

To: Joel I. Klein, New York City Schools Chancellor
From: Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger, Executive Director, Research Policy and Support Group
Re: Response to April 9, 2009 New York Times Op-Ed by Diane Ravitch
Date: April 28, 2009

The New York Times published an opinion piece on April 9 by Diane Ravitch. In many cases, her arguments were misleading or incomplete. This memo addresses Dr. Ravitch's specific claims in order to correct the record.

In her Op-Ed, Dr. Ravitch dismisses New York City students' achievement gains under No Child Left Behind, asserting that our students' progress on State exams was mirrored by gains across the State: "And, indeed, the State scores have soared in recent years, not only in the City but also across New York State."

This is misleading. Since the beginning of mayoral control in 2002, New York City has made major gains in the percentage of students scoring at proficient levels on grades four and eight math and English Language Arts ("ELA")—28 points on fourth grade math, 15 points on fourth grade ELA, 30 points on eighth grade math, and 14 points on eighth grade ELA. We have also consistently and substantially outpaced (1) the rest of the State, and (2) the other big cities in New York State (Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, and Buffalo, which, with New York City, make up the "Big Five Cities"):¹

- Since 2002, the gap separating our students from students in the rest of the State has narrowed by 18.8 points in fourth grade math, while the gap separating students in the other big cities from students in the rest of the State has narrowed by 5.7 points.
- Since 2002, the gap separating our students from students in the rest of the State has narrowed 11.5 percentage points in eighth grade math, while the gap separating students in other big cities from the rest of the State has *grown* by 3.7 percentage points.
- Since 2002, the gap separating our students from students in the rest of the State has narrowed by 8.7 percentage points in fourth grade ELA, while the gap separating other big city students from the rest of the State has narrowed by 1.6 percentage points. (Our gap closing here would have been larger had it not been for a change in State law

¹ Dr. Ravitch takes the position that only results beginning in the 2003 school year should be attributed to this administration, saying that many of our reforms first went into effect then. As the Chancellor has made clear in the past, we disagree. The Mayor took charge of the schools before the beginning of the 2002 school year. In that first year of mayoral control, the DOE brought in a new leadership team, implemented performance bonuses based on improvements in State test scores for community and high-school superintendents, extended the school day, significantly enhanced professional development for teachers, and emphasized our strong focus on school and system-wide accountability. The Mayor also gave the schools substantial funding increases, including a large pay hike for teachers. But even viewed during the 2003-2008 period that Dr. Ravitch prefers, we still experienced major gains, which were substantially larger than those in the rest of the State and the other big cities.

requiring us to test many more English Language Learners in 2007 and again in 2008, a change that had a big impact on us but not on the rest of the State.)²

- Since 2002, the gap separating our students from students in the rest of the State has narrowed by 2.7 percentage points in eighth grade ELA, while the gap separating other big city students from the rest of the State has narrowed by 0.9 percentage points.
- Additionally, over the 2002 – 2008 period, New York City has made considerable progress in closing the racial and ethnic achievement gaps. In both reading and math, in both fourth and eighth grades, the black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gaps have been narrowed under mayoral control, as measured by NCLB standards.³

These results show strong, across-the-board progress. At the beginning of mayoral control, we were much closer to the other four big cities than to the rest of the State. Today, we are generally closer to the rest of the State than to the other cities.⁴

In addressing our graduation rate, Dr. Ravitch writes: “The City says the rate climbed to 62 percent from 53 percent between 2003 and 2007; the State’s Department of Education, which uses a different formula, says the City’s rose to 52 percent, from 44 percent. Either way, the City’s graduation rate is no better than that of Mississippi, which spends about a third of what New York City spends per pupil.”

The City’s rate has been calculated the same way for more than two decades. Using that methodology, the graduation rate has increased from 51% in 2002 to 62% in 2007. According to the State’s methodology, adopted in 2005, we have also made substantial gains, rising from 46.5% for the class of 2005 to 52.2% (or 55.8% including August graduates) for the class of 2007.⁵

These increases reflect substantial progress by our schools and students, any way you measure it (see <http://tinyurl.com/cl3fy7>). The gains are particularly dramatic when you consider that the City’s graduation rate stagnated around 50% from 1992-2002, the decade before mayoral control.

² The percentage of the fourth grade ELA cohort tested in our City in 2006 who were English Language Learners was 4.6, compared with 15.5% in 2007. For the rest of New York State, however, the percentage of English Language Learners went from 1.0% to 2.2% in the same time period. For fourth grade English Proficient students, i.e., comparing apples to apples, NYC scores increased by 17.7 points from 2002-2008, while scores in the rest of the State increased by only 7.3 percentage points.

