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Urban School Students Score at Highest Levels Ever On State and Federal Tests

Report Includes City-by-City Profiles of Big-City School District Trends On Math and Reading Assessments

WASHINGTON, April 22 – Students in the nation’s major city public school districts continue to advance in reading and math on state tests and on the more rigorous federal test—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

A new report analyzing academic progress in 66 urban school systems in 37 states and the District of Columbia shows substantially higher test scores in 2007 than in 2003 in fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics and reading on state assessments. It indicates that the state and national test scores are at their highest levels since academic proficiency data have been collected for urban schools.

Beating the Odds: An Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments by the Council of the Great City Schools compares this past school year’s state test scores with those reported a year after the federal *No Child Left Behind* law was implemented in 2002, requiring school districts to report performance levels based on state tests and show the percentage of students who score at the “proficient” level.

The *Beating the Odds* findings for the 2006-2007 school year show that 63 percent of urban school students scored at or above the proficient

Increases in Percentages of 4th and 8th Grade Urban Students Scoring at or above Proficiency in Reading and Math*						
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Change
4 th Grade Reading	51%	55%	58%	59%	60%	+9 points
4 th Grade Math	49%	55%	56%	60%	63%	+14 points
8 th Grade Reading	43%	44%	45%	49%	51%	+8 points
8 th Grade Math	42%	48%	49%	51%	55%	+13 points
*Percentages reflect student performances on differing state assessments in cities that administered the same test in each of five consecutive years						

level in fourth-grade math on their respective state assessments, a whopping 14 percentage point gain from 49 percent in 2003. For eighth-graders, the percentage climbed to 55 percent, compared with 42 percent in 2003, a 13 percentage point rise.

In reading, urban schoolchildren also posted gains over the past four years. From 2003 to 2007, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring at or above the proficient level in reading on state tests rose to 60 percent from 51 percent – a 9 percentage point hike. For eighth-graders, the percentage increased to 51 percent from 43 percent in 2003, an 8 percentage point gain.

National Test Assessments

The report also reveals that the state-test trends coincide with NAEP gains by urban students, but with lower percentages of students scoring at or above the proficient level on what is generally considered a more rigorous exam than most state tests.

Students in big-city public schools have made faster math and reading gains than the nation on the NAEP over the past few years, according to *The Nation's Report Card* for 2007 released by the U.S. Department of Education. The report last November marked the first time that the nation could see four- or five-year trends on NAEP for the country's major urban public school systems since the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) was launched in reading in 2002 and math in 2003.

Some 28 percent of urban fourth-graders scored at or above the proficient level in math in 2007 on NAEP, an 8 percentage point hike from 20 percent in 2003. In reading, 22 percent of urban schoolchildren in fourth grade reached or went beyond the proficient level in 2007, a 5 percentage point increase from 17 percent in 2002.

Beating the Odds also includes how student test scores in 11 big-city school districts that volunteered for the trial urban NAEP compare with scores on their respective state tests. Among the 11 cities are New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the nation's three largest school systems. **(Two charts attached show Trends in State vs. NAEP Proficiency Levels.)**

“Academic gains by urban students on both state and federal tests confirm that city schools are making real progress,” says Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. “These improvements belie the mistaken impression that urban schools aren't working hard to reform.”

Although urban schools show gains in math and reading performance, the districts still generally lag behind state and national averages in fourth and eighth grades, and acknowledge that they still have a long way to go to reach proficiency levels. But there are exceptions.

State Math Achievement

In the report's eighth annual analysis, data show that 22 percent of urban school districts now score as high as or higher than their respective states in fourth-grade math, and 16 percent score as high or higher at the eighth-grade level in 2007.

The school districts with both fourth- and eighth-grade math scores equal to or greater than their respective states are Anchorage, Broward County (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.), Charleston, New Orleans, Palm Beach and Portland, Ore.

State Reading Progress

In 2007, 16 percent of urban school districts scored at or above their respective states in fourth-grade reading, and 14 percent at the eighth-grade level.

The school districts with both fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores equal to or greater than their respective states are Anchorage, Broward County (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.), Charleston, New Orleans, Portland, Ore., San Diego and San Francisco.

Achievement Gaps

Beating the Odds VIII also indicates that racial achievement gaps in urban schools narrowed in math between 2003 and 2007, although they remain wide. Some 66 percent of big-city school districts narrowed the gap between their fourth-grade African-American students and white counterparts statewide in math proficiency – 63 percent in eighth-grade math. Among Hispanic students, 63 percent of the urban school districts narrowed the gap with white fourth-graders statewide – 58 percent in eighth-grade.

In reading, between 2003 and 2007, 64 percent of major city school systems narrowed the achievement gap between fourth-grade African-American students and white counterparts statewide in reading proficiency – 67 percent at the eighth-grade level. Among Hispanic students, 57 percent of urban school districts narrowed the gap with white fourth-graders statewide – 63 percent in eighth grade.

Urban Environment

America's big-city school systems enroll about one-quarter, or 26 percent, of all students of color in the nation, and a disproportionately high number of English language learners and poor students.

