

FOREWORD

Public education has historically provided a pathway out of poverty for our most vulnerable youth. However, that pathway has been eroded.

City leaders know this better than anyone. In April 2015, *Politico Magazine* reported results from a survey of 20 mayors across the country about the challenges facing their cities. The mayors listed public education second only to “deteriorating infrastructure” as their biggest challenge.

The future of our country depends on our youth. Yet our public education system, designed more than 100 years ago, faces significant new challenges in preparing all students for success in career and civic society. Today, students of color and students from low-income families make up the majority of public school students in the U.S.¹ Urban leaders are struggling to provide hope and opportunity for these youth, many of whom live in cities and neighborhoods where the schools are ineffective, jobs are scarce, and poverty is widespread.

For years we have seen evidence of persistent achievement and opportunity gaps between racial and socio-economic student groups. Some have concluded that poverty and racial inequities are conditions that schools cannot overcome.

This report shows that conclusion is, at least, premature. It shows that while the inequities are profound, cities can create schools that serve all students well. It shows that educators can find ways to give more students access to challenging curriculum and a pathway to college and career. The question before us is how we can create those opportunities for all students.

Measuring Up: Educational Improvement and Opportunity in 50 Cities speaks to those who are concerned about the overall health of America’s urban schools. It provides the first comprehensive view of all schools in a city, whether district-run or charter.² We selected the cities based on their size and because they reflect the complexity of urban public education today, where a single school district is often not the only education game in town. We went beyond test scores, using a variety of publicly available state and federal data to measure school system health and educational opportunity for students from low-income households and students of color.

1. For example, see William J. Hussar & Tabitha M. Bailey, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2022*, 41st ed. (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2014); and Lesli A. Maxwell, “US School Enrollment Hits Majority-Minority Milestone,” *Education Week*, Aug. 19, 2014.

2. The National Assessment of Education Progress, Trial Urban Assessments (NAEP-TUDA) provides limited information on academic achievement based on standardized test results in core subjects. It is limited to 21 urban districts and does not include charter schools. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has published reports on charter school performance relative to traditional public schools. The Brookings Institution’s Education Choice and Competition Index scores large school districts based on choice-related policy and practice but does not assess citywide opportunity and improvement.

Citywide Indicators

How well are the city's schools doing overall?

- School-level gains in math and reading proficiency relative to state performance
- High school graduation rates
- Share of students enrolled in “beat the odds” schools
- Share of schools stuck in bottom 5 percent of the state based on proficiency rates that stay there for three years running

How well are they doing for students from low-income households and students of color?

- Enrollment in highest- and lowest-scoring elementary and middle schools
- Proficiency gaps for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL)
- Advanced math course-taking
- ACT/SAT test-taking
- Out-of-school suspensions

Looking across all the cities, we see four themes:

INEQUITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION, THOUGH WIDESPREAD, IS NOT INEVITABLE.

Results in many cities offer optimism that things can be better:

- In Washington D.C., FRL-eligible students enroll in top-scoring schools at higher rates than their more advantaged peers.
- In 20 of the 50 cities, black students take the ACT/SAT at the same or better rates than white students. In Santa Ana, California, a 6-percentage point ACT/SAT test-taking gap favors black students.³
- A handful of cities appear to be successful at either fixing or closing their lowest-performing schools: In New Orleans and Memphis, none of the schools that performed in the bottom 5 percent in the first year of our data (for reading and math) stayed at that level for three consecutive years.

BUT PERFORMANCE IN MOST CITIES IS STILL FLAT.

In the three most recent years of available data:

- Less than a third of the cities we studied made proficiency gains relative to their state's performance (only 12 made overall gains in math proficiency and only 14 made gains in reading).

3. Improving access to the ACT/SAT is important, but a recent report from ACT and the United Negro College Fund highlights the gaps between ACT results for black students and those of other students, showing that access to these tests is not enough to improve college readiness rates among black students. See *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2014: African American Students*.

- Eight cities are actually falling behind their earlier performance in math, in reading, or in both subjects relative to their state's performance.
- One in four students do not graduate high school in four years.
- Large shares of schools (40 percent across all these cities) that were in the bottom 5 percent of all schools statewide in year one stayed stuck there for three years running.

POOR AND MINORITY STUDENTS STILL FACE STAGGERING ACADEMIC INEQUITIES.

- FRL-eligible students score lower than other students in nearly every city. The gaps are especially large in some cities (Denver, Cleveland, and Raleigh) but smaller in others (Santa Ana, Detroit, and Los Angeles).
- With few exceptions, FRL-eligible students and students of color are less likely than white students in the same cities to enroll in high-scoring elementary and middle schools, take advanced math courses, and take the ACT/SAT.
- In every city, some schools “beat” their demographic odds, but on average, only 8 percent of students in the cities we studied are enrolled in schools (district or charter) that got better results than schools with similar student demographics in the state.

THE PICTURE IS ESPECIALLY BLEAK FOR BLACK STUDENTS.

- In Newark—where a majority of students are black—only 6 percent of black students enrolled in a top-scoring elementary or middle school (in math) compared to 85 percent of white students.
- In every city we studied except for Baton Rouge, black students are much more likely to be suspended than white students.
- In Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, black students were at least four times more likely than white students to attend a school scoring in the cities' bottom 20 percent in math.

