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U.S. News: Literacy Scores Stall in Inner Cities

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Students in large U.S. inner cities are struggling to improve their reading ability, especially at middle-school levels, according to results from a national reading test released Thursday.

Only Atlanta and Los Angeles, two of the 11 urban centers that took the reading exam, showed statistically significant growth in eighth-grade reading from 2007 and 2009. They also were the only two to show growth since 2002.

Four districts notched gains at the fourth-grade level since 2007, while five showed progress since 2002.

The test scores are part of the urban National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. Known as the "nation's report card," the exam has been given in urban districts biennially to students in the two benchmark elementary and middle school grades.

The lackluster reading results follow the December release of urban math scores, which also showed stalled progress.

The stagnating scores of urban schools come at a key time in education reform. President Barack Obama has centered his education agenda on lifting the achievement of inner-city children. Their progress, especially in literacy skills, is critical to his push to keep the nation competitive in a global economy.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan lamented the middle-school scores during an interview Thursday. He said his administration wants districts to build more comprehensive reading programs that reach into middle and high schools.

"We tend to focus on the early grades, which is important," he said. "But if we want to really move the needle on reading, we need to tackle the tough reading challenges in middle schools."

Mr. Duncan has proposed a new \$450 million literacy program for 2011 that would provide competitive grants to states that craft comprehensive literacy initiatives from pre-K through 12th grade.

School districts in six areas, including Chicago, New York and Washington D.C., have voluntarily participated since 2003. Seven districts took the test for the first time last year. A companion NAEP exam is given to students across the country, allowing a comparison between national and urban scores.

The highly regarded test is scored on a zero-to-500 point scale, with scores broken into "below basic," "basic," "proficient" and "advanced." Students are considered to have passed the exam at the proficient level.

The test is more rigorous than most state exams. So while many urban districts report impressive gains on state tests, they cannot claim such progress on the NAEP.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, said that trend data from 2003 show urban schools have made some strides in reading. But he said junior-high literacy continues to present a challenge.

"It appears students simply are not coming into middle school with a high enough level of comprehension skills," said Mr. Casserly, whose nonpartisan group represents 66 city districts. "This is not just in the cities, but a nationwide problem."

Overall, urban schools scored far below the national averages in fourth- and eighth-grade reading. Most urban districts posted higher scores on both exams. But in many cases, the gains were not statistically significant, meaning they could have occurred by chance and might not reflect real growth.

At fourth grade, four of 11 inner-city districts saw an uptick in performance between 2007 and 2009, with the District of Columbia and Houston notching the largest gains. D.C. jumped from an average score of 197 to 203. But even that kept them at "below basic," the lowest quartile on the scoring chart.

Houston improved from 206 to 211, landing them one step up in the "basic" category. The national average was 220 last year, the same score as 2007.

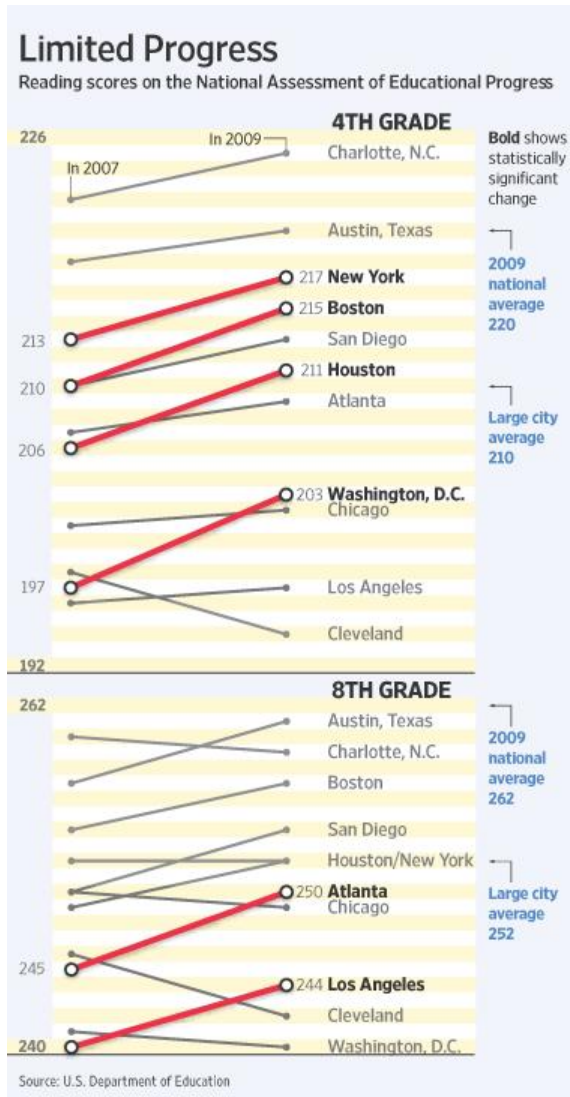
But eighth-grade reading proved a bigger hurdle. Only two districts showed progress, and even then, their scores were far below the nation. Atlanta posted a 250, Los Angeles a 244. The national average was 262. All of these scores are below the proficient level.

D.C. posted a slight gain if charter schools are removed from the equation. Unlike most national school districts, the D.C. charter schools are considered a separate entity from the D.C. public school system. In the national data, D.C. charter schools were included in 2007, but not in 2009, inflating the scores.

Catherine Snow, a reading expert at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said the nation spent seven years under No Child Left Behind focusing on the basic reading skills of children.

Literacy efforts in many urban districts were driven by Reading First, President George Bush's \$6 billion reading initiative for kindergarten through third grade.

"Reading First was a good effort at solving a problem that was defined too simply," she said. "We spent a lot of money focused on phonics and fluency and those are very important. But we have not spent enough time teaching kids comprehension skills and we are suffering because of it."



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