

Room for improvement

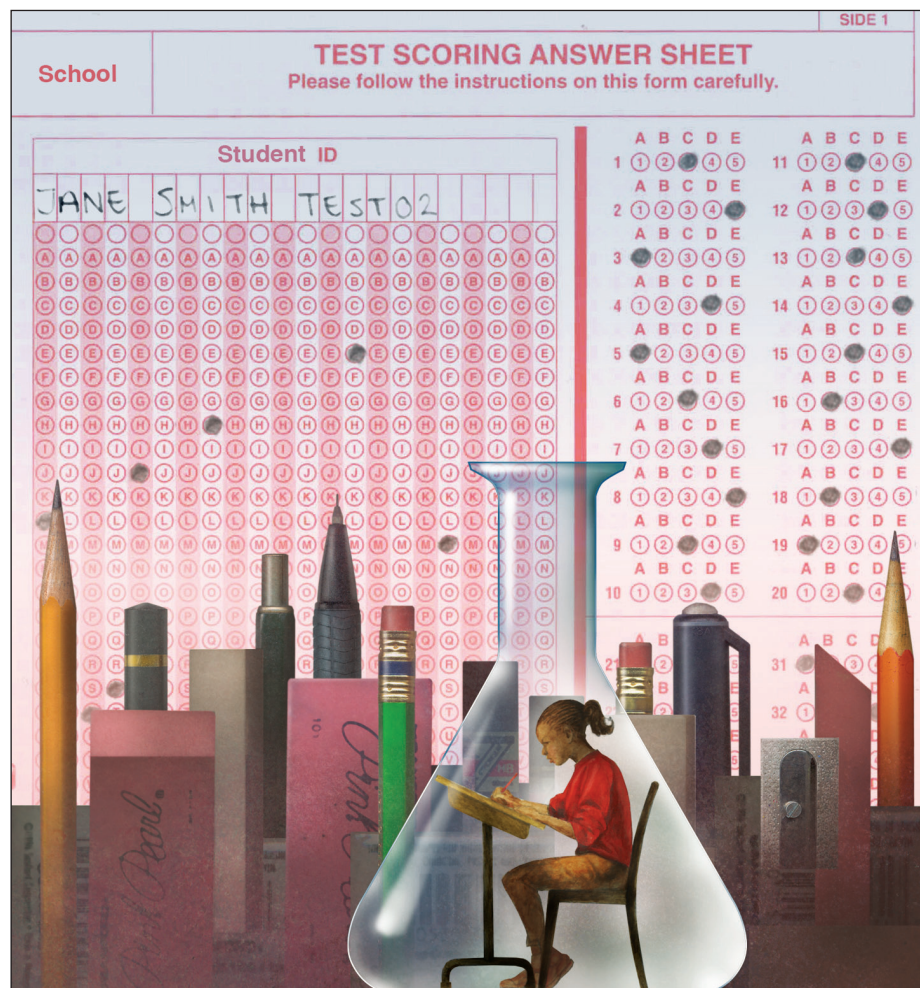
NAEP releases first-ever assessment of science scores in urban districts

For the first time, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, more commonly known as NAEP, has released science results for students in 10 urban school districts to provide a look at how those students compare with the nation as a whole. Given the demographics of the 10 districts—with majorities of low-income students—the urban scores were, not surprisingly, somewhat below the national average.

AFT executive vice president Antonia Cortese says the science results “tell us there is much more work to be done in our nation’s urban schools. Laws like NCLB are narrowing the education curriculum to the point that crucial subjects are in danger of being left behind.” For now, NCLB only requires testing in math and reading. Cortese points out that the concerted focus on reading—stimulated at least in part by NCLB—has led to the continuous improvement of NAEP reading scores among urban students. Because this is the first urban sample in science, there is now a way to compare urban achievement trends in that subject. These scores will serve as a baseline for future comparisons.

The science results prompted at least one group, the Council of the Great City Schools, to call for the establishment of national standards not only in science but also in reading and math. “Many of the districts now have their instructional programs so tightly aligned with the state assessments that they are lacking the rigor that NAEP rightly assesses,” says Michael Casserly, who heads the council, which represents the nation’s largest public school systems. “The nation’s urban schools call on our national policymakers to develop and adopt national standards and require that states tie their tests to them.”

In many of the systems in the science trial (Atlanta; Austin, Texas; Boston;



Charlotte, N.C.; Chicago; Cleveland; Houston; Los Angeles; New York City; and San Diego) the AFT represents teachers and other educators. Cortese emphasizes that the AFT has consistently described the elements of “what works,” including research-based programs, more instructional time, ongoing support and adequate funding—and those elements apply to any area of the curriculum.

The scores, which are from the 2005 NAEP and include fourth- and eighth-graders, show large variations among the 10 districts. In fourth grade, for example, the average national score was 149 (out of 300). The urban scores ranged from 147 in Austin to 126 in Chicago and Los Angeles. Among eighth-graders, where the national average was 147, Austin students again were at the top, with 144, while Atlanta’s 117 was the lowest. The report includes an important caveat regarding these scores. The number of students excluded from the sample because they were classified as special education or English language

learners, ranged from only 3 percent of fourth-graders in Charlotte to 9 percent in Austin. The national exclusion rate is 3 percent.

“Comparisons of achievement results across districts should be interpreted with caution if the exclusion rates vary widely,” the study’s authors note.

In her comments on the test results, Cortese strongly emphasizes the need to maintain a focus on “what really makes a difference in education.” In addition to the elements noted above about what works, we need highly qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, and testing that is aligned with strong standards and curricula. “Urban communities face daunting challenges,” Cortese points out. “All of our students should be given the chance to live up to their potential. Those hard-working educators who serve these children remain committed to that goal.”

More information on the NAEP trial urban assessment in science or other NAEP results are available at nationsreportcard.gov.

TRY IT!

LOVE OF LITERATURE Serving as a role model is a great way to guide student learning, and Douglas County (Colo.) elementary teacher Irma Sturgell and other teachers provided a great example for students studying literature. Members of Sturgell’s book club, most of whom are teachers, held a session in the classroom while the students observed. Afterward, the students talked about what they had seen and how they could use it in their own discussions. Sturgell says the session was fun for all, and it reminded the students that reading and learning are lifelong endeavors.

NOT JUST FOR BATHROOMS Individual dry-erase boards for students can be expensive, but middle school teacher Maria Williams of Lynn, Mass., has an alternative. Building supply stores sell white bathroom paneling that can be cut into smaller sizes. She says a 4 foot by 8 foot piece, which costs about \$10, can be cut into 32 pieces that are 12 inches square, or fewer large pieces if that’s preferred. Besides being great for individual or group activities, the paneling can turn dead wall space into useable board space.

NO LATE RETURNS Pittsburgh PE teacher Matthew Milanak has developed a way to get all the athletic equipment returned on time after recess. When it’s time to go back to class, he blows a whistle and records the names of students in order as they return their basketballs, jump ropes, etc. The next day, he reads out the names of the students who returned their equipment first, and they get first choice of equipment and get started playing first. Students rarely waste time anymore at the end of recess. First come, first served.



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