

Testimony
on
“Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization: Improving NCLB to Close
the Achievement Gap”
before the
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
and the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
U.S. Senate
by the
Council of the Great City Schools

March 13, 2007
Washington, D.C.

Good morning, my name is Michael Casserly. I am the Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this joint House-Senate hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the impact of *No Child Left Behind* on student achievement and gaps in that achievement.

The Council is a coalition of 66 of the nation’s largest urban public school systems. Our Board of Directors is composed of the Superintendent of Schools and one School Board member from each city, making the Council the only national organization comprised of both governing and administering personnel and the only one whose sole mission and purpose is improving urban education.

Our member urban school systems educate more than 7.4 million students—or about 15 percent of the nation’s K-12 public school enrollment. Some 64 percent of our students are eligible for a free lunch and about 18 percent are English language learners. Approximately 78 percent of our students are African American, Hispanic, or Asian American. Nearly one-third of the nation’s students of color and poor students are educated in our schools each day.

The Council of the Great City Schools supported the passage of *No Child Left Behind* when it was heading to the House and Senate floors for final passage in December 2001. We were the only national education organization to give the legislation any measure of support, and we did so because our members wanted to be on record in support of raising student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and being accountable for results.

We think that the law has been helpful in a number of ways. It has—

- Continued and strengthened the standards movement, and placed greater emphasis on student achievement and closing various achievement gaps

- Spurred the use of regular assessments to measure student progress, and the collection of better data, particularly on children who were often lost in the averages
- Placed more emphasis on the use of reading research
- Introduced accountability for results into the education arena
- Underscored the importance of having highly qualified teachers in every classroom

The Council has backed up its support of the law by providing extensive technical assistance to our members on implementing the law; publishing our annual state test scores—city-by-city, grade-by-grade, year-by-year in both reading and math for each subgroup;¹ initiating the Trial Urban District Assessment to track our progress as cities on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP);² conducting research on the reforms that are common among major urban school systems across the country that are making substantial academic gains;³ and organizing Strategic Support Teams to help our member urban school districts raise student achievement.⁴

We also backed *No Child Left Behind* as it was being finalized, knowing that it had numerous challenges for urban schools, multiple requirements, and many poorly calibrated provisions. We see many of the same problems with the law that its toughest critics see, including—

- Insufficient focus on good instructional practice in many of the law’s multiple provisions
- Non-instructional requirements that have resulted in an overemphasis on the implementation of and compliance with the law’s technical provisions, and inconsistent implementation of the law at federal and state levels
- Diversion of large amounts of Title I money into supplemental educational services that appear to show limited, if any, effects on state test scores
- Annually cascading sanctions that result in school districts changing strategies each year before anything has had time to work
- Precious little technical assistance from the federal government or the states or research at any level on how to meet the legislation’s performance goals, and inadequate funding

¹ *Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*, March 2006.

² *Trial Urban District Assessment: Reading and Mathematics*, 2005. National Assessment of Educational Progress: The Nation’s Report Card.

³ *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*. MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools, 2002.

⁴ The Council has provided Strategic Support Teams to Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Denver, Detroit, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, St. Louis, Toledo, and Washington, DC.

The nation's major urban school systems have seen steady academic gains over the last several years under *No Child Left Behind*, but it is not clear how much of the improvements are due to the law and how much is due to the underlying standards movement—to which we give considerable credit. Our academic improvements, in fact, now outpace those at the national and state levels on both the state assessments and on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The law may have helped sustain our gains, but it is not clear yet whether it accelerated them. (See attached graphs.)

Still, our overall academic performance is below state and national averages, and our racially identifiable achievement gaps remain wide—although they are not much wider than those of the nation at large. The gap in reading between white and African American fourth-graders nationally on the NAEP in 2005 was about 29 points (on a 500-point scale); the gap in the large central cities was about 32 points. The gap in math was about 26 and 30 points, respectively—the equivalent of about two-and-a-half to three years of schooling. Neither gap—national or urban—has narrowed much since 2002, when the Trial Urban District Assessment was first administered, although both white and black students in the cities have shown parallel gains.

