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NATIONAL NEWS

Urban Districts Post Gains in NAEP Math

Education Week

By: Erik W. Robelen

December 7, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/08/14naep.h31.html?kn=WLTfbmtbScA%2BByy91HAv1Gno3KBABJod1lsq7&cmp=clp-edweek>

Reading achievement in a set of large urban districts has stayed mostly flat since 2009, based on new national test results, while in mathematics, half the school systems saw some growth over the past two years, including Atlanta, the district at the center of a recent, high-profile cheating scandal.

In math, four out of 18 big-city districts posted statistically significant 4th grade gains from 2009 to 2011, while six out of 18 made progress at 8th grade, according to data released today from the Trial Urban District Assessment, which tests representative samples of students on the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), known as “the nation’s report card.” Atlanta was the only district to make math gains at both grade levels since 2009.

In reading, meanwhile, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., school district was the only participant to see reading gains of statistical significance since 2009, and those were only at the 8th grade level.

The longer historical view tells a more hopeful story, however. Nearly all the districts to participate in TUDA since the early 2000s have made gains in both subjects.

For instance, all six urban systems that took part in the 4th grade reading exam back in 2002, when TUDA began, posted higher scores this round. And in math, nine of 10 districts gained ground since 2003 both at the 4th and 8th grades. (Cleveland saw no statistical changes.)

Atlanta’s academic growth since 2009, and over the long haul, seems especially noteworthy, given that the system has been reeling from a state investigation that found widespread cheating on state assessments for a number of years. (“[Report Details ‘Culture of Cheating’ in Atlanta Schools.](#)” July 13, 2011.)

In a conference call with reporters early this week, a federal official emphasized that, based on a separate federal investigation, there was no reason to believe the cheating extended to NAEP.

“The short story is we couldn’t find any evidence [of cheating],” said Jack Buckley, the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers NAEP. “What happened is virtually impossible on NAEP” because of its format and other factors, he added.

Atlanta’s strongest gains were in 8th grade math, where the district climbed 6 points on the 500-point scale since 2009, and 22 points since 2003. Measured another way, the proportion of Atlanta students scoring “basic” or above climbed from 30 percent in 2003 to 54 percent in 2011.

In reading, Atlanta saw no statistically significant changes since 2009, but climbed by 16 points since 2002 at 4th grade and by 17 points at 8th grade.

“There was cheating by some teachers on the state tests, but at the same time, what you saw by way of reform in the district was real,” said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools, who took part in the conference call.

The latest TUDA results come about a month after a new round of NAEP data in reading and math for the nation was released. (["NAEP Results Show Math Gains, But 4th Grade Reading Still Flat."](#) Nov. 9, 2011.)

That data found average reading scores flat in the 4th grade, but a slight increase in 8th grade reading as well as math at both grade levels.

The new TUDA report provides a close look not only at the set of participating districts, but also highlights average achievement for students across all large U.S. cities and suggests the achievement trend here largely mirrors the nation as a whole. However, the pace of improvement for large cities appears to be eclipsing that of the nation.

For example, 8th grade math scores for students from big cities climbed 3 points from 2009, compared with 1 point for the nation. In taking a longer view, large cities gained 12 points since 2003, compared with 7 for the nation.

In 4th grade reading, there was no significant change since 2009 for the nation or for large cities, but urban students posted a 9-point increase since 2002, compared with a 3-point rise in the national average.

"We've continued to narrow the differences between urban school districts and the nation at large," said Mr. Casserly.

He noted that the gap for the first time was less than 10 points in all four categories—that is, in both grade levels and subjects.

Mr. Casserly said his organization earlier this fall issued a [report](#) on the factors that help to explain why some urban districts have shown greater gains than others.

The report identifies some common threads among urban districts that have shown strong improvements over time. They include strong and stable leadership and setting clear, systemwide goals and a "culture of accountability" for meeting them, as well as a coherent, well-articulated program of curriculum and instruction and regular use of data to gauge learning, modify practice, and target resources.

Detroit Makes Headway

Although Atlanta was the only TUDA district to make gains in math at both the 4th and 8th grades since 2009, half the participants did see significant improvement in one or the other grade.

Those to do so at the 4th grade were Austin, Texas; Baltimore; and Philadelphia. At the 8th grade, the other districts to improve were Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Detroit, the District of Columbia, and Jefferson County, Ky.

The largest gains posted in 8th grade math were for Detroit, which climbed 8 points since 2009. But even with those gains, its score of 246 was the lowest of all 21 districts to participate in TUDA this year. Measured another way, 71 percent of Detroit's 8th graders scored below basic in the subject. And only 4 percent were "proficient" or "advanced."

This year, three school districts in urban locations participated in TUDA for the first time: Albuquerque, N.M.; Dallas; and Hillsborough County, Fla. They join 18 others that have taken part more than once.

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State Science Expectations 'All Over the Map,' Study Finds

Education Week

By: Erik Robelen

December 7, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/12/states_science_expectations_al.html

A student in New Hampshire or Rhode Island is likely to have a much tougher time achieving academic "proficiency" in science than another in Virginia or Tennessee, a new analysis suggests. But don't blame it on the schools. The reason is that states around the nation set the bar for science proficiency at widely varying levels, concludes the report issued today by the business coalition Change the Equation, in collaboration with the American Institutes for Research.

Billed as the first-ever national analysis of how states define proficiency on science assessments, the [report](#) finds that states have established "radically different targets" for what their 8th graders should know and be able to do in science. And in many instances, what a state has deemed a "proficient" score is equivalent to below "basic" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in science.

"At a time when the demand for robust skills and knowledge in science has gone global, 'proficiency' may have more to do with where you live than what you have learned," the report says. "This hodgepodge undercuts a major reason why we have tests in the first place: to provide reliable information on how well we're preparing students for the challenges of the global economy."

As some readers may know, such analyses in reading and math have been going on for some time now, and generally have reached the same conclusion, including a [study](#) issued this summer by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The new study, looking at 37 states in which relevant data were available, compared the passing scores states set on their 2009 8th-grade science tests by measuring them against the 2009 NAEP in science. The researchers took each state's passing score and mapped it onto the 300-point NAEP scale, allowing them to equate states' standards for "basic," "proficient," and "advanced" with scores on the NAEP scale.

In 15 of the 37 states examined—from Virginia and North Carolina to Connecticut, Texas, and California—the state bar for proficiency was actually below the NAEP threshold for basic. New Hampshire and Rhode Island were the only states that had a higher proficiency threshold than NAEP, while in Massachusetts it was about the same.

I should caution that some experts have long suggested that NAEP's definition of proficiency is overly stringent. I've also been told that NAEP is quite different from many state assessments, complicating such comparisons.

Leaving those matters aside, it seems clear from the new study that states do not agree on what level of science learning is needed. And it suggests that parents in many states may be getting a distorted view of student achievement.

The new report—"All Over the Map: Comparing States' Expectations for Student Performance in Science"—is part of an ongoing effort by the group Change the Equation, a coalition of more than 110 corporate CEOs, to report on the condition of STEM learning in the United States. Earlier this year, the group [released](#) a set of state-by-state STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) "Vital Signs" reports. At that time, the group also sent letters to all the nation's governors calling for higher proficiency standards in science and mathematics so that American students will be better prepared to compete globally.

It's worth reminding readers here that a major effort is currently under way to develop a set of common standards in science, which could be an important first step toward creating more aligned, and more rigorous, expectations for students around the nation.

The new study also sought to put state proficiency standards in context by comparing them with the [findings](#) of a 2009 study by ACT. It notes that while two-thirds of the states examined reported that most of their 8th graders were proficient in science, the ACT report found that only 8 percent of U.S. 8th graders were on track to do well in introductory college science courses.

"Setting a low bar in science breeds complacency and takes our eye off the ball," the report says. "If we lull parents, teachers, schools, and communities into believing their children are doing just fine in science, thank you very much, we deprive them of information and the sense of urgency they need to improve the quality of teaching and learning."

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STATE NEWS

Louisiana: BESE passes rating system for teachers

The Advocate

By: Will Sentell

December 8, 2011

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1510317-125/bese-passes-rating-system-for.html>

A plan that will link the job status of many public school teachers to how they fare on a scale of 1 to 5 won final approval Wednesday from Louisiana's top school board.

The package, which stems from a 2010 state law, will apply in various forms to all of the state's roughly 50,000 public school teachers starting with the 2012-13 school year.

About 17,000 math, English and other teachers will be affected by the 1 to 5 rating scale, with half of the annual evaluation linked to the growth of student achievement.

