

## Charlotte Observer

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is a proven leader

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While Charlotte's school children are on spring break this week, parents might want to take a moment now that the brutal winter has come to an end to reflect on the increasingly sunny picture of public education in their city. Recent news stories about Charlotte's public schools tell of falling dropout rates, decreasing crime and new community investments in local schools. The district also boasts some of the highest levels of student achievement among big city school systems across the country.

In fact, the latest results of the rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – the Nation's Report Card – once again showed Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools at the head of the pack among major school systems nationwide. At both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, more students scored at or above proficient in reading and math in Charlotte than across the state, the nation and other large cities.

Students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch scored higher, on average, than their counterparts in other large cities and across the state and nation in fourth-grade reading and math, and African American students in Charlotte outscored their counterparts in reading and math at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels.

Compared to other big city school districts across the nation, Charlotte also has a higher percentage of English language learners scoring at or above proficient in these core subjects, and a lower percentage scoring below basic in fourth- and eighth- grade math and eighth-grade reading.

In fact, as the overall numbers of Charlotte's students scoring at or above proficient levels has risen, the numbers performing below basic levels of attainment has dropped significantly across the board.

What's more, 10 years of NAEP data show that Charlotte can not only sustain this high level of academic achievement, but it can build upon it as well. Since CMS started administering the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment in 2003, it has grown five points in fourth-grade math, 10 points in eighth-grade math, seven points in fourth-grade reading, and four points in eighth-grade reading – growth that either meets or exceeds the gains of other school districts across the country.

Of course, CMS still has much work to do. While average scale scores have risen among nearly all student groups over the past decade, the achievement gaps between African American and white students, ELLs and native speakers, and advantaged and disadvantaged students remain large – an enduring challenge Charlotte shares with schools across the country.

In response, the school system is moving aggressively to narrow these disparities and to boost academic attainment for all students. It has established a bold community-outreach plan, initiated efforts to boost graduation rates – already at an all-time high, pursued innovative strategies to turn around low-performing schools, increased participation in advanced placement courses, and improved services.

Sometimes members of the community look longingly at reforms in other major cities and ask why Charlotte can't be like them. Charlotte can certainly learn from other communities, but the truth is that those cities are often looking at Charlotte and wishing they could be more like you.

As it works to further improve the quality of instruction and implement higher college and career-ready standards, CMS can certainly learn from the successes and challenges faced by other school districts. But with its record of high achievement and sustained growth, and with school leadership, staff, principals, and teachers that are the envy of school systems large and small across the country, the district is in a strong position to maintain its forward momentum.

So as spring brings an end to the dark, cold days of winter, it is a good time to refresh some of the outdated notions of big city public schools. For Charlotte's school children, the future is certainly looking brighter.

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