

Urban Schools Advance in Making the Grade

by Henry Duvall

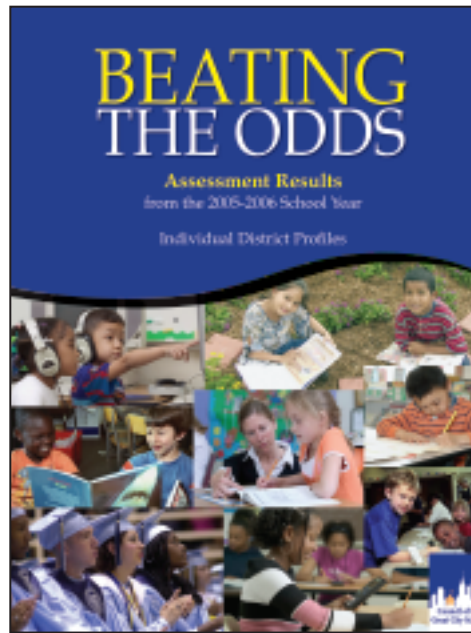
Just how well are the nation's urban schools achieving academically?

A new study shows that the nation's big-city school districts continue to improve in reading and mathematics on state-mandated tests, with evidence of racial achievement gaps narrowing and low-performing students making gains.

Students in 67 major city school systems in 37 states posted higher test scores in fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics and reading on state assessments in 2006, according to *Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments* by the Council of the Great City Schools.

The study's findings show that 59 percent of urban school students scored at or above proficiency in fourth-grade math in 2006, a whopping 15 percentage point increase from 44 percent in 2002 on state tests. For eighth graders, the percentage climbed to 46 percent, compared with 35 percent in 2002, an 11 percentage point rise.

In reading, urban schoolchildren also posted gains, but not as fast as in math. From 2002 to 2006, the percentage of fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency in reading on state tests rose to 55 percent from 43 percent in 2002 — a 12



Results from the Beating the Odds study show that big-city school districts continue to improve in reading and math on state-mandated tests.

percentage point gain. For eighth graders, the percentage increased to 42 percent from 34 percent in 2002, an 8 percentage point hike.

"The data not only show consistent gains over the past several years, but a more complete, fuller picture of progress in urban schools on state assessments," said Council Executive Director Michael Casserly.

Although urban school achievement is advancing, it still lags behind state averages. However, 20 percent of big-city school systems scored at or above their respective state averages in fourth-grade math and 18 percent in reading, while 16 percent did likewise in math at the eighth-grade level and 20 percent in reading.

Five urban districts — Anchorage, Alaska; Portland, Ore.; Florida's Broward County in Fort Lauderdale; and San Diego and San Francisco — showed both fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading scores that were equal to or greater than their respective states.

The seventh annual *Beating the Odds* report also examined academic trends among the most "struggling urban students" — those who scored "below basic" levels of proficiency.

From 2002 to 2006, the percentage of urban fourth graders who scored "below basic" achievement levels in math on their respective state tests decreased from 29 percent in 2002 to 19 percent in 2006. In eighth-grade math, there was an improvement of 4 percentage points — from 30 percent in 2002 to 26 percent in 2006.

Among the most low-performing students in reading, the study found that the percentage of urban fourth graders who scored "below basic" achievement levels on their respective state tests decreased from 27 percent in 2002 to 21 percent in

2006. In eighth-grade reading, there was an improvement from 29 percent in 2002 to 25 percent in 2006.

Beating the Odds VII also indicates that racial gaps in math and reading achievement in urban schools appear to be narrowing.

For example, between 2002 and 2006, 67 percent of urban school districts in the study narrowed the gap between their fourth-grade African-American students and their white peers statewide in math proficiency. In reading, 77 percent did so.

Among Hispanic students in the major cities, 62 percent of school districts narrowed the gap between their fourth graders and white peers in math proficiency, while 67 percent did so in fourth-grade reading.

The study also found similar evidence of racial achievement gaps narrowing in eighth-grade math and reading.

Details: *Beating the Odds* is available at www.cgcs.org. To learn about NLC's efforts to help city officials improve K-12 education, visit www.nlc.org/iyef or contact Lucinda Dugger at (202) 626-3052 or dugger@nlc.org.

Henry Duvall is editor of the Urban Educator newsletter published by the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based coalition of the nation's largest urban public school systems.



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