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Opinion

Yes, problems persist, but urban public education is getting better all the time

The data show that not only have the nation's large city schools — including Philadelphia — made progress, but their gains are larger between 2003 and 2024 than schools in the nation at large.

Alejandra Rodriguez, 9, of Key Largo, Fla., watches a demonstration in March in support of the U.S. Department of Education, outside the agency's headquarters in Washington.Jacquelyn Martin / AP

by Michael Casserly, For The Inquirer

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Is urban public education getting any better, especially after all the reforms, the foundation help, millions of dollars in federal aid, and stiff public pressure? Do our schools add value to the lives of our students, or do they simply mirror — maybe even perpetuate — the inequalities in American society? Are they the "great equalizer" that the 19th-century reformer Horace Mann envisioned for public education?

These are not only important questions, but now is the right time to answer them, when so much of our national life, including public education, is being turned upside down. The answers, in fact, might surprise a lot of people.

First, have urban public schools improved? The best evidence is found in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Nation's Report Card. The data show that not only have the nation's large city schools — including Philadelphia — made progress, but their gains are larger between 2003 and 2024 than schools in the nation at large. In fact, our urban schools have narrowed the gap with the nation by between 65% and 37%, depending on grade and subject, over that period.

Second, do urban schools add any value for our young people, or do we simply reflect the poverty and other barriers most of our students grow up with? Here, the Nation's Report Card shows that the large city schools are producing academic results several times greater than one would expect statistically based on family income and other factors. In other words, they are mitigating the effects of poverty, language, and disabilities better than the average public school.

Third, the progress one is seeing extends beyond test scores. You can see it on state assessments, four-year graduation rates, ninth-grade core-course passing rates, number of students successfully completing Algebra I by the end of ninth grade, and number of students taking one or more Advanced Placement courses and passing the exams. For instance, the percentage of urban students scoring three or higher, a passing grade, on the rigorous College Board Advanced Placement exams has increased from 38% in 2016 to 51% in 2020.

In short, the data on urban schools contradict the reigning pessimism and instead tell a story of steady improvement.

Take the Philadelphia School District under the leadership of Superintendent Tony B. Watlington Sr. and board president Reginald L. Streater. Data on the Nation's Report Card show the district has recovered more rapidly from the pandemic than the national average. Philly schools have also rebounded even more than a typical large city school system

between 2019 and 2024 in math and reading. In fact, only one other major city school district has recovered more than Philadelphia in eighth-grade math.

You can see gains as well in Los Angeles, the District of Columbia, Miami, Dallas, Detroit, Jackson, Miss., Houston, Chicago, and many other cities. To be sure, the pandemic was a setback for the nation's public schools, but even here, urban schools' performance fell off less significantly than the nation, except in fourth-grade math. The job is not yet finished, but the progress is unmistakable.

The improvement in the Philadelphia school system and urban districts everywhere is not by accident, nor is it the result of demographic changes. It is because urban school leaders made it happen. The Council of the Great City Schools, whose members will convene next month in Philadelphia for the first time since 1968, has been studying for years, largely outside the public's gaze, why some urban school systems improve and others do not, and we have been applying those lessons to urban systems wherever possible.

We have learned that large city school districts improve when their leadership regularly attends to student achievement over an extended period, when their academic program is grounded in the standards, the curriculum is rigorous and coherent, and when teaching is consistently on grade level.

Districts also do better when they continuously support teachers in providing ever stronger instruction, when there is accountability for results, when they use data to improve rather than just monitor the status quo, and when they use well-evaluated interventions for schools and students if they start to slip behind.

We have learned, moreover, that urban systems will struggle academically when their leadership pays more attention to operations and adult issues than to how their students are doing, when the instructional program is low-quality and fractured, when the districts have little way to bolster the quality of their people, when no one is accountable for what happens, when they have data but don't use it, or when they let students fall behind without help.

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Doing what works and avoiding what doesn't sounds simple. Yet, it is anything but in systems with tens of thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of students, millions of moving parts, and a rightfully demanding public.

The important point is that understanding how to spur improvement bodes well for continued progress in the future. In the meantime, the public should be vigilant about

attempts to weaken their public schools. And policymakers in Harrisburg should be confident their investments in Philadelphia schools are paying off.

As the new school year begins, urban public education is starting to look increasingly like the great equalizer Mann envisioned. Urban school systems like Philadelphia's are adding value rather than perpetuating inequality. They are forces for upward mobility. And they are improving just as the public wants and deserves. It is the makings of a great comeback story — if we continue to support it.

Michael Casserly is a strategic adviser for the Council of the Great City Schools, was its executive director for almost 30 years, and is the author of "The Enduring Promise of America's Great City Schools," published by Harvard Education Press.