

Many 8th graders score poorly on US history, civics exam

April 29 2015, by Kimberly Hefling

Time for another history lesson. Only about a quarter of eighth graders showed solid performance or better in U.S. history, civics and geography on tests known as the Nation's Report Card.

The 2014 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress released Wednesday were similar to those four years ago when the assessments were last administered. Students did better overall in U.S. history and civics than their peers in the 1990s when the tests were first given, but geography scores have remained stagnant since 1994.

Among the findings: Less than half—45 percent—of eighth-grade respondents were able to correctly interpret time differences using an atlas with time zones. Only about a third knew that "the government of the United States should be a democracy" is a political belief shared by most people in the U.S.

Michelle Herczog, president of the National Council for the Social Studies, said the results "point to a need for immediate action." Tackling issues like terrorism, human rights, race relations and poverty require a deep understanding of the historical and geographic context, she said.

"How do we, as a nation, maintain our status in the world if future generations of Americans do not understand our nation's history, world geography or civics principles or practices?" Herczog said.

A breakdown of the test and results:

HOW STUDENTS DID

Only 18 percent of students demonstrated solid performance or better in U.S. history. The results for geography and civics were slightly better, 27 percent and 23 percent, respectively.

A large share of the eighth graders who took the test scored at the "basic" level, meaning just partial mastery of the subjects. Only 1 percent of test takers in U.S. history, 3 percent in geography and 2 percent in civics scored in the advanced level.

White and Asian students performed better than their Hispanic and black peers. Although the scores overall were similar to 2010, Hispanic students made gains in U.S. history and geography and white students made gains in U.S. history and civics. The scores of black and Asian students didn't budge in the three categories.

OTHER FINDINGS

About two-thirds of the eighth graders were able to use a map to locate a country on the Horn of Africa, but only a quarter successfully completed a two-part question that involved explaining how the participation of African-Americans in the Civil War affected the war's outcome.

WHO TOOK THE TEST

A nationally represented sample of 29,000 eighth graders from public and private schools took a test in one of the three subjects.

It is administered by the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics.

HOW STUDENTS LEARN

History class is going digital.

Compared to four years earlier, more students in 2014 reported using computers at school in their U.S. history and social studies classes. Fewer said they read material from a textbook and more listened to information presented online or watched movies or videos. More of them said they use letters, diaries or essays written by historical people in their studies.

The assessment is not designed to provide the context needed to explain student performance or what works in classrooms.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Question: The Supreme Court's 1803 decision in *Marbury v. Madison* established the court's power to:

- Impeach a president
- Decide whether a federal law is constitutional
- Resolve conflicts between states
- Resolve conflicts between the president and Congress

(asterisk)(The answer is B, which 41 percent of students chose correctly.)

Question: What is one responsibility that modern Presidents have that was not described in the Constitution?

- A) Commanding the armed forces

- B) Granting pardons
- C) Appointing Supreme Court justices
- D) Proposing an annual budget to Congress

*(The answer is D, which 38 percent of students chose correctly.)

More information: Online: NAEP results:
www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/

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Citation: Many 8th graders score poorly on US history, civics exam (2015, April 29) retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-8th-graders-struggle-history-civics.html>

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