Title I in Monroe County Elementary Schools

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Education H520

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December 8, 2004

The purpose of this research paper is to discuss the Title I federal compensatory education program for the poor and examine the data relating to the use of Title I funds in the elementary schools of the Monroe County (Indiana) Community School Corporation (MCCSC). Where possible, I intend to correlate Title I programs to changes in outcomes for low-income students. I predict that Monroe County, like the country as a whole, will show only modest gains in achievement for the students served by Title I.

Federal poverty guidelines for 2003 define poverty as a yearly income of $18,400 or less for a family of four[1]. In 2002, 34.6 million Americans were living in poverty, including over 12 million children[2]. This means that 20 percent of all children in America live in poverty.[3] These children enter school with a long list of potential problems including poor nutrition, lack of health care, lack of needed school supplies, and inadequate clothing. They may also have "overburdened parents [who] subsist on welfare or work long hours at miserably paid jobs."[4] Seen as an example of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, one could envision that these parents may have less time, energy and possibly education of their own with which to help their children succeed in school.[5]

A gap in scholastic achievement between children of poverty and their more affluent peers has long been observed. In creating the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which includes Title I, President Lyndon Johnson initiated the first federally funded program for compensatory education. Title I sought to eliminate the gap in achievement by providing additional funding to school districts with high concentrations of poverty. These districts were struggling with the twin problems of many children who were in need of services and a lower tax base from which to fund the schools. In making Title I a celebrated component of his "War on Poverty," Johnson demonstrated his belief that education could overcome poverty.[6]

In many ways, compensatory education for the poor was intimately related to another of President Johnson's idealistic goals, passage of the Civil Rights Act. With 65 percent of African-American children living in poverty, the correlation of race and economic status had become too obvious to overlook. Compensatory education for the disadvantaged thus also became a Civil Rights issue and the Supreme Court ruled that adequate education is guaranteed to all by the 14th amendment of the Constitution.[7]

ESEA was important legislation with lofty goals. However, as Vinovskis (1999) points out, Title I was in reality only a funding mechanism and did not prescribe any specific programs to combat the disadvantages faced by low-income children. It distributed money to local school districts based on the number of poor children they served without any determination of how the money would be spent, which led to a widely varying collection of local programs. However, one regulation did arise early on that stated federal funds could not be used as a substitute for state or local money. Title I was to "supplement, not supplant" other funding and provide additional services for low-income children.[8]

Another debate focused on whether aid to low-income schools should be general in nature or should focus on services provided only to specific children identified as disadvantaged. The argument was resolved in part because groups such as the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund reported instances of inappropriate use of general aid money. They argued that more oversight was needed to make sure federal funds were actually benefiting the disadvantaged children for whom Title I was intended.

In response to this publicity and criticism, most school districts began to provide Title I services in a way that made their spending easier to track. This resulted in special services being held in "pull-out" sessions separate from regular classrooms. This was the beginning of a long

tradition of categorical programs in which struggling low-income children were removed from their regular classrooms to spend part of their day in special environments such as remedial reading labs.

Today, Title I is an $12.3 billion[9] program serving about 12.5 million[10] children in 50,000 schools across the country, representing 95 percent of all school districts[11]. One hundred eighty-nine thousand special school employees have their salaries paid with Title I funds.[12] This represents an enormous investment in compensatory education on the part of our government and society. As such, the legislation is reviewed and renewed every five years. This provides an opportunity to update the methods used to ameliorate the effects of poverty on education. The latest incarnation of Title I is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB)[13]. Although controversial in its implementation, NCLB is the continuation of an existing trend toward more accountability for educational outcomes and more flexibility in how those outcomes are achieved.

For example, there has been increasing controversy over the categorical method in recent years, with research suggesting that the pull-out approach may be stigmatizing and may hold children receiving services to lower academic standards than their peers. With the implementation of the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendment to Title I (1988) and the Improving America's Schools Act (1994), schools with progressively lower and lower percentages of poverty have been approved for a more flexible approach.[14] Today, schools with a 40 percent or greater poverty rate are allowed to implement programs that serve the school as a whole instead of only those children who meet Title I criteria.[15]

Monroe County, Indiana contains two school districts: Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC), which serves the city of Bloomington and some outlying areas to the east and south, and Richland-Bean Blossom Community School Corporation (R-BBCSC), which serves the smaller towns and rural areas in the northwestern portion of the county. My discussion will only include MCCSC elementary schools. I have chosen this school district because it is by far the larger of the two, it has a more diverse population, and as a parent of a child attending an MCCSC elementary school, it is of greater interest to me personally.

Poverty in Monroe County can be easy to overlook, due in part to Indiana University's main campus and a large number of well educated, relatively affluent citizens. However, Monroe County's median household income of $33,311 ranked 87th out of 92 Indiana counties in 2000.[16] Monroe County also had the highest poverty rate in the state, despite one of the lowest rates of unemployment. The 2000 Census found 2,465 children in Monroe County (11.8%) living in poverty.[17]

Federal poverty guidelines do not tell the whole story, however. A Self-Sufficiency Standard for Monroe County produced in 2002 indicates that a family of four (consisting of two adults, one school aged child and one preschool aged child) would need to earn $41,121 per year to meet the estimated monthly costs of living in this area.[18] This includes the greatly increased cost of housing in Bloomington and its vicinity caused in large part by the influx of university students. Therefore, many people in Monroe County continue to struggle greatly with de facto poverty, even though they are not counted among the county's poor. The disadvantages born of this poverty accompany many children into Monroe County's schools.

The federal government provides Title I funding to local school districts based on the percentage of poverty in the district found by the U.S. Census. Districts then determine the

amount each school will receive based on their own measure of poverty. Often, as in MCCSC, this is the number of children qualifying for free or reduced price school lunches. In 2003, that included 3,126 MCCSC students, or 29.53% of the student population.[19] In order to receive Title I money, an MCCSC school must have more students than the district average in the subsidized lunch program. Schools that qualify under this formula are then served in order of need, highest poverty level to lowest. [20]

School districts decide for themselves how to use Title I funds. Districts can choose to serve all their high poverty schools (elementary, middle and high schools) or only a subset of these. In practice, 90% of students receiving Title I services nationwide are in Kindergarten through eighth grade.[21] MCCSC has chosen to serve only Kindergarten, first, second, and occasionally third grades in their qualifying schools in an attempt to focus on early intervention.[22]

School districts also choose what sorts of programs to provide. In the case of MCCSC, reading skills programs have been made the top priority and receive nearly all the available funds. Program decisions are made through the Title I administration office, with its director working in cooperation with the principals of the Title I schools. [23]

MCCSC includes a total of 14 elementary schools. However, two of these, Rogers and Binford, are in reality one school in two adjacent buildings, with Rogers serving Kindergarten through second grade and Binford serving the third through sixth grades. Of these 14 elementary schools, six are considered Title I schools.[24]

A seventh school in MCCSC technically qualifies for Title I funding. This school, University Elementary, is excluded by the school district based on the observation that it represents a unique type of poverty in the district. Graduate students at Indiana University, often

visiting from other countries, head many of the families served by this school. Their poverty is considered to be situational, not generational. If one takes into account the test scores for the school, which rank among the highest in the district, this seems to mean these children suffer less educational disadvantage. Therefore, MCCSC officials have made the judgment that University Elementary is not in need of supplementary funding. [25]

This view of University Elementary's population would also seem to uphold Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital. Though poor, these are parents who are well educated and may provide more support and enrichment than their counterparts at schools with more entrenched poverty.[26]

In fiscal year 2004, Monroe County Community School Corporation received $1,839,389 in federal Title I grants.[27] According to the Title I director for MCCSC, the district spends this supplemental funding in three ways: early intervention reading programs, professional development for teachers, and parental involvement programs. Of these, the reading programs receive the largest proportion of the available funds.

MCCSC uses three different kinds of reading interventions in the early grades: classroom reinforcement, literacy groups, and Reading Recovery. Classroom reinforcement removes the struggling student from his or her regular classroom for additional help with the reading lesson taught that day. In literacy groups, students are taught in small groups based on their skill level. This instruction can take place in the regular classroom or in another room. The main focus of the Title I program in MCCSC elementary schools, however, is Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is used only in the first grade and consists of 30 minutes per day of one-on-one instruction from a certified Reading Recovery teacher as a supplement to regular classroom instruction. This continues for 12 to 20 weeks, or until the struggling student reaches the average reading level for his or her classroom.[28]

Reading Recovery has been used in the United States since 1984, and has become a very popular method of early reading intervention, appearing in 49 states and the District of Columbia. The Reading Recovery Council of North America claims that 80 percent of students who have gone through the program since 1984 have achieved the goal of reading and writing at the average level for their class. Assessment within the program is based on an Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement and daily progress records administered by the Reading Recovery teacher. Much emphasis is placed on research methods and empirical evidence that the program works well and is cost-effective.[29]

Despite its popularity and widespread use, Reading Recovery does have its critics. Among the problems and flaws reported are some that seem to question the effectiveness and equity of Reading Recovery. Since this program represents MCCSC's largest expenditure of Title I money and its main approach to closing the achievement gap between low-income children and their more advantaged peers, I believe that a summary of such criticism is valuable.

According to a study by Grossen, Coutler, and Ruggles (1997), there are several drawbacks to Reading Recovery that should be taken into account. First, there are problems with data collection and analysis that affect the reliability of the reported success rate. This includes the fact that "[w]ithout explanation, about half the data on children eligible for Reading Recovery are omitted from the final analyses." [30] Also, the teachers who are responsible for student outcomes are collecting the data on those outcomes.

Perhaps the most disturbing issue is the inequity inherent in using the classroom average as a measure of performance success. Reading Recovery serves the bottom 20 percent of children in the local school population, but what comprises that bottom 20 percent varies based on the demographics of the particular school. For example, class averages in high-poverty areas

are around the 20th percentile on standardized tests. This means the goal of Reading Recovery in those schools would be to raise the lowest achieving students only to the 20th percentile, while those at or above the 20th percentile would receive no services. In low-poverty areas, the class averages are usually much higher, meaning that the lowest achievers may have the goal of reaching a class average of the 80th percentile. According to the authors, "[t]his inequity raises constitutional issues because it impacts minority children, who are overrepresented in low-income schools."[31]

In addition, children who start the program can be removed if they do not make adequate progress. Children who have been removed are not included in calculating the rate of success. It has also been shown that participation in Reading Recovery does not substantially decrease the need for further services. The argument that Reading Recovery leads to savings through decreased need for additional services is often used to justify Reading Recovery's high cost per pupil.

One solution to these problems would be for schools with greater than 40 percent poverty to use Title I funding to implement a schoolwide program. This allows a high-poverty school to improve curriculum and instruction for the school as a whole. Grossen, Coulter, and Ruggles assert that the amount of money spent on one year of Reading Recovery would be enough to reduce class size and revamp the early literacy program for that entire school.

As with categorical programs, Title I leaves decisions about how to implement schoolwide programs up to the individual school districts. However, there are some common features seen in most schoolwide programs. These include reducing class size by hiring more teachers; increased professional development for staff; increased parental involvement programs; more decision making and control by teachers; and introduction of a more integrated and

coordinated curriculum in which it is difficult to distinguish Title I services from the regular curriculum[32].

In Monroe County Community School Corporation, four of the six Title I schools have greater than 40 percent poverty. However, only one school, Templeton Elementary, has implemented a schoolwide program and it varies little from the targeted assistance programs in place at the other five schools. The main attempt to improve achievement for Templeton students continues to be Reading Recovery.[33]

Such a large financial investment in education on the part of federal, state and local governments creates a need for scientifically demonstrable results. Many studies of varying quality have been conducted to gauge the effectiveness of Title I since its inception. There has always been a great deal of data available in the form of annual reports produced by local school districts and states. Historically, the methodology used and quality of the data has varied greatly. Federal studies have also been plagued for many years with methodological problems, such as relying on norm-referenced models.[34] Reviews of these studies have shown only small positive effects, more so in mathematics than in reading, which tend to appear in the early grades and then decrease rapidly.[35] Given these disappointing results, it is not surprising that there have been numerous calls for reforming Title I. An important part of this reform movement must be good research. As Biddle (2001) puts it, "'reform' in our country is more often driven by ideology and political expediency than by research knowledge."

The most comprehensive study to address the effectiveness of Title I in recent years was called *Prospects: The Congressionally Mandated Study of Educational Growth and Opportunity*. Preliminary results released in 1993 agreed with what earlier studies had suggested: that Title I did not significantly close the achievement gap. There were modest improvements in the

academic performance of Title I students, but it was not sufficient to overcome their initial deficits in relation to their higher-income peers. This has not been viewed as total failure of Title I, however, as evidence shows that the achievement gap would have become worse without the interventions provided by Title I. [36]

The Prospects study also found a wide variation in academic standards that was related to the level of poverty in the school. It has been argued that Title I and its emphasis on remedial instruction in pull-out settings has exacerbated the problem by expecting less of low-income children.[37] Arising from this dilemma has come a new emphasis on student outcomes, almost always measured in terms of standardized test scores, a method which presents it's own set of controversies. According to Jennings (2000), "[s]trict fiscal accountability and unclear educational accountability in Title I led to dissatisfaction with the program, which led to the adoption of the opposite approach - clearer educational accountability based on high academic standards and greater flexibility in the uses of federal aid."