Reading gaps on the NAEP between white and Hispanic fourth-graders are about the same, nationally and in the urban areas, as those between whites and African Americans—about 27 to 30 points. Gaps in math performance are somewhat smaller, however—about 21 to 24 points. In the last several years, there are few signs that these gaps are narrowing on the NAEP.

Trend lines on the state tests, however, show tangible progress. Between 2000 and 2005, reading data indicate that 84.6 percent of all fourth grades tested in the Great City Schools showed some narrowing of the achievement gap between white and African American students; and 63.3 percent of all eighth grades tested did. The fourth grade math data, moreover, showed that 55.6 percent of all fourth grades tested showed some narrowing of the achievement gap between the two groups during the same period; and 56.4 percent of all eighth grades did.

Gaps between whites and Hispanics on the state tests also show some narrowing, although conclusions are tricky because of problems with definitions. Between 2000 and 2005, reading data indicate that 76 percent of fourth grades tested in the Great City Schools showed some narrowing of the gap between white and Hispanic students; and 75.9 percent of all eighth grades tested showed some narrowing between the two groups during the same period.

These gaps are stubborn because they result from the long-standing cross-generational patterns of inferior education, and from the persistent racial and economic inequities that are rampant in the nation's educational system, public and private. We also know that the quality of education received by our children's parents and grandparents strongly predicts their skills as they begin their formal schooling, a deficit that nearly doubles by the time a child is 17. Schools have exacerbated this situation historically by affording poor and minority students the worst textbooks, facilities, and most

importantly, teachers. The problems have persisted largely because the country has only recently understood the full effects of this pattern and has not always had the will to address it.

However, these gaps are not inevitable, as multiple international studies have shown. The gaps *can* be closed. And the research has been reasonably clear about how to do it—improve teaching and the access of all children to it. The difference between several years of good teachers versus a comparable period of ineffective ones has been estimated to account for as much as 50 percentile points in achievement. Good teacher training and professional development, smaller class sizes, and solid reading and math instructional materials can also help.

A number of our member school districts have shown progress on their overall state-test scores and in reducing their racially identifiable gaps using this research and the accumulating wisdom about what it takes to improve large urban school systems. Districts showing unusual headway on both fronts in reading, in particular, include those in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Richmond (Virginia), Miami-Dade County, Atlanta, Norfolk, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Austin, Long Beach, and Broward County (Florida).

These and other urban school systems are using a number of strategies to close these gaps and raise students' overall performance. Faster-improving school systems usually have strong and stable leadership, wherein the school board and the superintendent are in agreement about how to pursue their reforms and are then able to sustain that consensus and relentless focus over time. These districts are also clear about their systemwide academic goals, and the goals for individual school and subgroup attainment. Many of these urban school districts also have developed internal procedures by which they hold their people—first at the senior staff level and then in the schools—responsible for attaining the achievement goals that the leadership has set.

These faster-improving urban school systems devote substantial financial and personnel resources to ensuring that their curriculum is tightly aligned with state standards and assessments. Their core reading and math programs are usually as consistent as possible with those standards, the assessments, and the curriculum. To the extent that gaps exist, the districts fill them with supplemental materials in order to make sure that students do not miss skills on which they are likely to be tested by the state. These districts also devote substantial energy to providing a coherent program of professional development, training their staff, principals, teachers, and academic coaches on the curriculum, the use of programs and supplemental materials, pacing guides, classroom management techniques, methods for enhancing the overall rigor of the instruction, induction and mentoring, and differentiating instruction for English language learners and students with disabilities.

Most of these faster-improving districts, moreover, have mechanisms to ensure that instructional reforms are implemented at the classroom level. In addition, these districts assess their students throughout the school year, using benchmark tests, in order to catch students if they begin to slip behind. These districts do not wait until the end of

the year, when it is too late, to discover that a student wasn't mastering the material or to begin remedial work.

