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Coal for Christmas

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In 19th century England, children were told by their parents that if they didn't behave, Father Christmas would bring them coal for Christmas instead of nice presents.

Two weeks ago, American children in large urban school districts did not produce the higher test scores hoped for by adults. Does this mean they should expect coal in their Christmas stockings -- or is there another reason?

Student achievement in the nation's large urban districts is measured by the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. District participation is voluntary, but eligible districts must have a minimum number of students overall, as well as minimum percentage of African American or Hispanic students and of low-income students. [1] These are the student groups considered most educationally at-risk.

Twenty-one districts across the country participated in the most recent TUDA, and unfortunately, the results were not promising. Of the 18 districts that participated in the math and reading assessments in both 2009 and 2011, only four improved their fourth grade math scores during this two-year period, and only six improved their eighth grade math scores [2]. In reading, no district showed a significant change in fourth grade scores since 2009, and only one district improved its eighth grade scores [3].

These two-year trends are discouraging. But if we look at trends going back eight or nine years the results are more positive. Of the ten districts that participated in the 2003 TUDA math assessment, 9 improved both their fourth and eighth grade math scores between 2003 and 2011. [4] All six districts that participated in the 2002 TUDA reading assessment for fourth grade showed an increase in scores between 2002 and 2011. Of the five districts that participated in the 2002 reading assessment for eighth grade, three made gains between 2002 and 2011 [5].

Thus, while reading and math scores on the TUDA assessment have generally increased since 2002 or 2003, large urban districts have made little progress since 2009. What happened in the last few years to slow their improvement? Two weeks ago, at the press conference announcing the results, no one seemed to have an answer.

Let me suggest one.

For the last three years, the Center on Education Policy has surveyed local school districts about the effects of the current economic recession on their schools. In school year 2010-11, 70 percent of districts reported that they had less to spend on education than they had the year before. For this current school year of 2011-12, about 84 percent of districts expected to have less than they did the year before. [6]

So, for two years in a row spending in a large majority of school districts has gone down. Generally, districts in those situations delay maintenance, purchase of text books, professional development and other lesser order spending. But the recent spending cuts are too deep to be mitigated by those measures alone.

In school year 2010-11, about 85 percent of districts with funding decreases cut jobs for teachers or other staff. Almost two-thirds of the districts that anticipated funding shortfalls this school year planned to do the same.

Usually, districts start with eliminating central office administrative positions, then school administrative staff, then counselors and other non-teaching staff. But, again the cuts are too deep, and districts report firing teachers, including teachers of basic academic subjects. Two of those subjects -- English language arts and mathematics -- are the areas tested in every public school for accountability purposes under the No Child Left Behind Act. They are also the areas tested for TUDA in the urban districts.

With class sizes increasing due to teacher layoffs, and with the dismissal of reading specialists and similar personnel, it is not far-fetched to say that learning is being jeopardized by less money being spent on education.

State governments are leading the way with cuts in elementary and secondary education. The tragedy is that school districts with fewer local sources of revenue are more dependent on state aid than are districts with larger tax bases in the form of more commercial real estate or more expensive homes. The large urban school districts, which often have limited or eroding tax bases, usually are more dependent on state aid than are more affluent suburban school districts. And urban district feel the cuts more keenly.

The economic condition of the states is not expected to improve for some time. Although it is always difficult to predict the future, it is clear what is happening now. School districts have less money. They have eliminated support staff and are now laying off teachers. Class sizes are growing.

Could it be that the test results for urban districts announced a few weeks ago are the first sign that student achievement is being held back by these cuts? Will we see further declines in test scores in the next year or so?

Students in urban districts don't deserve coal for Christmas, but maybe adults do for letting this happen.

[1] National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): About the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), (2011). Available at: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/district.asp#about_naep_tuda

[2] National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card: Trial Urban District Assessment Mathematics 2011 (2011), Figure A. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/dst2011/2012452.asp>

[3] National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card: Trial Urban District Assessment Reading 2011 (2011), Figure A. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/dst2011/2012455.asp>

[4] National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card: Trial Urban District Assessment Mathematics 2011 (2011), Figure A. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/dst2011/2012452.asp>

[5] National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card: Trial Urban District Assessment Reading 2011 (2011), Figure A. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/dst2011/2012455.asp>

[6] <http://www.cep-dc.org>

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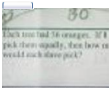
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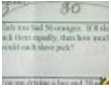
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