



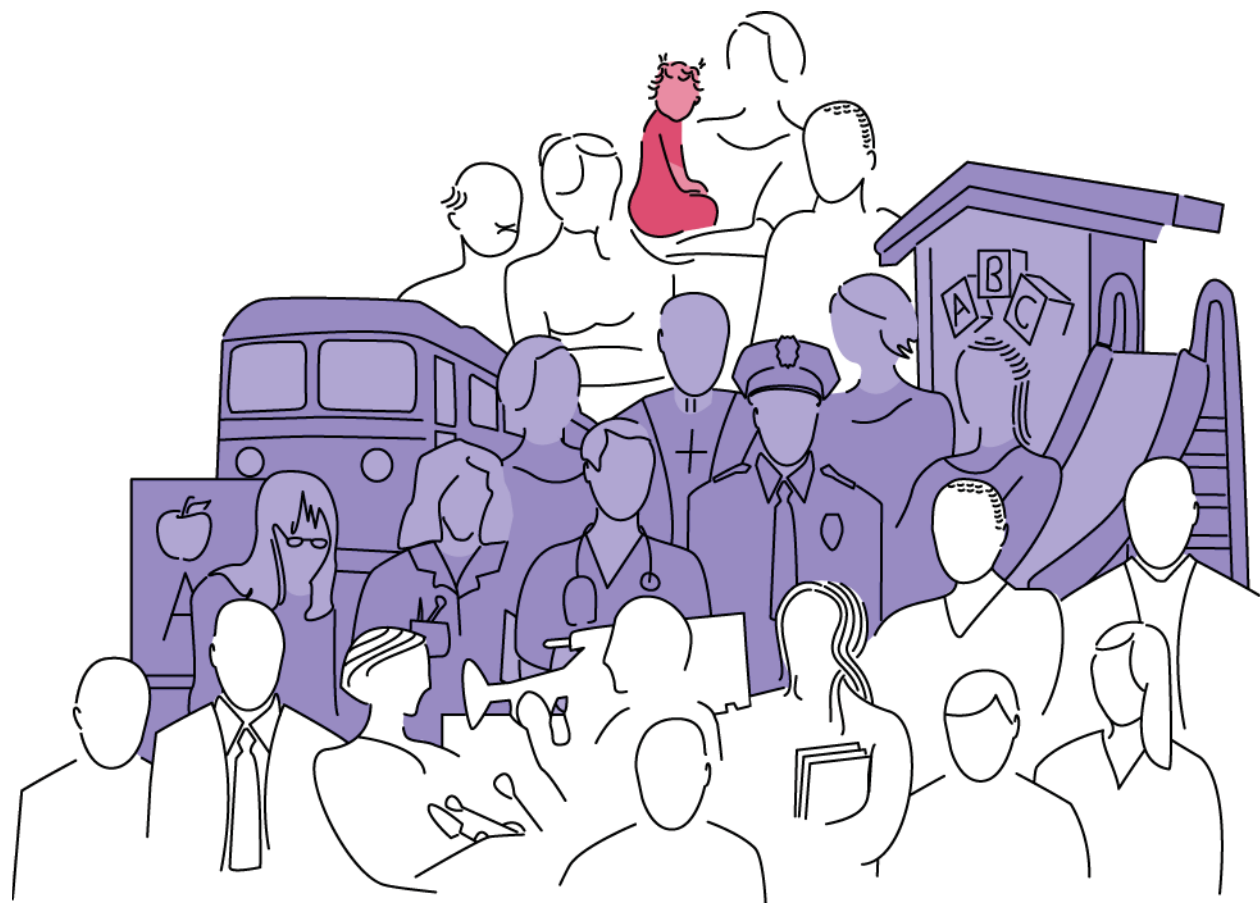
Center for Urban Child Policy

Advancing Public Policy to Improve the Well-Being of Children

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN MEMPHIS: AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Children come to school from all different backgrounds and developmental experiences. The start they receive in the first years of life matters for their success in school. In turn, their success in school matters for their life-long well-being, as well as the economic and social progress of our community.

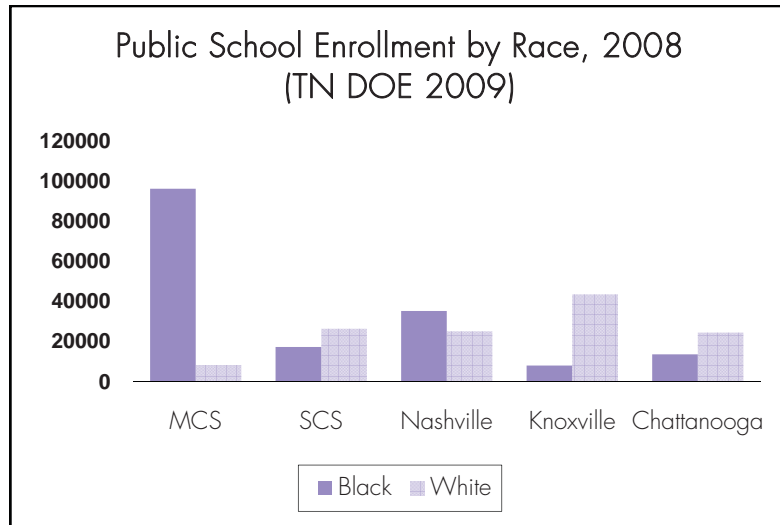
March 23, 2009



1 IN 6 OF TENNESSEE’S CHILDREN LIVE IN MEMPHIS AND SHELBY COUNTY. THE MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT (MCS) IS THE LARGEST IN TENNESSEE AND 23RD LARGEST IN THE NATION.

NCES 2009

MCS serves more—and more minority— students than any other district in TN.



Memphis City Schools serve 107,314 students in 113 Elementary, 34 Middle and 37 High Schools.

86.1% of MCS students are Black, 7.2% are White, and 5.3% are Hispanic.

Shelby County Schools (SCS) serve 46,537 students in 28 Elementary, 12 Middle and 7 High Schools.

36.1% of SCS students are Black, 55.2% are White, and 4% are Hispanic.

91% of all 5-17 year olds in Memphis attend public school and 77% of all 5-17 year olds in Shelby County outside the city attend public school. American Community Survey 2007

Across the United States, 89% of all 5-17 year olds attend public school. American Community Survey 2007



Low socio-economic status (SES) has more impact on cognition scores than factors such as race, ethnicity, home reading, and family educational expectations. Economic Policy Institute 2002

79.6% of MCS students are from low-income families (earning less than 185% of the federal poverty line or \$39,220 a year for a family of 4).

30.1% of SCS students are from low-income families.

In 77% of Memphis City Schools, at least 3 in 4 students come from low-income families. TN Report Card, 2009

The TCAP (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program) is the principal tool for assessing the performance of students in public elementary and middle school in Tennessee.

The TCAP includes tests of reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies.

It is given every year to students in the 3rd through 8th grade. Additionally, students in the 5th, 8th and 11th grade complete the TCAP writing exam.

The TCAP is a Criterion Referenced Test, meaning that students who have mastered a grade-level of knowledge should receive high marks on the TCAP exam for that grade.

Scores on the TCAP are categorized as Advanced, Proficient, and Below Proficient.

The Gateway Exams are the principal tool for assessing the performance of students in public high school in Tennessee.

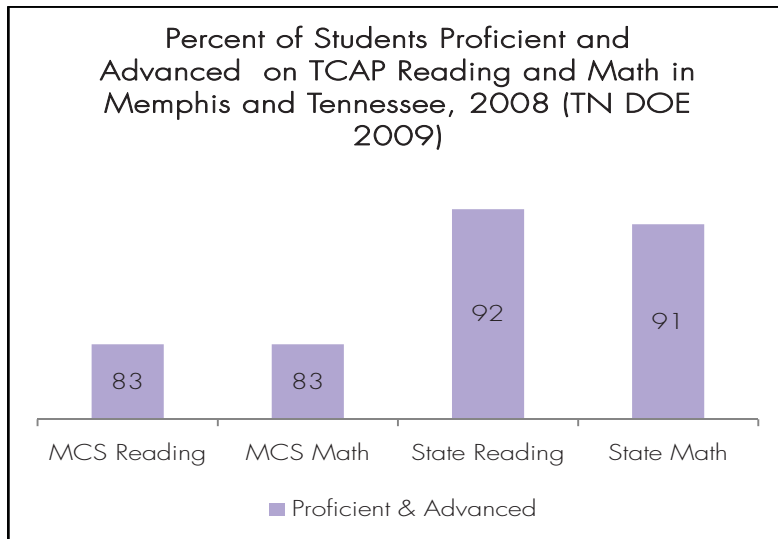
The Gateway exams includes tests of language arts, math and science and end of course exams in history and english.

Students have to score at least proficient or advanced on the reading, math and science exams to graduate from high school.

For Spring 2009, answering 1/2 of the questions correctly on the math exam and slightly more than a 1/3 of questions correctly on the science and language arts exams would earn a score of proficient on the exams. Tennessee DOE 2009



The TCAP indicates that most MCS students are doing well in Reading and Math—but our rates of proficiency are lower than the State averages. TN Report Card 2009



In the figure above, the vertical bars represent the performance of students in Memphis and Tennessee on the TCAP exams in Reading and Math.

In Reading, 83% of MCS students are proficient, 9% below the state average.

In Math, 83% of MCS students are proficient, 8% below the state average.

There are reasons to be cautious about TCAP results.

Students are considered proficient on the TCAP if they are able to answer between 1/3 and 1/2 of the questions correctly.

District results on the TCAP are very different than the results of national assessments of academic success.

30 percent of Tennessee students are at grade level in reading and math according to the NAEP—the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

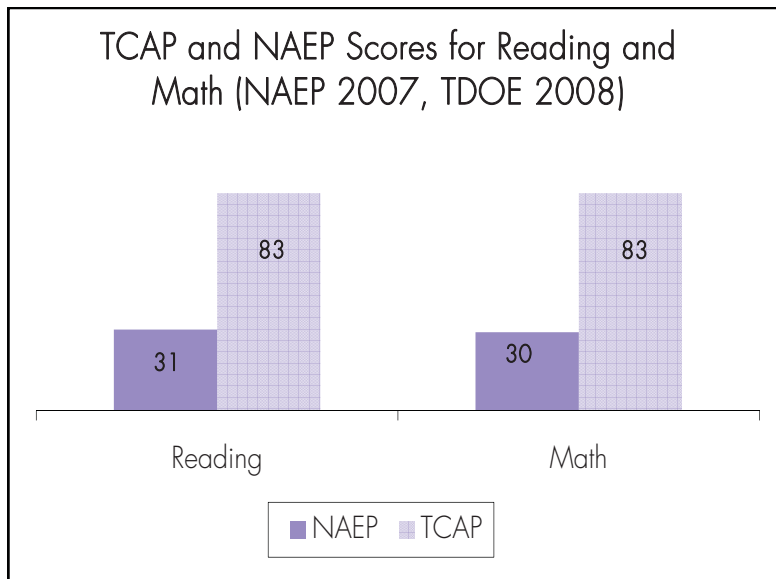
In addition to the TCAP, a sample of students in TN (and across the U.S.) also take the NAEP exam.



The NAEP is administered to 4th, 8th and 12th grade students and includes tests in math, science, reading and writing.

The NAEP is “the gold standard of large scale assessments because of its high technical quality and because it represents the best thinking of assessment specialists ... and content specialists from around the nation” (U.S. Department of Education 2006).

While the TCAP indicates that most students in TN are proficient in Reading and Math, the NAEP suggests that TN student performance is actually much lower (of all students at grade level in reading and math).



What explains the difference between scores on the TCAP and on the NAEP?

The TCAP evaluates mastery of the state curriculum, which is not aligned with the national content standards measured by the NAEP.

States that have written their state exams to reflect the rigor of the NAEP find much closer scores between their state and national exams.

The disparity in scores between the TCAP and the NAEP suggests either that Tennessee’s public school curriculum does not align with national standards.



Implications for Public Policy

TCAP results suggest that most students in Memphis are performing close to their peers across the state in reading and math.

This picture is heartening given that MCS educates a disproportionate share of low income and minority students, two groups that historically have lagged behind their more advantaged peers on measures of academic achievement.

However, our confidence in the high marks awarded by the TCAP is undermined by the much less encouraging results of Tennessee students on the NAEP exam, which suggests that only 30% of TN students are at grade-level; and by the low threshold (1 in 3 questions answered correctly) set to achieve a score of proficient.

This discrepancy leaves us with little concrete evidence with which to assess the degree to which we are effectively preparing students to assume roles in the future within their communities, in the economy, and as citizens.

Substantially different percentages of black (98%) and white (41%) school-age children are enrolled in city schools, suggesting a large racial gap in the public's confidence in city schools, or in their access to other educational venues.

Moreover, while the proportion of black children enrolled in MCS has remained constant since 2000, the proportion of white city children enrolled in Memphis City Schools has fallen by 19% over the last six years.

Alongside the aggregate picture of student success, it is important to evaluate the size of the achievement gaps between low and middle income students and between students of different racial and ethnic groups.



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