

Chicago's Progress Evident on NAEP

In 2005, few would have looked to Chicago for lessons on school improvement. Just one in seven fourth graders scored at or above *Proficient* in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The city's high school graduation rate hovered below 60 percent. And bitter disagreements persisted over the fate of under-enrolled and low-performing schools.

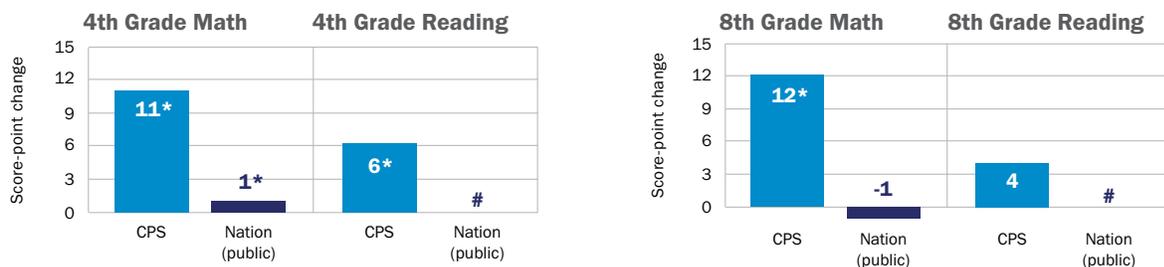
Today, the outlook for the nation's third-largest school district is considerably brighter. Performance of Chicago students now is similar to that of students in other large urban districts in reading and math, as measured by NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). Scores in grade 4 math and reading have improved faster than the nation as a whole in the last decade. And since 2007, the percentage of

grade 8 students who score at or above *NAEP Proficient* in math has more than doubled.

The city's education leaders point to several factors contributing to the improvement, including data-driven decision making, an emphasis on principal leadership, and a robust, education-focused civic culture. The district relies on the TUDA program for valid, objective achievement data that shows the city's progress over time.

"We consider it the national gold standard," Janice Jackson, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), said of TUDA. "They're long-term trends in student performance that we can see, and we can compare our district to other districts and states, which I think is critically important."

Score-Point Changes on NAEP 2009–2019



Rounds to zero. | Note: *Score changes are statistically significant (p < .05).

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019 Trial Urban District Assessment Reading and Mathematics



Overview of the Trial Urban District Assessment

The TUDA program provides urban school districts with district-level NAEP results in reading, math, science, and writing. Chicago was one of six original districts to participate when it began in 2002. Today, TUDA includes a total of 27 districts.

Before TUDA, districts had long struggled to compare their performance to similar districts across the country, explained Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools and a driving force behind the creation of TUDA. It was nearly impossible to gauge, on a district-by-district level, where improvement was happening and why. Chicago's progress, for example, might have gone unnoticed or been discredited if not for its participation in the program.

In that sense, Casserly says that TUDA helps highlight progress in urban education and shows that improvement is not only possible, it's happening in cities like Chicago.

"We've actually narrowed the gap between [urban school districts] and the nation by about half since they first started taking the assessment," Casserly said. "So it's not simply us asserting that urban schools are improving—look at the numbers. The numbers are quite clear. The proof of the improvement is found in the NAEP results."

Data-Driven Decision Making

NAEP data has been particularly instrumental in Chicago, where the district's embrace of research and data to guide decisions has been a central piece of its improvement efforts.

In a partnership that was the first of its kind among large districts, CPS and the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) (UChicago Consortium) collaborate closely to collect, track, and analyze education data. That has allowed researchers to identify and share solutions to some of urban education's most difficult challenges.

"For the past 20 years, they (UChicago Consortium) have had unfettered access to achievement data in our district," Jackson says. "That's created opportunities for us to refine our approach to education, but also creates ... public accountability around student performance in our district."



