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“Should We Believe the *NYT* on Reading Education?”

We begin this brief essay with Table 1 from the US Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Table 1.—NAEP Results: 4th Grade Reading, 1992-2022

Years	Average scale score for students		
	Mississippi (BLACK)	Mississippi (ALL)	National (ALL)
2022	204	217	217
2019	209	219	220*
2017	203	215	222*
2015	202	214	223*
2013	197	209*	222*
2011	198	209*	221*
2009	198	211*	221*
2007	195	208*	221*
2005	190	204*	219*
2003	192	205*	218
2002	189	203*	219
1998	189	203*	215*
1998 ¹	191	204*	217
1994 ¹	185	202*	214*
1992 ¹	186	199*	217

¹ Accommodations were not permitted for this assessment.
 * Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2022.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1992, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022 Reading Assessments.

Table 1 tracks average 4th grade reading scores for Black and all Mississippi students and for the nation. We bring these statistics to your attention because the *New York Times* (*NYT*) published an opinion piece by Nicholas Kristof on May 31, 2023, “[Mississippi is Offering Lessons for America on Education.](#)” The piece showers praise on Mississippi for its advances in teaching 4th graders to read. Before we analyze the statistics, a brief digression is in order.

Please know that I will spend the rest of my life convincing Black Americans (Afrodescendants) that we are as smart or smarter than White Americans. Over the last year, I realized that many Black Americans born during the second half of the 20th century just do not want to accept this fact. Many Black Americans of that age, who have participated in higher education, were taught by White professors (mainly males), who “knew” their subjects well—sometimes very well. These Black American students were also sucked into an educational experience with White student at the elementary and secondary levels. Unfortunately, these Black students were unduly influenced (overtly or subliminally) to think/believe that Whites simply operate at a higher knowledge level. Fortunately, this is not so!

Now back to Table 1. Having worked in educational systems in two states (Virginia and Florida) and having visited scores of elementary and secondary schools in numerous states (about half of the fifty states), I have yet to speak with a teacher, educator, or an administrator (principal or superintendent) who truly understands the NAEP. It stands with no discussion that parents and the public have little-to-no understanding of how the NAEP works. I realize that people do not comprehend it when I explain it to them. I am convinced that they fear querying me to finally discover what this NAEP “thing” is and about its use.

In the *NYT* opinion piece, Kristof is your first alert. Having seen Kristof offering his opinions on CNN over the past decade, I recognize him for what he is—and is not. I am not impressed that he possesses a Harvard degree or that he studied law at Oxford University in the United Kingdom as a Rhodes Scholar. He is not an expert on education. But I am. Kristof is also not an expert on the NAEP or the NAGB (National Assessment Governing Board). But I am. And, whereas I am not an expert on Mississippi public schools, I have spent enough time in Mississippi and in Jackson, specifically, to know that Mississippi public schools are in no position to teach America how to teach reading to American 4th graders.

While I have no idea why Kristof decided to heap accolades on Mississippi’s education, my SWAG (scientific wild ass guess) is that his base motivation is politics. Remember, Kristof stepped away from the *NYT* earlier when he considered a run for the Oregon Governor’s Mansion.

Kristof is identified as a journalist (a reporter), but he has worked mainly as an opinion writer for the *NYT*. The opinion piece being analyzed here is misleading and, in places, patently false—violating fundamentals of good journalism and disclosing an absence of “smartness.”

What’s not smart? What’s not true?

First, Kristof asserts that Mississippi elevated itself to the top of the national state rankings on the 2022 NAEP 4th grade reading assessment. When examining this assertion, one recognizes that one does not need to know what the NAEP scores were in 2022 to realize that reading (and academic performance generally) suffered across all grades and throughout the country due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Table 1 shows clearly how Mississippi was already among the lesser lights when home-schooling began in 2020. Let us be clear: Virtual learning is no substitute for in-class instruction and in-person tutelage. Other states had a long way to fall whereas Mississippi was already below par. Kristof’s assertion is not a bald face lie, but a nuanced inaccuracy that is available because most readers are not likely to know what the NAEP is or how it works. Most

importantly, Table 1 indicates (by no asterisks (*)) that Mississippi’s 2022 NAEP 4th grade reading assessment score is not statistically different from scores for the previous three testing years at the five percent level of significance.

