SCORE State Collaborative on Reforming Education

Tennessee Leads the South on NAEP After Two Decades of Progress

SEPTEMBER 2026

A new analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data finds that Tennessee made the largest gain in national rankings of any state between 2003 and 2024. During that period, **Tennessee moved from 42nd to 16th nationally on a composite measure combining fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math achievement. Today, Tennessee ranks first in the South in education and is the only Southern state in the national top 20.**

SCORE commissioned Basis Policy Research to examine Tennessee's long-term performance and standing relative to other states. Their **report confirms Tennessee's position as the highest-ranked state in the South** on the combined NAEP reading and math measure. (Further details on NAEP are available in the Appendix.)

Tennessee's rise to the top is worth celebrating. It demonstrates that a sustained commitment to high expectations and evidence-based policies and practices can contribute to meaningful gains in student learning. It also underscores the work ahead. Fifteen states remain ahead of Tennessee on the composite measure, and significant differences in outcomes persist among student groups within Tennessee.

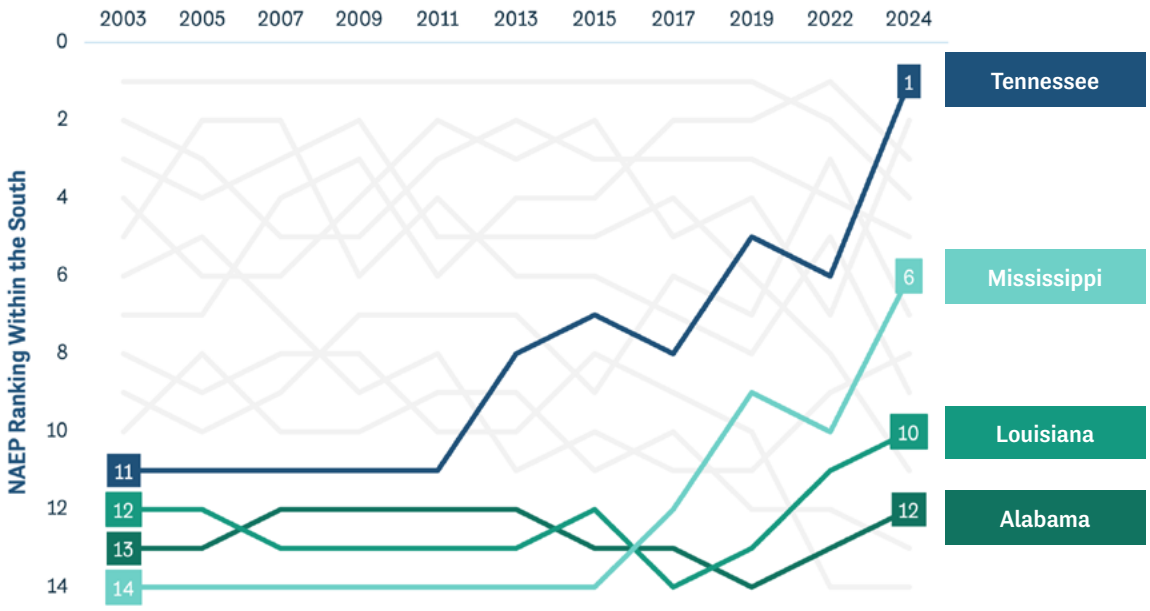
UNDERSTANDING TENNESSEE'S PROGRESS AND NATIONAL STANDING

The release of the 2024 NAEP data brought renewed attention to a "Southern Surge" in academic performance. After reviewing initial evidence through **research from the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy**, SCORE commissioned the report from Basis Policy Research to test and extend a composite approach that combined fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math results from NAEP. (For details regarding the project's methodology, see the Appendix.) Most conversations about NAEP focus on changes from one testing cycle to the next. This analysis examines something different: how Tennessee's performance has changed relative to other states over more than two decades. Looking across grades, subjects, years, and student groups provides a broader view of Tennessee's long-term trajectory and current national standing.

