



Students**First**NY

THE HIDDEN TRUTH:
**MASSIVE GRADE
INFLATION CONCEALS
UNDERPERFORMANCE
IN NYC SCHOOLS**

NOVEMBER 2015

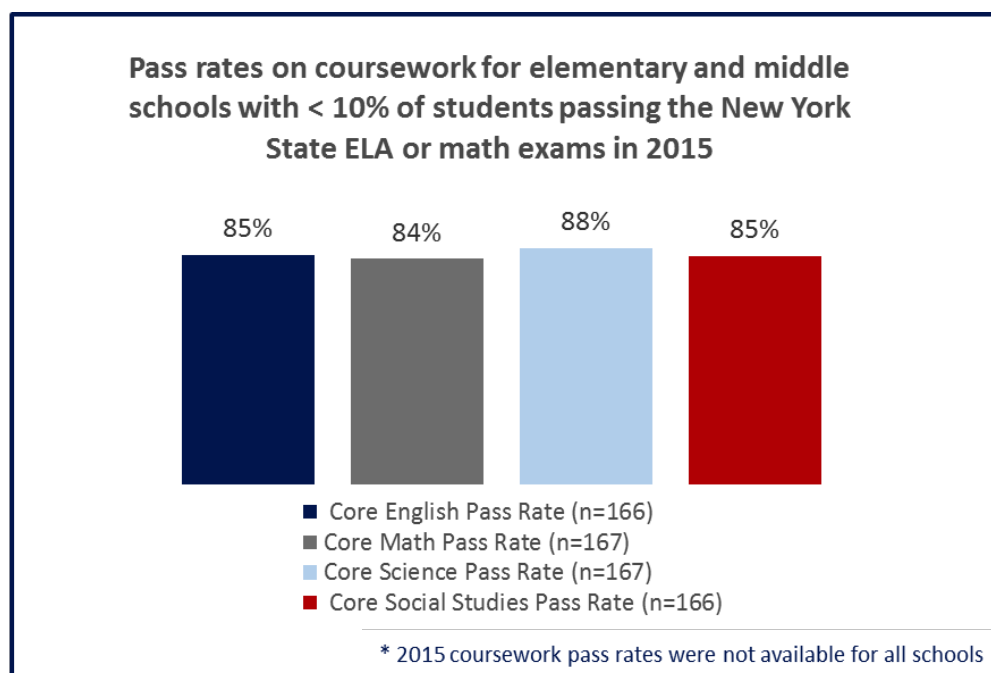
SUMMARY

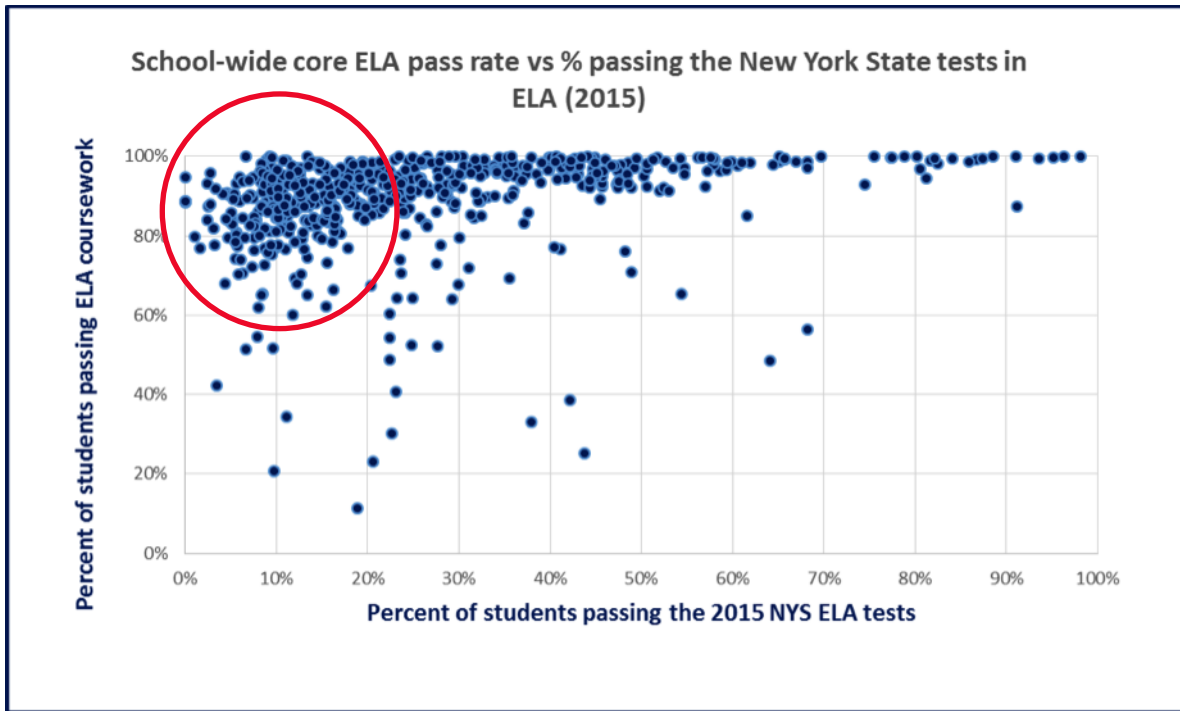
To hear Mayor Bill de Blasio tell it, New York City's failing schools are few and far between, and improving quickly. Better yet, New York City's students are passing their math, science, social studies, and English courses with flying colors. In reality, hundreds of schools – and the majority of students – are failing state tests, a truth that is masked by rampant grade inflation within NYC Schools. This report reveals that schools across the city are misleading parents by giving students high marks on school coursework even though the students are performing below grade level. The vast majority of students are passing their classroom work while failing state tests. The findings of this analysis underscore why state test results play a critical check and balance function – it's only by reviewing both school coursework and state test results that parents have the full picture of how their children are performing. To address this across-the-board grade inflation, StudentsFirstNY is calling for an independent audit of school coursework in NYC public schools to ensure that it is on grade level.

