

Our Children Can't Wait

A Proposal to Close the Middle-Grades Achievement Gap



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A Report by the

NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

January 2008

The skills that many students do not achieve mastery of when they are in middle school are the same skills that they fail to display when they arrive at the doorsteps of college. Even though they have met the requirements for high school graduation, they remain profoundly limited in their abilities to do college-level academic work, in many ways because of what they did not learn in middle school.

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NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) is continuing its campaign to transform the city's middle-grade schools into platforms for success, rather than pathways to failure, for all our city's students.

CEJ, launched in 2006, is a collaborative of community-based organizations and unions with long track records of strengthening their communities through organizing, social services, and housing development. CEJ believes that education is a critical lever for social and economic equity, that the opportunity for an excellent education is not distributed equally across New York City's neighborhoods, and that far too many children are trapped in failing schools that are not preparing them for college and the world of work.

Led by parents, CEJ is organizing a movement to ensure a quality and well-rounded education for all students and to end the inequities in the city's public school system. The coalition, together with its allies, is mobilizing the power of parents and communities to create a more equitable educational system.

CEJ and its member organizations, by forming new kinds of collaboration among parents, teachers, and school staff, have won important victories in securing new programs and resources for historically neglected schools. The coalition's successes so far include:

- **Middle grades:** Working with City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, CEJ won a middle-grades reform package that includes funding for measures to improve fifty low-performing middle-grade schools, free professional development courses for staff at these schools, the appointment of a Director of Middle School Initiatives, and a commitment to offer Regents classes in all middle-grade schools by 2010.
- **Science labs:** The Brooklyn Education Collaborative, composed of CEJ groups in the borough, secured a commitment of \$444 million from the New York City Department of Education to build science labs in every middle and high school by 2010.
- **Teacher quality:** The Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools, composed of CEJ groups in the borough, created the Lead Teacher Program, which puts master teachers in schools to support the development of other teachers. The program began in District 9 in the South Bronx in 2004 and has since expanded to more than 100 schools citywide.

CEJ will continue working with community advocates and unions to build a broad social movement to end educational inequities and ensure that *all* of New York City's children receive an excellent education.

This report was written for the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice by the Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

The charts, graphs, and tables were produced by Deinya Phenix, Tara Bahl, and Megan Hester of the Annenberg Institute.

Copyediting, layout, design, and production were carried out by Susan Fisher, Haewon Kim, and Margaret Balch-Gonzalez of the Annenberg Institute.

We acknowledge the invaluable assistance of all the New York City middle-grade parents, teachers, principals, and other staff who helped us conceive and prepare this report.

Summary

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein have staked their legacy on closing the achievement gap in our city's schools. But in a crucial part of the school system – the middle grades – that gap is not closing. New York City's middle-grade schools are continuing to fail to prepare thousands of Black and Latino students for success in high school and college. The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), along with a score of citywide and local education organizations, calls on Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein to take bold action now by implementing the most important recommendations of the New York City Council Middle School Task Force in 200 of the city's low-performing middle-grade schools.

The Failure to Close the Achievement Gap

Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores show no improvement in eighth-grade reading achievement since Children First implementation began in the 2003-2004 school year, and New York State (NYS) scores have shown only a moderate increase. But results from both tests reveal that the achievement gap in reading and writing by race and income is not closing in the middle grades.

On NAEP:

- The overall percentage of eighth-grade students reading at or above the basic level did not increase during the Children First years. In fact, there was a small, though non-significant decrease, and the decline was largest for Black and Latino students.
- New York City showed the least progress overall on the NAEP eighth-grade Reading test of all the major urban areas tested from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007 and the least progress for Black, Latino, and low-income students.

On the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) tests:

- Only three out of ten Black and Latino eighth-graders are reading and writing at NYS standards, compared to six out of ten White students. This gap has grown by 5 percentage points for Black students and one percentage point for Latino students since the Children First reforms began.
- Three out of four eighth-graders at high-poverty schools read and write below NYS ELA standards; the gap between these students and those at low-poverty schools has grown by 6 points since 2003 and now stands at 44 percentage points.

The gap in teacher quality is growing in middle-grade schools:

- The gap between the percentage of teachers teaching outside of their certification area in low-poverty versus high-poverty schools has grown 6 percentage points for English teachers and 9 percentage points for mathematics teachers since 2004.

- In 2006, over a quarter of English and mathematics teachers in high-poverty middle-grade schools were teaching a subject they were not certified in, and over 40 percent had three years of experience or less.

A Call for Bolder, More Comprehensive Action

The failure of middle-grade schools is not new. A year ago, CEJ issued *New York City's Middle-Grade Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?* (NYCCEJ 2007), a comprehensive report that documented the systemic failure that has occurred over many years. The report contributed to City Council Speaker Quinn's decision to form the City Council Middle School Task Force in February 2007. In an agreement negotiated with Speaker Quinn, Mayor Bloomberg, and Chancellor Klein, the city school system allocated \$5 million to implement several of the Task Force recommendations in fifty low-performing schools under the title of the Middle Grade Initiative.

When the release of the NAEP data highlighted the middle grades as the weakest link in the city system, Chancellor Klein publicly acknowledged the system's "weakness in eighth-grade reading" and characterized it as an "unacceptable trend." Given the severity and persistence of the middle-grade crisis, the Department of Education Middle Grade Initiative is not nearly enough. The crisis calls for far bolder and more comprehensive action.

New funding sources are available to support such bold action. The New York State Contract for Excellence funding provides a historic opportunity to close the gap in the middle grades. CEJ calls on Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein to use this new funding, along with city resources, to implement the following reforms in the city's middle-grade schools that are struggling the most.¹

Redesign School Day and Add More Time for Learning: College Preparatory and Enrichment Curriculum

While curriculum and testing requirements have exploded in the last twenty years, the time allotted to meet these requirements has not changed. Students in low-performing middle-grade schools need rigorous core classes that strengthen their critical thinking skills, as well as a range of enrichment opportunities that engage their creative energies. Providing expanded learning opportunities allows for both.

