

City Schools

A Summary of:

“Beating the Odds: A City-By-City Analysis of the Student Performance and Achievement Gaps On State Assessments” (May 2001)

Council of the Great City Schools. By Sharon Lewis and Michael Casserly.

“Closing the Achievement Gaps in Urban Schools: A Survey of Academic Progress and Promising Practices in the Great City Schools” (October 1999)

Council of the Great City Schools. By Sharon Lewis, Jack Jepson and Michael Casserly.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- ✓ Extended Learning

Overview

In 1999, the nation’s urban public schools educated about 40% of all students of color, 35% of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch, and 30% of English language learners in the nation. The Council of the Great City Schools’ National Task Force on Closing Achievement Gaps compiled and examined efforts and data from 48 major urban school systems across the nation. The evaluators discussed achievement gaps in the context of two general observations: 1) African American, Latino, Native American and other students score lower, as groups, than white students on standardized achievement tests; 2) students of lower socio-economic status score lower, as groups, than students of middle or higher socio-economic status on standardized achievement tests. Some school districts had the goal of boosting achievement specifically for minority populations; others tried to boost the achievement of every student with the thought that minority achievement increases would follow.

POPULATION

The school districts observed were of varying sizes and had varying mixtures of minority populations. Depending on the minority populations present, each urban school district chose to concentrate its “closing the gap” efforts on different groups. Some focused on groups of a certain socio-economic status rather than on groups of a certain race. For example, in Dallas, schools concentrated on closing the achievement gap for Latino students, while in Baltimore and Birmingham – both with more than 85% African American student populations – schools concentrated on boosting the achievement of all students. In Des Moines, schools focused on improving achievement for all students, but then broke out achievement data by socio-economic status/ income in order to shape future efforts.

Key Findings

This report shares a variety of findings from urban districts around the nation. A sampling of these findings show many cities increased the achievement of African American and Latino students on standardized tests and reduced the gap between

minority and white students, by differing amounts. Some of the initiatives described here also increased white achievement. Below, data from several cities are reported, though readers should use caution in comparing the school districts (see Evaluator Comments below).

In Boston, MA

Time period: 1996 to 1998

African American achievement gains in math, grade 5: 56% to 59%, 3 percentage points

White achievement gains in math, grade 5: 79% to 80%, 1 percentage point

Gap reduction: The gap between African American and white students decreased from 23 to 21 percentage points in grades 5.

How measured: Percent at or above “basic” level on the Stanford-9 Achievement Test.

[See chart for more details on Boston’s achievement gap reduction.]

Strategy: Raised academic standards in every subject area and every grade.

In Broward County, FL

Time period: 1994 to 1998

Gap reduction: The gap between African American and white students decreased from 25 to 18 percentage points.

The gap between limited English proficient students (LEP) and non-LEP students decreased from 24 to 12 percentage points.

How measured: Florida writing assessment.

Strategy: Implemented curriculum reforms and assigned “academic coaches” to schools.

In Charlotte, NC

Time period: 1995-1996 to 1997-1998

African American achievement gains in grade 3: 39% to 48%, 9 percentage points

White achievement gains in grade 3: 78% to 83%, 5 percentage points

Gap reduction in grade 3: The gap between African American and white students decreased from 39 to 35 percentage points.

How measured: Percent reading at or above their grade level.

Strategy: Adopted high achievement goals and created Project Charters.

In Memphis, TN

Time period: Since the 1994-95 school year

African American achievement gains:

Percentage earning an honors diploma doubled.

Strategy: Offered extended learning opportunities such as “Algebra Camp” for minority students and others in need, eliminated low-level course offerings.

In El Paso, TX

Time period: 1994 to 1998

African American achievement gains in grade 3: 39% to 66%, 27 percentage points

White achievement gains in grade 3: 72% to 85%, 13 percentage points

Gap reduction: The gap between African American and white students decreased from 33 to 19 percentage points.

How measured: Percent who achieved minimum expectations on all sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

Strategy: The El Paso School District does not have a formal policy to address achievement gaps.

In Fort Worth, TX

Time period: 1994 to 1999

Latino achievement gains in math, grade 3: 44% to 78%, 30 percentage points

White achievement gains in math, grade 3: 78% to 88%, 10 percentage points

Gap reduction: The gap between African American and white students decreased from 34 to 14 percentage points in math, grade 3.

