

The curve of Rhode Island's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests tells the story of a state that realized it had a lot of catching up to do... and then lost its breath before reaching the train.

Using an online application developed by the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity,<sup>1</sup> it's possible to compare Rhode Island's scores based on a variety of criteria, including by state, demographic group, math or reading test, and fourth or eighth grade. Users can see for themselves how Rhode Island has performed, based on their own knowledge and interests, but here are some of the key points that the Center has observed.

### Nationally Average, Regionally Lagging

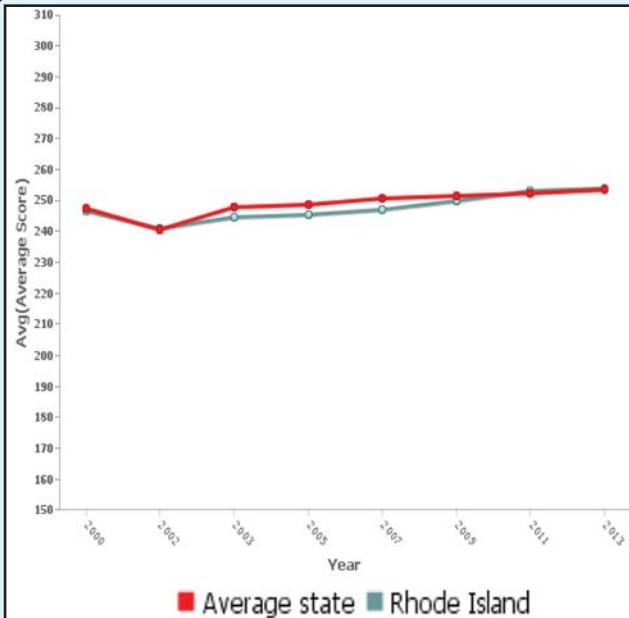
Compared with the other 49 states, Washington D.C., and the Dept. of Defense's educational programs, Rhode Island tracks very closely with the average state. Combining 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and math and reading scores, the average state had a score of 253.5 in 2013, and Rhode Island came in just a quarter point higher.

RI's thoroughly average score, however, comes after a decade during which the Ocean State improved more quickly than all states as a group. The average state improved by 5 ½ points from 2003 to 2013, but Rhode Island gained nine points. In other words, Rhode Island spent most of the last decade below average.

Its improvement has brought RI to the back of the New England pack, whereas ten years ago, the Ocean State wasn't even close enough to appear as part of the group. For 2013, Rhode Island's 253.75 average score on the four tests compares with the New England average of 260.0. Closest to Rhode Island's score is Maine, at 257.25; leading the group is Massachusetts, at 265.75. For context, some researchers suggest that a 10-point difference represents a full grade level of learning.

### Who's Hurt Most

Not surprisingly, Rhode Island does most poorly with students who are most challenged. Among white students, Rhode Island has passed Maine and Vermont, since 2007, but among Hispanics, New



England as a whole does worse than average, and Rhode Island is last in the region. Among financially challenged students, Rhode Island does worse than average and trails with a big gap behind every New England state except Connecticut. Most dismally, Rhode Island has spent the last decade losing ground with disabled students and is both below average and below New England.

Another interesting comparison is Rhode Island and the results for five states that have been leading the way on school reform, generally, emphasizing school choice. (For our purposes, we include Arizona, Washington, D.C., Florida, Georgia, and Indiana.) These observations are tentative, because actual school choice provisions have been somewhat limited, and in some states, they've had a stop-and-go beginning.

That said, every demographic group of students performs better among the school choice states, except for "all students." That result is almost definitely attributable to the larger proportion of white students, in Rhode Island, so even though white students do better in the school choice states, there are more non-white students elsewhere, too.

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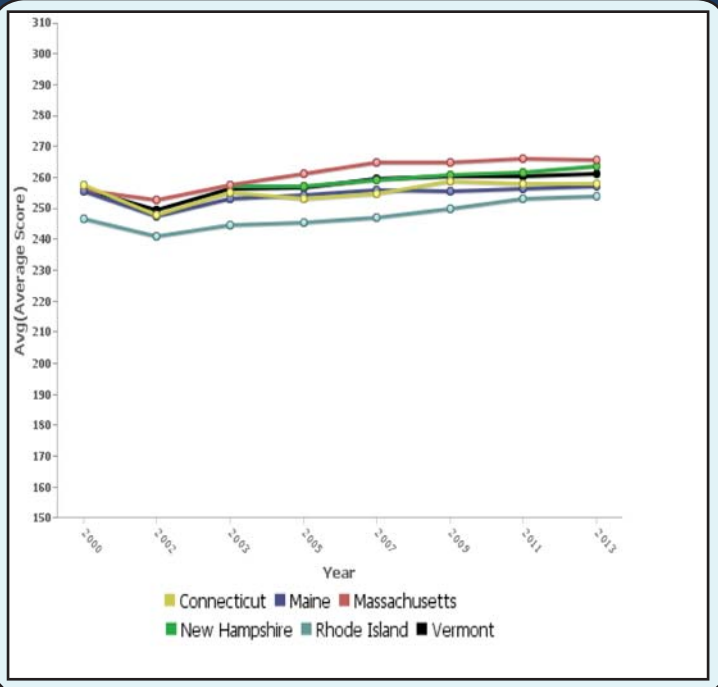
Most dramatic, though, is the fact that every single group improved in the school choice state average in 2013, while the trend in Rhode Island was mainly stagnation or loss of ground.

### The Curve and the Ceiling

That final point ought to be of most concern to Rhode Islanders, especially parents and students. Beginning with the 2005 implementation of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests, and the promise that they would become a graduation requirement, Rhode Island was on a trend of reform. The state board of education was increasingly filled with reform-minded members, and the commissioner hired in 2009, Deborah Gist, rode in as a reform agent.

With the union-promoted election of Governor Lincoln Chafee, in 2011, that trend halted. A push for teacher evaluations was diverted. The testing requirement for graduation was diluted and delayed. And now, the commissioner's job is on shaky ground.

We cannot know what the NAEP trend lines will do in the future, but the voices calling for large-scale school choice in Rhode Island look to be starting with a likely



assumption. Rhode Island is failing its students, and its surge of improvement has stalled. Meanwhile, states with real school choice appear to be improving the lives of all of their children.

<sup>1</sup> <http://rifreedom.org/states-on-the-nations-report-card/>

