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Latest National Report Card Shows Little Student Improvement in Music and Art

This is the third time that the National Center for Educational Statistics has assessed eight-graders in music and visual arts



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Every year, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) releases a report card detailing how well America's students do in math, reading and science. But every once in a while the survey also looks at how well students are doing when it comes to visual arts and music education. [LA Johnson at NPR](#) reports that in a recently release report, students aren't doing too hot.

According to the report card, which has been issued twice before in 1997 and 2008, student knowledge about and skill in the arts has remained flat for the past eight years. According to Johnson, the survey was given to 8,800 eighth graders from 280 schools.

They were asked questions like “Identify a correct time signature for a piece of printed music” and “Identify the style of an artwork as surrealism.”

In the 2008 music test, students averaged 150 on a 300 point scale. In 2016, they averaged 147. In visual arts, the average was also 150 in 2008 and was 149 last year.

While holding steady may not seem too horrible, digging into the data shows both good and bad trends.

-According to the data, [boys are falling behind girls](#) when it comes to music. While the music score for girls did not change between 2008 and 2016, staying steady at 155, the average score for boys fell from 145 to 140.

-Students are not participating in music and arts activities as much outside of school. According to the data, about 35 percent of students said that they played a musical instrument outside of school and only 13 percent reported taking art classes outside of school. Less than half of students in the survey, only 42 percent, took an art class in school. “The Nation’s Report Card paints a picture that shows eighth-graders continuing to take arts classes at the same rates and performing at the same levels as eight years ago,” Peggy Carr, the acting commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics says in a [press release](#). “We are noticing, however, that students are less likely to participate in activities such as taking art classes or playing a musical instrument outside of school.”

-In visual arts, the score gap between white and Hispanic students decreased from 26 points in 2008 to 19 points in 2016. In music the difference changed from 32 points in 2008 to 23 points in 2016. The performance of students identified as Asian and Pacific Islanders surpassed white students for the first time, with scores averaging four points higher in music and eight points higher in visual arts. Scores in both categories remain almost unchanged for black students.

-While the four major regions of the United States—the Northeast, Midwest, South and West—all saw at least small ticks downward, in music, the Midwest saw a six point drop. In visual arts, the West saw an increase of five points while the Midwest saw a seven point drop. The south and Northeast stayed virtually the same, with the Northeast boasting the highest averages in both music and visual arts. They also reported taking more art classes outside of school. Jeff Poulin, the program director for arts education at Americans for the Arts, tells [Jackie Zubrzycki at Education Week](#) that the regional data isn’t surprising and “speaks to the importance of state education policy for arts education.”

-Lower income students who qualified for free or subsidized lunches did significantly worse than their better off peers, scoring 24 points lower in music and 22 points lower in art. “[T]oo often in America, zip code is destiny,” Michael Blakeslee, the executive director of the National Association for Music Education, tells Zubrzycki. “We’d love to see a more equitable access to the arts and to the results arts can bring.”

About Jason Daley

Jason Daley is a Madison, Wisconsin-based writer specializing in natural history, science, travel, and the environment. His work has appeared in *Discover*, *Popular Science*, *Outside*, *Men’s Journal*, and other magazines.

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