



SUPPORTING ACADEMIC PROGRESS IN OHIO'S URBAN DISTRICTS

Prepared by The Ohio 8 Coalition

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Much has been written about the state of education in urban America, but a major falsehood still pervades the educational landscape: Kids from low-income families cannot achieve at high academic levels.

As superintendents and teacher union leaders representing the largest urban districts in the state of Ohio, we know firsthand the immense challenges facing our students. Our districts include Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown. Each day we instruct more than 250,000 students who have an average annual household income of less than \$23,000. In some districts, the median annual household income is as much as \$10,000 below the state average. Our classrooms have higher numbers of minority students, higher proportions of non-English speaking students, and higher proportions of students who are classified as special education than the average Ohio classroom. It would be an understatement to say that these children have the cards stacked against them.

We have been committed to finding ways to reach these students and guide them to success for many years. Since the late 1990s, our urban districts have invested significant time and resources in practices such as disaggregating student data, developing 21st century academic standards, aligning curriculum, and increasing time on task for students.

We support the objectives of No Child Left Behind legislation – closing the achievement gap and raising the standards for all children. We also believe the federal government can play a crucial role in reaching those goals. In addition to NCLB, we believe there are other steps policymakers and educators can take in partnership to assure even greater academic progress for students.

The purpose of this brief is to review the academic progress Ohio's urban districts are making, explore the policies and practices that are contributing to this progress, and recommend additional policies, both within NCLB legislation and beyond that law, that will support continued academic progress in urban areas.

The Ohio 8 Coalition was founded on the principle that a high-performance public education system is essential to the civic and economic health of Ohio's cities. Because it places such strong emphasis on collaboration and partnership, the Coalition enables superintendents and teacher union presidents to work together on issues of common concern. Our labor/management coalition is the only one of its kind in Ohio and perhaps in the country. As partners, we realize that working together is fundamental to reaching our goal of preparing *all* of our students for a successful future.

Big-City Districts Improving at Faster Rate than State Average

Results show that our students *are* improving, and improving at a more rapid rate than the state as a whole. The Coalition tracked reading and math scores on the Ohio Proficiency Tests for fourth and sixth graders from the 1998-99 school year through the 2004-2005 school year, as reported by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). During that time, students in our eight big-city school districts scored significant improvements:

- **In fourth-grade reading scores**, seven of the eight districts posted gains higher than the statewide gain. Toledo, Youngstown and Akron led the way, posting gains of 25.6 percentage points, 24.2 percentage points, and 23.8 percentage points, respectively. The statewide gain was 17.4 percentage points.
- **In fourth-grade math**, each of the eight big city districts achieved higher proficiency test score increases than the statewide gain, with Akron, Cincinnati, Columbus, Toledo and Youngstown all posting gains of better than 22 percentage points, compared with the statewide average of 14.9 percentage points.
- **In sixth-grade reading**, seven of the eight districts posted gains higher than the state as a whole. For instance, Cleveland posted a gain of 32.3 percentage points, and Cincinnati, Columbus, Dayton and Toledo demonstrated gains of better than 22 percentage points. The statewide gain was 17.7 percentage points.
- **In sixth-grade math**, all eight urban districts surpassed the state gain of 10.9 percentage points. In fact, Cleveland's gain of 27.2 percentage points was nearly three times that of the state, and Columbus and Cincinnati nearly doubled the state improvement, with 19.9 percentage points and 19 percentage points, respectively.

Performance Index Measurements

Broader benchmarks demonstrate a similar pattern of improvement. In progress assessed through Ohio's Performance Index – a calculation that measures test performance on all state indicator tests – our urban districts showed far greater rates of improvement than districts across the State of Ohio. The Ohio 8 districts averaged a gain of 14.1 percentage points, compared with the state average of 9.1 points since ODE began the calculations for the 2000-2001 school year.

Similarly, several of the Ohio 8 districts have shown steady progress on the state report card ratings, which look at test results, graduation rates and attendance. For the most recent report, Akron, Cincinnati and Toledo achieved ratings of Continuous Improvement. Other districts, like Canton and Columbus, missed Continuous Improvement standing by a handful of students. Both Akron and Toledo met the standards for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

We share these results not to declare the race is won but to demonstrate that high-poverty students in Ohio's big cities are making very significant progress. We know we have a long way to go in assuring broad-based academic achievement for all of our students. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the hard work of students, teachers, parents and administrators is clearly paying off for Ohio's urban students.

