

Report: N.C. Narrows Achievement Gap

The study focused on math and reading exam scores, comparing highest- and lowest-scoring students.

By **TANNER BOND**
Staff Writer

The National Education Goals Panel recently released a report that suggests North Carolina has become a leader in reducing the achievement gap on exams between the highest- and lowest-scoring students.

The report reveals the findings of a study conducted by the panel during the last decade. The panel compared scores in reading and math from selected years throughout the decade.

The study looked at math scores from fourth and eighth grade and reading scores from fourth grade. North Carolina was the only state to not only improve the

scores of both the highest- and lowest-scoring students, but to close the gap between the two groups in reading.

John Barth, the panel's senior education associate, said the study was based on scores from tests designed by the National Association for Primary Education (NAPE) — an education advocacy group. "We looked at what happened to the average NAPE scores, and then we looked at the bottom quartile and top quartile," he said.

Barth added that the difference between the top and bottom quartiles defined the "gap" between the best and worst student performance. "What appears to have happened is that the top has stayed about the same, while the bottom has improved," Barth said.

North Carolina's increased math scores in all quartiles were well above the national average rate of improvement. But the gaps between the quartiles in math remained virtually unchanged.

The study's focus on gaps comes

from the increasing trend for the lowest-achieving students to fall years behind their peers.

Barth stressed that in half the states participating in the study, this gap was only growing larger. "If you look at the national averages of NAPE scores, the highest fourth-graders score higher than the lowest eighth-graders."

Kay Williams, director of communications for the state Department of Public Instruction, attributed some of the state's success to its standardized curriculum. "We have a standard course of study in all schools," Williams said. "Very few states have a statewide curriculum."

And Williams said North Carolina intends to stay ahead of the game by enacting a requirement in 2005 requiring that students pass an exit exam before graduating.

Williams added that another factor contributing to the state's improved scores was the quality of its teachers.

"The issue of attracting and retaining

good teachers is an issue we're working on," she said. "Teachers' salaries are too low, and we know that."

Gov. Mike Easley is also looking for ways to maintain high scores.

Easley spokeswoman Amanda Wherry said the governor has proposed a plan to reduce class size in kindergarten through third grade and begin a prekindergarten program for at-risk children.

"We've taken vital steps to bring real accountability to the classroom," Wherry said. "But we still have a long way to go."

But Barth said that while better teachers and smaller classes might improve overall education, the panel is not sure what measures could be taken to mitigate the scoring discrepancies between the top and bottom quartiles. "At this stage, we frankly don't know the answers."

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Chinese Agree to Send U.S. Plane Crew Home

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Bush said Wednesday he looked forward to welcoming home the crew of the U.S. surveillance plane after a delicate diplomatic compromise to end their 11-day detention in China.

But the Navy plane remained in Chinese hands, its future to be taken up at a joint meeting next Wednesday.

The EP-3E Aries II, crammed with surveillance equipment, collided with a Chinese fighter jet Sunday and made an emergency landing on Hainan island in southern China. Crew members worked to delete top-secret codes and intelligence before the Chinese came aboard.

China's acceptance Wednesday of a letter in which the United States said it was "very sorry" the Chinese pilot was lost and the U.S. plane had not sought permission to land broke the stalemate on the crew's return. The Chinese had demanded a full apology.

The letter delivered in Beijing by the U.S. ambassador, Joseph Prueher, a

retired admiral, to Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, was written in English, which gave Chinese officials some room for their own interpretation.

Bush said the American people are "proud of our crew and we look forward to welcoming them home."

"This has been a difficult situation for both countries," the president said. "We are working on arrangements to pick them up and bring them home."

The crew is expected to be on U.S. soil in Hawaii in time for Easter Sunday. There, the Navy men and women will be debriefed.

The spy plane's future, meanwhile, appeared murky.

"Obviously, the return of the crew has been our No. 1 priority from the beginning of this incident," Philip Reeker, a State Department spokesman, said. "We have also stated repeatedly that we expect the return of our aircraft. But as the letter states fairly clearly, that will be on the agenda at the meeting. The diplomacy continues. The discussions will continue."

It's late Saturday night and your buddy's buzz has reached a critical mass. When he passes out, you should be prepared to offer him:

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- B An iced grande latte.
- C A pillow and a blanket.
- D NONE OF ABOVE.*



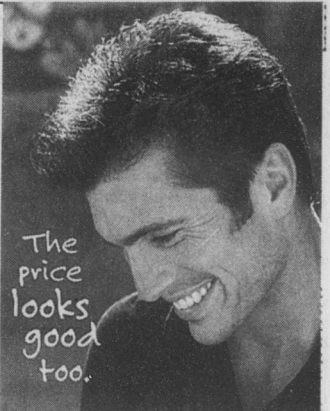
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