Details are still being worked out on how the other 33,000 teachers will be evaluated but those changes will be in place for the next school year as well in a bid to improve student achievement.

The 11-member board approved the plan without discussion.

A BESE committee spent 75 minutes on the issue Tuesday.

Under current rules, teachers undergo formal reviews once every three years.

The new system will require annual reviews, and half of the results will be linked to the growth of student achievement on standardized tests, especially compared to how students did in the three previous years.

For instance, a fourth-grade teacher's evaluation would depend in part on how students did on LEAP, which is supposed to ensure that students have a basic understanding of math and English skills.

The other half of the evaluation will stem from ratings generated by formal and informal observations by principals and assistant principals.

Under the change, teachers will get a score of 1-5 on the growth of student achievement and a score of 1-5 based on classroom observations.

The scores will be divided by two to come up with an overall rating, said Rayne Martin, deputy superintendent of innovation for the state Department of Education.

Scores of 2.0 to 4.0 will earn ratings of effective. Those from 4.1 to 5.0 will earn a highly effective label. Scores of 1.9 and below means the state considers the teacher ineffective.

Those educators will then have to undergo remedial work. If they fail to improve over a certain period, they can face dismissal by

local school boards.

In addition, teachers who are rated as ineffective in either the growth of student test scores or classroom observations will be rated as ineffective overall regardless of the other score.

BESE's action endorsed the recommendations of a 34-member advisory committee, which was put together to spell out details of the new evaluations.

Eighteen members of the panel are teachers.

"Teachers can do this," said Connie Bradford, of Ruston, a member of BESE. "I am confident we have a good beginning."

Under the plan, the link to student achievement includes a wide range of factors, including attendance, any disabilities, the family income of the student and classroom discipline.

However, officials have said the biggest factor in deciding the teacher's impact on a student is how he or she fared academically compared to their performance for up to three years previously.

Lee Barrios, of Abita Springs, a retired teacher who ran unsuccessfully for BESE this year, said the new review system is flawed and will cause some good teachers to lose their livelihoods by linking part of the evaluation results to student test scores.

"This single standardized test score is not valid and reliable," Barrios told a BESE committee on Tuesday.

Exactly how the other 33,000 teachers will be evaluated is still under review, including those who teach art, music and physical education.

However, Martin noted that last year's law requires those evaluation methods to be in place for the 2012-13 school year.

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New Jersey Pilot Teacher Evaluation System Slow to Gain Traction in Newark

New Jersey Spotlight

By: John Mooney

December 8, 2011

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/11/1208/0032/>

Superintendent Anderson "disappointed" in teachers union, moving ahead in half-dozen schools

In New Jersey's highest-profile school district, plans to test one of Gov. Chris Christie's highest-profile reform initiatives have gotten off to a bumpy start with the teachers union.

Still, a half-dozen district schools will test a new teacher evaluation system.

Superintendent Cami Anderson plans to formally launch the pilot in the next week, naming a team to oversee the development of the system. She said there would be a heavy emphasis in the beginning on setting clear goals and feedback for teachers.

Anderson said she hoped to put the pilot in place in as many schools as possible, but after what she described as extensive outreach to teachers and the Newark Teachers Union, she was unable to win any buy-in votes.

Instead, she will start in just seven schools receiving federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs), with the pilot being a condition of the grants. The schools were chosen from among the state's lowest performing.

"The more people who weigh in, the more likely it will be successful," she said yesterday. "That was the spirit, to get more involved."

But Anderson put some of the blame on the NTU for a lack of wider involvement. "It is absolutely clear to me they played in a role in that, and that's disappointing," she said. "I believe their members want to be part of this."

Newark is one of 11 districts that are conducting a pilot of a new statewide teacher evaluation system that ultimately could be used for determining teachers' tenure and perhaps even pay.

The system has been the centerpiece of Christie's moves to revamp teacher tenure and tie it more closely to student performance. Newark's involvement would have been especially notable not just as the state's largest district but also due to its headline-grabbing \$100 million gift from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Part of that money will go toward the pilot's development.

But even in other pilot districts, union support has been a delicate balance, albeit so far mostly cooperative. That is particularly noteworthy since the teachers in all the other districts are represented by the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), the

statewide teachers union that has been in frequent combat with Christie.

