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## City Eighth-Graders Improve In Writing on National Test

Public school eighth-graders in the nation's large central cities posted significant gains in writing achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), substantially outpacing gains nationwide on the rigorous test.

In addition, four big-city school districts that volunteered to take the national test in eighth-grade writing in both 2002 and 2007 made substantial gains, according to federal data released in early April. 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 NAEP, while there was no statistically 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 outpaced 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.

Commenting on behalf of urban schools at the NAEP press conference, Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, stressed in regard to the trend lines since 2002, "We made as much progress in the last five years as the nation made in 10."

The four districts with the 2002 baseline are among 10 big-city school systems that volunteered for the



Education Secretary Margaret Spellings

## Education Secretary, Former Governor, Congressman Speak

In 2005, when U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings made her first appearance at the Council of the Great City Schools' Annual Legislative/Policy Conference, she said an educational rebirth was taking place in urban school districts.

Three years later at her fourth and possibly last appearance at the conference, Spellings praised urban school systems for the continued progress they are making in educating students across the nation.

"Urban school districts are on the front lines of education reform," Spellings told some 200 big-city school educators assembled in Washington, D.C. "Some are outpacing the achievements going on in other districts in their states."

A graduate of the Houston Independent School District, Spellings noted how the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act has benefited urban students by "reframing the discussion in Washington around the kids in your districts."

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## Educators in California Protest Budget Cuts



A young student attends a budget rally at the statehouse in California to denounce proposed cuts in education funding. Story on page 5. Photo credit: Hydra Mendoza

# Nine Council Schools Recognized for Excellence in Urban Education

As a result of declining enrollment and the budget crisis facing school districts in California, Benjamin Tucker Elementary School in Long Beach will close next fall.

But before Tucker closes its doors, the school can celebrate having recently been selected to receive the 2008 National Excellence in Urban Education Award.

The school is one of 11 big-city schools across the nation to receive the award presented by San Diego State University's National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST). Nine of the 11 schools selected to receive the award come from member districts of the Council of the Great City Schools.

In addition to Tucker, other urban schools chosen for the award were Bridesburg Elementary School in Philadelphia; Harriet Tubman Blue Ribbon School in Newark; Louisa May Alcott Elementary School in Cleveland; Southside Elementary Museums Magnet School in Miami; Signal Hill Elementary School in Long Beach; Thomas Henderson Middle School in Richmond, Va.; Dreamkeepers



Kindergartners at Long Beach's Signal Hill Elementary School participate in the Signal Hill DAD Program in which the students honor their dads, special friends or relatives-- and make them Kings for a Day.

Academy at JJ Roberts Elementary School in Norfolk, Va.; and William Dandy Middle School in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Long Beach was the only school district with two schools selected to receive the award.

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## Albuquerque, Providence Name New Leaders; Richmond, Sacramento Chiefs Departing; Birmingham Interim Selected

Winston Brooks has led Kansas' Wichita Public Schools for nearly 10 years, but in July he will be at the helm of a new school district: New Mexico's Albuquerque Public Schools.



Winston Brooks

Brooks was recently selected to take the reins of the 90,000-student school system, succeeding interim superintendent Linda Sink.

He became superintendent of the 49,000-student school system in Wichita in August 1998 and during his tenure the achievement gap between students of different ethnicities has narrowed, academic achievement as well as enrollment increased and voters approved a \$284.5 million bond issue. The district also approved Brooks' plan to end its decades-old voluntary busing plan for desegregating schools and give children the opportunity to attend neighborhood schools.



Tom Brady

"I'm excited about being your superintendent, and I look forward to serving the Albuquerque community and its students," said Brooks in a news statement.

Also selecting a new leader was Rhode Island's Providence Public Schools, which named Thomas Brady, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army, to take the reins of the 24,410-student school district.

