The Lesson from America's Urban Schools is Clear: When We Invest in Public Education, Students Rise

By Miguel Cardona and Raymond Hart

For years, the story told about America's big-city public schools has been framed as a story of loss. Lost learning. Lost faith in the ability of public education to deliver for children. But, that story was never complete. And now, new national data from the Education Scorecard makes something else clear: In many of the nation's largest urban school districts, students are not standing still. They are gaining ground.

What the data shows should force a more honest national conversation: the temporary federal pandemic relief funds worked, especially in high-poverty communities where the need was greatest. This should reinforce our sense of urgency around delivering more lasting supports for schools and students furthest from opportunity, investing in public education rather than destroying it, and embracing what works in education.

The Scorecard finding that should command the attention of every governor, member of Congress, and state education chief is this: The recovery in the highest-poverty districts appears to have been largely driven by federal pandemic relief. Without those funds, the average high-poverty district would have remained stuck well below pre-pandemic achievement levels.

Sustained academic growth is hard in any school system. It is especially hard in big city districts managing concentrated poverty, housing instability, chronic absenteeism, staff shortages, aging facilities, and the lingering social and emotional effects of the pandemic. Yet the data shows that some of the strongest improvements in reading and mathematics between 2022 and 2025 were in large urban systems – from places like Charleston County (SC), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Cincinnati, District of Columbia Public Schools, East Baton Rouge Parish, Fayette County (KY), Houston, Los Angeles, Memphis-Shelby County (TN), Metropolitan Nashville, Richmond, Seattle, Winston Salem/Forsyth County (NC), and many others highlighted in the report.

How did these districts achieve these gains? By targeting investment toward practices that we've long known work in education, such as evidence-based literacy work, high-quality instructional materials, tutoring, summer learning, and more. When leadership, strategy, and resources align, true progress is possible.

That offers a few important lessons as we consider the path forward for public education.

First: Sustained investment in public education is crucial.

The data makes clear that the $190 billion the Biden and Trump Administrations delivered to address recovery for K-12 students in the greatest need was critical. But the path forward cannot be another temporary emergency program. It should be a more serious national commitment to sustained academic recovery and excellence.

Importantly, the report reminds us that the status quo in education was broken long before the pandemic. We can't afford to settle for a return to 2019 in education.

Second: We can and should unite around what's best for our nation's students.

It's hard to remember amid the partisan rancor and divisive voices at the national level, but we firmly believe that there is much more common ground around education than the headlines suggest. Across the country, parents, educators, and community members simply want the best for students to learn and thrive.

That means uniting around, and investing in, the approaches that have been proven to work in so-called red and blue states alike, like evidence-based reading instruction, summer learning, and strategies to tackle chronic absenteeism. It also means studying the districts that are beating the odds. The Scorecard identifies 108 "Districts on the Rise" that improved substantially faster than peer districts in their states in both reading and math, including Atlanta, Baltimore City, Birmingham, and Detroit Public Schools Community District. We can all learn from those districts.

We must also unite against destructive efforts that serve to undermine public education. This includes cuts to the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education (vital for the data that shows us exactly where we're making progress and where we need to improve in education) and the shutdown of the Office of English Language Acquisition (a crucial support for English learners and bilingual education). It also includes efforts to privatize education through voucher programs that undermine local public schools that exist to serve all students, no matter their race, zip code, or economic background.

Third: Never bet against educators.

Throughout our years in education, one thing has remained constant: the deep dedication and expertise of teachers and school leaders. The data on academic recovery after the pandemic hints at what's possible when investments target what educators know works in their schools.

That's why, despite the challenges we face, we don't buy into a mindset of doom and gloom. We can never bet against the people who've made education their life's purpose, working tirelessly for our nation's students.

At the end of the day, when we invest in public education, students rise. That should be the headline. Not that urban schools are broken beyond repair. Not that poverty determines destiny. Not that federal investment fails to impact children. With targeted investment, quality instruction, and sustained support, students in low-income urban communities and beyond recover and accelerate.

Our students have shown what they are capable of achieving. Now it is our responsibility to continue investing in the public schools and educators that help them rise.

Miguel Cardona served as the 12th U.S. Secretary of Education and is the founder of Cardona Solutions, an educational consulting firm. Raymond Hart is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.