Participating middle-grade schools will redesign the school day, add ninety minutes of academic and enrichment time per day, hire teachers on a voluntary basis for the extra time, and integrate the existing extended-time initiatives.

Instructional Quality: Attract, Train, and Keep the Best Teachers and Principals

Research demonstrates that teacher quality is the key element in improving student performance. Unfortunately, nearly half of the

¹ School staff will vote whether to adopt the reforms.

teachers in high-poverty middle-grade schools have three years or less of experience, and their principals have even less.

Participating schools will be designated Professional Learning Schools, with a rigorous, continuous, and school-based professional development program that includes a strong focus on literacy and adolescent development and a series of incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

Strong Supports for Students: Student Success Centers

Adolescence is a time of great challenge and opportunity. Middle-grade schools must create healthy and safe places for youth to thrive, provide rapid response to students who fall off track, and develop close communication among school support workers, community partners, teachers, and families so that every student has access to the culturally relevant academic, social, and emotional supports necessary to be successful.

Participating schools will establish a Student Success Center that will integrate school and community resources to provide strong academic, social, and emotional supports to students, including significantly lower student-counselor ratios and access to specialized high school application and college-preparation programs.

Implementing these reforms immediately in 200 of the city's lowest-performing middle-grade schools can begin to transform the dismal academic futures facing thousands of our city's students.

Introduction

Efforts to improve the performance of urban school systems have become one of the primary civil rights agendas of our time. In this globally competitive era, college entry and eventual completion, not just high school graduation, are the necessary platforms for economic survival and career success. The ongoing failure to close the education achievement gap between Black and Latino and low-income students on the one hand, and White and more affluent students on the other, compromises public education's role as the gatekeeper to equal opportunity for all citizens.

The result is that while 76 percent of White students graduate from high school nationwide, only 52 percent of Black and 56 percent of Latino students do so (EPE Research Center 2006). In New York City, the local diploma rates are similar, but less than 30 percent of Black and Latino students graduate from high school in four years with a Regents diploma – a minimum standard for college readiness – while nearly 60 percent of White students earn that diploma. The economic consequences are drastic: high school dropouts will earn half of what a college graduate earns, and even high school graduates will struggle to earn enough to support a family.

Mayor Bloomberg has called improving our schools “the greatest civil rights challenge we face today,”² and has defined Children First, the city's systemic school reform effort, as the lever to meet this civil rights challenge. Children First's achievements have consistently been celebrated as a national urban education success story, and Mayor Bloomberg, Chancellor Klein, State Education Commissioner Richard Mills, and corporate and civic leaders across the nation have hailed the reforms for raising student test scores and graduation rates and closing the race-based achievement gap. In fall 2007, the Eli Broad Foundation awarded New York City their Prize for Urban School Reform, which recognizes outstanding student improvement as well as progress in closing the achievement gap for poor students and students of color.

However, over the last year, CEJ and its many allies have argued that achievement is problematic in the city's middle-grade schools and that, consequently, middle-grade schools are the weakest link in the K–12 pathway to college (see NYCCEJ 2007). Furthermore, CEJ has argued, substantial improvements in high school graduation and college readiness will not be realized without major improvements, particularly in reading and writing, in the middle grades. This report seeks to answer the question: How much has Children First improved student achievement in literacy in the middle grades? How successful has Children First been in closing the race and poverty achievement gaps in literacy in the middle grades?

² Mayor Michael Bloomberg's weekly radio address, 1010 WINS News Radio, January 14, 2007.

The recent release of the testing results from the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), a special component of NAEP that focuses on reading and math in eleven major U.S. cities, provides critical new data for assessing the impact of Children First in the middle grades.³ As a congressionally mandated testing program, NAEP is designed to establish a national standard against which the results of statewide testing can be compared, most recently as a guidepost for state No Child Left Behind results. While the NYS ELA eighth-grade testing program shows moderate gains for Children First since its implementation in 2003-2004, those gains do not correlate with the NAEP results. The latter's results for New York City students show no gains in Reading for eighth-grade students from the 2003-2004 academic year through 2006-2007, the time period that encompasses the Children First reforms.⁴

³ Austin did not participate in the 2002-2003 testing and, thus, is not included in the graphs in this report.

⁴ Mayor Bloomberg was elected in 2001, took office in 2002, and appointed Joel Klein Chancellor in August 2002. Klein initiated the planning for Children First in September 2002, and the mayor announced the Children First components in January 2003. Implementation of Children First began in September 2003. Therefore, we treat the 2002-2003 school year as the pre-Children First baseline year, and the 2003-2004 school year as the first year of Children First's implementation.

⁵ We focus on reading and English Language Arts (ELA) results in this report because literacy is the foundational skill on which all effective academic achievement depends. However, the mathematics results, though more complex than the reading outcomes, also do not substantiate the claim of strong achievement or significant gap reduction across the Children First years.

⁶ Letter from Chancellor Joel Klein to school staff, November 20, 2007.

Most relevant for this report, New York City outcomes on both the state and the NAEP eighth-grade testing in Reading and ELA show that the achievement gap between White students and Black and Latino students has not narrowed during the period of the Children First reforms.⁵ The data are so clear that even Chancellor Klein has been forced to admit that eighth-grade reading results are “unacceptable . . . and that we have a lot of work to do.”⁶

The Data: The Urgency of the Middle-Grades Crisis

Middle-grade schools have long been defined as the critical turning point in students' educational careers, but they have largely been ignored as sites for systematic reform. Recent research from several large urban school districts illustrates the urgency of the middle-grades crisis by demonstrating that students who fare poorly in the middle grades are unlikely to graduate from high school. Research conducted by the Parthenon Group (2005) for the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) shows that students who achieve at Level 1 or low Level 2 in the NYS ELA test in eighth grade have a four-year graduation rate of only 38 percent, compared with an 83 percent graduation rate for students at Level 3 in eighth grade and a 94 percent graduation rate for Level 4 eighth-graders.

