

State of the New York City Public Schools 2002

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CENTER FOR CIVIC INNOVATION
AT THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the educational performance of the New York City public schools over the past five years. It finds that educational performance has not improved during that period. Among its specific findings are:

- Only 70 percent of students complete high school, either by obtaining a diploma (60%) or a GED (10%) within seven years of initial enrollment. Only 50 percent complete high school, either with a diploma (46%) or GED (4%) within four years of initial enrollment. These figures are unchanged from the beginning of the 1990s.
- Only 44 percent of black students, and only 39 percent of Hispanic students, complete high school within four years.
- While passage rates on the State's Regents exams have increased since 1995, fewer than 50 percent of City students pass even one of these challenging exams. Only a maximum of 19 percent of City students could have passed five exams last year, based on low passage rates for Biology (16%) and Earth Science (19%). Since students will have to pass five of these exams to graduate from high school by 2005, City high school graduation rates may drop precipitously in the near future.
- City elementary and middle school students are also not learning what they need to. Only 41 percent of these students scored at an acceptable level on the citywide reading tests in 2000, while only 34 percent scored at an acceptable level on the citywide math tests.
- One in five City elementary and middle school students scored at the lowest level on the reading tests, and nearly one third of these students scored at the lowest level on the citywide math tests.

Many areas of the City are virtual educational dead zones. Seven entire districts (23, 19, 12, 7, 5, 9 & 85) have fewer than 30 percent of students passing the city's English exam, and fourteen (the seven above plus 17, 13, 8, 4, 6, 10 & 16) have fewer than 30 percent of student passing the city's Math exam.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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STATE OF THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2002

This is the third report card on the New York City Public Schools issued by the Center for Civic Innovation. The first was prepared by the author of the current report in 1998 with the Public Education Association. The second was prepared in 2000 by Joe Viteritti and Kevin Kosar of New York University. This series of reports is meant to provide a statistical overview of the performance of New York City's public school system, the nation's largest. It draws upon data made available by the city's Board of Education and by the State Education Department and focuses on bottom line indicators of student outcomes.

This year's report presents data on the performance of the school system before our city and nation experienced the horror of September 11, 2001. As the long term effects of that event continue to play out, this report offers a snap shot of the state of the school system prior to the impact of those larger issues. This report also comes at a time of governmental change in New York City. Mayor Bloomberg has just taken office and all seven members of the Board of Education are up for reappointment on July 1, 2002. Given the fact that the Mayor and four of the five borough presidents are new, it is likely that a very different Board of Education will be in place in six months time.

The data in this report are presented in a "just the facts" manner, with little editorial comment. Our purpose is to provide the city's new leadership, as well as all concerned New Yorkers, with a single, easy to read, source of information on the recent trends in school and student performance.

Some trends are clear, however, and are worth noting.

On many important indicators of student performance, the school system is not improving. The rate at which students graduate from high school is low and stagnant. The four-year graduation rate has re-

mained stuck at 50% for the past three years, two points higher than the rate in the mid-1990s, but one point lower than the rate at the beginning of the 90s. Only 60% of the city's public school students receive high school diplomas by age 21, and that rate has not changed in the years for which data is available.

In the elementary and middle schools, the results of the state and city tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics present a mixed bag, but generally support the observation that the performance of the school system is just not improving. ELA scores have improved by 4 points over the last three years, but math scores remain very low and stagnant.

There does seem to be one area in which the school system is experiencing sustained improvement. While there has been no increase in the high school graduation rate, a number of indicators suggest that those students who are graduating are reaching higher levels of achievement. Pass rates on the Regents examinations in English and in History have been climbing steadily and the percentage of graduates who earn the tougher Regents-endorsed diploma has increased from 19 percent to 27 percent in the 4 most recent years, reversing an 8 year decline.

This improvement in the academic performance of those students who graduate from a New York City Public High School seems to be the first identifiable impact of the State's imposition of higher graduation standards. Other effects remain to be felt. Students who are currently seniors in high school will have to pass four Regent's exams in order to graduate, and next year's seniors will need five passing scores. For the time being, the state is allowing a score of 55 on those exams to be considered passing, but is scheduled to raise the passing score to 65 for those students who are now tenth graders. Currently, fewer than a third of high school students seem to be passing all five of those tests with at least a score of 65. Complete

data is not available, but the figure could actually be lower than that level. At best, achievement among current high school students is going to have to increase dramatically, if the school system is even to maintain its current low graduation rate.

While the scope of this report is limited to the school system's outcomes, the data presented herein suggest some broad areas of concern which the incoming leadership of the city and school system should address.