These higher-performing districts are often very good at interpreting and using their data to decide on where professional development is needed and for what, and to determine what tiers of interventions are appropriate when they see students starting to slip behind. Finally, these districts have a clear strategy for their lowest-performing schools and students—such as developing extended-time programs, more intensive interventions, and tutoring. Sometimes these strategies are targeted explicitly on reducing achievement gaps; sometimes they are not. But either way, they are designed to improve the performance of the lowest-achieving students and schools.

There are multiple ways to use these strategies to boost achievement and narrow the academic gaps; there are also ways to do them poorly. All in all, though, strategies such as these hold greater promise for raising achievement than many of the procedures currently required in *No Child Left Behind*, that is, allowing the state to run the school, privatizing or chartering the school, appointing an outside advisor or consultant, restructuring governance, reorganizing staff, allowing students to transfer to another school, writing another plan, and decreasing management authority.

The Council has seen many of the strategies used by the faster-improving urban school systems succeed as they were introduced by our Strategic Support Teams in schools and districts that have not seen gains. Consequently, we are recommending that Congress retain the overall framework of *No Child Left Behind* but refocus the law's provisions around instructional strategies that improve student achievement and move away from procedures that don't.

Our proposals are designed to articulate clearly the standards we—as urban school districts—are expected to achieve and to eliminate some of the inequities in expectations that our nation's current 50-state educational system has produced. These proposals are also intended to give schools adequate time to see their instructional interventions work before sanctions are applied. Thus, we recommend that the first three phases of school improvement be consolidated into a single multiyear period in which schools would be required to devote their federal resources to instructional activities. This approach would also have the benefit of muting the effects of late state test data. We have also included sanctions at the end of the intervention and improvement period, tailored to the specificity and pervasiveness of the school failure.

The Council's proposals also attempt to begin addressing the issues of teacher effectiveness and the uneven distribution of teachers. Thus, we recommend taking steps to build the technical infrastructure by which data on student performance and individual teachers are linked, as well as creating incentives and induction programs aimed at retaining experienced teachers in the schools that need them the most. Finally, our proposals aim to reduce attempts to manipulate and escape the law's accountability system but to give schools credit for academic growth and progress.

Our overall goal is to offer practical solutions to some of the problems that have plagued *No Child Left Behind*; retain the stated purposes and goals of the law; shift the focus of the law to raising achievement; and make the law more workable and operational at the local level.

The following is a summary of some of the Council's proposals to strengthen the law. We will submit our full package of proposals next week.

Thank you.

High Academic Standards

1. Develop and phase in national—not federal—education standards in reading, math, and science using a broad-based process with stakeholders and coordinated by an independent entity.
2. Align new national education standards with the best international benchmarks, 21st century workforce competencies, and skills necessary for students to succeed in postsecondary education and training.
3. Require states to tether or align their assessment systems to new national education standards with common definitions of proficiency.

Teaching and Learning

4. Reorient the legislation toward a greater emphasis on instruction and achievement by replacing the current system of annually cascading sanctions—school improvement I, school improvement II, and corrective action—with a single three-year school intervention and improvement period. (See graph.)
5. Require schools that are identified for the three-year school intervention and improvement period to spend an undifferentiated amount equal to 30 percent of their Title I funds on the following instructional strategies and interventions —
 - Tiered instructional interventions/differentiated instruction
 - Research based or promising instructional programs and methodologies
 - School review and monitoring protocols
 - Instructional coaching
 - Achievement-related professional development
 - Interim (benchmark) testing
 - Extended-time programming or supplemental educational services
 - Transfer options to higher-performing public schools
6. Make available extended time/after-school supplemental educational service (SES) programs for low-performing, low-income students. Authorize all school districts to be a provider of SES services, but allow parents 30 days to opt out of a district

program for a state-approved private provider with a record of academic effectiveness.

7. Provide low-performing, low-income students in a school identified for improvement the opportunity to transfer to a school within the school district that is not identified.
8. Require schools exhibiting a “persistent and pervasive” lack of progress in raising student achievement to close or reconstitute in one of the following two ways
 - *Comprehensive Restructuring*: Schools that fail to make academic progress in two of the three core subjects with a majority of their students during the three-year intervention and improvement period must either close or must reconstitute the school leadership and staff.
 - *Focused Restructuring*: Schools that fail to make academic progress in two of the three core subjects with one or more subgroups comprising less than the majority of all enrolled students during the three-year improvement period must review the performance of the school leadership and staff serving these subgroups of students, and then must institute a comprehensive overhaul of the academic programs and services provided to them.

