

# Boston Business Journal

## Headlines don't tell whole story about test scores

By Kit Nichols

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Massachusetts fourth- and eighth-graders recently ranked first in the country on the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test. "Read all about it: Mass. kids tops" was the Page 2 *Boston Herald* story. And indeed, there is cause for celebration. The NAEP is called the "Nation's Report Card." Mandated by Congress, the exam is administered to a sampling of students from randomly chosen schools in participating states. In 2002, 3,236 Massachusetts fourth-graders from 111 schools and 2,576 eighth-graders from 104 schools took the reading exam. Massachusetts fourth-graders topped the other states, beating out second ranked Connecticut by 5 points. Eighth-graders were second in the nation behind top-scoring Vermont eighth-graders.

These scores, coming as they do a decade after the Education Reform Act of 1993 seem to show great progress—but there is more to a story than a banner headline.

To begin with, just what are we celebrating? The NAEP sets achievement levels according to score. For fourth graders, for example, a score of 268 denotes an advanced level of achievement. And 238 and higher indicates a level of proficiency. Massachusetts fourth-graders topped the chart with an average scaled score of 234 (out of 500) – or, not even proficient. Forty-seven percent of Massachusetts fourth-graders performed at or above the proficient level—that means 53 percent of our fourth-graders are not proficient readers.

While our kids were well ahead of the nationwide fourth-grade average of 217, it seems that what we are actually celebrating is the fact that that our bad news isn't as bad as other states'. The fact is we have a nation where the majority of fourth-graders, including those in Massachusetts, cannot read at a proficient level.

The good news is that there is progress: The fourth-grade average score in Massachusetts jumped significantly from the 1998 score of 223. In addition, scores among all racial/ethnic groups have improved since the 1998 test cycle. Despite these gains, however, minority children continue to lag far behind their white peers on these tests. The scale score of Massachusetts white fourth graders is 239; for blacks it is 212. Hispanic fourth-graders averaged 207. To give a sense of proportion, according to the NAEP scoring system, a score of 208 indicates a basic reading level, which NAEP defines as "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skill that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade." Forty-three percent of the commonwealth's black children and 49 percent of Hispanic children had reading skills that were below the basic level. We're talking about basic literacy, here. If you cannot read well, the likelihood that you will take biology, master word problems in algebra, or read the Declaration of Independence is nominal. This is a basic life skill, without which success is that much harder to attain.

These numbers also illustrate the substantial and continuing achievement gap between white students and their minority classmates—only 14 percent of white Massachusetts fourth-graders were below the basic reading level. Despite the massive increase in education spending since the passage of the Education Reform Act, the gap between white and black students has hovered around 26 points since the 1992 NAEP. While the scores for all racial/ethnic groups have risen, we have not made adequate progress in closing the achievement gap.

Also troubling is the NAEP results of low-income children. The average scale score for fourth-graders who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch was 215, compared to 241 for children who are not eligible for the free lunch program. While the scores of low-income kids have improved since 1998, the gap between poor kids and their wealthier counterparts remains about the same.

While we've made significant progress since the passage of the Education Reform Act, we are far from a point where we can sit back and congratulate ourselves on our children's success.

This is not a new story. We already know which kids are lagging behind. Many people will argue that the answer is more money – if we just had enough cash, we could close these achievement gaps and bring all kids up to a proficient reading level. But since 1993, we have pumped literally billions of dollars into the public education system, with the express goal of equalizing spending across

municipalities. In a budget crisis like the one that we are facing now, additional spending is simply not feasible.

For all the sincere concern about leveling the economic playing field for low-income and minority kids, however, we as a society have so far been unwilling to give their parents the same option that wealthier parents enjoy: the choice of removing their children from schools that do not give them the skills they need and transferring them to other schools, public or private, which will put them on the road to success. Instead, we keep these children, trapped by their circumstances, in schools that are often underperforming while we tinker around with education reform—allowing small numbers of kids to attend a limited number of charter schools or pilot schools, for example. But as we try to "fix" schools, it's important to keep in mind that another generation of kids is passing through without the basic skills they need.

That's nothing to celebrate.

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