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Real progress in Atlanta's public schools

By Michael Casserly

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Atlanta's public schools have made the fastest reading gains of any major city school district in the country. They also have made significant progress in math. Those are the facts.

Between 2002 and 2009, Atlanta's fourth- and eighth-graders increased their reading scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress — the "Nation's Report Card" — by 14 points.

The next fastest-improving city school systems, the District of Columbia and New York, saw their fourth-graders gaining 12 and 11 points, respectively. No other city's eighth-graders improved their reading skills by more than seven points.

During the same period, the nation's fourth-graders have seen only a three-point increase and eighth-graders have seen no progress at all. Georgia's fourth-grade performance, which includes Atlanta's, increased by only three points and its eighth-graders saw no statistically significant gains.

Student achievement in Atlanta Public Schools continues to fall below Georgia averages, but the district has sliced the difference between itself and the state by more than half in that seven-year period at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels. Those are the numbers behind the facts.

Earlier this year, a team of national reading, math and science experts who have examined instructional programs in scores of cities nationwide came into Atlanta to investigate the reasons behind the district's gains, especially in reading.

The results of the examination — based on extensive interviews, data analysis and document review — attributed the improvements to a number of organizational and instructional factors: strong community support; an increasingly cohesive school board; a visionary and skilled superintendent; a clearly articulated strategy for reform that was sustained over a prolonged period; a strong mechanism for holding adults accountable for student results; good data with which to monitor progress and inform classroom practice; and other factors.

The team was also able to determine why the district's gains were stronger in reading than they were in math — an unusual pattern compared with other city school systems.

In this case, the district's decade-long literacy initiative, the school system's unusual organizational structure that brought focused technical assistance and coaching into the schools, a strong writing program, and a nearly universal professional development initiative worked in tandem to produce reading gains that far outstrip what other cities have seen.

Many of these same overall patterns of achievement gains are mirrored on the state tests, but the advantage of having the district participating in the national assessment is that it provides an independent analysis of school system progress that cannot be manipulated or altered.

Administration and scoring of the National Assessment of Educational Progress is done by a third party federal contractor. School district staff members do not handle test booklets or answer sheets. That's also a fact.

It has been suggested that the national assessment results for Atlanta are not valid because the sample changed from 2002 to 2009.

But it changed in the same way that a national poll of public opinion changed in not telephoning the same 1,000 people each time we are interested in tracking what people think about things. The samples are representative, and suggestions that they are not or that changes in them were somehow responsible for the improvements seen in the school district is both erroneous and irresponsible.

There is also nothing in the preliminary investigations of cheating at individual schools to suggest that districtwide results on either the national or the state assessments should be called into question.

Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that district leadership either prompted any alterations or created a culture in which such actions were encouraged.

The leadership of the Atlanta Public Schools has made it repeatedly and publicly clear that any alterations of state test scores at individual schools will result in severe consequences.

In the meantime, Atlanta should be confident that its school system, while continuing to need improvement, has made real and sizable gains for its children of which the citizenry can be justifiably proud.

And while everyone is entitled to their own opinions, no one is entitled to their own facts.

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