First, school and district level management is uneven. There has been a consensus in the city for some time that there are well and poorly run schools and districts, but little has changed in those educational dead zones. There are some dedicated educational leaders within the system and there are some public schools in the city which are as good as those anywhere in the country. At the same time, thirteen school districts within the city have fewer than a third of their students reading at acceptable levels. Much attention is given to the state's list of Schools Under Registration Review (SURR), but many more schools than are on the list are in trouble. Some 345 schools have fewer than 30% of their students reading at acceptable levels.

Most of these poorly performing schools are filled with low-income students from Black or Hispanic families. However, there is ample evidence from both within and outside the school system that the link between race, family income and academic achievement can be broken by well run schools. The Board of Education itself identifies those schools which perform better than other schools with similar student populations. A recent study of the city's Catholic schools indicated that many schools in that system are out-performing their public school counterparts. The public school system needs to undertake a well thought-out and sustained effort to recruit, train and support more effective leaders in its failing schools and districts.

Beyond the aforementioned link between race, family income and school performance, three other trends stand out in the school system's data.

First, girls outperform boys on almost all measures for which data is available. Girls have a high school graduation rate that is 20 percent higher than that of boys in New York City Public Schools. Girls achievement on state tests is generally 10 points higher than that of boys in both grades 4 and 8. Twenty-five years ago, it was argued that girls came to school at a more

advanced developmental stage than boys but that school practice, and maturation, wore that down over time. No such trend is visible in the city public schools in this day and age. Girls start out ahead and stay ahead. This might not be problematic, but for the point that overall achievement is so low to begin with. The performance of boys in the school system merits serious attention.

Second, the school system is struggling with mathematics achievement in the grades beyond elementary school. Over thirty percent of the city's elementary and middle school students score at the lowest level of the state mathematics test. Only 34% of all students pass that test.

The mathematics "problem" seems connected to the third major trend in the data, the low performance of middle and junior high schools in the city. In both mathematics and English Language Arts, the city's middle and junior high schools seem to be the weakest link in the system. Achievement in English Language Arts (the state test measures achievement in reading, writing, and listening) drops from 44 percent in grade four to 33 percent in grade 8. In Math, the drop is steeper, from 51 percent in grade four to 22 percent in grade eight. The drop in mathematics achievement is also evident in public schools outside of the city. Other studies have also indicated low performance of Catholic school students on the grade eight mathematics test. The teaching and assessment of mathematics is an issue which the State Education Department and Board of Regents should be addressing.

While mathematics deserves special emphasis, the system's ways of organizing and running schools for early adolescents needs a thorough rethinking. There is a clear drop-off in achievement between the system's elementary schools and the middle and junior high schools. That problem clearly feeds the city's seemingly intractable high school dropout problem.

The data presented in this report and in previous reports in this series are sobering. So much of public life in New York City has improved in the last decade, but the public schools have not participated in that improvement. Now that the city faces its greatest challenges, one wonders where the impetus for meaningful school improvement will come from. Efforts to create alternatives to the monopolistic school system have slowed. Only 19 charter schools exist in the city, and it is too soon to judge their impact. The city's effort to privatize some of its failing

public schools was politically mishandled and never got off the ground. Improvement efforts within the school system have yet to change the general profile of low student achievement.

What are the implications for policy makers? First, the actions of the Mayor, the Board of Education and the lawmakers in Albany must be guided by the understanding that the school system simply does not produce enough success. There has been no sustained improvement in the school system in a generation.

This does not mean that there is no success within the school system. Quite the contrary, some public schools in this city do a wonderful job in trying circumstances. Their success should guide the way for the system. However, the overall performance of the school system is inadequate and stagnant. Real change in the ways that the public education enterprise is organized, governed, staffed and financed must be debated and firm action must be taken.

Second, parents and students must be given options outside of the current structure of the Board of Edu-

