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**STATEMENT ON 2005 TRIAL URBAN DISTRICT ASSESSMENT
RESULTS IN READING AND MATHEMATICS FROM
THE NATION'S REPORT CARDTM**

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Today marks the third time that NAEP has issued results for what we have come to call our TUDA program. This means we now can begin to see not only where the districts participating in NAEP stand, but also where they are going. And that, I think, is one of the greatest values of the program, because NAEP provides an independent, consistent, and objective accounting of the changes in academic achievement.

It is important to look at the gains, to see where the greatest progress has been made, and for other districts—in TUDA and around the country—to try to learn from these successes.

In fourth grade math, gains were made in eight of the 10 districts in TUDA in both 2003 and 2005; in eighth grade math, gains were made in four of the 10 districts. In both grades, the most substantial gains were right here in Boston, followed by San Diego, Los Angeles, and Houston.

The improvements in mathematics are part of a national pattern that has continued since the current framework for NAEP's math assessment was first used back in 1990. But because many of the urban districts are behind the national averages, they must improve faster in order to catch up. During the past two years, that happened in a number of urban districts, but nowhere more strikingly than in Boston.

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In fourth grade math, the proportion of Boston students at or above NAEP's *Proficient* achievement level reached 22 percent in 2005—up from 12 percent just two years earlier. The proportion at or above *Proficient* in public schools nationwide rose just four percentage points to 35 percent. In Boston, 72 percent of fourth graders reached the *Basic* achievement level in math this year, compared to just 59 percent in 2003. Nationwide, the improvement was just three percentage points to 79 percent at or above *Basic*.

Obviously, many students are still below *Basic* and many more have not yet reached *Proficient*. So clearly, there is still much work to be done. But it is also clear that considerable progress is being made in fourth grade math in Boston—and in eighth grade math too—and this should be a cause for celebration.

In reading, unfortunately, there have been far fewer gains—a pattern that also showed up all too clearly in the NAEP national and state results, which were released in mid-October. Among the TUDA districts, the only sustained upward trends that have produced statistically significant improvements since 2002 have been in fourth grade in two districts—New York City and Atlanta.

These districts are quite different. New York City is the largest in the nation with 1.1 million students. Atlanta is the smallest of the TUDA districts with an enrollment this year of about 51,000. In New York, no single ethnic group accounts for more than 40 percent of enrollment; in Atlanta, about 85 percent of enrolled students are black. There is one factor both districts have in common—large numbers of students in poverty: 84 percent of fourth graders eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in New York, 76 percent eligible in Atlanta.

But both have been making steady gains in early reading, and New York now is just four points below the national average for fourth grade. In 2002, it was 11 points behind, which is quite a substantial closing of the gap. The eighth grade NAEP reading scores in New York are not nearly so encouraging, which is also the case in the other urban districts taking the exam.

New York's gains in fourth grade reading may come from a balanced approach that includes explicit instruction in reading comprehension, plenty of time to read, and a careful matching of readers to books. But in eighth grade—in New York City and elsewhere—it clearly is more difficult to achieve reading gains. Some of this may just be a matter of time. The eighth graders have had the benefit of new reading approaches for just the past few years. But there also is the issue of what reading comprehension consists of in middle school and what NAEP requires in eighth grade.

The NAEP eighth grade assessment has a wide mix of reading passages—short stories, speeches, magazine articles, and poems. The Governing Board approves all of them, and some are quite complex. To reach the *Proficient* achievement level, students not only have to identify main ideas and major relationships; they should also be able to analyze and interpret what they have read, compare different passages, draw inferences and conclusions, and justify what they assert through evidence and logic.

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To develop these skills, which are needed in high school and the world beyond, requires a rich, demanding curriculum, well-written literature and texts, and writing assignments that involve clear organization and clear expression. Often it is quite difficult for schools and teachers to do all this. Yet it must be provided over many years of schooling for eighth graders to become strong readers who not only understand what they read but can analyze the text critically.

Besides the trend information NAEP offers on 10 urban school districts, this year's TUDA reports contain data on one new district, Austin, Texas, which joined the program in 2005. The Austin results are quite encouraging. Overall, its students meet or exceed the national and Texas NAEP averages in both grades and both subjects tested. Its students did particularly well in fourth grade math, where 40 percent reached the *Proficient* achievement level, compared to 35 percent of all public school students nationwide.

If appropriations are available, the Governing Board hopes that even more urban school districts will be able to join the Trial Urban District Assessment, and rather soon, we expect, the word "trial" will be dropped from its name.

The districts that volunteer for this assessment are really quite brave. They are asking for an independent report card, which sometimes may not give good news. But they realize that all children in their schools live in one country and, increasingly, in one world. They must be competitive.

The children in New York, Austin, Boston, and Washington, D.C., all need the same skills as students across the nation. And NAEP can give their school districts some perspective and some insights to understand where they are and how well they are moving ahead.

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