

# THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

What Students Can Show Us  
About How School Is Letting  
Them Down—and How to Fix It

**#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH**

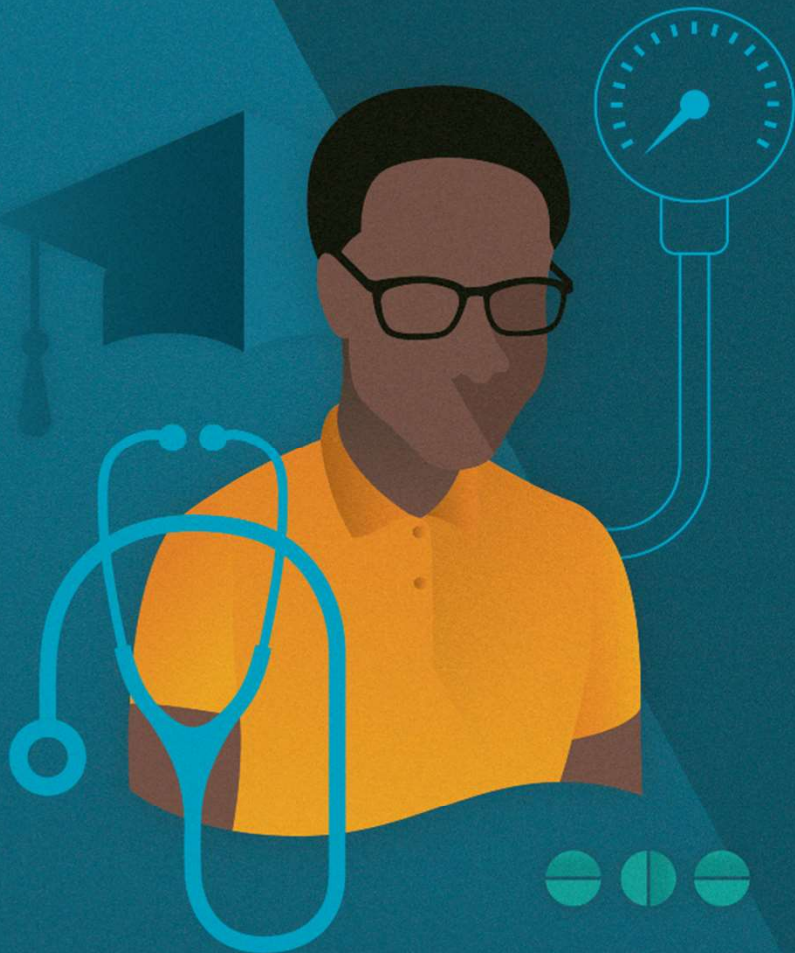
[opportunitymyth.tntp.org](http://opportunitymyth.tntp.org)

TNTP's latest report, *The Opportunity Myth*, examines the quality of students' academic experiences in school—and its effect on their long-term success.



At the heart of this report are real students, their aspirations and dreams, and how school sets them up—or doesn't—to reach those goals.

## Students like Isaac.



Isaac, 17, attends a small public high school in the western part of the country. He plans to attend college to study nursing and become an RN.

“I can’t give up on this dream that I’ve had since I was a little boy. I’m willing to take any chance in my life for this dream.”

–Isaac, 11th grade

Isaac did what school asked of him.  
Has school held up its end of the deal?

SOURCE: Student Interviews

For many students, the answer is no. Nationwide, nearly 70 percent of high school graduates go on to college—but far fewer are succeeding once they get there.



40%

of all college students take at least one remedial course



60%

of African-American and Hispanic college students take at least one remedial course

Graduates who opt for a career straight out of high school aren't faring much better. Many employers report that high school graduates enter their roles missing the skills they need to do their jobs well.

We wanted to understand why. To do that, we partnered with five school systems to look closely at what students are doing in school –and how to improve those experiences at scale.

Understand students' academic experiences



### RESEARCH

Survey students in real time throughout a school year; pair with schoolwork, observations and achievement data.

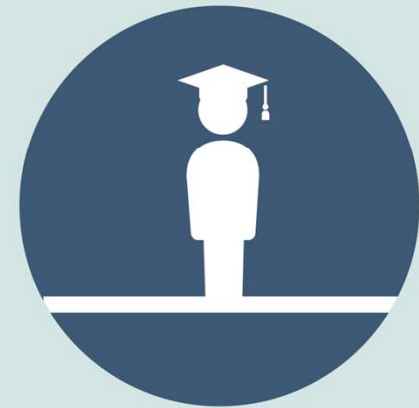
in schools nationwide



### SCOPE

Work with 4 diverse districts and 1 charter network; follow about 250 teachers and almost 4,000 students.

to advance student learning.

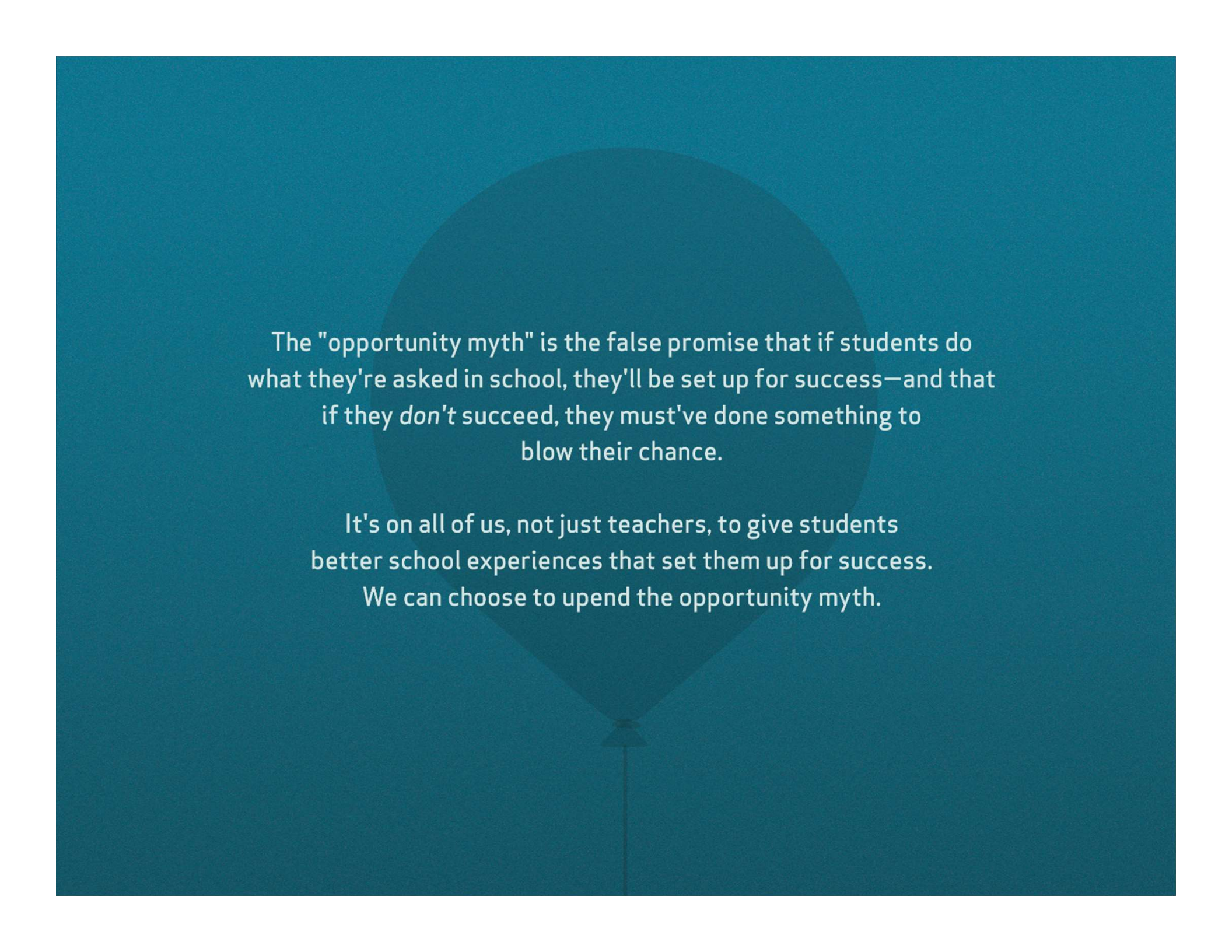


### RECOMMENDATIONS

Define concrete next steps for policies and practices in classrooms, schools and districts

## Here's what we found:

- 1 Students have big, clear plans for college and career.
- 2 Most students do what they're asked in school—but are still not ready to succeed *after* school.
- 3 Students spend most of their time in school without access to four key resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations.
- 4 Students of color, those from low-income families, English language learners, and students with mild to moderate disabilities have even less access to these resources than their peers.
- 5 Greater access to the four resources can and does improve student achievement—*particularly* for students who start the school year behind



The "opportunity myth" is the false promise that if students do what they're asked in school, they'll be set up for success—and that if they *don't* succeed, they must've done something to blow their chance.

It's on all of us, not just teachers, to give students better school experiences that set them up for success.  
We can choose to upend the opportunity myth.

How can state leaders lead the way toward making students' opportunities less myth and more reality?

## THROUGHOUT TODAY'S DISCUSSION, CONSIDER...

Do you know how often students in your state have access to the four key academic resources we discuss?

Are there any of the four resources that schools in your state need to provide your students more access to?

If there are, how can you improve that area of your state's practice?

What supports do your teachers, school leaders, and district leaders need to give students greater access to all four key resources?



The students we met and surveyed have ambitious goals for themselves  
—and they expect school to add up to something practical:  
readiness to meet those goals.



