



Submitted to the Editor, Indianapolis Star by Dr. Eric Cooper, January 2006.

"There have been many articles and editorials in the "Star" about the pace of student achievement in Indiana and Indianapolis Public Schools in particular. In a search for solutions to improve student achievement, several of the pieces have called for early childhood as well as K-12 program interventions. Obviously when schooling fails students, there is a concomitant negative impact on the economic health of the state, region and city of Indianapolis. A salient challenge for the long-term economic health of the region is the loss of human and family capital due to poor education achievement by schoolchildren and youth. If all Indiana citizens are to lead productive adult lives, than education reform remains the last hope for those challenged by poverty and family circumstances.

As the school year gears up for its second half, citizens of Indianapolis can look at the most recent report of the Indiana State Test of Education Progress (ISTEP) with sincere optimism about a brighter future for students in the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). This optimism is supported by some general trends and by the significant, even spectacular, advances of some schools engaged in deliberate and sustained efforts to focus and sharpen instruction. The records of particular schools stand out for their upward trends and high performance. But optimism must be measured because such achievement is not easy and requires the concerted effort of many parties, from the classroom to boardroom to the living room.

The larger picture is that the downward trend of student performance from 1990-98 has reversed; from 2000-2001 performance has risen each year. Some schools now not only meet state standards, they exceed them. The circumstances of life for their students did not become easier. The standards they must meet were not lowered. Their resources increased, but not dramatically. Student performance rose the old fashioned way, with hard work and smart instruction.

Seven schools among an increasing number recently illustrate how this was accomplished. They are part of the Vanguard Plus program of IPS and the National Urban Alliance that has worked with the district since 1998. The success of these schools repudiate claims that the students who are not

achieving at a given time lack the intelligence to ever achieve, and it repudiates claims that schools with low achievement are lost causes better abandoned than bolstered with targeted assistance. These cases give hope and guidance to those who believe in the potential of all children to be good people leading good and productive lives.

Case in point: School 56 that moved from 56% of its third graders passing the ISTEP in both English/Language Arts and Math (10 points below the state average) in 1999 to an 82% pass rate in 2005 (9 points above the state average). Another: School 14 soared as well. For English/Language Arts several schools in the Vanguard Plus program powered ahead over those six years: 40 percentage points by School 56, 32 by School 14, 29 by School 31 and 24 by School 88. Were these outstanding? Yes. They are students from low-income backgrounds who have engaged a challenging curriculum with increasingly effective teachers. Those students are mastering basic cognitive skills that are a foundation for all that follows. They stand out, but they are the vanguard of a system on the move.

Already there are system gains as well as pace-setting individual schools supported by the system. In the six years ending with the current 2005-6 school year, IPS's percentage of students passing the ISTEP in both English and Math increased from 43.6% to 65.4%. That 22-point increase compares to an overall 9-point rise in the state passing rate over the same period. IPS is closing the gap, just 10 points off the average of the state and rising at more than twice the rate of the state. This is being achieved with twice the State's percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches (IPS is second highest in the state at 77%) and a widening gap between IPS and the state in per capita income. These conditions are challenges, not barriers. Poverty is not destiny. Character, of the individual--teacher and student--and institution--school and district--is an engine that cannot be denied. This is true especially when the character of the community reinforces both the better nature and the best efforts of those in the classroom.

A stronger base is being built for higher achievement in the middle and high schools. The successes of students now in the early grades of elementary school point to higher performance when those students reach middle and high school. The gap in passing percentage on the English/Language Arts ISTEP has narrowed from 17 points to 10 in just six years. The overall gap in the percentage passing the 3rd grade ISTEP has narrowed from 17 points to 9 points, even as the state passing rate rose 4 points. A further example: six of seven schools in the Vanguard Plus program scored at or above the passing score for vocabulary on the Indiana Performance Index in grades 3, 4 and 5. (The seventh was within 1 point in grades 4 and 5) Vocabulary is a key to successful reading and writing, and has been a weakness in the

development of urban students. Additionally, the overall IPS 6th grade pass rate improved from 1999-00 to 2005-6 at a faster clip than the state averages. The percentage of IPS students passing both English and Math almost doubled in those years while the state had about half that rate of improvement. Yes, IPS scores are not yet at the state average, but they have cut the gap and over half of IPS 6th graders passed the ISTEP, up from just under a third in 1999-2000. The percentage of IPS graduates who go on to higher education was 54% in 1999-2000; in 2003-4 it was 73.4%, exceeding the state average! The decimal points are not important. The decade-long effort is important. This is real progress.

The community should be especially supportive of IPS's efforts and successes with African American students. Across the state, for grades 3-5, IPS has seven of the top 20 schools ranked by success of African American students in English/Language Arts. But, the performance of African American students still lags that of White and Hispanic students. This gap persists throughout the grades until Black students overtake Hispanic ninth and tenth graders on the English scores and almost tie them in 10th grade math, but at average levels that call for renewed efforts to accelerate their rise. Again, a stronger base is building, but all students deserve attention now. A deepened focus on instruction in the new small high schools throughout IPS offers real hope and opportunity.

Yes, a stronger base is being built in the early grades but later success is not inevitable. Such successes set students on a high trajectory, but attention to teaching in every grade is essential to building on those successes in early grades. Rays of hope shine from the Vanguard Plus schools and others that have committed to their mission of bringing every student to readiness for further education, life and work and have tuned their policies and instructional practices to reach and teach everyone enrolled. There is hard evidence and there are sound reasons to believe that the mission of IPS can be accomplished. As district and NUA partners have come to understand, for all students to succeed we must first: "Believe to Achieve!"

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