Brady is currently the interim superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, the eighth largest school district in the nation with 173,000 students. He has also served as the chief operating officer for the District of Columbia Public Schools and is a 2004 graduate of the Broad Urban Superintendents Academy, which trains executives to lead urban school systems.

Brady is scheduled to begin his tenure in July and succeeds Donnie Evans, who recently resigned from the district.

### Two Leaders Departing

When Deborah Jewell-Sherman was named superintendent of Virginia's Richmond Public Schools in 2002, her contract stipulated that she could be fired if student test scores didn't improve.

However, scores did improve with the school system making remarkable improvement in the classroom, according to the *Richmond Times Dispatch*.

After six years, Jewell-Sherman recently announced she will leave the 24,226-student school system when her contract expires in 2009.

Also leaving is M. Magdalena Carrillo Mejia, the superintendent of California's Sacramento City Unified School District. She recently announced she will retire this summer from the district she has led since 2004.

According to the *Sacramento Bee*, Mejia was the first woman and the first Latina to lead the 46,000-student school system.

### Interim Leader Named

Birmingham City Schools recently named Barbara Allen, the district's chief of staff, as its interim superintendent.

Allen replaces Stan Mims, who recently resigned from the district after serving at the helm since 2006.

## State Report Shows Minneapolis Students Perform Better Than Suburban Counterparts

Students in Minneapolis Public Schools are making greater academic gains in math and reading than students who left the district for schools in the neighboring suburbs, according to a recent report.

The Choice is Yours study, conducted by the Minnesota Department of Education, evaluated reading and mathematics test scores of students in the Minneapolis school system compared to students who left the district under a voluntary desegregation program implemented in Minneapolis and nine surrounding suburban school systems in 2000.

The Choice is Yours program allows students in the Minneapolis Public Schools who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch to attend a district school, a selected magnet school, or one of the participating suburban schools.

The report evaluated test scores for students in grades three through seven and found that in every grade level students who decided to stay in the Minneapolis school district performed better in reading than students who left the district. In addition, reading scores for suburban choice students were, on average, nine percentile points lower than those of comparable non-participants, while math scores for the two groups were comparable.

This is the second year in a row a report was released indicating that students in Minneapolis public schools achieve higher test scores than students who opted out of the district.

According to district officials, the 36,370-student school system has lost many students to local suburban schools, as well as charter schools, which on average report lower test scores than the district, because parents believe that suburban schools provide students with a better education.

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**National Test** continued from page 1

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," Casserly said. "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."

Released at the Library of Congress in Washington, the federal report card on 2007 writing prompted Librarian of Congress James Billington to note, "The written word and the discipline of writing help bind us together as one people, even amidst all our diversity...."

### Minority, Poor Students Gain

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.

### Rising Writing Proficiency

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.

## Seven More Districts Step Up to NAEP

The Council of the Great City Schools recently joined the National Assessment Governing Board in announcing seven more urban districts volunteering to be assessed by a rigorous national test in fourth and eighth grades.

Now there will be 18 urban school districts, up from 11, participating in the trial urban National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), considered *The Nation's Report Card*.

The seven districts represent Baltimore, Detroit, Fresno, Louisville, Miami, Milwaukee and Philadelphia in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), and will begin national testing in 2009. They were selected among 10 urban districts applying for TUDA.

"These districts join 11 others to reaffirm their determination to raise student performance, assess the effect of their reforms and compare themselves to their big-city counterparts in other states," says Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school districts.

In 2000, the Council approached the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP, with the idea of urban districts volunteering for the national test. The Council also collaborated with NAGB to determine eligibility criteria for TUDA expansion, secure congressional appropriations, and recruit urban districts for 2009.

"We are pleased that more of the nation's biggest school districts will now have a detailed look into how their students are performing at the local level and in comparison to peers in other urban districts," says Governing Board Executive Director Charles Smith.

**Seven More** continued on page 12

## Urban Districts Grappling With Severe State Budget Cuts

Last month, fifth-graders from Commodore Sloat Elementary School in San Francisco delivered letters to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The letters listed their concerns about attending crowded and noisy classrooms, playing in dirty schoolyards and not having enough supplies and computers.