How to use this report:

We hope this report and the [online data](#) that go with it will serve as a catalyst for cities to take a comprehensive look at their schools, ask tough questions, and find other cities to turn to for inspiration. We did not measure outcomes against specific improvement strategies. However, city leaders looking for solutions can use our analysis to identify and learn more from cities that are ahead of the curve on certain indicators. City leaders might ask, for example,

- **How have New Orleans and other cities managed to improve or replace so many of their lowest-performing schools?**
- **What is happening in cities like Memphis and Chicago—where black students participate in advanced courses and the SAT at high rates?**
- **Why do some cities, like Newark and Cincinnati, have high numbers of schools that “beat the odds” by performing better than schools with similar demographics?**
- **What accounts for the favorable discipline outcomes in cities like Baton Rouge, the only city we studied where black students are not suspended at higher rates than white students? Or Los Angeles, where overall suspension rates are low and Hispanic students are less likely to be suspended than white students?**

The implications of this report should serve as a call to action. In order for America's cities to move forward and for all of our youth to have real opportunities to learn, urban public education needs to focus on more than just incremental improvement.

As a start, we should acknowledge and address the systemic reasons that academic segregation occurs so blatantly in our urban public schools. For years, research has documented within-district inequities in funding and access to quality teachers and other resources. CRPE and others have documented how state funding, district policies, union contracts, and neighborhood assignment provisions can reinforce educational inequity.⁴

Rather than be distracted by dogfights over Common Core, testing, choice, teacher evaluations, charter schools, and other policy debates, our city school system leaders need to aggressively hunt for and be open to new solutions, and respond quickly and meaningfully to shifting demographics and other challenges.

The varied results in this report suggest that no single model for providing or governing schools—district operation, chartering, or vouchers—has been a sure solution to address the needs of urban students. What we can say, however, is that given the enormity of the challenges represented in this study, no city should close off any possible source of good schools, or favor its existing schools over options that might create new opportunities for children. Emerging approaches to school governance and whole community change, starting with early childhood, should be tried more broadly and aggressively.⁵

In the meantime, there are things every city can do immediately to overcome the lack of opportunity facing too many low-income students and students of color. They can:

- **Find ways to improve or replace the bottom 5 to 10 percent of schools with better options and move students into more effective teaching and learning environments.** Cities like New Orleans have done this by having clear and tightly enforced accountability standards and by investing in effective new schools that can replace low-performing schools.
- **Insist that all students can and should have access to advanced placement and other college-prep coursework.** Many of the cities we studied, like Cleveland and Denver, are investing in innovative, technology-driven school models to make that access possible for all students.
- **Make a frontal attack on overly aggressive discipline policies.** Some cities, like Washington, D.C., have started publishing suspension and expulsion rates citywide and asking schools to voluntarily reduce their rates. Safe and orderly schools are necessary, but high-performing schools can find ways to maintain order without overly severe consequences for students.

4. For example, see Natasha Ushomirsky and David Williams, *Funding Gaps 2015: Too Many States Still Spend Less on Educating Students Who Need the Most* (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2015); Dan Goldhaber, Lesley Lavery, and Roddy Theobald, "Uneven Playing Field? Assessing the Teacher Quality Gap Between Advantaged and Disadvantaged Students," *Educational Researcher* 44 (no. 5): 293-307; Joshua M. Cowen and Katharine O. Strunk, "The Impact of Teachers' Unions on Educational Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Learn," *Economics of Education Review* (March 2015); Annette Lareau and Kimberly Goyette, ed., *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014); Marguerite Roza and Paul Hill, *How Within-District Spending Inequities Help Some Schools Fail* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2004).

5. See, for example, Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and James Harvey, *It Takes a City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and Betheny Gross, *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013); and Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim, *A Democratic Constitution for Public Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

At the same time, doing better will require long-term commitment to a search for more effective strategies. We urge cities to:

- **Double down on bold, evidence-based solutions.** Cities must be open to any promising school—district or charter—if it opens up new possibilities. City leaders must address their weaknesses head on and search widely for new solutions.
- **Recognize that the hard work ahead cannot be the work of schools alone.** Cities like Memphis and New Orleans that are radically redesigning their schools and school systems are seeing results, but even these efforts need continued, coordinated support from teacher preparation programs and social and health services. They also need city and state leaders to support them when they have to make hard decisions—new leadership, turnaround, etc.—about failing schools.

CRPE has, over the last 20 years, been developing new citywide governance frameworks and support systems.⁶ We will continue to develop and test new approaches and track these cities' progress in coming years.

America is at a profound moment of social struggle. More children grow up in poverty, more young people end up incarcerated, persistent racial bias holds back opportunity. School improvement cannot wait for us to solve poverty or racial injustice. We can create great school options now for young people that can help to mitigate these other social challenges.

We hope this report will be both a source of urgency and a source of hope. Results are discouraging. But what should make us both angry and hopeful is that there is evidence that things don't have to be this way.

We can and we must do better. We cannot improve our cities without improving our schools.

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6. See crpe.org for our research, proposals, and tools for city leaders.