"The main feedback we are hearing from teachers is that there is still a lot of work to do but they appreciate being at the table," said Justin Barra, the state Department of Education's communications director.

The Newark Teachers Union is part of the American Federation of Teachers and had appeared more receptive to the effort. But its leadership said it balked after its members' expressed reluctance over some of the details in the plan.

"In our discussions, a few of our building representatives asked if we would accept a resolution not in favor of the pilot in its current form," said Joseph Del Grosso, the union's long-time president. "It passed unanimously."

But he denied any formal campaign against the proposal in individual schools or among his members.

"We just said we want other things in it," Del Grosso said, pointing specifically to the union's push for a greater role for teachers' peers in their evaluations.

Anderson maintained the pilot would include extensive feedback from peer teachers. "It's all about how do we get teachers great feedback, but that is not just limited to peers," she said.

But even those details are still to be developed, Anderson said, part of a process that will take place early in the year and start to be tested in different schools in the spring. The more controversial use of student test scores in gauging teacher performance likely will not come until the next school year. The district is currently conducting its own review of its student and teacher data, including through an audit by KPMG.

"We still need to clean up our own data in Newark before we can do that, and also need that statewide comparability data that will come from the state," Anderson said.

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Fine Print: New Jersey State Senator Buono's Teacher Quality Bill

New Jersey Spotlight

By: John Mooney

December 8, 2011

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/11/1208/0048/>

Rather than relying heavily on test scores, this bill focuses on peer evaluations and student portfolios

What it is: State Sen. Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex), the outgoing Senate Majority Leader, has introduced a bill that would put in place a statewide system for evaluating and supporting teachers. Modeled after the one used in Cincinnati public schools, the system would rely on peer evaluations, teacher observations, and student portfolios in gauging teacher effectiveness.

What it means: The bill is counter to those being proffered by both Gov. Chris Christie's administration and Democratic legislators, who are pushing a complete overhaul of not just teacher evaluation -- which puts heavy emphasis on student test scores -- but of how it is used in determining tenure.

What else it means: Buono remains on the short list of those said to be thinking about making a run for governor in 2013, and education has been among the issues she has been most outspoken on. But she also appears on the outs within her own party's Senate leadership, voted out as its Majority Leader after the November election. That makes this bill's chances shorter, but it also speaks to the lack of a clear consensus within the Democratic membership as to what is the best approach.

What it's not: The proposal ramps way down the reliance on test scores that is the underpinning of Christie's proposals, as well as proposed tenure reforms being developed by state Sen. Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex) as part of a bill soon to be reintroduced. "Test scores have a place, but they should also give us pause," Buono said. "When we want to make high-stakes decisions about teachers and students, let's make sure we are doing this the right way."

Academic underpinnings: Buono said she has worked on this proposal for the better part of a year, meeting with academics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, among others. And it led to a unique press announcement, one that listed a number of academic studies. Typically, legislative press releases do not come with footnotes.

NJEA similarities: The bill bears some resemblance to what the New Jersey Education Association has proposed as a tenure reform to counter Christie's proposal. The NJEA would include an added year for a teacher to get intensive training before receiving tenure, something that Buono has also proposed, and the union has long been critical of the emphasis on test scores as a measure of teacher performance. Buono adds in another pro-union piece: the system would ultimately be part of collective bargaining. But Buono said the NJEA was not involved in the crafting of her plan, and in fact disagreed on some pieces. The NJEA concurs this is not its bill and that it is helping draft another one for introduction soon.

Political prospects: Buono said she's not placing any bets on her proposal in the near future, including the current lame duck session, but hopes it will spark further discussions, including with Ruiz. And she knows her diminished role in the Democratic leadership doesn't help. "But I'm going to be as outspoken as ever, if not more so," she said.

Not done yet: Coupled with her proposal for a fourth year of training, Buono said she hopes to complete a package of bills on educator effectiveness, the next one focusing on evaluating principals. "I have a draft almost ready," she said.

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Wisconsin Governor Walker signs bill tying test scores to teachers

Associated Press

By: Staff

December 7, 2011

http://host.madison.com/news/state_and_regional/walker-signs-bill-tying-test-scores-to-teachers/article_2260358d-916a-5535-8368-9b1fc7c5a283.html

Gov. Scott Walker has signed into law a bill that allows student test scores to be used as a reason to fire a teacher.

