

BUDGET CUTS COINCIDE WITH WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Virginia Should Restore Cuts That Disproportionately Harm High-Poverty Schools

The achievement gap between low-income Virginia students and other students has widened on national standardized tests since the onset of state-level budget cuts in 2009. According to a report by The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, the Virginia General Assembly will have cut state per-pupil funding nearly 17% from the 2008–2009 levels by the start of the 2015–2016 school-year.¹ In a separate report covering a different time period, The Commonwealth Institute found that the most severe cuts have fallen on high-poverty school divisions, which suffered a 21% decrease in funding. Those cuts are nearly twice as large in magnitude as the most affluent school divisions, which experienced only an 11% cut.² Meanwhile, the gap in performance on reading and math tests between low-income and other students has widened.

Overall Score Gains Mask Disparities between Low-Income Students and Other Students

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (“NAEP”), known popularly as “the Nation’s Report Card,” regularly administers standardized tests to a representative sample of 4th and 8th grade students from each state. The use of standardized content and administration methods year after year allows states to objectively measure student achievement over time and compare results across states. NAEP reading and math testing is conducted in the spring semester every two years. This analysis examines the trend in student achievement for low-income students as compared to other students since the imposition of budget cuts in 2009.

Overall, NAEP reading and math scores for Virginia students showed moderate improvement from 2009 to 2013 (Table 1), allowing Virginia to maintain its standing in the top 25 percent of states nationwide.

¹ Mitchell Cole, *The Half Sheet: Virginia Among Top States in Education Funding Cuts*, THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL ANALYSIS (Oct. 17, 2014), <http://thehalfsheet.org/post/100252855453/virginia-among-top-states-in-education-funding>

² Mitchell Cole and Michael Cassidy, *Unsettling Divide: Education Cuts Hit Poverty School Divisions Hardest*, THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL ANALYSIS (Dec. 12, 2014), http://www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/unsettling_divide_v3.pdf

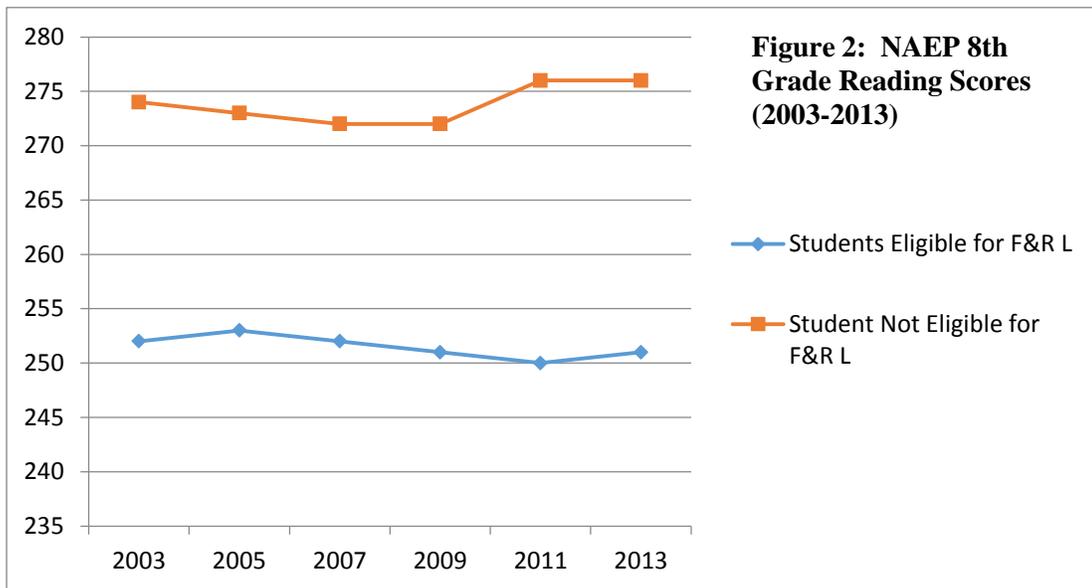
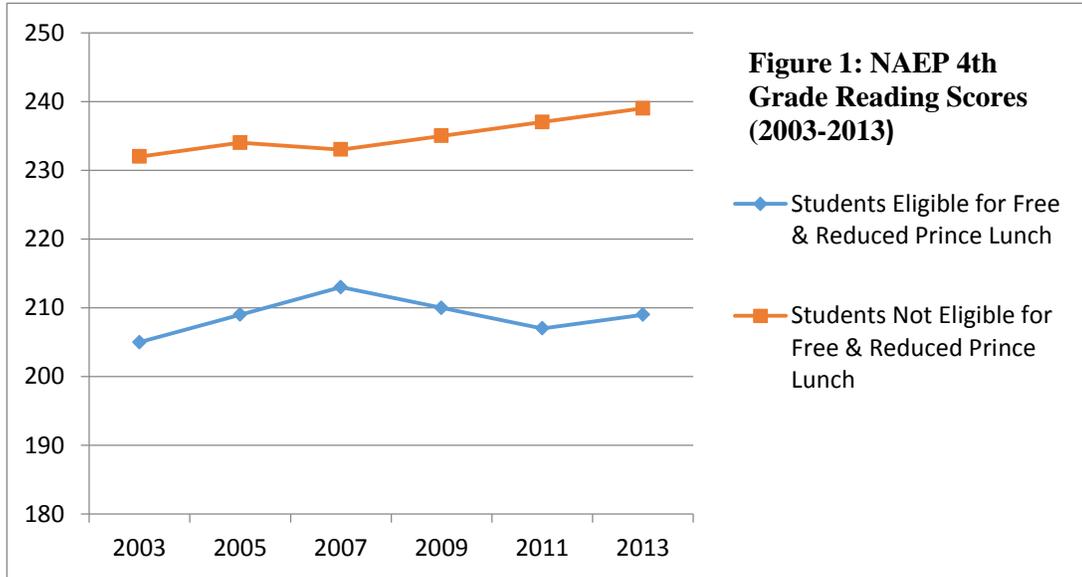
Table 1: Average 4th & 8th Grade NAEP Scores, 2009 & 2013, All Students