This new flexibility and accountability can be seen in the increased use of schoolwide programs, which are expected to show improvement in student achievement for the school as a whole. As of 2001, 16,000 schools had implemented schoolwide programs.[38] In fact, schools with high levels of academic success despite high concentrations of poverty often share several characteristics, one of which is use of a schoolwide program.[39] The Special Strategies study (Springfield, Milsap, and Herman, 1997), which examined new programs developed using Title I funds, found that schoolwide programs tended to exhibit better results than schools focusing only on targeted populations.[40] This may have more to do with the quality of the program and its implementation than the fact that it is schoolwide. However, in schools where the population of

students is significantly homogeneous in terms of poor economic situation, schoolwide programs would seem to be the most useful approach.[41]

One of the ways the flexibility of a schoolwide program can be applied is by reducing the average classroom size as measured by student to teacher ratio. The Tennessee Classroom Size Study (Mosteller, 1995) showed that a 50 percent lower class size in the early grades was correlated with a significant improvement in achievement for all students, and an especially strong improvement for disadvantaged children.[42] (Small reductions in class size do not appear to be as effective.[43]) All school districts would like to reduce their student to teacher ratios, but are prevented mainly by the expense of hiring more teachers. As was mentioned earlier, some researchers believe that the amount of money already spent on other Title I programs such as Reading Recovery would be enough to finance reduction in class size.[44] It would also allow the highest poverty schools to improve the outcomes of more than just the bottom 20 percent of students, as in Reading Recovery. More research would be helpful in exploring the effectiveness of such an approach.

Along with this new flexibility has come an increased demand from the federal government for accountability. All states receiving federal funds for education are required to have established academic standards, to define what level of achievement signifies student mastery of material, and to test students to assess their achievement. However, this approach has allowed academic standards to vary from state to state, causing controversy over a lack of uniformity.[45]

In response to frustration with results from Title I, another approach has recently emerged: Comprehensive School Reform. These are schoolwide programs that provide a framework for reform in every part of a school's operation. Robert Slavin, whose own reform

program Success For All is one of the most widely used, emphatically states: "It is time to change Title I radically. As much as Title I is a popular program, it cannot continue to survive year after year without producing better outcomes for children." [46]

Slavin proposes rigorous third party testing of innovative programs, including the use of experimental-control comparisons, to determine their effectiveness. This would result in a list of proven programs from which interested schools could choose, saving them from having to design their own reforms. Slavin estimates that 3-6% of the current Title I budget would be needed to carry out such a plan. This is a large amount of money; however, if our society truly values an effective educational system, the government will need to invest in educational research and development as it would in medicine or other scientific fields.[47]

If Comprehensive School Reform is widely adopted in the future, there are several criteria that must be met for real success. The available reform programs must continue to improve their ability to serve larger and larger numbers of schools without compromising program effectiveness. Secondly, reform programs should be voluntarily adopted with the overwhelming support of the local teachers and administrators. Without this support, a proven program may not work effectively due to less than enthusiastic implementation. Lastly, funding of startup grants for schools adopting comprehensive reform is crucial to cover the large upfront costs of training and materials. One grant program, the Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration, is already in place and awarding startup grants of about $150 million per year, which have been distributed to 1,800 schools so far.[48]

It would be easy to consider the data on Title I and come to pessimistic conclusions about its effectiveness. I believe that Title I, from its inception to today, has been a well-intentioned effort, staffed by dedicated, caring teachers and administrators who are working hard to make a

difference in the lives of disadvantaged children. That is not to say there is no room for improvement, however. I realize that I have only scratched the surface in understanding the intricacies of how such a huge program operates. Nevertheless, with my outsider's view and the guidance of the research literature, I will offer my opinions and conclusions based on what I have learned.

In the microcosm of the Monroe County Community School Corporation, one can see examples of how Title I is not living up to its full potential. One of the discoveries that most surprised me was that Title I in MCCSC effects only six schools and only three grade levels in each of those schools. With the focus on Reading Recovery as the main intervention, only about 20 percent of students in this subset of the student population receive the services that consume most of the available funding. Given the very high rates of poverty in several of these schools, this approach seems inadequate to provide meaningful assistance to those in need.

Also surprising to me was the fact that only one of four eligible schools has enacted a schoolwide program when it seems a logical choice for schools with very high rates of poverty. Continued reliance on Reading Recovery even within the context of a schoolwide program demonstrates the popularity and entrenchment of that program. While it has no shortage of proponents, the criticism of Reading Recovery's effectiveness, its cost, and the limited number of participants strike me as problematic.

In order to evaluate the influence of Title I funding on student outcomes, I must use the only data available to me, which are the scores from the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP) standardized test. I have performed no actual statistical analysis, but have examined eight years of raw data for each of the elementary schools in the corporation. The correlation between poverty and test scores is painfully evident (Fig. 1). The schools with

the highest poverty consistently have the lowest test scores, despite the additional funding and supplemental programs made available through Title I. Though there are yearly fluctuations, no clear trend of improvement emerges (Fig.2-14). In fact, one of only two schools showing continued improvement in test scores over the last four years is University Elementary, a school that does not receive Title I funding even though it qualifies for it (Fig. 14). It would not seem that Title I is having a large impact on student outcomes in Monroe County Community schools.

While the lack of impressive results nationally and locally is frustrating, Title I should not be regarded as a failure. As Jennings points out, "Title I marked a major shift in public policy: it changed both what society expected of schools and what the more disadvantaged in society expected for themselves. Those are, indeed, solid achievements."[49] Doubtless, many children have benefited from the extra academic support provided through Title I over the last 40 years. Those who made only small gains might have fallen farther behind without that assistance. I believe that any attempt to compensate for the effects of poverty on education is a noble one, and even small successes are important. However, if the goal is to make sure Title I funding is spent wisely in order to help the most children possible, there is still work to be done.

The source of current disillusionment with Title I may arise from the fact that we have expected to accomplish too much with too little. As Vinovskis states, "[o]ur initial expectations of [federal compensatory programs] were unrealistically high and our understanding of the nature and persistence of disadvantages among the poor was too simplistic and naïve."[50] For many years Title I has been a system of "uncoordinated, underfunded, untested, and largely ineffective…federal initiatives."[51]

Title I is not all it could be, but it is not without hope for significant improvement. Different ways of envisioning the challenges of Title I are leading to new methods such as

schoolwide programs and Comprehensive School Reform. With continued emphasis on scientific research and proof of effectiveness, Title I will continue to evolve and improve.

