

## Childhood poverty and school achievement

This week's release of the [2011 Kids Count Data Book](#) reminds that child poverty is on the rise in Maine, as it is everywhere in the United States.

In Maine, the most recent [census figures](#) show that 17.5% of children under the age of 18 lived in households below the [federal poverty threshold](#). In a broader sign of systemic failure, this number has steadily increased over the past ten years, both in Maine and nationwide.

Why the United States continues to grow [one of the worst rates of relative childhood poverty](#) in the world is a question that a nation with our wealth ought to be asking itself with deep concern.

But this trend is one that teachers and school administrators recognize as they deal with growing percentages of students who reflect progressively familiar patterns of ill-preparedness which stem from family displacement and economic trauma.

To reach these students, schools are finding it necessary to broaden both their internal scope and outreach into their communities, becoming the coordinating hubs of networks for child nutrition, medical care, and social services. Without these additional efforts, schools are finding their traditional mission to be increasingly unreachable by those at their margins.

Against this circumstance, schools concurrently face the rising demands for achievement set by the federal 'No Child Left Behind' initiative, the inexorably accelerating benchmarks of which the Secretary of Education now warns will leave [82% of all schools defined as failing](#) this year.

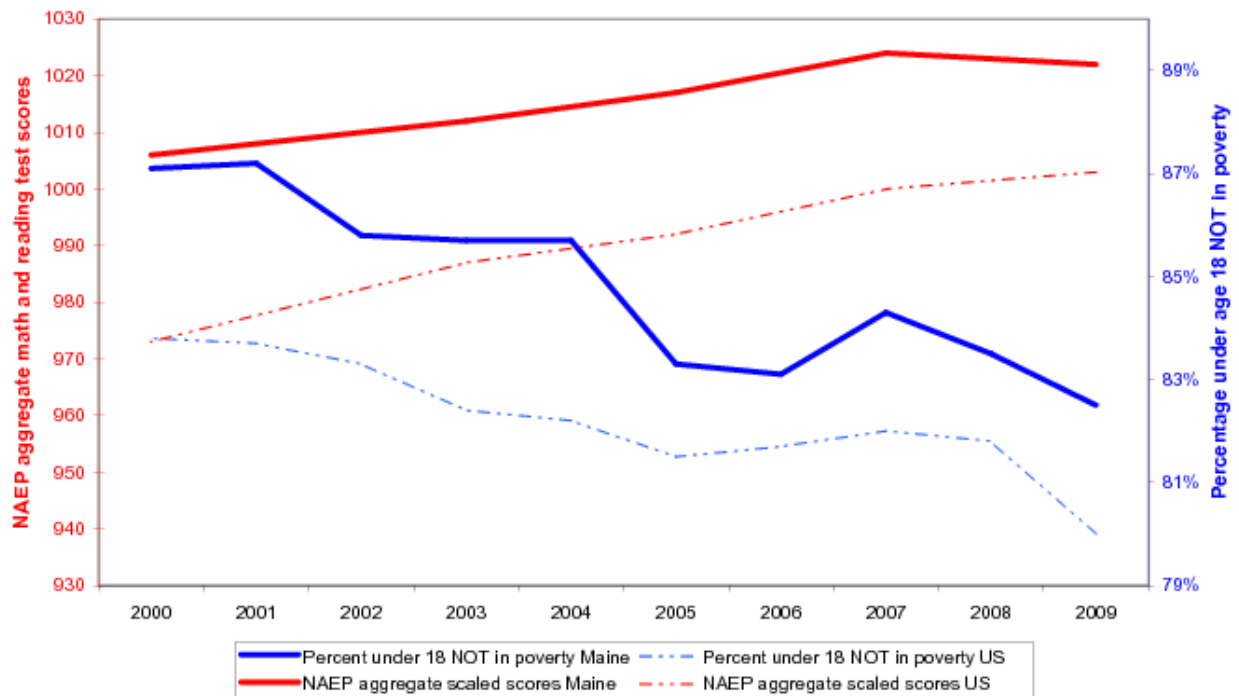
That the ambitious intention of NCLB has produced only relatively modest increases in national test scores suggests a programmatic failure from inordinate reliance on standardized testing as the vehicle for accountability.

But it's important to note that test scores did increase, slowly but steadily, over the past decade. More impressively, these increases occurred simultaneously with such a dramatic acceleration of student poverty with all its associated handicaps.

In this respect, even modest gains in test scores should be acknowledged as significant achievements from the schools in what is termed among school reformers as "value-added measures."

Here is a [graphical representation](#) of that value, shown for both Maine (solid lines) and for the US (dotted lines).

*Measures of schools' value added*  
**Child poverty and test scores**  
(Maine and US)



The red lines show the overall rising [trend of public school test scores](#) over the period since 2000, with Maine's distinctly above the average national score.

The declining blue lines track the increasing [rate of student poverty](#). In 2000 the poverty rate among those under age 18 in Maine was 12.9% and the national rate was 16.2%. By 2009, that poverty rate had risen in Maine to 17.5% and nationally to 20.0%.

The broadening space between the respective lines of increasing test scores and declining affluence might be taken as a measure of the effort being produced by public schools to meet the increasing demands of achievement standards.

If so and if the poverty trend continues to accelerate, the task for schools will only get rapidly more difficult.

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March 18, 2011