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– Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools



The fruit of that collaboration is evident in Chicago's progress on NAEP and other metrics. For example, before 2007, fewer than six in 10 ninth-graders could be expected to complete high school. Working with the district, researchers at the UChicago Consortium identified ninth grade as a "make-or-break year" for students and developed a set of "early warning indicators" to monitor student performance. Equipped with real-time data, administrators learned to identify students as soon as they fell off track for graduation and intervene with additional resources like mentoring and credit-recovery opportunities.

"That's when we started seeing big improvements in high school performance," said Elaine Allensworth, the director of the UChicago Consortium. Today, Chicago's high school graduation rate is above 75 percent and the district is closing the gap with the national average of 85 percent.

Allensworth says that NAEP data helps the district and its research partners confirm that the progress is real. "There's always these questions about, 'Can we really trust the gains that we're seeing?'" she explained. "But with NAEP, I feel like we have a lot more confidence in that. So, a lot of times I'll see trends in CPS, and I'll look to see, 'Do we see the same trends in NAEP?'"

Similarly, NAEP gives credence to the district's claims of improvement, says Karin Chenoweth, a writer at the nonprofit group The Education Trust who has closely studied Chicago's public schools. "I think NAEP has a lot more resonance with people who otherwise would dismiss state tests and state data," Chenoweth said. "So NAEP provides an intellectual integrity to any kind of thinking about where students are academically."

Principal Leadership

In addition to embracing data, education leaders say an emphasis on principal quality has helped drive the district's improvement. Supported by research from the UChicago Consortium, district leaders recognized in the early 2000s that principals play an outsized role in setting the vision and culture of a school. Research shows that effective and consistent school leadership is linked to student achievement and teacher effectiveness. On the other hand, frequent turnover in the principal's office can create a feeling of instability in schools and drive teachers away.

While school improvement efforts have long focused on the influence of teachers, academic programs, class sizes, and other factors, Chicago was one of the first major districts to recognize and significantly invest in principal training, preparation, and support.

"Back then, nobody was talking about school leadership as being the core lever of improvement for schools," says Chenoweth. "The insight that school leaders were the thing that could make everything happen was new."

By prioritizing school leadership, Chicago has become much more strategic in the way it recruits, trains, and supports principals. "Principal leadership and autonomy are huge features here in Chicago," says Jackson. Empowering school leaders "allowed us to move things very quickly despite some of the turmoil and turnover at the top," she says, referencing frequent changes in district leadership.

Education-Focused Civic Culture

Supporting the city's concrete efforts to improve schools has been something more abstract: a culture of civic engagement and activism that often puts public education front and center.

In a city where philanthropies look to scale up what works, community organizations work to support students, and unions speak with a powerful voice, schools are almost always in the spotlight. Despite frequent, and often heated, disagreements among these different interests, the fact that education is so often debated helps ensure that school improvement remains at the top of the city's priorities.



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“The question of schools has a very high profile inside the public discourse and politics of the city,” says Jesse Sharkey, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). “That goes back to the fact that there’s social movements around public education, there’s a lot of community organizations that organize around school issues, there’s strong unions. Then... you have the mayor and a number of large civic interests and philanthropists that put a lot of energy in schools as well.”

This level of civic engagement has created what Jackson calls a “culture of accountability” in Chicago. “I think people expect a lot of the school system and we’re held accountable to that in a very public way,” she says.

NAEP plays a critical role in that system of public accountability. “That goes back to having not just the district talking about the progress they made but having external validators like... the NAEP data validate that things are trending in the right direction,” Jackson says.

Continuing Forward

Looking ahead, the district faces challenges as it seeks to sustain and build on its progress. After some early improvement, grade 4 CPS scores in reading are no different from 2013 scores, while grade 8 scores are on par with performance on the initial assessment in 2002.

While Jackson says she is “never pleased to see any kind of stagnation or regression,” the NAEP data has galvanized the district to rethink and retool its ideas and strategies for improvement. As Jackson explains: “Our mantra we have is, ‘What got us here won’t get us to the next level.’”



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