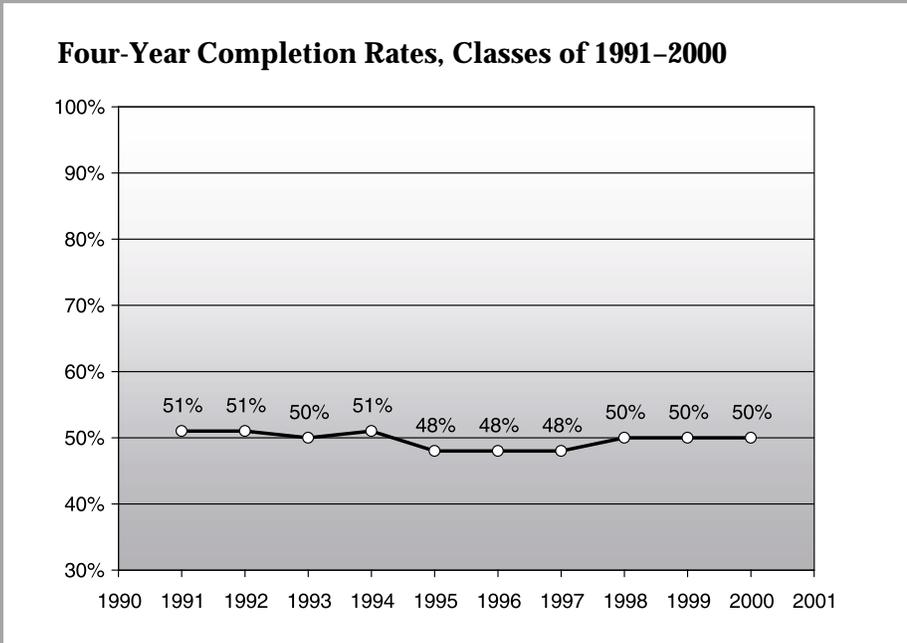
cation. There is simply too much failure within the system to justify its current monopoly status. There are a number of ways to provide options to families, and each has its own advantage. Those who oppose vouchers should be the biggest supporters of charter schools. That particular reform is off to a slow start in New York City and both the city and state should be considering ways to accelerate the creation of additional charter schools.

Finally, both the city and the state must examine the causes of low math achievement and of the poor performance of middle schools. They must also consider the state of boys in the school system and develop reasonable responses to these problems.

The refrain from 110 Livingston Street has been that the school system was on the right course and that it needed more money and time to show results. The evidence does not support that belief. The city's new leadership cannot accept excuses for failure; it must drive home the message that the families and children deserve better than this school system has provided them.

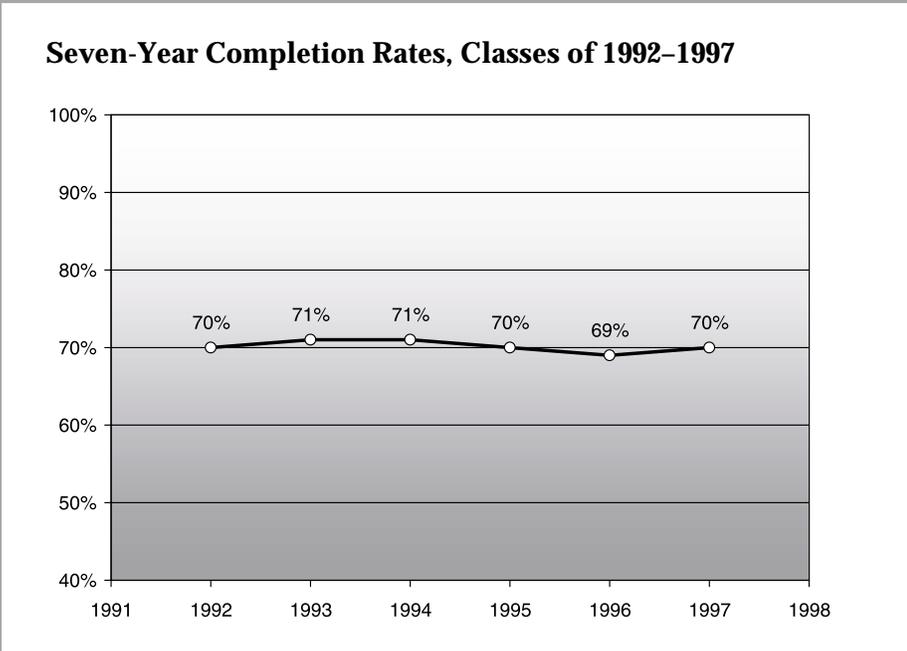
At what rate do NYC students finish high school in the traditional four years?

About half the city's public school youngsters complete high school in the traditional four years. That figure has changed little over the last ten years.



Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

At what rate do NYC students complete high school by age 21?