³ From 2002 to 2008, the black-white gap for 4th grade math scores on NY State tests narrowed from 34.7 points to 18.3 points. And the Hispanic-white gap closed by over 15 points. Fourth grade ELA gaps and 8th grade gaps also narrowed over this time period, by smaller but still noteworthy margins.

⁴ Our performance since the beginning of mayoral control is also significantly better in absolute and relative terms than it was in the three years prior to mayoral control — from 1999, when testing first began, to 2002. During those years, the City’s results were similar to those in the rest of the state and in the other big cities; indeed, the gaps between us and the rest of the state actually increased in 8th grade math and ELA during that period.

⁵ The City rate includes GED and IEP diplomas and excludes certain special education students. The State calculation, which does none of these things, is a more accurate overall number. We would have used only that number had it existed from 2002 when we started.

After a long period of no growth, gains of more than two percentage points a year are noteworthy. We are also seeing substantial gains under both the City and State methodologies in our five- and even six-year graduation rates.⁶

Dr. Ravitch seeks to dismiss these gains by comparing New York City's graduation rate to Mississippi's. But comparing graduation rates in different states that have very different graduation requirements and different demographics is misleading at best.⁷

Dr. Ravitch also says the City's graduation rate has been "pumped up" by "dubious means, like 'credit recovery.'"

In New York State, students are required to take and pass certain courses and Regents examinations as well as to accumulate the necessary credits in order to graduate. When a student doesn't pass a required course or doesn't complete all of the necessary coursework, the student must make up that work, a process often referred to as "credit recovery." This is a sensible and long-standing practice. Credit recovery can be done in several ways: retaking the entire course, going to summer school, or, as our State Education Department recently explained: "Sometimes students may come close to passing a course and may have deficiencies only in certain clearly defined areas of knowledge and skill. In those cases, it may not be necessary for the student to retake the entire course. Instead, the student might be permitted to make up those deficiencies, master the appropriate standards, and receive credit." Like any other process, of course, credit recovery can be abused, which only hurts students and is cause for disciplinary action. To that end, we have been working with the SED to establish clear guidelines and procedures for this process (see <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2009Meetings/April2009/0409emscd2.htm>).

Dr. Ravitch further challenges the graduation rate, writing: "the City does not include as dropouts any of the students who were 'discharged' during their high-school years."

⁶ Under the State's methodology, the five-year graduation rate for the class of 2005 was 55.7%. For the class of 2006, the percentage of students who graduated in five years was up four points to 59.5%. The six-year graduation rate for the class of 2005 was 58.5%, meaning the percent students who graduated increased about 3 percentage points between Year 5 and Year 6. To see the comparison, please see <http://tinyurl.com/c9szug>.

⁷ Mississippi has been shown to have lower standards than other states. An analysis of fourth grade reading test standards by the National Center for Education Statistics gave Mississippi the lowest score among 32 states; New York State ranked ninth (see <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2007482.pdf#page=24>).

This is not the case. Over the entire period of mayoral control, the percentage of discharges has remained essentially flat, within a point of 20%. Thus, discharges would not have affected the *growth* in the graduation rate.⁸

Dr. Ravitch further claims that students who graduate from our high schools are not ready for college.

On the contrary, the number of City graduates enrolling in CUNY campuses as first-time freshman increased by a remarkable 49% between 2002 and 2008. This means the number of students going to CUNY schools grew by approximately 8,000 (from about 16,000 to about 24,000) during the course of mayoral control. About half of the additional students are going to four-year colleges and half enrolled in two-year colleges. Nearly 5,700 of the 8,000 additional students were black and Latino. Indeed, increases in Latino student enrollment in CUNY schools has outpaced overall enrollment increases, with nearly three quarters more Latino students enrolling in 2008 than in 2002. Moreover, despite substantially higher enrollment than ever before, the percentage of New York City public school graduates entering CUNY's two- and four-year colleges and needing remedial instruction *dropped*—from 58% in 2002 to 51% in 2008. During the same time, average SAT scores of first time freshman at CUNY Senior Colleges are up by 19 percentage points. These are major accomplishments and should be a source of enormous pride to all.⁹

Dr. Ravitch also says that there has not been independent verification of New York City's recent progress. She writes: "Mr. Bloomberg's allies say that the results of the current system are so spectacular that the law should be renewed without change. Secretary Duncan agrees: 'I'm looking at the data here in front of me,' he said while in New York. 'Graduation rates are up. Test scores are up ... By every measure, that's real progress.' It sounds good, but in fact no independent source has verified such claims."