ANALYSIS

The School Quality Reports reveal grossly exaggerated pass rates on student coursework, giving parents a misleading picture of how their children are doing. Mayor de Blasio's School Quality Reports would have you believe that roughly 85 percent of students in failing elementary and middle schools pass their coursework even though they are failing state exams. That 85 percent of students in schools with a 90+ percent failure rate on the New York State ELA exams manage to pass their ELA coursework belies logic. Either these schools are giving students below grade level work or they are accepting work product that does not meet grade level standards.

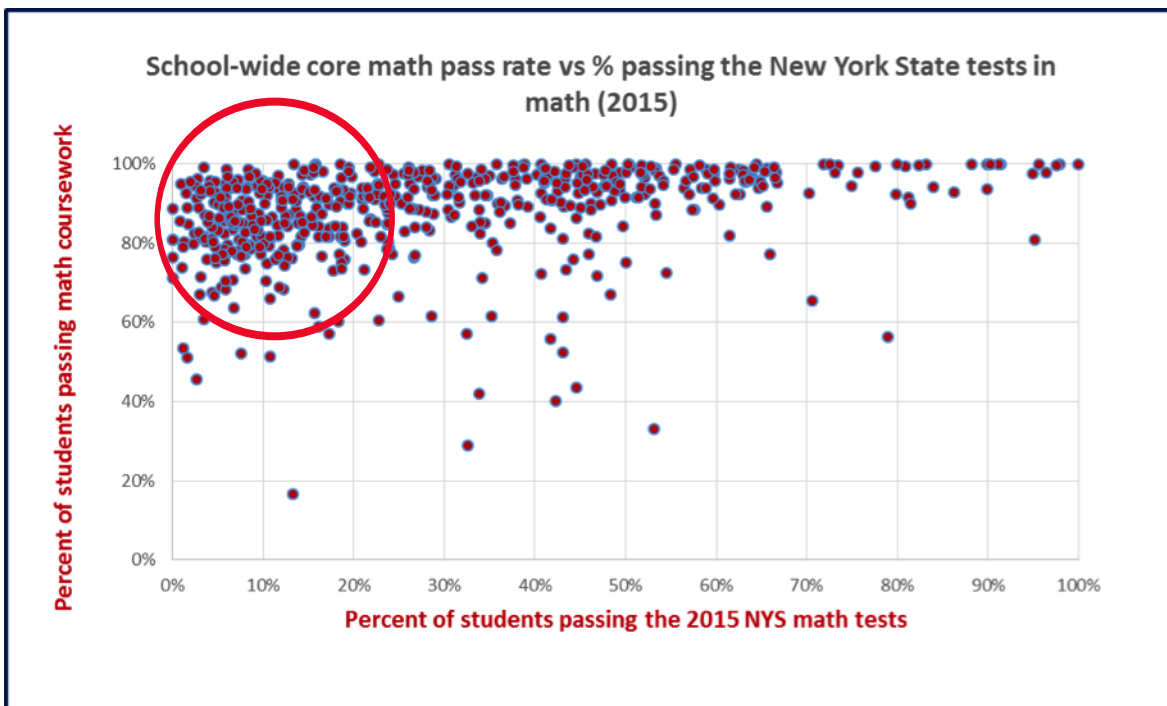
It is not just parents at failing schools who are being misled to believe that their children are on track: at the majority of schools in New York City, ELA and math coursework pass rates are above 80 percent, regardless of how well or poorly they performed on the New York State tests. Across the entire NYC public school system, parents are looking at quizzes, homework assignments, and in-classroom work that is either below grade level or being judged at very low standards. No wonder parents are upset when state test results reveal that their children are below grade level -- parents should have gotten earlier indicators from their child's school. By inflating grades, NYC public schools are painting a falsely rosy picture and denying parents the information they need to support their children.





