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Katrina students show strong performance gains after four years in Texas schools

AUSTIN – A new study released today found that students who relocated to Texas because of Hurricane Katrina have made significant academic progress during the past four years and are performing slightly better than a demographically and economically matched set of Texas students.

When compared with all Texas students, the Katrina students perform as well or better than the Texas students on reading performance and the gap in mathematic performance narrowed substantially.

“I was so proud of the Texas public schools when they took in the students who evacuated their homes because of Hurricane Katrina. But today, I am even more proud of these schools and our educators because they have made a real and lasting difference in the lives of these children,” said Commissioner of Education Robert Scott.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into coastal states in August 2005 creating major damage across the southern United States, 46,504 evacuees from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida suddenly enrolled in Texas public schools.

Texas schools opened their doors and provided not only academic services but clothing, counseling and other services to the children.

Recently, research staff at the Texas Education Agency examined how a subset of students who remained in Texas fared academically after four years in the Texas public schools.

The study looked at Katrina students who were in grades 3, 5 and 8 in 2006 and still enrolled in Texas schools in 2009, and compared them to students enrolled in Texas schools who matched the group based on gender, ethnicity, economic background, and by geographic region. Additionally, the researchers looked for Texas students who had Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores similar to the evacuees in 2006. Along with this matched student comparison, the researchers also compared the Katrina students to all Texas test takers.

The students’ performance on the TAKS was tracked and studied from 2006 to 2009.

In 2006, the percentage of Katrina students in the study passing the TAKS reading test was 80 percent for the third-grade group, 63 percent for the fifth-grade students and 71 percent for the eighth-grade students.

After four years of Texas education, the percentages of Katrina students in the study who were passing the TAKS reading tests rose to 93 percent for the third-grade cohort, 94 percent for the fifth-grade cohort and 91 percent for the eighth-grade cohort.

In 2006, the percent of Katrina students who passed the TAKS math test was 67 percent for the third-grade cohort, 61 percent for the fifth-grade cohort and 48 percent for the eighth-grade cohort. By 2009, the percentage of these student groups passing TAKS math tests was 75 percent for the third-grade cohort, 73 percent for the fifth-grade cohort and 69 percent for the eighth-grade cohort.

Results indicated that, in general, the performance of Katrina students across the four years in which those students were educated in Texas was slightly better than the performance of the comparable set of Texas students.

The timing of the hurricane may have resulted in many of the Katrina students being educated less than a full year in Texas and the stress of the experience may have led those students to perform poorly that first year, the study said.

“The improved performance of the Katrina students over the last three years of the study relative to their matched peers may also reflect the recovery of these students, the increased stability in their schooling, the commitment of additional state and federal funding to meet the needs of students and families impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the focused attention of Texas educators on this specific population of students,” according to the study.

Over the four years of the study, the average reading performance of Katrina students increased so that the passing rates for these students was similar to or better than the average performance for all test takers in 2009. In mathematics, the achievement gap between the Katrina students and the Texas students in 2006 was larger than the performance gap in reading. By 2009, the gap in mathematics performance narrowed substantially but lagged behind the performance of all test takers.

“These students have made remarkable gains over the past four years. All Texans can be proud of our service to these students,” Scott said.

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