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Urban Students Improve in Math, Reading

Large cities are making progress at a faster pace than the nation as a whole

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Although large cities are improving as a whole on national tests, some urban districts still fall behind the average.

Although students in some of the country's biggest cities are making strides in math and reading scores, they still often fall below average compared to students in other large cities and the nation as a whole, according to a new report.

Overall, fourth- and eighth-graders in U.S. cities with at least 250,000 people, have improved at a faster pace than the national average, according to a report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. But of the 21 urban districts that participated in NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment, most still scored lower than the average scores for their home states as a whole.

During the last 10 years, however, the score gap between large cities and the nation narrowed by 32 percent in fourth grade reading and 34 percent in eighth grade reading. The gains in math scores were even greater, with urban students narrowing the gap by 38 percent in fourth grade math and 43 percent in eighth grade math.

"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," said Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in a statement. "While we still have a lot of work to do to close achievement gaps in our largest cities, this progress is encouraging."

Most urban districts that participated in the first reading or math assessments in 2002 and 2003, respectively, scored higher in 2013, and none scored lower than the first year they participated in the testing.

According to the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP, about 30 percent of students in America, or 15 million individuals, attend schools in urban districts.

"Every district has its own story, but as a whole over the last 10 years all of the districts are improving," said David Driscoll, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, in a statement. "In general, though, these scores are too low, and that should concern everyone. TUDA matters because these school systems need our attention more than ever before."

In the long-term, several of the districts have made gains in both mathematics and reading. In fourth grade mathematics, for example, six districts – Atlanta, Boston, the District of Columbia, Chicago, San Diego and Los Angeles – made score gains significantly higher than the national average since 2003. Of those six, the District of Columbia, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago and San Diego also made score gains significantly higher than the national average.

Similar score gains were seen in eighth grade mathematics since 2003, and in fourth grade reading since 2003.

Likewise, more students in large cities in both grades and both subjects are scoring at or above proficient. In 2003, 20 percent of fourth graders scored at or above proficient in math, compared to 33 percent in 2013. The gains were smaller in reading for both grades, but still statistically significant.

"Our gains over this last decade are statistically significant and educationally significant – maybe even politically significant," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, in a call with reporters. "In general, we are encouraged by the new results, but we are not satisfied with them. We know we need to accelerate. And we know that our gaps are still too wide."

Since 2011, 10 districts also made significantly higher gains than the nation and the large city average in some grades and subjects.

The District of Columbia was the only district that made gains in all grade and subject combinations since 2011. And for fourth grade math and eighth grade reading, those gains were significantly higher than score gains in both the nation and large cities overall. The District of Columbia also had some of the largest gains in fourth and eighth grade math, as well as fourth grade reading, since 2003.

On the other hand, Cleveland was the lowest-scoring district and had the smallest gains in math at both grade levels since 2003, and actually had significant score decreases in both fourth and eighth grade reading.

"These results show incremental progress despite the challenges urban schools face, but poverty and economic inequality...will stymie long-term gains unless policymakers face these issues head-on," said American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, in a statement. "Some would use [this data] to double down on our country's testing fixation, which more and more is not simply taking the joy out of schools but is not even measuring the skills and knowledge necessary for students to be prepared for the 21st century."

Also of note was the fact that several districts also saw improvements for individual student groups since 2011. In Los Angeles, for example, all students improved in fourth grade mathematics. But a closer look shows that all student groups – including white, African-American and Hispanic students, as well as those eligible for free or reduced lunches – had score gains. The same situation was true for students in the District of Columbia for eighth grade reading.

Several other districts, including Atlanta, Chicago, Jefferson County, Fresno, Dallas and Baltimore City, had also had improvements for some grade and subject combinations.

"We have a long way to go," Casserly said. "But inertia in urban public education has ended. And it has been replaced by progress."

