



## **Students in Oakland catch up Reading, math scores rise amid turmoil**

By Katy Murphy, STAFF WRITER  
4/12/2007

OAKLAND — Test score reports aren't generally a source of validation for the Oakland public school system. But a study released Wednesday by the Council of the Great City Schools highlighted some uplifting trends in Oakland and in dozens of other large urban school districts nationwide.

In "Beating the Odds," researchers found that nonwhite students in Oakland and other cities have become better at reading and math since 2001. It also found those children are slowly catching up to their white and more affluent peers in their states.

"It's pretty clear from the achievement results Oakland has made a lot of headway over the last several years," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the council, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of the nation's 66 largest urban school districts.

The disparities are still stark. Last year on the state's standardized tests, just 31 percent of Oakland's low-income fourth-graders were proficient in reading — a bar set by the California Department of Education — compared with 70 percent of their more affluent peers throughout the state.

But the study points out more of the city's public school children are excelling each year, at about every grade level. The report includes data for grades three to 11 for reading. It does not include math scores above the seventh-grade level, because more than one test is offered to students in the higher grades.

Each year, more Oakland kids have become proficient in reading and math. Fewer are testing at "below basic" level or worse, meaning they are in need of intensive remediation, researchers found.

One of the most dramatic upswings was in fourth-grade math. In the spring of 2002, 21 percent of all Oakland fourth-graders were proficient in the subject. By the spring of 2006, that percentage grew to 45 percent. At the same time, fewer students tested in the "below basic" categories each year — 31 percent in 2006, down from 55 percent.

Some researchers question the validity of state achievement data. The Policy Analysis for California Education, a research center at the University of California, Berkeley, has called attention to the gaps between various state results and those from the federal testing system, the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

In nearly all 12 states analyzed by PACE, the fourth-graders appeared to be making greater strides according to their state's assessment than they did by federal standards.

Also, more students throughout California are becoming proficient in reading and math — not just in Oakland. But in the elementary and middle school grades, at least, Oakland's gains have slightly outpaced statewide averages.

Russlynn Ali, director of the Oakland-based Education Trust-West, said the council's optimistic findings are in line with her organization's research. Her nonprofit advocacy group — the western branch of Education Trust, based in Washington, D.C. — works to address the educational disparities between the haves and the have-nots in California.

Ali said she considered the Oakland school district's progress remarkable, considering the "wounds" the community has experienced in recent years. In the summer of 2003, amid a fiscal crisis in the school district, the California Department of Education assumed temporary authority over the school district, suspending the voting powers of the city's elected school board members.

In the nearly four years since, the school system has undergone sweeping administrative changes and has adopted a number of controversial approaches to school reform. Last year, the district narrowly averted a teachers' strike.

"Given the kind of drama and turmoil that has happened in Oakland, the student achievement gets lost," Ali said. Yet somehow, she observed, the school system "has kept its eye on the prize."

The full "Beating the Odds" report can be found at the Council of the Great City Schools' Web site, [cgcs.org](http://cgcs.org).