Ohio 8 Recommendations

From a combined labor/management perspective, we want to share our insight and recommendations for steps that can be taken to solidify our gains and to assure continued progress toward the goals of No Child Left Behind. As a coalition, we have had a common set of experiences in implementing NCLB, and each of our districts has experienced situations unique to its community. In a general sense, our over-arching concerns fall into six policy areas, and we are eager to work with policymakers to reflect the importance of these areas in policy that is fair and effective.

1. Measuring Student Performance and Adequate Yearly Progress

In the testing regime, achievement scores provide only partial measures of how well a school is performing. In addition to test scores, there are other important indicators in determining whether a school is in need of improvement. In many instances, a school or district may be making significant gains in multiple categories, but unless exact targets are met, that progress is not recognized.

Policy Areas for Consideration:

- Supplement achievement criteria with value added growth metrics that fairly represent the work of all school districts.
- Explicitly require states to use additional measures such as attendance rates, graduation rates, teacher quality, parental involvement and other attributes of effective schools.

2. Choice and Unified Accountability

Every student deserves to have an excellent education and to have options for choosing a learning environment that works best for him or her. Children, especially those in urban settings, move frequently during their school years. It is imperative that all the choices students have available are aligned with state standards, are staffed by highly qualified teachers, are operated by organizations committed to student success and are measured by the same accountability mechanisms.

Policy Areas for Consideration:

- Require a “unified” state accountability system that is applied evenly to traditional public schools, charter (or community) schools, voucher-supported schools, supplemental service providers and other school improvement interventions.
- Require school curricula and actual classroom instruction to align with agreed-upon state academic standards.

3. Technical Assistance for Low Performing Schools

Urban schools and districts face unique challenges that need to be addressed effectively at the district and state levels. Turning around low performing schools requires additional time, funding, staff resources and support from the entire community. Early childhood education is especially significant to children in high-poverty settings. Supplemental service providers could play an important role in this process, but currently their role is not defined and there are not enough *qualified* service providers available to help schools that are struggling to succeed.

Policy Areas for Consideration:

- Provide additional funding for early childhood education, for expanding the knowledge base about what works in urban schools, and for building a platform for sharing that research and expertise.
- Establish comprehensive standards for turning around low performing schools that include requirements for funding, technical assistance and time frames. Apply the standards equally to low performing charter schools.

4. Highly Qualified Teachers and Leaders

The State of Ohio is experiencing a time of economic transition. We have lost 280,000 jobs in the last five years, and our young people are leaving the state at record numbers at a time when we desperately need them to stay. It is within this context that schools in Ohio are attempting to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers and school principals. This task is especially difficult among already-hard-to-staff urban areas.

Policy Area for Consideration:

- Create funding incentives for innovative approaches for recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators.
- Support research-based professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators that will improve educational outcomes and student achievement.

5. Family and Community Engagement

Strategic partnerships and the authentic engagement of parents and community are essential to sustaining innovation and improvement in urban schools. Studies have documented that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher-level programs, attend school regularly, have better social skills, graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Policy Areas for Consideration:

- Create incentives for establishing and expanding parental involvement, community engagement and labor/management partnerships.
- Create a collaborative model that encourages multiple agencies to work together at the local level to provide medical, dental and psychological services; afterschool programming and other community services.

6. Funding

No Child Left Behind demands improved student outcomes from the nation's school districts. Yet in the President's fiscal year 2007 federal budget, education received a decrease in funding of approximately \$1.5 billion from the 2006 level. Many urban districts like those in the Ohio 8 have not seen an increase in their Title I support for the past two years and may face similar support levels this year. At the same time, districts like those in Ohio's big cities are seeing dramatic increases in the percentages of children who are economically disadvantaged, who have limited English proficiency or who have other special needs. These students are especially hurt by diminished federal support and are most at risk for being left behind by the education system.

Policy Area for Consideration:

- Focus attention to the needs of urban children and the degree of difficulty in helping all urban children succeed in school and in life. In districts where interventions with the neediest children are producing favorable results, Congress should allocate additional funds that enable the districts to take the strategies to scale and to share successful practices with other educators.
- Assure that non-education budget line items which may impact the safety and well-being of school children – such as Medicaid reimbursement – are not arbitrarily eliminated or reduced.

The Ohio 8 Coalition continues to work toward improved academic achievement for all students, and looks forward to working in partnership with federal policymakers to further improve No Child Left Behind.