These results are consistent with a 2006 Philadelphia study showing that sixth-graders who have poor attendance, *or* poor behavior, *or* fail mathematics or English have only a 20 percent chance of graduating in five years, compared with a 60 percent chance for sixth-graders without any of those risk factors (Balfanz & Herzog 2006).

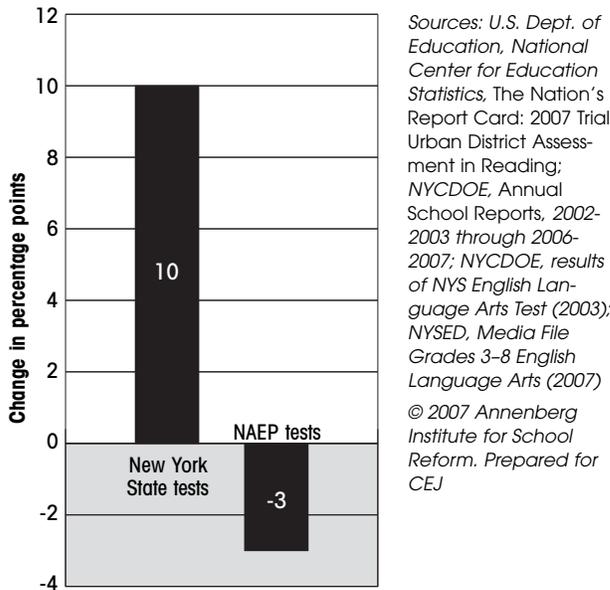
Research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows that student performance in ninth grade is a strong predictor of high school graduation. Eighty-one percent of students who have sufficient credits and have failed no more than one class at the end of ninth grade graduate in four years, compared with only 22 percent of students who are behind in credits or have failed more than one class (Allensworth & Easton 2007). The quality of instruction that students receive in the middle grades is a major factor in whether they will succeed or fail at earning these necessary credits and grades in their ninth-grade year. Using different methods, each of these studies starkly demonstrates that to increase high school graduation rates, cities must aggressively stem systemic failure in the middle grades.

In this section, we present eighth-grade Reading results on the NAEP test and ELA results on the state assessments, as well as data on teacher certification, experience, and turnover in the middle grades.

NAEP Reading Results during the Children First Years

Figure 1 shows how widely New York State's eighth-grade ELA test scores vary from the NAEP eighth-grade Reading outcomes for New York City students during the Children First implementation years. While the city's eighth-grade students improved by 10 percentage points from the 2002-2003 school year to the 2006-2007 school year on the NYS ELA

Figure 1. Change in percentage of students performing at or above basic levels from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007: New York State results compared with NAEP results

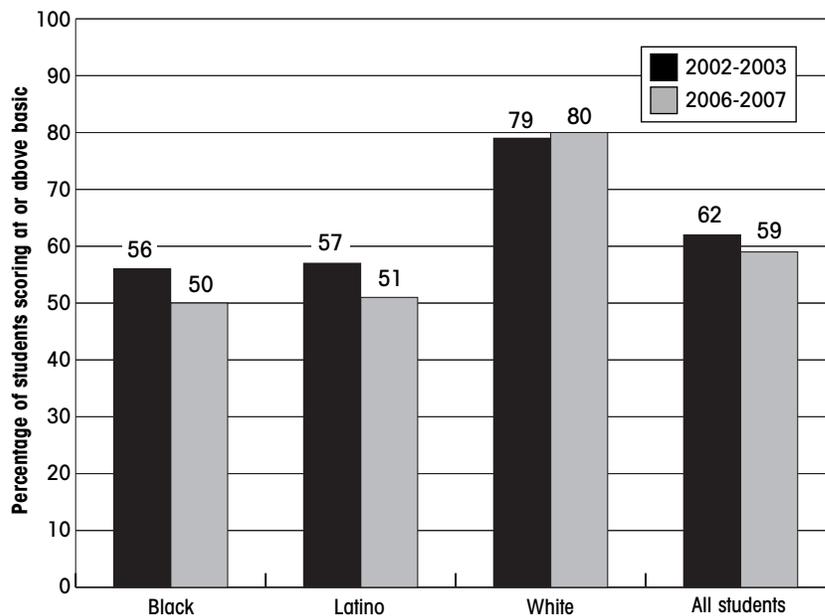


test, eighth-grade NAEP Reading scores fell by 3 percentage points across the same school years.⁷

Across the country, local city and state testing outcomes show similar and often dramatic variation from NAEP results. Many researchers argue that this variation reflects how states have configured their testing programs to ensure that most of their schools and districts meet No Child Left Behind requirements.

Figure 2 demonstrates that NAEP eighth-grade scores for New York City students have not improved during the years of Children First, from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007. While half of Black and Latino eighth-graders are reading at

Figure 2. NAEP eighth-grade Reading scores for New York City students from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007



or above Basic on NAEP, 80 percent of White students are reading at that level, a gap of 30 percentage points. Although

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading

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⁷ Student performance on New York State tests is measured by the percentage of students achieving levels 3 and 4. Student performance on NAEP tests is measured by the percentage of students achieving at or above basic level (including basic, proficient, and advanced). This is consistent with the NYCDOE's analysis of proficiency. According to NAEP, the three-point drop for New York City from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007 was not significant.

Figure 3. New York City's rank on eighth-grade Reading among NAEP cities, 2002-2003 to 2006-2007

RANK	2002-2003	2006-2007
1	Charlotte	Charlotte
2	New York City	Boston
3	Boston	Houston
4	San Diego	Chicago
5	Chicago	San Diego
6	Houston	New York City
7	Cleveland	Cleveland
8	Atlanta	Atlanta
9	Washington, DC	Los Angeles
10	Los Angeles	Washington, DC

NOTE: Austin is not represented because it did not participate in the 2002-2003 tests.

