

County schools lauded in 'beat odds' report

By [Laura Green](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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Despite big-city obstacles, such as large numbers of students who struggle to speak English and come from poor homes, the Palm Beach County School District was recognized Wednesday for its performance among urban school districts nationwide.

The plaudits came in the Council of the Great City Schools' annual Beating the Odds report, which compared 2006 test scores of 67 urban districts with their states' averages.

Palm Beach County was one of just seven urban school districts in which fourth and eighth-grade students scored as well or better in math than their peers statewide.

In reading, eighth-grade scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test also beat the state average. Fourth-graders trailed the state by a single percentage point.

"Most urban districts don't do as well in any area," said Jason Snipes, the council's research director.

Compared with other metropolitan districts, Palm Beach County had an advantage. Only about 40 percent of students here qualify for subsidized lunch, compared with 77 percent in Chicago and 66 percent in Miami. Studies have shown a correlation between high poverty rates and lower test scores.

The council couldn't compare one urban school district with another because the federal No Child Left Behind law permits each state to use its own standardized test, which have varying degrees of difficulty.

County schools were noted for performance compared with other Florida districts. Still, less than half of county eighth-graders and only a third of 10th-graders are considered proficient readers. Since 2000, the county has reduced the achievement gap between black students here and whites statewide by a third, from 44 percentage points to 29, in fourth-grade reading.

But minority students continue to lag behind their white peers and even behind minority students statewide. Last year, 46 percent of black county fourth-graders were reading on grade level compared with 49 percent of blacks and 75 percent of white students statewide.

The report didn't attempt to determine what propelled some urban school districts to success. During a conference call with reporters, superintendents from Memphis and

Denver touted choosing a common curriculum, administering frequent tests and relying on test scores to guide teaching.

The Palm Beach County district uses all three approaches.

"We've done a number of things that have been very positive with our students," Superintendent Art. Johnson said. "It's nice for another organization to acknowledge that."