

CMS tops urban districts on national math, reading tests

By Ann Doss Helms

ahelms@charlotteobserver.com

Posted: Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013

Students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools outperformed counterparts in 20 urban districts on a rigorous national test of math and reading, according to 2013 results released Wednesday.

The majority of students in CMS, North Carolina and the nation fell short of proficiency on the exams, which were given to a representative sampling of fourth- and eighth-grade students in 21 large districts. But the report on the National Assessment of Educational Progress highlights a number of strong points for Charlotte:

- CMS topped all other districts in fourth- and eighth-grade math and was one of only three districts logging significant gains in eighth-grade math since the tests were last given in 2011.
- CMS was virtually tied with Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa, Fla., to top the list on reading. CMS showed small gains in reading, but the increase was not considered significant.
- Black, white and Hispanic students in CMS outperformed the national, state and big-city average for those groups on all exams.

At a time when North Carolina's testing program is in flux, the national exams known as the nation's report card provide a stable gauge of how well students across the country are mastering academic skills. Statewide results were released in November; CMS is the only district in the Carolinas included in Wednesday's urban report. Results are not reported for individual students or schools.

"While I've always believed that there's more to the story than test scores, the reality is test scores matter," Superintendent Heath Morrison said. "NAEP is one of those measures I've always believed is very important."

Reading and math proficiency have increased for all racial and income groups in CMS since the district began getting results in 2003. But the long-term data paint a picture not only of the district's success but of its persistent challenges.

Race, poverty matter

Across the country, black, Hispanic and low-income students are far less likely to earn proficient scores on the NAEP tests than white, Asian and middle-class counterparts. In CMS, the minority

and low-income students who make up the majority of the student body have made gains, but white and nonpoor students have made bigger gains.

Between 2003 and 2013, for instance, CMS black students went from 11 percent proficiency on eighth-grade math to 20 percent, while CMS white students went from 55 percent to 68 percent. Because black, Hispanic and low-income students make up a growing majority of CMS enrollment, the district's overall proficiency growth has been relatively small – from 32 percent to 40 percent on eighth-grade math over the past decade.

Demographics also contribute to CMS' high standing. CMS and Hillsborough County have the lowest poverty levels of all the urban districts, with 55 percent of CMS eighth-graders and 56 percent of Tampa eighth-graders qualifying for lunch aid to low-income families.

Eleven districts reported poverty levels of 80 percent or higher. Detroit and Cleveland, at the bottom of the performance rankings, had eighth-grade poverty levels of 88 percent and 100 percent, respectively.

Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky., is the only participating district where whites make up 50 percent of the students. White students accounted for 32 percent of CMS enrollment last year.

To be included, big-city districts must have poverty levels and/or nonwhite enrollment of at least 50 percent. Wake County, for instance, is a larger district than CMS but doesn't meet that threshold.

CMS has been one of the top performers among the NAEP urban districts every year.

Morrison acknowledged that the NAEP results show "there's work to be done," and that the report compares CMS with districts that serve large numbers of disadvantaged students. "Sometimes that makes us a tall tree in a short forest," he said.

N.C. and NAEP line up

North Carolina's new testing system, which debuted in 2013, showed a dramatic drop in pass rates compared with previous years. After years of showing much higher proficiency rates than the national tests indicated, the state results are now similar to the NAEP.

For CMS, the NAEP math proficiency ratings – 50 percent in fourth grade and 40 percent in eighth grade – were virtually identical to the North Carolina results released last month. The district's reading proficiency on NAEP – 40 percent in fourth grade and 36 percent in eighth grade – was slightly below what state exams indicated.

All students take state exams, but only a sample designed to represent states and urban districts take the NAEP.

The national exams, authorized by Congress and operated as part of the U.S. Department of Education, have been given since 1969. The urban district report debuted in 2002, with CMS joining the list a year later, as an effort to track performance in the big-city districts that educate a large portion of the nation's low-income and minority students.

The large-city average still trails the national average for all public school students, but the urban districts have made progress, the report says.

“The 2013 NAEP results show gains in large city schools over this last decade that are statistically significant and educationally significant,” Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, said in a news release. The council is a coalition of urban districts.

“We estimate that nearly 100,000 more of our fourth graders score at or above the proficient level in math than 10 years ago, and some 50,000 more are at the proficient level in reading,” Casserly said.