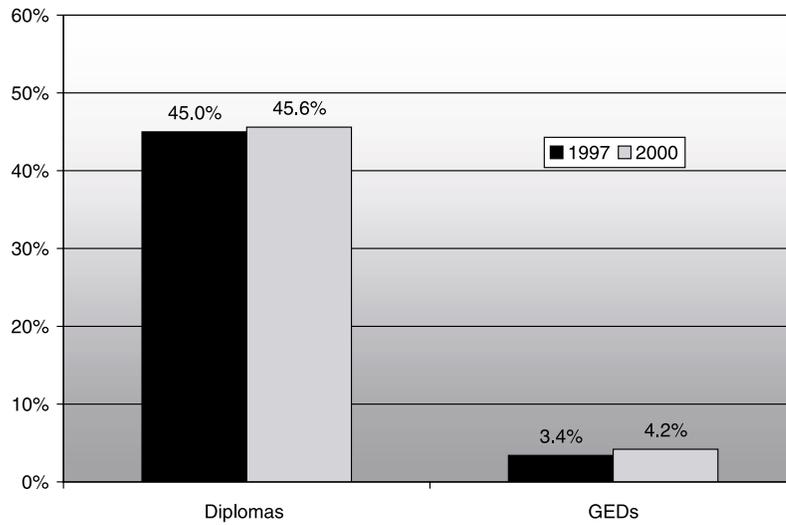
Seventy percent of the city's public school youngsters complete high school by age 21. That figure has changed little over the last six years.

Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

What type of diploma do students earn after four years of high school?

The very slight increase in the graduation rate is split between diploma and G.E.D. recipients.

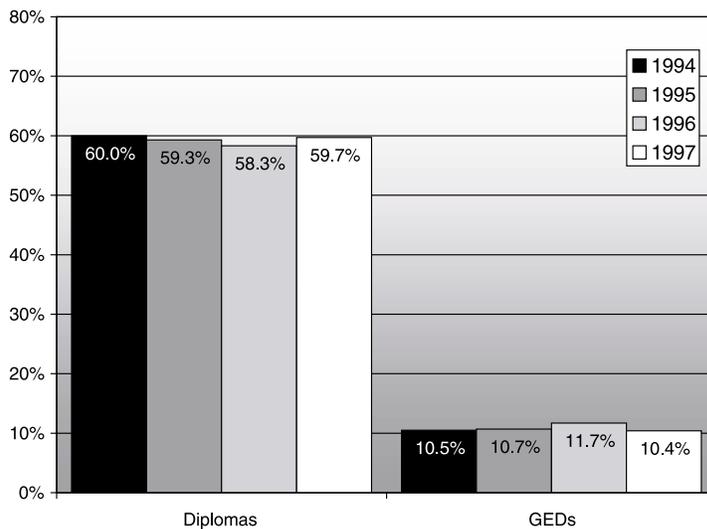
Types of Diplomas Earned, Classes of 1997 and 2000



Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

What type of diploma do students earn after seven years of high school?

Types of Diplomas Earned After 7 Years, Classes of 1994-1997

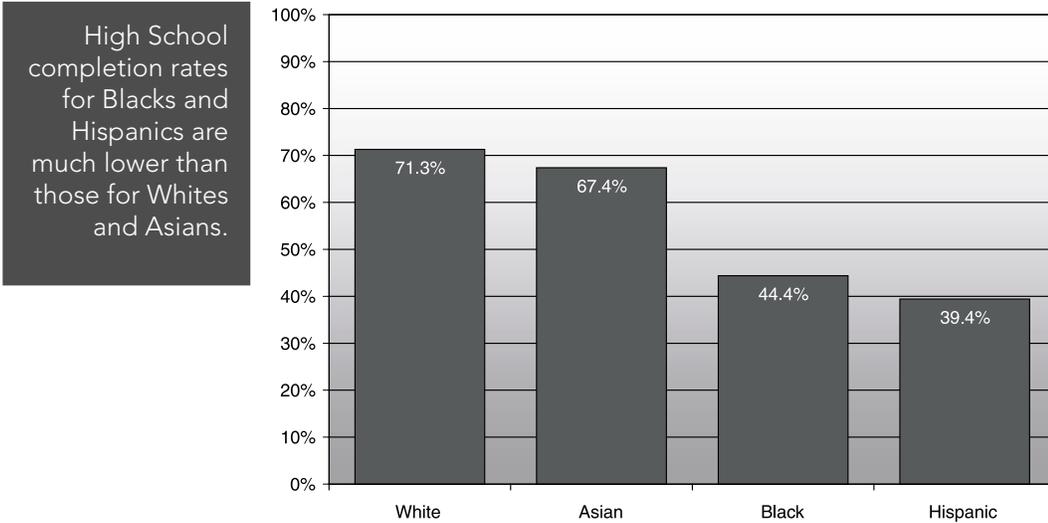


About 60% of all students ever receive a high school diploma. Ten percent more receive a G.E.D.

Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

Do completion rates in NYC vary by racial/ethnic groups?

Four-Year High School Completion Rate by Racial/Ethnic Group, Class of 2000

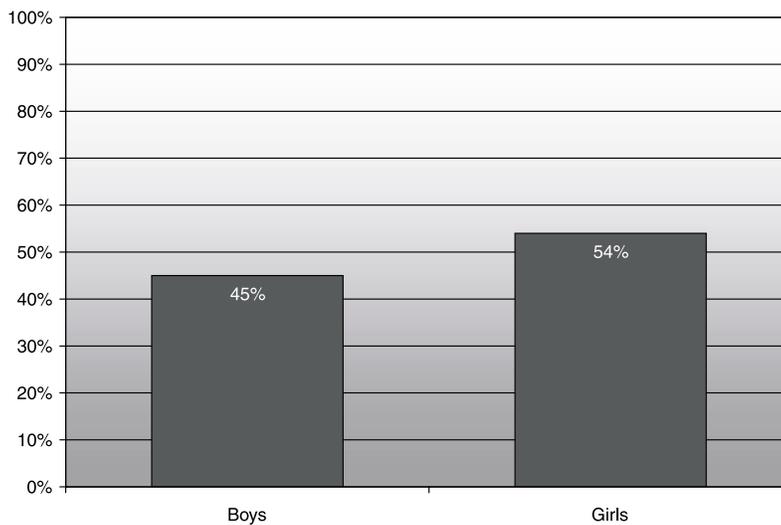


High School completion rates for Blacks and Hispanics are much lower than those for Whites and Asians.

Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

Do completion rates differ for boys and girls?

Four-Year High School Completion Rate for Boys and Girls, NYC, 2000

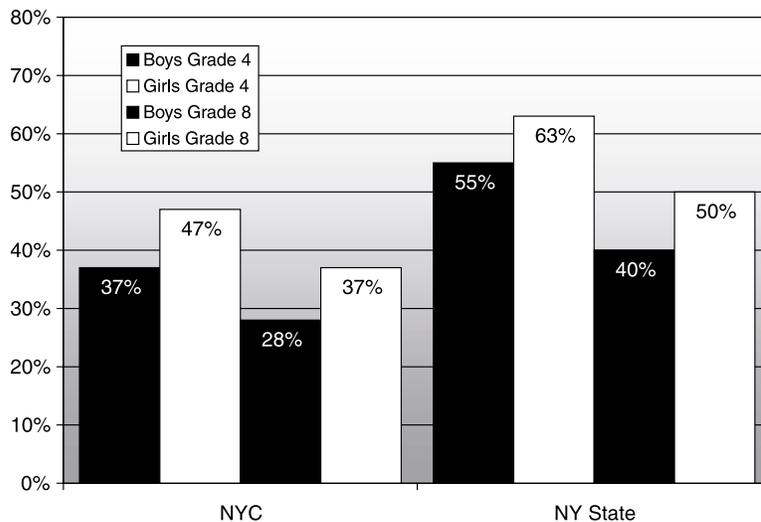


The high school completion rate for girls is 20 percent higher than that for boys.

Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYC BOE.

Do passing rates differ for boys and girls?

Percentage of Boys and Girls Passing State ELA, NYC and NY State, 2000



In both the city and state, girls outperform boys.

Source: NY State Education Department, Annual Report to Legislature, 2000. (NY State data includes NYC).

What are the SAT achievement levels of NYC high school graduates?

Average SAT Scores of High School Seniors, NYC, New York State, and U.S.A., 1996-2000

	NYC	NY State	U.S.A.	
Only 37% of the city's public school seniors actually take the SAT—about the rate for the state as a whole. City scores are 35-50 points lower on each section of the test. Compared to the nation, the city is losing ground on verbal scores, but its increase in math scores mirrors the national trend.	Verbal 1996	448	497	505
	Verbal 1997	448	495	505
	Verbal 1998	na	495	505
	Verbal 1999	441	495	505
	Verbal 2000	444	494	505
	5 year change	-4	-3	0
	Math 1996	465	499	508
	Math 1997	462	502	511
	Math 1998	na	503	512
	Math 1999	na	502	511
	Math 2000	471	506	514
	5 year change	6	7	6

Source: NYC Annual Schools Reports; State Education Department Report to the Legislature, and The College Board's Annual Report on SAT Results.

How will city students fare under the state's new graduation requirements?

One of the concepts behind the state's move to higher graduation standards is that schools and students will rise to the challenge over time and improve achievement. NYC high school students have certainly improved in English, Global History and U.S. History. However, pass rates on these tests remain below 50 % despite the improvement.

Percentage of Average Enrollment Passing Regents Exams Required for Graduation

	Pass Rates: NYC			Pass Rates: Rest of State		
	1995	2000	Change	1995	2000	Change
English	30.7	47.8	17.1	61.1	74.2	13.1
Seq. Math 1	33.5	36.4	2.9	63.2	75.7	12.5
Biology	17.3	16.3	(1.0)	54.2	64.7	10.5
Earth Science	10.2	19.4	9.2	54.9	66.5	11.6
Global History	30.8	44.2	13.4	60.7	80.7	20.0
U.S. History	28.2	38.5	10.3	57.3	67.0	9.7

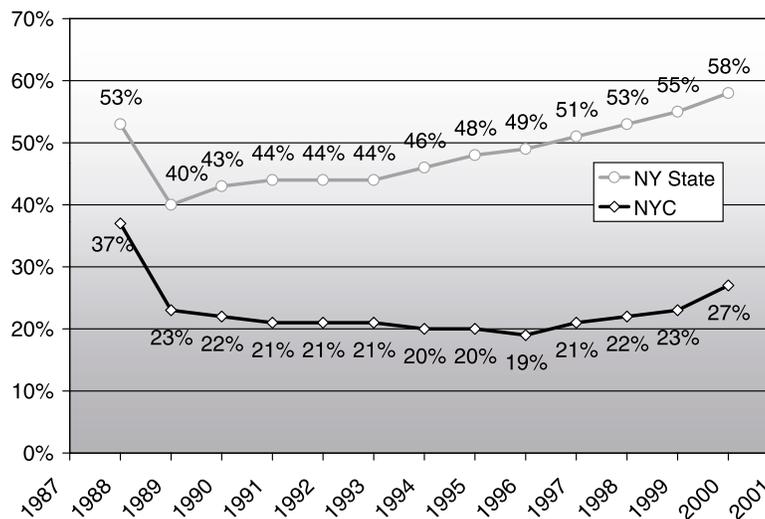
Math and Science remain tougher challenges for the city schools and improvement in these subjects is not yet evident.

Source: NY State Education Department, Annual Report to the Legislature, 2001.

Passing rates are expressed as a percentage of "average grade enrollment." Students will have to pass five Regent's exams—English, Math, Global History, U.S. History and one of the four science exams which are offered by the state (Biology, Earth Science, Chemistry and Physics)—to graduate. Results are shown for both Earth Science and Biology because most students take at least one of those exams. We do not know have an unduplicated count of the students who have passed either Biology or Earth Science.

How well has the city responded to the state's challenge in the past?

Percent of Graduates Earning Regents Diplomas 1988–2000



In 1989, the state made it more difficult to earn Regents diplomas. The rest of the state adapted more quickly than did the city. In more recent years, the city's performance has improved steadily.

Source: NY State Education Department, Annual Report to the Legislature, 2001.

How well are students reading in elementary and middle school?

The Board of Education has endured a series of mishaps with its testing program in recent years, rendering comparisons with previous years impossible.

Citywide Reading Test Scores, Grades 3, 4, 5, 7 & 8, 1999–2001

Year	% at an acceptable level	% at the lowest score level
1999	36.4	21.6
2000	38.9	19.3
2001	40.6	20.2

In 2001, for example, it reported the publisher had recommended that the scores of sixth grade students not be reported due to problems in the calibration of the test.

Source: NYC BOE report of English Language Assessment Results, 2001.

City and State English Language Assessments assign students to levels 1 to 4. Levels 3 and 4 are acceptable, meaning that the student is making sufficient progress towards the achievement that will be required for graduation from high school. Level 1 is the lowest level and indicates that the child is having severe difficulty.

How well are students doing in mathematics in elementary and middle school?

Citywide Mathematics Test Scores, Grades 3–8, 1999–2001

Year	% at an acceptable level	% at the lowest score level
1999	33.7	33.3
2000	33.7	30.6
2001	34.0	31.7