The students fear all of these scenarios could become a reality if \$4.8 billion in education cuts Gov. Schwarzenegger has proposed to deal with a \$14 billion deficit facing the state are enacted. In addition, the governor has asked the state legislature to suspend Proposition 98, which requires a minimum percentage of the state budget be spent on education.

The cuts would be the largest reduction to education funding in California history and was the reason approximately 100 school superintendents from across the state assembled on the steps of the California State Capitol in Sacramento last month to denounce the possible budget cuts. The superintendents also used the opportunity to inform legislators how the loss of state funding would result in larger class sizes, teacher layoffs and the closing of schools across the state.

According to officials in the San Francisco Unified School District, if the cuts are enacted the district will lose approximately \$40 million in funding from the state, or roughly 10 percent of its annual operating budget. Recently, 535 teachers and administrators in the district received preliminary layoff notices.

"This is not an action we take lightly," said San Francisco Schools Superintendent Carlos Garcia, "But unless we take it, we risk our financial solvency as a district."

The San Diego Unified School District is facing an even bigger shortfall and may be forced to cut \$80 million from its 2008-09 school budget. The budget crisis led to the district's new superintendent, Terry Grier, to take the reins of the 135,000-stu-



San Francisco Schools Superintendent Carlos Garcia (at podium) is joined by other superintendents and school leaders from districts in California at a rally on the steps of the State Capitol Building to protest budget cuts in education. Photo credit: Hydra Mendoza

dent school system in March, four months earlier than originally planned.

According to the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, cost-saving measures the district may implement include eliminating 50 vice principals, increasing class sizes and having one principal administer two schools. The school district recently sent layoff notices to approximately 900 teachers, counselors and other staff members.

The nation's second largest school system, the Los Angeles Unified School District, is facing \$460 million in potential cuts and what could be the school system's biggest shortfall ever, according to district officials. The cuts would be the "equivalent of closing 22 high schools, firing 5,750 employees or instituting an 8 percent pay cut for all employees," said the district's chief financial officer in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Officials in the Long Beach Unified School District recently approved more

than \$40 million in funding shifts and budget cuts to deal with the state budget crisis and avoid issuing layoff notices. The cuts include eliminating summer school offerings, school supplies, counselors and increasing the fees for families in the reduced-price lunch program.

Other big-city school districts in California facing budget woes are the Fresno Unified School District, which is planning for \$27 million in cuts; the Oakland Unified School District, which may have to eliminate \$22 million from its 2008-09 budget; and the Sacramento Unified School District, which has issued layoff notices to employees and is considering closing and consolidating schools.

### California is Not Alone

Big-city school systems in California are not the only districts facing cuts in state education funding. The economic downturn throughout the nation is causing a number of urban school districts to grapple with budget shortfalls.

Particularly hard hit have been several urban school systems in Florida, such as Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Education funding from the state to the district was cut by \$32 million last fall and this year the district is facing \$29.2 million in funding cuts.

Also being hit is Orange County Public Schools in Orlando, which is facing \$70 million in cuts, and Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, which may experience \$34.2 million in state cuts.

According to the *New York Times*, several new school accountability programs may be eliminated in New York City public schools because the district faces a loss of more than \$600 million in education funding over two years.

And Boston Public Schools recently received \$10 million from a city reserve fund to help solve its \$30.7 million shortfall for next year. The district plans to implement a number of cost-savings measures, including eliminating professional development pro-

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Spellings said NCLB was intended to give more attention to students in big-city school districts and more intensive focus on the needs of minority children.

She said the law has come a long way in six years and her goal during the reauthorization process is to make the law better.

One of the issues the department is reviewing is aimed at helping states differentiate between chronic underperforming schools and schools that are closer to meeting the goals of NCLB.

