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Tuesday, October 14, 2003

## Improved scores show Detroit schools on right track

By Michael Casserly / Special to The Detroit News

Detroit had some good news last week when the school system released the long-awaited results of its spring testing. Fourth and seventh graders -- the only two grades that the state currently tests -- were up substantially in reading on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests.

The percentage of fourth-graders who were proficient readers on the state exam increased from 33 percent to 55 percent since the 2002 testing. And the percentage of seventh-graders who met or exceeded state reading standards improved from 22 percent to 31 percent.

The fourth-grade gains were particularly impressive because they were faster than average gains statewide. It was a significant accomplishment for a school system that had seen its reading performance drop during the past several years.

The district has the right to crow a little about the results, but it can feel particularly good about how the results were achieved. They were not accidental. In fact, they were rather scientifically created and based on enough good research to suggest that there may be more improvements in the future.

Two years ago, district Chief Executive Ken Burnley asked the Council of the Great City Schools for something quite unique. He wanted to know what some of the fastest-improving urban school districts in the nation were doing that Detroit wasn't doing. Questions like this are asked frequently in the private sector, but they are all-too rare in public education.

The council, which was then studying what made some urban school systems more effective than others, benchmarked or compared the practices, policies and programs of the Detroit Public Schools with school districts like Houston, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., and others. Personnel from 15 cities across the country came to Detroit and worked pro bono to conduct the comparisons.

We looked at a series of conditions in Detroit that we found were key in the improvements of other cities: the political direction of the district's school board; the district's goal-setting process; its system for holding people accountable for results; its curriculum and professional development; its methods for ensuring reforms were implemented in the classrooms; its assessment system and use of data; and its focus on the city's lowest-performing schools.

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The teams of professionals from other cities worked to determine what Detroit needed to be doing to accelerate the chief executive's initial reforms and act more like cities that were seeing gains. The district's leadership then launched an effort to put into place as many of these reforms -- particularly in reading -- as quickly as possible. We don't know of another city that moved as fast as Detroit to implement so many reforms while it was still trying to fix operational and financial problems that many other cities don't have.

The results were clearly seen in the stronger reading scores. Much work remains, however. Math performance did not change much over the previous year and remains a serious concern. The district's professional development remains thin and often incoherent. And the district's data systems often do not yield the kind of information that teachers need to drive student performance.

But we are convinced that Detroit is on the right track. If its leaders pursues the next steps in the reform process as aggressively as they pursued the initial reforms, the city can expect to see achievement gains as far as the eye can see.

Detroit and its citizens have asked that the school district do a better job teaching its children. The reading scores indicate they are doing that. The district now needs the city's support and patience to finish the job. Detroit has a winning academic team. It needs to stay the course.

*Michael Casserly is executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban school systems based in Washington, D.C. Send letters to The News at 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226, (313) 222-6417 or [letters@detnews.com](mailto:letters@detnews.com).*

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