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading

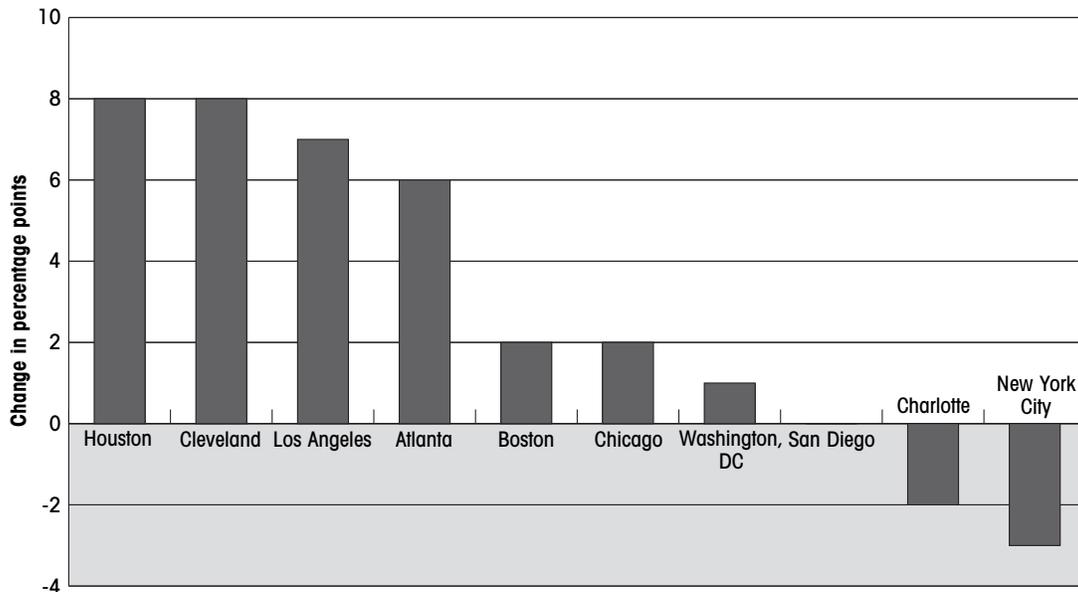
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the declines represented for all students and for Black and Latino students are not statistically significant according to NAEP, there has clearly been no improvement in achievement.

One of the strengths of NAEP testing is that it allows comparisons across cities. Figure 3 lists the ranking of NAEP cities, in order of the percentage of their eighth-graders meeting the basic standard in Reading. It shows that between 2002-2003 and 2006-2007, New York City eighth-graders lost ground in Reading in comparison to other major cities. In 2002-2003, New York City eighth-graders ranked second among the ten large urban school districts tested in Reading. However, by 2006-2007, New York City had fallen to sixth place.

Figure 4 represents the progress in reading made by eighth-graders in each of the ten

Figure 4. Change in percentage of students performing at or above basic on NAEP eighth-grade Reading tests in major cities, 2002-2003 to 2006-2007



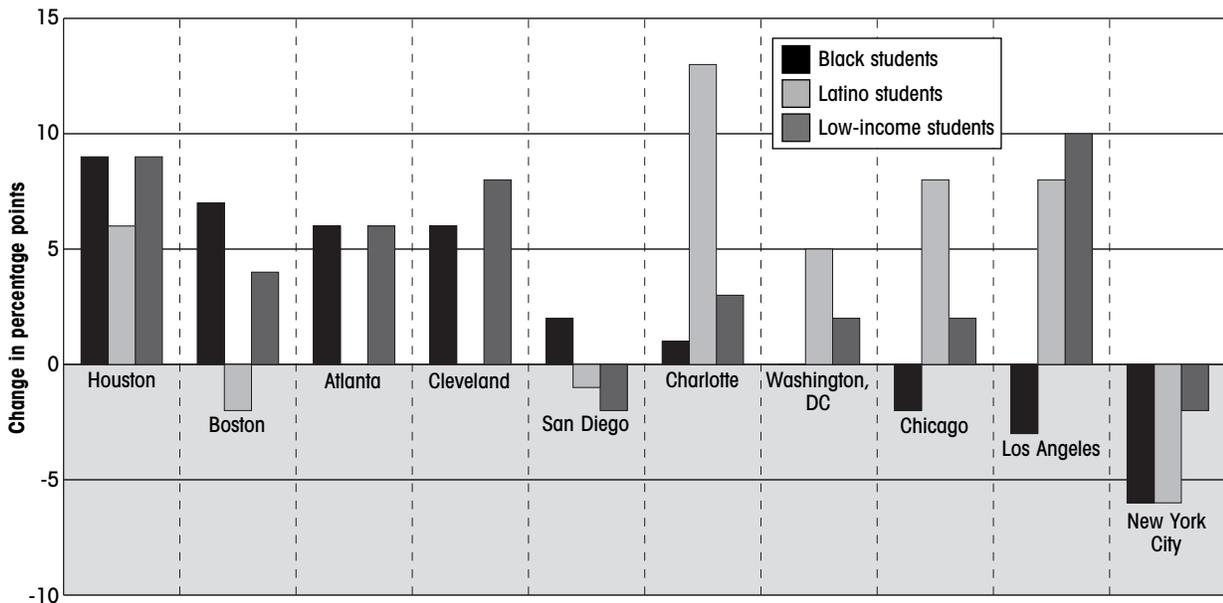
Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading

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cities tested between 2002-2003 and 2006-2007. Seven of the ten cities posted gains, although only the gains for the top four are statistically significant. San Diego showed no change, and only Charlotte and New York actually declined.

Figure 5 shows that the eighth-grade Reading performance of Black, Latino, and low-income students in New York City has declined more than in any of the other NAEP cities across the years of Children First. Six of the ten cities (Houston, Atlanta, Cleveland, Washington, DC, Chicago, and Los Angeles) showed statistically significant gains for at least one of these student populations. New York City is the only city in which Black, Latino, and low-income students all did worse in NAEP Reading testing in 2006-2007 than they did in 2002-2003.