“We have to provide more nuance in our accountability,” said Spellings. “There must be more distinction between chronic underperformers and schools in range.”

She also said that NCLB is intensely focused on elementary and middle school students, but not so much on high school students.

“We have to find more accurate ways to measure dropout rates and focus more on high schools because the business community is demanding it,” said Spellings.

The eighth secretary of education said that educators must do a better job of offering supplemental services to students and providing tutoring to those students who need it the most.

“We are at a critical moment in education,” Spellings stressed. “We know where we need to go.”

After her address, Spellings held a question-and-answer session with conferees. Yolie Flores Aguilar, a board member from the Los Angeles Unified School District, expressed her concern that many elementary teachers enter the classroom without having the sufficient skills to teach reading.

Spellings said that the Reading First program, which focuses on providing early reading instruction, not only helps teach students to read better but is largely a professional development program.

She said she is disappointed that the program is facing cuts in funding because it is a very useful tool for teachers.

“Because of gaps in teacher preparation, we are spending a billion a year in the class-

room making sure kids have the necessary skills,” said Spellings.

The nation’s top education official was also asked her views about the testing requirements under NCLB. She said that NCLB requires students to be tested only one time a year in reading and math and report it in a disaggregated way.

The secretary also praised big-city school districts for continuing to volunteer in the trial urban National Assessment of Educational Progress. “I’m proud of you for holding yourselves up,” said Spellings.

### **Improving Graduation Rates**

Also addressing the conference was Bob Wise, president for the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, who discussed how the nation can improve high school graduation rates.



**Former governor Bob Wise**

Wise posed this question to conferees: “Who pays when students fail to graduate?”

Wise said the first person who pays is the students themselves. He said that students without high school diplomas have lower income and lower health outcomes.

But he also acknowledged that the rest of society also pays when students fail to graduate from high school.

“We lose about 7,000 high school students every day and 1.2 million annually,” said Wise, noting that more than half are from minority groups. “There is a big economic and social impact.”

He said that dropouts from the Class of 2007 alone cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over their lifetimes.

Wise also noted that if the graduation rates of minority students were raised to the level of white students by 2020, the nation could add more than \$310 billion to the economy.

In respect to NCLB, the former governor and congressman is a supporter of the education law but wishes it would place greater emphasis on graduation rates and accountability.

As a result, he is advocating the Every Students Counts Act, which would require low-achieving high schools to increase their graduation rates as part of the annual accountability requirements under NCLB.

Wise has discovered that the best practices and innovations to improve graduate rates are being found in large, urban districts across the nation, such as Boston and Miami, and that people need to look at the best practices and research and replicate and support what works.

He urged big-city educators to insist federal policy reflect best practices and research, but also to share information with the public about how to improve high school graduation rates.

Wise believes that low graduation rates are a national problem that requires national attention.

He noted that the U.S. Congress recently passed a stimulus bill to help Americans. But according to Wise, “the best economic stimulus package is a diploma.”

### **A Personal Stake**

Before John Sarbanes (D-Md.) became a congressman, he was special assistant to the Maryland state superintendent of schools, serving as liaison to the Baltimore City Public Schools.

“I saw up close and personal what worked and didn’t work with NCLB,” said Sarbanes. “I came to Congress having seen what it meant out in the field.”

A member of the House Education and Labor Committee, Sarbanes told urban educators that due to the upcoming presidential elections it is highly unlikely Congress will reauthorize NCLB this year. However, his committee will still hold ex-

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tensive hearings to find out how the law is working, or in some cases not working, to improve student academic achievement.

"I have children in high school," said Sarbanes. "I have a personal stake in what is happening in education and I want to do what is best for our children."

The congressman said his committee will review several issues concerning NCLB, including providing schools with more flexibility in how to measure progress.

He noted that progress in schools usually happens over a three-to five-year period, but NCLB regulations are written in a way that measure progress every year.



