Testimony
on
"No Child Left Behind: Raising Student Achievement in America's
Big City Schools"
before the
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
by the
Council of the Great City Schools

June 23, 2004
Washington, D.C.

Good morning, my name is Michael Casserly. I am the Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee on *No Child Left Behind* and its initial impact on student achievement in the nation's big city schools.

The Council is a coalition of over 60 of the nation's largest urban public school systems. Our Board of Directors is composed of the Superintendent of Schools and one School Board member from each city, making the Council the only national organization comprised of both governing and administering personnel and the only one whose sole mission and purpose is urban.

Our member urban school systems educate over 7.3 million students or about 15.0 percent of the nation's K-12 public school enrollment. Some 63 percent of our students are eligible for a free lunch and about 17.3 percent are English Language Learners. Approximately 77 percent of our students are African American, Hispanic or Asian American.

The Council of the Great City Schools supported the passage of *No Child Left Behind* and continues to support the Act today. We backed the bill knowing that it had numerous challenges for urban schools, multiple requirements, and some poorly-calibrated provisions. But, we believed that the legislation set the right goals and targeted the resources on the right kids—those too often left behind.

Mr. Chairman, I have been asked to focus my testimony on the findings of a report that my organization recently published—*Beating the Odds IV: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*—and to offer some perspective on the initial impact of *No Child Left Behind* on student achievement in the nation's big city schools.

Background

The Council published this report—*Beating the Odds*—in March 2004. It was the fourth edition of the study and contains detailed statistics on the percentages of urban students achieving at or above proficiency levels on each city's respective state test through Spring 2003. The results in reading and math were presented by city and year

and compared with each state's trends. Additional data were presented by race, poverty, language, and disability status.

We have published this report annually since 2001 to—

- Make it clear to the country that our urban schools were strongly in favor of the standards movement and were committed to higher performance and greater transparency and accountability.

- Track our progress on the academic goals that the nation was setting for us.

- Better understand the effects of the reforms we were pursuing and to gauge what seemed to be working from city to city.

Beating the Odds IV

Findings and Scores

Our most recent report attempted to answer the question, "Have urban schools improved student achievement since *No Child Left Behind* was enacted?"

The answer appears to be 'yes.'

The evidence from *Beating the Odds IV* and other sources is that the nation's big city schools have seen important gains in reading and math since *No Child Left Behind*. Between the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 school years (the period since NCLB), the percentage of urban 4th graders scoring at or above proficiency levels on their respective state reading tests increased from 42.9 percent to 47.8 percent—an increase of 4.9 percentage points. (See table). The percentage of urban 4th graders scoring at or above proficiency levels on their respective state math tests increased from 44.2 percent to 51.0 percent—an increase of 6.8 percentage points.

The percentage of urban 8th graders, moreover, scoring at or above proficiency levels on their respective state reading tests remained at around 37 percent and the percentage of urban 8th graders scoring at or above proficiency levels increased from 36.4 percent to 39.4 percent—a gain of 3.0 percentage points.

Percentage of Urban 4th and 8th Graders Scoring at or above Proficiency in Reading and Math in 2002 and 2003[1]

	2001-2002	2002-2003	Change
4th Grade Reading	42.9%	47.8%	+4.9
4th Grade Math	44.2	51.0	+6.8
8th Grade Reading	36.8	37.9	+1.1
8th Grade Math	36.4	39.4	+3.0