	2009	2013	Gain
4th Grade Reading	227	229	+2
4th Grade Math	243	246	+3
8th Grade Reading	266	268	+2
8th Grade Math	286	288	+2

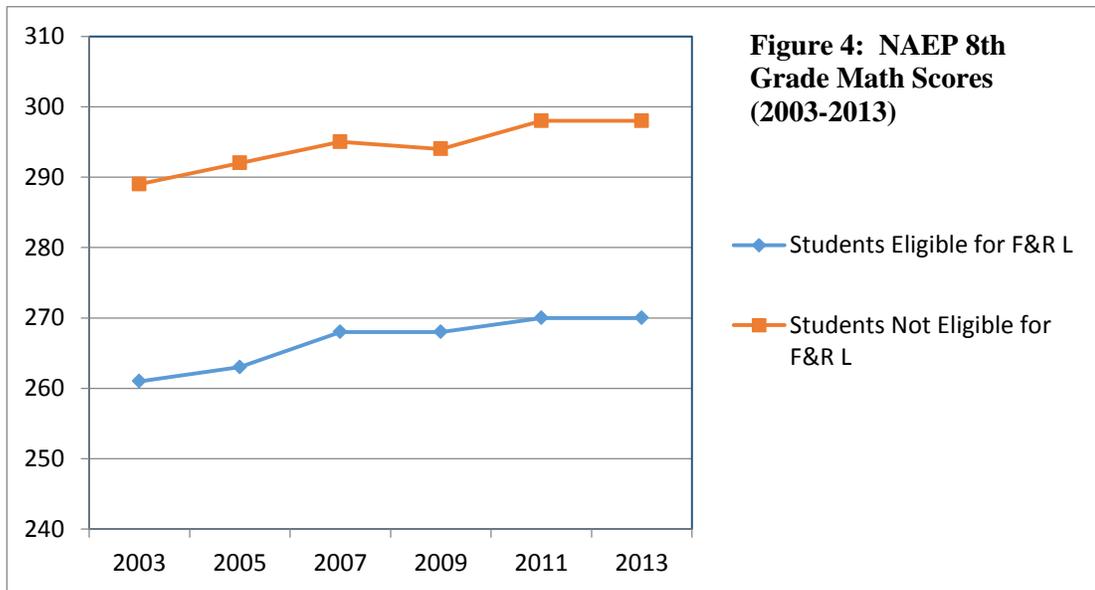
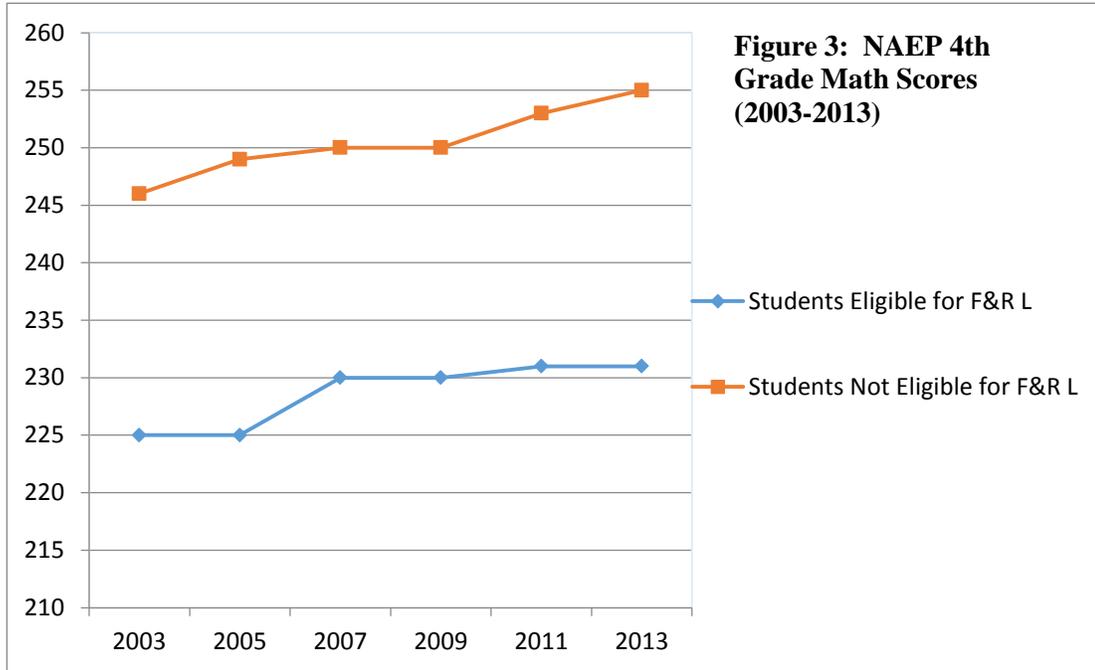
A closer analysis of NAEP performance from 2009 to 2013 shows that these modest gains in overall scores mask the much less positive results for students from low-income families.³ The overall improvements in Virginia performance since 2009 are attributable almost entirely to gains for students who are *not* from low-income families. Performance of low-income students since the start of budget cuts has been relatively stagnant or even declined in some cases.

