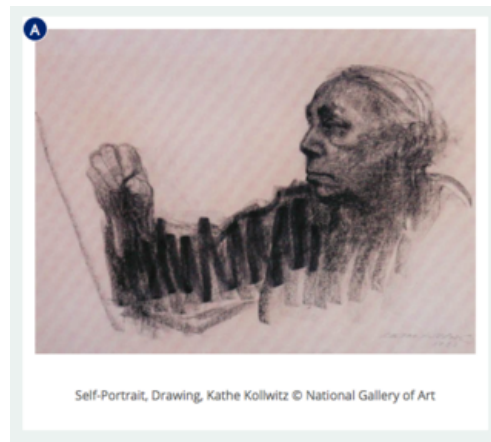


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8th Graders' Arts Scores Hold Steady on Latest National Assessment

By Jackie Zubrzycki on April 25, 2017 12:32 AM



Updated

On the first national assessment of students' performance in visual arts and music in eight years, girls, suburban students, private schoolers, and higher-income students came out ahead of their peers.

But, despite fears about dramatic cuts in recent years to arts programs, students' overall scores and reported participation in arts have remained about steady since 2008. Across the country, more students reported taking a music class (63 percent) than a visual art class (42 percent).

Those are some of the **results of the third-ever National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** arts assessment. The NAEP is often referred to as the "nation's report card" and is administered by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). A nationally representative sample of some 8,800 8th graders in public and private schools took exams in late 2016 that involved responding to and creating artwork.

Arts and music education advocates said that the NAEP helps to paint a picture of the state of arts education in the U.S., though some argued for evaluating students' skills in other artistic disciplines, such as theatre: "It's absolutely essential to have surveys like this," said Jeff Poulin, the program director for arts education at Americans for the Arts. "But I think it could be broadened." He also noted that the sample of students lacked data that would allow for the achievement of Native American students to be pulled out.

The overall steadiness of the scores disguises some substantial differences and changes among geographic areas, school types, and students' family income levels and racial backgrounds.

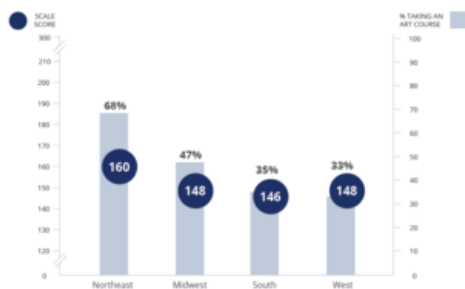
For instance, Hispanic students' scores improved between 2008 and 2016 in both visual arts and music: In visual arts, for instance, Hispanic students' average score was 139 out of 300, up from 134, and the gap between Hispanic and white students lessened from 26 points in 2008 to 19 points in 2016. Asian students' scores increased significantly in visual arts: from 156 in 2008 to 166 in 2016. Asian students scored higher than white students in 2016; white students had, on average, scored four points higher than Asians in 2008.

On survey questions given with the assessment, fewer students reported participating in visual arts or music activities outside of school than in 2008, though officials say they're not sure why.

Participation in arts classes was associated with higher scores, and Northeastern schools in particular have something to brag about: Students in that region were almost twice as likely to report taking a visual art class as their Western and Southern peers, and their scores were correspondingly higher.

Poulin said that while those regional differences weren't surprising, the NAEP finding "speaks to the importance of state education policy for arts education" and is a timely reminder at a time when states are discussing policies and preparing **their plans for the Every Student**

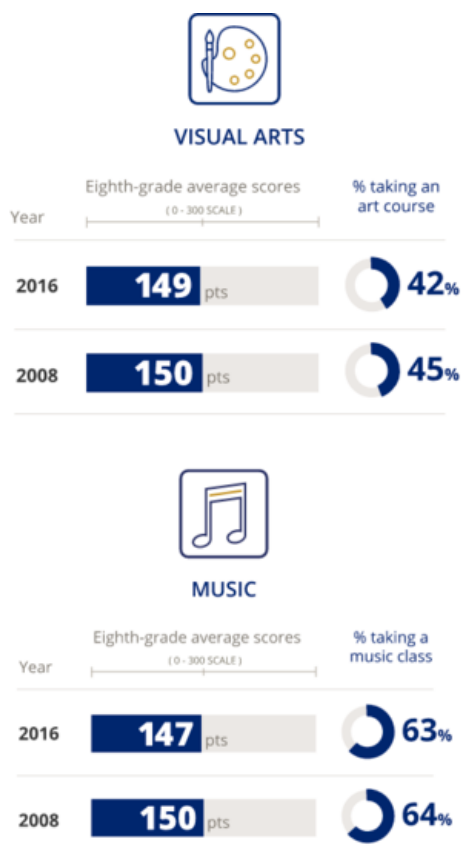
Succeeds Acts.