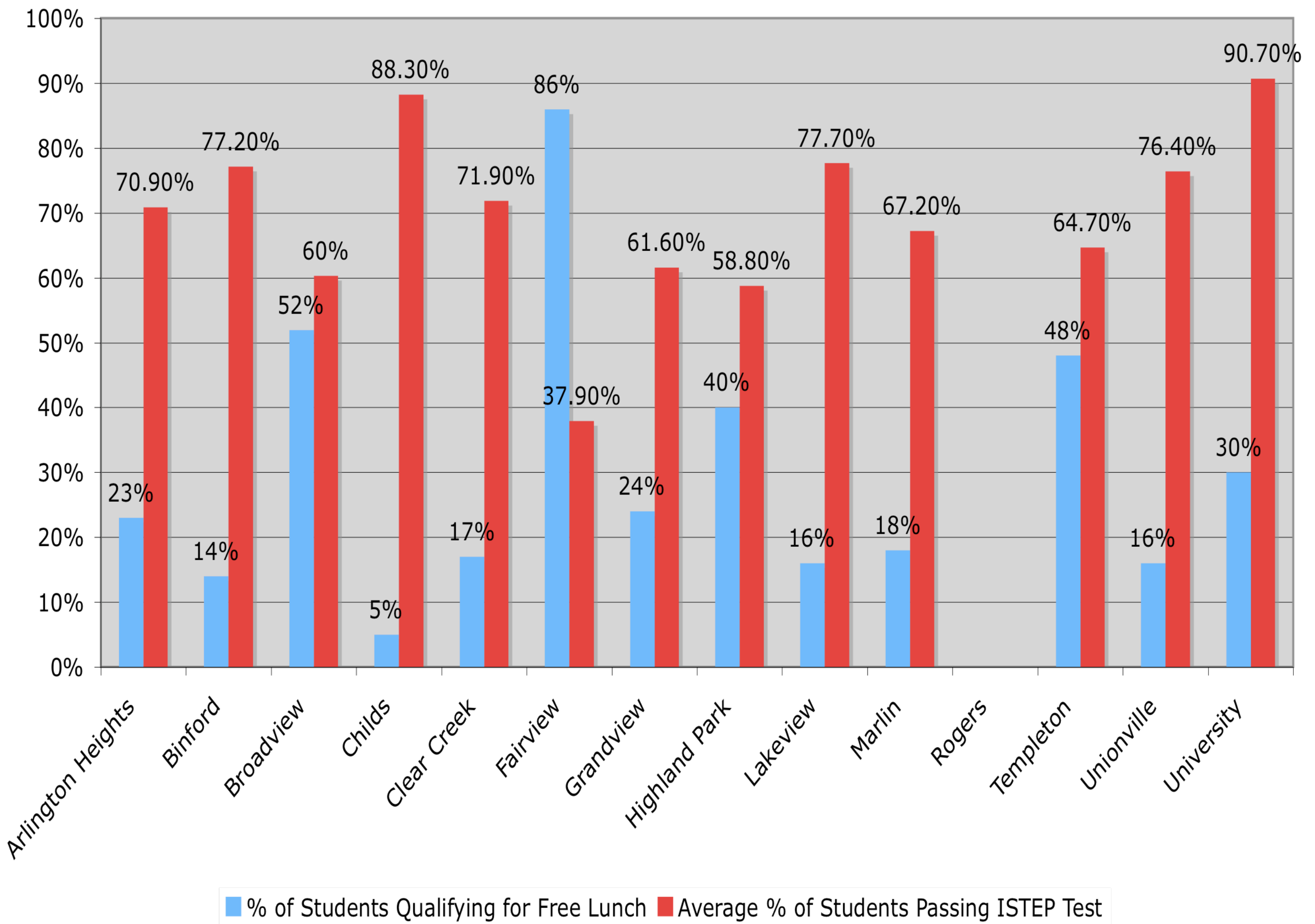


Fig. 1

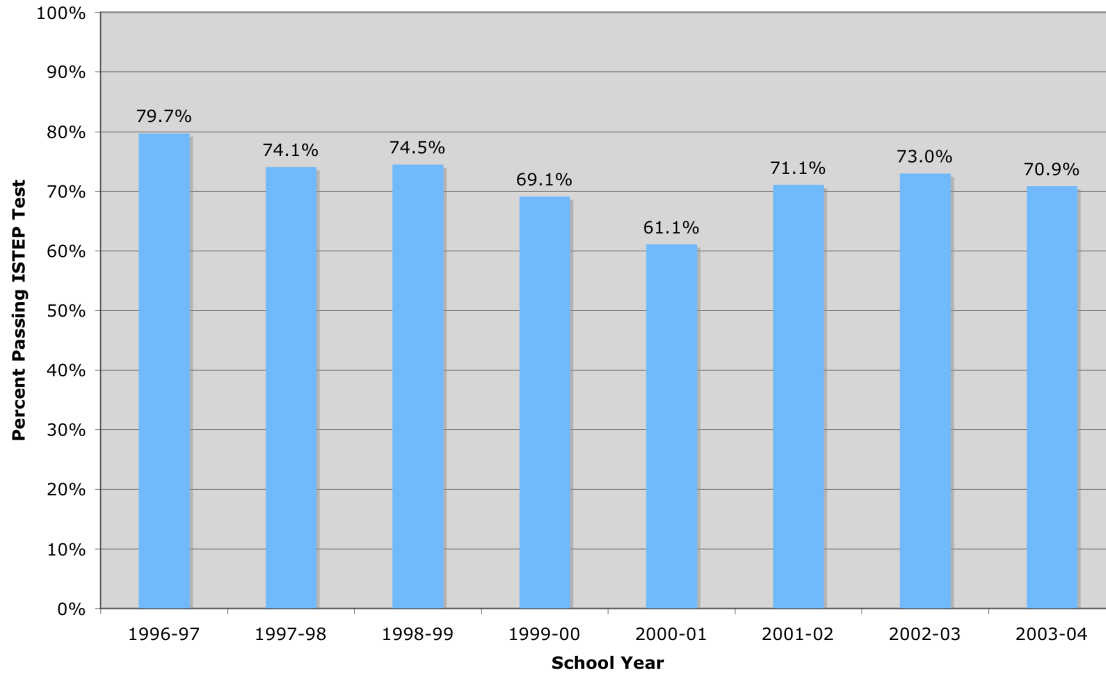
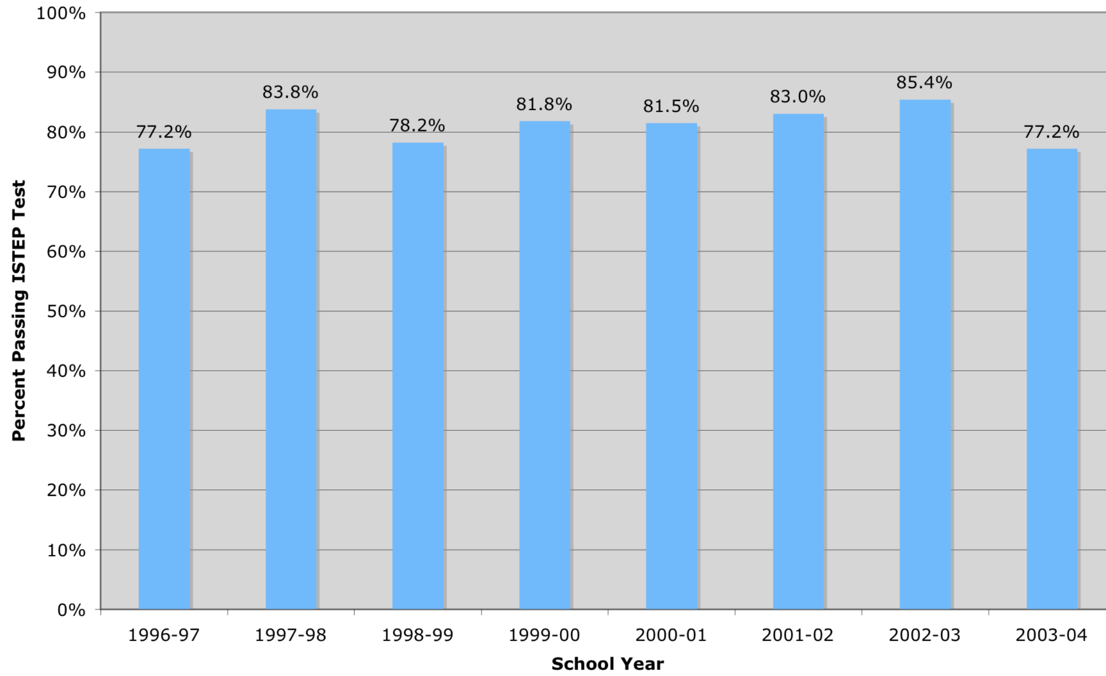


