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STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading 2009

DAVID W. GORDON
Superintendent of Schools, Sacramento, California
Member, National Assessment Governing Board

Last year was the fifth time that the National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Assessment was given to representative samples of students in some of the nation's largest urban school districts. Of the 6 districts that have been in the program since it began in 2002, 4 have recorded significant gains in reading at grade 4 and 2 have shown gains at grade 8. Among students in large city public schools across the country there have been substantial gains in fourth grade reading achievement since 2002, but no significant change at grade 8.

In the NAEP mathematics results released last fall, the gains by large-city schools have been even more widespread. Since TUDA math began in 2003, 7 of the original 10 participating districts have shown significant gains at fourth grade and 8 out of 10 have posted gains at grade 8. The large-city schools as a whole have shown substantial improvement in math in both grades.

The significance of all this is that, according to NAEP's independent barometer, the nation's large-city schools have been raising student achievement for more than half a decade—although not in every district in every subject every time NAEP is given. But the trend is clearly up after years of low achievement and discouraging news. This progress merits notice and we should applaud it. NAEP clearly verifies that something positive is happening. The schools and the country must build on what has been accomplished.

Yet, NAEP also tells us that serious problems continue in many of our large-city schools, and that serious work still needs to be done. Although many of the gaps have narrowed between big-city schools and others, substantial deficits remain. Also, the gaps within the big-city school districts themselves—by income and race/ethnicity—continue to be stubbornly large.

One clear way of looking at this is through the achievement levels set by the Governing Board. The *Proficient* achievement level in reading, which represents solid academic performance at each grade tested, has been reached by 23 percent of fourth graders in large-city schools. This is still well below the 32 percent of fourth graders nationwide reaching that standard, but the proportion has grown by 6 percent, from just 17 percent in 2002. During the same period the proportion reaching *Proficient* in reading among public school fourth graders nationwide rose by just 2 percentage points. There have been even greater increases in the proportion of large-city students reaching *Proficient* in fourth and eighth grade math.

The gains at the *Basic* achievement level, a standard of partial mastery, have been even greater. In large-city schools nationwide the proportion of fourth graders reaching the *Basic* level in reading went up from 44 to 54 percent over seven years—a gain of 10 percent. And in 3 of the TUDA districts the gain has been 15 percent—in Atlanta from 35 to 50 percent, in the District of Columbia from 31 to 46 percent, and in New York City from 47 to 62 percent.

The one exception to this pattern of substantial and widespread gains has been eighth grade reading in large-city schools as well as among the full NAEP sample of public schools nationwide. This must be a cause for concern. Over the past seven years there has been no significant change in the proportion of students reaching *Basic* or *Proficient* in eighth grade reading, either among large-city schools or nationwide. The proportion of big-city students reaching *Proficient* still is just 21 percent at grade 8, compared to 30 percent in public schools nationwide. Even more disturbingly, 37 percent of big-city eighth graders score below the *Basic* achievement level on NAEP, compared to 26 percent nationwide who miss that mark. Two TUDA districts—Atlanta and Los Angeles—have shown substantial growth in eighth grade reading scores since 2002, but the general pattern is stagnation.

By itself, NAEP cannot tell us why there are different patterns of change in different grades and subjects. But I think a careful look at our tests and at how math and reading are taught and learned may give us some idea of what's happening and what we should do next.

The NAEP Reading Assessment is a test of reading comprehension, not just of reading skills. It is primarily a test of understanding and application, of reasoning and analysis—not of word attack skills or finding a particular fact in a paragraph. A mastery of basic skills is certainly necessary to do well on NAEP reading, but it is clearly not enough. The reading abilities that NAEP tests are developed not just in reading and English classes, but also across the curriculum and throughout the school day. They are developed not just in school but are influenced powerfully by the reading and writing, and the speaking and listening, that children do at home, on the Internet, and with their friends. By contrast, math is a school subject almost entirely, taught and learned almost entirely through school.

I think the fourth grade results indicate that the big-city schools are making strides in early reading instruction. This is the one facet of reading where teachers can have the most impact, particularly with our neediest children who have more limited literacy experiences at home. However, the stagnation at eighth grade shows the need for a richer curriculum, more complex texts, and more writing—not only in English classes, but also in the social studies and science classes that our junior high and middle schools offer.

In math there has been a major push throughout the country for all students to take algebra in eighth grade, or at least be ready to take it by grade 9. This may well have contributed to the improvement in grade 8 math results on NAEP. But there seems to have been no similar goal, no similar coherence, in the rest of the middle school curriculum. Instead, far too often, the middle schools have fallen into a sort of adolescent counseling modality where there is more emphasis on how well the kids get along than in drilling down on the subject-matter knowledge and the reasoning and analytical skills that their students need to do well in high school and college. And, not coincidentally, background knowledge and analytical skill are required to do well on the NAEP Reading Assessment.

There are two other points I think it is important to make.

First, the stagnation in NAEP eighth grade reading shows the importance of having a coherent, goal-oriented curriculum that stretches from early childhood through a high school diploma and means students are prepared for college or rewarding careers. Good early education is crucial,

but it must be built upon in a coherent progression from the preschool years through high school. There must be a systemwide approach that stretches from top to bottom and bottom to top. We must have a system that ensures that all children are taught a curriculum that gives them the content knowledge they need and develops their analytical skills.

Second, the experience of the two school districts we are highlighting today—Atlanta and New York City—illustrates the importance of stability in school leadership that can put into place and develop the coherent systems that schools need. Both cities now have leaders who have been at the helm for many years. Both districts have moved beyond random programs and quick fixes to stable systems, driven by data, that have shown positive results. Both districts have ramped up effective professional development systems.

Both leaders, of course, acknowledge that more must be done and that serious deficiencies remain. As school budgets are strained by the recession, continuing to make progress may become more difficult. But, as an independent assessment, NAEP can verify that progress has indeed been made. And hopefully, other districts may learn from what they have accomplished.