

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

With the completion of its 1994 assessment program, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) concluded its 25th year as the only nationally representative and continuous assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. In 1994, the NAEP program included United States history assessments that were administered to representative samples of public and nonpublic school students at grades 4, 8, and 12. This report is *first look* into the results of this assessment, providing summary data only for the major demographic subpopulations in the nation. The forthcoming *NAEP 1994 United States History Report Card* will give more detailed information about the results presented here. Perhaps more importantly, it will provide a context for understanding the findings as they relate to *instructional content; instructional practices; school and teacher characteristics; school conditions; and student background, student activities, and home environment.*

## The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

NAEP is a congressionally mandated survey administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education. Since 1969, NAEP has reported on the educational achievement of America's students and provided accurate and useful information to parents, educators, and policymakers at the national, state, and local levels. NAEP has become an integral part of our nation's evaluation of the condition and progress of education.

Since its beginning, NAEP assessments have been conducted periodically in reading, mathematics, science, writing, history, geography, and other fields. The NAEP 1994 program included assessments in reading, U.S. history, and geography. U.S. history was last assessed by NAEP in 1988. However, the NAEP 1994 U.S. history assessment was developed using newly revised specifications, and the results of the two assessments are not comparable.

## The NAEP National Sample

The NAEP 1994 U.S. history assessment was based on a national probability sample of public and nonpublic school students enrolled in grades 4, 8, and 12. (Independent samples were used for the three subject areas assessed in 1994.) Approximately 5,500 fourth-grade students, 9,000 eighth-grade students, and 8,000 twelfth-grade students participated in the assessment. Detailed information about the samples is presented in Table A.1 in Appendix A.

## The NAEP U.S. History Framework

The NAEP 1994 U.S. history assessment was built from a new blueprint or framework. The NAEP 1994 *U.S. History Framework*<sup>1</sup> was developed through a national consensus process involving historians and educators from around the country. The result of the consensus process was a framework organized around three concepts or dimensions: major themes of U.S. history, chronological periods in U.S. history, and ways of knowing and thinking about U.S. history.

**Themes in U.S. History.** Four historical themes are the core organizing structure of the framework. In using themes rather than periods, the NAEP assessment differs from most history curricula, which are organized in a chronological fashion. The themes were intended to ensure that all major branches of historical study were covered and that emphasis on various areas was balanced.

### 1. *Change and Continuity in American Democracy: Ideas, Institutions, Practices, and Controversies*

This theme primarily concerns the development of American political democracy from colonial times to the present. It covers political events that shaped American democracy, such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the fight for civil rights, as well as the core ideas and principles that underlie it. This theme ensures that students' knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the founding of the nation, the writing of the constitution, and other fundamental components of the nation's political history will be assessed. At the same time it calls for evaluating students' knowledge of the role that major political ideas and conflicts have played at different points in our history.

## 2. *The Gathering and Interaction of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas*

The second theme is broadly defined because it covers a vast component of U.S. history: the interactions among the people and cultures of many countries, racial groups, and religious traditions that have contributed to the development of American society. This theme covers the nature and role of immigration throughout our history, cultural developments, patterns of social organization, and changing roles of men and women.

## 3. *Economic and Technological Changes and Their Relation to Society, Ideas, and the Environment*

This theme focuses on the economic history of the nation and its development from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrialized superpower. It covers the role economic ideas and beliefs have played in this change as well as the roles of geography and of developments in science and technology.

## 4. *The Changing Role of America in the World*

This theme calls for coverage of the many factors — physical geography, political ideals, economic interests, public opinion — that have shaped American foreign policy. It also addresses specific interactions between the U.S. and other nations and the domestic consequences of developments in foreign policy.

Table 1 shows the percentage of assessment time to be devoted to each theme specified in the framework. In addition to guiding assessment construction, these percentages are used to weight the thematic subscales in the calculation of the composite NAEP U.S. history scale used in this report. (A discussion of the thematic

subscale results will be included in the forthcoming *NAEP 1994 United States History Report Card*.)