Highly Qualified Teachers

9. Require states to develop databases by 2010 that would provide longitudinal and disaggregated state test score and other data on student performance by individual teacher.
10. Prohibit the disproportionate assignment or hiring of less experienced or underqualified teachers to the highest-poverty, lowest-performing schools in every district. Provide a plan by which schools that cannot meet this standard are brought into compliance.
11. Permit school districts to use Title I or Title II funds for additional or incentive pay for highly effective teachers and principals serving in low-performing, high-poverty schools or for such other incentives as induction and mentoring, additional planning time, smaller class sizes, or reduced course loads.

Assessments and Data Systems

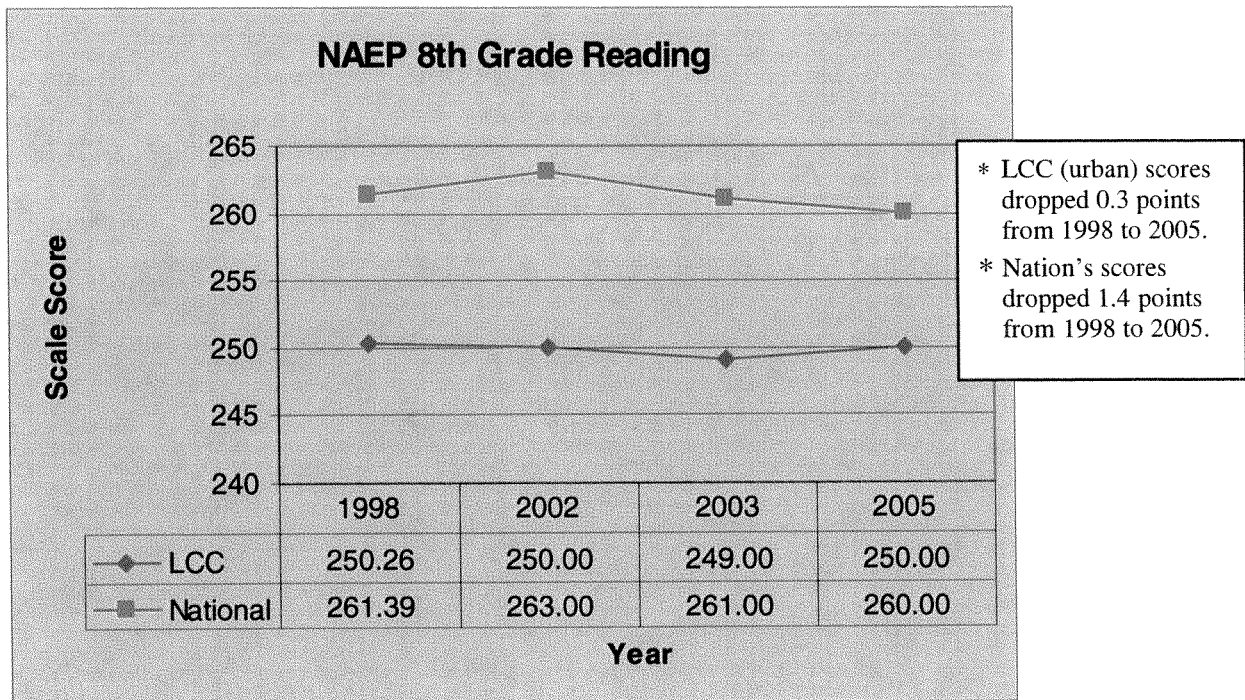
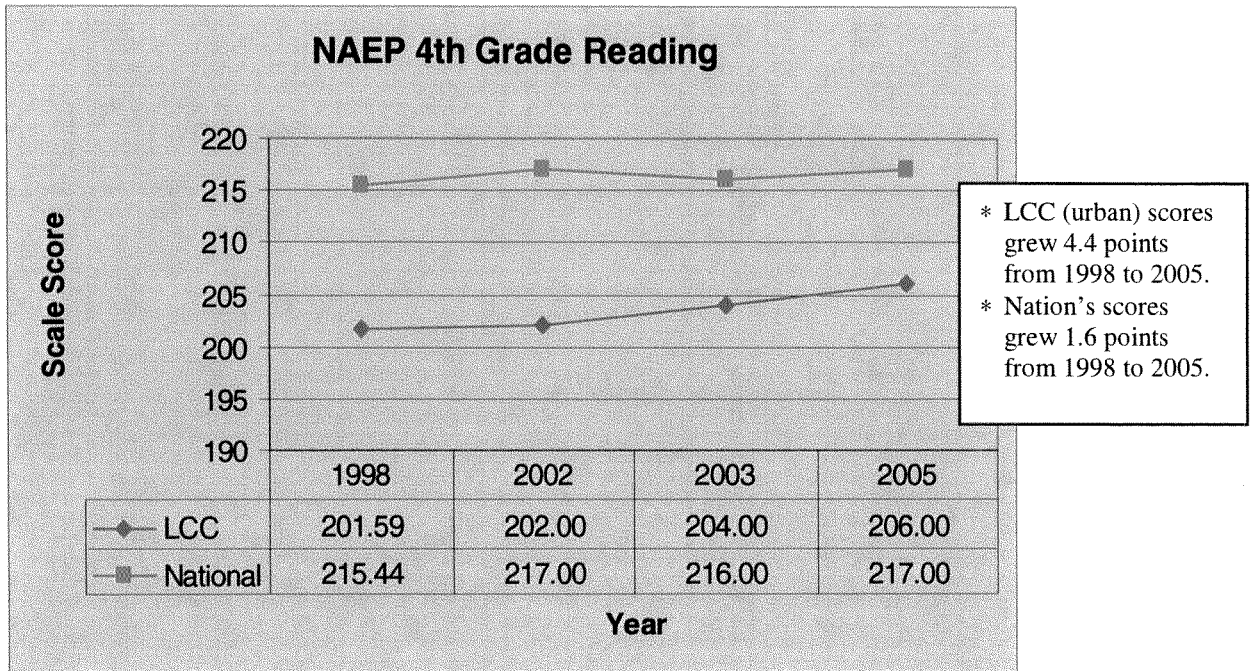
12. Improve state data systems in order to provide assessment results to local school districts in an instructionally useful form at least one month before the start of the school year.
13. Allow a three-year (school year) window for students with limited English proficiency who are new to U.S. schools before requiring them to participate in state assessments if not available in their native language.

