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New York City Public Schools Make Strides on Testing

By Raymond Domanico

Critics of New York City's Department of Education have been pointing to the results of the New York State English language arts and mathematics test results released last summer to demonstrate the apparent failure of the city's traditional public schools. The results weren't stellar – only 35 percent of students in the city's traditional public schools were deemed proficient in math and 30 percent were proficient in ELA – but the challenges the city faces are shared by the rest of the state as well.

These low scores statewide mask a more nuanced picture. The 2015 test results show the continuation of a slow and steady shift in the relative performance of city schools compared with schools in the rest of the state. This shift has been underway since the onset of mayoral control, a trend that continued across dramatic changes to the state's testing program and across city mayoral administrations. Today, city students' performance in ELA is essentially the same as those in the rest of the state, and less than 3 percentage points behind the state average in math. This is dramatically different than the relative standing of the city and state in 2006, when the city lagged the state by 11 percentage points in ELA and 9 points in math.

Generally, test results for schools tend to be related to the demographic characteristics of their students. We have looked at the results for public schools statewide, while controlling for differences in the student populations. After controlling for school-level differences in the student poverty level, special education status, gender and race, schools in New York City are doing better than those in the rest of the state. After controlling for these demographics, we found a 14-point advantage for New York City traditional public schools over schools in the rest of the state on the ELA test and a 15-point advantage in math. Both traditional public schools and charter schools in the city are doing better than schools in the rest of New York State when differences in student demographics are considered.

These findings have a number of implications. First, if there is an achievement crisis in the state, it is not limited to New York City schools, since the city's unadjusted scores are almost on par with the rest of the state and are better when considering differences in the school populations.

Second, improving educational opportunities for city students may not be as simple as expanding the size of the charter sector in New York City, as some have suggested. Individual school quality matters a lot, and schools in both sectors vary greatly in terms of quality and student make-up.

When we look at the highest-achieving traditional public schools, we find that many of those schools are selective schools or are located in neighborhoods with less challenging social and economic conditions. The city's Department of Education must continue to find ways to improve educational performance in the city's lowest-income neighborhoods.

With mayoral control of the city's schools up for renewal by Albany, it's worth noting that under the current system, the city as a whole has been catching up and surpassing New York state's schools. In New York City, this is a testament to the hard work going on in traditional public and charter schools. Clearly, though, there is more work to be done as too many schools throughout the state lag far behind their peers.