Second, Table 1 reveals a seeming unstated agenda of the NAEP. I believe that the NAEP was engineered to “prove” that Black students’ performance was below White students’ performance not because of segregation, but because of the former’s inherent intellectual deficiencies. When one picks apart Kristof’s argument, a racist orientation pushes forward—the core ideas seem to include the notion that Black Americans are second-class citizens. Consider the following:

- If the NAEP assessment is to be a useful tool for measuring academic performance and shaping future progress, then the assessment should be designed with both “norm-referenced” and “criterion-referenced” measures in mind so that a near 360-degree perspective of student performance can be ascertained. Instead, the NAEP features only “criterion-referenced” results and “cut scores” as part of its “Nation’s Report Card.” The latter intentionally or unintentionally enables policymakers to avoid adopting modifications to educational processes that can improve learning outcomes for students.¹
- What Table 1 does not reveal, but is essential to know, is that scores on the 4th grade reading assessment can range from 0 to 500. Why? This is an important question to ask because all students know that most tests that are administered in the US educational system have possible scores between 0 and 100. A perfect score is 100. From Table 2 below, you can see that the NAEP and the NAGB have established 268 points as reflecting “Advanced” achievement on the 4th grade reading assessment. Let us call 268 a perfect score. But students could have scored up to 500 points. Identifying 268 as “Advanced” is akin to indicating that an A (or top) grade is achieved when one obtains 54 points on an assessment of 50 questions valued at 2 points each and with a maximum of 100 possible points. Also, note from Table 2 that 238 and 208 are established as the “Proficient” and “Basic” level of achievement, respectively. Comparing these achievement level “cut scores” with the 2022 reading assessment average scores reveals that the 217 Mississippi and national average scores exceed the “Basic” level of achievement, but fall substantially below the “Proficient” level of achievement. These results should be a source of consternation, not celebration.

Table 2.—NAEP 4th Grade Reading Assessment Achievement Levels for 2022 (Established in 2009)

NAEP achievement level	Cut scores
Advanced	268
Proficient	238
Basic	208

Black Americans should begin to ask the following types of serious questions about education in the US: (1) If reading was so crucial to the learning process, then why are students permitted to

¹ For an explanation of “norm-referenced” versus “criterion-referenced” assessments and “cut scores,” visit Renaissance.com; <https://www.renaissance.com/2018/07/11/blog-criterion-referenced-tests-norm-referenced-tests/> (Ret. 060923).

use Cliff Notes or Spark Notes? (2) Why does the NAEP not test “Listening Skills,” given that listening is a very important skill in professions dependent on symbol manipulation in pen-and-paper and digital environments? (3) Why is Kristof not reporting on Mississippi’s performance in preparing students in mathematics? We all know that all future high-paying jobs require highly developed mathematical skill (robotics, physicians, marine biologists, climatologists, physicists, astrophysicists, engineers designing quantum computers, etc.).

Interestingly, the *NYT* opinion piece slips in the fact that the NAEP result showing Mississippi at the pinnacle of 4th grade reading achievement in the nation were “adjusted for demographics.” In other words, after adjusting Mississippi’s reading assessment scores for the disproportionate number of lower socioeconomic families including Black Americans in the state, it can be reported that Mississippi is among the top performing states in 2022. Also (ignoring for a moment our earlier point that Mississippi’s 2022 score is not statistically different from the previous three testing years), the opinion piece neglects to inform readers that Mississippi achieved an average score of 219 in 2019 before the pandemic and a 217 score in 2022. Do we now celebrate performance declines?

Black America must awaken to the fraud that education can be in the US, and to the fact that White Americans do not operate at a higher knowledge level.

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