Under current law, standardized test data can be one of several factors used to evaluate a teacher's performance, but it can't be used to discipline them.

The bill Walker signed Wednesday would allow the scores to be used as one of multiple reasons to discipline or fire a teacher. Test scores alone could not be used to discipline a teacher.

Walker says the bill provides flexibility to school districts to reward the best teachers, help mentor those who are struggling and hold those who don't improve accountable to help improve education for all students.

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Draft offers ambitious Kentucky digital learning plan

Associated Press

By: Staff

December 7, 2011

<http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Draft-offers-ambitious-Ky-digital-learning-plan-2368698.php>

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — A draft report presented to the [Kentucky Board of Education](#) on Wednesday offers ambitious goals for online and digital learning in the state's public schools, including shifting to online assessments and instructional materials.

The Digital Learning 2020 draft calls for ensuring all students in Kentucky have access to digital learning, especially by expanding digital and online offerings within public school buildings.

It also proposes creating a new office in the state [Department of Education](#) that would manage the program and funding for a transition to digital learning.

No costs were proposed during the presentation, but suggestions were offered for changing funding procedures, such as linking funding to student performance in online courses.

"We have to find ways to provide more one-on-one opportunities for our students," [David Cook](#), director of the education department's innovation division, told the board. "What are the delivery methods that work best ... let's fund those ... rather than something that's archaic."

The 11 recommendations in the draft include moving to online assessments by the 2013-2014 school year, shifting to online instructional materials by 2014-2015, and allowing students to use technology to personalize their learning.

Board members expressed general concerns about student access to computers and whether online teaching materials would be subject to state oversight.

"You tend to think there is a textbook that somebody has sat down and reviewed the textbook," said [David Karem](#), board chairman. "... The quality control is a big issue. It's going to be a huge challenge."

The draft report is the result of the final report from the Governor's Task Force on Transforming Education in Kentucky, which calls for greatly expanded use of technology in the state's public schools.

Cook said board members would be regularly updated on the proposal, as it is still a work in progress.

In other business, the board approved its 2012 legislative agenda, including requesting \$13.3 million to help turn around some low-performing schools and \$28.1 million to fund three programs aimed at improving college and career preparation.

The agenda also includes plans to urge legislation increasing the dropout age from 16 to 18. The [General Assembly](#) failed to take action on the legislation, backed by first lady [Jane Beshear](#), during a special session earlier this year.

The board also approved revisions to a state law regarding special education students, removing specific accommodations that had been previously allowed during statewide testing of reading and math.

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Michigan Board of Education says cap on cyber charters should be lifted only after review of existing schools, conditions

Grand Rapids Press

By: Dave Murray

MLive.com December 7, 2011

http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/12/state_board_of_education_says.html

LANSING – State Board of Education members say they don't want the cap on so-called cyber charter schools lifted until the two existing schools can be studied and there are guarantees the schools follow the same rules as brick and mortar programs.

The state House Education Committee listened to testimony from educators and charter school families on Wednesday, and planned to resume after session, Rep. Tom McMillin, R-Rochester Hills, told people waiting to speak.

State school board members offered recommendations at their Tuesday meeting, adopting a resolution calling for a review of two years of performance data from the two existing schools.

The board also wants clear plans from the schools, and wants them held to the same requirements “for student achievement, growth, and outcomes as all public schools; and for full participation in school accountability, data collection and assessment systems.”

State Superintendent Mike Flanagan has supported virtual schools, where students spend part of the time in class while also completing work online.

He's granted “seat time” waivers to schools, including one in the the Grand Rapids suburb of Wyoming, allowing students to receive credit for online classes.

Educators testifying on Wednesday included Ottawa Area Intermediate School District Superintendent Karen McPhee, who said she's not opposed to virtual schools, and has some online components in a charter school the district oversees.

But she said there are concerns about the two full-time virtual charters, saying “virtual truancy” is a problem when students don't stay atop of classwork.

McPhee said one of the two Michigan cyber charters has struggled in another state, with students falling way below state averages.

“When Gov. Snyder said 'any time, any place, any where, any pace,' I don't think he meant at any cost,” she testified.

“Without a doubt online learning in both virtual and blended environments will play a significant role in education. But the current experiment is much too young, much too volatile and undocumented to simply pull out all the stoppers.”

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