Contrary to Dr. Ravitch's assertion, several independent sources have verified New York City's recent progress. For example:

- In the fall of 2007, New York City won the Broad Prize, the most prestigious national K-12 education award, which is given to the urban district "that demonstrate[s] the greatest

⁸ There are three outcomes for students who enter our high schools: they can graduate, be discharged, or drop out. Most students who are discharged transfer to other schools outside of New York City. Others are admitted to private or parochial schools in the City, while still others enroll early in college. This happens throughout the State and the country, and is common in a city like New York where many families move often. Indeed, the number of high school students coming to our City, and included in our graduation cohort, has gone up dramatically in recent years, further underscoring the enormous mobility of our high school population.

⁹ The New York City Department of Education agrees that the remediation rate, while declining, is too high. That is why we supported the Regents decision to end the granting of a "local" diploma, and are also working closely with CUNY on programs to ensure that our graduates are college ready.

overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among poor and minority students.” (See <http://broadeducation.org/asset/27-2007newyorkwinnerrelease.pdf>.)

- A recent independent report by the Brookings Institution showed that New York City ranked 8 out of 37 big cities on student achievement gains from 2000 to 2007, which largely covers the period under mayoral control (see http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/0225_education_loveless.aspx). In fact, as shown above (see footnote 4), New York City’s progress on State tests accelerated after 2002, suggesting that we would be even higher on a 2002 to 2007 comparison. In any event, only one of the cities ahead of us in the 2000 to 2007 comparison had the same range of poor students, and none came anywhere near New York City in size.
- An independent analysis by the Editorial Projects in Education, a division of the non-profit organization that publishes *Education Week*, found that New York City has made more progress in improving the graduation rate than all but two of America’s top 50 largest school districts. This analysis uses the Cumulative Promotion Index, which is based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and is calculated using a different method than those used to calculate our State and City graduation rates. This method uses promotion data to calculate the likelihood that a ninth grader will complete high school in four years and assumes that no students are discharged.¹⁰ According to that analysis, between 2002 and 2005 (the last year available), our graduation rate went up from 36.8% to 50.5%, more than 4.5 points per year. This is a much greater increase than in the six years prior to mayoral control when our rate went from 34.5% to 36.8%, less than half a point per year.
- For the past three years (Class of 2005, 2006, and 2007), the graduation rate, as calculated by the City’s traditional methodology, has been validated by an independent audit by Ernst and Young, LLP.

Dr. Ravitch devotes the bulk of her attention to our performance on the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP). She writes: “On the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress—widely acknowledged as the gold standard of the testing industry—New York City showed almost no academic improvement between 2003, when the mayor’s reforms were introduced, and 2007.”

¹⁰ The cumulative promotion index (CPI) relies on estimates to calculate the graduation rate. It uses a formula that includes three grade-to-grade promotions (ninth to tenth grade, tenth to eleventh grade, and eleventh to twelfth grade) and ultimately earning a diploma (twelfth grade to graduation) using enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data. The CPI formula multiplies promotion ratios together to estimate the likelihood that a ninth grader will complete high school in four years. This method does not count students who receive GEDs as graduates.

Although NAEP is an important measure, it should not be the sole, or even dominant, basis for analyzing New York City's results. NAEP is not wholly aligned with New York State standards. That means students don't learn some of the information on NAEP by the time they are tested. Moreover, neither our school system nor our students are held accountable for the NAEP results. Indeed, we aren't even required to participate as an identifiable city in NAEP and are one of 11 large cities that does, precisely because we want as much information about our students' performance as possible. We are instead held accountable for the requirements laid out in No Child Left Behind, and for those established in our own accountability system. Both require us to demonstrate progress against State standards, and that's where our schools appropriately focus their instruction; and our accountability tools are specifically designed to help schools improve their instruction as measured against those standards.

New York City's record on NAEP, which tests a sample of New York City fourth- and eighth-grade students every two years in reading and math, shows strong progress in the fourth grade but not in the eighth grade. Below are our latest NAEP results:

