history results, it is time to acknowledge the nation's history deficiency and act in a forceful way to correct it. Fortunately for school board members and others in a position to influence what U.S. children learn, there are readily available examples of history programs that work. In addition, most of these also incorporate geography in their history programs. Though better than the U.S. History results, 2001 NAEP Geography exam results reveal that only 21 to 30 percent of 4th, 8th and 12th graders have a "proficient" understanding of geography. This area of study, therefore, must not be overlooked. With that in mind, the next section briefly examines what constitutes a good history program, and introduces some programs and curriculum providers that would take any school in the right direction. **The Curricular Essentials** Despite the political struggles surrounding the study of history, the best programs are built on this conviction: The study of history should be about learning hard data - dates, names, events - especially in the pre-high school years. After that students can begin to master "critical thinking" and other higher-order historical analyses. To try to do that before students have mastered the figures, years and events of history, however, as too many schools currently do, is to build a house without a foundation. As the Core Knowledge Foundation explains:

Children learn new knowledge by building upon what they already know. It's important to begin building foundations of knowledge in the early grades because that's when children are most receptive, and because academic deficiencies in the first six grades can permanently impair the quality of later schooling. The most powerful tool for later learning is not an abstract set of procedures (such as 'problem solving') but a broad base of knowledge....

This makes sense. After all, how can a student be expected to analyze, say, the causes of the Civil War, if he thinks it took place in the 1950s, involved Mexico and the United States, and featured the exploits of "Old Hickory"?

Resources The following are some of the best history curricula available today: **Core Knowledge**

This program serves as an excellent starting point to see what constitutes a good history curriculum. The Core Knowledge Foundation was founded in 1986 by Dr. E.D. Hirsch and puts into practice his belief that all students must have a comprehensive knowledge of history, as well as other subjects like math and literature, to be properly educated. The history curriculum designed by Hirsch's foundation reflects this conviction, emphasizing the learning of specific dates, people and events, facts students must know before they can proceed to higher-order exercises such as critical thinking. The Core Knowledge Foundation and Pearson Learning now offer a beautifully written and illustrated, in-depth and content-rich set of books to guide implementation of the Core Knowledge system. For K-2 the program offers books ranging from *The War of 1812* to *Ancient China*. In grades 3-6 the series goes more in-depth, examining numerous subjects from *The Renaissance* to *Westward Expansion Before and After the Civil War*. For more information visit the Core Knowledge Foundation's website at <http://www.coreknowledge.org/>



Hillsdale Academy

Perhaps the most important thing about the Hillsdale model, aside from its adherence to the general tenets of the core-curriculum, is its eschewing the use of textbooks, which in recent decades have become notable mainly for their vacuousness and political correctness. In fact, a recent Texas Public Policy Foundation analysis of the quality of social studies textbooks being considered by that state found that all the books "have bleached history from the pages." This is especially important because Texas's position as the second largest buyer of textbooks in the country, behind only California, causes its selection to severely limit what is made available for the rest of the country. Fortunately Hillsdale has made it easy for other schools to copy its history curriculum, providing a full curricular break down, complete with an exhaustive reading list for each grade, available in PDF format at <http://www.hillsdale.edu/academy/curriculum.htm>

National Heritage Academies

The National Heritage Academies (NHA) program integrates the best aspects of the Core Knowledge and Hillsdale curricula. The NHA model is based largely on the Core Knowledge Sequence, and like Core Knowledge emphasizes that "for a democratic society to function, schools must provide a core body of academic, historical and national knowledge to children." NHA teachers do not use textbooks, but rather utilize teacher-developed instructional materials and project-based learning. The focus of the NHA curriculum is on heroes and morality in history, with a strong emphasis "on the uniqueness of U.S. history and on the people who shaped it." The NHA curriculum designers also made a concerted effort to integrate geographical studies into their history lessons, a nod to the inseparability of the two disciplines. To learn more, go to: <http://www.heritageacademies.com/>

K12

The K12 curriculum is in many ways a reflection of the philosophy of the company's founder, former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett. It focuses on old-fashioned values and a traditional teaching style, "integrating great literature, geography and civics" into its history lessons. The delivery of the K12 curriculum, however, is thoroughly modern: It is internet-based and used widely by charter schools and home schoolers. It stresses the sort of rigorous, traditional history education that distinguishes all of the programs highlighted here, but delivers it with an eye toward the future. You can visit K12 at <http://www.k12.com> <http://www.k12.com/>.

A Few Good Textbooks There are a few excellent history textbooks available for various grades according to Gil Sewall of the American Textbook Council, who has reviewed history texts for more than fourteen years.

A History of US, Oxford (a "hybrid" series, starting at grade five) *The Story of America*, Holt Publishing (8th grade and above) *A History of the United States*, Prentice Hall, authored by former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin (for 11th grade and above) *Pathways to the President*, Prentice Hall, Cayton et.al., (for 11th grade and above)

Conclusion Other good programs no doubt exist, as do books that can be used to supplement any history course. Nonetheless, these provide excellent examples after which programs around the country can and should be patterned, and in the light of the recent NAEP revelations, it is clear that the U.S. can no longer leave the job of history lessons to traditional publishers (see CER's *The Textbook Conundrum: What are the Children Learning and Who Decides* for more on traditional publisher textbook quality). Schools must replicate and institute successful history curricula now, or doom our students to repeat the historical failure of the past.

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K-12. For more information contact CER at 202-822-9000 or [send us an email](#).

