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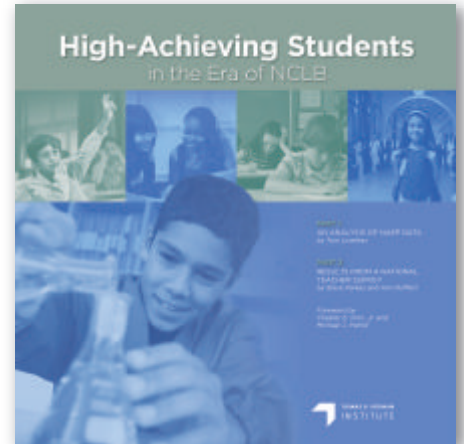
# NUTSHELL



## HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS IN THE ERA OF NCLB

The Fordham Institute's latest report contains two separate studies examining the status of high-achieving students in the No Child Left Behind era. In the first, Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution analyzes results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and concludes that the nation's top pupils have "languished" academically while the lowest-performing youngsters have gained dramatically. The second study, by survey researchers Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett, finds that most teachers feel pressure to focus primarily on their lowest-achieving students and neglect the high achievers, even though this offends their sense of fairness.

*"To its credit," said Fordham president Chester E. Finn, Jr., "No Child Left Behind appears to be making progress toward its stated goal: narrowing achievement gaps from the bottom up. Let us celebrate the gains of our lowest achieving students. But in a time of fierce international competition, can we afford to let the strongest languish? As John Gardner once asked, 'Can we be equal and excellent too?' Surely the answer must be yes. For America to maintain prosperity and strength on a shrinking, flattening planet, we need also to serve our ablest youngsters far better than we're doing today."*



### Major Findings

- **While the nation's lowest-achieving youngsters made respectable gains from 2000 to 2007, the performance of top students was languid.** Children at the tenth percentile of achievement (the bottom 10 percent of students) have shown solid progress in fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade math, but those at the 90th percentile (the top 10 percent) have made minimal gains.
- **This pattern—big gains for low achievers and lesser ones for high achievers—is associated with the introduction of accountability systems in general, not just NCLB.** An analysis of NAEP data from the 1990s shows that states that adopted testing and accountability regimes saw similar patterns prior to NCLB: stronger progress for low achievers than for high.
- **Teachers say that advanced pupils are lower priority in their schools.** Sixty percent say struggling students are a "top priority" at their school. Just 23 percent of teachers say this about "academically advanced" pupils. (They could give multiple answers to this question.)
- **Low-achieving students receive dramatically more attention from teachers.** Asked "Who is most likely to get one-on-one attention from teachers?" 81 percent of teachers named "struggling students" while only 5 percent named "advanced students."
- **Yet teachers believe that all students deserve equal attention.** They were given this choice: "For the public schools to help the U.S. live up to its ideals of justice and equality, do you think it's more important that they (A) focus on raising the achievement of disadvantaged students who are struggling academically OR (B) focus equally on all students, regardless of their backgrounds or achievement levels?" Only 11 percent chose the former, while 86 percent chose the latter.

**Minimal Progress at the Top**  
4th Grade Reading NAEP scores, 2000-2007  
(90th and 10th percentiles)



Note: National means: 2000=215, 2007=222, a change of +7  
Source: Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample