

## School District Leaves Nine Others Behind

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Among the nation's super-sized school systems, the Clark County School District stands tallest in at least one category:

It is the nation's only district among the 10 most populous that met all federal benchmarks for the federal No Child Left Behind Act in the 2006-07 school year.

Several local officials were ecstatic when told the news, saying it indicated the district is among the nation's best urban school systems.

But national experts said the enthusiasm should be tempered because states choose which standardized test to use and then determine the achievement standards for its students.

There is no national litmus test to compare the results of one school system from one state with another school system in a different state, they said.

Clark County Superintendent Walt Rulffes said being the nation's only large district to meet all federal standards is significant. He said it lets residents know their children will receive a solid education in the county's public schools.

Rulffes said the achievement is even more telling considering that Nevada usually lags behind nearly every state in the amount of money it spends per student.

"This clearly validates that the Clark County School District is not only doing a good job, but the community and taxpayers are getting a great bang for their buck," he said.

Clark County is considered the nation's sixth largest school system by the U.S. Department of Education. The school district in Puerto Rico is included among the nation's 10 largest because the island is an unincorporated territory of the United States. The only school system in that country must abide by federal No Child Left Behind standards.

Jane Clark Lindle, a distinguished professor of educational leadership at Clemson University, said states set different proficiency standards for their students.

The law's goal is to have all students perform at grade level by the 2013-14 school year.

"It's been apples to oranges comparing these (state) standards, but nobody can seem to resist," Lindle said.

Brian Stecher, senior social scientist with the RAND Corp., a nonprofit think-tank based in Santa Monica, Calif., agreed with Lindle.

"It's all relative," he said. "Each state picks its own tests. Each state sets their own level of proficiency."

But Lindle said that it is impressive for a district as large as Clark County's to meet all federal standards, an achievement sometimes even difficult for small school districts.

"The rule tends to be, the more diverse the district, the more difficult it is to meet all (federal) requirements."

Like the New York, Miami and California school systems, Clark County has a large number of minority students.

Minorities make up a majority of students in the county. During the 2006-07 school year, Hispanics comprised 38.8 percent of enrollment. During that school year, 216 schools met federal guidelines while 123 schools failed.

The school system met all federal standards because enough students met benchmarks in English and math.

Of the students tested in grades three through eight, at least 40 percent passed standards in English and 43 percent passed benchmarks in math.

The standards for high school students were higher, and only juniors were assessed. At least 52 percent of high school juniors had to meet requirements in math, while at least 78 percent had to meet requirements in English.

In total, 165,000 students in the county were assessed last school year.

Greg Levitt, an assistant dean in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said Clark County's achievement should be applauded, but it would be a stretch to claim it's among the nation's elite urban districts.

"It would be hard to say it's one of the best," Levitt said. "The school district is dealing with its issues better than other school districts."

Levitt said the school district's two most pressing "issues" are its high transiency rate, and the high percentage of students whose primary language isn't English.

Last school year, 69,000 students were enrolled in the district's English as a second language program, and 94 percent of them were Hispanic.

Rulffes pointed to three reasons why the district has met federal standards, the first being the implementation of a \$3 million software system three school years ago.

The system, called the Instructional Data Management System, allows teachers to track individual student performance on standardized tests and focus on where they need improvement.

He said the district also stepped up attempts to get parents involved, and businesses have made large financial contributions to schools and provided mentors for students.

According to district statistics, businesses big and small contributed \$8 million worth of services to local schools during the 2006-07 school year.

Although Rulffes was happy about his school system's federal designation, he acknowledged that the district has lots of room for improvement.

According to the latest data available, 63.5 percent of students graduated in the 2005-06 schools year.

"We have lots of room to grow, and we'll stay at it," he said.

School Board member Carolyn Edwards was less modest about the district's feat, saying, "It's a big accomplishment and it should be recognized."

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#### **Clark county schools unique among top 10**

The Clark County School District is the only one among the nation's 10 most populous school districts to have reached all federal No Child Left Behind Act benchmarks for the 2006-07 school year.

School district	Enrollment	Met NCLB standards?
1. New York City Public Schools	1,042,078	No
2. Los Angeles Unified Public Schools	694,288	No
3. Puerto Rico Department of Education*	650,000	No
4. City of Chicago School District	410,000	No
5. Miami Dade County Public Schools	341,898	No
<b>6. Clark County School District</b>	<b>308,860</b>	<b>YES</b>
7. Broward County Public Schools (Fla.)	258,905	No
8. Houston Independent School District	202,936	No
9. Hawaii Department of Education	181,355	No
10. Philadelphia City School District	167,128	No

\*Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory