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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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California's Largest Urban School Districts Fall Short on Nationwide Tests

OAKLAND – Students of all ethnic and economic subgroups in California's two largest urban school districts trail students from most urban districts in fourth and eighth grade math and reading, according to results released today from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

In early 2003, NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment tested ten of the nation's largest, urban districts who volunteered to take part in the program. Los Angeles and San Diego volunteered from California.

"Los Angeles and San Diego should be commended for their focus on improving student achievement," said Russlynn Ali, director of the Education Trust West, a non-profit working to close achievement gaps. "The results show that there is still room for significant improvement, and Los Angeles and San Diego are leading the charge by seeking the data that identifies and frames their problems."

Los Angeles, Cleveland and the District of Columbia were the lowest-scoring districts in the study. The Los Angeles and San Diego results also showed large gaps between different ethnic groups, a trend that is reflected in the scores of all participating districts. While San Diego scored as well or better than most of the other urban districts overall, it too falls far behind when looking only at students with comparable ethnicities and economic levels.

When demographics are held constant – and students of the same ethnicity and poverty level are compared only with each other – California's students scored far below students in the leading districts.

Some examples:

- In 4th grade reading, African American students in Los Angeles read between one and two grade levels below their peers of the same ethnicity in New York City, Houston, Boston, and Charlotte.
- In 4th grade math, white students in Los Angeles scored more than a grade level behind white students in Houston, Charlotte and Atlanta.
- In 8th grade math, poor students in San Diego scored almost a full grade level below poor students in New York City.

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“Why does all this matter? Because it means we can no longer blame the demographics of California’s large urban areas for our low performance,” Ali said. “We certainly don’t want to see any achievement gaps. And our African American children – or our poor children, or any children – should not perform differently from children in similar subgroups in other states. What these results show us is that we’ve got gaps within gaps. If African American 4th graders in Los Angeles read at the same level as African American 4th graders in Boston, New York or Houston, the gap between our white and African American students would be cut in half. We’ve got a lot to learn from these high-performing districts.”

The high note signaled by the scores was the improvement of the 4th grade reading scores of English Language Learners in Los Angeles. Los Angeles and San Diego teach more ELL students than any district in the nation, and exclude a smaller percentage from testing than do other districts.

Both Los Angeles and San Diego have been making significant gains on the state’s own Academic Performance Index, which suggests that a focus on student achievement has started to move things in the right direction. But the NAEP results show that California school districts still have a lot to learn from leading districts nationwide.

“The results of some other states in this study should serve as encouragement to California,” Ali said. “This can be done. Large urban, high-poverty, high-minority districts can achieve at high levels.”

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