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Lessons from elsewhere on education

By Michael Casserly

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America's urban schools are under more pressure to improve than any other institution — public or private — in the nation. However, there is mounting evidence that the aggressive reform efforts of these urban school systems are beginning to pay off.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that, although big-city schools continue to lag behind national averages for the most part, large-city schools made statistically significant gains in both reading and mathematics at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels between 2003 and 2013. Moreover, urban systems are outpacing the nation in their rate of growth, a pattern also seen in results from the 2013 NAEP testing.

The [Council of the Great City Schools](#) and the [American Institutes for Research](#) sought to examine these patterns — as well as the factors that might be driving urban district improvements — in greater detail. We selected four districts for intensive study — one district with consistently high overall performance (Charlotte-Mecklenburg), one district showing significant and consistent improvements in reading (Atlanta) and one that showed such improvements in mathematics (Boston), as well as one district that lacked such improvement (Cleveland). The overarching goal was to identify variables that might be contributing to improvement in urban education across the nation and to explore what might be needed to accelerate those gains.

First, we examined the level of alignment between NAEP frameworks and state (and, where applicable, district) standards in reading, math and science. We then looked for a connection between a district's relative degree of alignment in a specific subject and its performance on the tamper-proof NAEP.

The results of this analysis revealed that there was no apparent relationship between student performance or gains on NAEP and the degree of content alignment with NAEP. Some districts made significant improvements on NAEP even when their state standards were not well-aligned with NAEP. Conversely, high alignment did not guarantee better results or more gains.

What did appear to drive a school system's ability to improve on NAEP was a comprehensive set of instructional and management policies and practices that Milwaukee might learn from. Specifically, there were a number of features common among improving and high-performing districts. All three districts benefited from skillful, consistent and sustained leadership and a focus on instruction. These leadership teams were unified in their vision for improved student achievement, setting clear, systemwide goals and creating a culture of accountability for meeting those goals.

While they did not necessarily employ common programs or materials districtwide, there was a clear, uniform definition of what good teaching and learning would look like. That vision was communicated throughout the district, and a strategy for supporting high-quality instruction and program implementation through tailored, focused and sustained professional development was aggressively pursued. And each of the districts used assessment data to monitor progress and to help drive these implementation and support strategies, ensuring that instructional reforms reached every school and every student.

Importantly, these common themes seemed to work in tandem: Each factor was critical, but it is unlikely that, taken in isolation, any one of these positive steps could have resulted in higher student achievement.

The findings of this study have some important implications, particularly for districts such as Milwaukee that are working to implement the new Common Core State Standards. Many educators — and the public in general — assume that putting into place more demanding standards alone will result in better student achievement.

This study, however, suggests that the higher rigor embedded in the new standards is likely to be squandered, with little effect on student achievement, if implementation is not approached in a thoughtful, deliberate way and if the content of the curriculum, instructional materials, professional development and classroom instruction are not high-quality, integrated and consistent with the standards.

Michael Casserly is executive director of the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) and will speak at a conference at Marquette University Law School Tuesday titled "[Lessons from Elsewhere](#)." For information, go to law.marquette.edu/current-students/lessons-elsewhere