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Big-City School Districts Improve In Eighth-Grade Writing on National Test

Racial Achievement Gaps Narrowed Faster Than the Nation

WASHINGTON, April 3 – Public school eighth-graders in the nation’s large central cities posted significant gains in writing achievement in the latest round of testing from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The improvements substantially outpaced gains nationwide.

In addition, four big-city school districts that volunteered to take the national test in eighth-grade writing in both 2002 and 2007 have made substantial gains, according to federal data released today. There were no fourth-grade data.

The Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2007 shows public school achievement for eighth-graders in Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles climbed over the past five years on the rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), while there was no significant change in Houston. But Houston joined the other three districts in significantly reducing the percentage of students performing below the *basic* level.

Atlanta and Los Angeles outperformed their respective states in the writing NAEP, which examines narrative, informative, and persuasive writing of students. Atlanta posted a 15-point gain compared with Georgia’s six-point rise since 2002 on the 2007 writing NAEP. Los Angeles saw a nine-point gain, while there was no statistically significant increase in California. Chicago’s 10-point increase could not be compared with Illinois’ since the state did not administer the test in 2002.

The four districts are among 10 big-city school systems that volunteered for the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) in 2007. Most of the TUDA districts, which also include Austin, Boston, Charlotte, Cleveland, New York City and San Diego, performed comparably to or higher than districts in large central cities, but below the nation. Large central cities outpaced national NAEP scores, increasing by six points compared to three points, respectively, since 2002.

Students in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools had the highest score among eighth-graders for public schools in large central cities in 2007, comparable to the national score.

“We are very encouraged by the writing gains of students in America’s major cities taking the nation’s most challenging test,” says Michael Casserly, executive director of the **Council of the Great City Schools**, a Washington-based coalition of the nation’s largest urban public school systems that initiated the city testing. “We’re now closer to the national averages in writing than we are in reading or math, although we are steadily closing the gaps in all three subjects.”

Minority and Poor Students Score Big Gains

African-American and Hispanic students in the nation’s large central city schools posted disproportionately large gains over the testing period—eight scale score points among African Americans and seven points among Hispanic eighth graders. Among the four TUDA districts with results for both 2002 and 2007, writing scores increased for black students in Atlanta and Chicago, for Hispanic students in Chicago and Los Angeles, and for white students in Los Angeles.

Scores for students eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch in some districts were comparable to the nation and large central cities. In Boston and New York City, eligible students scored higher than their counterparts in large central cities, but not significantly different from those in the nation.

Achievement Gaps Closing

The impressive gains among black, Hispanic, and poor students in the nation’s big cities are also closing the achievement gaps at a faster rate than the nation, according to data on the online NAEP data tool. The 30-point gap between urban blacks and whites in 2002 shrank to 24 points in 2007, compared with a three-point reduction nationwide over the same period. And the 30-point gap between urban Hispanics and whites in 2002 fell to 25 points in 2007, compared to a nationwide drop of three points. The large central cities also closed the writing gap between poor and non-poor students by six points.

Writing Proficiency on the Rise

Of the four urban districts that could compare eighth-grade writing scores from 2002 and 2007, the Atlanta Public Schools saw a whopping achievement jump from 68 to 83 percent of students scoring **at or above basic**; Chicago Public Schools saw a rise from 72 to 83 percent; Houston improved from 74 to 81 percent; and Los Angeles gained from 64 to 77 percent.

The writing attainment of students in large central cities generally increased from 74 percent at or above basic to 81 percent, compared with an increase nationally from 84 percent to 87 percent.

Eighth-grade writing performance **at or above the proficient** level also increased among the four urban districts that showed trend lines between 2002 and 2007. Atlanta saw an achievement rise from 10 to 19 percent; Chicago saw a jump from 16 to 23

percent; Houston remained steady at about 18 percent; while Los Angeles gained from 11 to 13 percent.

The large central cities overall improved from 19 percent at or above the proficient level in 2002 to 22 percent in 2007—or three percentage points, compared with an average national gain of one point at this attainment level.

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