



U.S. Chamber of Commerce  
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COLLABORATIVE FOR  
**STUDENT  
SUCCESS**

# The Honesty Gap: America's Academic Outcome Truth Serum

Assessment and Accountability Brief Series

April 2026





**The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation**

harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world. We anticipate, develop, and deploy solutions to challenges facing communities—today and tomorrow.

**The Collaborative for Student Success**

is a non-profit organization dedicated to lifting up and defending strong practices and policies driving improved outcomes for all students. Through capacity-building efforts with in-state organizations and collaboration with national partners, the Collaborative promotes fact-based public discourse and amplifies strong K-12 policies and practices.

# The Critical Importance of High Academic Expectations

Business leaders value objective data. Good news or bad, they rely on data to understand how they are doing—the sustainability of their businesses, the health of the workforce, and the strength of the talent pipeline.

The same principle applies to our K–12 education system. Can students read, write, and do math at grade level? Understanding whether students are meeting grade-level academic standards—what states expect students to know and be able to do—is vital. Declining achievement, which is unfortunately all too common right now, limits students’ ability to build in-demand skills and thrive in the workforce. Ultimately, it threatens the economic vitality of our communities.

However, data can sometimes be misleading. States should set a high bar for student achievement in English, language arts, and math, with the expectation that schools will prepare students to meet rigorous standards. Yet some states lower the bar for proficiency to make achievement results appear stronger.

Lowering expectations sends the wrong message. It signals to students and parents that the state does not expect students to meet high standards—or that schools should not help them achieve those standards. Lower expectations are a threat to our future workforce, especially when businesses consistently report a lack of critical skills among applicants for open positions.

The business community plays an important role in holding policymakers accountable when expectations are lowered—and in supporting leaders who believe that students will rise to meet high standards when given the right support.

# What is the Honesty Gap?

The “Honesty Gap,” coined by the Collaborative for Student Success, is the difference between how well students in a state meet national expectations versus state expectations for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

It is calculated by comparing student outcomes on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—often called the Nation’s Report Card—with results from each state’s end-of-year assessment, commonly referred to as the summative test.

NAEP is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is housed within the U.S. Department of Education. Conducted every two years, NAEP measures how a sample of fourth- and eighth-grade students perform in one of three achievement levels—Basic, Proficient, and Advanced—in every state in the country.

NAEP provides insight into student performance at two critical points in K–12 education. Research shows that fourth grade is a pivotal moment for reading comprehension, while eighth grade is an important indicator of students’ readiness for high school.

NAEP is the only assessment with results that are comparable across states. In general, the bar for proficiency on NAEP—widely considered the gold standard in education measurement—is relatively high compared with other tools that measure academic achievement.

The second academic outcome used to calculate the Honesty Gap is each state’s summative assessment. Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, states are required to assess all

students annually in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school.

Even as some states reportedly request waivers from the U.S. Department of Education for this requirement, the business community should remain steadfast in its support for annual assessment data. While these results allow comparisons across districts and schools within a state, comparisons across states are difficult due to the small number of states that share grade-level standards and definitions of proficiency.

The Honesty Gap is the difference between the percentage of students who are proficient according to NAEP and the percentage of students who are proficient according to each state’s summative assessment. Because NAEP most commonly assesses reading and math in the fourth and eighth grades, those subjects and grade levels are used to calculate the Honesty Gap.

If a state has an inverse Honesty Gap, it means that fewer students scored at the “proficient” level on the state’s summative assessment than on NAEP. In other words, the state’s summative assessment is more rigorous.

An Honesty Gap, by contrast, indicates that the state’s summative assessment holds students to a lower bar than NAEP.

# Why Would a State Have a Large Honesty Gap?

There are two primary reasons a state may have a large Honesty Gap, though one explanation is far more common.

## 1 The state has lower grade-level standards for reading and math

Statewide assessments are designed to measure whether students are meeting the academic standards established for that subject and grade level within a state. A student who scores “proficient” (or its equivalent) is meeting those standards.

Because each state sets its own academic standards, expectations can vary. In other words, students in Connecticut may be expected to complete fifth grade with a different set of knowledge and skills than students in Wisconsin. As a result, each state’s summative assessment measures a slightly different set of expectations.