14. Revise the special education assessment and accountability regulations (1-percent and 2-percent provisions) after completion of the negotiated rulemaking process in 2008.

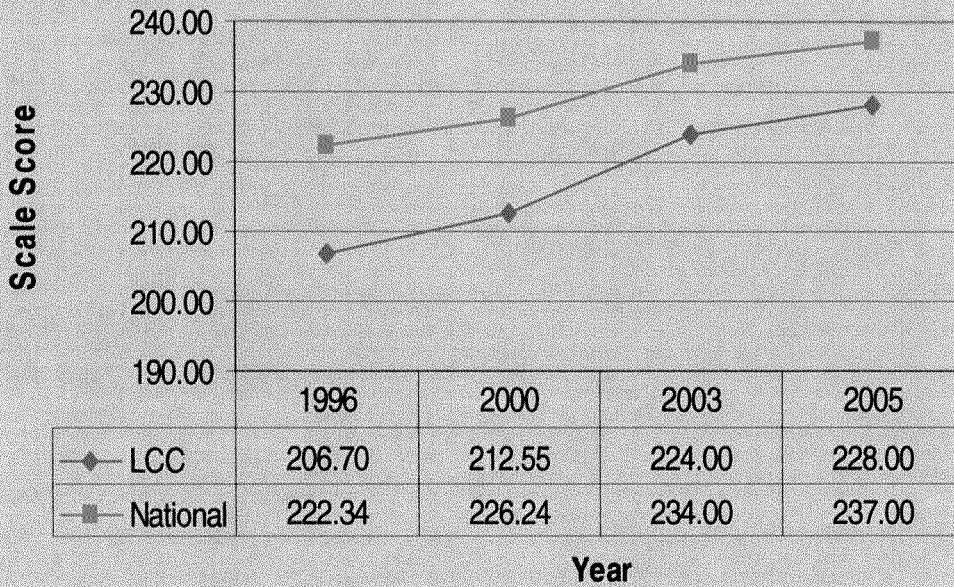
Accountability

15. Allow states to adopt progress models that take into account the growth or gain in academic achievement of districts, schools, and subgroups when determining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).
16. Allow local school districts with demonstrable data capability in states not adopting a progress model to adopt the approved progress model from another state and use it with one's own state assessment for AYP purposes.
17. Include "safe harbor" provisions for students not making AYP on either status or growth procedures by recognizing subgroup progress or a narrowing of achievement gaps across performance levels. ("Safe harbor" refers to the minimum progress that a school can make in the short run to meet *No Child Left Behind* requirements.)
18. Determine AYP on the performance of the same subgroups in the same subject over consecutive years rather than on the performance of any combination of subgroups or subjects.
19. Prohibit the use of a minimum subgroup size or N-size larger than 30 and prohibit the use of different N-sizes for different subgroups of students.

