

**Remarks by Michael Casserly, Executive Director  
Council of the Great City Schools  
At  
Press Conference on Urban NAEP 2009  
Reading Results  
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Atlanta**

Thank you. I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools. I am pleased to join this distinguished panel this morning.

Before I begin, I want to thank David Gordon and Cornelia Orr and their team at the National Assessment Governing Board; John Easton and his staff at the Institute of Education Sciences; and Stuart Kerachsky and Peggy Carr and their team at the National Center for Education Statistics.

It is an honor to work with you on this important project. Thank you for the great job you do.

I also want to take a second to summarize why we initiated the trial urban district assessment ten years ago this Fall.

1. We—as urban school systems—wanted to make it crystal clear that we were fully committed to the highest academic standards for our children.
2. We wanted to be able to compare ourselves individually and collectively with each other and the nation.
3. Finally, we wanted a common way to gauge our progress and evaluate our reforms in ways that the current 50 state assessment system does not allow.

I am repeating these reasons today because people often forget how serious we are about improving student achievement in our urban schools.

I want to call your attention to the Large City variable in the report being released today and make a number of quick points about the overall progress urban schools have made in reading.

First, the new data indicate that reading achievement among fourth grade students has climbed steadily since 2002.

The number of large-city students scoring at the proficient level or better on reading has increased by 35 percent among fourth graders since 2002.

Moreover, the percent of fourth graders scoring below the basic level dropped by 18 percent between 2002 and 2009.

Encouraging reading progress has also been made among 8<sup>th</sup> graders for the first time since 2007.

Second, the data are clear that we are closing in on the nation. Between 2002 and 2009, the large cities increased 8 scale score points at the fourth grade level on NAEP while the nation increased by three.

And the gap between the large cities and the nation narrowed by one-third between 2002 and 2009. We are now just ten scale score points away from national averages at both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels.

We are not only improving; we are catching up.

If you look solely at any two-year testing cycle in any individual city, subject or grade, the results are sometimes confusing. It can lead one to believe that there has been no progress. You see arrows going up, down, and sideways. But if you stand back from the individual trees, you will see a forest that is growing taller and getting stronger.

Two of our fastest growing trees are Atlanta and New York City, which are joining us today.

Atlanta, in fact, has shown the fastest reading gains of any city participating in NAEP—an eye-popping 14-point gain at both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels since 2002. Our organization is conducting a major study of TUDA districts, and it is clear that Atlanta's gains are real and substantial.

We have also conducted an extensive site visit, analyzed data, reviewed programs, and convened numerous focus groups. We conclude that Atlanta's unprecedented progress is due to its strong and sustained leadership, its emphasis on accountability for results, and its focused professional development in literacy. We are very proud of Beverly Hall and the work she has done.

New York City, as well, posted statistically significant gains in reading among 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Since 2002, the city has improved by a whopping 11 points, while the nation improved by only three points during the same period and New York State showed no improvement whatsoever.

In combination with NAEP math gains in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades since 2003, 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading improvements, and state test score trends in both reading and math, it is clear that our greatest city is making substantial headway.

I also want to single out Washington, DC, which posted the fastest fourth grade reading gains between 2007 and 2009. And is the only city to have posted statistically significant gains in both the fourth and eighth grades since the last testing.

We would also highlight Boston, Houston, and Los Angeles for their significant reading gains in this round of assessments.

Conversely, we are profoundly troubled by the scores in Detroit. That district's performance is an outrage and should not be allowed to stand.

Urban schools in general, however, are getting better. And we are determined to make them better still.

We are encouraged by the new results but we are not satisfied. We know we need to accelerate. And we know that our gaps are still too wide.

But these NAEP data give us the tools we need to ask hard questions about our instructional practices. We are conducting a ground-breaking study of these cities and their NAEP trends. And the results are giving us even greater confidence that urban education in this nation can be and is being improved.

And that's the point behind all the numbers. It is why we volunteered in the first place. So we could tell what was working and what wasn't. So we could raise the quality of public education in our Great Cities. So we could give our kids—the kids that America too often overlooks—a shot at the American dream.

We know that the great civil rights battles that were fought here in Atlanta were not fought over access to mediocrity. They were fought over access to excellence. Our goal is to deliver it. And NAEP is helping us do that.

Thank you.