



New York City Student Performance on National Tests During Mayoral Control

Hon. James F. Brennan
New York State Assembly

Prepared by
Brena Cascini
Legislative Aide

Room 842 Legislative Office Building, Albany, NY 12248, 518 455.5377
416 Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11215, 718 788.7221
1414 Cortelyou Road, Brooklyn, NY 11226, 718 940.0641
brennaj@assembly.state.ny.us

Background

In several highly publicized reports, the Department of Education (DOE) claims that New York City schools have experienced unparalleled achievement under mayoral control, citing performance on state tests as evidence of this fact. In contrast, the Bloomberg administration publicizes little information regarding the performance of New York City schools in the National Assessment of Educational Progress Trial Urban District Assessment (NAEP TUDA), a measure of student achievement referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card” and proclaimed by many education experts to be the “gold standard” in educational testing.

This paper details the NAEP TUDA assessment, explaining what it is, how educational professionals view it, and how it contributes to a discussion of mayoral control of New York City schools. NAEP TUDA, a valuable additional measurement of student achievement, provides important insight into the performance of our city’s schools over time. Rather than pointing to the unparalleled achievement of New York City schools, an examination of the NAEP TUDA results indicates no significant improvement in three out of the four major test areas as well as minimal progress with regard to narrowing the achievement gap.

The Test

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is administered by the National Department of Education Statistics, which is itself a part of the U.S. Department of Education. By design, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) provides a common yardstick by which to measure the academic achievement of students across the nation. Using samples of students, the main NAEP assessment measures the ability of groups of students in a variety of subject areas. This assessment does not report scores for individual schools or districts, but rather for populations of students and subgroups within those populations.

The NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), however, provides a measurement of student progress for many of the nation’s largest urban school districts. In 2002, NAEP began administering the test in certain subjects with the goal of determining the feasibility of using NAEP as a district wide assessment. The test was administered in reading, mathematics, science and writing in 2003, 2005, 2007 and is scheduled again for 2009. Participating urban districts include New York City, Boston, Chicago, District of Columbia, Los Angeles, Charlotte, Austin, San Diego, Atlanta, Houston, and Cleveland.

The NAEP results are important for several reasons. First, this test provides a valuable additional perspective on student achievement that complements the state tests. While many schools focus on preparation for state tests, it is not common practice to prepare students for NAEP tests, which, given the format of the test, many believe to be more difficult to do. Based on this fact, some argue that NAEP results are more likely to reflect actual learning rather than test preparation. Second, in contrast with state tests which change frequently, the NAEP test varies little from year to year. This has led Congress and the U.S. Department of Education to rely on NAEP as the primary measure of student achievement over time.

Whether or not one agrees that state tests inflate scores or that state tests have become easier, it is clear that an additional measurement provides information that allows us to better understand the status of our nation’s schools. As such, NAEP is a welcome “second opinion” on academic

achievement of students over time. In what follows, the performance of New York City schools on the NAEP tests will be examined and placed within the context of other participating districts.

NAEP TUDA & New York City

From 2003 to 2007, New York City public schools showed little improvement on the TUDA. The Department of Education Statistics reports that there were no significant gains in 4th and 8th grade English and 8th grade math. In November 2007 when these scores were publicized, the Department of Education released its own interpretation of the results. The performance of New York City schools and the statements made by the DOE are examined further below.

From 2003-2005, test scores on the NAEP TUDA in 4th grade reading in New York City improved from 53% to 57% at or above basic, an increase of four points. From 2005-2007, test scores remained stagnant at 57% at or above basic level. Test scores for 8th grade reading actually decreased by three points from 2003 to 2007, declining from 62% at or above basic to 61% in 2005 and 59% in 2007.

When these results were released in 2007, NAEP reported that the increase in 4th grade reading was not statistically significant. In a report released by the DOE presenting the same findings, the Department of Education claims that these increases represent “continued steady gains in reading.” With only a three point increase from 2003 to 2005, an increase that is not significant, and absolutely no gain between 2005 and 2007, these increases do not seem to be continued or steady.

In the 2007 report detailing these findings, NAEP also reported that the decline in 8th grade reading was not statistically significant. It is important to mention, however, that New York City was the only district of the nation’s largest participating cities, Boston, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago and DC to experience any decline whatsoever during this period.

In 4th grade math, test scores improved from 67% at or above basic to 79% from 2003 to 2007, an increase of twelve points. In 8th grade math, test scores increased three points from 54% at or above basic to 57% at this level in 2007. The 8th grade math scores do not represent a significant increase from 2003-2007, according to NAEP.

The increase in 4th grade math is the only increase that NAEP reports as statistically significant. While this improvement is laudable, it is not at all unique to New York City. As the next section of this paper indicates, comparable districts such as Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago and DC experienced similar large-scale increases during this time.

New York City and other TUDA Cities

Of the eleven districts that participate in the NAEP TUDA exam, there are five districts that are comparable to New York City: Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago and DC. These districts have poverty rates that are comparable to New York City, and as such provide an appropriate context in which to evaluate the achievement of New York City schools relative to other large cities across the nation.

Families with Children Under 18 in Poverty (2000)		
	#	%
Cleveland	21,624	32.3
Atlanta	14,959	31.9
New York	266,616	25.8
Los Angeles	122,289	25.3
Washington DC	15,231	24.5
Chicago	84,598	23.1
Boston	13,811	22.2
Houston	59,498	21.8
San Diego	24,012	15.9
Austin	10,265	13
Charlotte	8,100	11

Source: 2000 US Census Data

A consideration of New York City schools in relation to these other large urban districts indicates that the rates of improvement of New York City schools are not at all exceptional. Rather, rates of improvement for New York City schools are comparable to other TUDA districts, and are actually lower than all five districts in two of the four major test areas.

The Results

While New York City students started out ahead of their peers in 2003 as test were administered, students in all five districts experienced similar improvements from 2003 to 2007. In 4th grade reading, New York City schools improved from 53% at or above basic in 2003 to 57% at or above basic in 2007, an increase of four points. During this same time, Boston experienced a six point increase, Houston a one point increase, Los Angeles and Chicago both a four point increase, and DC an increase of eight points.

In 8th grade reading, New York City scores actually decreased from 62% at or above basic in 2003 to 59% at or above basic in 2007, a decrease of three points. During this time, all other comparable districts experienced an increase in the percentage of students at or above basic. Boston schools increased by two points, Houston increased by eight points, Los Angeles increased by seven points, Chicago improved by two points, and DC improved by one point.

In 4th grade math, New York City students improved from 67% at or above basic in 2003 to 79% at this level in 2007, an increase of 12 points. During this same period, other comparable districts also experienced large increases. Boston schools increased by 18 points from 2003-2007, Houston schools increased by 10 points, Los Angeles and Chicago increased by eight points and DC increased by 13 points.

In 8th grade math and 8th grade reading, all of the comparable districts, Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago and DC experienced higher rates of improvement. In 4th grade reading, four out of five of these districts had the same or higher rates of improvement.

In addition to similar rates of improvement, Boston and Houston schools have comparable percentages of students at or above basic level. In fact, in 8th grade math the percentage of students at or above basic in Boston was eight points higher in Boston than in NYC. Similarly,

in the same year in 8th grade reading, the percentage of students at or above basic in Boston was four points higher than NYC. In 4th grade math in 2007, the percentage of students at this level in New York City was two points higher than their peers in Boston. In 2007 in 4th grade reading, the percentage of students at or above basic was three points higher in New York City than in Boston.

Houston schools are outperforming New York City schools in three of the four major tests. In 8th grade math, the percentage of students at or above basic in Houston is eight points ahead of New York City. In 8th grade reading, Houston is ahead by four points, and in 4th grade math Houston is ahead by one point.

% At or Above Basic in 4th Grade Math			
	2003	2005	2007
New York City	67	73	79
Boston	59	72	77
Houston	70	77	80
Los Angeles	52	58	60
Chicago	50	52	58
DC	36	45	49

% At or Above Basic in 8th Grade Math			
	2003	2005	2007
New York City	54	54	57
Boston	48	58	65
Houston	52	58	65
Los Angeles	32	38	45
Chicago	42	45	49
DC	29	31	34

% At or Above Basic in 4th Grade Reading			
	2003	2005	2007
New York City	53	57	57
Boston	48	51	54
Houston	48	52	49
Los Angeles	35	37	39
Chicago	40	40	44
DC	31	33	39

% At or Above Basic in 8th Grade Reading			
	2003	2005	2007
New York City	62	61	59
Boston	61	61	63
Houston	55	59	63
Los Angeles	43	47	50
Chicago	59	60	61
DC	47	45	48

Achievement Gap & NAEP TUDA

NAEP has as one of its mandates the goal of measuring the performance of subgroups within a given population. By measuring the achievement gap with reference to average scores, the NAEP results are able to capture precisely how certain students are performing relative to their peers. Such a consideration reveals little progress in closing the achievement gap between white students and their black and Hispanic peers.

In 4th grade reading in New York City the black-white achievement gap closed by four points from 2003-2007, and the white-Hispanic achievement gap widened by three points. In 2003 white students had average scores of 231, while black students average scores were 201, a difference of 30 points. In 2007, white students had an average score of 232, while black students had an average score of 206, a difference of 26 points. For the same test, white students had an average score of 231 in 2003, while Hispanic students had an average score of 205, a difference of 26 points. In 2007, Hispanic students had an average score of 203, while white students had an average score of 232, a difference in 29 points.

During this same period in New York City in 4th grade math, the black-white achievement gap closed by three points, and the white-Hispanic achievement gap closed by four points. In 2003 white students had an average score of 244 in 4th grade math, while the average score for black students was 219, a difference of 25 points. In 2007, the difference in average scores between black and white students was 22 points. In 2003, the average score for Hispanic students was 220, 24 points below their white peers. In 2007, the average score of Hispanic students was 19 points lower than white students.

From 2003-2007 in New York City in 8th grade math, the black-white achievement gap closed by five points and the white-Hispanic achievement gap closed by two points. In 2003, the average score for white students was 289, while the average score for black students was 253, a difference of 36 points. In 2007, the average score of black students was 31 points lower than white students. In 2003, the average score for Hispanic students was 260, 29 points lower than their white peers. In 2007, the average score for Hispanic students was 262, 27 points lower than white students.

In 8th grade reading, the black-white achievement gap increased by five points, and the white-Hispanic achievement gap increased by six points. In 2003, the average score of white students was 270 and the average score of black students was 245, a difference 25 points. In 2007 the average score of black students was 30 points below their white peers. In 2003, the average score of Hispanic students was 23 points below their white peers. In 2007, the discrepancy in average scores between Hispanic students and their white peers had increased to 29 points.

4th Grade Reading Scores by Race/ Ethnicity			
	2003	2005	2007
White	231	226	232
Black	201	206	206
Hispanic	205	207	203
Asian	227	235	230

4th Grade Math Scores by Race/ Ethnicity			
	2003	2005	2007
White	244	245	249
Black	219	222	227
Hispanic	220	226	230
Asian	247	253	257

8th Grade Reading Scores by Race/ Ethnicity			
	2003	2005	2007
White	270	269	270
Black	245	241	240
Hispanic	247	247	241
Asian	264	271	268

8th Grade Math Scores by Race/ Ethnicity			
	2003	2005	2007
White	289	286	289
Black	253	257	258
Hispanic	260	259	262
Asian	286	295	299

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have placed much emphasis on their accomplishments in narrowing the achievement gap. In July 2008, Mayor Bloomberg testified before The House Committee on Education and Labor that his administration had “done everything possible to narrow the achievement gap” and that in some instances had “reduced it by half.”

By whatever measure Mayor Bloomberg was staking this claim, this statement is clearly refuted by the NAEP TUDA results. The achievement gap actually increased with regard to white-Hispanic students in 4th grade reading as well as white-Hispanic students and white-black students in 8th grade reading. There were decreases in the gap between white-black and white-Hispanic students in 4th and 8th grade math from 2003-2007. With the discrepancy between white students and their black peers at 26 points in 4th grade reading, 22 points in 4th grade math, and 31 points in 8th grade math, the narrowing of the gap by 4 points, 3 and 5 points respectively hardly represents a 50% reduction. Similarly, the white-Hispanic achievement gap, which did decrease by 4 points in 4th grade math, and 5 points in 8th grade math, is nowhere close to the reduction the Mayor claims.

Conclusion

Ultimately the NAEP TUDA results demonstrate that the DOE's claim of unparalleled student achievement is inaccurate. When compared with other large U.S. Cities, the rates of improvement of New York City schools are lower than all other comparable districts in two of the four major test areas. While New York City schools started out ahead of many districts in 2003, the slower rates of improvement represent a decline relative to other comparable TUDA cities in 8th grade math and 8th grade reading.

Despite DOE rhetoric, New York City schools have experienced little progress from 2003-2007, the first five years Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein were in control of New York City schools. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's analysis indicated that the only statistically significant improvement was in fourth grade math. The rates of improvement in New York City in 4th grade reading and 8th grade math and reading during this time were negligible. Further, while Mayor Bloomberg is boasting his accomplishments with regard to closing the achievement gap, the NAEP scores reflect little progress in this regard.