Figure 5. Change in percentage of Black, Latino, and low-income students performing at or above basic on eighth-grade NAEP Reading test in major cities, 2002-2003 to 2006-2007



NOTE: Where bars are missing for a city, data for that student group were not available. Austin is excluded because it did not post 2002-2003 results.

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading

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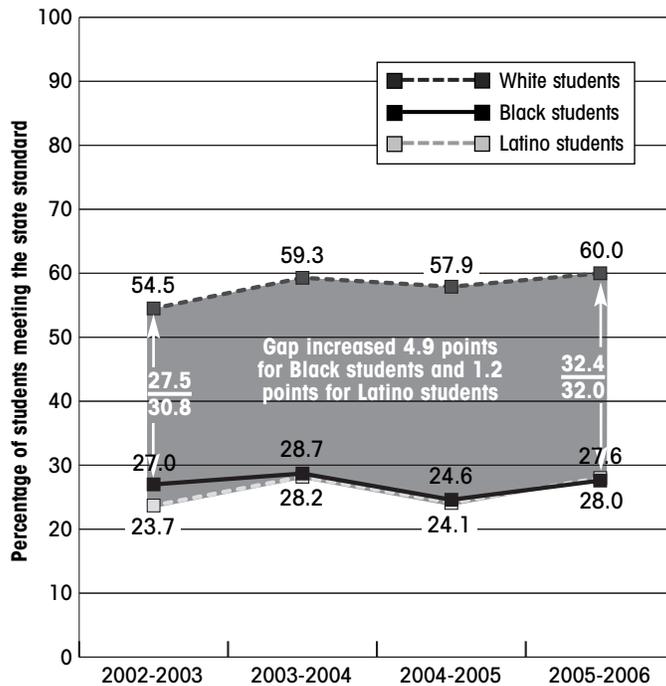
New York State ELA Results

Figures 6 and 7 shift the focus from the NAEP Reading testing to New York State's eighth-grade ELA test.⁸ Figure 6 demonstrates that, although New York City students' scores on the eighth-grade ELA exam have increased across the years of Children First, the achievement gap between White students and Black and Latino students has also increased.⁹ In 2006, less than 30 percent of Black and Latino eighth-graders were reading at state standard, a gap of more than 30 percentage points compared to their White counterparts. Thus, it is difficult to substantiate the Mayor and the Chancellor's claims that Children First has reduced the achievement gap, at least for eighth-grade Reading, since both the NAEP outcomes and the New York State outcomes demonstrate that the race-based achievement gap has not narrowed.

⁸ New York State's 2007 ELA testing included a greater number of English Language Learners than in previous years. However, because data by language proficiency is not available for all years, we could not compare like student populations across the years. Thus, this data reflects all students tested in each year.

⁹ This figure for the increase in the achievement gap is from 2002-2003 to 2005-2006. Disaggregated test-score data for the eighth-grade for 2006-2007 was not available from either the NYCDOE or the NYSED when this report was written.

Figure 6. Achievement gap by race, New York State eighth-grade ELA exam, 2002-2003 to 2005-2006



NOTE: Demographic data for 2006-2007 are not yet available from the NYCDOE.

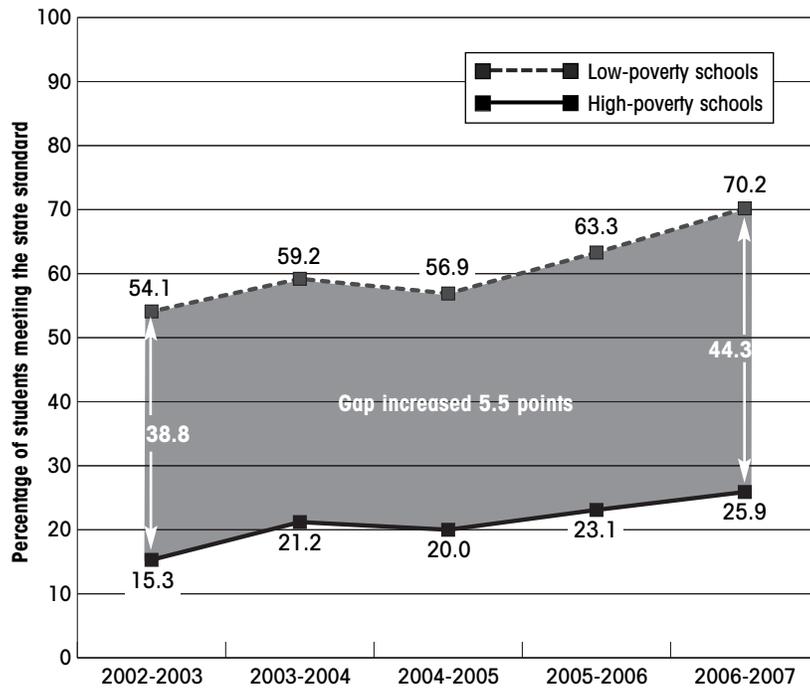
Source: NYCDOE, Annual School Reports, 2002-2003 through 2005-2006

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Another way to assess the achievement gap is to measure it by income rather than by race, as depicted in Figure 7. In CEJ’s analysis, New York City’s middle-grade schools were classified into groups based on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, assigning schools that were one standard deviation or more above the citywide school poverty rate as high-poverty schools and schools that were at least one standard deviation below the citywide average as low-poverty schools. The following patterns emerge in the comparison of high- and low-poverty schools.