Eight Years Later

The arts assessment has changed enough since the first test, administered in 1997, that the NAGB and NCES warn against comparing those results to the 2016 test.

Since the 2008 test, scores and reported participation have slightly dropped in both music and visual art—but the drops aren't statistically significant:



More students report taking music classes than visual arts classes. Scores in both subjects hovered around 150 on a 300-point scale.

In a call with media, Peggy Carr, the acting commissioner of the NCES, was wary of characterizing the overall scores as either positive or negative: "The important thing to note is whether it's changed over time," she said. "I wouldn't want to identify it as a bad result." In fact, she said, a score around 150 represents "a strong understanding of technical techniques, skills, and appreciation." She said the average is comparable to the average scores in other subjects. Unlike other NAEP subjects, arts scores aren't sorted into categories like "Basic," "Proficient," and "Advanced." Carr said that's because of the complexity of the arts tasks and the domains being measured.

One striking change is that in 2016, a greater share students who took the test were from lower-income families: The percentage of students who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program—a measure of students' family income levels —increased from 36 percent in 2008 to 49 percent in 2016.

The most substantial gap in scores is between those students and those from higher income levels. Students whose families were well-off enough to not qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch scored 24 points higher than lunch-program peers in music and 22 points higher than their peers in visual arts. Students whose parents had higher education levels and those who attended private schools also scored better.

Michael Blakeslee, the executive director of the National Association for Music Education, said those findings are a reminder that "too often in America, zip code is destiny." He noted the improvement in scores among Hispanic students' scores, saying, "we welcome the ability to find out if we can come up with any reasoning behind that. We'd love to see a more equitable access to the arts and to the results arts can bring."

Blakeslee said existence of a national assessment can "help people understand that arts education can be part of what a superintendent, parent, or principal takes into consideration when planning for the overall education of kids."

But, he noted, NAEP's survey of which students take an arts class isn't specific enough to help get a full understanding of the quality and depth of arts courses around the country. "Do they have it once a year, or five times a week? That's highly relevant."

Girls' Successes

In 2016, girls outperformed boys in both music and visual arts: The average score for girls was 155 in music and 156 in arts; boys scored 140 in music and 142 in visual arts. Those gaps were present in 2008, but grew in both subjects in 2016.

Girls also scored better on the NAEP on the Technology and Engineering Literacy assessment, given to 8th graders in 2014. Carr noted that both tests require substantial amounts of writing, and that girls have historically outperformed boys on writing. "I'll put that out there as a hypothesis," she said.

But, she said, female students also reported taking more arts classes than male students. "There are differences in participation that might help understand why they're doing better."

Location Matters

In addition to the notable differences in regions, students' scores and participation varied depending on whether they attended school in an urban, rural, or suburban area.

Suburban students and those who live in towns were most likely to participate in both arts and music, followed by urban students and then by rural students. Suburban students also scored the highest of any group.



What's Tested, What's Taught?

States have recently been adopting a set of standards written in 2014 that were inspired by a framework, or approach to arts, similar to the **one that informed the NAEP**. The standards, and the design of the NAEP, both emphasize different ways people interact with the arts—for instance, creating, responding, or critiquing music.

On the NAEP, for instance, students are asked about specific content knowledge, such as what dynamic signs in music mean:





They're also expected to create their own rhythmic pattern:



And in another question, they're asked to identify a visual representation of a the texture of piece of music by Johann Sebastian Bach.

In visual art, students were asked a series of questions about two self-portraits and then were asked to create a self-portrait that communicates "something about [their] personality."

Carr said that while the overall set of arts questions mirrors how arts are taught in many schools, the assessment doesn't capture the growing STEAM movement, in which arts are integrated with instruction in science, technology, engineering, and math.

However, she noted parallels between the arts exam and the technology and engineering literacy exam: Both ask students to design and create something based on information provided in the test. She said that an arts test designed today might emphasize STEAM and design tasks more heavily.

Other findings also hint that the tests' design may not mirror how arts are taught in every program, including outside-of-school programs: Black students had the lowest overall scores in 2016, but were most likely to participate in out-of-school arts.

Image: One of the pieces of visual art students were asked to respond to in the arts NAEP.

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