- Fourth-grade math: The percentage of New York City students scoring at or above basic has risen by 12 points between 2003 and 2007—from 67% to 79%—and those at or above proficient has risen by 13 points during the same period—from 21% to 34%. These are big gains.
- Fourth-grade reading: The percentage of our students scoring at or above basic is up 10 points since 2002. (This is the only NAEP exam our students took in sufficient numbers to count in 2002.) New York City students have thus made significant progress even though a recent change in the State law meant that the test-taking population was changed, with significantly more students still learning English now taking the reading exam. (The percentage of English Language Learners assessed rose from 8% in 2005 to 15% in 2007 on the fourth grade reading test.) Because of this change in the test-taking population, any year-to-year comparisons in reading are not apples-to-apples. If we look at comparable students—i.e. those who were English proficient in 2002 and those who were English proficient in 2007—the percentage of students scoring at or above basic increased by 14 points, which is also a very large increase.
- Eighth-grade math: The percent of our students scoring at or above basic has risen 3 points since 2003. (This movement is in the right direction, but is not statistically significant, according to National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, which is responsible for reporting NAEP data.)
- Eighth-grade reading: The percent of our students scoring at or above basic is down 3 points since 2003. (This movement is in the wrong direction, but is not statistically significant, according to NCES.)

Dr. Ravitch also says that, according to NAEP results, the achievement gap has remained unchanged: “The federal test reported no narrowing of the achievement gap between white students and minority students.”

Here are the facts about students scoring at or above basic (see <http://tinyurl.com/czv78f>):

- In fourth grade math, the black-white gap was 30 points in 2003. In 2007, it had narrowed to 19 points.
- In fourth grade math, the Hispanic-white gap was 28 points in 2003. In 2007, it was down to 17 points.
- In fourth grade reading, the black-white gap was 34 points in 2002 and 26 points in 2007.
- In fourth grade reading, the Hispanic-white gap was 2 points larger between 2002 and 2007. While not statistically significant, this resulted from the policy change referred to above that required substantially more students to take the reading exam even though they were still learning English.
- In eighth grade math, the black-white gap shrunk by 7 points between 2003 and 2007. There was a 39 point gap in 2003 and a 32 point gap in 2007. (While in the right direction, this change was not statistically significant.)
- In the eighth grade, the Hispanic-white gap closed slightly in math and widened slightly in reading, though none of the changes were statistically significant.

Dr. Ravitch further claims that no subset of our student population made remarkable gains on the NAEP exam (excepting, of course, fourth-grade math, where our students have shown great progress, which she chose to ignore): “There were no significant gains for New York City’s students — black, Hispanic, white, Asian or lower-income — in fourth-grade reading, eighth-grade reading or eighth-grade mathematics.”

To begin with fourth-grade reading, on the most recent NAEP test in 2007, 51% of black fourth graders scored at or above basic levels in reading, a 14-point gain since 2002. In fact, in 2007, New York City’s fourth grade black students outperformed black students nationally by 5 points and outperformed black students in all large urban cities by 10 points in reading. We lead among the 11 participating urban districts in the number of black students scoring at or above basic. This is a major accomplishment.

There were also large gains for black and Hispanic fourth graders in math that Dr. Ravitch did not include in her article:

- 72% of black fourth graders scored at or above basic levels in math, a gain of 14 points since 2003. By comparison, 58% of fourth-grade black students in other large cities and 63% nationally scored at or above basic levels in math. Black fourth-grade students in New York City ranked second among the 11 participating urban districts in both their level of achievement and gains in math. They also made significant gains in proficiency, moving from 12% to 20%.
- 74% of Hispanic fourth graders scored at or above basic levels in math, a 14-point gain since 2003. By comparison, 66% of Hispanic fourth graders in other large cities and 69% nationally scored at or above basic levels in math. Our Hispanic fourth graders, including the substantially increased number of English Language Learners who were tested in 2007, ranked fifth among the 11 participating urban districts in achievement and third in gains. They also made huge gains in proficiency, doubling from 13% to 26%. These are significant accomplishments.

Dr. Ravitch questions our strong NAEP results in fourth-grade math: "...the validity of this is suspect because an unusually large proportion—25 percent—of students were given extra time and help."

This assertion is not correct. An independent, publicly available study by NCES, the organization responsible for reporting NAEP data, found that accommodations had no impact on New York City's results (see http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/effect_exclusion.asp).¹¹

¹¹ Accommodations may be granted to students who are learning English or have individualized education programs (IEPs). On a math test, for example, an accommodation might allow an English language learner to have the test translated into her native language. That's fair and reasonable so that the language barrier doesn't detract from the assessments of the student's abilities in math. In New York City, the number of accommodations grew in recent years as significantly more students were identified as ELL or special education and there was an increased need for the kinds of supports that accommodations provide. At the same time, the number of students exempted from NAEP testing actually fell by 2%. In 2007, New York City had a lower percentage of students excluded from grade 4 and 8 NAEP reading and math tests than almost all of the ten other large cities participating. Our exclusion rate has been dropping steadily since 2003, meaning many more formerly exempted students are now in the testing population.