



NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly in-depth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
Published by the NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS PANEL

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URBAN STUDENTS IMPROVE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT ON STATE TESTS

New Study from Council of the Great City Schools Documents Surprising Gains

A new study released in Washington May 22 shows surprising evidence that improvements in student achievement are being made among urban students many consider least likely to succeed. The central purpose of the education reform movement has become the general improvement of student achievement. To realize the hope that "all students can achieve to high standards," however, entails making significant improvements among poor and minority urban students – the very students thought to be performing at the lowest levels. Leaders of the nation's largest urban school districts have been reviewing state data that show these students are not only making significant academic progress, but in some cases are improving faster than the state average.

Beating the Odds is the first-ever national study of inner-city students' performance on tests of the academic goals set by states. This *NEGP Monthly* reports on the experiences of **Baltimore, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), and Houston** among 55 member cities whose student performance on state assessment systems in 35 states were studied by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS). Schools and districts each operate in the context of their state's accountability system, which sets standards for student achievement and usually determines rewards and interventions for given levels of performance. Because state standards and tests vary, test results can be compared to those of other districts within a state but not to those of districts in other states. To confirm the reliability of trends shown on these varying state tests, the Goals Panel, like the emerging Elementary and Secondary Education Act and President Bush's initiative to *Leave No Child Behind*, rely on other national (National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP) and international (Third International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS) assessments.

The report's authors conclude that inner-city students are making "meaningful gains" on math scores. For example, more than



90 percent of the Great City School districts increased their scores in more than half the grades tested for math on their state assessment. In 47 percent of the districts, the increase in math scores occurred at a faster rate than the statewide average. Results for reading are more mixed, although, for the most part, they too show gains on state assessments.

Less than 10 years ago, improving academic achievement was not even among the top five priorities of urban district leaders, according to a survey by CGCS in 1992. Like many others at the time, they were more interested in social supports for students. Three years later, another survey found that academic performance and student achievement were the top priorities, according to Michael Casserly, executive director of CGCS and author of the new report.

Intensive efforts in the past few years helped urban students make considerable progress in meeting state standards. Casserly and his researchers acknowledge the limitations of existing data, but for the most part they do allow district and grade level scores to be tabulated, as well as racial/ethnic gaps in student scores on state assessments. The results are encouraging, Casserly says, “but we still have a lot of work to do.”

The gains in math were corroborated by available national data. The Council’s own study of the ACT college admission test results in the cities and the National Assessment of Educational Progress math scores for disadvantaged urban school populations show similar improvements.

Four urban districts – Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Fort Worth, Houston, and Miami-Dade – narrowed the achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups in all or almost all grades tested by the state.

These gains occurred despite contexts that often are used as excuses for low performance. Three of five students in the Council’s districts are low income, compared to two in five nationwide. The urban districts enroll almost three times as many children from homes where English is not the first language (22 percent compared to 8 percent). Seven of 10 students in the Council’s districts are minority (African American or Hispanic) compared to one-third (32 percent) nationwide.

Casserly also notes that while urban districts “are doing triple time” to catch up, per pupil expenditures are not keeping pace. The per pupil expenditure in the Council’s districts is at or just below the national average. State spending on the urban districts has declined slightly since 1995-96, and the percentage of the Council’s districts with an average per pupil current expenditure lower than that of their respective state grew from 33 percent to 52 percent in 1998-99.

With large percentages of low-income and/or minority students, the Council’s districts are challenged, more than other districts, to compensate for the lack of educational resources in students’ homes. *Beating the Odds* cites the recent data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study-Repeat (TIMSS-R) on home resources in the benchmark districts and states that participated. School districts such as Naperville and those in the First in the World Consortium, both in the Chicago area, were among the highest performing and reported high levels of home educational resources. Conversely, the four urban districts participating in TIMSS had the lowest relative math performance among the districts—and the lowest percentage of students with high home resources.



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Specific Results

Data from state assessments provide hopeful details about the progress being made in many large city systems across the country. Eight school systems, for example, achieved average math scores in at least half of the grades tested that were the same as or higher than the average scores within their states. Three of the urban districts – Albuquerque, Hillsborough (FL) and San Francisco – recorded higher scores than the statewide average in math in **all** grades tested.

In reading, 79 percent of all the fourth grades tested in the Council's schools and 60 percent of all 8th grades tested showed gains on their state reading tests. The students in half or more of the grades tested in 17 urban districts improved their reading scores faster than the state average.

