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Today's results from the first national assessment of urban school district performance in science will give little comfort to the public leaders and business executives who are expressing concerns about science achievement in the United States. As we reported last spring, over half of our students do not perform at the higher levels of achievement.

While the overall average scores for most of the 10 participating urban districts are lower than the national average, analysis by demographic group presents a different picture of achievement. The average scores for students in these districts broken down by racial and ethnic characteristics, in general, are not significantly different from the scores for the same groups nationally.

And in most cases, the size of the white-minority achievement gap among eighth graders is the same or smaller in these districts than in the nation as a whole.

While the National Assessment is designed to report on student performance and not on the reasons for that performance, it is hard to ignore the similarity of these science results to previous findings in reading and mathematics. Both the data and common sense suggest that students who do not read and comprehend well and who are not adequately skilled in math are not likely to do well in science. What else should we expect?

As we reported earlier this year, national science scores are improving in the fourth grade where gains in reading and mathematics performance appear most evident. Results of improvements in instruction in the early grades are encouraging. Fewer national science gains were seen in the eighth grade where gains in reading and math are not as evident.

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And, 12th grade performance remained quite disappointing. When we report on the 2005 reading and mathematics performance of 12th graders, we will have another opportunity to compare results by subject.

Recognizing the high level of interest in science, the National Assessment Governing Board recently developed a new test framework that will be used to develop the content for national science assessments. This two-year effort involved many elementary and secondary science educators and representatives of post-secondary education and industry who carefully considered what students should know about science, technology and scientific activities by the time they leave high school. We believe that the new framework represents the best thinking on important topics in science and technology for the 21st century. This new framework is available to educators, interest groups and to the public at large and will be used in 2009 and future science assessments.

We are indebted to these 10 school districts for volunteering to participate in this assessment and agreeing to share their results with the public. The Council of the Great City Schools initiated the idea of urban district assessment and worked hard to convince Congress to fund the effort. Most of these districts previously participated in the 2002 reading and writing assessments and in the 2003 and 2005 reading and mathematics assessments in grades 4 and 8.

Collectively, the TUDA districts educate three million students, and their results are important. By choosing to participate, they provide a real national service.

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