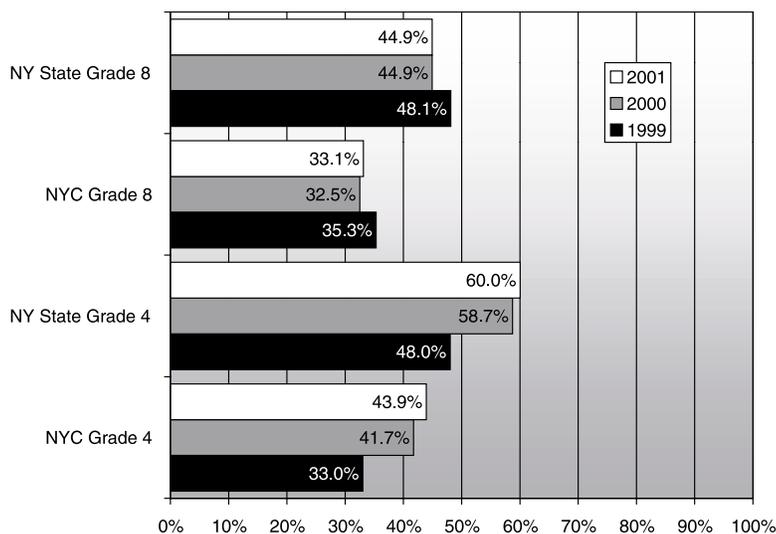
The Board of Education began using a new mathematics test in 1999, rendering comparisons with previous years impossible.

Almost as many students score in the lowest level of mathematics achievement as actually pass the test.

Source: NYC BOE report of Mathematics Results, 2001.

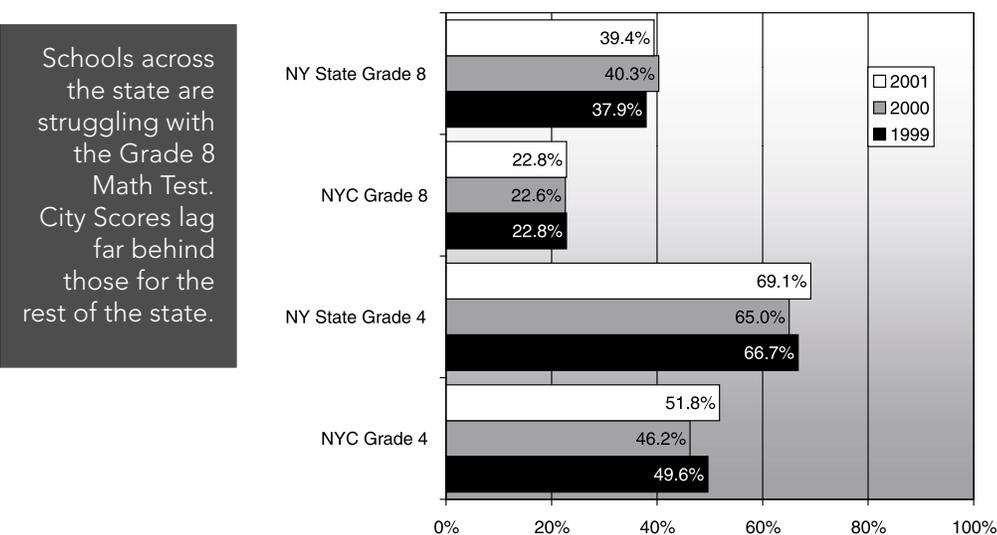
How do NYC's test scores compare with the rest of New York State?

Percentage of Public School Students Passing State English Tests, NYC vs. NY State 1999-2001



Both city and state are improving in grade 4, but declining in grade 8. City Scores lag far behind those for the rest of the state.

Percentage of Public School Students Passing State Math Tests, NYC vs. NY State 1999-2001

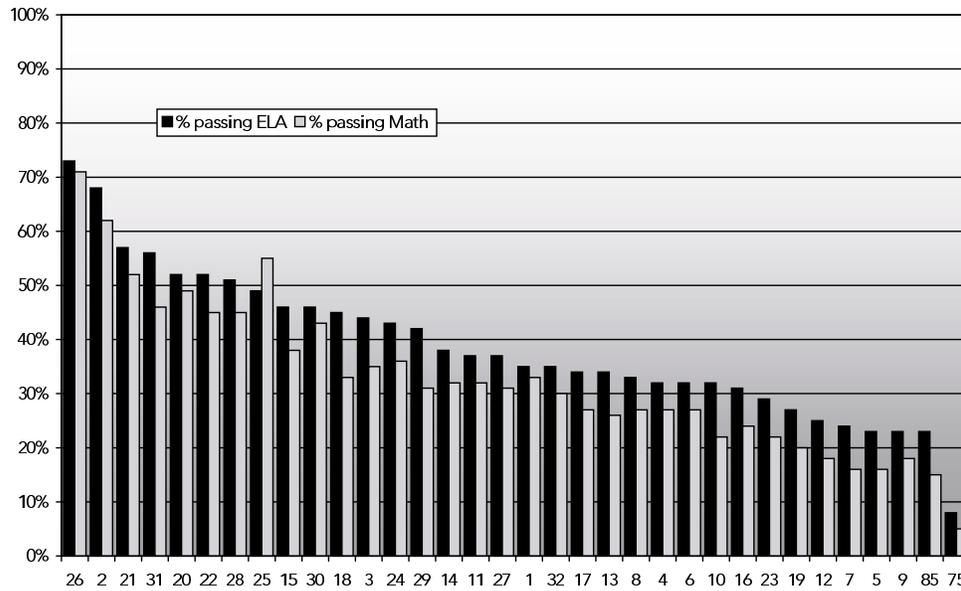


Schools across the state are struggling with the Grade 8 Math Test. City Scores lag far behind those for the rest of the state.