Congressman John Sarbanes

"But I do believe NCLB, with its clear focus on student achievement, has stimulated more thinking, so we're constantly reviewing what's the best way to do instruction," said Sarbanes.

He shared with conferees the story of a class of fifth-graders in Baltimore where 95 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, yet these students scored higher than any other group of students in Maryland on a state exam.

He said the first reaction by state officials was to conduct an investigation. But officials soon discovered that the students had the same teacher in fourth grade who worked extensively with them after-school, on weekends and during the summer.

"My motivation with respect to education comes from the belief that every child out there can be reached," Sarbanes emphasized, "and if you teach them they can succeed."

## What Are the Education Issues Important to the Presidential Candidates?

Education issues have not received a great deal of attention in the Democratic and Republican presidential primary campaigns, but the issue took center stage when education advisers of Sen. Hillary Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama participated in a session at the Council of the Great City Schools' Annual Legislative/Policy Conference.

Titled "Education Issues from the Presidential Campaigns," the session featured Catherine Brown, domestic policy director for Sen. Clinton, and Steve Robinson, legislative assistant for education for Sen. Obama. A representative for Sen. John McCain was invited but did not attend.

Brown told big-city educators that federal policy is important in regard to education, but educators at the local level determine children's futures.

"You are setting the tone and steering the ship," said Brown.

She said Clinton has a long history of working to improve education, and as senator, helped provide \$500 million to districts to recruit teachers and school leaders, especially in high-need areas.

Brown said Clinton has five education principles she believes in. They are:

- Strengthening human capital by providing support to teachers;
- Enrolling children in early childhood education programs;
- Raising expectations that all students can succeed;
- Funding construction costs to rebuild crumbling schools; and
- Investing in interventions aimed at helping at-risk children.

Sen. Clinton has been vocal about the need to fund *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and wants the federal government to stop micromanaging schools and provide real support to struggling schools. "She wants to ensure students of all abilities get the help they need," said Brown.

### Improving Teacher Quality

Steve Robinson, an education adviser for Sen. Obama, told conferees that one of the first bills the senator introduced was the "Innovation Districts for School Improvement Act."

The legislation provides grants to school districts to implement innovative techniques and is an example of

the senator's belief that change must come from the district level. "The federal role is to support innovation and what works," said Robinson.

Sen. Obama supports the principles of NCLB but believes the law has not been fully funded and is critical of the assessments used to track student progress.

According to Robinson, Obama said the dropout problem is a crisis and has introduced legislation to provide funding to school districts to invest in intervention strategies in middle school. "He believes you can't solve the dropout program by starting in high school," said Robinson.

Teacher quality is an issue that concerns Sen. Obama deeply and he supports creating Teacher Residency Programs to recruit well-qualified teachers for high-need schools.

"Education is near and dear to his philosophy of how we make progress as a nation together," said Robinson.



Council director of legislation Jeff Simmering, left, moderates a session on education issues featuring Sen. Clinton adviser Catherine Brown and Sen. Obama adviser Steve Robinson.

## Safety Training Saves Florida Teacher

Shelly Copeland, a teacher in Florida's Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa, owes her life to an emergency management plan developed by the district several years ago.

Last month Copeland, who teaches third grade at the Folsom Elementary School, fainted in her classroom. After the principal realized that Copeland's heart stopped and she was not breathing, the school nurse began to deliver CPR while a teacher began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. A secretary then gave the nurse an automatic external defibrillator (AED) to get Copeland's heart beating again until the paramedics came and rushed her to the hospital.

Copeland is recuperating from her ordeal and her physicians credit her survival to her coworkers' ability to implement the Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP). Developed several years ago by the school system's district chief of security in consultation with local emergency response agencies, the plan provides information for district personnel on how to prepare and respond to emergencies, ranging from violence to hurricanes. The plan also addresses such issues as team planning and appropriate follow-up and offers a framework for schools to create their own school-based crisis management plans.