Fig. 2



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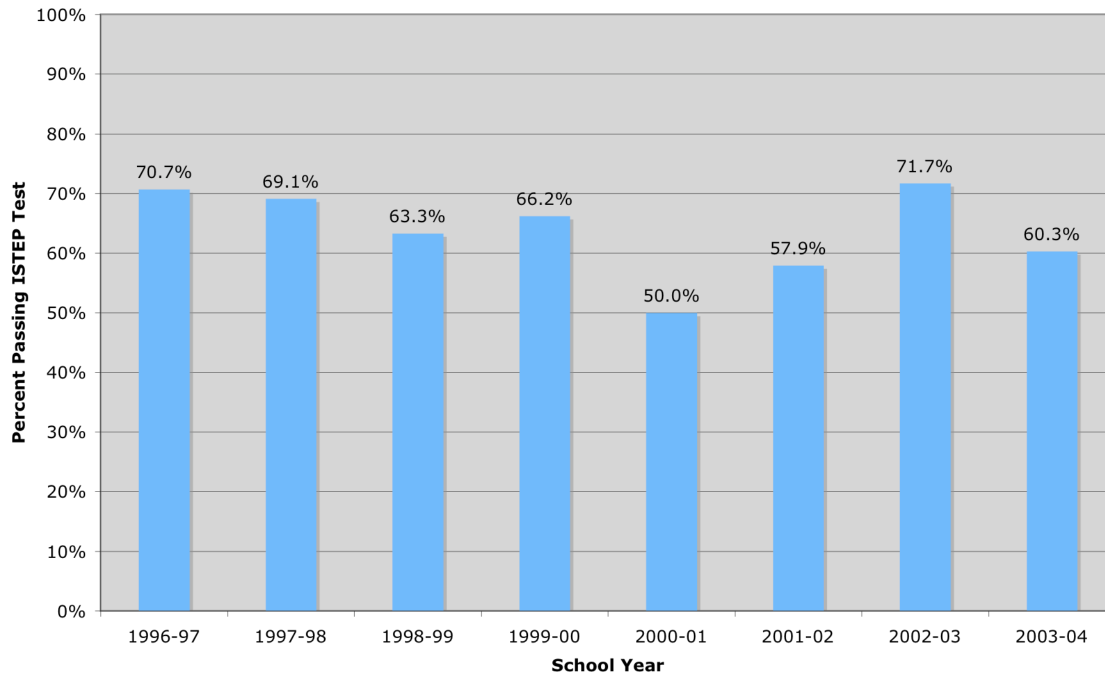


Fig. 4

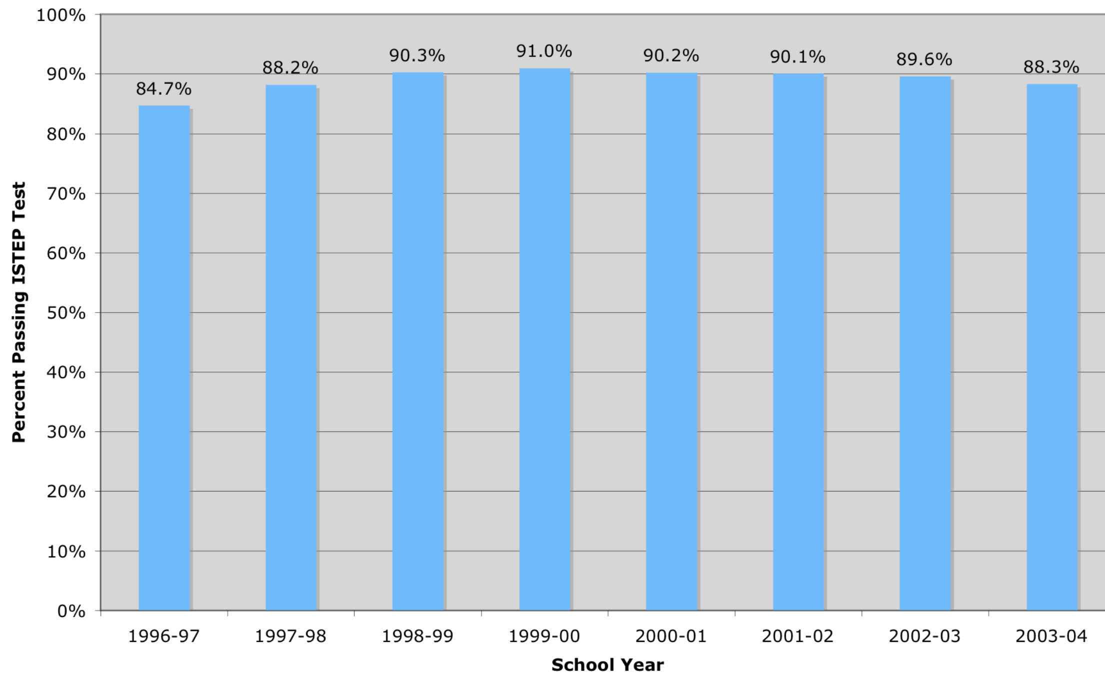
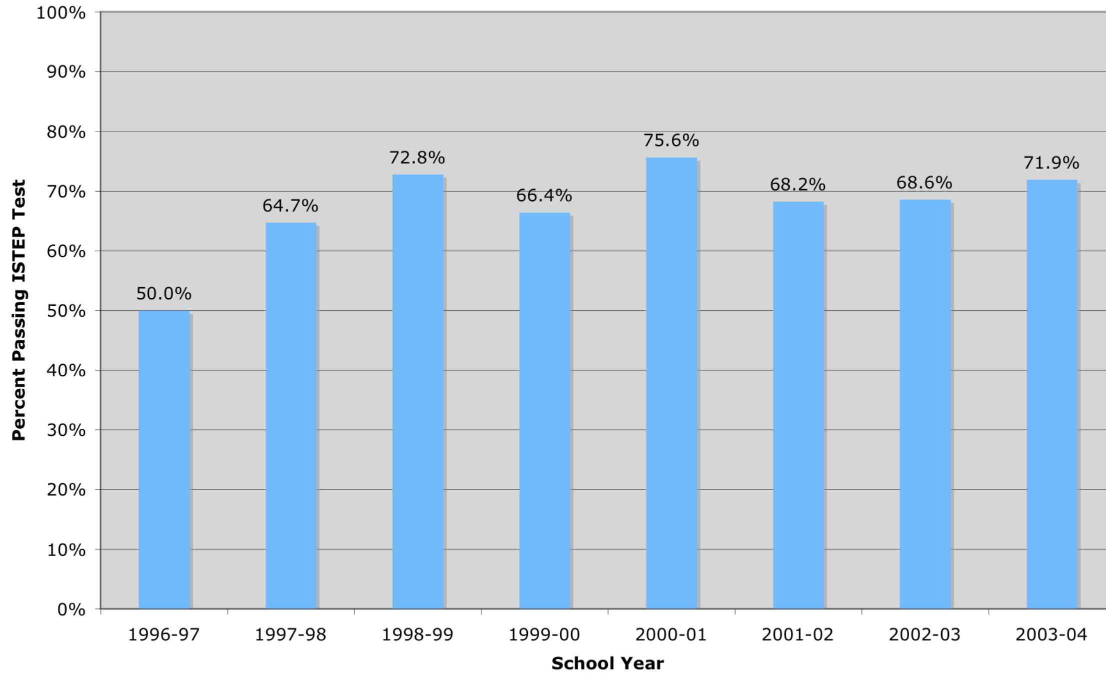


