NAEP Critical to District of Columbia's School Improvement

In the last decade, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has set the pace when it comes to improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Students in the nation's capital have posted the largest math and reading score gains among urban districts and improved more quickly than the nation as a whole, as measured by NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA).

Progress in D.C. Public Schools has been hard-earned. Nearly eight in 10 students in the district are economically disadvantaged. Its schools have long experienced higher than average teacher turnover. And the city remains an epicenter for fierce battles over education policy.

Despite these challenges, the district's math and reading scores on NAEP in grades 4 and 8 have increased by double digits in the last decade. Moreover, among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the district significantly increased student achievement in three of the four

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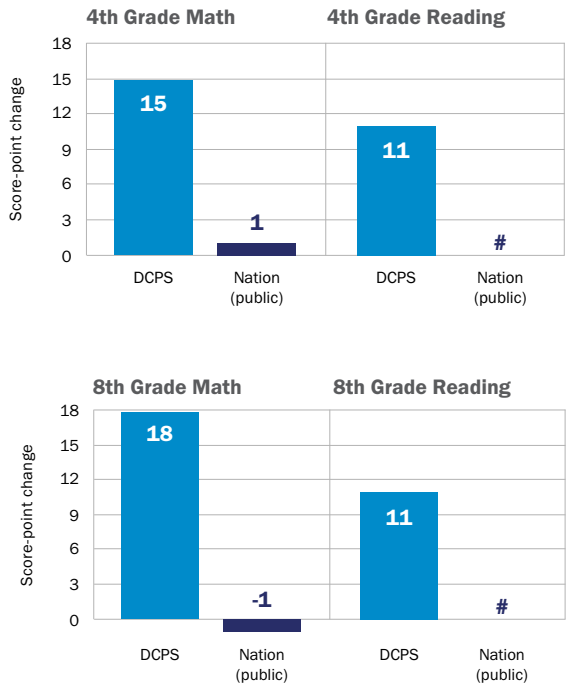
Score-Point Changes on NAEP 2009–2019



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

grades and subjects. In the process, the score gap between DCPS and the nation as a whole has narrowed significantly.

While significant work remains to sustain and build on this progress, education leaders point to NAEP and the TUDA program as critical tools in their improvement efforts. As the school district has undergone significant policy and demographic changes in the last decade, they have relied on NAEP as a trusted gauge of student performance.

"Because it is a truly independent measure and because it is so consistent over time, NAEP data is critically important to us," said Hanseul Kang, the D.C. state superintendent of education. "It's the one true apples-to-apples comparison across the country."

Overview of the Trial Urban District Assessment

That Kang and others can confidently take stock of the school district's progress is a credit to the TUDA program, which provides 27 urban school districts with district-level NAEP results in reading, math, science, and writing. DCPS was one of six original districts to participate in TUDA when it began in 2002. Since that inaugural assessment, 21 other districts have joined the voluntary program.

The governance structure of education in the District of Columbia makes it a unique, and somewhat complex, case. Public education in the city is split roughly equally between a network of charter schools and DCPS, the city's system of traditional public schools. While NAEP measures the progress of all DC students in DCPS and public charter schools, TUDA includes only students in DCPS. This distinction provides district leaders with student achievement data on a more granular level.

Before TUDA, school districts lacked an objective measure to confidently 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. "We had nothing that was comparable across state lines that could answer the question, 'Are we or aren't we making progress?'" Casserly said. "But if we had results city by city, we'd have a better idea of which cities were improving and what they were doing to improve."

For nearly 20 years, districts like DCPS have relied on TUDA as a consistent, reliable measure of student achievement—something education leaders in D.C. say is especially valuable given the tremendous changes the district has undergone in recent years.

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A Decade of Changes in the Nation's Capital

The story of DCPS in the last decade is one of across-the-board improvement on NAEP amid significant policy and demographic shifts. In 2009, fourth graders in the nation's capital scored 16 points below the national average in reading. By 2019, the gap was five points and DCPS students scored higher than the average among large urban districts. In math, what was once a 19-point gap between fourth graders in DCPS and the national average is now just five points.

Significant policy reforms have accompanied these score improvements, including:

- Expansion of early childhood education
- Adoption of high-quality curriculum and standards
- Changes to teacher evaluation and compensation

In 2008, the District of Columbia embarked on an ambitious mission to make free pre-K programs available to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the city. Today, the city boasts one of the most comprehensive universal pre-K programs in the country, leading all states in terms of access, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

DCPS has also invested significantly in improving what and how students are taught. That work began in 2010, when the school system became an "early and aggressive adopter" of the Common Core State Standards, according to Corinne Colgan, DCPS chief of teaching and learning. The adoption of more rigorous standards set in motion a series of changes to improve the quality and consistency of instruction in the district. "We really wanted to establish a high-quality floor that all students would experience but that allowed teachers the flexibility to innovate and go above and beyond and tailor the curriculum," Colgan says.

And in one of the more controversial reforms, DCPS changed how the district evaluates and pays its teachers. The new policy measured teachers' performance, in part, by student test scores and gave high-performing teachers salary raises and bonus pay.

While the evaluation and compensation policy has changed since its introduction in 2009, its core tenets remain. School district leaders credit it as critical to DCPS's improvement, though the policy continues to be a subject of much debate in the city.

Insights Provided by NAEP

Given these and other significant changes in D.C., education leaders say NAEP is invaluable as a consistent and reliable measure of student achievement.

"It's always very helpful and affirming, when we're making changes, that we're seeing those results on NAEP," Colgan says. "To have that one really consistent gold standard to measure ourselves with. And when we see other districts making great progress on NAEP, those are places we may go to learn what they're doing."

Similarly, NAEP helps the district "put in context the level of progress that is happening in D.C. and truly how much it stands out relative to what's happening in the rest of the country," says Kang, whose office oversees DCPS schools as well as charter schools.

In D.C., where score improvements have coincided with significant changes in the composition of the student body, education leaders pay particularly close attention to the student group data NAEP

provides TUDA districts. In the last decade, the proportion of white and Hispanic students has increased, while the proportion of Black students has declined. At the same time, the median family income in D.C. has increased significantly.

Because NAEP breaks down results by race, gender, and eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, the district can see whether improvement is reflected across all student groups. "We are very much focused on not only improving results overall but ensuring that our students furthest behind are making even faster progress," Kang says.

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More Work to Be Done

Despite score improvements in DCPS, education leaders acknowledge that significant work remains. Among the most pressing challenges are the score gaps that persist between students of different races. Even when the performances of Black and white students who are not eligible for free and reduced-price meals are compared, the gaps are statistically significant and striking. In eighth grade reading, for example, Black students scored an average of 260, while white students scored an average of 301. In eighth grade math, Black students scored an average of 282, while white students scored an average of 325.

That NAEP and TUDA data shine a light on these gaps adds urgency to the work school district and community leaders are doing to promote equity, said Mary Filardo, the executive director of the 21st Century School Fund, a local nonprofit education organization primarily concerned with modernizing school facilities.

In September 2020, Kang announced that she would leave her position, but she leaves a valuable legacy of using NAEP scores to spur and monitor school improvement. Underlying all the improvement efforts is a "fundamental commitment… to believing that our students can learn and achieve at higher levels than we previously have been supporting them to do," says Kang. "I think that fundamental commitment absolutely remains true and will remain true into the future."