The Folsom Elementary/CPR AED team had practiced how to respond to emergencies many times but they were still surprised when their responses and reactions came so easily in a time of crisis. "We worked like a well-oiled machine," said Principal Marjie Sandler, with everyone assuming their assigned responsibilities and executing them.

In addition to creating the CEMP plan to respond to emergencies, the Hillsborough County school district also used a \$1 million school safety grant from the federal government to purchase at least one AED for each school and site. Funds from the grant were also used for crisis response training.

## Three Council Districts Vie For Urban Ed. Prize

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has been a finalist for the \$1-million Broad Prize for Urban Education for the past two years, while California's Long Beach Unified School District won the prize in 2003.

The two districts are in the hunt for the prize again this year as well as Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., because all three big-city school districts were recently selected as finalists for the 2008 Broad Prize. Two other districts were also named finalists for the award, sponsored by The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.

The award is presented to the urban school district that has made the greatest progress in raising student achievement while narrowing the achievement gap between students of different racial groups.

The winner of the Broad Prize will receive \$500,000 in scholarships for graduating seniors. Each of the four finalist school systems will receive \$125,000 in scholarships.

"While numerous urban school districts are struggling to prepare students today for the jobs of tomorrow, these finalists are demonstrating that academic progress in our cities is possible and is happening," said Eli Broad, founder of the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.

One of the achievements shared by all of the district finalists this year is the progress made by Hispanic students. In all of the districts, Hispanic students outperformed and showed greater

improvement than their peers in similar districts in their respective states. And all of the district finalists made strides in narrowing achievement gaps between Hispanics and their white peers.

The five finalist districts were selected from among 100 of the largest urban school systems nationwide and chosen by a board of 19 influential education researchers, policymakers and executives from top universities, national education associations and foundations.

In the upcoming months, site visits to the five districts will be conducted by teams of educational researchers who will gather information, interview district personnel, and interview parents, community leaders and school board members.

The winning district will be announced in a ceremony in October at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.



### Jackson District Leader Testifies

Mary Hill, food services executive director of Mississippi's Jackson Public Schools, testifies recently before the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee in a hearing on school nutrition programs televised on C-SPAN. Hill is the president of the School Nutrition Association and a 1974 graduate of the Jackson school system.



## Fort Worth Launches PEAK Program To Recruit And Reward Teachers

The Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas has launched what it calls the PEAK program to attract highly qualified teachers, offering financial incen-

## Council Partners With Mock Election

The Council of the Great City Schools joins other national education organizations and the National Association of Broadcasters Education Foundation to motivate civic engagement in the 2008 National Student/Parent Mock Election.

The Council encourages its member big-city school districts to get students and parents involved in the voting process in a partnership with the nation's oldest and largest voter education project.



With the nation's broadcast outlets participating in the project, Gloria Kirshner, president of the National Student/Parent Mock Election, points out, "This is an

unprecedented opportunity for educators and student leaders to work with their local TV and radio stations and make the voices of young voters heard."

The Mock Election is open to elementary and secondary school as well as college students in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and in American schools abroad.

In the 2004 presidential election, more than 4 million votes were cast with Web voting available to American students and parents worldwide through the Mock Election.

To enroll in the 2008 election, access the Mock Election web site at [www.nationalmockelection.org](http://www.nationalmockelection.org), or call (520) 877-VOTE. School administrators may enroll an entire school district.

tives to educators who can improve student achievement in some of its most low-performing schools.

PEAK, an acronym for Public Educators Accelerating Kids, combines a team of teachers to elevate the performance of students in nine Fort Worth public schools, rewarding them for their progress.

"Teachers in this program can potentially increase their income by as much as 50 percent," said Superintendent Melody Johnson in a news release. "But this is about much more than just money. It involves a complete teaching commitment both for the pilot schools involved and the teaching teams within those schools."