* Based on the 572 Elementary and Middle schools for which both 2015 ELA coursework and 2015 ELA State test pass rates are available.

Take Note: Schools where the vast majority of students pass coursework but fail state tests.



* Based on the 576 Elementary and Middle schools for which both 2015 math coursework and 2015 math State test pass rates are available.

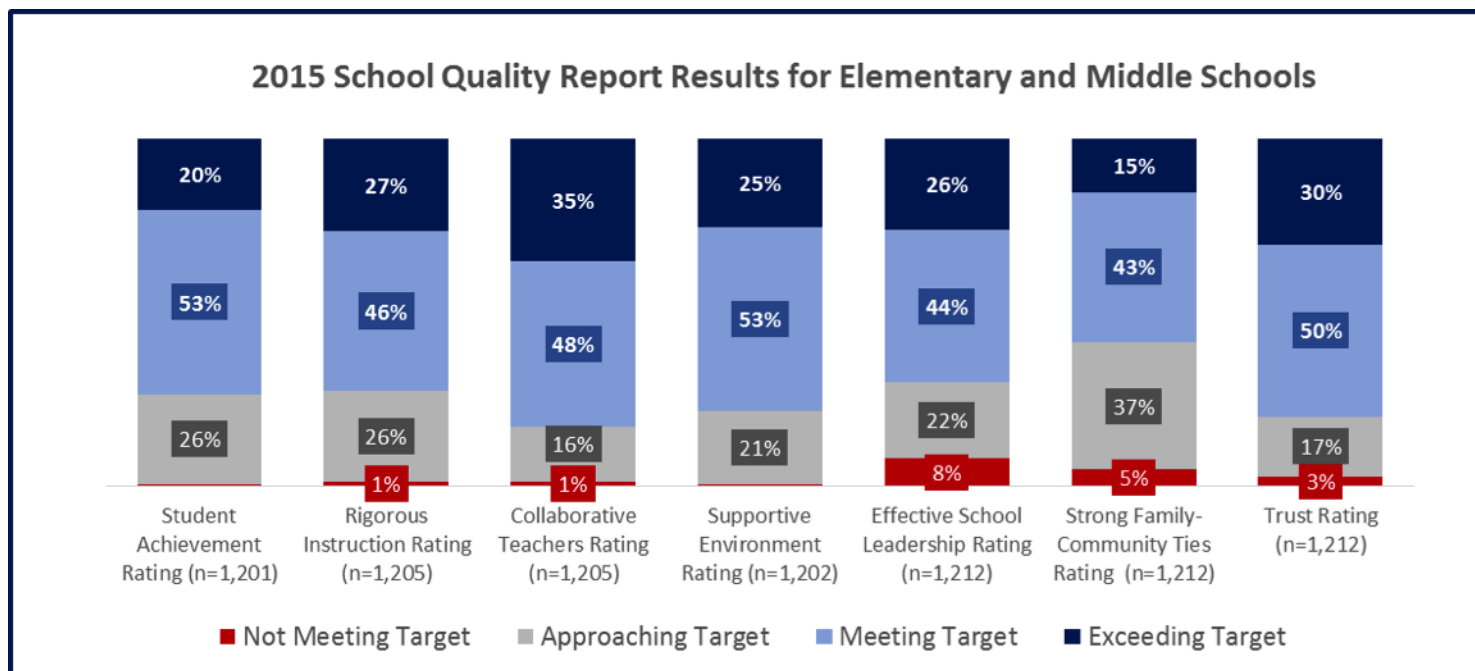
It's not hard to understand why Mayor de Blasio would choose to obscure what's really happening in New York City's schools. Owning up to the extent of school failures citywide would obligate City Hall to address the issue in a meaningful way – something the de Blasio administration has shown no inclination to do. Improving school quality and genuinely elevating the quality of education in New York City is hard, and requires the courage to enact policies and practices that the United Federation of Teachers does not support. Things like making sure that students have access to the best schools possible – including charters – and are taught by the best teachers available are unpopular with special interest groups.

