NEWS RELEASE
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High School Graduates Earning More Credits and Better Grades Than in Past, New NAEP Study Shows

Average GPA reaches all-time high, graduates taking more rigorous courses, yet NAEP performance steady or in decline

WASHINGTON – Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the average GPA and number of course credits earned by high school graduates reached an all-time high, according to findings released today from the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) High School Transcript Study. Compared to previous graduating classes since 1990, the class of 2019 took more science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses; participated in more rigorous coursework overall; and earned higher GPAs. However, NAEP grade 12 mathematics and science scores have declined or stayed steady over the last decade.

The NAEP High School Transcript Study is the only continuous source of national data on high school graduates' course taking and performance, collecting such data since 1987. Released every 10 years, this is the first High School Transcript Study since 2009 and includes data from about 47,000 students in the graduating class of 2019. The study provides information on the types of courses that graduates take, how many credits students earn, their GPAs, and the relationship between course taking and NAEP scores.

"We must build on the progress in these results — including the fact that high school students are graduating with more courses in STEM subjects — as schools and districts help students recover from the pandemic," said Gov. Beverly Perdue, chair of the Governing Board.

Graduates Taking More STEM, Fewer Career/Technical Courses
The 2019 High School Transcript Study shows that the average number of Carnegie credits earned by high school graduates increased over the last three decades. The class of 2019 earned an average of 28.1 credits, which is 0.9 credits more than in 2009 and 4.5 credits more than in 1990. One Carnegie credit typically equals one year-long course.

An increase in academic courses, particularly STEM courses, drove this increase in overall credits. Graduates earned 20.8 credits in academic courses in 2019, compared to 16.7 credits in 1990. More than 95 percent of high school graduates earned STEM credits in 2019, a 20-percentage point increase compared to 1990. Since 1990, credits earned in mathematics courses increased by 1.0 credit to 4.2 credits in 2019, and credits earned in life and physical science courses made a similar jump, rising 0.9 credits over the same period to 3.7 credits.

Conversely, the percentage of high school graduates earning at least one credit in career/technical education courses decreased overall since 1990, from 92 percent to 85 percent. In 1990, the average graduate earned 3.8 credits in career/technical courses, whereas the average graduate in 2019 earned just 3.3 credits.

"This was one of the most significant drops in course taking," added Gov. Perdue. "Students must have opportunities to explore interests in career and technical areas while they are still in high school. Additionally, we must determine other ways that districts and schools can prepare students to meet workplace demand for these skills."

GPAs Rise, Rigorous Coursework More Prevalent, But Disparities Remain

The average GPA earned by high school graduates rose to 3.11 in 2019, an increase from 3.00 in 2009 and 2.68 in 1990. And, while GPAs among all races/ethnicities have increased since 1990, significant racial disparities remain. In 2019, Asian/Pacific Islander graduates earned the highest average GPA (3.39), followed by White graduates (3.23), Hispanic graduates (2.95), and Black graduates (2.83). Additionally, female graduates on average earned a higher GPA than males; 3.23 compared to 3.00.

Average GPAs rose even as students took more rigorous coursework. Curriculum levels serve as an overall measure of a high school graduate's coursework. The three curriculum levels – standard, midlevel, and rigorous – focus on the number and types of high school courses that graduates took. The percentage of graduates who completed a midlevel curriculum was at its highest ever in 2019, with increases for all racial/ethnic groups from 2000 to 2019. The percentage of high school graduates who attained a standard curriculum or higher increased to 84% in 2019 from 41% in 1990.

Graduates completing midlevel and rigorous curriculums showed stronger NAEP mathematics and science performance than those attaining standard or below standard curriculums. However, when comparing 2019 to 2009, the average NAEP grade 12 mathematics score declined among students with midlevel and rigorous coursework and NAEP grade 12 science scores registered no significant change at any curriculum level since 2009.

For full results from the 2019 NAEP High School Transcript Study results, visit nationsreportcard.gov.

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