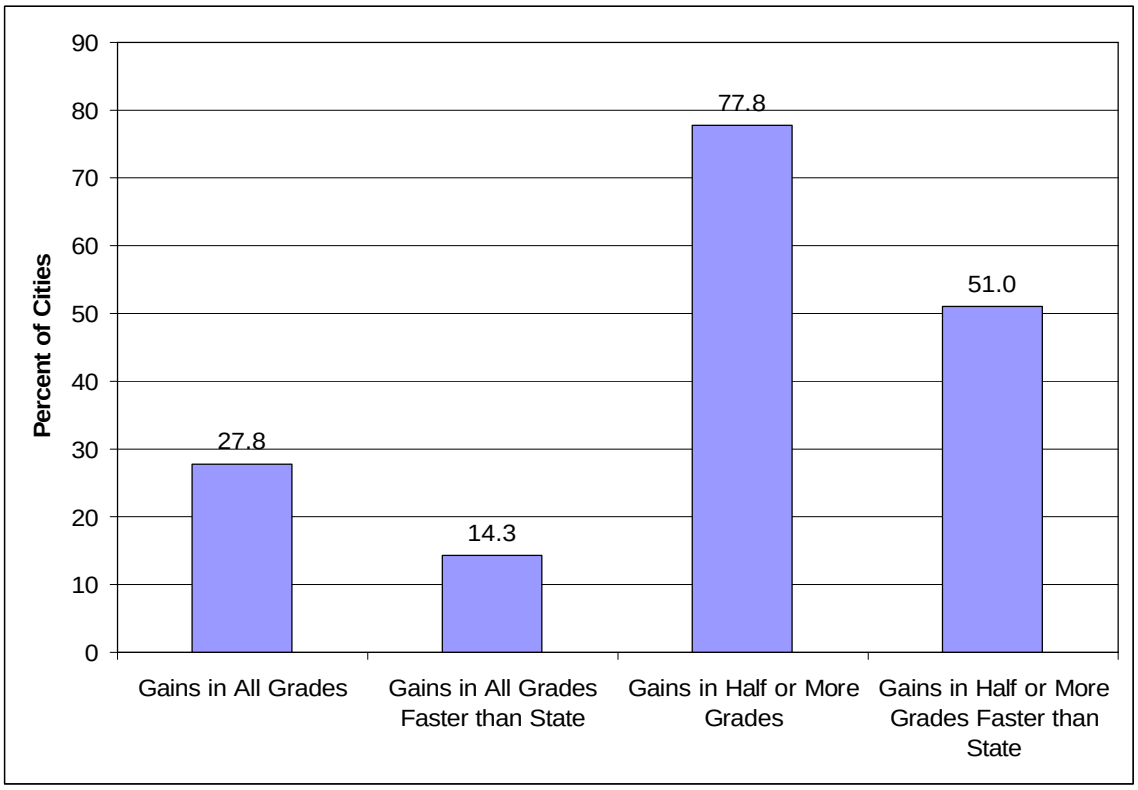
[1] Data should be handled with caution since percentages are based on differing state definitions of proficiency, data from states using identical tests in both years, and the use of enrollment counts.

Improving Reading Achievement

The Council also looked at the percentage of city school *districts* that had posted reading gains between 2002 and 2003. (See Graph 1.) The results showed that —

- 27.8 percent of urban school *districts* posted reading gains in *all* grades tested between 2002 and 2003.
- 14.3 percent of urban school *districts* posted faster reading gains than their respective states in *all* grades tested.
- 77.8 percent of urban school *districts* posted reading gains in *half or more* of the grades tested;
- 51.0 percent of urban school *districts* posted faster reading gains than their respective states in *half or more* of the grades tested.

Graph 1. Percentage of Urban School Districts Posting Increases in Reading Scores between 2002 and 2003



In addition, the report found that—

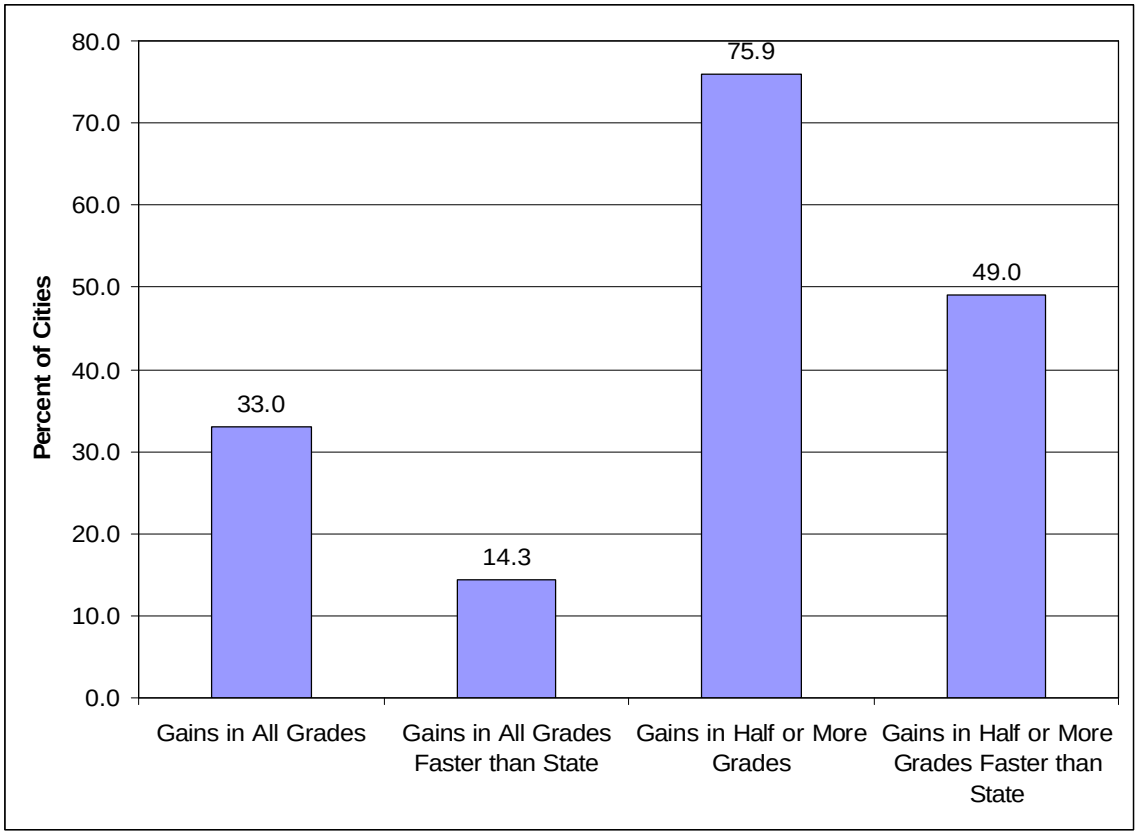
- 70.1 percent of all grades tested showed reading gains in the average performance of African American students; and
- 69.1 percent of all grades tested showed reading gains in the average performance of Hispanic students.