Unfortunately, until the Mayor finds the courage to address school quality head on, we can expect the pattern of style over substance to continue.

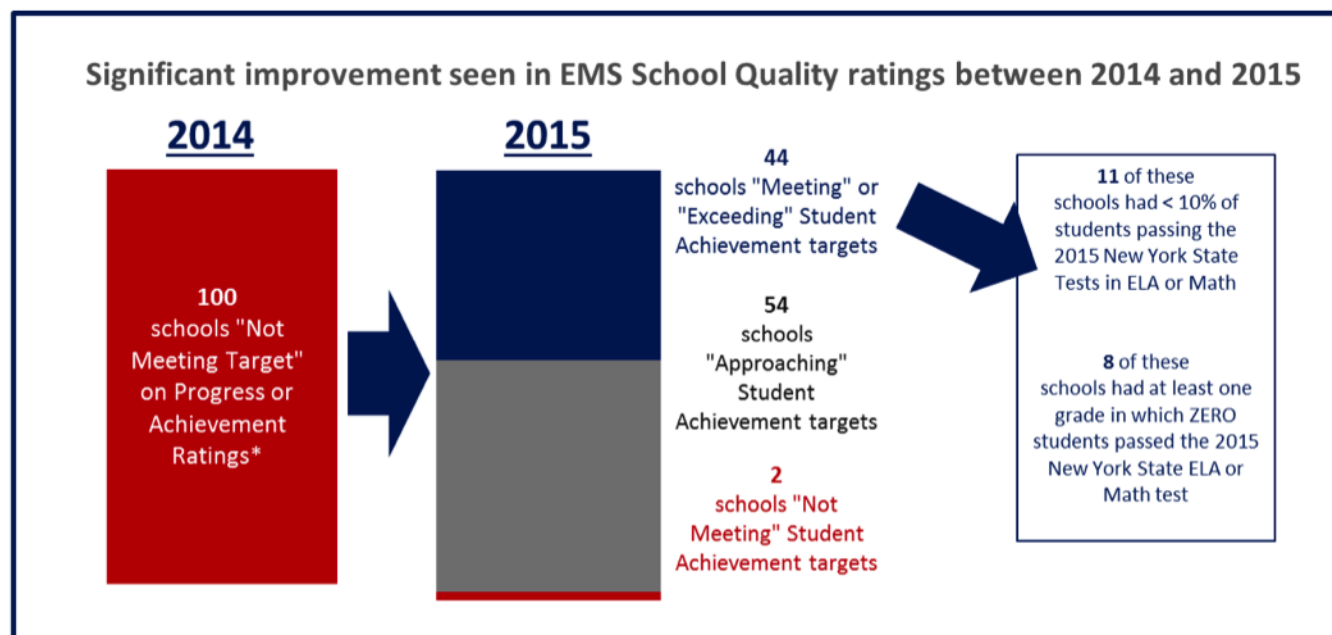
StudentsFirstNY is calling for an independent audit of school coursework in NYC public schools to combat rampant grade inflation and to ensure parents have an accurate picture of how students are performing.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

The DOE's 2015 School Quality Reports, the department's main school accountability tool, were released earlier this month and they paint an overly optimistic picture. The reports, which were redesigned this year to align with Chancellor Carmen Fariña's "Framework for Great Schools," tell us that the vast majority of elementary and middle schools in New York City are "meeting" or even "exceeding" the performance targets set for them in 2014.



