

Lit Scan

Facts & Figures from the Colorado Literacy Research Initiative

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Parental Education Explains Largest Gap in U.S. History Scores, 2001

On May 9, Secretary of Education Rod Paige and other U.S. Department of Education officials announced the results of U.S. history tests for the nation's public school students. The press release—

"Improvements Seen in NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) 2001 U.S. History Results at Grades 4 and 8"—acknowledged that there was no change between 1994 and 2001 for 12th graders.

To many, the news about scores for the nation's high school seniors will be the strong impact of several demographic factors on how well students knew their U.S. history. Demographic groups for which scores were reported include: gender, race/ethnicity, poverty (i.e., eligibility for the National School Lunch Program), school location (i.e., central city, suburban, rural), parents' education level, types of reading materials available in the home, and television viewing habits.

Highlight

As a predictor of U.S. history scores, parental education outweighs race/ethnicity, TV viewing habits, home reading materials, poverty, school location, and gender.

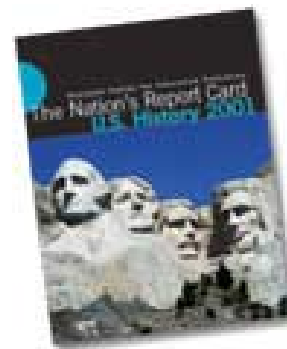
Table 1. U.S. History Composite Scores for 12th Graders in U.S. Public Schools by Major Demographic Factor, 2001

Demographic Factor	Higher Scoring Group	Lower Scoring Group	Higher-lower difference
Parents' highest level of education (no high school v. college graduates)	297	269	28
Race/ethnicity (White v. Black)	292	268	24
(White v. Hispanic)	292	273	19
Daily hours of TV viewing (0-2 v. 6+)	290	266	24
Types of reading material at home (of newspaper, encyclopedia, magazines, >25 books: 0-2 v. 4 types)	291	268	23
Poverty (eligible v. ineligible for NSLP)	288	271	17
School location (suburbs v. central city)	292	281	11
(suburbs v. rural)	292	284	7
Gender (male v. female)	287	285	2

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While several of these factors account for dramatic differences in test scores between higher and lower scoring groups, parental education level explains the largest discrepancy between sub-groups. (See Table 1. Note: The average score for all students was 286.)

- There is a 28-point difference in the average scores of seniors whose parents graduated from college and those whose parents did not graduate from high school. As family literacy advocates know, academic achievement—or lack thereof—can be a generational phenomenon.
- White and Black students are separated by a difference of 24 points in their average scores, while 19 points separate White and Hispanic students. Doubtless, minority status masks a number of potent predictors of academic achievement, such as poverty status and parental education.
- A 24-point difference also separates the average scores of students who watch television excessively and those who do not. Obviously, young people who spend most of their waking after-school hours watching TV do not have the opportunities to read and study enjoyed by those who spend only 2 or 3 hours a day watching TV.
- Students who live in “print-rich” environments—homes with a variety of reading materials, including newspapers, encyclopedias, magazines, and more than 25 books—scored, on average, 23 points higher than students who have less variety in the reading materials available to them at home. Numerous studies have found that a powerful predictor of academic achievement is simply having access to books and other reading matter at home and via libraries.
- Students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, a major poverty indicator, averaged scores 17 points lower than students not eligible for that program.
- Students from the suburbs tended to outperform students from both central cities and rural areas—with 11 and 7 point gaps respectively.
- Males outscore females by a negligible difference of only two points.



SOURCES

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- The Nation's Report Card, including details about the results of the 2001 U.S. history test, is available on the National Center for Education Statistics website at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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