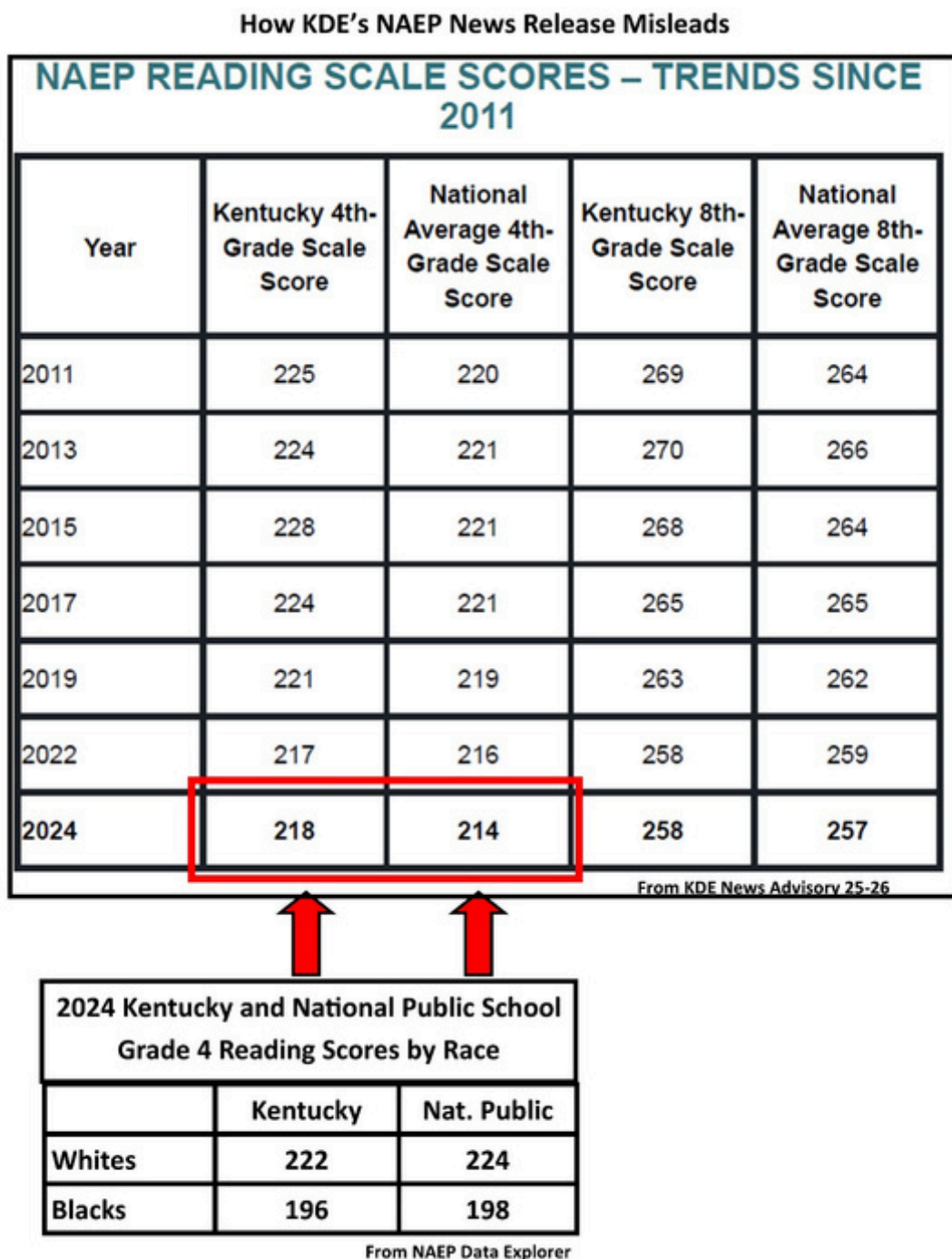


## Why aren't Kentuckians getting a full – and accurate – picture of how their public schools perform?

The new National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores are out, and no time has been wasted by many in portraying an incomplete, shallow – and even misleading – analysis of the results. We had to search no further than the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) for our first example.

In its [first News Advisory about the scores](#), the KDE included a table titled “NAEP Reading Scale Scores – Trends Since 2011,” shown in the top part of Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



This table, and all other discussion in KDE’s release deal only with overall average results. On the surface, these numbers inside the red frame in Figure 1 (above) suggest Kentucky did pretty well in 2024 by scoring four NAEP Scale Score Points above the national average in Grade 4 reading.