Generally, however, academic standards across most states today are relatively similar and sufficiently rigorous. Maintaining rigorous academic standards is essential to ensuring that students who meet or exceed these expectations are truly prepared for the workforce or postsecondary education.

The National Center for Education Statistics [compared state standards](#) in 2022, though those results are currently not accessible.

## 2 State policymakers have lowered the bar for proficiency on the statewide assessment

The more common explanation is that the state agency or legislature has lowered the threshold for how many questions students must answer correctly to be labeled “proficient.”

This process can become political. Policymakers may feel pressure to show academic progress, even if doing so requires lowering expectations. In contrast, NAEP is insulated from state-level political pressures. Its definition of proficiency remains rigorous and is not influenced by political actors.

In recent years, several states have considered or implemented efforts to redefine proficiency on their state assessments by including students with lower scores.

### EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- **Illinois**, where the State Board of Education lowered the cutoff for proficiency to the achievement level below it so that more students would count as proficient.
- **Kansas**, where the State Board of Education made a similar change.
- **Wisconsin**, where the governor and former state superintendent vetoed a legislative effort to restore more rigorous cut scores after the governor-appointed superintendent had lowered them the previous year.

There has also been some positive movement. In **Oklahoma**, a government agency overturned a previous decision by the Oklahoma Department of Education to lower the bar for proficiency for the 2023–24 school year. As a result, the number of students reported as proficient [increased](#) under the restored standard.

## How Should the Business Community Use the Honesty Gap?

The Honesty Gap provides an objective measure of the rigor of the academic expectations students in a state are expected to meet. It is a powerful tool for the business community as it partners with state education leaders to maintain high-quality public schools.

Businesses are also uniquely positioned to advocate for accurate data. Leaders in the private sector understand the importance of return on investment (ROI) and the role reliable data plays in driving improvement.

Find your state’s [2024 Honesty Gap](#) in fourth grade reading and eighth-grade math.

# If your state has a **LARGE** Honesty Gap

- Find out when the state last updated its definition of proficiency, how the change was received by stakeholders, and which policymakers were involved in the process.
- Talk with state leaders about the need to raise expectations for students. Make the case that the workforce will not meet the demand for in-state jobs unless students and families see that schools are expected to help them meet a high bar.
- Engage district leaders about how they are encouraging students to move beyond simply meeting the “proficient” threshold.

It is also important to highlight how inaccurate data affects resource allocation. Without clear data:

- Parents cannot effectively advocate for their children.
- Educators cannot accurately diagnose learning gaps.
- Policymakers cannot allocate resources strategically or target interventions effectively.

Inflated results—reflected in a large Honesty Gap—can ultimately mean that fewer resources reach the students who need them most.

## STATE EXAMPLE:

**VIRGINIA** provides one of the most prominent recent examples of a state addressing its Honesty Gap. In 2022, the state released a [comprehensive report](#) describing how its academic expectations were falling short for students. Governor Glenn Youngkin has also [spoken consistently](#) about the need to raise expectations and close Virginia’s Honesty Gap.

Efforts like these are far more likely to succeed when a diverse group of stakeholders—including the business community—stands together on the side of students.

# If your state has a **SMALL** Honesty Gap

- Monitor whether state leaders are considering changes to proficiency definitions or academic standards that would lower expectations.
- Support district leaders working to increase the number of students who reach proficiency in reading and math. This could include organizing partnerships with local stakeholders or advocating for state resources aligned with academic needs.
- Highlight leaders who champion high expectations for students, particularly when proficiency rates decline in the short term as standards remain rigorous.

## STATE EXAMPLE:

**ARKANSAS** finished 2024 with a relatively small, single-digit Honesty Gap and aims to [maintain that performance](#) with a new statewide assessment and rigorous proficiency definitions approved last year.

New assessments often produce lower scores in their first year, which can create political pressure to redefine proficiency. The business community should consider helping policymakers resist calls to artificially “correct” the definition of proficiency.

# We Are Here to Help

Do you need advice about addressing a large Honesty Gap in your state or defending a small Honesty Gap when there is pressure to lower expectations?

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, is committed to helping the business community work alongside state and community leaders to maintain high expectations and improve academic outcomes for students.

For more information, contact [Kyle Butler](#).



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