



School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder  
Boulder, CO 80309-0249  
Telephone: 802-383-0058

NEPC@colorado.edu  
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

## NAEP SCUSES: MAKING SENSE OF EXCUSE-MAKING FROM THE NO-EXCUSES CONTINGENT

*Kevin G. Welner, University of Colorado Boulder  
October 2015*

---

Tomorrow's release of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) will report a dip in scores, according to multiple sources. These lower grades on the Nation's Report Card are not good news for anyone, but they are particularly bad news for those who have been vigorously advocating for "no excuses" approaches—standards-based testing and accountability policies like No Child Left Behind. Such policies follow a predictable logic: (a) schools are failing; and (b) schools will quickly and somewhat miraculously improve if we implement a high-stakes regime that makes educators responsible for increasing students' test scores.

To be sure, the sampling approach used by NAEP and the lack of student-level data prohibit direct causal inferences about specific policies. Although such causal claims are made all the time, they are not warranted. It is not legitimate to point to a favored policy in Massachusetts and validly claim that this policy caused that state to do well, or to a disfavored policy in West Virginia and claim that it caused that state to do poorly.

However, as Dr. Bill Mathis and I explained eight months ago in an [NEPC Policy Memo](#), it is possible to validly assert, based in part on NAEP trends, that the promises of education's test-driven reformers over the past couple decades have been unfulfilled. The potpourri of education "reform" policy has not moved the needle—even though reformers, from Bush to Duncan, repeatedly assured us that it would.

This is the tragedy. It has distracted policymakers' attention away from the extensive

research showing that, in a very meaningful way, achievement is *caused* by opportunities to learn. It has diverted them from the truth that the achievement gap is *caused* by the opportunity gap. Those advocating for today's policies have pushed policy makers to disregard the reality that the opportunity gap arises more from out-of-school factors than inside-of-school factors.

Instead, they assured us that success was a simple matter of adults looking beyond crumbling buildings and looking away from the real life challenges of living with racism or poverty. As a substitute, we were told to look toward a “no excuses” expectation for all children. This mantra has driven policy for an entire generation of students. The mantra was so powerful that we as a nation were able to ignore the facts and fail to provide our children with opportunities to learn.

So schools with low test scores were labeled “failing” and were shut down or reconstituted or turned over to private operators of charter schools. Voucher and neovoucher policies pulled students out of “failing schools” (again, those with low test scores) and moved them to private schools. Teachers whose students' test scores didn't meet targets were publicly shamed or denied pay or even dismissed. Our entire public schooling structure became intensely focused on increasing test scores.

But once we admit that those test scores are driven overwhelmingly by students' poverty- and racism-related experiences outside of school, then “failing” schools are little more than schools enrolling the children in the communities that we as a society have failed.

In the face of the mounting evidence that “reform” policies have come up short, what are advocates saying now? The first sign came a week ago, when Mike Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, heard rumors about lower NAEP scores and [pre-emptively announced](#) that the dip was likely caused by the recession triggered by the 2008 financial crisis. (He neglected to mention that this crisis was due to the same sort of deregulatory policies promoted for education by Fordham and similar advocates.) We must, he tells us, “acknowledge the strong link between students' socioeconomic status and their academic achievement.” In short, he gave the same “excuse” that “no-excuses” reformers have condemned year after year.

Mr. Petrilli is correct, of course—not about his implicit causal argument for the new NAEP scores—but about the strong link to poverty.

A point comparable to Petrilli's is made by Matt Barnum in “[The Seventy Four](#),” who tells his readers that “schools have an extremely important impact on student learning, but out-of-school factors have an even [greater effect](#) on student test scores.” Indeed, he continues, “The many out-of-school factors driving achievement — the economy, access to healthcare, etc. — mean we can't even be sure that changes in NAEP scores had anything to do with changes in schools.” The co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Seventy Four* is Campbell Brown, whose primary advocacy is for teachers' tenure protections to be based on students' test scores. She has very little tolerance for teachers' excuse-making about how the students' poverty undermines their ability to drive those scores up.

A similar publication called the “[Education Post](#),” which advocates for standards-based testing and accountability policies, also came out with a pre-release article, reminding people that the general trend on NAEP scores is up. (What they neglected to mention is that the trend was up before the reform era as well; there has been steady growth for 30 years.) That article also suggests that lower NAEP scores may be because Common Core's

focus has shifted teaching away from the sorts of test items included in the NAEP. Chad Aldeman of [Bellwether Education Partners](#), a consultancy think tank that advocates for the same testing and accountability policies, pointed to the changing demographics of NAEP test-takers and to Simpson's Paradox and the need to focus on subgroups.

Yes, it's possible that NAEP scores could be impacted by Common-Core-induced changes in what's taught. And as noted above, those scores certainly are impacted by poverty. But why are "no excuses" reformers suddenly so busy making excuses?

It seems that the only lesson the new excuse-makers are asking us to draw from their nod to the importance of poverty is something like, "Don't worry. The status-quo reform policies are probably still working." Even though these advocates are now vocally recognizing the crushing impact of poverty, the policy implication of their epiphany remains beyond their grasp. Can they really be asking policy makers to keep focusing on test-based accountability in hopes that we might detect a small uptick in 15 years (at the cost of broad and engaging learning)? Won't they acknowledge that our outcomes will continue to be disappointing unless and until we address poverty itself?

In terms of educational policy, this points to continued investment in, and research about, community schools and other wrap-around approaches. But more broadly, it points to need to think about educational improvement within a broader set of policies addressing housing, employment, wealth inequality and the social safety net.

It's long past time to recognize that any benefits of test-based accountability policies are at best very small, and any meager benefits teased out are more than counterbalanced by negative unintended consequences. Judging by the rhetoric of this past weekend from the Obama Administration and others, there's a growing recognition that the American people are ready to move on. But we shouldn't hold our breath waiting for status-quo reformers who have ridden the "no excuses" bandwagon for a generation to accept this reality and start advocating for policies that focus on inputs and close opportunity gaps. We also shouldn't hold our breath waiting for them to call upon states to undo those voucher and turnaround and charter-conversion policies based on "failing schools."

But maybe they could at least stop making excuses.