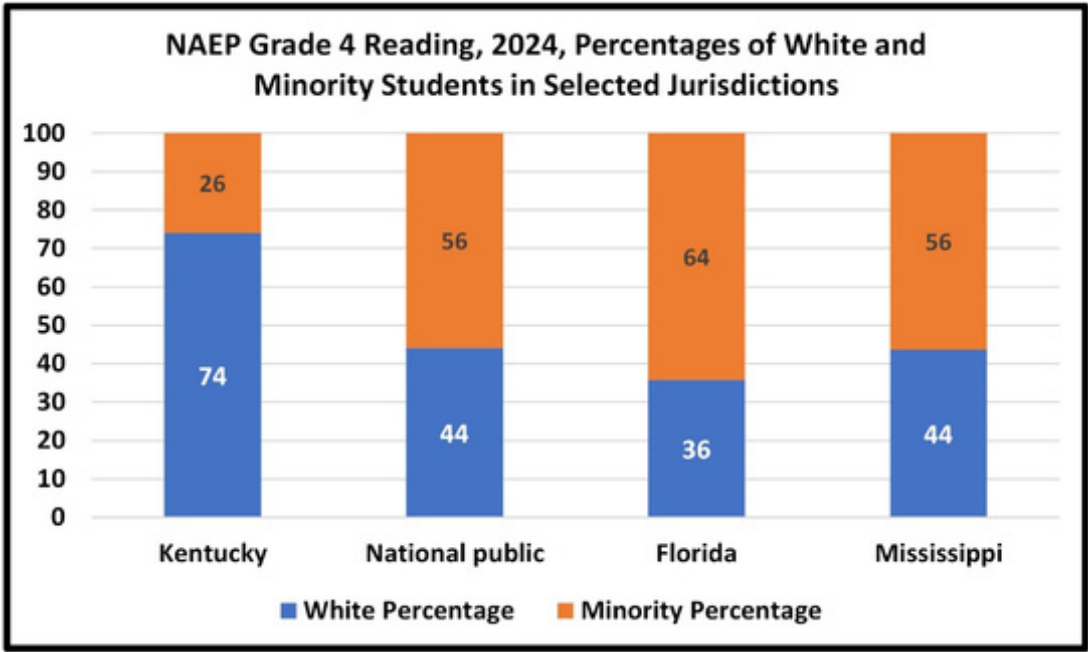
But the picture significantly changes once you break the Grade 4 data out by race, which I add in the bottom of Figure 1 based on data in the [NAEP Data Explorer](#) web tool. For Kentucky’s dominant racial groups – whites and Blacks – Kentucky scored two points BELOW the national average.

So, is the state ahead or behind? You MUST break the data out by race to begin to understand the true situation since whites just tend to perform better on tests – a historical pattern – than Black students.

Student demographics vary widely across the nation, and that gives Kentucky a huge, but unearned, advantage in any comparison of overall NAEP scores only.

Consider Figure 2, developed from data in the [NAEP Data Explorer](#) web tool, which shows a breakdown of white and minority student percentages in several different jurisdictions.

Figure 2



Even in 2024, Kentucky’s public school system is very highly populated by white students – about three out of four overall are whites. Nationwide, however, well under half of public-school students are white.

When you only look at overall average scores in Kentucky and across the nation’s entire public school system, you’re matching a whole lot of white students in Kentucky to a large number of minorities elsewhere.

Thanks to the well-known – and very much still present – a racial achievement gaps, limiting the comparison to only overall-average scores will be heavily biased in Kentucky’s favor. Results must be broken out by race to begin to understand the real picture.

For example, in Figure 3 (below), a 26-point gap exists in Grade 4 Reading results between white and Black students in Kentucky’s public schools. The size – and seriousness – of that gap becomes even more impactful considering that education researchers believe that each 10 NAEP Scale Score points represent a full extra year of learning.

By the way, the national whites-not-a-majority situation is found in Mississippi, a state that’s been getting a lot of attention since NAEP Grade 4 Reading scores came out in 2019. Mississippi, which had historically trailed Kentucky in key academic areas, **surpassed** the Bluegrass State for Grade 4 reading and mathematics.

If you try to compare Kentucky to Mississippi without breaking the data out by race, you will draw significantly incorrect conclusions. Things get even more imbalanced in Kentucky’s favor if you look at Florida, where little more than one in three students are white.

Figure 3 shows the NAEP Grade 4 Reading Scale Scores for 2024 for the jurisdictions mentioned above with racial breakouts. This was also generated using data from the [NAEP Data Explorer](#) web tool.

Figure 3

NAEP Grade 4 Reading Scale Scores in 2024 for Selected Jurisdictions				
Jurisdiction	All Students	White	Black	Hispanic
National Public	214	224	198	203
Florida	218	227	204	215
Kentucky	218	222	196	208
Mississippi	219	231	206	215

Only seeing the overall average scores for “All Students” that the KDE shows suggests that Kentucky was “neck and neck” with Florida and ahead of the national public school average. But the truth of how Kentucky is performing academically is not told by KDE’s incomplete release. It can only be known when scores are separately considered for each race.

By comparing Kentucky’s NAEP results to other states without breaking out scores beyond just overall results, the KDE, at best, shows it either doesn’t understand the data, or worse, is trying to mislead. —Richard G. Innes