This disparity is most striking for reading results (Figures 1 and 2). Scores for low-income 4th graders have declined slightly since 2009, while scores of more advantaged 4th graders have increased from 235 to 239. That pattern essentially repeats for 8th graders – scores for low-income students did not improve; those for other students did (from 272 to 276).

³ Low-income is defined as those who qualify for free and reduced price lunch (F&R L).



Scores for math are shown in Figures 3 and 4. Higher-income 4th and 8th graders made far greater improvements than low-income students, whose scores improved only slightly.



Achievement Gap Widens, Reversing Previous Improvements

Commendably, in the early- and mid-2000s, Virginia was able to narrow NAEP score gaps between low-income students and other students. These gains coincided with progressive increases in per pupil funding during those years. Funding increased every school year from 2002-2003 to 2008-

2009. The average annual increase was 6.3% in state per pupil support and 5.4% in total (combined state, local, and federal) per pupil support.⁴ Since 2009, however, that trend has been reversed: NAEP score gaps have widened, while state funding has declined. Figures 1 through 4 show that, without exception, the score gap for each grade and subject has worsened since 2009 – most notably for reading. Both 4th- and 8th-grade reading gaps had been reduced to 20 points by 2007 (Table 2). The 4th-grade gap of 30 points is now at its highest since 2002, and the 8th-grade gap of 25 points at its highest since 1998.⁵ Meanwhile, according to a recent report by the Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, state per pupil funding declined by nearly 16% from 2009 to 2013; total per pupil support declined by almost 8%.⁶

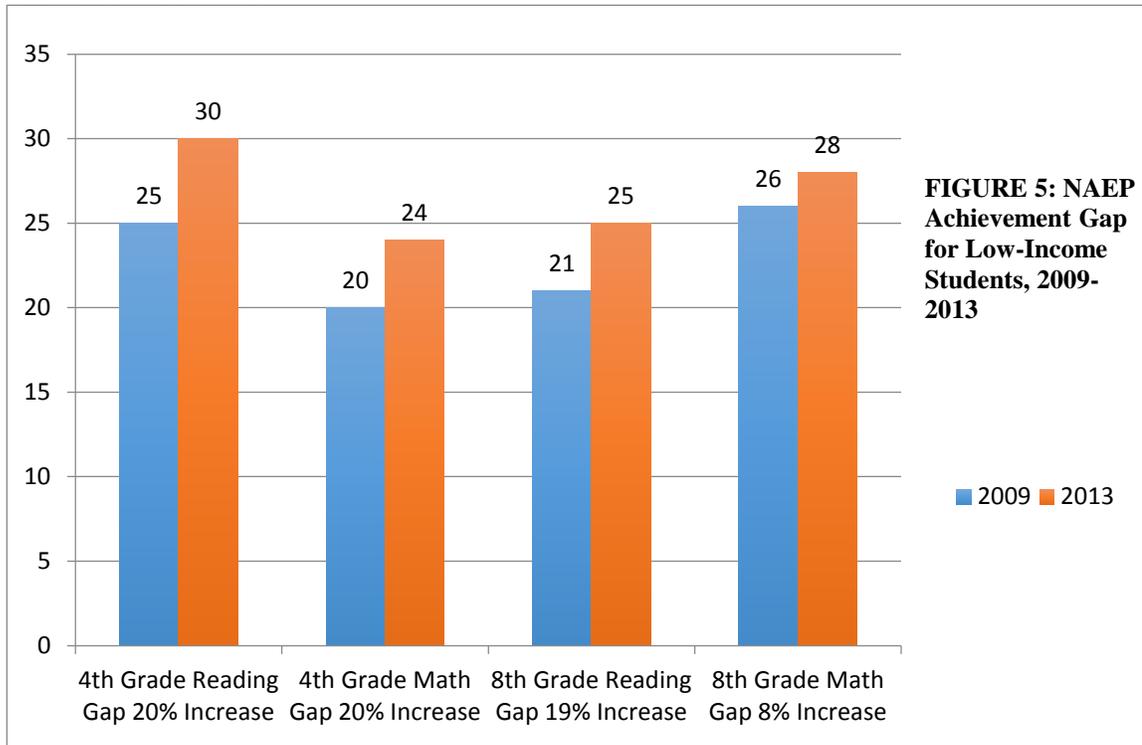
Table 2: NAEP Score Gaps 2003-2013 Between Eligible and Non-Eligible Students for Free & Reduced Priced Lunch						
	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013
4th Grade Reading	27	24	20	25	30	30
8th Grade Reading	23	20	20	21	26	25