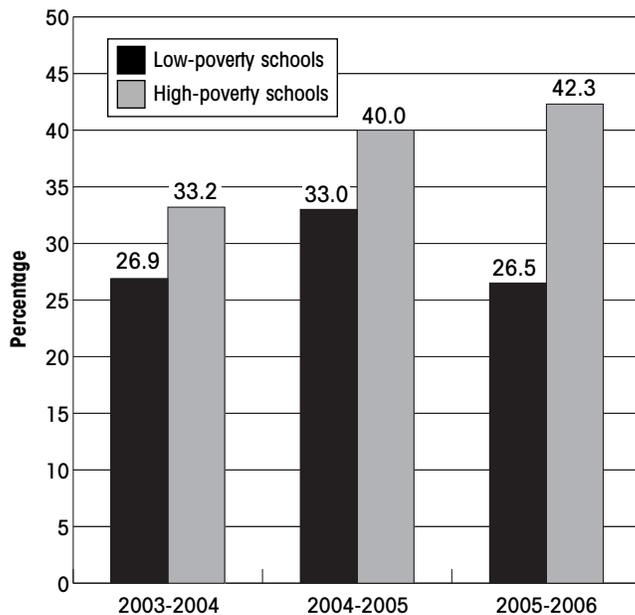
Again, ELA eighth-grade scores have risen across the years of Children First for both high- and low-poverty schools. But the gap in scores between high-poverty and low-poverty schools has also increased. Only a quarter of eighth-grade students in high-poverty schools are reading and writing at state standard, which is a full 44 percentage points below their peers at low-poverty schools. As is the case with the race-based achievement gap, it is hard to demonstrate that Children First has reduced the income gap in eighth-grade ELA. Indeed, whether race or income is the focus, the achievement gap in eighth-grade ELA/Reading has not narrowed.

Figure 7. Achievement gap by income, New York State eighth-grade ELA exam, 2002-2003 to 2006-2007



Sources: NYCDOE, Annual School Reports, 2002-2003 through 2006-2007
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Figure 8. New York City middle school English teachers with three years or less of experience, 2003-2004 to 2005-2006



NOTE: Data from 2002-2003 and 2006-2007 are not available from NYSED.

Sources: NYCDOE, Annual School Reports, 2003-2004 through 2005-2006; NYSED, Personnel Master File, 2003-2004 through 2005-2006

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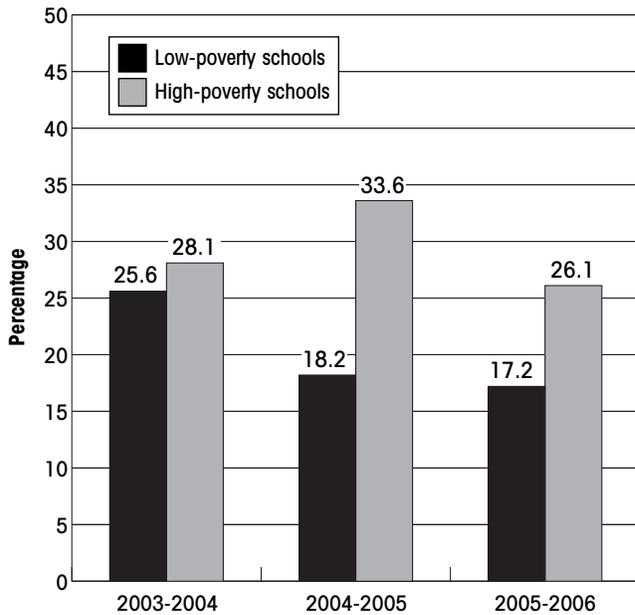
Teacher Experience, Certification, and Turnover

Figures 8 and 9 analyze the issues of teacher experience and certification. How long a teacher has taught, and whether a teacher is certified in the subject area they are teaching, are imperfect measures of teacher quality or effectiveness. Instead, both indicators are best used comparatively, to suggest trends or patterns across the city's teaching force. Figure 8 shows that high-poverty middle-grade schools have considerably larger percentages of inexperienced English teachers than low-poverty schools and that this gap in teacher experience has been increasing across the Children

First years. Over 40 percent of teachers in high-poverty middle-grade schools are novices, while in low-poverty middle-grade schools, that percentage is just over a quarter. Figure 9 shows that at high-poverty middle-grade schools, over a quarter of the English teachers are teaching out of their certification area, and this gap has also been increasing across the Children First years. Figure 10 illustrates the crisis in teacher retention in middle schools, especially low-performing schools. The figure shows that mathematics teachers leave middle schools in much higher numbers than they leave elementary schools, and they are fleeing from low-performing middle schools at alarming rates. In fact, over 40 percent of math teachers at low-performing middle schools leave after two years, compared to only 21 percent at low-performing elementary schools and 17 percent at high-performing middle schools.

These three figures suggest one cause for the worsening achievement gap in middle-grade schools' eighth-grade Reading and ELA test scores: a persistent systemic inability to distribute a critical educational resource – experienced and certified teachers – to the schools whose students need such resources the most.

Figure 9. New York City middle school English teachers teaching out of certification area, 2003-2004 to 2005-2006

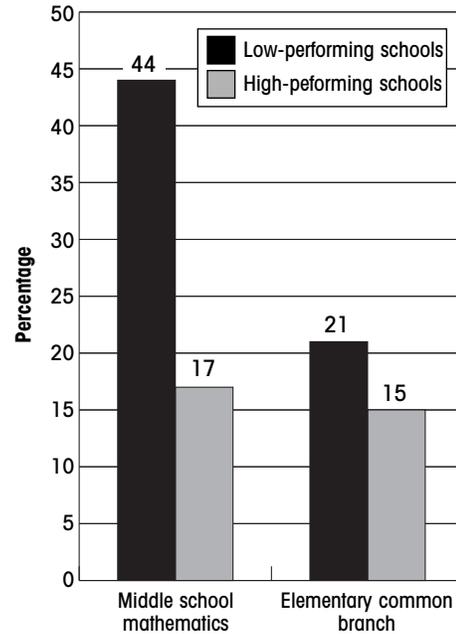


NOTE: Data from 2002-2003 and 2006-2007 are not available from NYSED.