Fig. 5



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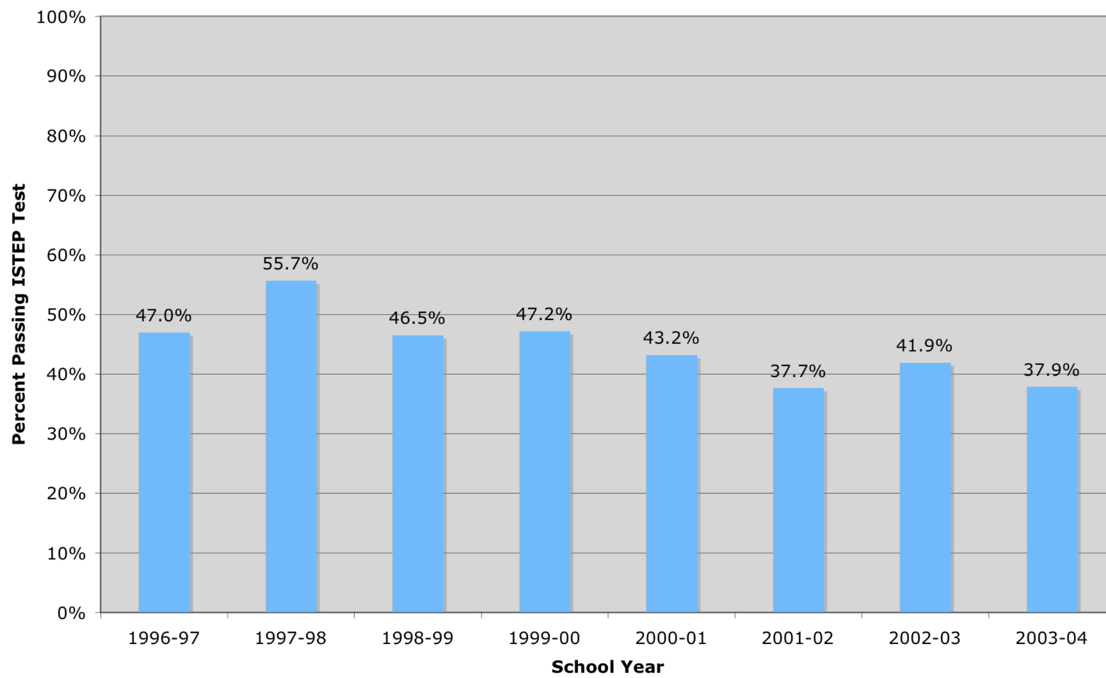