TENNESSEE'S LONG-TERM RISE SETS IT APART IN THE SOUTH

Tennessee moved from 11th among the 14 Southern states in 2003 to first in 2024. Tennessee's climb within the South outpaces the growth of its fellow Southern Surge states. States associated with the Southern Surge have seen growth aligned to the adoption of the science of reading and other evidence-based reforms in recent years. Tennessee's trajectory, however, spans more than two decades and reflects a long-standing commitment to high expectations for students and educators.

Tennessee's Rise to No. 1 in the South Follows Two Decades of High Expectations and Evidence-Based Reforms



Unlabeled South Region States and 2024 Rank: Arkansas (13th), Florida (3rd), Georgia (7th), Kentucky (2nd), Missouri (11th), North Carolina (5th), Oklahoma (14th), South Carolina (8th), Texas (9th), and Virginia (4th).

Standardized rankings for 14 Southern region states on a composite of fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math NAEP assessments for all students, 2003 through 2024.

Data Note: Composite rankings across grades and subjects use a within-year standardization. This approach standardizes each of the four NAEP domains (fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math) relative to the distribution of state scores in the same year, then averages the standardized scores.

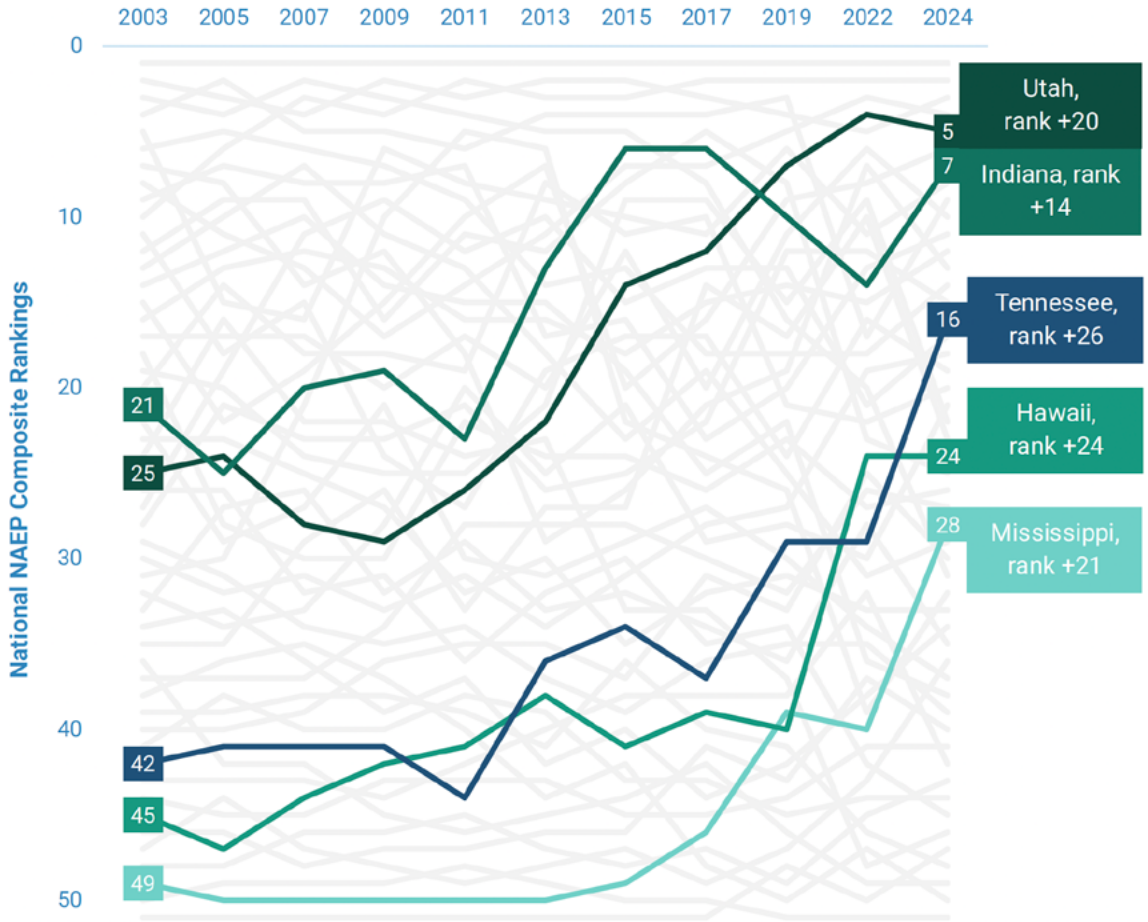
Source: NAEP, 2024

Tennessee's experience demonstrates that a state's educational trajectory is not fixed. Over more than two decades, Tennessee sustained high expectations while adopting evidence-based reforms designed to strengthen teaching and learning. This long-term view captures the scale of Tennessee's progress more than any single NAEP score or one-year change.