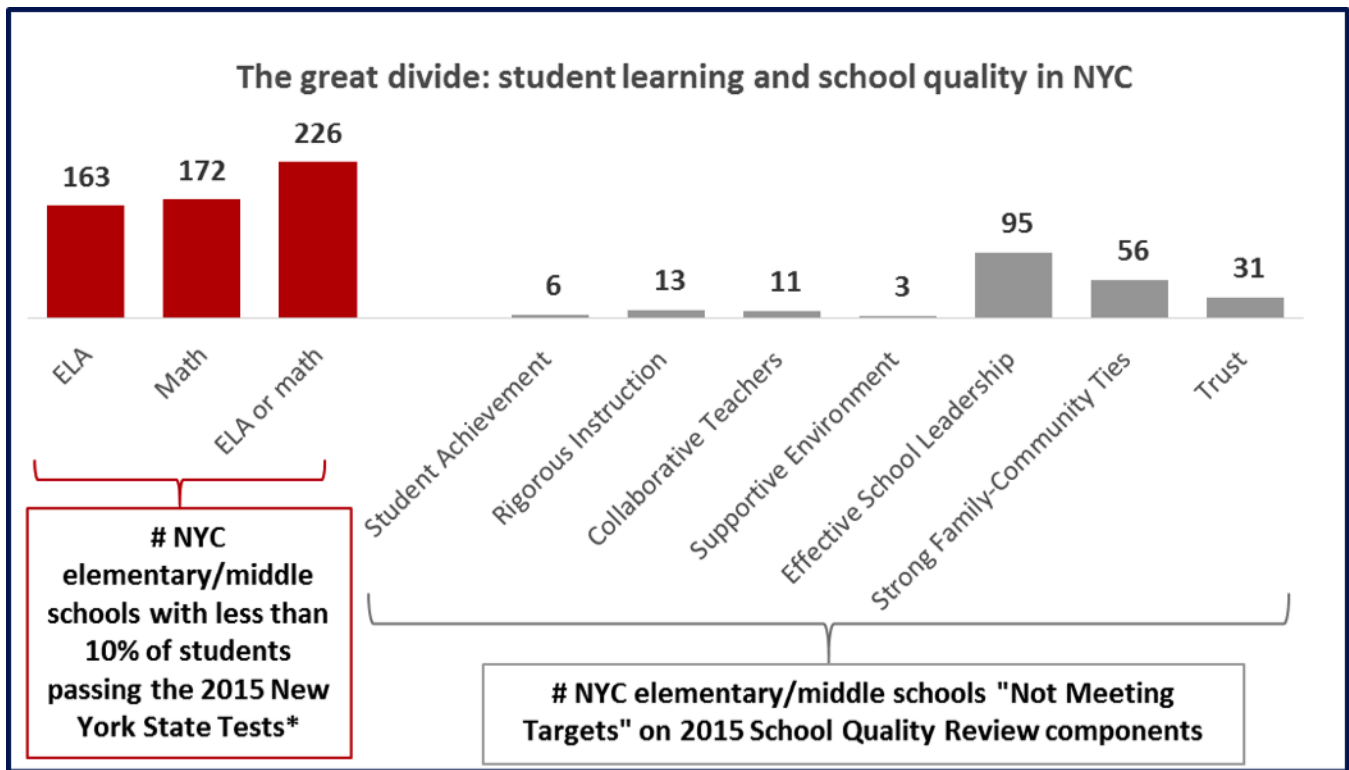
Even worse, many schools that were failing in 2014 have now been labeled “much-improved.” Of the 100 elementary and middle schools “not meeting targets” on Student Progress or Student Achievement on the 2014 School Quality Reports, only two are still failing to meet Student Achievement targets in 2015. Fifty-four of these schools have made moderate progress toward reaching their goals, and a whopping 44 are now “meeting” or “exceeding” their Student Achievement targets.