Fig. 7

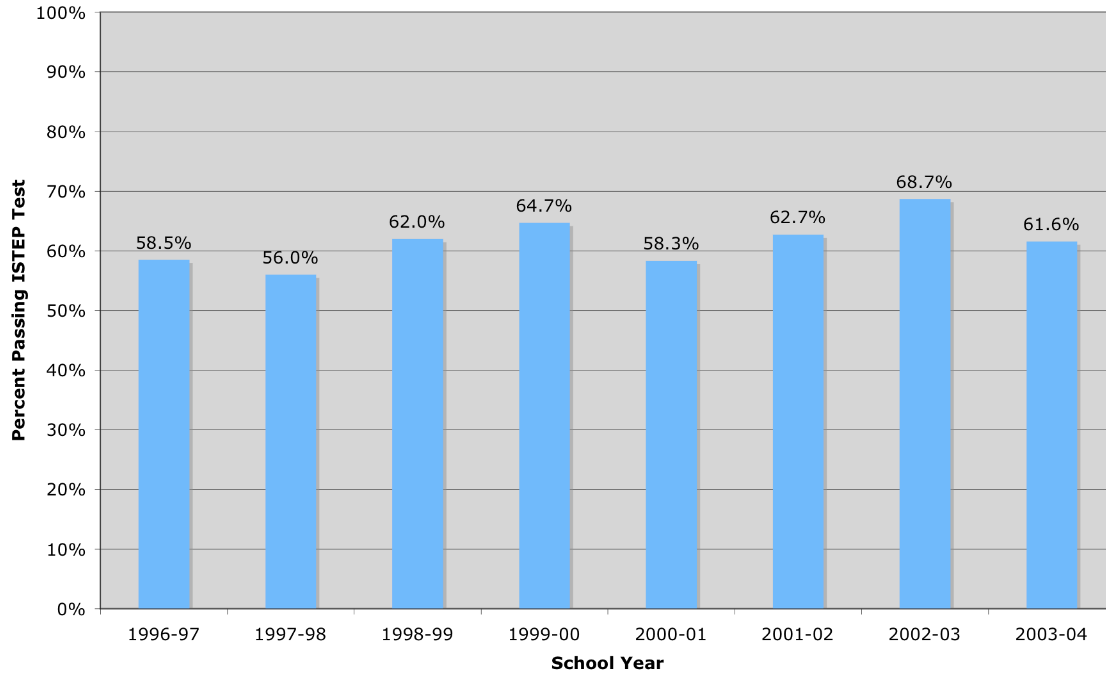

Fig. 8

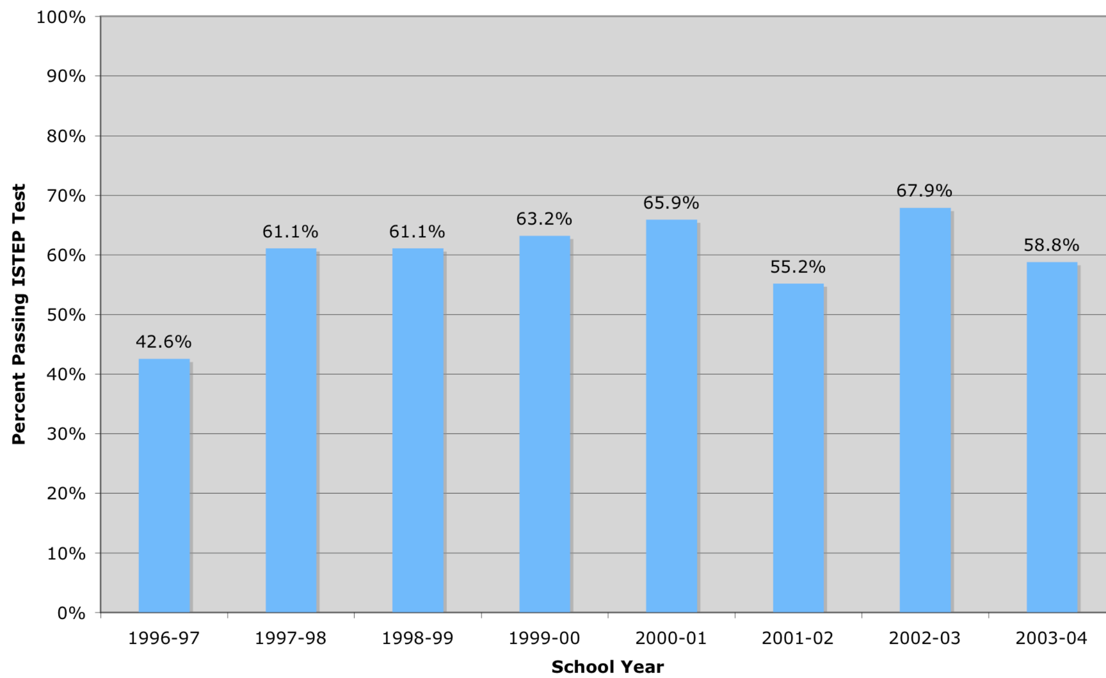

Fig. 9

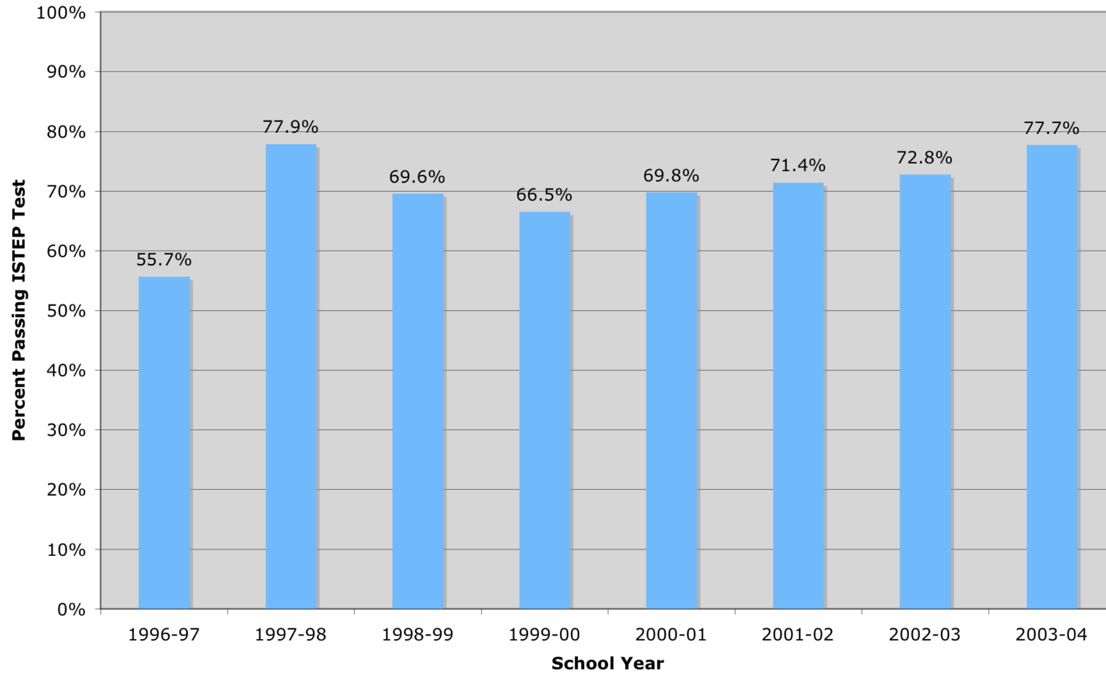

Fig. 10

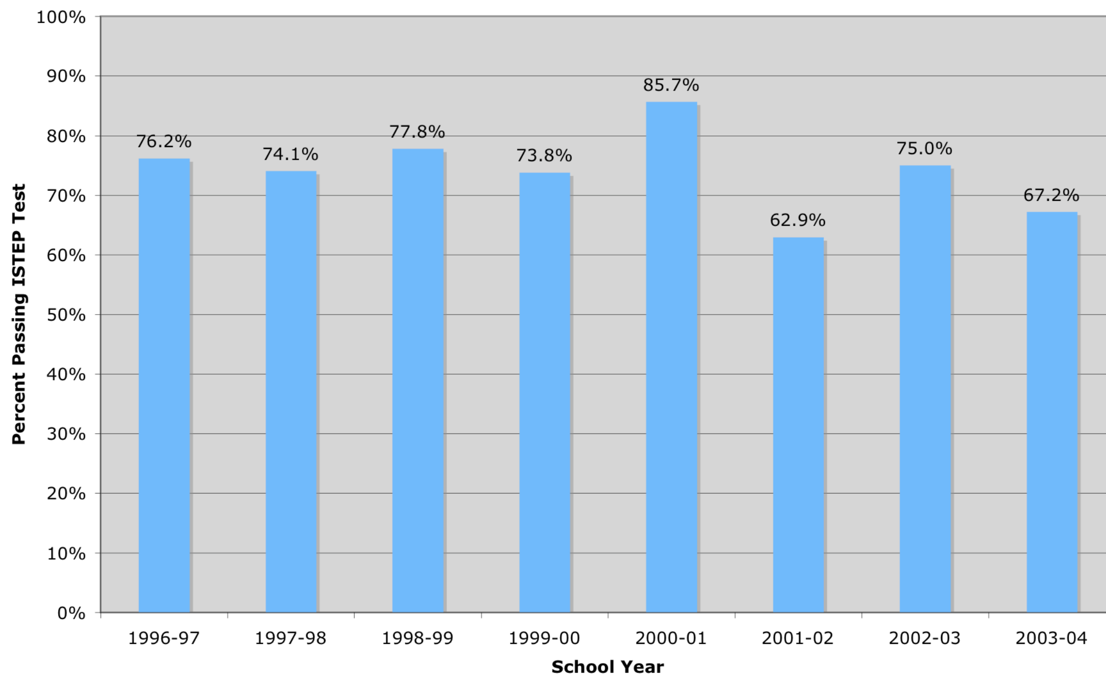

Fig. 11

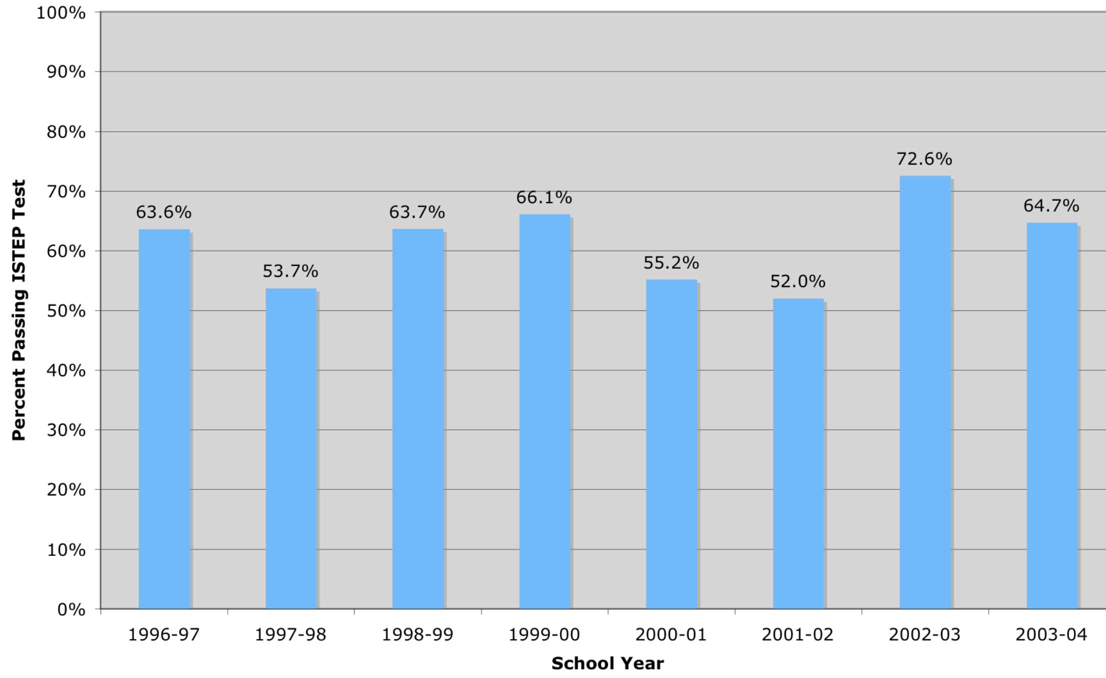

Fig. 12

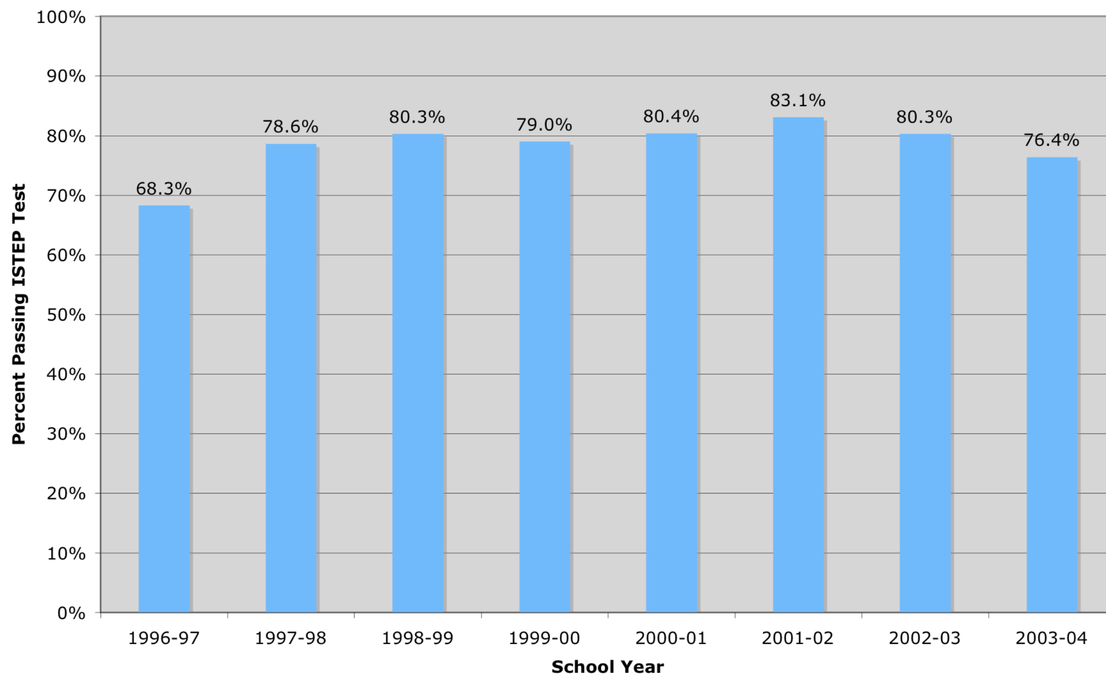