However, progress in reading has been slower than in math. For example, 21 percent of the grades tested showed declines in reading, compared to 11 percent in math. Only five major cities—Albuquerque, Hillsborough County (FL), Portland (OR), San Diego, and San Francisco—reported that their reading scores in half or more of the grades tested were the same or higher than the average for their respective states

The Council's districts generally reduced the achievement gaps between racial subgroups. In states where test data were disaggregated and reported, the math achievement gaps between white and black students narrowed in 49 percent of the grades tested; they narrowed between white and Hispanic students in 56 percent of the grades. Fewer data are available for reading, but based on information from 27 of the Council's districts, the reading gaps between white and black students were reduced in 65 percent of the grades tested, while the gaps between white and Hispanic students were reduced in 68 percent of the grades tested.

What Contributes to Improvement?

Evidence does not yet permit drawing causal relationships between specific actions or programs and improved performance of urban students. What may work in one district might not be suitable for another. However, Casserley notes an emerging consensus about what is required to achieve broad academic gains in urban districts.

Chief among them is an effort to provide consistency and stability of policies at all levels. Turning failing schools around requires a long-term investment that must allow large, urban districts to invest in building capacity around known goals. In addition



to their work on standards, all states have or are developing criteria to identify consistently failing schools, interventions to help them, and measurements of their progress. Similarly, programs such as the Eisenhower grants offer focused professional development oriented to state standards. Some states, such as North Carolina, Maryland, and Texas, identify high-poverty, high-performing schools and use them as examples to guide and motivate less successful schools and districts.

Maryland state officials are using data from the state's accountability system – the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program – to develop policies aimed at improving minority performance. The Maryland state department of education adopted advisory council recommendations to raise minority achievement. In Maryland, minority students' performance is taken into consideration when determining a school's academic progress; recognition and rewards are based on disaggregated performance data; the Department's discretionary resources are supporting district programs that close achievement gaps; and the Department established a program to identify and distribute information about exemplary strategies for raising minority achievement. The Department also is studying the relationships between poverty and academic performance in terms of school organization, use of funds, access to technology, and teacher preparation and experience.

Beating the Odds discusses many of the district policies that make up a new consensus on how to go to scale with successful reforms in urban districts. With so many student and system needs, urban districts have tended to try to do too much. The report says the districts must focus upon raising student achievement as their primary goal, using high academic standards to transcend the individual interests of various groups within the systems.

A second necessary step is to strengthen supports for teachers and leaders. This means stabilizing urban district leadership. Casserly points out that the only districts that have made substantial progress in recent years have had the same leadership over a long period of time. Support also means deep learning for teachers, collaboration with higher education on adequate preparation of teachers for urban districts, well-thought-out rewards for improving student achievement, and better training for administrators.

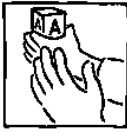
The districts also need to: develop school climates conducive to learning through smaller learning communities and better ties to communities, establish stronger accountability for performance, increase investments and efficiencies, and build on what works.

Jennifer O'Day of the University of Wisconsin and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education says the good news about failing schools "is that we've got their attention, and they are working harder." What policymakers need to monitor, however, is what they are working harder at and what they are valuing, she adds. "They may have the will, but the will to do what?" Her research and that of others shows that there is a great deal of emphasis on test scores, less emphasis on day-to-day achievement. Also, states' use of probation for failing schools has limited results. "Probation is demoralizing," she said at a briefing on Capitol Hill on CPRE research, "and getting off probation becomes an all-consuming goal to the point that teachers and administrators focus mostly on the borderline students who can boost a school's scores."

Policies also may need to differentiate the types of interventions needed in low-performing schools, according to O'Day. She said the research points to a school needing to have some capacity for change before it can accept the challenge of interventions. This is because teachers most in need of development are the least likely to see the necessity to change. Leaders of low-performing schools have weak theories of action and do not know how to leverage change. And low-capacity



THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS



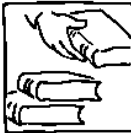
Goal 1: Ready to Learn



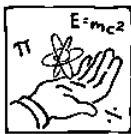
Goal 2: School Completion



Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship



Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development



Goal 5: Mathematics and Science



Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning



Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools



Goal 8: Parental Participation

schools therefore have considerable problems implementing improvement plans. The interventions ought to be tailored to the level of capacity existing within schools.

While most current state and district policies and policy talk assume the problem of failure lies in the school, more attention needs to be paid to the systems' capacities and the barriers created by systems. *Beating the Odds* indicates that some urban districts are making such academic progress system-wide and improving faster than other types of districts in their states.

School District Efforts

'Several urban districts that show steady progress on improving student achievement, especially in math, are supported by long-term state policies, including state-developed assessment systems. Thirteen states also volunteered to participate in TIMSS-R, and thus have an additional check on their standards and achievement that is benchmarked to expectations that go beyond states' own efforts. Even though these states and urban districts have better records than others, the states place only in the middle of achievement levels when compared to the countries participating in TIMSS. All are now considering ratcheting up their current standards.

