

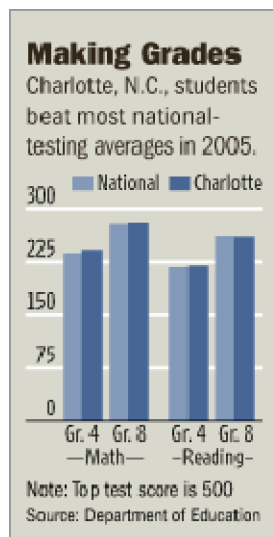
How Charlotte Tops Big Cities in School Tests

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Laura Aiken, a fourth-grade teacher at the Montclair Elementary School, in Charlotte, N.C., knows whether her students are mastering state reading standards long before they take mandatory year-end exams.

After each quarter, she gives the children a small, 30-question test designed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district. Within a week, Ms. Aiken gets back a computer-generated report indicating, in percentages, how well her students understand basic reading skills, such as how to summarize information or make inferences. "It gives me a snapshot of every student," says Ms. Aiken, who can immediately send low-performers to reading specialists for help.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg administrators say that such data crunching and early intervention is one reason their district scored so well on a new round of federal tests designed to compare reading and math achievement in 11 urban school districts with the scores of public-school students nationwide.



The scores on those tests were released yesterday and on the whole, results for big cities were mixed and achievement gaps between white and minority students persisted. The tests, taken by fourth- and eighth-graders in the 2004-2005 school year, are part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, widely considered the nation's most independent and accurate measurement of achievement in core subjects. Districts volunteered for the big-city testing. Statewide NAEP tests are mandatory under the "No Child Left Behind" law, but they are used only to shed light on performance, not to determine compliance or funding. The tests are administered by the federal government, which samples students based on demographics.

Among the participating urban districts, Charlotte, with 124,000 students, had the highest scores in all categories except eighth-grade math, where it tied with Austin, Texas. Charlotte's fourth-graders beat the average for all schools in math, with a score of 244 (on a 0-to-500 scale), seven points above the average. In reading, the fourth-graders' average score was 221, four points above the national average.

Districts in the urban NAEP -- including Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, and New York City -- face some of the nation's biggest challenges because a high proportion of their students are from low-income and minority families.

Charlotte was the only participating district that beat the national average for fourth-grade reading. Only Austin and Charlotte beat the national average on eighth-grade reading.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said the report "dispels the myth that city schools can't make the grade," and she added that some of the best results came from states with the longest histories of creating accountability with standardized test scores.

A reform effort launched by Charlotte-Mecklenburg in the late 1990s focused on shifting more district funds to low-performing schools from schools that were doing better -- a move that has lately created some backlash. The district also reduced class sizes in those schools and offered

to pay graduate-school tuition for teachers who agreed to work in those schools for at least two years. The district also required all of its elementary schools to adhere to a strict, phonics-based reading program.

And it brought more learning-disabled students back into mainstream classrooms and paired up teachers who had been teaching them separately. Now, "you have a great combination of teachers who are very, very versed in reading and teachers who are very, very versed in additional learning strategies," says Frances Haithcock, the district's interim superintendent.

The district's demographics also helped. Although centered in Charlotte, it is a countywide district that takes in more suburbs than most of its urban counterparts. About 56% of its students are minorities, compared with about 77% in big-city schools overall. Meanwhile, the district has annual tax revenue of about \$9,500 per pupil in its budget, compared with \$9,300 for Los Angeles and \$8,100 for Houston.

Even so, low-income and minority students in the Charlotte district performed well compared with their counterparts elsewhere. Among fourth-graders in low-income families -- identified by their participation in discount lunch programs -- Charlotte students scored higher than the national average in math by five points, while black and Hispanic eighth-graders outpaced their counterparts nationwide in reading.

"Charlotte has a history of taking ... school reform pretty seriously," said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a public-schools policy group based in Washington, D.C.

Over the last five years, the district used a combination of state grants and federal anti-poverty funding to hire retired teachers to return to the classroom to mentor younger instructors and developed "pacing guides" that tell teachers where they should be in the curriculum in any given week of the year. To make certain that teachers in low-performing schools keep pace, teams from the central office visit classrooms up to four times a year.

When analysis of the quarterly tests shows schools or classrooms falling behind, so-called rapid support teams of administrators are dispatched to help make changes.

But while such initiatives have succeeded in boosting achievement in the lower grades, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, like most urban districts, is struggling to overhaul its high schools. In state-mandated tests last year, students had a pass rate of less than 60% at 10 of the district's 17 high schools.

"We feel like we have some of these things nailed," said Ms. Haithcock, the interim superintendent. "Now what we have to do is continue to stay the course."

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