Sources: NYCDOE, Annual School Reports, 2003-2004 through 2005-2006; NYSED, Personnel Master File, 2003-2004 through 2005-2006

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Figure 10. Percentage of New York City teachers leaving their school after two years



Source: Boyd et al. (2007)

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What the Data Show

The data in this section demonstrate that Children First reforms have not succeeded in reducing achievement gaps in eighth-grade Reading and English Language Arts. Moreover, the data suggest that the school system’s failure to correct the traditionally skewed distribution of teacher quality may be a major contributor to Children First’s failure to improve Reading and English Language Arts outcomes in the city’s middle-grade schools. Finally, this systemic failure to improve middle-grade students’ Reading and English Language Arts skills puts thousands of students at risk of dropping out of high school and facing futures of severely limited options.

Where We Are and Where We Need to Go

Much of the data this report presents is new. But the patterns of poor performance, stagnant achievement, and a continuing achievement gap – at least for eighth-grade English Language Arts test score outcomes – have been previously documented by CEJ. In January 2007, CEJ issued a comprehensive report – *New York City’s Middle-Grade Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?* – that exposed the extent of failure in the city’s middle schools. The CEJ report demonstrated the following:

- In 75 percent of New York City’s middle-grade schools, a majority of the eighth-graders could not read at the New York State standard.
- Only 25 percent of the school system’s African American and Latino eighth-grade students met the New York State ELA standard.
- In high-poverty middle-grade schools, only 22 percent of the eighth-grade students met the ELA standard.
- Because the small number of adequately performing middle-grade schools were mostly selective schools, the average middle-grade student attended a neighborhood school from which most students would graduate unprepared for high school.
- The city’s poorly performing middle-grade schools were characterized by “damaging patterns of low academic expectations and unequal resource distribution” (NYCCEJ 2007, p. 2). Poorly performing middle schools did not offer critical gatekeeping courses in mathematics and science, and teacher experience and certification rates were significantly lower in those poorly performing schools.

The CEJ report was released at a citywide press conference attended by many of the city’s elected officials, and it received extensive media coverage. To capitalize on the report’s reception, CEJ launched an effort to encourage City Council Speaker Quinn to convene a citywide task force to assess the performance of the school system’s middle-grade schools and to issue a series of recommendations for improvement. In February 2007, Speaker Quinn announced the formation of the City Council Middle School Task Force and named two CEJ parent leaders as members.

Under the leadership of New York University Professor Pedro Noguera, the Task Force met for several months, visited many schools, and heard testimony in public sessions in each of the five boroughs. CEJ leaders testified about the scale and scope of change necessary to transform the city’s middle-grade schools into effective schools. In August 2007, the Task Force issued its report and a set of comprehensive recommendations for systemic improvement. In an agreement negotiated with Speaker Quinn, Mayor Bloomberg, and Chancellor Klein, the city school system agreed to:

- identify at least fifty high-need middle-grade schools that can access a \$5 million Department of Education Fund to implement the Task Force’s recommendations;

- waive the costs of all centrally offered professional development for these schools;
- work to implement Task Force recommendations citywide;
- expand Regents-level courses citywide;
- establish an ongoing discussion on middle-grade reform with a working group of key stakeholders;
- establish the NYCDOE position of Director of Middle Grade Initiatives.

Since then, CEJ has worked with Lori Bennett, the Director of Middle Grade Initiatives, to identify the target middle-grade schools, support the distribution of the funds, and participate in the stakeholder working group.

However, at the press conference in August announcing the initiative, all the parties agreed that this was only the first stage in implementing the Task Force recommendations. Given the enormity of the middle-grades failure and the lack of improvement during Children First, the next stage must begin immediately to ensure that the academic futures of thousands of middle-grade students are not forfeited.

Looking to the Future: A Historic Opportunity

In neighborhoods across New York City, parents fervently want their children to graduate from high school and succeed in college. Cruelly, this hope is a fantasy for thousands of New York City families whose children attend failing middle-grade schools. While the current NYCDOE Middle Grade Initiative is a first step, it cannot address the magnitude of the problem. Unless it becomes a launching pad for much bolder and more comprehensive change, as outlined in the New York City Council Middle School Task Force report, its impact will be minimal. Thousands of middle-grade students in low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods will continue to have little chance of graduating high school ready for college.

Parents from low-income communities throughout New York City led the Campaign for Fiscal Equity struggle for fair and adequate funding for public schools. Now, the new Contract for Excellence funding from New York State provides a historic opportunity to help *close the gap in the middle grades*.

CEJ stands united with a wide range of citywide and neighborhood allies (see Endorsers of the CEJ Middle Grade Action Plan on page 21). Together, we call on Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein to use this new funding, along with city resources, *to implement the most important recommendations of the City Council Middle School Task Force, as outlined in the following Middle Grade Action Plan, in 200 of the city's low-performing middle-grade schools*. To facilitate each school's investment and commitment to reform, school staff will vote on whether to adopt the Action Plan.

The Middle Grade Action Plan

Redesign School Day and Add More Time for Learning: College Preparatory and Enrichment Curriculum

While curriculum and testing requirements have exploded in the last twenty years, the time allotted to meet these requirements has not changed. Students in low-performing middle-grade schools need both rigorous core classes that strengthen their critical thinking skills and a range of enrichment opportunities that engage their creative energies.

Participating middle-grade schools will redesign the school day and add ninety minutes of academic and enrichment time per day, coordinating with existing extended-day initiatives.

The faculty of each participating school can choose to extend the school day by staggering their work schedules, by working the additional ninety minutes and receiving commensurate compensation, and/or by partnering with community-based and nonprofit organizations. Redesigning the school day, in conjunction with the additional time, will allow schools to ensure that all subjects get the attention they deserve, students are more engaged in their own learning, and the following elements become part of the school week:

- visual/performing arts and physical education for every child, every semester
- strong focus on literacy across the curriculum
- advanced courses across the curriculum, especially Math A (algebra) and Regents-level science, available to every student
- quality ESL, bilingual, and dual-language programs
- small-group and individual tutoring for struggling students

Adolescents need close relationships with adults who monitor their progress and intervene if they get off track. To build this support, the school schedule should be restructured to create opportunities such as:

- teams of four teachers who share seventy-five students for the entire year
- class sizes of no more than twenty-three students
- summer academy for incoming sixth-graders to orient and prepare them for the middle grades
- advisories for all students

Instructional Quality: Attract, Train, and Keep the Best Teachers and Principals

Research demonstrates that teacher quality is the key to improving student performance. Unfortunately, nearly half of all teachers in high-poverty middle-grade schools have less than three years' experience, and their principals have even less. Professional development can improve teacher and principal practice, as well as encourage quality instructional leaders to stay in their schools.

