

Kids don't have the write stuff

Test shows their pens aren't mighty

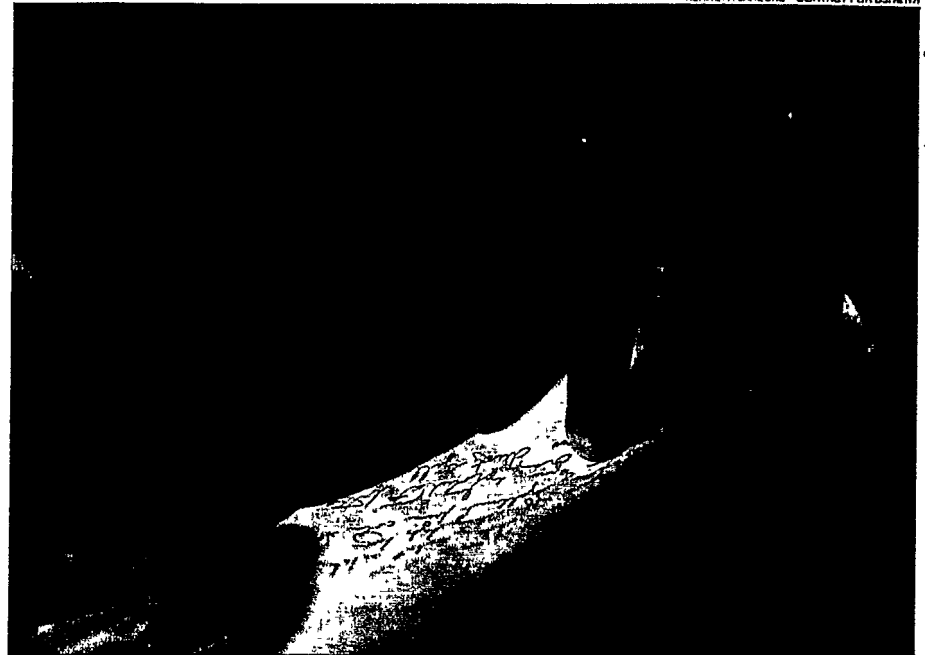
BY BEN WILDAVSKY

A decade ago, President George Bush and the nation's governors met in Charlottesville, Va., and set demanding education goals for the country. Last week's national education summit in Palisades, N.Y., focused on ways to help students reach those high standards. Good idea, because it looks like they can use all the help they can get: For all the talk about school reform, a national test of children's writing skills shows that America's pupils still have a long way to go.

Only about a quarter of fourth, eighth, and 12th graders write well enough to meet the "proficient" achievement level used in the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress, according to results issued last week. A measly 1 percent of students attained NAEP's challenging "advanced" level. Close to 6 out of 10 pupils reached just the "basic" level—defined as "partial mastery" of writing skills. And a sizable chunk of kids, ranging from 16 percent in grades four and eight to 22 percent in grade 12, couldn't meet even the basic standard.

Apples and oranges. The federally sponsored exam, in which most students had 50 minutes to answer two essay questions, has been changed considerably since the last time it was administered in 1992. So unlike reading scores released earlier this year, there's no way to compare whether the students' skills have improved or slipped. But that did not stop officials from spinning the results.

Gary Phillips, acting commissioner of education statistics, says the dreary scores indicate students generally lack solid writing skills. By contrast, Educa-



A national sample of 60,000 students fared poorly on a new standardized writing exam.

tion Secretary Richard Riley maintains that the standards are "very high," stressing that about 80 percent of students are at or above the basic level. Marilyn Whirry, a 12th-grade English teacher at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, Calif., called the results "both encouraging and sobering." Many students "are able to write at a basic, minimally effective level, but few can produce strong, coherent prose," says Whirry, who serves on the national board that sets policy for the testing program.

Students who did well on the test tended to be those who planned out their compositions and had teachers who required practice drafts. Kids from homes filled with books, newspapers, magazines, and encyclopedias had higher average scores. Twice as many girls as boys scored at or above the proficient level. The gap was even wider between Asian and white students and lower-scoring

blacks and Hispanics. Wealthier students had much higher average scores than poor students.

In addition to a national sample of 60,000 pupils, the writing test was given to 100,000 eighth graders in 35 states and several jurisdictions. The highest proportions of public-school eighth graders scoring at the proficient level or above were in Connecticut (44 percent), Maine (32 percent), Massachusetts (31 percent), and Texas (31 percent). The lowest pro-

portions were in the Virgin Islands (9 percent), Mississippi (11 percent), the District of Columbia (11 percent), and Louisiana (12 percent).

But Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California-Berkeley, cautioned against reading too much into state-by-state comparisons. "The problem with snapshots like the NAEP is that it doesn't disentangle the effects of family poverty from the discrete effects of school quality," he says. "For large, urban states with huge populations of poor families, it doesn't tell us much about how schools are doing."

But Lawrence Feinberg, assistant director for reporting and analysis at the National Assessment Governing Board, points out that comparing subgroups across the nation shows that poor and minority kids do much better in some states than in others.

Nationally, 10 percent of public-school eighth graders eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches scored at or above the proficient level. But the figure was much higher in Texas (17 percent), where officials have made concerted efforts to boost the scores of poor and minority students, than in California (6 percent), although both states have similar poverty levels. Black students in Connecticut and Texas were more than three times as likely to write well as those in Arkansas and Missouri. The highest average black student scores were at military base schools run by the Department of Defense. In other words, says Feinberg: "Demography is not destiny." ■



Education chief Riley