**Periods in U.S. History.** Eight periods provide chronological structure that can be used to trace many questions raised by the four themes. These periods focus attention on several major eras of U.S. history. They overlap at some points because they were conceived to ensure coverage of major trends and events. The historical periods are not used as reporting subscales. The proportion of assessment time devoted to each of these periods is specified in the framework. The periods are:

1. **Three Worlds and Their Meeting in the Americas (Beginnings to 1607)**
2. **Colonization, Settlement, and Communities (1607 to 1763)**
3. **The Revolution and the New Nation (1763 to 1815)**
4. **Expansion and Reform (1801 to 1861)**
5. **Crisis of the Union: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 to 1877)**
6. **The Development of Modern America (1865 to 1920)**
7. **Modern America and the World Wars (1914 to 1945)**
8. **Contemporary America (1945 to Present)**

**Cognitive Domains.** The framework considers the various forms of thinking and knowledge that historical study requires. These are divided into two general cognitive domains in order to ensure that each is appropriately represented in the assessment. The two domains and their definitions are as follows.

### 1. **Historical Knowledge and Perspective**

This domain includes knowing and understanding people, events, concepts, themes, movements, contexts, and historical sources; sequencing events; recognizing multiple perspectives and seeing an era or movement through the eyes of different groups; and developing a general conceptualization of U.S. history.

### 2. **Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

This domain includes explaining issues, identifying historical patterns, establishing cause-and-effect relationships, finding value statements, establishing significance, applying historical knowledge, weighing evidence to draw sound conclusions, making defensible generalizations, and rendering insightful accounts of the past.

Theme	Grade 4	Grade 8	Grade 12
Change and Continuity in American Democracy: Ideas, Institutions, Practices, and Controversies	25%	30%	25%
The Gathering and Interaction of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas	35%	30%	25%
Economical and Technological Changes and Their Relation to Society, Ideas, and the Environment	25%	20%	25%
The Changing Role of America in the World	15%	20%	25%

The framework also places a major emphasis on using a wide variety of primary and secondary historical documents. These are used to measure students' ability to interpret and analyze historical materials.

Finally, the framework indicates that at least 50 percent of testing time should be spent on constructed-response questions that require students to write short (one or two sentences) or extended (a paragraph or more) answers. In the actual assessment, approximately 60 percent of assessment time was devoted to questions of this type.

At each grade level assessed, the NAEP U.S. history assessment consisted of a set of test booklets, each containing student background questions and cognitive tasks. The background sections asked students to provide information about their characteristics, classroom instruction, and motivation to complete the assessment. The cognitive sections included stimulus materials and associated tasks designed to assess students' historical knowledge and skills. Examples of cognitive sections are presented in Appendix B. Each section contains a mixture of multiple-choice and constructed-response questions. The assessment was composed of six 25-minute blocks of cognitive questions at grade 4 and eight 25-minute blocks at both grades 8 and 12. At grades 8 and 12, the 25-minute blocks were supplemented by one 50-minute block. Each assessed student completed a booklet with either two 25-minute blocks or one 50-minute block. The booklets were distributed randomly to students and required about one hour to complete.

## The NAEP U.S. History Scale

Responses to the assessment tasks were analyzed to determine the percentages of students responding correctly to each of the multiple-choice questions and the percentages attaining each of the possible scores for constructed-response questions. Item response theory (IRT) methods were used to produce within-grade scales that summarize results for each of the four historical themes. Each subscale for grade 4 was linked to the corresponding subscale for grade 8. Likewise, each subscale for grade 12 was linked to the corresponding subscale for grade 8. Then, each linked subscale was mapped onto a 0 to 500 scale. These separate subscales were then weighted by the percentages shown in Table 1 to produce a composite NAEP U.S. history scale, which is used in Chapter 2 to present results. (The scales for each of the NAEP subjects assessed in 1994 were developed independently; therefore, results should not be compared across subjects.)

## Achievement Levels

In addition to summarizing results using the NAEP U.S. history scale, this report presents data using the U.S. history achievement levels authorized by the NAEP legislation<sup>2</sup> and adopted by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). The achievement levels are based on collective judgments — gathered from a broadly representative panel of teachers, education specialists, and members of the general public — about what students should know and be able to do relative to the body of content reflected in the NAEP assessment framework. Three achievement levels were defined for each of the grade levels assessed: *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*. The policy definitions of these achievement levels are given in Figure 1. In reporting NAEP results, there are effectively four achievement-level categories: the percentages of students at or above each of the levels and the percentage below the *Basic* (lowest) level.

**Figure 1. Achievement Level Policy Definitions**

<i>Basic</i>	This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.
<i>Proficient</i>	This level represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.
<i>Advanced</i>	This level signifies superior performance.