Baltimore students improved their math and reading scores in every grade tested by the state. This is good news for a district that has gone through state-negotiated reorganization and is being closely monitored by state officials. A tool for state policy is the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program, developed with the help of instructional experts and teachers more than a decade ago and based on the Maryland Learning Outcomes. The state also has adopted high school exit exams (but delayed associating consequences until state financial support is sufficient) and recently added norm-referenced tests of students. Because of the large number of schools in Baltimore not meeting state standards, the state strategy, based on agreements among state education officials, the legislature, and Baltimore leaders, focused initially on reshaping the organization and expectations for the whole district. According to State Superintendent Nancy Grasmick, state policy is now also turning toward greater attention to the instructional dynamics within classrooms. As she told the CPRE forum on Capitol Hill, state experts are working with researchers to delineate teacher behaviors that lead to improved student learning.

Under stable leadership and a long-term commitment from the mayor, who now has authority over the schools, the **Boston** public schools also have seen their students improve their math and reading scores in every grade tested by the state. Working with a



RESOURCES

Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments, Council of the Great City Schools, Michael Casserly, with researchers Sharon Lewis, Jack Jepson, and Nicole Baker; 1301 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20004; 202/393-2427; www.cgcs.org The Council also recently published reports on urban student performance on ACT, SAT I, Stanford Achievement Tests, and Advanced Placement exams.

Raising Achievement and Reducing Gaps: Reporting Progress Toward Goals for Academic Achievement, Paul E. Barton. A 2001 Publication of the National Education Goals Panel. Copies of the report may be obtained on the web at www.negp.gov or by calling 202-724-0015

comprehensive reform plan focused on improving teaching and learning so all students achieve at high levels, the district's leadership has focused on changing the structure of the district to focus on student performance, providing safe and supportive environments for learning, and engaging parents and the community in school improvement. A Center for Leadership Development provides continuous, high-quality professional development to support the goals. With a commitment to all students able to read by the third grade, the district shifted resources to full-day kindergartens and a community-based literacy effort that helps families support their children's learning. Despite some controversy, the state has continued to refine its high-stakes testing program, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Using the expertise of WestEd, the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission analyzed the effect of MCAS on changing curriculum, instruction, assessment, and allocation of resources within schools. The analysis found that because of MCAS, schools and districts have evidence about where local curricula fail to match state frameworks. Teachers are emphasizing writing more, and more than 70 percent of the teachers surveyed said that MCAS data had influenced their teaching.

The **Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC)** schools improved in reading and math scores on the North Carolina End-of-Grade Tests in grades 3-8. In fact, the improvements shown in reading and math by the district's students were faster (between 1997 and 2000) than those of the state in four of the six grades tested. The district began adopting higher standards even before state efforts were fully implemented. It also has focused on reducing the racial gap in test scores, setting high standards for all. Its goals for this year, for example, include reducing the disparity based on race, gender, and socio-economic status to no more than 10 percentage points on all academic measures. It keeps an Equity and Student Success reporting system that tracks many indicators of closing the racial gap including enrollment in advanced courses, workforce development, and provision of resources as well as disaggregated student achievement data. The state level in North Carolina has developed consistent leadership through its assessment system, a focus on support for low-performing schools, and strong professional development opportunities. State assistance teams, for example, have worked with a few schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg that were low-performing. The recent cancellation of some testing components in North Carolina does not affect the state's accountability model, according to state department officials.

Houston improved its reading and math scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills between 1994 and 2000 in grades 3-8 and grade 10. In reading, the gains were faster than the state average gains in all grades tested; in math, the gains



What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Goals Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
- Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
- Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, or e-mail, or by Internet.

were faster in six of the seven grades tested. Also, the Houston public schools narrowed racial/ethnic achievement gaps substantially at each grade level. The district has aligned its goals, curriculum, and assessment and invested heavily in professional development, especially for its early reading initiative and its emphasis on math and science instruction through an Urban Systemic Initiatives grant from the National Science Foundation. All 5,500 elementary teachers, for example, are participating in 100 hours of professional development in science, math, and technology; and a cadre of more than 400 elementary teachers are receiving 200 hours of instruction. Also, Rice University is collaborating with the district on a district-wide Algebra Initiative. The project eventually will involve all K-8 teachers through professional development for lead teachers in each school and redesigned curriculum based on national math standards. Texas state policy not only requires data from TAAS to be disaggregated, but also requires schools to make progress on each sub-group of students. Studies commissioned by the National Education Goals Panel document long-term efforts to improve student achievement in Texas (and North Carolina), backed by consistent support from the business community.