Fig. 13

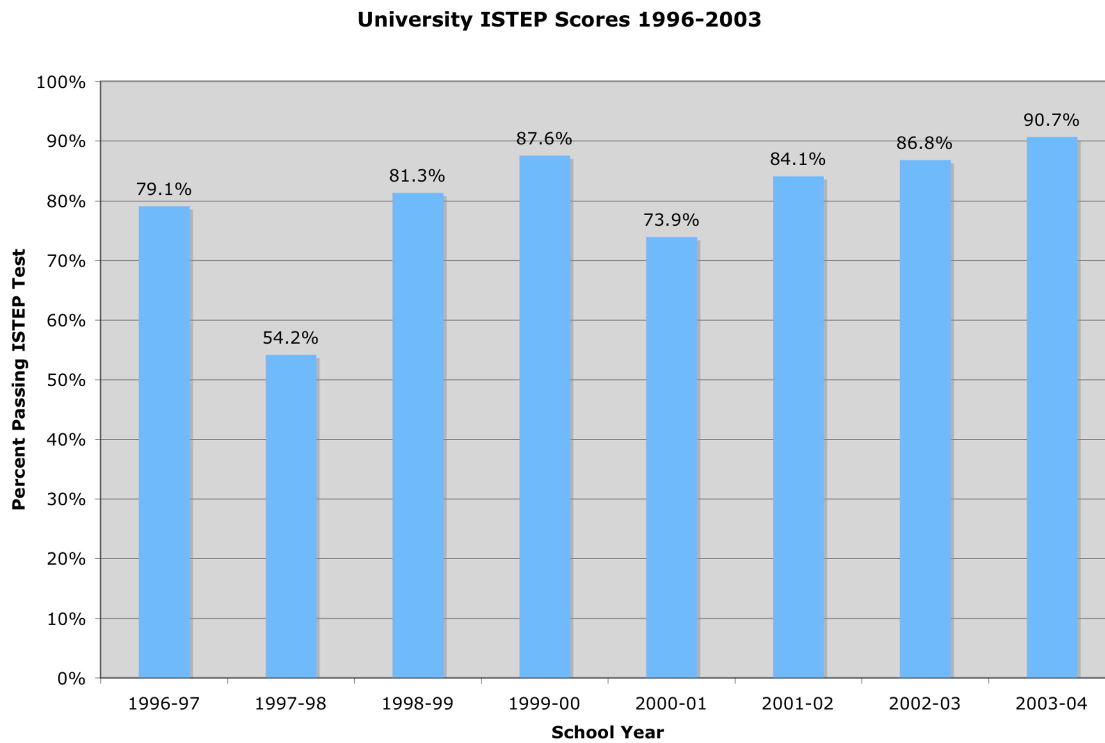

Fig. 14

There is no ISTEP data available for Rogers Elementary. [52]

Notes

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8. Jennings, "Title I: Its Legislative History and Promise."

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