

**Remarks by Michael Casserly, Executive Director
Council of the Great City Schools
At
Press Conference to Release 2005 Trial Urban NAEP
Science Results
November 15, 2006**

Thank you. I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's coalition of large urban school systems. I am pleased to join this distinguished panel this morning.

Before I begin, I want to thank Darv Winick, Charles Smith, and their team at the National Assessment Governing Board; Russ Whitehurst and his staff at the Institute of Education Sciences; and Mark Schneider, Peggy Carr and their team at the National Center for Education Statistics.

It is an honor to work with you on this important project. Thank you.

I want to take a second to summarize why we initiated this trial urban NAEP assessment back in November of 2000.

1. We—as urban school systems—wanted to make it crystal clear that we were fully committed to the highest academic standards for our children.
2. We wanted to be able to compare ourselves with those with many of the same challenges.
3. Finally, we wanted a mechanism to gauge our progress and evaluate our reforms in ways that the current state-by-state testing system does not allow.

I am repeating these reasons today because people often forget how serious we are about improving student achievement in our urban schools.

But the results that we are releasing today underscore critical issues that the nation's Great City Schools urge the country to get serious about.

First, these test results make it clearer than ever before that we need national standards, not just in science, but in reading and math as well. And we need to require that the states tether their tests to those national standards and adopt common definitions of proficiency.

We are now faced with a situation where the nation's big city schools, the districts that the nation wants most to improve, are trying to hit two separate and distinct targets at the same time—the state tests to which we are being held legally accountable under *No Child Left Behind*, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress on which we are being judged by the public and the press.

These separate assessment systems test different concepts, at differing levels of rigor, in different ways, and at differing times. The National Assessment of Educational Progress measures the ability to comprehend and apply complex concepts, while many state tests test our students on whether they can recall specific facts. The NAEP uses extended-response items to determine whether students can apply these complex concepts to common problems, while state tests often rely on multiple-choice items in order to return results by the next school year. And the NAEP assumes that many scientific and other constructs are taught one school year, while many states teach them in another.

NAEP tests electrical circuitry and the difference between plant and animal cells and the formation of rocks in the fourth grade, for instance, but some states don't teach them until the fifth. It is not clear then what our teachers are supposed to teach when.

And it is not clear how the public makes sense of the results.

Many of our districts now have their instructional programs so tightly aligned with their state standards and assessments that they miss what NAEP rightly tests with such rigor.

The nation cannot possibly think that it can raise its science performance and remain preeminent scientifically with each state setting its own standards, its own definitions of proficiency, and its own measurement criteria. It is the height of national folly to think that America can maintain any competitive edge in science the way we are now teaching and testing it.

The Great City Schools therefore call on our national policymakers to develop and begin implementing national standards, linked to the highest international benchmarks, and require states to tie their tests to them. We would then be clear what the nation expects of us.

Second, we know that our results are low, as are the nation's. No one—across the country or in the cities—has any bragging rights. Our results are shaped in part by the fact that we have been devoting our time and energy to raising achievement in reading and math—largely because of the requirements of *No Child Left Behind*, a law that the Council continues to support. We have given little priority to science over the last several years, but we have seen substantial gains in reading and math, areas where we have focused our greatest attention. We have every reason to believe that we can make progress in science as we concentrate on it.

Third, our results are clearly related to variables both outside and inside the schools. Student poverty, parent education, home resources, English-language proficiency, and other factors outside our control work in tandem like a perfect storm to dampen our results in ways that few others have to contend with.

We were pleased that many of our subgroup scores were comparable to those nationwide and that our gaps were about the same. But our goal is not to reflect or perpetuate society's inequities; our goal is to overcome them.

We call on the nation to help city schools raise our math and science performance, if our pretense for global competitiveness is real. It is not enough for the federal government, state governments, universities, labs and centers, foundations, think-tanks, and other gadflies to study us, write about us, comment on us, audit us, analyze us, regulate and monitor us. We don't need more jawboning from the peanut gallery. We need help.

It is not enough that our colleges of education graduate but a handful of science teachers each year. It is not enough that the unions want to pay science teachers the same as our phys-ed teachers. And it is not enough for us to provide less than two hours a week of low skills science instruction.

We need the funding, the research, the expertise, and the support to meet the goals the nation is setting for us—and that we welcome. The challenges of urban classrooms are not just an issue for the nation's cities but for the nation as a whole. We need partners who are willing to work with us.

Fourth, we have stuck our necks out to take the toughest tests in the country to demonstrate our commitment to high standards and bolster our instructional programs. We hope that the press will not make it harder for us to continue doing so, will look beyond just the immediate results, and will cover what we will do about them.

Finally, these data are starting to give us the tools we need to ask hard questions about our instructional practices.

And that's the point. They allow us--as urban school systems--to ask and begin answering questions that we could never pose using the state tests alone. It is why we volunteered in the first place. So we could tell what was working and what wasn't. So we could raise the quality of public education in our Great Cities. So we could build a foundation for the nation's future economic well-being. So we could give our kids—the kids that are too often out-of-sight and out-of-mind—a shot at the American dream.

Thank you.