

Analysis of Ohio data shows improvement lagging in big city schools

Performance poor for both traditional and charter public schools

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

August 15, 2007

Despite a decade of significant school reform efforts in Ohio, students in the state's largest cities still struggle mightily to meet basic academic standards and are nowhere close to achieving the goals set by the federal *No Child Left Behind* law, according to an analysis of the latest Ohio school report-card data.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute found 46 percent of 183,000 public and charter school students in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus and Dayton are attending schools graded either D or F (officially, academic watch or academic emergency). That compares to about 75,000 students in D or F schools in the entire rest of the state. (These figures do not include a few thousand students attending online e-schools or in schools that did not receive academic ratings.)

"This figure is frightening. There are literally thousands of children in Ohio whose futures are at serious risk," said Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio operations and policy for the Dayton-based nonprofit educational policy group. "Ohio's best schools are getting better, leaving many urban children behind."

The urban results are in stark contrast to student performance in most Ohio school districts where the majority of children meet state standards and attend schools rated Excellent or Effective. This fact raises profound questions about the impact of poverty on student achievement, and Ohio's move toward value-added assessment of student achievement over time should provide better data on this issue in coming years.

It's not all bleak in the state's big cities. Reading and math student achievement scores continue long-term improvement in Ohio's eight largest cities, according to the state data, but results still fall far short of minimum standards and the trend lines aren't nearly steep enough to close the state's achievement gap any time soon.

"There are good, and even excellent, schools in every city. Some are district-operated schools, some are charters; but there aren't nearly enough to go around," Ryan said. "Improvement is just too slow. We need to study what works in both high-performing district and charter schools and encourage the expansion and growth of these efforts."

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute analysis found that:

- In the eight largest urban districts, which house most charter schools, overall performance levels between the two sectors were similar. In reading, about six in 10 charter and comparable district students were proficient. In math, about half of charter and comparable district students were proficient.
- Only in Dayton did charter schools outperform district schools, by about eight percentage points, in reading and math.
- Charter e-school performance lagged that of schools statewide in both reading and math.
- Over the last six school years, urban charter-school performance has improved at a more rapid pace than Ohio's eight big-city districts. In the last year, however, district school improvement was higher.
- Relatively low percentages of both charter and district schools in the Ohio Eight fared well in state and federal accountability systems. Only 38 percent of Ohio Eight district schools met the federal standard of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), compared with 28 percent of urban charter schools.

The Fordham analysis was based on annual school report-card data released Tuesday by the Ohio Department of Education. The report-card data rates every charter school and district school in the state, based on test scores, graduation rates, attendance and other factors for the 2006-2007 school year.

In Dayton, for example, 36 percent of students (district and charter) are attending schools the state considers in academic emergency while 43 percent are attending schools graded academic watch (for a total of 79 percent of students in "D" or "F" schools). For Dayton district schools alone, 84 percent of students attend schools in the two-lowest categories. Charter school students fare a little better, with about 70 percent of those students in schools rated academic emergency or academic watch.

Of the four cities Fordham looked at in depth, Dayton struggles the most, while Columbus fares the best. In that city, 34 percent of students attended either district or charter schools in the two-lowest categories. Also, Columbus Public Schools outperformed its charter schools, with 30 percent of public school students in academic-emergency or academic-watch schools, compared with 56 percent for charter schools.

"Columbus is clearly the bright spot among Ohio's big cities, at least for traditional public education," Ryan said.

In Cleveland, 47 percent of students were in district or charter schools in the two-lowest categories. However, district schools beat out charter schools with 43 percent of district students in the two lowest categories compared with 69 percent in charter schools.

In Cincinnati, 46 percent of students attended district and charter schools in the lowest-two categories. About 43 percent of district school students were in the lowest-rated schools compared with 60 percent for charter schools.

Charter schools were launched in Ohio in 1997 as alternatives for children in failing public schools and as laboratories to forge new ways to educate children. After a decade, Ryan said, it's time for charter schools to live up to their promise.

"Even friends and long-time supporters of charter schools and chartering are tired of explaining away mediocre and poor results, the more so because the too-few terrific schools demonstrate that it doesn't have to be this way," he said. "I hope district officials are as impatient with their weak schools as many friends of chartering are weary of explaining away the poor performance of too many of theirs."

"This data makes painfully clear that too many children in charter schools are being left behind. Sadly, for many the only choice they have is to go back to a district school that's not performing any better," Ryan said.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, which sponsors eight charter schools in southwest Ohio. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

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