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New Analysis Shows CPS Students Strong in Grade 8 Reading, Still Behind in Grade 4 Math and Reading

Kids First Chicago analyzes two decades of "Nation's Report Card" results and compares CPS with other large urban districts

Chicago, IL – Chicago Public Schools students are showing a split-screen pattern of academic performance, according to a new issue brief from Kids First Chicago analyzing two decades of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called "the Nation's Report Card."

The brief finds that Chicago's eighth graders perform competitively in reading compared with other large urban districts, while fourth graders continue to lag in both reading and math. The analysis also finds that districtwide averages mask deep and persistent disparities by race, income, and gender.

NAEP is administered to a representative sample of 4th and 8th graders across the country and, through the Trends in Urban Districts Assessment (TUDA), allows Chicago to be compared with more than two dozen other large urban school districts on a consistent scale going back more than 20 years. Because NAEP does not report individual student or school scores, it offers a rare, comparatively low-stakes window into long-term student performance trends.

Key Takeaways

1. **Chicago's strongest relative result is Grade 8 reading.**
   In 2024, CPS scored 255 in Grade 8 reading, above the large-city average of 252 and close to the national public-school average of 257.
2. **The biggest warning signs are in Grade 4.**
   Chicago scored below the large-city average in both Grade 4 reading and Grade 4 math. In Grade 4 reading, more than half (53%) scored Below Basic.
3. **Pandemic-era declines interrupted years of progress.**
   From 2003 to 2019, Chicago made sustained gains in math, but much of that progress was erased between 2019 and 2022.
4. **Districtwide averages hide major gaps among students.**
   The report finds persistent and widening gaps by race, income, and gender, especially in Grade 4.
5. **Peer comparisons sharpen the picture.**
   Compared with demographically similar cities, Chicago lags in Grade 4 math but performs strongly in Grade 8 reading.

"NAEP does not tell us everything, but it does give us a clear long-term signal," said Mariam Raheem, Senior Data Analyst at Kids First Chicago and lead researcher on the brief. "Chicago's Grade 8 reading results show that CPS has real strengths to understand and build on. At the same time, the Grade 4 results and the widening gaps by race and income show that progress has not reached students

evenly. The question for 2026 is not just whether average scores improve, but whether the students furthest behind are catching up."

Kids First Chicago is calling on district leaders, policymakers, and community partners to look beyond overall rankings and focus on the students furthest behind — including Black, Latine, and economically disadvantaged students, English learners, students with disabilities, and boys in reading — and ensure they are catching up.

"Strong public schools are essential to Chicago's long-term economic vitality and civic health," said Derek R. B. Douglas, President of the Civic Committee and the Commercial Club of Chicago. "This analysis gives civic, business, and education leaders a clearer picture of both where CPS is showing strength and where too many students are still being left behind. The challenge now is to use these data to focus attention, resources, and action on the students and schools with the greatest need."

Explore the Analysis

The full issue brief, including trend data since 2003 and district-by-district comparisons across TUDA cities, is available at kidsfirstchicago.org/Chicago-NAEP.

Questions about this analysis can be directed to Mariam Raheem, mraheem@kidsfirstchicago.org or Hal Woods, hwoods@kidsfirstchicago.org.

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Kids First Chicago's mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are the respected authorities on what their kids need and decision-makers in their kids' education. We do this by partnering with families to support them in gaining the resources, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children. K1C provides transparent and rigorous education analysis to families, educators, and policymakers alike to inform data-driven and inclusive decision-making about the future of Chicago's public schools. Visit kidsfirstchicago.org.