

NAEP Gains in D.C., Los Angeles Outpace Other Big Cities

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Reading and mathematics achievement on national tests stagnated in many big-city districts since 2011, but rose notably in a few, especially in the historically low-performing school systems in the District of Columbia and Los Angeles, where students demonstrated progress in both subjects.

In math, four out of 21 urban districts saw statistically significant gains in average scores in the 4th grade from 2011 to 2013, while three did so in 8th grade, according to data released today from the Trial Urban District Assessment, or TUDA, a specially collected and analyzed set of test results on district-level achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The District of Columbia system, with 45,000 students, was the only TUDA participant to make significant gains in math at both grade levels, while the 640,000-student Los Angeles district did so in 4th grade. Detroit was the only school system to lose major ground in math on TUDA, posting a six-point drop in average scores at the 8th grade level, compared with 2011.

The urban assessment program incorporates results for charter schools in a handful of TUDA districts, including Los Angeles, but not for the District of Columbia.

On the reading exam, five out of the 21 districts that participated in TUDA posted significant gains for at least one grade level from 2011 to 2013, an improvement from two years ago when the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., district was the only one to do so.

This year, both the District of Columbia and Los Angeles saw reading gains of statistical significance at both grade levels. Houston, which was awarded the Broad Prize for Urban Education earlier this year, was the one TUDA participant to fall back in reading achievement, with 4th graders there posting average scores that were five points lower than in 2011. (NAEP officials suggested that the drop in Houston could be attributed in

part to the district's higher rates of inclusion of students with disabilities and English-learners in the 2013 test administration.)

In the decade since TUDA results in reading and math were first reported, nine out of the 10 originally participating districts posted greater score gains than the nation in both subjects, Jack Buckley, the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the NAEP, said in a call with reporters.

"Our gains have been significantly larger than in the nation in the last decade and are evident however one looks at the data," said Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a policy and advocacy group that represents most of the nation's largest school systems. "We are encouraged, but not satisfied. These results give us confidence that urban education can, and is, being improved across the country."

But racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps remain stubbornly large in most urban districts, including those that demonstrated the most progress. In Los Angeles, for example, white 4th graders scored 38 points higher in reading than their Hispanic peers. In the District of Columbia, white 4th graders posted an average reading score that was 60 points higher than their African-American peers. And that gap was nearly identical to the one between the District of Columbia's 4th graders who qualify for free and reduced-price meals and those who do not: Low-income students had an average reading score that was 58 points lower than their more affluent peers.

In a written statement, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan singled out the performance in the District of Columbia, Los Angeles, and Fresno, Calif., a 73,000-student system where 8th graders posted significant progress in both math and reading.

"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," Mr. Duncan said. "While we still have a lot of work to do to close achievement gaps in our largest cities, this progress is encouraging. It means that in 2013, tens of thousands of additional students in large cities are proficient or above in math and reading than was the case four years earlier. In particular, three districts that pressed ahead with ambitious reforms—the D.C. Public Schools system, Los Angeles, and Fresno—made notable progress since 2011."

Explaining Gains

Among the most striking results this year came from the District of Columbia, where students in both tested grades showed statistically significant progress in math and reading—the only district to do so in 2013.

While the city's more recent improvements in academic achievement are often attributed in large part to its flourishing charter school sector, the TUDA results reflect only the performance of students in regular public schools.

"I think because DCPS has struggled for such a long time, some of our less-generous friends believe that any growth that happens in the city is only attributable to charters," said Kaya Henderson, the chancellor of the District of Columbia system. "We are equaling or exceeding charter growth in all areas. I think with parents making decisions about where they will entrust their children's education, these scores will show that DCPS is a good bet."

Overall, however, the District of Columbia continues to trail average scores for large cities (those with populations of more than 250,000) and the nation in both subjects and at both grade levels. The system's 4th graders posted an average scale score of 206 in reading this year, compared to 212 for large cities and 221 for the nation.

And the black-white achievement gaps are larger in the District of Columbia than any other TUDA participant. For example, white 4th graders in the district posted average math scores that were 59 points higher than their black peers.

Ms. Henderson said the city's vast socioeconomic divide, which breaks down largely along racial and ethnic lines, is an ongoing challenge for the school system. In recent years, the district's overall demographics have become whiter and more affluent, another shift that some say explains the district's improving academic achievement picture.

"We have those gaps and we will continue to work on shrinking them," she said, pointing to additional investments the district has been making in its 40 lowest-performing schools. "Is it stressful that white, wealthy students are growing [their achievement levels] at a faster pace than poor, African-American students? Absolutely, but poor, African-American students are also growing and that is a big part of the battle."

The District of Columbia also has been intensely focused on overhauling instruction and curricula and providing professional development to teachers and principals around the Common Core State Standards in math and English/language arts.

In Los Angeles, students posted significant progress in all categories but 8th grade math, signaling that the nation's second largest school system's focus on rolling out the new common standards and preparing teachers is paying dividends, said Mr. Casserly of the Council of the Great City Schools.

"It's not particularly mysterious what's been going on in L.A.," he said. "They've been going about the bread-and-butter work of implementing the common-core standards and modifying their curriculum and providing lots of professional development to get their teachers ready."

Mr. Casserly said the district's growth on NAEP is consistent with the growth it demonstrated earlier this year on California's state tests.

John Deasy, the superintendent in Los Angeles, said the district's progress is especially remarkable given the deep budget cuts school districts in California have endured in recent years.

"The work we have been doing in a punishing economic climate is absolute testimony that poverty is not destiny," Mr. Deasy said in an emailed statement to *Education Week*.

Special Populations

Driving down the numbers of students with disabilities and English-language learners who are excluded from taking the NAEP is a major goal for the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the national tests, and most of the big-city districts made progress in this arena in 2013.

The district with the highest rates of exclusion of such students was the Baltimore city school system. There, 14 percent of 4th graders who were identified as having disabilities were excluded from the reading test, compared to 2 percent for large cities and 2 percent for the nation. In the 8th grade, 15 percent of students with disabilities were excluded compared to 2 percent for large cities and 2 percent for the nation.

While rates of exclusion are decreasing nationally, Maryland's rates remain high, especially in reading. On the 2013 NAEP, the state excluded 62 percent of 4th graders with disabilities and English-language learners from taking the reading exam. Nationwide, the rate was 12 percent. Maryland education officials have said the state's exclusion rates are high mostly because of a "read-aloud accommodation" it provides to some students with disabilities and English-learners, which is not allowed on the NAEP exam.