Large Central City (LCC) Progress on NAEP

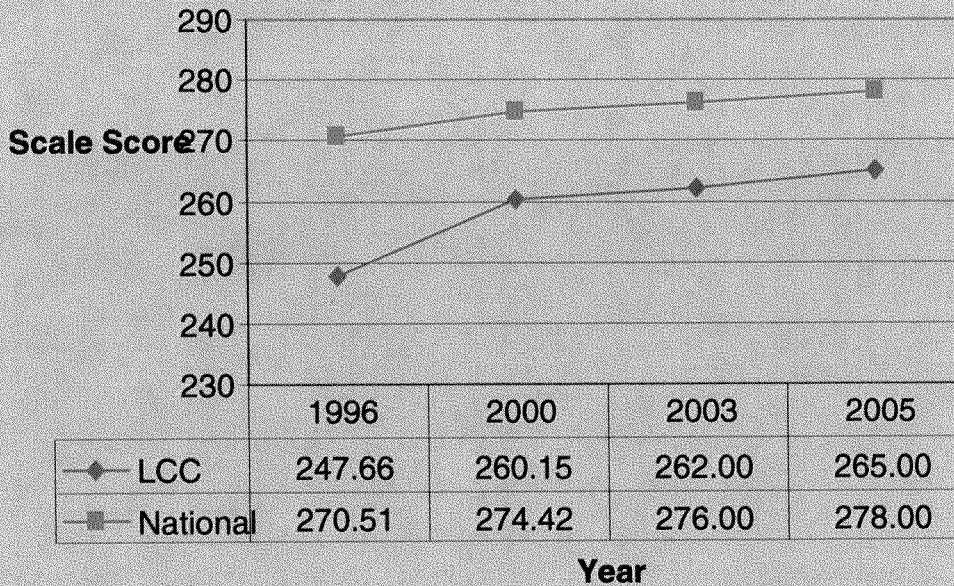


NAEP 4th Grade Math



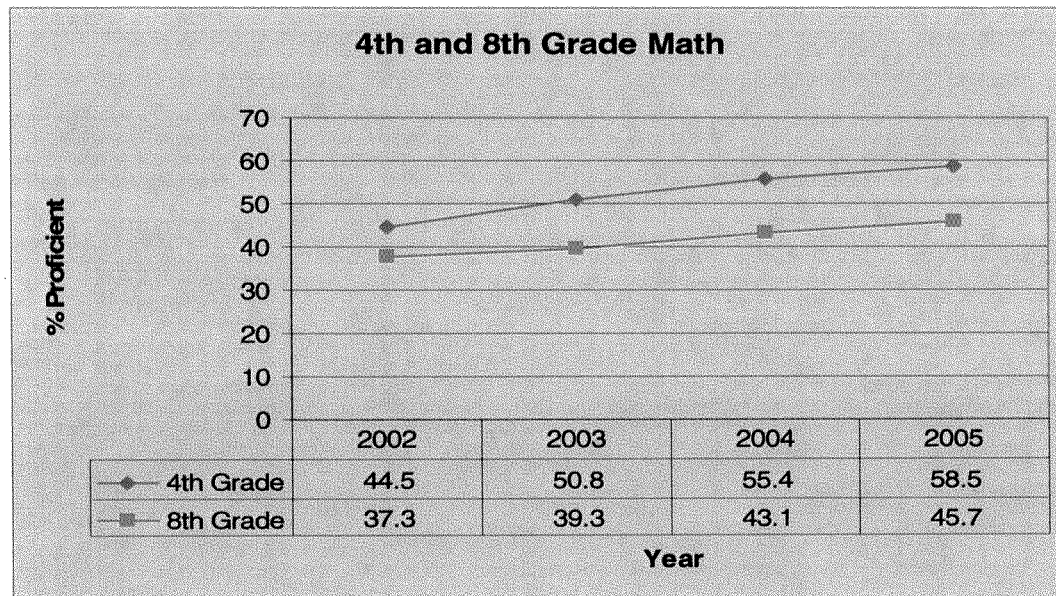
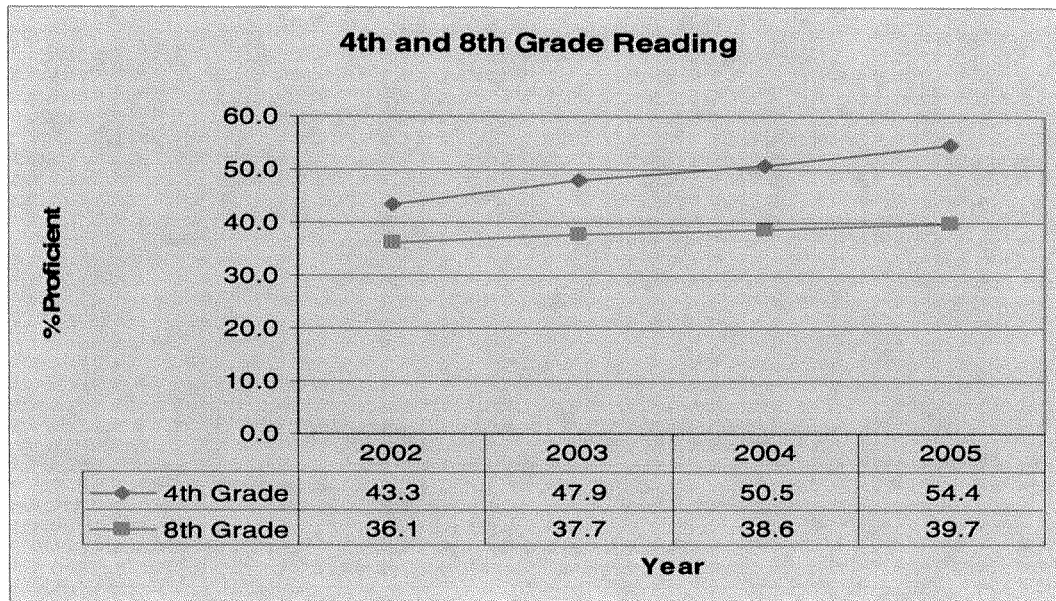
* LCC (urban) scores grew 21.3 points from 1996 to 2005.
 * Nation's scores grew 14.7 points from 1996 to 2005.

NAEP 8th Grade Math



* LCC (urban) scores grew 17.3 points from 1996 to 2005.
 * Nation's scores grew 7.5 points from 1996 to 2005.