Improving Math Achievement

Finally, we looked at the percentage of city school *districts* that had posted math gains between 2002 and 2003. (See Graph 2.) The results showed that —

- 33.3 percent of urban school *districts* posted math gains in *all* grades tested between 2002 and 2003.
- 14.3 percent of urban school *districts* posted faster math gains than their respective states in *all* grades tested.
- 75.9 percent of urban school *districts* posted math gains in *half or more* of the grades tested.
- 49.0 percent of urban school *districts* posted faster math gains than their respective states in *half or more* of the grades tested.

Graph 2. Percentage of Urban School Districts Posting Increases in Math Scores between 2002 and 2003



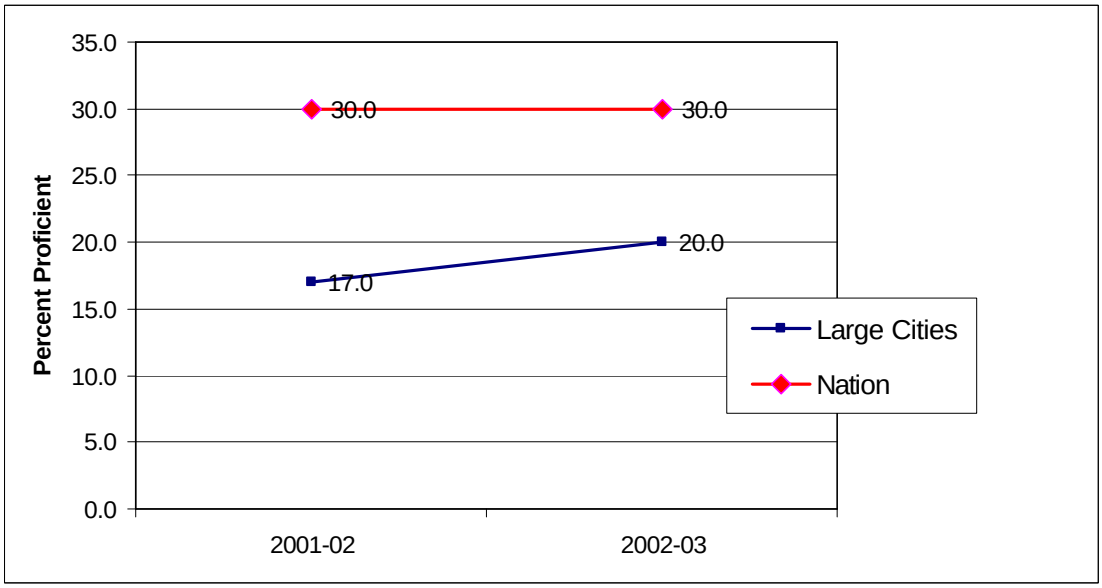
The report also showed that—

- 72.2 percent of all grades tested showed gains in the average performance of African American students; and
- 68.6 percent of all grades showed gains in the average performance of Hispanic students.

NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment

Many of these findings from *Beating the Odds* are corroborated by reading data from the Trial Urban District Assessment—a test that the Council of the Great City Schools arranged with the National Assessment Governing Board to measure urban school progress. These National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data showed that reading performance among urban 4th graders had increased by a statistically significant margin between 2002 and 2003 (the only years available). The percentage of 4th graders in the 67 large central city school districts that form the NAEP sample who were reading at or above proficient levels improved from 17 percent to 20 percent over the one year period. (See Graph 3.) Reading performance among urban 8th graders was unchanged. (No trend data for cities are available for math.)

Graph 3. Increases in the Percentage of 4th Graders Reading at or above Proficiency on NAEP

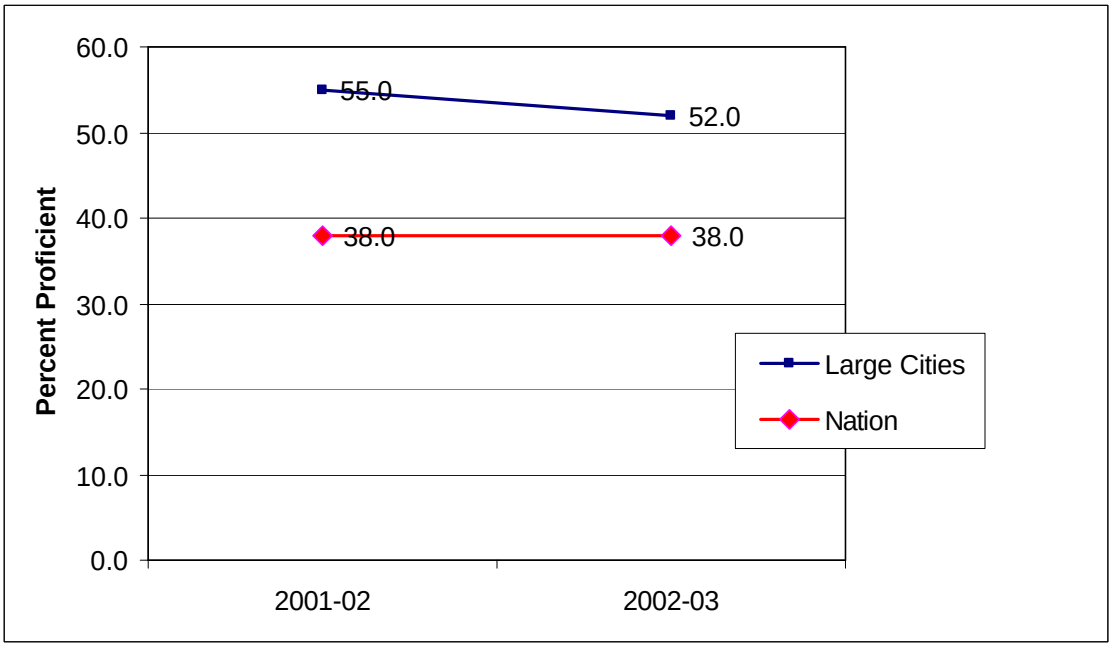


Conversely, the percentage of urban 4th graders reading below "basic" on NAEP decreased from 55 percent in 2002 to 52 percent—numbers that are still too high but which reflect a statistically significant drop. (See Graph 4.) The cities did not post any change in the percentage of 8th graders reading below basic levels of proficiency.

These urban NAEP gains, moreover, came during a period in which the nation showed little overall movement in reading performance. The percentage of 4th graders nationally who read at or above the proficient level remained unchanged at 30 percent between 2002 and 2003, for instance. And the percentage of 4th graders nationally who read below the basic level remained unchanged at 38 percent over the same period.

The significance of these differing trend lines is that city school scores were not being pulled upward by a larger national "effect." The cities were producing these gains by doing something different from what others were doing.

Graph 4. Decreases in the Percentage of 4th Graders Reading below Basic on NAEP



Discussion

The data from previous editions of *Beating the Odds* also suggest that improvements in urban school achievement, particularly in math, pre-date *No Child Left Behind* by a number of years. Reading gains appear to be more recent. We saw signs in previous reports that the numbers of urban students approaching the proficiency bar were increasing, but we did not see large numbers meeting or exceeding it until this most recent study. Finally, data from previous reports suggested that racially-identifiable achievement gaps were narrowing in many cities.

In other words, *Beating the Odds* suggests that big city schools did not begin implementing *No Child Left Behind* from a standing position. They had a running start.

We can generally conclude from the data in *Beating the Odds* that—

- Reading achievement in the nation's urban schools has shown particularly strong gains over the last year.
- Math achievement in the nation's urban schools has been improving for some time.
- The rate of average increases in urban reading and math scores outpaces the states about half the time.
- Achievement gains in the nation's urban schools are far more significant at the elementary level than at the middle and high schools. Improving our high schools remains one of our most serious challenges.

