

- Because the tests generally don't affect students' grades, some students may not take the tests seriously, in which case test results may not reflect actual reading ability. For example, some test administrators have reported students making designs with the multiple-choice "bubbles" on their tests, rather than trying to answer the questions to the best of their ability.
- State-by-state comparisons may not be valid if the makeup of the student population varies significantly among states. For example, California has a relatively large percentage of students for whom English is a second language. Some people believe that this explained the state's low test scores, rather than anything to do with teaching techniques.
- There is some evidence of cheating on the part of the *adults* involved in the NAEP tests by, for example, choosing samples that are not truly representative but instead skewed toward students who read better. This cheating may be motivated by the fact that individual schools, school districts, and states are ranked according to NAEP results. High scores can lead to rewards for teachers and administrators in the form of increased funding or higher salaries, while low scores may lead to various punitive actions.

You can probably think of a dozen other problems that make it difficult to interpret NAEP results. Thus, it should not be surprising that reading continues to be a huge political battleground. So what can you do, as an individual, to help a child to read? Fortunately, the NAEP studies also reveal a few correlations that are fairly uncontroversial and agree with common sense. For example, higher reading performance correlates with each of the following factors:

- more total reading, both for school and for pleasure
- more choice in reading—that is, allowing children to pick their own books to read
- more writing, particularly of extended pieces such as essays or long letters
- more discussion of reading material with friends and family
- less television watching

These correlations give at least some guidance on how to help a child learn to read and should be good starting points for discussions of how to increase literacy. Of course, politicians and special interest groups will probably find ways to make these results fit whatever preconceived agenda they might have. So, if you have strong opinions about teaching techniques, you can join the political battles that will probably continue for decades to come.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. One clear result of the NAEP reading tests is that students in private schools tend to score significantly higher than students in public schools. Does this imply that private schools are "better" than public schools? Defend your opinion.
2. Do you think that standardized tests like those of the NAEP are valid ways to measure academic achievement? Why or why not?
3. Currently, the NAEP tests are given to only a few thousand of the millions of school children in the United States. Some people advocate giving similar tests to all students, on either a voluntary or a mandatory basis. Do you think such "standardized national testing" is a good idea? Why or why not?
4. One correlation that has not yet been studied carefully is the correlation between computer use and reading. Do you think that using a computer and the Internet helps or hurts children in terms of learning to read? Why?