

Boston is 'best' at boosting urban ed

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For Boston high school seniors who sweated out years of standardized tests, a reward – with dollar signs – has finally arrived.

This week Boston Public Schools won the annual **Broad Prize for Urban Education**: \$500,000 in college scholarships for eligible 2007 graduates.

The award highlights districts that have narrowed achievement gaps and outpaced comparable districts in their states on factors such as graduation rates and the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams. Four finalists – Bridgeport, Conn.; Jersey City, N.J.; Miami-Dade County, Fla.; and New York City – will each receive \$125,000 in scholarships.

Boston “is leading the way to keep America the most innovative country in the world by preparing today’s urban children with the skills to succeed in tomorrow’s jobs,”

said former US Secretary of Education Roderick Paige at the ceremony in New York Sept. 19. Mr. Paige was on the jury that chose the winner after observing classrooms and talking with school and community stakeholders in the Top 5 districts. (Finalists were identified by a larger group that analyzed demographic and achievement data.)

Among the reasons cited for Boston’s win (and its status as a finalist for the past four years):

Reading and math scores. On state tests, Boston students outperformed other districts with similar

low-income populations. They also improved more strongly than their peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Gains for African-Americans. Compared with similar districts in Massachusetts, these students made greater strides in math at all grade levels and in reading at both the middle and high school levels.

Expanded college preparation. Between 2002 and 2005, Hispanics in Boston more than doubled participation in AP math and English exams; African-American participation went up 78 percent.

Under the 11-year tenure of recently retired Superintendent Thomas Payzant, Boston pursued a number of strategies now credited with boosting achievement – including collaborative teaching, instructional changes based on test data, and breaking high schools into smaller learning communities.

For Mr. Payzant, the best part of the award is the scholarships it brings for students with significant financial need who improved during high school. But he’s also pleased with “the national recognition that urban districts can improve, [and that] schools and school systems must improve ... for all students to have a chance for a quality education.”

Businessman Eli Broad and his wife, Edythe Broad, formed their foundation in 1999 in Los Angeles to improve academics in urban public schools.

The prize “is long overdue for Boston,” says Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools in Washington, a coalition of urban districts that does not participate in selecting Broad winners. “This award often serves as a major morale booster.”

By publicizing how districts have narrowed racial and economic gaps, the award also shows there’s no silver bullet. “Data-driven instruction.... the nature of the curriculum, the cohesion of the professional development... how [the district] assesses their kids – there’s a whole range of factors that go into boosting student achievement,” Mr. Casserly says.

CLOSING THE GAPS