How measured: Percent of third-graders who passed the TAAS math assessment.

Strategy: Created instructional support teams, tutoring and reading programs, a new mathematics initiative, restructured bilingual programs, staff development, and benchmark testing.

**Boston Public Schools: % of Students
Scoring at or Above “Basic” Level
on Stanford-9 Achievement Test, 1996 and 1998**

	1996	1998	Change in Gap 1996-98
Grade 5			
Math			
African American	56	59	
(African American–White Gap)	23	21	2
White	79	80	
(Latino–White Gap)	19	16	3
Hispanic	60	64	
Grade 6			
Reading			
African American	76	80	
(African American–White Gap)	14	10	4
White	90	90	
(Latino–White Gap)	22	14	8
Hispanic	68	75	
Math			
African American	38	45	
(African American–White Gap)	29	25	4
White	67	70	
(Latino–White Gap)	30	21	9
Latino	37	48	
Grade 7			
Reading			
African American	76	82	
(African American–White Gap)	17	13	4
White	93	95	
(Latino–White Gap)	24	21	3
Latino	69	73	
Grade 9			
Reading			
White	87	90	
(Latino–White Gap)	23	24	1
Latino	64	67	
Math			
African American	26	39	
(African American–White Gap)	42	36	6
White	68	75	
(Latino–White Gap)	40	35	5
Latino	28	40	
Grade 11			
Reading			
White	85	86	
(Latino–White Gap)	39	32	7
Latino	46	54	

Program Components

The 48 urban school districts evaluated varied in their approaches, but some common threads emerged:

- ◆ Reducing class size was a structural change that accompanied many of the school reforms.
- ◆ New learning standards were adopted by most urban school districts.
- ◆ Academic coaches, instructional advisory teams, curriculum specialists and other school reform specialists were hired by school districts to help offer technical assistance to schools on a full-time or part-time basis.
- ◆ Training for principals or teachers was commonly offered before implementation began.
- ◆ School-wide “learning philosophies” or “covenants” were often used as a way to build student, parent and staff enthusiasm for a school-wide reform.
- ◆ Summer learning academies or other intervention strategies were employed as a way to supplement curriculum.
- ◆ Many districts established and annually reviewed achievement goals, measuring achievement with multiple assessments.

“Improving our data, and hence our ability to monitor trends, should be one of our highest priorities.”

—Michael Casserly, Executive Director,
Council of the Great City Schools

Contributing Factors

Focus on Minority Achievement

Many districts began their reform efforts after analyzing data that clearly showed the achievement gaps between minority students and other students, or between low-income students and other students.

Extended Learning

Many districts attributed success in part to longer school days, longer school years, summer school,

after-school tutorials or Saturday enrichment opportunities.

Increased Emphasis on Reading

An increased emphasis on reading, particularly in the early grades, helped boost both achievement scores and student confidence.

Community Involvement

Some districts developed linkages with community organizations or private businesses that offered equipment, facility improvements, mentors for students, and other resources.

Planning, Implementation and Evaluation

The districts that showed the most dramatic progress had detailed reform planning and evaluation procedures.

“Few goals could be more important to American public education today than closing the achievement gaps among students by race, income, language and gender.”

—Michael Casserly, Executive Director,
Council of the Great City Schools

Evaluator Comments

The evaluator noted that there are limitations in the comparisons that can be drawn between the data from various school districts in the Key Findings section of the summary:

- ◆ It is difficult to compare some achievement data across states, because each state has developed its own assessment, administration guidelines, testing timelines, and grades to be tested.

- ◆ Trend lines may vary in duration from state to state. Some districts have trend data spanning four to six years, while others may have data for only two years.

Each state reports its results in differing metrics or statistical units. The metrics can affect how good or bad the scores look and can influence the direction of the trends.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The evaluators mailed a survey developed by the National Task Force on Closing Achievement Gaps to curriculum and research directors in the Council of the Great City Schools' 55 cities. Response rate was 87%. Achievement data was self-reported by the districts and was rounded to the nearest whole number.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The study was conducted and funded by the Council of the Great City Schools. Reforms discussed were funded in a variety of ways but most commonly through state, district or Title I monies.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The study covered a national span.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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