# America is misreading its urban schools: op-ed

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*This is a guest opinion column*

To read much of the coverage of the latest *Education Scorecard*, you would think American public education is in uniform collapse. The familiar language is all there: "crisis," "learning recession," long-term decline. But one of the most important stories in the data points in the opposite direction — and it is unfolding in the very school systems most often written off as failures.

Big-city public schools, which have routinely been invoked as cautionary tales, in fact, outpaced the nation in post-pandemic improvement. In many places, that progress is not a short-term blip. It reflects years of underappreciated improvement that began long before COVID-19.

Start with math. The Scorecard reported results for 60 major city school systems, and 49 of them improved between 2022 and 2025 *faster* than the nation as a whole. Only 11 (18 percent) did not. The faster-improving school districts included Atlanta, Baltimore City, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Memphis-Shelby County, Miami-Dade County, Nashville, and Philadelphia. In contrast, 40 percent of districts nationwide *lost* ground in math. If that does not complicate the standard narrative about urban schools, nothing does.

These are not lightly burdened systems serving the easiest students to educate. They are large, complex districts serving high concentrations of low-income students, multilingual learners, and children with disabilities. Yet, some of the highest-poverty urban districts improved the most. That is why the old, reflexive picture of urban education as a story of fixed dysfunction now looks less like analysis than habit.

Reading is a more mixed story, and no serious person should pretend otherwise. The point is not that urban districts have solved reading recovery; it is that the usual storyline still misses what the data show. Of the 59 major city school systems included in the study for reading, 20 improved more than the nation between 2022 and 2025, while 39 did not. Urban districts, however, did not fall as far as the nation in reading during the pandemic,

and some of the poorest districts posted unusually strong gains. Baltimore City, Cincinnati, the District of Columbia, and Richmond, for example, reported reading gains at or more than half a grade-level above the national average. Uneven progress is still progress, and it counters the narrative that urban public education is uniquely broken.

None of this means the work is finished. Outpacing the nation is not the same as full recovery, and many urban systems still remain below their own 2019 levels. Chronic absenteeism is still a serious obstacle, even if rates are beginning to improve. But that is exactly why the caricature is so misleading: These districts are improving while carrying some of the heaviest burdens in American education.

The *Education Scorecard* does show a nation still struggling. But it also shows something too important to bury beneath the panic: Some of the strongest progress is happening where the country has long expected the least. Crisis is always easier to narrate than complexity. Public debate still runs on dated assumptions about urban schools, while newer evidence receives only a fraction of the attention. That mismatch is no longer just unfair; it is producing a distorted picture of what is happening in American education.

These gains did not happen by accident. Over the past two decades, many big-city school systems, including Birmingham under superintendent Mark Sullivan, have raised expectations, improved the quality and coherence of classroom instruction, and concentrated help on the students and schools furthest behind. That has meant stronger curricula, deeper investment in teacher support, better use of data, more sustained intervention in struggling schools and, more recently, strategic use of federal relief dollars for tutoring, summer learning, and literacy and math instruction. Much of that effort unfolded outside the spotlight. That is one reason so many commentators are still reacting to stereotypes instead of results.

The country should stop treating urban public schools as permanent exhibits of decline and start studying them as places of hard-won progress. If we are serious as a nation about learning recovery, we should stop talking past the evidence and start paying closer attention to the districts improving against the odds. The real story is not that urban schools are failing like everyone else. It is that many are recovering faster than the country is willing to see.

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