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**STATEMENT ON 2007 TRIAL URBAN DISTRICT ASSESSMENT
RESULTS IN MATHEMATICS AND READING
FROM *THE NATION'S REPORT CARD*TM**

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This is the fourth time that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been able to report results for a group of large urban school districts—and the trends we see are encouraging. Most of these districts are making gains, particularly in mathematics. In some cases the gains are greater than for the nation as whole, which means that achievement gaps are closing.

We haven't arrived yet. Most of the districts still lag behind the averages for public schools nationwide. There is still a great deal more work to do. But NAEP shows we are moving in the right direction.

I am pleased to see that Atlanta Public Schools, where I am an elementary principal, has continued to demonstrate significant improvement in both mathematics and reading at both 4th- and 8th-grades since the Trial Urban District Assessment started in 2002. Atlanta illustrates what can be done when comprehensive school improvement efforts are put in place, when the conviction is strong that children can learn, and when accountability systems provide the data we need to focus and improve. We are climbing the mountain, but we aren't on top yet, and the NAEP results for Atlanta also show the scope of the task ahead of us.

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Atlanta Public Schools was one of the original five districts that volunteered to participate in the first NAEP urban assessment back in 2002. The overarching reason was that we wanted an independent measure of student achievement that could confirm that academic progress is being made. We did not want to rely solely on our state tests. Secondly, as the world becomes increasingly flat, it is important that students in Atlanta are able to compete successfully with others nationally and internationally too. The NAEP frameworks cover a broader range of topics than the state assessments, and they help us see where we stand in this broader world.

When NAEP was first given in 2002 the results for Atlanta were less than encouraging. Only 35 percent of the 4th-graders were at or above the *Basic* achievement level in reading. This meant that almost two-thirds of our 4th-grade students had serious problems understanding the overall meaning of simple stories and text. They had trouble making obvious connections and picking out important details. The 4th-graders below *Basic* are not necessarily non-readers, but they do have serious reading problems which make it difficult to do their other work in school.

This year the proportion of 4th-graders in Atlanta reaching the *Basic* achievement level in reading is 48 percent—still too low—but 13 percentage points higher than it was five years ago. Nationally, the proportion at or above *Basic* has gone up just 4 percentage points over the past five years—from 62 to 66 percent. So there still is a serious gap between Atlanta and the nation, but we are closing it. Atlanta has also increased the proportion of students reaching *Proficient* in 4th-grade reading—from 12 to 18 percent, a jump of 6 percentage points, compared to just a 2 percentage point rise for public schools nationwide.

Although the standards used and the numbers reported are different, the trends for Atlanta on NAEP are the same as those on Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. This strengthens the evidence that the district's instructional program and accountability system are working.

We often are told it is more difficult to improve academic performance in middle school than it is in the elementary grades. Of course, there is adolescence to deal with, and whatever achievement deficits there are only tend to get larger. The curriculum in middle school is becoming more abstract and demanding.

Certainly, there have been much greater gains on NAEP nationwide at 4th-grade than at 8th-grade. That's true over the past four or five years and since the current versions of assessment began in early 1990s. Nationally, achievement in 8th-grade reading is actually slightly lower in 2007 than it was in 2002.

Yet, in Atlanta there have been strong gains at 8th-grade. From 2005 to 2007 the average score in 8th-grade reading went up by 5 points, and 8th-grade math surged by 11 points. I think this reflects the concentrated efforts we have made to improve our middle schools with a range of well-respected national reform models, strong accountability, and a strong belief that the children in these grades can learn.

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About three-quarters of the students in the Atlanta Public Schools are low-income and eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program. More than 80 percent are Black. But we do not have a double standard, expecting less and teaching less because they are “disadvantaged.”

The Nation’s Report Card released today not only has data on the 11 urban districts that participated in our assessment but also for a nationally representative sample of public school students in all of the country’s large central cities, which have a population of 250,000 or more. There are 66 of these, and the students in the large central city schools account for about 15 percent of the nation’s public school population. The central city schools enroll about 25 percent of the nation’s low-income children and almost 30 percent of its Black and Hispanic students.

Since this category was first used in NAEP reporting in 2002 and 2003, the students in these large central city schools have made significantly greater gains than the nation in 4th-grade reading (6 points compared to 3 points) and 8th-grade math (7 points versus 4 points). In 4th-grade math they have made about the same gains, which are substantial but not enough to close the achievement gap. In 8th-grade reading there has been no change in the average for large central cities, while the national average for public schools declined slightly.

Overall, the bottom line is that Atlanta and many of the nation’s urban schools are making progress, but they must do better and more. The pace of improvement must be accelerated. The NAEP data show this can be done, but the changes we need will not be easy.

I am convinced that when the nation’s urban schools provide instruction that is rigorous and relevant and is delivered by highly skilled and effective teachers, we can and will make a difference in the lives of all our children.

Thank you.

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