

Educational progress in Boston

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By Michael Casserly

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Real gains in learning by public school students often get drowned out by noisy debates about the quality of education across the nation. But below the radar screen is a district that has made real progress: Boston.

The Boston Public Schools is one of 21 major city school systems across the country that volunteer to take the rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — the nation's gold standard in assessing academic attainment — to yield reading and math scores on the district that can be compared to each other and to other states.

Based on the most recent NAEP scores, one simple, amazing fact emerges: Our big-city public schools are making significantly larger gains than schools nationwide.

In fact, the urban school systems that are often the subject of so much reform have narrowed the gap with the nation in reading and math by about one-third since 2003 when the cities first started participating in the assessments. And Boston has recorded some of the most striking gains.

Between 2003 and 2011, the Boston Public Schools posted gains in fourth- and eighth-grade math that were about three times larger than improvements nationwide and about two times greater than gains in the average city. The city's reading gains in the fourth grade also were about three times larger than improvements nationwide.

Most impressively, the math gains in Boston are among the largest seen by any jurisdiction, state or local, in NAEP's 30-year history.

Indeed, Boston is the only big-city school district to have actually caught up with the nation in any grade or subject after having started significantly below it. Eighth graders in Boston have gone from proficiency levels in math that were 10 percentage points below national averages in 2003 to levels that match the country in 2011.

Notably, the Boston schools made these gains even as they teach children with poverty rates and limited English proficiency rates that are at least twice national averages. Boston's eighth graders now outscore their peers in math in 23 states and 18 of 21 cities participating in NAEP. And the few cities that outscore Boston all have student poverty levels that are considerably lower than here.

How did Boston do it? A study conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools and the American Institutes for Research found some of the answers in the strong and sustained leadership of mayor Tom Menino, school committee chairs Liz Reilinger and Gregory Groover, and superintendents Tom Payzant and Carol Johnson.

Their clear and consistent vision, coupled with unusually coherent and thoughtful educational programming and professional development, particularly in math, and the effective use of data by the district's many excellent teachers to guide classroom instruction have resulted in academic progress that is the envy of other cities.

Of course, the school system here faces enormous challenges. The city's children continue to perform below statewide averages; significant budget cuts have become a way of life; and some low-achieving schools still need substantial overhaul. And the debate about what else needs to be done is as lively as ever.

Still, it is worth pausing, taking a deep breath, looking beyond the annual ups and downs of state testing results, and publicly celebrate what too many other public school systems across the country can't: real improvement and the leadership in place to make more. We thought the people of Boston would like to know.

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