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Urban schools are winning

Here's what the political defund narrative gets wrong about big-city schools.

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Dallas ISD Superintendent Stephanie S. Elizalde speaks to members of the media during the first day of school at Albert C. Black STEAM Academy on Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2025, in Dallas. Chitose Suzuki / Staff Photographer

In its first six months, the new Trump administration has pursued a sweeping education agenda that includes eliminating the U.S. Department of Education, cutting federal school aid, promoting school choice, proposing state block grants and eliminating so-called woke ideology. Unfortunately, this agenda is likely to fall disproportionately on the nation's big city public schools precisely when the investments the nation has made in them have begun to pay off.

The fact is that student achievement gains in urban schools directly contradict the narrative of broad-based mismanagement, waste, fraud and neglect that some are using to justify budget cutbacks, argue for vouchers and block-grant otherwise targeted aid.

It is time for some myth-busting.

While it is certainly true that urban school districts have somewhat higher per pupil expenditures than others, the data reveal another truth: They are making significant progress — progress, in fact, that is outstripping the nation at large.

In fourth grade, for instance, large-city schools reduced the reading gap with the nation from 14.7 points on a 500-point scale in 2003 to 5.8 points in 2024. That means large-city schools closed 60.5% of the gap. For math, the gap went from 10 points to 6.3, or 37%.

At the eighth-grade level, the gaps narrowed by 65.6% in reading and 54.2% in math. The large-city schools are also producing academic results several times greater than one would expect statistically from their unusually high poverty rates.

This progress in urban education is showing up not only on the Nation's Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP, but on other key performance indicators as well, including four-year graduation rates, ninth grade core-course passing rates, numbers of students who have successfully completed Algebra I by the end of ninth grade, and numbers of students taking one or more Advanced Placement courses and scoring three or more on the exams.

Extra spending well used — not spending cuts — has achieved results.

This progress was not random. It was due to smarter strategies, including targeted investments in consistent academically focused leadership, rigorous standards, high-quality and aligned curricular materials, better instruction, coherent professional development and using data to track progress. Urban school leaders have learned what to do by studying the practices of “high flyers” and the districts showing unusual progress. And knowing what works bodes well for future growth.

The progress of Dallas ISD under current and former superintendents Stephanie Elizalde, Michael Hinojosa and Mike Miles is a good example. Data on NAEP show that Dallas has

improved more than the national average between 2019 and 2024 in math and reading in every grade tested, recovering all its losses during the pandemic. You can see similar progress in Los Angeles, Philadelphia and other cities. In Los Angeles, for instance, the district has not only recovered what it lost but is nominally ahead of where it was before the pandemic in fourth grade reading and math.

We have also learned what does not work in our urban schools: low standards, fragmented curriculum, fractured professional development, endless remedial instruction, scattershot community engagement and leadership that does not prioritize student achievement. Urban educators have worked hard to reduce these ineffective practices.

Of course, the road to recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is a long one. But these new data should reassure the public that our urban schools can and will rebound. According to NAEP and the Education Recovery Scorecard, a collection of data from more than 30 states assembled by researchers at Stanford and Harvard, signs of renewal emerged in 2023 and 2024. State test results for 2025 also point significantly upward.

The implication is clear: Congress, states and the public should firmly resist attempts to pull the financial rug from underneath these schools now that they are making the progress that the public has long demanded.

Think again about our urban public schools. Yes, they face greater challenges than other schools in other areas. Yes, they still have considerable work to do. But their leaders have dedicated themselves to long-term improvement, and the data show that they are making significant headway on that goal. Increasingly, they are engines of upward mobility, demonstrating their ability to mitigate the effects of poverty and add value to the lives of their students. If policymakers insist on cutting budgets and undermining improvements, then they should know that they will have wrecked one of the great comeback stories in American education.

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