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4th-, 8th-graders outpace urban schools, report says

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Students in Birmingham city schools scored better in state math and reading assessments than fourth- and eighth-graders in other large urban school systems nationwide, according to a report released this week.

Reading and math scores are improving in the nation's largest urban systems, the Council of the Great City Schools said in its annual assessment, and Birmingham students exceeded the national figures for urban systems in each category. Despite those scores, the Birmingham school district lags the state.

"You don't jump from being behind to being ahead of the state in one year," said Claudia Williams, chief academic officer of Birmingham city schools. "It takes time. We intend to keep the course we're on and continue making progress every year. We'll get there."

The report said students in 67 major cities in 37 states posted substantially higher scores in 2006 than in 2002 on state assessments for fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading.

Alabama's figures go back only to 2004, when the Alabama Reading and Math Test was administered to grades four, six and eight for the first time. The math portion of that test, however, wasn't given to eighth-graders until the following year. All students in third through eighth grades now take the test.

Each state has its own assessment tests, aligned to the state's curriculum. The nation's 50-state assessment system makes it impossible to compare scores across the nation, so the report doesn't rank cities on their performance, just on the percentages of students who passed.

"The data not only show consistent gains over the past several years, but a more complete picture of progress in urban schools is emerging," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the council.

The findings for the 2005-06 school year show that 59 percent of urban school students scored at or above proficiency in fourth-grade math on their state assessments, a 15-point increase from 44 percent in 2002. For eighth-graders, the percentage climbed 11 points to 46 percent.

In reading, 55 percent of urban fourth-graders matched or exceeded proficiency, as did 42 percent of eighth-graders.

In a district-by-district assessment, Birmingham's math and reading scores in grades three through eight showed gains from the last year, with the exception of fifth-grade reading, which dropped 1 percentage point, and sixth- and seventh-grade math, which didn't change from the previous year.

Birmingham's sixth- and eighth-graders showed the most gains in math. In 2004, just 31 percent of students scored at or above proficiency level, compared with 58 percent in 2006. In math, the percentages rose from 40 in 2005 to 57 in 2006.

Williams said she attributes students' gains in math and reading to several programs the system implemented.

"We brought into our math curriculum what we call 'rolling-in-service,' where we identified our weaknesses in math and sent a group of professional development trainers into our schools to show our teachers better ways to teach math," she said. "We also have a systemwide assessment tool to keep our finger on the pulse of the progress in our schools. We do the assessments three times a year, and if a school isn't making progress, we'll send someone in there."