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City Students Improve Test Scores, But Still Lag Significantly

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Students in America's largest cities are scoring higher on math and reading exams, but still perform well below the national average, according to a new government study released Wednesday.

The report examines results from the 2013 Trial Urban District Assessment, a piece of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, a national standardized test known for being more reliable than state tests. NAEP tested fourth and eighth graders on math and reading, and TUDA drills down to the performance of participating cities with populations of 250,000 or more -- districts that represent about 30 percent of America's school-age children. In fourth and eighth grade reading and in eighth grade math, one-quarter of those students were deemed proficient; in fourth grade reading, that number is higher, with one out of three performing at proficient levels.

In Austin, Texas; Charlotte, N.C.; and Hillsborough County, Fla., math and reading scores were higher than average for big cities. Students in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Washington, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Fresno, Calif., were below average in both subjects.

"Every district has its own story, but as a whole over the last 10 years, all of the districts are improving," said David Driscoll, who oversees the National Assessment Government Board, the U.S. Education Department body in charge of administering the tests. "In general, though, these scores are too low, and that should concern everyone."

He added that "these school systems need our attention more than ever before."

Washington, D.C. -- a standard bearer for what's known as the education reform movement since former school chancellor Michelle Rhee's tumultuous tenure at D.C. Public Schools -- was the only city to show score increases in both grades in both subjects since 2011. Los Angeles saw increases in reading at both grade levels and in fourth grade math.

But these huge cities still perform dismally. Not one showed a statistically significant increase in eighth grade math, and over the last few years, average proficiency in fourth grade reading has

increased by only 2 percentage points. And generally, white students in the participating cities did well, beating the national average.

"Over the last decade, participating cities have generally made progress across the board," said Andy Smarick, a former Bush administration education official who now works for Bellwether Education Partners, a D.C.-based consulting firm. "But in the big scheme of things, it is not nearly enough. The list of most-improved cities includes Atlanta, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Yes, we should be proud of them, but their gains are partly attributable to how despairingly low their performance had been." He called the results "heartbreaking" overall.

Statisticians warn against citing these gains as evidence of efficacy or inadequacy in debates about particular school reforms. "It's not a causal model," said Mark Schneider, a vice president at the American Institutes of Research, who used to oversee the Education Department's research arm. "I get very leery when people say that 'This shows that X happened, DCPS is doing everything right and we should be learning, it's had spectacular gains since 2003' -- we really can't do that. Demographics in D.C. have changed. The city is a different city."

He noted that it's worth paying special attention to cities at the low end of the performance scale, as many of them are using much-touted strategies similar to those in districts that are having more success, like D.C. "Boston had strong teacher evaluations. Half of these school districts had as many reforms and innovations as DCPS, and they didn't move," he said.

Others took a more positive view. "Our gains as urban schools have been significantly larger than the nation itself over the last decade," said Mike Casserly, who oversees the Council of the Great City Schools and who is often credited with helping to get TUDA established. "The gains are evident however one looks at the data. We have made progress since 2003. And we've made progress since 2011 in eighth grade reading and fourth grade math."

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan offered some cautious optimism. "The 2013 TUDA results show student performance in large cities continues to both improve overall and that large-city schools nationwide are improving at a faster pace than the nation as a whole," he said. "While we still have a lot of work to do to close achievement gaps in our largest cities, this progress is encouraging."

But whatever the opinion on the larger trends, for some observers, the report sounds an alarm on behalf of certain cities, most notably Detroit. Students there reported eighth grade math scores seven points lower than their peers in 2011. "We need to declare an educational state of emergency in Detroit immediately," Smarick said. "It is the lowest-performing city in all four categories, and it got worse in three since the last administration, including a plummet in eighth grade math, dropping its proficiency rate to less than 5 percent. Less than 1 in 10 eighth graders read proficiently. Cleveland and Milwaukee are just barely better than Detroit -- they too need massive interventions right away."