The magnitude of NAEP score gaps before and after budget cuts is pictured in Figure 5. Fourth- and 8th-grade reading gaps have increased by 20% and 19%, respectively, after just four years of reduced per-pupil funding. The math score gap has increased by 20% for 4th graders and 8% for 8th graders.

⁴ Virginia Department of Education, *Superintendent’s Annual Report*, http://doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/supts_annual_report/index.shtml

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx> (last visited Jan. 7, 2015).

⁶ Mitchell Cole and Michael Cassidy, *Unsettling Divide: Education Cuts Hit Poverty School Divisions Hardest*, THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL ANALYSIS (Dec. 12, 2014), http://www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/unsettling_divide_v3.pdf



Continued cuts to state funding pose a threat to Virginia’s efforts to raise the achievement of struggling students and low-performing schools, and may further widen the achievement gap between low-income and other students.

Why Budget Cuts May Have Been More Harmful to Low-Income Students

The most recent report from the Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, *Unsettling Divide*, reveals a perverse reality: school divisions with high poverty rates when the cuts began – those likely to have the greatest number of struggling students – saw deeper state budget cuts than lower-poverty divisions. Reductions in state per-pupil funding to high-poverty divisions were nearly **three times greater** than in the lowest-poverty divisions. Total per-pupil support (including state, local, and federal funding) also declined. Again, these total cuts to high-poverty divisions were 31%

deeper than in lower-poverty divisions. Clearly, divisions with high concentrations of low-income students have suffered disproportionately from per-pupil funding reductions.

Compared to other students, those from low-income families often contend with a greater number of personal, family, and neighborhood risk factors that make it more likely they will struggle academically. As a result, these students are precisely those most likely to require extra help, special remedial efforts, and other support services in order to succeed.

While education cuts clearly can have negative consequences for all students and for all school divisions, regardless of their relative poverty or affluence, low-income students are experiencing a double dose of educational risk. First, they are generally more vulnerable to the loss of extra support that benefits struggling students. Their families are often less able to compensate for reduced help at school (*e.g.*, less able to provide extra help with homework, pay for tutors, or enroll in remediation programs, etc.). And second, low-income students are also more likely to live in high-poverty communities, whose schools have suffered disproportionately deeper budget cuts. Such schools are now less able than others to maintain the extra support so crucial to academic success for struggling students.

Implications for Policymakers: Restore Prior Cuts and Invest in Gap-Closing Measures

Virginia is experiencing another serious budget shortfall that necessitates funding cuts and/or revenue increases. The prospect of a further widening achievement gap should be especially troubling to policymakers, as it foretells a more difficult future for many low-income students, and ultimately for Virginia's workforce and economy. It is laudable that some policymakers have stated their desire to avoid new K-12 budget cuts. However, **merely maintaining the current level of education funding will not be adequate to narrow or even to hold steady our long-standing educational disparities.** Allowing a widening achievement gap is untenable, economically hazardous and morally dubious. Despite budget constraints, it is imperative not only to refrain from further education cuts, but also to increase funding to high-poverty school divisions that have

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suffered disproportionately deep cuts. A “no more K-12 cuts” stance is not enough to right this course. “No new cuts” would essentially cause Virginia’s struggling students and schools to fall further behind—something that neither those students nor Virginia can afford.

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