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## High-Achieving Students Often Lose Momentum, Fordham Study Shows

### DO HIGH FLYERS MAINTAIN THEIR ALTITUDE?

### Performance Trends of Top Students



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In the eyes of Michael Petrilli, education discussions and policies based on the disparity in performance between subgroups of U.S. students -- known as the achievement gap -- leave some honors students behind.

"The overwhelming focus has been on gap-closing and equity," said Petrilli, a George W. Bush-era education official who is now executive vice president of the right-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Institute. "There are trade-offs. Policies good for the lowest-achieving kids may be bad for the highest-achieving kids. But we're not even having that conversation."

Petrilli's observations come on the heels of the release of Fordham's latest paper, "[Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude?](#)" The paper suggests that high-performing students lose ground because of policies -- such as the federal No Child Left Behind act -- that incentivize proficiency, instead of growth or excellence, and direct resources toward the lowest-scoring students.

"When No Child Left Behind was passed, people worried about it," he said. "It wasn't hard to predict that this focus on the lowest-achieving kids could lead the highest-achieving students to be ignored."

The report defines the elite group it calls "high flyers" as those who score in the 90th percentile or higher on the Measures of Academic Progress exam, a computer-administered test that districts use as a diagnostic exam to assess how students might perform on state standardized tests. The MAP, developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association, adapts the rigor of its questions to students' grade level.

The report's findings were determined by NWEA researchers' analysis of individual student data. They show that between one-third and half of the 120,000-student sample dropped out of the top-performing group over time.

In reading, 44 percent of students first categorized as high flyers fell out of the top tier between third and eighth grades, and 48 percent dropped below the 90th percentile between sixth and 10th grades. In math, 43 percent of students lost their high flyer status between third and eighth grades, and 30 percent dropped between sixth and 10th grades.

But the mobility works both ways: The overall group of high-achieving students increased over time. While some "high flyers" dropped out, other students, whom the paper calls "late bloomers," joined the cohort.

The Fordham paper calls this a "glass half-empty or half-full" situation. The paper's authors wrote:

**Eight, ten, twelve, seventeen years old, with little more than a coin toss determining whether they wind up in their school careers simply "above average" or among the country's top achievers and brightest hopes for the future.**

The authors call for more attention to be paid to students performing in the upper tier in order to keep them there, as well as encourage an increase in the number of "late bloomers" who join their ranks.

The paper suggests its findings can be explained by NCLB's focus on the lowest-performing students, but the lack of data on the performance trends of pre-NCLB era "high flyers" makes that claim hard to prove. NCLB, meanwhile, is [up for re-authorization](#).

The report shows the importance of using student growth -- not proficiency rates -- as the basis for school funding decisions, Petrilli said. "Schools should have an incentives to make sure all their kids are making progress," he added.

The study also found that "high flyers" improved their scores in reading more slowly than their low-achieving peers did. Jaekyoung Lee, associate dean for academic affairs at SUNY Buffalo's Graduate School of Education, said that phenomenon is merely a regression to the mean.

"This is well known," he said. "If someone does extremely well on a test today, the person is much less likely to do as well tomorrow."

Lee also suggested that the Fordham study might have found different results -- and drawn different conclusions -- had it used different tests or cut-off points. "State standards are all over the place," he said. "There's no consistency."

The results might also be misleading, Lee said, because the tests are MAP diagnostic -- they are not high-stakes standardized tests.

"There might be some motivation issues, especially with high achievers," he noted. "If [a test] doesn't matter, why should they try so hard?"

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