

Detroit Public Schools' scores improve, but still at bottom on Nation's Report Card; poverty a factor

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For the third time in a row, Detroit Public Schools scored the worst among urban school districts that participated in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), which released fourth- and eighth-graders' reading and math scores today from the rigorous test known as the Nation's Report Card.

DPS posted the lowest scores among the 21 cities that voluntarily took part in the TUDA. DPS has participated since 2009, allowing its scores to be publicized. Other district scores are not made public.

After posting some of the worst scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test ever in 2009, DPS's test scores have inched up a few points on three of the four tests, but the test analysis released today described those results as "no significant change."

The encouraging results came in eighth-grade reading. The score showed a significant increase since 2009; this year, 8% of Detroit eighth-graders scored at a level that was proficient or above on the reading test, compared with 26% in the urban districts.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's primary coalition of large urban public school systems, said a student's family income has a major influence on test scores. DPS's scores were likely affected because the percentage of students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price lunches fell, from 24% of tested students in 2009 to 13% in 2013, he said.

"One of the underlying dynamics in Detroit is the shift of its enrollment of students who are slightly better off economically," Casserly said.

Steve Wasko, spokesman for DPS, called the NAEP results an "outlier" because they differ from the increases DPS has seen on state standardized tests and increases in graduation rates.

"Officials believe continued implementation of the district's academic plan and ability to maintain a stability in school and classroom leadership and programs will result in (a) DPS NAEP performance to match its current trajectory on the MEAP," he said.

NAEP is the largest nationwide, continuing test of what America's students know about various subjects, and is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education.

NAEP tests in reading and math are scored on a scale of 0-500. The test is tough; the average scores typically are in the 200s. The results also show the percentage of students who score in three categories: basic, proficient and advanced.

Overall, the large-city averages increased in 2013 compared with 2003, the first year of the comparison.

“Anyone interested in the state of our nation’s education should start by looking at progress in these urban districts, which face a concentration of the challenges all schools grapple with to some degree,” said David Driscoll, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP.

This year’s DPS results show:

- In fourth-grade math, 4% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared with 33% on average in the large cities, 37% in Michigan and 42% in the nation.
- In eighth-grade math, 3% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared with 27% on average in the large cities, 30% in Michigan and 34% in the nation.
- In fourth-grade reading, 7% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared to 26% on average in the other large cities, 31% in Michigan and 34% in the nation.
- In eighth-grade reading, 9% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared with 26% on average in the other large cities, 33% in Michigan and 34% in the nation.