

For a district of more than a million children, we've made incredible gains

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There's a lot to dig into in New York City's just-received report card on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and there's no doubt that people will debate what it all means. As someone with perspective on how large cities have performed over the years, I'm most struck that New York City schools have held up their gains since 2003, in spite of substantial budget cuts and the fact that many families have struggled through a terrible recession.

Most important: New York City's public schools remained steady at relatively high levels of performance. A massive new study of NAEP data conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools and the American Institutes for Research showed that city fourth-graders score significantly higher in reading and math than one might have predicted statistically from the high numbers of poor, limited-English-proficient and disabled students here. This was also true of eighth-graders in math.

In fact, only five major city school systems across the country — Austin, Tex.; Boston; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; Houston, and Miami-Dade County — were beating the odds on behalf of their children in both grades and subjects tested. In other words, New York City schools were overcoming the challenges of poverty, language, disability, race and home resources to a far greater extent than most big city school systems across the nation.

This does not mean that the school district doesn't have more work to do. But it does indicate that this reform-minded school system is adding educational value for its students to a degree that most others are not.

Achievement gains are harder to come by as performance rises, and future progress will depend on the city's ability to boost overall instructional quality. That difficult task will rest on how well the Education Department implements the new common core standards that promise to significantly enhance the academic rigor seen in American classrooms.

There is considerable optimism about these standards in New York City, and the schools have had a faster start in putting them in place than most cities. For the last two years, the city has been working toward adopting higher learning standards for children. In 2010, it began introducing principals to the common core standards even before New York State decided officially to adopt these tougher expectations.

This year, every teacher in the city — from pre-K through 12th grade — is engaged in training and preparation to teach this new, rigorous curriculum, and focus especially on literacy skills students need for success in college and careers. In September, [Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott](#) instructed schools to engage every student in a common core-aligned project in literacy and math throughout the year.

The new standards are a key part of improving reading skills in middle school, and eighth grade in particular: They place a much greater emphasis on nonfiction texts, academic language and the kinds of critical thinking and writing that are required in high school and college.

Some of the press coverage this year on NAEP will focus on the fact that few districts made large gains between 2009 and 2011. But the significant progress that New York and other major city school systems have made since first taking the tests in 2002 and 2003 — and the aggressiveness of this city in putting into place much more rigorous standards — will serve the city's children well for many years to come. At that point, no one will remember that NAEP scores in the city leveled off for one testing cycle, while [Mayor Bloomberg](#) put in place standards all city students need for a brighter future.

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