TENNESSEE'S 20-YEAR CLIMB STANDS OUT NATIONALLY

In 2003, Tennessee ranked 42nd nationally on the composite measure. By 2024, Tennessee ranked 16th, an improvement of 26 places. **Tennessee improved more than any other state in the analysis.** Additionally, the movement was not confined to a single grade or subject because the composite brings together reading and math results in both fourth and eighth grades.

From 2003 to 2024, Tennessee Students Had the Largest Gain in Rankings of Any State, Climbing From 42nd to 16th in the Nation for Composite Scores



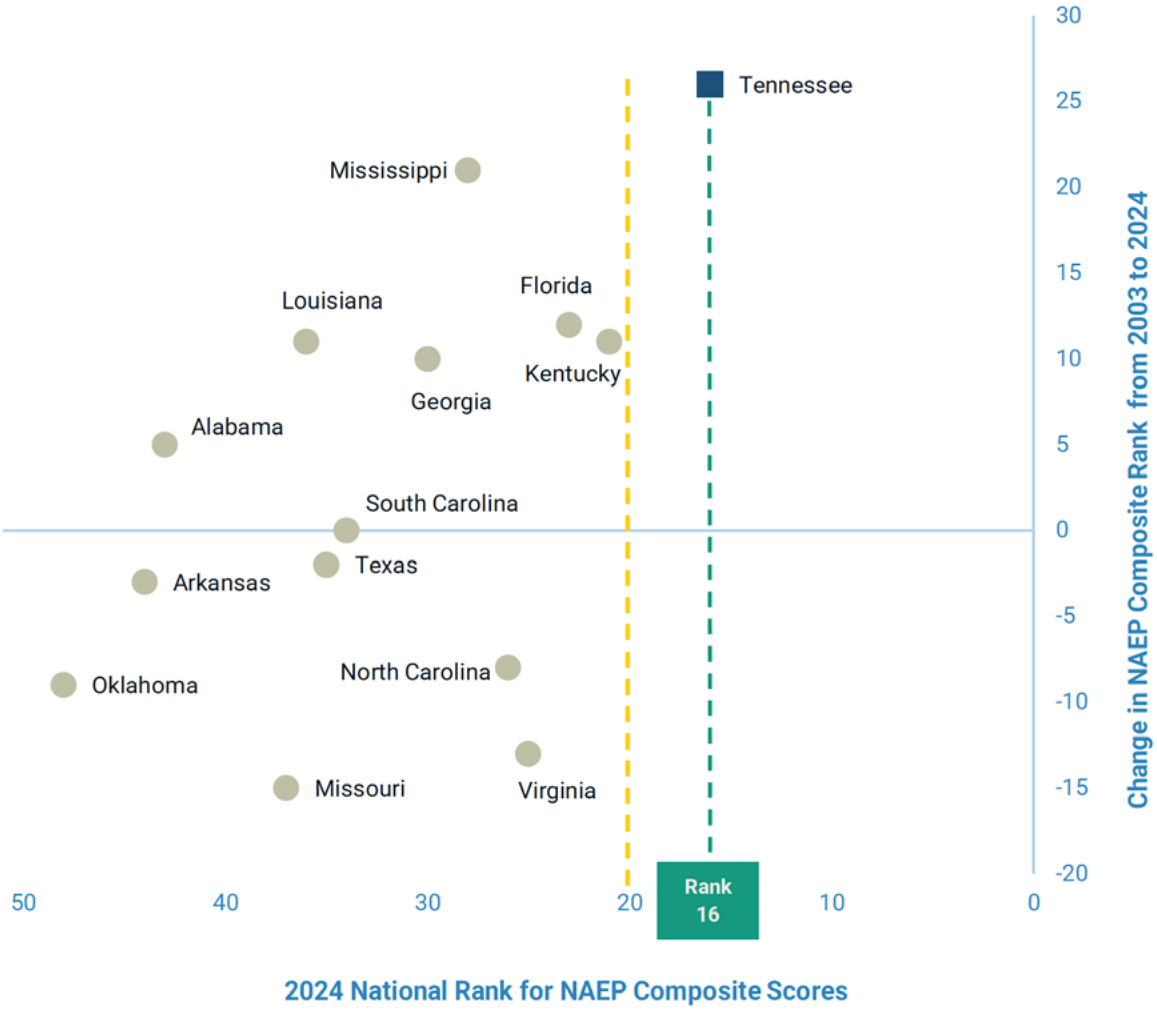
Standardized rankings for 50 states and the District of Columbia on a composite of fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math NAEP assessments for all students, 2003 through 2024.