The report attributes the standards movement as the catalyst that triggered change in urban schools. It gave urban school administrators direction on what they were being held responsible for delivering.

Beating the Odds analyzed two assessments – state and national – because the nation does not have a single system to measure progress relative to the same standard across school districts in all states. “The Council of the Great City Schools is trying to address this weakness through the urban NAEP and by advocating for national standards in reading, math and science,” says Casserly.

City-by-city profiles of the eighth edition of *Beating the Odds* can be found on the Council's Web site at www.cgcs.org.

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The Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools is a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school districts.

Table B: Trends in State Test Results vs. NAEP Proficiency Levels for TUDA Cities in Math-4th Grade¹

		State Tests ²				NAEP			
		2003	2005	2007	△	2003	2005	2007	△
National	% Proficient+	-	-	-	-	31	35	39	8*
	% Below Basic	-	-	-	-	24	21	19	-5*
Urban	% Proficient+	49	56	63	14	20	24	28	8*
	% Below Basic	29	23	19	-10	37	32	30	-7*
Atlanta	% Proficient+	67	70	76	9	13	17	20	7*
	% Below Basic	-	-	-	-	50	43	39	-11*
Austin	% Proficient+	77	78	82	5	-	40	40	0
	% Below Basic	-	-	-	-	-	15	17	2
Boston	% Proficient+	16	21	27	11	12	22	27	15*
	% Below Basic	38	32	27	-11	41	28	23	-18*
Charlotte	% Proficient+	-	-	69	-	41	44	44	3
	% Below Basic	-	-	9	-	16	14	15	-1
Chicago	% Proficient+	-	-	72	-	10	13	16	6*
	% Below Basic	-	-	3	-	50	48	42	-8*
Cleveland	% Proficient+	-	-	52	-	10	13	10	0
	% Below Basic	-	-	23	-	49	40	47	-2
District of Columbia	% Proficient+	-	-	34	-	7	10	14	7*
	% Below Basic	-	-	28	-	64	55	51	-13*
Houston	% Proficient+	74	69	80	6	18	26	28	10*
	% Below Basic	-	-	-	-	30	23	20	-10*
Los Angeles	% Proficient+	40	43	50	10	13	18	19	6*
	% Below Basic	34	32	25	-9	48	42	40	-8*
New York City	% Proficient+	-	-	74	-	21	26	34	13*
	% Below Basic	-	-	8	-	33	27	21	-12*
San Diego	% Proficient+	39	52	56	17	20	29	35	15*
	% Below Basic	29	23	19	-10	34	26	26	-8*

¹ City scores on state tests cannot be compared with one another and NAEP scores cannot be compared with state scores.² Tests of statistical significance were not conducted on state test score gains.

* Statistically significant change from 2003.

Table D: Trends in State Test Results vs. NAEP Proficiency Levels for TUDA Cities in Reading—4th Grade¹

		State Tests ²					NAEP				
		2002	2003	2005	2007	△	2002	2003	2005	2007	△
National	% Proficient+	–	–	–	–	–	30	30	30	32	2*
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	–	–	38	38	38	34	-4*
Urban	% Proficient+	–	51	58	60	9	17	19	20	22	5*
	% Below Basic	–	28	22	20	-8	56	53	51	47	-9*
Atlanta	% Proficient+	–	–	–	80	–	12	14	17	18	6*
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	–	–	65	63	59	52	-13*
Austin	% Proficient+	–	81	78	81	0	–	–	28	30	2
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	39	38	-1
Boston	% Proficient+	24	27	25	31	7	–	16	16	20	4
	% Below Basic	27	28	26	26	-1	–	52	49	46	-6
Charlotte	% Proficient+	72	79	83	85	13	–	31	33	35	4
	% Below Basic	7	5	4	3	-4	–	36	35	34	-2
Chicago	% Proficient+	–	–	–	57	–	11	14	14	16	5*
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	3	–	66	60	60	56	-10*
Cleveland	% Proficient+	–	–	59	61	2	–	9	10	9	0
	% Below Basic	–	–	22	22	0	–	65	63	61	-4
District of Columbia	% Proficient+	–	–	–	36	–	10	10	11	14	4*
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	20	–	69	69	67	61	-8*
Houston	% Proficient+	–	76	70	77	1	18	18	21	17	-1
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	–	–	52	52	48	51	-1
Los Angeles	% Proficient+	24	28	34	40	16	11	11	14	13	2
	% Below Basic	38	34	32	26	-12	67	65	63	61	-6*
New York City	% Proficient+	–	–	–	56	–	19	22	22	25	6
	% Below Basic	–	–	–	8	–	53	47	43	43	-10*
San Diego	% Proficient+	36	40	51	53	17	–	22	22	25	3
	% Below Basic	28	23	19	18	-10	–	49	49	45	-4

¹ City scores on state tests cannot be compared with one another and NAEP scores cannot be compared with state scores.² Tests of statistical significance were not conducted on state test score gains.

* Statistically significant change from 2003.