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EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's

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NATION'S REPORT CARD: Reading Scores Flat for Fourth Graders; Eighth Graders Improve by One Point

Reading scores for eighth-grade students climbed one point while the reading performance of fourth-grade students was unchanged from 2007 according to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, also known as *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009*. The report also finds that only 32 percent of the nation's eighth graders read at a proficient level, which demonstrates 'solid academic performance,' while 25 percent of eighth graders read below the basic level.

"Today's results once again show that the achievement of American students isn't growing fast enough," said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. "After modest gains in recent years, fourth-grade reading scores are flat and eighth-grade scores were up just one point. The achievement gap didn't narrow by a statistically significant amount in either grade. Like the NAEP 2009 math scores released last fall, the reading scores demonstrate that students aren't making the progress necessary to compete in the global economy. We shouldn't be satisfied with these results. By this and many other measures, our students aren't on a path to graduate high school ready to succeed in college and the workplace."

Trend in Fourth- and Eighth-Grade NAEP Reading Average Scores



“To have nearly 70 percent of the nation’s eighth-grade students performing below the proficient level during a time when all students need to graduate career and college ready is unacceptable,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “The federal government must recognize the need to assist literacy efforts from kindergarten through high school instead of essentially focusing only on the early grades. As the Congress works to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year, it should include the **LEARN Act**, which was introduced last year and would help ensure that children from birth to grade twelve have the reading and writing skills necessary for success in school and beyond.”

Although achievement gaps between minority students and white students continue to narrow, large gaps continue to exist. White eighth-grade students had an average score of 273 out of 500, compared to 246 for African American students, representing an achievement gap of 26 points, one point smaller than in 2007. Hispanic eighth graders had an average score of 249, making the white-Hispanic achievement gap 24, also one point smaller than in 2007.

At the state level, nine states boosted the scores of their eighth-grade students while scores were unchanged in the other forty-one states and the District of Columbia. Leading the charge were Connecticut and Kentucky, each showing five-point improvements in their eighth-grade reading scores, followed by Florida, Hawaii, Missouri, and Utah, which boosted their scores by four points. New Mexico and Pennsylvania saw three-point increases, and Alabama raised its score by one point.

Read the complete report at http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/.



MOVING ON UP: Delaware and Tennessee Win First Phase of the Race to the Top Competition

On March 29, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that Delaware and Tennessee won grants in the first phase of the Race to the Top (RTT) competition, a \$4.35 billion competitive grant program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) that rewards states for undertaking significant K–12 education reforms designed to boost student achievement.

“We received many strong proposals from states all across America, but two applications stood out above all others: Delaware and Tennessee,” Duncan said. “Both states have statewide buy-in for comprehensive plans to reform their schools. They have written new laws to support their policies. And they have demonstrated the courage, capacity, and commitment to turn their ideas into practices that can improve outcomes for students.”

State	Score
Tennessee	443.4
Delaware	438.4
Georgia	434.4
Florida	425.0
Illinois	423.4
Ohio	423.4
South Carolina	423.2
Kentucky	416.4
Pennsylvania	412.2
New York	411.2
Rhode Island	411.0
Louisiana	410.8
Colorado	408.8
North Carolina	407.0
Massachusetts	403.8
District of Columbia	402.0

Tennessee and Delaware—with scores of 443.4 and 438.4, respectively—were selected from a group of sixteen finalists. Delaware will receive approximately \$100 million while Tennessee will receive \$500 million to implement their comprehensive school reform plans over the next four years.

According to its [press release](#), the U.S. Department of Education awarded Delaware and Tennessee high marks for the “commitment to reform from key stakeholders, including elected officials, teacher’s union leaders, and business leaders.” Both states also have aggressive plans to improve teacher and principal evaluation, use data to inform instructional decisions, and turn around their lowest-performing schools.

The U.S. Department of Education has about \$3.4 billion available for the second phase of the RTT competition. Applications for the second phase are due on June 1, 2010. For Phase 2, the department made one rule change that requires the state’s budget to conform to specific budget ranges depending on the size of the state. For example, states with large populations like California and Florida can submit a budget of up to \$700 million while smaller states such as New Mexico and Vermont must submit budgets that range from \$20–\$75 million. The budget ranges for every state are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/funding.html>.

To help states prepare their proposals for Phase 2, all Phase 1 applications, peer reviewers’ comments, and scores are available on the department’s website at <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03292010.html>.



METLIFE SURVEY OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER: Only Half of Teachers Think Their Students Will Attend a Two- or Four-Year College After High School

A recent survey on educators’ views about student achievement reveals that about two thirds of teachers (64 percent) strongly agree that it is important for all students to have one year or more of postsecondary education in order to be prepared for work or a career. However, the study also shows that only 59 percent of secondary school teachers report that they regularly talk about what college is like with their students and on average, teachers expect only 50 percent of their students will attend a two- or four-year college after high school.

According to [Part 2: Student Achievement](#) from the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, there is majority discrepancy between teachers’ confidence in their own abilities versus their confidence in their students’ abilities. Eighty four percent of teachers believe they can enable *all* of their students to succeed academically, while only 36 percent believe that *all* of their students have the ability to succeed academically. A higher percentage of principals (51 percent) believe that *all* of their students are capable of educational success. Data from the study also showed that 51 percent of teachers (including 71 percent of secondary teachers) agree that students only do enough work to “get by” in their school.

In a [recent statement](#), Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, said, “The nation has devoted a lot of attention to the achievement gap, and thanks to No Child Left Behind we’re starting to see some improvement in that area. However, as the MetLife report demonstrates, the expectations gap—the difference between

what teachers expect their students to know and what students need to know to succeed in today's economy—remains under the radar.”

The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* has been conducted annually since 1984 by Harris Interactive. To read the full report visit <http://www.metlife.com/about/corporate-profile/citizenship/metlife-foundation/metlife-survey-of-the-american-teacher.html>.

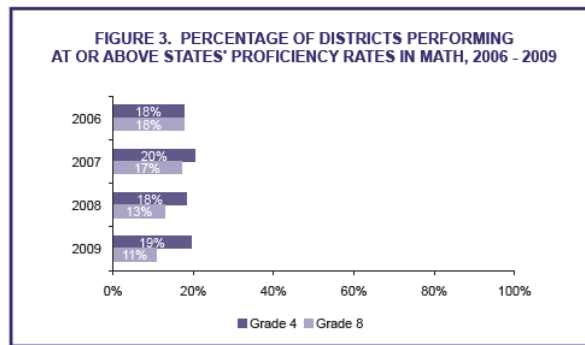


BEATING THE ODDS: New Report Finds that Urban School Districts Are Improving Student Outcomes but Still Trailing State Averages

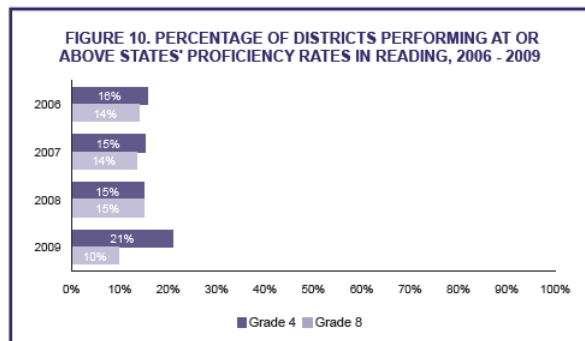
According to a new report from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), students in the nation's biggest cities are improving their performance on state and national tests but are still scoring below state averages. However, the report, *Beating the Odds: Analysis of Student Performance on State Assessments and NAEP*, also finds that urban districts are demonstrating faster growth in improving math and reading scores than are states.

“The study presents the best available picture of how American's urban public schools are performing on state tests and strongly suggests that they are making substantial progress in both reading and mathematics,” says **CGCS Executive Director Michael Casserly**. “But there's still a long road ahead as urban schools are making noticeable gains.”

The study finds that 88 percent of districts increased the percentage of eighth-grade students who scored at or above proficient in math between 2006 and 2009. Additionally, approximately 60 percent of districts have exhibited faster growth than states in improving eighth-grade mathematic scores. However, in 2009, only 11 percent of urban districts had eighth-grade proficiency rates that were equal to or greater than their respective state, a decline of 7 percent since 2006, as shown in the chart above.



In reading, 71 percent of urban districts increased the percentage of eighth-grade students who scored at or above proficient between 2006 and 2009, and over one quarter of the districts increased the percentage of eighth-graders who scored at or above proficient by greater than 10 percentage points. Moreover, about 49 percent of districts have exhibited faster rates of improvement in increasing eighth-grade reading scores than have states. Yet urban districts continued to trail state averages. Only 10 percent of Great City School districts had eighth-grade reading proficiency rates that were equal to or greater than their states.



Beating the Odds also finds that racial and achievement gaps are improving in urban areas.¹ In eighth-grade math, 62 percent of urban school districts narrowed the achievement gap between black students in their district and their respective state average for white students; 69 percent did so for Hispanic and white students; and 60 percent narrowed the gap between their economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students.

The progress in narrowing the achievement gap in eighth-grade reading was slightly less significant. Fifty-three percent of urban school districts narrowed the achievement gap between black students in their district and their respective state average for white students; 53 percent narrowed the gap between Hispanic and white students; and 43 percent narrowed the gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.

The report also compares urban student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) with national student performance on the test. At the eighth-grade level in math, the percentage of students from large cities who scored at or above proficient increased from 19 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2009. Nationally, eighth graders who scored at or above proficient increased 5 percentage points—28 percent in 2005 to 33 percent in 2009. There were several big city school districts that outperformed schools nationwide in mathematics. For example, 39 percent of Austin’s eighth graders scored at or above proficient. However, from 2005 to 2007, there was no progress observed nationally or in large city schools in eighth-grade reading.

In total, the study represents sixty-five city school systems in thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia. To read the complete report, visit <http://www.cgcs.org/Pubs/BT9.pdf>.



ARE TEST SCORES PRIMARILY STATIC? Turning Around a Failing School Is “Extremely Difficult” but Not Impossible, According to New Report

A new report from the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy finds that turning around a failing school is “extremely difficult” but not impossible. After comparing test scores on the California Assessment Program (CAP) from 1989 and 2009, *The 2009 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* finds that test scores are primarily static and concludes that the odds of turning around a failing school are “daunting.”

“School achievement appears astonishingly persistent,” said **Tom Loveless, Brookings senior fellow and author of the report**. “Nearly two thirds of low-performing schools in 1989 are still low performers two decades later. But there is a ray of hope, as about one third of these schools show evidence of improvement. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that a low-performing school becomes a high-performing school; the chances (four out of 290) are less than one out of seventy.”

¹ The report defines achievement gaps as the difference between the proficiency rates of a given student group in the district and their comparison group statewide. This method was employed to avoid pitting students in the same district against one another and to take into account that some cities have very few white or economically advantaged students to count toward the comparison.

The report compares the test scores of 1,156 California schools that contained an eighth grade in 1989 and were still operating in 2009. As shown in the table below, 184 (63.4 percent) of the 290 low-performing schools scored in the lowest quartile (Quartile 1) in 1989 and again in 2009. Seventy-nine schools (27.2 percent) moved up from Quartile 1 to Quartile 2; twenty-three schools (7.9 percent) moved from Quartile 1 to Quartile 3, and four schools (1.4 percent) moved from the bottom quartile (Quartile 1) to the top quartile (Quartile 4).

School Composite Test Scores, 1989 and 2009, by quartile						
						Table 2-1
		1989 Composite Score				
		Quartile 1	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4	TOTAL
2009 Composite Score	Quartile 4	4	22	81	182	289
	Quartile 3	23	78	108	80	289
	Quartile 2	79	121	69	20	289
	Quartile 1	184	69	29	7	289
TOTAL		290	290	287	289	1156

On the other end of the spectrum, 182 (nearly two thirds) of Quartile 4 schools in 1989 were still there in 2009. Eighty schools (about 25 percent) slipped from the fourth to the third quartile and twenty schools (7 percent) declined to the second quartile; only seven of the highest-performing schools in 1989 (2.4 percent) had fallen from Quartile 4 down to Quartile 1 in 2009.

Loveless attributes the lack of school movement to the “institutional DNA of schools” by which a school’s culture is passed down from outgoing students and teachers to incoming generations. “Some of it may be due to how school populations change, with teachers and administrators—and kids and their parents—slowly transitioning in and out of schools,” Loveless writes. “The newcomers learn about the culture of a school from those who have been there and are preparing to leave.”

The report also includes an analysis of the 2009 math scores on NAEP and examines whether converting failing schools to charters is an effective way to reform schools.

The complete report is available at <http://tinyurl.com/ygm5qbm>.



REPORT EXAMINES CONNECTION BETWEEN HEALTH AND HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

A new report from the California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) describes the connections between health and high school dropouts and examines several aspects of how health affects dropouts. The report, *The Connection Between Health and High School Dropout*, notes that children with poor health will likely have difficulty learning throughout their school careers, culminating for many into failure to graduate from high school. After their educational career is over, students who fail to graduate from high school are at an even higher risk for future health problems throughout adulthood.

“Expanding access to medical care and providing disease management support are strategies that will help to improve educational performance,” said **Russell Rumberger, director of the CDRP**. “The report underscores the need for health care reform and demonstrates how it can help address America’s dropout crisis.”

The report highlights three distinct pathways in which education and health are connected—childhood physical illness, childhood mental health problems, and adolescent risk behaviors. According to the report, many childhood physical illnesses such as Asthma and Type 1 Diabetes are already present when children first enter school. However, if managed properly with medical treatments, there is no medical reason for any of these conditions to have negative educational effects, the report notes. Strategies that expand access to medical care and provide support for disease management in and out of school such as health clinics are most likely to improve the educational performance of students with these illnesses.

According to the report, childhood mental health problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are among the most common health conditions and affect an estimated one of every five school-aged children and adolescents. Complicating the problem is the fact that as many as 80 percent of children with mental health problems are likely to be undiagnosed and untreated. The report lists early identification and support as important strategies to limit the impact on a child’s education. By avoiding or reducing academic deficits in the early grades, interventions may reduce deficits in academic achievement later on, thereby improving students’ chances of graduating,” the report reads.

The report also examines adolescent risk behaviors such as substance abuse and unprotected sex. It notes that the connection between adolescent risk behaviors and educational problems is in the reverse direction, from education to behavior. “Students who receive low grades or test scores are more likely than other students to initiate risky behaviors,” the report reads. “Substance use and early sexual behavior may thus be indicators that a student is already on a hazardous educational trajectory, rather than contributory causes of educational failure.” The report suggests that interventions targeted at these behaviors could improve educational outcomes. As an example, it offers an intervention that targets adolescent smokers by pairing smoking cessation treatment with academic support.

The complete report is available at http://cdrp.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_reports.htm.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.