- Student achievement in the nation's urban schools is generally below state and national averages.

- Racially-identifiable achievement gaps are showing some signs of narrowing.

The question about what is producing these gains is more difficult to answer. We suspect that the improvements are attributable to—

(a) The standards movement and the changes it has triggered in urban schools. The movement has reminded educators—particularly those in cities—why we were in business and what we were being held accountable for.

(b) The hard work and commitment of urban school administrators, teachers, and boards across the country. Urban educators are working harder and smarter than ever before.

(c) The hard work of many others who want to see us succeed.

We also give some credit to *No Child Left Behind* for focusing our attention more sharply on student achievement. It would be difficult, of course, to claim that the new law has had a direct effect programmatically in just one year. Our reading gains, for instance, are probably not related directly to "Reading First" since most cities did not receive their "Reading First" grants until this school year. But, the gains may be attributable in part to our increasing awareness of the research, strategies, and programs on which "Reading First" and *No Child Left Behind* were built.

What Impacts Student Achievement

We have also learned from studies like *Foundations for Success*[2] what it takes to produce and sustain gains. Our research indicates that big cities making the greatest gains are often characterized by—

- A strong consensus for reform and city and district leadership working together over a sustained period on the same agenda to improve student achievement.

- Districtwide and school-by-school goals that are concrete, measurable, and disaggregated and are aligned with state standards.

- Strong accountability systems starting at the top.

- Uniform and sometimes prescriptive reading and math curriculum applied districtwide.

- Standardized professional development built around implementation of the curriculum.

[2] *Foundations for Success: How Urban School Systems Are Improving Student Achievement and Closing the Gaps*. MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools, 2002.

- Regular system for monitoring the implementation of reforms at the school and classroom levels.

- Continuous assessment of student progress and data systems that allow decision-making about where to intervene and how to retrain.

- Clear sequence of reforms starting at the early elementary grades.

- Improved rigor of high school courses and strategy for boosting skills of students without basic skills.

- Clear strategy for boosting the performance of the lowest-achieving schools and groups.

Conclusion

The Council of the Great City Schools is now working to translate these broad lessons and the details behind them into technical assistance to urban school systems throughout the country that are struggling to raise student achievement.

The Council continues to support *No Child Left Behind*. We believe that it has important implications for the achievement of students who have not always been well-served by our schools. We do worry, however, that the Act's grand vision is being undercut by statistical manipulations of subgroup sizes and confidence intervals in a way that exempts a great many children as long as they are not concentrated in large numbers in the same districts, schools, and classrooms.

The Committee and the country should know that we understand we have a long way to go to attain the goals that *No Child Left Behind* has set for us. We have substantial challenges in front of us.

Still, the data in *Beating the Odds IV* present an emerging and promising picture of how America's Great City Schools are performing and strongly suggest that we are making progress in both reading and math. These results are preliminary but they are strongly bolstered by urban NAEP data.

Some of our gains are coming from working harder and smarter, and squeezing inefficiencies out of every scarce dollar. Some of the gains come from cities doing what the research says and what the nation has agreed is likely to work—high standards, strong and stable leadership, better teaching, more instructional time, regular assessments, stronger accountability, extra resources, and efficient operations.

The data now indicate that improvement, however modest, is possible on a large scale—not just school-by-school. The key question for the public should no longer be whether urban education can be saved. We should no longer worry about whether student achievement can be raised. It clearly can be. The question now is, "How fast?" This change in perspective alone is important and worthy of note.

Summary of Findings from Beating the Odds
(2002 Compared to 2003)

Reading	Percent Change
% Cities w/All Grades Improved	27.8%
% Cities w/All Grades Improved Faster than State	14.3%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Grades Improved	77.8%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Grades Improved Faster than State	51.0%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Above State	14.3%
% Grades Tested Improved	67.1%
% Grades Tested Improved Faster than State	42.8%
% Grades Tested Declined	24.6%
% Grades Tested Improved for African Americans	70.1%
% Grades Tested Improved for Hispanics	69.1%

Math	Percent Change
% Cities w/All Grades Improved	33.3%
% Cities w/All Grades Improved Faster than State	14.3%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Grades Improved	75.9%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Grades Improved Faster than State	49.0%
% Cities w/At Least 50% Above State	10.7%
% Grades Tested Improved	70.0%
% Grades Tested Improved Faster than State	41.5%
% Grades Tested Declined	19.1%
% Grades Tested Improved for African Americans	72.2%
% Grades Tested Improved for Hispanics	68.6%