Great City School Progress on State Tests



Trends in State vs. NAEP Proficiency Levels in Reading/Language Arts—4th Grade⁵

		State Tests				NAEP			
		2002	2003	2005	Δ	2002	2003	2005	Δ
National									
	% Proficient +	--	--	--	--	30	30	30	0
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	38	38	38	0
Urban									
	% Proficient +	43.3	47.9	54.4	+11.1	17	20	20	+3*
	% Below Basic					56	53	51	-5*
Atlanta									
	% Proficient +	71	76	83	+12	12	14	17	+5*
	% Below Basic	29	24	17	-12	65	63	59	-6*
Austin									
	% Proficient +	--	75	78	+3	--	--	29	--
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	--	--	39	--
Boston									
	% Proficient +	24	27	25	+1	--	16	17	+1
	% Below Basic	26	28	27	+1	--	52	49	-3
Charlotte									
	% Proficient +	74	83	84	+10	--	31	33	+2
	% Below Basic	--	5	4	-1	--	36	35	-1
Chicago ⁶									
	% Proficient +	35	36	42	+7	11	14	13	+2
	% Below Basic	17	20	17	0	66	60	60	-6
Cleveland									
	% Proficient +	40	59	59	+19	--	9	9	0
	% Below Basic	27	13	22	-5	--	65	63	-2
D.C. ²									
	% Proficient +	29	31	39	+10	10	10	11	+1
	% Below Basic	35	33	25	-10	69	69	67	-2
Houston									
	% Proficient +	--	69	70	+1	18	18	21	+3
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	52	52	48	-4
LA									
	% Proficient +	24	28	34	+10	11	11	14	+3*
	% Below Basic	38	34	32	-6	67	65	63	-4
New York									
	% Proficient +	47	52	54	+7	19	22	22	+3
	% Below Basic	15	9	9	-6	53	47	43	-10*
San Diego									
	% Proficient +	36	40	51	+15	--	22	22	0
	% Below Basic	28	23	19	-9	--	49	49	0

⁵ City scores on state tests cannot be compared with one another.

⁶ Third grade rather than fourth grade.

Trends in State vs. NAEP Proficiency Levels in Math—4th Grade⁷

		State Tests				NAEP			
		2002	2003	2005	Δ	2002	2003	2005	Δ
National									
	% Proficient +	--	--	--	--	--	31	35	+4*
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	--	24	21	-3*
Urban									
	% Proficient +		50.8	58.5	+7.7	--	20	24	+4*
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	--	37	32	-5*
Atlanta									
	% Proficient +	--	67	70	+3	--	13	17	+4
	% Below Basic	--	32	30	-2	--	50	43	-7*
Austin									
	% Proficient +	--	67	78	+11	--	--	40	--
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	--	--	15	--
Boston									
	% Proficient +	--	16	21	+5	--	12	22	+10*
	% Below Basic	--	38	32	-6	--	41	28	-13*
Charlotte									
	% Proficient +	--	95	93	-2	--	41	44	+3
	% Below Basic	--	1	1	0	--	16	14	-2
Chicago									
	% Proficient +	--	49	55	+6	--	10	13	+3
	% Below Basic	--	19	16	-3	--	50	48	-2
Cleveland ⁸									
	% Proficient +	--	50	53	+3	--	10	13	+3
	% Below Basic	--	40	37	-3	--	49	40	-9*
D.C.									
	% Proficient +	--	35	41	+6	--	7	10	+3*
	% Below Basic	--	25	20	-5	--	64	55	-9*
Houston									
	% Proficient +	--	63	69	+6	--	18	26	+8*
	% Below Basic	--	--	--	--	--	30	23	-7*
LA									
	% Proficient +	--	40	43	+3	--	13	18	+5*
	% Below Basic	--	34	32	-2	--	48	42	-6*
New York									
	% Proficient +	--	67	78	+11	--	21	26	+5*
	% Below Basic	--	9	5	-4	--	33	27	-6*
San Diego									
	% Proficient +	--	39	52	+13	--	20	29	+9*
	% Below Basic	--	29	23	-6	--	34	26	-8*

⁷ City scores on state tests cannot be compared with one another.

⁸ Third grade rather than fourth grade.