Three Fort Worth high schools, a middle school, and three elementary schools have been designated PEAK schools. They were selected because of poor academic performance, demographics, unequal distribution of experienced teachers and high teacher turnover, according to Clint Bond, the school system's external communications coordinator.

Another low-performing high school and middle school will become PEAK rewards schools because they have begun to show improvements.

At the nine schools selected to the PEAK pilot program, Superintendent Johnson pointed out, "...we want to staff those schools with energized and highly qualified teachers who truly understand the challenges they will encounter."

The district will use grant money to provide monetary incentives and rewards at both the subject and class levels. And the PEAK schools will be provided with additional clerical support, structured mentoring and master teacher coaches for new teachers.

As the district prepares to implement the PEAK pilot program for the 2008-2009 school year, it has already selected the principals to lead the charge of reenergizing and transforming the schools toward greater academic performance.

## Jackson School District Earns Accreditation

Mississippi's Jackson Public Schools recently earned district-wide accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

It is accredited as a "Quality School System" following an extensive review by a team of veteran educators who visited Jackson.

"The entire process is about being the best we can be on behalf of our students," said Jackson Schools Superintendent Earl Watkins.

The SACS CASI report commended the school board and superintendent. It also praised the district for its clearly communicated mission, team work, data-driven decision making, use of multiple media for sharing information with the community, and its commitment to school improvement.

Jackson Public Schools now joins Florida's Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale and North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools as big-city school systems that have received SACS CASI district-wide accreditation in recent years.

## Atlanta District, Two Universities Open Confucius Institute

Spanish is the most popular foreign language taught in Atlanta Public Schools, but that may change with the opening of a new cultural center to promote understanding of Chinese language and culture.

The Confucius Institute of Atlanta is a partnership among the school district, Emory University in Atlanta, Nanjing Uni-

**Confucius Institute** continued on page 10

## Noted Psychiatrist to Address Council



Alvin Poussaint

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, psychiatrist, media consultant, author and professor at Harvard Medical School, will address urban school leaders at the Council of the Great

City Schools' 2008 Fall Conference, Oct. 22-26, in Houston.

An expert on the dynamics of racial and ethnic relations, Poussaint recently collaborated with actor/comedian Bill Cosby to write a book titled *Come on People: On the Path from Victims to Victors*, providing a message for families and communities in an effort to strengthen the nation. He had worked with Cosby as a script consultant for the popular television program *The Cosby Show*.

The Harvard professor of psychiatry also serves as director of the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston, which promotes the health and wellbeing of children and families. One of his media center pro-

grams, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, advocates reducing the impact of advertising in children's lives.

Additionally, he is national co-director of the Lee Salk Center, where he promotes good parenting and children's health.

Poussaint has written extensively about African Americans, and has received numerous awards and honorary degrees.

### Teacher/Author to Speak

Urban school leaders will also hear from revolutionary teacher Erin Gruwell at the Council's Fall Conference, hosted by the Houston Independent School District under the banner "Pioneering the Educational Frontier."

As a Long Beach, Calif., school-teacher in the late 1990s, Gruwell transformed students into critical thinkers, captured in the book *The Freedom Writers Diary – How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*.

Her book inspired the movie "Freedom Writers" featuring actress Hilary Swank.

## Charlotte Launches Database Initiative To Boost Achievement

A new data system in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools will train teachers how to use test scores to tailor the curriculum for their students in ways that can best help them improve academically, and graduate college-ready.

The initiative is being implemented in five high schools in the Achievement Zone, a group of low-performing schools that receive additional resources and support, including experienced teachers, support staff and maintenance.

In partnership with the Data Wise Institute at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, the Charlotte school system will provide teachers access to student achievement data throughout the year that will enable them to track student progress. In addition, a full-time, on-site data analyst will work at each of the five high schools, who will monitor each school's progress and assist teachers and administrators in improving their curriculum and instruction.

The new data initiative is being funded by a \$1.4-million investment from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is also providing support to help recruit community volunteers in Achievement Zone high schools.

