

City schoolkids are gaining – without a doubt

The nation's big-city public school systems have posted significant gains in math achievement over the last several years. That's a fact.

But most people don't know it because many media outlets focus solely on year-over-year test results. This misses the larger trends building in big-city school systems nationally.

The gains in question are seen on the latest numbers released from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card. The federal government publishes fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP scores every other year, and this year marked the first time since 2003 that meaningful trends were apparent.

We should be heartened by what these trends tell us. They tell us that the number of big-city fourth-graders scoring at or above proficient levels in math increased by 45% since 2003, and the number of eighth-graders scoring in this range increased by 50%. What's more, cities are catching up with the nation, having narrowed the gap with the rest of the country by 20% in the last six years among both fourth and eighth-graders.

If one looks solely at any two-year testing cycle, city, subject or grade, it can lead to the conclusion that there has been no headway anywhere.

The New York City school system is a case in point. Between 2007 and 2009, the city schools moved one scale-score point upward among the fourth-grade sample and three points upward in the eighth-grade sample. These gains are certainly better than declines by those same amounts and might be statistically significant if the sample were a slightly different size – but one might conclude from the numbers that New York City is only taking baby steps.

The truth over the longer trendline is that the city can boast of meaningful improvements in

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both grades since 2003 – with an increase in the number of fourth-graders scoring at or above proficient in math by 67% over the last six years, and a rise in the number of eighth-graders at this level by 30% over the same period. In fact, New York City has shown statistically significant progress across nearly all student groups since 2003.

At the same time, the city has decreased the numbers of fourth-graders scoring below basic levels of attainment by 36% and among eighth graders by 13%. And the city has narrowed gaps with the state and is closing in on national averages. In fact, students in New

York City, on balance, are less than a year's worth of learning (10 scale score points on NAEP) away from catching national averages.

We know that if you look at the New York City schools or any urban school district, you see a jumbled picture from one testing cycle to another. Trends go up, down and sideways. But if you stand back from the trees, you see a forest that is growing taller and stronger. Urban public education is improving, including – especially – in New York City.

Behind these gains, all across the country, are the same strategies: strong leadership, high expectations, coherent professional development and an exacting use of student achievement data to drive reform.

If the public fails to understand that urban public schools and New York City are heading in the right direction, it might conclude that we – the nation's big-city school systems – aren't worth saving. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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New test results show clear trends