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Improvement seen in performance gaps between urban and suburban schools in Greater Waterbury, Litchfield County

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Amiyah Hing, 12, right, and Isabella Gonzalez, 12, both sixth grade students at Brass City Charter School in Waterbury, work on finding text evidence from the book "The Giver" by Lois Lowry, during school on Wednesday. School districts around the city and region are showing improvements on the state's annual report card on school and district accountability. Jim Shannon Republican-American

Gaps in how urban and suburban school districts perform are shrinking, according to the latest state data.

Waterbury Public Schools, for example, perform at a level significantly below the state average. But the district appears to be improving at a slightly faster rate than others.

The results on the state's annual report card for measuring school performance — based on student achievement and other data collected during the 2017-18 academic year — showed those gaps.

Some schools and districts in Greater Waterbury and Litchfield County are improving, but suburban and rural school districts still outperform their urban counterparts.

Schools' and districts' grades are reported on a 100-point scale. The Litchfield Public Schools, with 85.9 points, scored highest in the region. The Cheshire Public Schools ranked second, with 83.6 points.

Subira Gordon, a Waterbury resident and executive director of the education advocacy group ConnCAN, has a mixed view of how schools are improving in her city.

"Yes, of course we're happy that the schools are improving," Gordon said. "But how long is it taking to improve? And how does a great school in Waterbury compare to a great school in Cheshire? And are the expectations the same of kid who's in a category 2 school in Waterbury, versus a category 2 school in Cheshire? Or are the standards a little bit different, given what district that they're in?"

The state's school grading program, the Next Generation Accountability System, was implemented in 2015 to comply with a revised federal education reform law and rates schools based on 12 factors. The factors, which are weighted, include students' academic performance on math, English and science tests, their attendance, graduation rates, physical fitness, physical fitness and whether that school provides access to arts education.

SCHOOLS ARE RANKED 1 TO 5 based on those grades, with the highest-performing schools rated Category 1. The schools ranking in the lowest 10 percent of schools statewide are rated a Category 4, while those among the lowest five percent rank as Category 5.

Ten Waterbury schools saw improvements that boosted their state rankings. Meanwhile, four city schools received grades placing them among the lowest five percent of schools statewide in terms of overall performance.

Because of those grades, the schools — North End Middle School, Wallace Middle School, West Side Middle School and Wilby High School — have been newly designated as turnaround schools. District officials now are required to submit turnaround plans to the state Department of Education, which must approve them, for each school. State funding is available.

While the district as a whole is still struggling, city school officials are optimistic about the improvements that have been made. The last grade showed a 2.5 point improvement over the district's grade in 2016-17, which was 58.9 points. The statewide average that year was 73.2 points.

Waterbury Schools Superintendent Verna Ruffin said schools that have improved the most have addressed specific performance areas. One example is reducing the use of out-school-suspensions in elementary schools. Ruffin said it's become a way of business at those schools for all staff to work to address student behaviors before they rise to the level requiring a suspension.

"They made some really significant improvements on out-of-school and in-school suspensions, which means they have more time to instruct students in the classroom," Ruffin said.

Although four city schools have been newly designated as turnaround schools, the city also had some bright spots, including Waterbury Career Academy High School, which the state named a School of Distinction for showing continued growth. Career Academy last year boasted a four-year graduation rate of 98.5 percent — highest among city schools. According to another measure included on the accountability report, 100 percent of Waterbury Career Academy students were reported "on track" to graduate.

BRASS CITY CHARTER SCHOOL, while not a district school, also showed significant improvement in math — enabling the school to boost its grade to 81.58.

Barbara Ruggiero, the school's executive director, attributed that growth in part to the school's small size — the school currently has 287 students from preschool to sixth grade.

If educators observe a dip in students' learning, "we just address it," Ruggiero said. "We can target areas we think we can improve."

Lily Zhao, an academic dean whose focus has been math, said the school made an effort specifically to improve math instruction last year.

"We updated the curriculum, responding to weakness," Zhao said.

State Department of Education Chief Performance Officer Ajit Gopalakrishnan, whose office determined the rankings, said the newly categorized turnaround schools will retain that status for three years, until the 2021-22 school year.

Gopalakrishnan said the turnaround declarations were not made by looking at one year of data alone. "It's a consistent underperformance over the past three years," he said.

Gordon of ConnCAN said while she is happy schools are improving, she worries about schools' and students' long-term success.

"I'm not sure if they're moving at the right level, and what are the long-term outcomes for students?" she said. "People always say schools in Waterbury aren't great. But there is improvement, but for every year that we're not at a 1, we're losing kids."

Here is a look at how school districts in Greater Waterbury and Litchfield County scored according to the state Department of Education's latest index. The index uses 12 factors, including student performance on standardized tests, attendance and graduation rates, on which to grade schools and districts to make up an overall score between zero and 100. The statewide average for all districts was 74.9. Most districts scored above that statewide average:

Litchfield	85.9
Cheshire	83.6
Wolcott	83.3
Region 10	82.2
Region 7	81.9
Brass City Charter School	81.58
Region 16	81.5
Region 12	81.2
Region 15	80.4

Region 1	78.5
Seymour	77.7
Region 6	77.2
Oxford	76.6
Watertown	76.3
Region 14	75.3
Thomaston	74.3
Naugatuck	73.3
Winsted	72.3
Gilbert School	71.7
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System (including Oliver Wolcott and Kaynor)	70.7
Torrington	68.7
Waterbury	61.4
Explorations Charter School	48.4
Statewide average	74.9

HOW THEY FARE IN THE DRG

The Waterbury Public School system ranks in the middle of comparable districts in terms of performance. Districts are rated on point system from zero to 100.

New Haven	65
Bridgeport	62.4
Waterbury	61.4
Hartford	59.6
New Britain.....	58.9

Source: Department of Education





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