### Confucius Institute *continued from page 9*

versity in China and the Chinese government. Housed at Sammie E. Coan Middle School, the institute will serve as an educational resource for teachers, parents and students throughout the Atlanta area on the teaching of the Chinese language and culture.

The institute will also serve as a regional resource center for teacher-training and curriculum design, sponsor cultural and

educational events and assist the school district in developing K-12 instruction in Chinese that can be used as a model for schools statewide.

The Confucius Institute of Atlanta is funded by a three-year grant from the Chinese Ministry of Education and will be administered by the Atlanta school system and Emory University, in what district officials believe to be the first institute oper-

ated by a private American university and a public school system.

"The institute is a one-of-the-kind international project in the Southeast that will serve as a model for K-12 students, both within and outside Atlanta," said Atlanta Schools Superintendent Beverly Hall.

The Confucius Institute of Atlanta is the first in the state of Georgia and the southeastern United States and is the 41<sup>st</sup> such institute in the nation.

# Pictorial of 2008 Legislative Conference



Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, second from right, poses with, left to right, Houston Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra, Anchorage Schools Superintendent and Council Chair Carol Comeau and Council Executive Director Michael Casserly.



Jackson school board president Delmer Stamps listens intently during a conference session.



Los Angeles school board member Yolie Flores Aguilar asks Education Secretary Margaret Spellings a question.



Fresno school board member Manuel Nunez, left, listens as Dallas Schools Superintendent Michael Hinojosa, second from right, shares his views during the legislative conference.



Boston Schools Superintendent and Council Secretary-Treasurer Carol Johnson takes notes at the legislative briefing.

## Photos by Alex Jones

## Seattle Gets Help To Expand Music Ed.

In Seattle Public Schools, more than 100 fourth- and fifth-grade students who signed up for music classes this school year were unable to participate because they did not have access to instruments.

To alleviate the problem, the district teamed with Seattle area Rotary clubs and the Northwest Youth Music Association to create the Rotary Music4Life partnership.

The mission of the partnership is to expand music education in the Seattle school district, beginning with acquiring 1,200 musical instruments for elementary students. Currently, 36 percent of all fourth- and fifth-graders in the Seattle school system participate in music programs and Rotary Music4Life hopes to increase that number to 50 percent.

The partnership will supply donated musical instruments from Rotary members and local citizens to schools that serve a large number of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and then will expand to schools districtwide.

### **Budget Cuts** *continued from page 5*

grams and adopting energy-management practices to lower utility costs and reducing central office services and staff.

“Our first priority remains providing every child with the best education possible,” said Superintendent Carol Johnson. “That means we will have to make some tough choices – to determine what we must continue to fund because it has the most positive impact on kids, and what we may have to scale back because the resources just aren’t there to support it.”

### **Minneapolis Students** *continued from page 3*

Minneapolis Schools Superintendent Bill Green said the recent report proves that the measures the district has undertaken to improve student achievement are working and he advises parents to review the report, which measures academic quality, when making decisions on which school their child should attend.

“If quality of education is a high priority for families, we would recommend that they send their children to MPS,” said Green.

### **Nine Schools** *continued from page 2*

To be chosen for the award, urban schools were required to meet 11 criteria, including proficiency rates on state assessments that exceed state averages, high achievement for all demographic groups served, high graduation and attendance rates and low suspension and expulsion rates. In addition, schools had to meet and exceed all *No Child Left Behind* adequate yearly progress requirements.

Twenty schools were named finalists and received on-site visits from teams of researchers and educators.

The winning schools receive a check for \$1,000.

### **Seven More** *continued from page 4*

Six school districts -- Atlanta, Chicago, the District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles and New York City -- set the initial benchmark for the first-ever TUDA, participating in the 2002 NAEP in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and writing.

Later, four more districts – Austin, Boston, Charlotte and San Diego – joined TUDA for national assessments in reading, mathematics, writing and science since 2002.



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