It should be noted that the setting of achievement levels on the National Assessment is relatively new and in transition. There have been evaluations which concluded that the percentages of students at certain levels may be underestimated<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, there have been critiques of those evaluations, which concluded that the weight of the empirical evidence does not support such conclusions<sup>4</sup>.

The student achievement levels in this report have been developed carefully and responsibly, and have been subject to refinements and revisions in procedures as new technologies for standard setting have become available. Upon review of the available information, the Commissioner of NCES has judged that the achievement levels have a developmental status. However, in 1994 the Commissioner and the National Assessment Governing Board also believe that the achievement levels are useful and valuable in reporting on the educational achievement of America's students.

## Overview of this Report

The two remaining chapters of this report present selected results in terms of the *NAEP U.S. history scale* and *student achievement levels*, respectively. Within each of these chapters, findings are presented for the nation, for the regions, and for the major reporting subgroups described below. More detailed descriptions of the reporting subgroups are presented in Appendix C.

- ▶ **Race/Ethnicity.** Estimates are reported by students' race/ethnicity (self-identified) using the following mutually exclusive categories: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian (including Alaskan Native).
- ▶ **Gender.** Estimates are reported separately for males and females.
- ▶ **Parents' Education Level.** Estimates are reported based on students' reports of the highest level of education attained by at least one of their parents: did not finish high school, graduated from high school, some education after high school, or graduated from college.
- ▶ **Public/Nonpublic Schools.** Estimates are reported for students attending public schools and nonpublic schools, including Catholic and other nonpublic schools.

This report examines and compares the U.S. history performance of groups of students defined by shared demographic characteristics or responses to background questions (for example, males compared to females). It does not explore the relationships among combinations of these groups (for example, White males compared to Black males).

The means and percentages presented in the report are *estimates* because they are based on samples rather than the entire population(s). Consequently, the results are subject to a measure of uncertainty, reflected in the *standard error* of the estimate. Although standard errors are not provided with the estimates presented in this report, a full set of standard errors will be available in the *NAEP 1994 United States History Report Card*.

The comparisons presented in the report are based on statistical tests that consider both the magnitude of the difference between the group means or percentages and the standard errors of those statistics. Throughout this report, differences between reporting groups are defined as significant when they are significant from a statistical perspective. This means that observed differences are unlikely to be due to chance factors associated with sampling variability. All differences reported are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with appropriate adjustments for multiple comparisons. The term "significant," therefore, is not intended to imply a judgment about the absolute magnitude or educational relevance of the differences. The term is intended to identify statistically dependable *population* differences as an aid in focusing subsequent dialogue among policymakers, educators, and the public.

This report contains three appendices. Appendix A provides information about sampling. Appendix B contains sample assessment questions. Appendix C includes descriptions of the reporting subgroups. Detailed information about measurement methodology and data analysis techniques will be available in the forthcoming *NAEP 1994 United States History Report Card* and the *NAEP 1994 Technical Report*.

## Cautions in Interpretations

The reader is cautioned against making simple or causal inferences related to the performance of various subgroups of students or about the effectiveness of public and nonpublic schools. Average performance differences between two groups of students may in part be due to socioeconomic and other factors. For example, differences observed among racial/ethnic subgroups are almost certainly associated with a broad range of socioeconomic and educational factors not discussed in this report and possibly not addressed by the NAEP assessment program. Similarly, differences in performance between public and nonpublic school students may be better understood after accounting for factors such as composition of the student body, parents' education levels, and parental interest.

## Endnotes

1. *U.S. History Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, U.S. Department of Education, Government Printing Office).
2. P.L. 103-382. Improving America's Schools Act of 1994.
3. *Education Achievement Standards, NAGB's Approach Yields Misleading Interpretations*, United States General Accounting Office Report to Congressional Requestors (Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, June 1993). GAO/PEMD-93-12 Educational Achievement Standards.  
*Setting Achievement Levels for the Nation*, The Second Report of the National Academy of Education Panel on the Evaluation of the NAEP Trial State Assessment, 1992 Trial State Assessment (Stanford, CA: National Academy of Education, 1993).
4. American College Testing, *Technical Report on Setting Achievement Levels on the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress in Mathematics, Reading, and Writing* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, 1993).  
Cizek, G., *Reactions to National Academy of Education Report* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, 1993).  
Kane, M., *Comments on the NAE Evaluation of the NAGB Achievement Levels* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board).