Schools that vote to participate will be designated Professional Learning Schools. They will have a rigorous, continuous, and school-based professional development program, with a strong focus on literacy and adolescent development, coordinated by an Assistant Principal or Professional Development Specialist, that includes opportunities for:

- daily common planning time for teacher teams (to discuss academic and social/emotional progress, analyze data, organize visits to other teachers' classrooms, and coordinate joint lesson planning);
- regular content-driven, embedded professional development for school staff, planned and led largely by classroom teachers and conducted in small- and large-group formats;
- a paid, voluntary summer session for teachers to participate in institutes led by expert researchers and practitioners, develop lessons, plan the year's activities, and identify areas for inquiry;
- paid time for teachers to visit families in their homes.

Each Professional Learning School will also offer incentives to attract and retain teachers, such as:

- a school-based mentoring program to support new teachers and principals in their first three years;
- a Lead Teacher in each of the four core subject areas, as well as the areas of special education and English Language Learners, who will support the teacher teams;
- a reduced course load for first-year teachers to allow time for extra planning and collaboration;
- a team-transfer policy so that teachers can transfer into the school with several colleagues.

Strong Supports for Students: Student Success Centers

Adolescence is a time of great challenge and opportunity. Middle-grade schools must become healthy and safe places for youth to thrive, provide rapid response to students who are falling off track, and develop close communication between school support workers, community partners, teachers, and families to ensure that every student can access the culturally relevant academic, social, and emotional supports necessary to be successful.

Schools that vote to participate will establish a Student Success Center that will integrate school and community resources to provide strong academic, social, and emotional supports to students. Under the leadership of a Center Coordinator, the Center will include:

- coordination of all counseling and support services provided by school staff, physical and mental health workers, community-based organizations, and social service providers;
- common physical space and necessary technology for support services;

- one school counselor per 200-250 students, who also works closely with their families;
- a paid voluntary summer program for staff to participate in institutes led by expert researchers and practitioners;
- a specialized high school articulation counselor who has knowledge of high school options for all students, including those with special education needs and English Language Learners, who begins working with students and families in the sixth grade, and who promotes college awareness for all students and their parents;
- implementation of a rigorous, research-tested college preparatory program.

Using the new Contract for Excellence funds to implement these three major reforms in low-performing middle-grade schools across the city will provide the structure, personnel, and comprehensive support necessary to close the achievement gap in the middle grades and ensure that all students enter high school prepared to graduate and go on to college. This is the crucial next step to achieve equity and excellence for all New York City students and make our school system a true success story.

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Endorsers of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice Middle Grade Action Plan

Advocates for Children

All Our Children Initiative of the Episcopal Diocese of New York

Alliance for Quality Education

Campaign for Fiscal Equity

Center for Arts Education

Children's Aid Society

Citizens Committee for Children of New York

Coalition for Asian-American Children and Families

El Puente

Families United for Racial and Economic Equality

Gambian Society

Latino Pastoral Action Center

Mothers on the Move

NAACP, New York State Conference–Metropolitan Council

National Center for Schools and Communities

Neighborhood Family Services Coalition

New Immigrant Community Empowerment

New York Immigration Coalition

Professional Staff Congress of CUNY

Queens Community House

Red Hook Initiative

Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ

UNITE-HERE Local 100

United Federation of Teachers

Urban Youth Collaborative

Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

Jon Snyder, Dean of the Graduate School, Bank Street College of Education

Pedro Noguera, Chair, City Council Middle School Task Force and Professor, New York University

Member Organizations of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

ACORN is a national membership organization of low- and moderate-income families with a thirty-year history of organizing for social change. The NYC ACORN Schools Office has developed new public schools and produced policy studies demonstrating racial and economic inequities in the school system.

Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE) was formed in 1997 by a group of parents and neighborhood residents concerned with the quality of public education in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn. Affiliated with the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, CHAFE has used outreach, advocacy, education, and community organizing to fight for neighborhood schools that provide all children with a quality, safe, and modern education.

Highbridge Community Life Center has been providing a wide range of educational and social services since 1979, including job-training programs and entitlement assistance to families living in the Highbridge neighborhood.

Make the Road New York is a major force for social change in New York City, with more than 3,000 members who lead the organization in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Make the Road New York offers a variety of services and strategies for neighborhood improvement, including organizing for civil rights and economic justice, legal services, educational programs, and youth development.

New Settlement Apartments owns and operates almost 1,000 units of low- and moderate-income housing in the Mount Eden neighborhood and provides educational and community-service programs to area residents.

New York Civic Participation Project is a collaboration of labor unions and community groups organizing union members in the neighborhoods where they live. The member organizations – SEIU Local 32BJ, AFSCME DC-37, HERE Local 100, the National Employment Law Project, and Make the Road by Walking – represent hundreds of thousands of workers and decades of success fighting for immigrant and worker rights in New York.

Queens Congregations United for Action (QCUA) is a coalition of faith-based institutions working together to empower and unite the community to achieve social justice through organizing. QCUA has organized and won victories on traffic safety, sanitation, neighborhood services, affordable housing, and education issues in the Corona and Elmhurst neighborhoods of Queens.

United Federation of Teachers Brooklyn Parent Outreach Committee works to strengthen home-school collaborations and increase parent involvement and responsibility.

1199 Child Care Fund has established the Public Education Advocacy Project to organize Hospital and Health Care Workers Union members, many of whose children attend public school, to participate in school-improvement activities.

The Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University has supported community organizing for school reform in New York since 1995. It provides a wide range of strategic support to CEJ and its member organizations, including data analysis, research, and training.

Additional copies of this report are available from
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