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Jersey City district earns award for improvement

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Give Jersey City public schools an A-plus when it comes to closing the achievement gap.

The Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation has named Jersey City Public Schools one of the top five school districts in the nation when it comes to improving student performance in an urban setting, a prize that comes with scholarship money for graduating seniors.

"Jersey City has made fantastic progress in narrowing achievement gaps for low-income students and especially minority students, especially when compared to urban districts across the country," said Erica Lepping, spokeswoman for the 7-year-old foundation.

"We looked at four years worth of data," Lepping added. "We're not just looking at how they did last year, but how they are doing compared to themselves. We're looking at trends."

Jersey City schools superintendent, Charles T. Epps Jr., in his sixth year, said the award validates the hard work of the district's teachers, administrators and students.

"I'm absolutely thrilled," Epps said. "It's gratifying such a prestigious foundation knows we are doing the job closing the achievement gap and we're doing it better than any other district in the state of New Jersey."

Educators working for the foundation examined 100 districts in the country, Lepping said. Factors that led to Jersey City's selection included:

[solid box] For the past two years, the district has narrowed achievement gaps in elementary and middle school reading and math between low-income students and their higher-income peers and between African-American and Hispanic students and their white counterparts.

[solid box] Compared to other districts in New Jersey that serve students with high poverty levels, Jersey City performed higher than expected in reading and math in elementary, middle and high school.

[solid box] Low-income and Hispanic students in Jersey City outperformed their peers across the state in elementary and middle school reading in 2005.

As a finalist for the "Broad Prize" of \$500,000 in scholarship money, Jersey City will receive at least \$125,000 for seniors graduating next year who have shown the greatest academic improvement during their four years in high school.

The other finalists for the Broad Prize, to be announced in New York City in September, are Boston Public Schools, Bridgeport Public Schools, Conn., Miami-Dade County Public Schools and New York City Department of Education.

Eli Broad, founder of two Fortune 500 companies - KB Homes, an international real estate company, and SunAmerica, now part of AIG Insurance Co. - started the foundation in 1999 and has given out the Broad Prize since 2001.