



Study shows city schools test scores are improving

Consortium of urban districts says students still lag behind

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By Joe Smydo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Pittsburgh Public Schools and other urban school districts are boosting overall achievement levels and narrowing racial achievement gaps, but they still have a lot of ground to gain, according to an analysis of test scores released yesterday by the Council of the Great City Schools.

The council, a consortium of the nation's 67 largest urban school districts, said many city districts' reading and math scores still lag overall scores in their respective states. Also, many urban district continue to miss achievement standards that states were required to set under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Council Executive Director Michael Casserly accentuated the positive during a conference call with reporters, saying districts' efforts to restructure schools and revamp curriculum yielded "substantial progress" over five years.

"I am delighted that the fruits of their long labors are finally becoming evident," he said. The council yesterday released the seventh annual edition of "Beating the Odds," a composite and city-by-city look at urban education.

Mr. Casserly said many urban districts are boosting math and reading scores faster than states are boosting overall scores, at least in some grades and subjects. In some cases, urban schools are also shrinking the ranks of lowest-performing students at rates faster than states overall.

Pittsburgh, for example, showed greater improvement in fifth-grade math scores between 2002 and 2006 than did students across the state of Pennsylvania. However, the scores of city school students still lagged behind average state scores.

In 2002, 34 percent of Pittsburgh's fifth-graders were proficient or above in math, a figure that improved to 58 percent in 2006. In the state, 53 percent of fifth-graders scored proficient or higher in 2002, which increased to 67 percent in 2006.

Principal leadership programs, teacher training, better use of student data and employee accountability measures were among the reasons districts improved, said Carol Johnson,

superintendent of Memphis City Schools, and Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver Public Schools. Both joined in the conference call.

The council did not rank urban school districts by their gains. Pittsburgh is outpacing other urban districts by some measures.

The council's report focused on reading and math scores for fourth- and eighth-graders, though not every district in the consortium had data for both grade levels. Pittsburgh, for example, began testing fourth-graders last year. In addition, each state uses different tests with different scores for proficiency.

The council said 46 percent of eighth-graders in member districts scored proficient or above on their states' math tests last year, up from 35 percent in 2002. The group said 42 percent of eighth-graders in member schools scored proficient or above in reading last year, up from 34 percent in 2002.

In Pittsburgh, 46 percent of eighth-graders scored proficient or above in math last year, up from 30 percent in 2002. Fifty-eight percent of Pittsburgh's eighth-graders scored proficient or above in reading last year, up from 39 percent in 2002.

Mr. Casserly said he was "heartened" to see Pittsburgh improving even before Superintendent Mark Roosevelt's improvement initiatives have had an opportunity to take root. But Pennsylvania figures show how far behind Pittsburgh remains.

Statewide, 62 percent of eighth-graders scored proficient or above in math last year, up from 50 percent in 2002, while 71 percent scored proficient or above in reading last year, up from 59 percent in 2002.

Pittsburgh did not meet state and federal performance standards last year. While it made achievement targets in eighth-grade reading and math, it missed the targets for other grades and for various student subgroups.

The council said a majority of districts, including Pittsburgh, narrowed racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in reading and math over the past five years. The council compared performance of a district's minority and poor students to performance of white and non-poor students statewide.