* 134 elementary and middle schools did not meet targets on Student Progress or Student Achievement in 2014, but only 100 have valid School Quality Reports for 2015

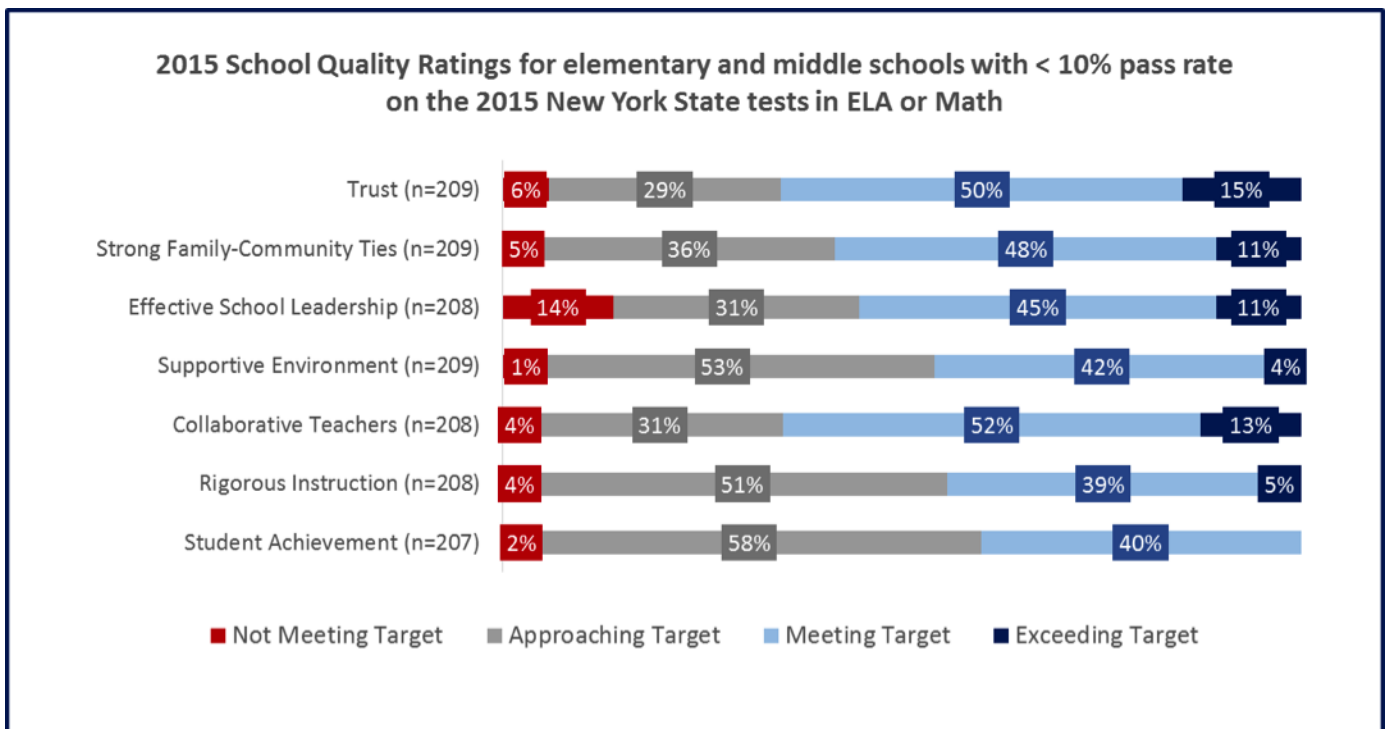
For 44 New York City schools to improve so dramatically – jumping two or more performance categories between 2014 and 2015 – would unequivocally be wonderful news, but the reality is that many of these improvements are nothing more than a distortion of the truth. Of the 44 “greatly-improved” schools, 11 had less than a 10 percent pass rate on the 2015 New York State tests in either ELA or math and 8 had at least one grade in which not a single student passed the ELA or math state tests.

The truth is that there are far more failing schools in New York City than Mayor de Blasio is willing to admit. A look at the 2015 New York State tests, which were administered to 3-8 graders city-wide this past spring, shows that there are hundreds of schools in which less than 10 percent of students are proficient in math or ELA. That’s hundreds of schools where more than nine out of ten students are reading, writing, and doing math below grade level. Given this reality, it is shocking that so few elementary and middle schools received failing marks on their School Quality Reports.



* Schools without valid 2015 School Quality Reports were excluded from this count.

In fact, most of these failing schools received glowing School Quality Reports. Of the approximately 200 elementary and middle schools with less than 10 percent of students passing last year's state tests in ELA or math, the vast majority received ratings of "meeting" or even "exceeding" school targets for that same year. Very few schools were rated as "not meeting targets," a disparity that can best be explained by rampant grade inflation at the school level across the city.



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