Source: NY State Education Department, Press Release, 2001. (Data for NY State includes that for NYC.)

Which city districts are doing best on state tests?

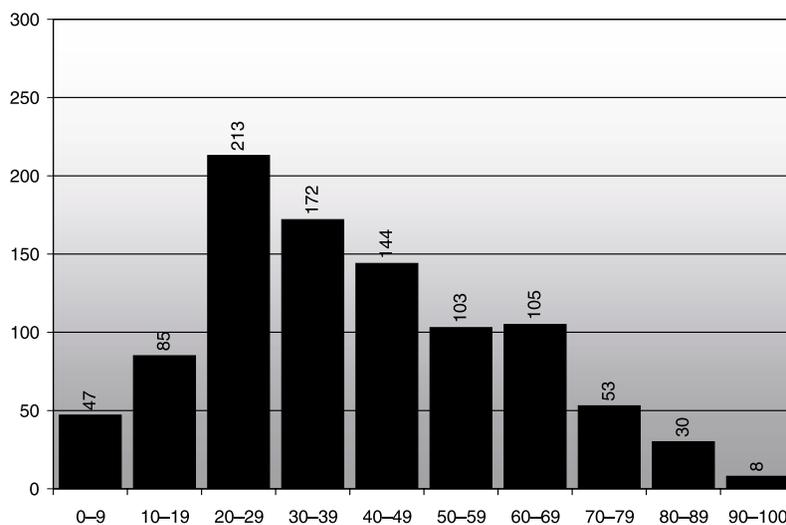
ELA and Math Scores by District, 2001



Source: NYC BOE Press Release, 2001.

How are most city schools doing on state tests?

Distribution of Schools by Percentage of Students Passing the ELA Test, 2001



The total number of schools is 971. Failure is concentrated in particular schools; 345 have fewer than 30% passing the ELA. Only 91 schools have more than 70% passing.

Source: Division of Assessment and Accountability, NYCBOE.

How are English Language Learners (ELLs) doing?

Students who once had been in ELL status had a higher 4-year high school completion rate (58.2%) than students who had always been English proficient (52.1%)

Percentage of Students in ELL Status

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Elementary	20.0	18.3	16.2	16.6	15.6
Middle School	16.2	14.7	14.1	14.6	14.0

Percentage of ELL Students Attaining English Proficiency

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Elementary	23.1	24.1	24.7	25.5	26.9
Middle School	10.7	14.1	12.6	14.2	11.6

Percentage of ELL Students at an Acceptable Level

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
<i>Elementary</i>					
ELA	9.3	12.6	9.8	10.3	5.7
Math	23.6	25.6	23.8	12.8	9.6
<i>Middle School</i>					
ELA	5.7	7.9	5.3	6.9	2.8
Math	19.1	22.5	21.6	14.9	4.6

But students who entered high school as ELLs had both a lower 4-year completion rate (30.3%) and a lower 7-year completion rate (64.2% compared to 70.8%) than English proficient students.

How are special education students doing?

Percentage of Elementary School Students in Special Education

	1998	1999	2000
Full-time	5.5	5.3	5.1
Part-time	5.4	6.0	5.9
Total	10.9	11.3	11.0

Percentage of Middle School Students in Special Education

	1998	1999	2000
Full-time	7.4	7.4	7.1
Part-time	6.8	6.8	6.9
Total	14.2	14.2	14.0

Percentage of Special Education Students at an Acceptable Level

Only 36% of high school Special Education students complete high school by age 21.

	1998	1999	2000
<i>Elementary</i>			
ELA	2.6	4.4	9.8
Math	6.0	3.7	9.2
<i>Middle School</i>			
ELA	2.3	3.6	5.6
Math	5.0	3.1	2.3

Are charter schools spreading in NYC?

Year School Began Operation	New Charter School	Converted Public School
1999	2	0
2000	7	4
2001	5	1
2002 (planned so far)	1	0
Total	15	5

In addition, two high schools which had converted from public schools into charter schools chose to revert to public school status in 2001.

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