

Boston's test scores flat, but reflect long-term gains

By [James Vaznis](#)

GLOBE STAFF

DECEMBER 18, 2013

Boston public schools earned relatively flat scores on national standardized test results released Wednesday that reflect a district largely challenged by stagnation for the past few years.

But in comparison to the other 20 large urban districts that took the [Trial Urban District Assessment](#) exams, the most prominent measurement of urban achievement, Boston tended to score in the top tier. The results also showed that some cities, such as Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, are gaining ground.

"We are always proud to outperform other cities, as our mission is to eliminate achievement gaps and ensure a high-quality education for every child in every classroom, in every school," Interim Superintendent John McDonough said in a statement. "This sustained level of high performance is a credit to the leadership of Mayor Menino and our School Committee, and especially our talented teachers, school leaders, parents and students."

"At the same time, it's not enough to be one of the best urban school districts in the country or to compete with many suburban districts around the nation," added McDonough. "We all recognize that there is a lot of work still to be done."

The results of the tests, which measure math and reading skills among fourth- and eighth-graders, were announced hours before the Boston School Committee was scheduled to unveil the first broad brush strokes of a new strategic plan for the city's school system. The plan aims to replace Superintendent Carol R. Johnson's five-year-old Acceleration Agenda, an education overhaul that was supposed to rapidly boost achievement.

Although Boston experienced some gains under the Acceleration Agenda, most notably a rise in high school graduation rates, the district's performance on the national urban assessment exams have often yielded disappointment. The exams have been administered every two years in math since 2003. The reading exams started in 2002.

Boston performed the worst in reading in the recent results, with fourth- and eighth-graders typically showing a basic knowledge of material. Fourth-graders scored an

average of 214 scaled points out of 500, 1 point lower than in 2009. Eighth-graders earned 257 points, the same level as in 2009.

Math results were more encouraging. Fourth-graders scored 237 points, 1 point higher than in 2009. Eighth-graders earned 283 points, 4 points higher than 2009. Test designers consider any variation in score of at least four points to be “significantly different.”

Boston and national educational leaders preferred to focus on the more positive results, particularly the long-term trend data that showed urban districts, for the most part, making larger gains than national averages, which include suburban districts. The urban tests are the same exams administered to states under the National Assessment of Educational Progress testing system.

“Every district has its own story, but as a whole over the last 10 years all of the districts are improving,” David P. Driscoll, the former Massachusetts education commissioner who chairs the National Assessment Governing Board, said in a statement. “In general, though, these scores are too low, and that should concern everyone.”

US Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in a statement: “While we still have a lot of work to do to close achievement gaps in our largest cities, this progress is encouraging.”

Boston has achieved some of the largest gains in the nation over the past decade.

On the fourth-grade math exam, Boston has achieved a 17-point increase over the 10 years, the second-highest gain in the nation, tied with Atlanta but several points lower than D.C., the leader. Boston eighth-graders also had the second highest gain in math, with a 21-point increase, just two points behind Atlanta.

Michael Casserly — executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, a national advocacy organization for large urban districts — noted that Boston eighth-graders have caught up with the national average, even though the school system has a far higher concentration of low-income students, indicating all students can achieve regardless of their background.

Achievement gains in reading, a subject Boston students also struggle with on state standardized tests, have been sluggish over the 10 years. The School Department is now in the midst of overhauling reading instruction again, just a few years after instituting a new curriculum and textbooks in elementary schools.