



## Rise in test scores leads to a debate

**Adversaries ask if Union City's success is because of mandates or despite them**

Monday, June 16, 2003

**BY JOHN MOONEY**  
**Star-Ledger Staff**

Over the last decade, Union City's public schools rose from what one administrator called the "bottom of the bottom" to a level of performance that rivals that of some suburban schools.

Along the way, the district has challenged the perception that urban education can't succeed.

Now, as New Jersey struggles to turn the corner on urban school reform and looks for models to emulate, a tug-of-war has erupted over who and what should get the credit for Union City's success.

The question is important because state officials and advocates for the 350,000 schoolchildren in 30 so-called Abbott districts are waiting for the state Supreme Court to rule whether its previous decisions on reform should be maintained or loosened. A decision in the latest aspect of the landmark Abbott vs. Burke case is expected soon.

At issue is the court's 1998 mandate that every school adopt a so-called "whole school reform" model, and each side has invoked Union City as an argument in its favor.

To state officials, Union City schools have made the gains almost despite the Abbott requirements, building on improvements started long before the court's mandates. They ask that schools be given a wider flexibility in either selecting models or choosing their own approaches.

To the Education Law Center, which has led the court fight on behalf of impoverished children, the Union City schools are evidence the mandates should be kept in place.

The ELC argues there has been steady improvement in the Abbott districts with the help of the models, which range from reworking curriculum and teaching to changing how a school is staffed and administered. Its argument is the state should do a better job ensuring the mandates are implemented correctly.

There is little disagreement that Union City -- a working-class community of 67,000 in Hudson County -- is a budding success story in urban education.

Last year 80 percent of its fourth-graders passed the state's language arts test and 65 percent passed the math, up from fewer than half passing each section in 1999. Almost 90 percent of eighth-graders passed in language arts and 71 percent in math, also sizable improvements from three years ago.

One turning point came a decade ago, when persistent failures and mismanagement had the school system of 11,000 pupils near state takeover. "Without a doubt, we were broke like a lot of other Abbott districts," said Fred Carrigg, former assistant superintendent in Union City and an architect of its revival.

Carrigg, who now is on loan to the state Department of Education, cites how the district in the early 1990s restructured its management and instituted a new literacy program.

The district benefited from the first infusion of state money from earlier Abbott rulings, he said, and technology saw a huge push. The district has a computer for every three kids.

But also of great benefit were programs to boost college preparation and advanced placement classes, Carrigg said, as well as better data collection to track pupils' progress. "By 1998, Union City had already reformed itself in many ways," Carrigg said.

Carrigg said his argument isn't with the models. But he says they have become an end in themselves, with little central coordination and sometimes varying school by school.

There are about 10 models now predominantly in use in Abbott schools, four of them in Union City. They range from the model developed by Yale-based psychologist James Comer that is used in most Union City schools, to the "Success for All" approach that almost scripts how a teacher teaches reading.

"You get to the nitty-gritty of imposing these pieces, and it gets counterproductive," Carrigg said. "I say you have to lighten up."

But others within Union City schools say you can't dismiss the models' help. The Success for All program is credited with helping remove the Sara M. Gilmore School from a federal "needs improvement" list.

"Without Abbott, without the funding and impetus of whole school reform, we would never have seen those kinds of test scores," said Annette Kaplan, a supervisor of special projects in Union City.

She also cites other forces, especially management changes that streamlined the bureaucracy. "When I talk about whole school reform, it's really whole district reform," she said. "You can't just plug in a model without the rest of the infrastructure supporting it."

Robert Waters School, one of the largest in the district with 1,300 pupils from preschool through eighth grade, is an example of the district's aggressiveness when a school is struggling.

Last year, only half of its fourth-graders passed the state's math tests, and eighth-graders didn't do much better.

The school's scores overall were better than they were four years ago, but the district still replaced the school's leadership team.

Bruce Naszimento, a Union City native and former high school assistant principal, was named the principal and came in with new assistant principals, technology coordinator, parent liaison and staff facilitator.

So far, they have kept the school's chosen model in place, with teachers and other staff saying change at the top this year appears to have the school on track.

The School Development Program model, developed by Yale child psychiatrist Comer, is the most popular among the Abbott districts, with nearly 120 enrolled schools. It provides a structure for the school to deal with a pupil's mental health needs along with the academic ones.

Discipline follows a "no fault" premise, where punishment is replaced by strategies to improve a pupil's behavior. Social workers and parent liaisons become involved.

"It makes sense," said Susan McCue, a science teacher. "You are learning how to reach the needs of all the children."

A no-nonsense presence with his walkie-talkie ever at the ready, Naszimento isn't shy about his goals, and highlights the intensive test preparation before the statewide exams this spring.

"I ask with everything, 'How's it going to help students, how will it raise test scores?'" he said.

The biggest hurdle in the past had been the math scores, something the new principal thinks will improve this time.

"At least I pray," he added. "We'll find out soon."

*John Mooney covers education. He may be reached at [jmooney@starledger.com](mailto:jmooney@starledger.com), or (973) 392-1548.*

Copyright 2003 NJ.com. All Rights Reserved.