Data Note: Composite rankings across grades and subjects use a within-year standardization. This approach standardizes each of the four NAEP domains (fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math) relative to the distribution of state scores in the same year, then averages the standardized scores.

Source: NAEP, 2024

This distinction matters because the research separates two questions that are often blurred together in discussions of the Southern Surge: How much has a state improved relative to others, and where does the state stand now? Several Southern states made meaningful long-term gains but remained outside the top tier nationally. **Tennessee stands out because the state made the largest upward move of any state in the analysis, rising 26 places in rank while also becoming the only Southern state in the top 20.**

Tennessee is the Only State in the South to Combine a Large Jump in NAEP Rankings With Top-20 National Ranking for Composite Scores



State ranking changes on a composite of fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math NAEP assessments for all students in the Census South region (2003 to 2024) plotted against South region states' national ranking in 2024.

Data Note: Composite rankings across grades and subjects use a within-year standardization. This approach standardizes each of the four NAEP domains (fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math) relative to the distribution of state scores in the same year, then averages the standardized scores.

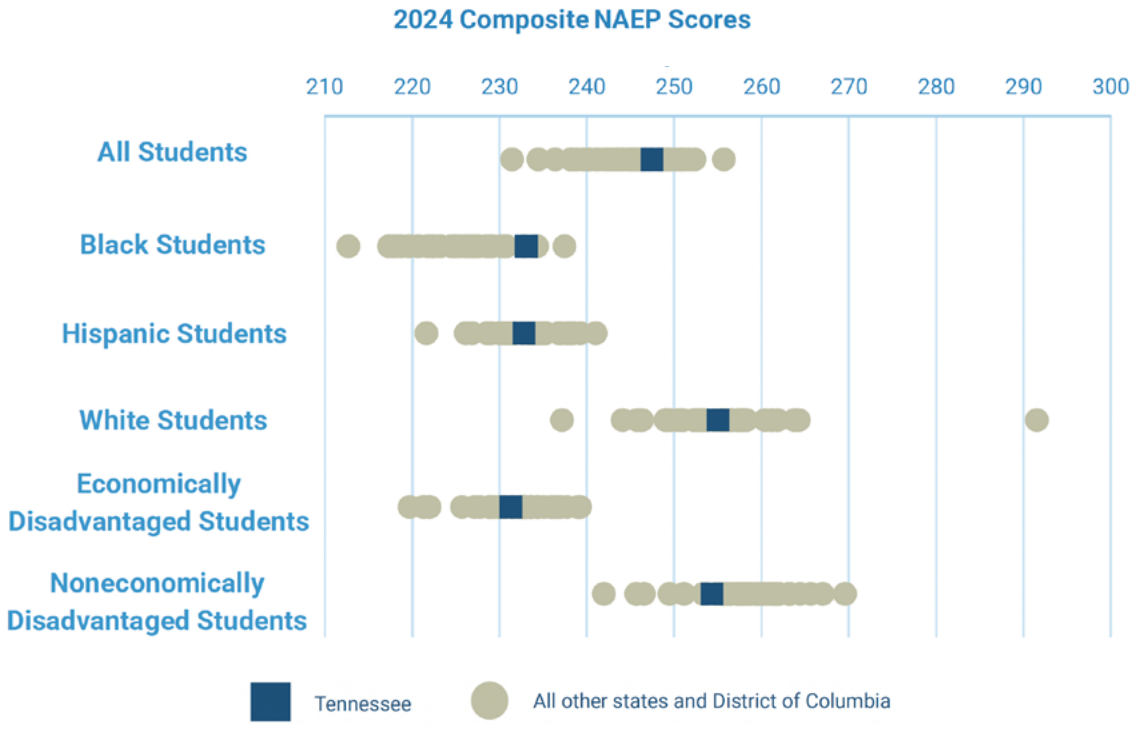
Source: NAEP, 2024

TENNESSEE'S PROGRESS HAS NOT YET REACHED EVERY STUDENT

While we celebrate this progress, Tennessee's overall ranking does not tell the full story. An analysis of student groups shows that Tennessee's Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students performed strongly relative to the same student groups in peer states in 2024. **However, sizable differences remain within Tennessee between student groups.** Despite positive progress, pronounced achievement gaps persist between economically disadvantaged and noneconomically disadvantaged students as well as between Black and Hispanic students and their White peers.

This finding is important for interpreting the state's progress responsibly. Tennessee's national and regional standing is worth recognizing, but the state's success cannot be measured only by its position relative to other states. The ultimate test is whether progress reaches every student and whether gaps in opportunity and outcomes narrow over time.

Students of Color and Economically Disadvantaged Students Perform Strongly Relative to Peer States, But Concerning Gaps Persist Within Tennessee



2024 Composite NAEP scores by student subgroup for the 50 states and District of Columbia.

Data Note: Composite scores across grades and subjects standardize each of the four NAEP domains relative to the distribution of state scores in the same year, then average the standardized scores. All four scale scores used to create this composite score and the composite score itself are on a scale of 0 to 500.

Source: NAEP, 2024

TENNESSEE MUST BUILD ON ITS PROGRESS TO LEAD THE NATION IN EDUCATION

Tennessee's progress did not happen by accident. Educators, families, policymakers, and communities have worked together to raise expectations and improve outcomes for students across the state. Over the past two decades, Tennessee has paired high expectations and accountability with standards-aligned annual student assessments, deepened commitment to effective teaching, broadened implementation of high-quality instructional materials, and strengthened research-based early literacy practices. Together, these policies and practices established a durable foundation that transformed higher expectations into sustained improvement.

These reforms created a consistent focus on what students should know and be able to do, while giving educators, families, and policymakers clearer information and stronger tools to support student learning over time. This analysis suggests that those efforts produced measurable results that stand out nationally and regionally. At the same time, the findings make clear that improvement alone is not enough. **Significant achievement gaps remain, and too many students are not yet experiencing the high-quality public education they deserve.**

Tennessee's rise from 42nd to 16th demonstrates what can happen when improvement efforts are sustained over time. Leading the nation will require more than continuing to climb in the ranks. **We must build on Tennessee's strong foundation and extend the impact of what is working to more students.** Tennessee must also continue to innovate and pursue the next set of bold, student-focused reforms that will move the state beyond being a national model for improvement to becoming the best state in the nation to learn.

Appendix: Technical Documentation

Additional context on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the methodological approach of this research project.

About the Nation's Report Card: NAEP enables apples-to-apples comparisons of student learning between states.

Administered every two years, NAEP is the nation's assessment of how well students are learning across subjects and grades. As an assessment, NAEP measures what the nation's students know, tracking student progress toward mastery across subjects. Because students across the nation take the same test, NAEP enables valid comparisons of student learning between states. The most recent available data are from 2024, and data from the most recent 2026 assessment cycle are expected to be available in 2027.

Methodological Approach: Combining fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading measures on NAEP creates a powerful measure of student learning.

To provide a more comprehensive view of state performance, this analysis standardized and combined results from four NAEP assessments: fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, and eighth-grade math. Standardized scores for each domain were averaged to create a composite measure. The analysis, which included all 50 states and the District of Columbia from 2003 through 2024, calculated national and regional rankings, examined outcomes for major student groups, and tested alternative composite specifications as a validation check. The composite measure is intended as a summary measure, not a replacement for subject- or grade-specific NAEP results. Rankings reflect relative performance, and because differences between states can be small, neighboring ranks may be separated by only modest score differences.