"I'm hoping to  
be a neurologist."  
—Hajima  
12th grade



"I want to go to  
police academy."  
—Raymond  
5th grade



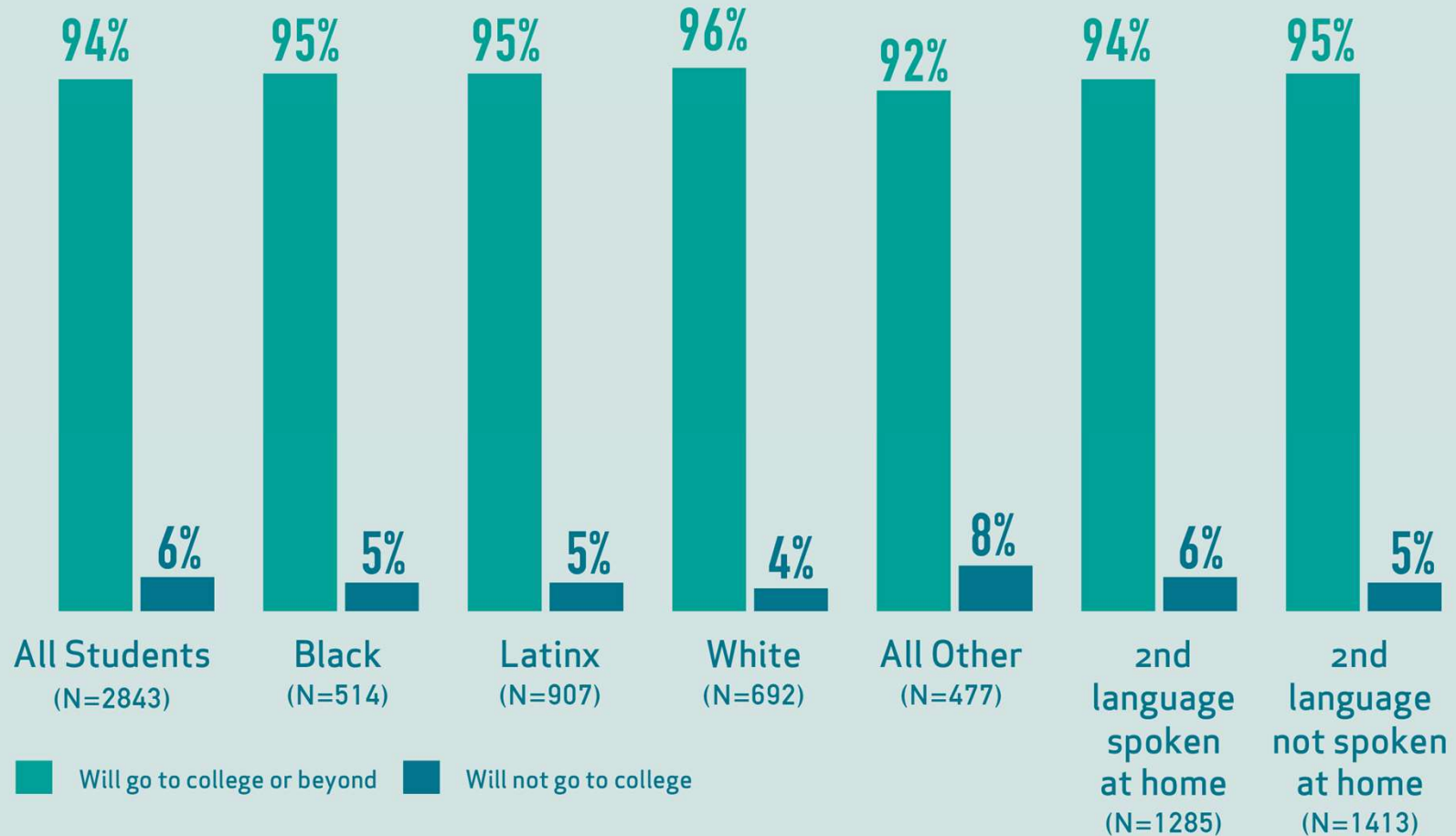
"I want to do  
something with kids."  
—Luz  
11th grade



"I want to be  
a trauma nurse."  
—Maggie  
10th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Almost all of them—regardless of who they are—  
intend to go to college or beyond.



Seventy percent of high schoolers aspire to careers that  
require at least a college degree.

SOURCE: Student background surveys

Students expect that school will set them up to meet their goals if they do what's asked of them—and they generally do just that.



**88%** of the time, students are working on activities related to class

**71%** of the time, students met the expectations of assignments they're given

**83%** earned As, Bs, and Cs in English language arts

**78%** earned As, Bs, and Cs in math

SOURCE: Student surveys (for time on task); Student work samples (for meeting assignment expectations); District extant data (for grades)

But even when they do what school asks,  
they're not set up for success to reach their long-term goals.

Students  
succeeded on

**71%**

---

of their  
assignments

They met grade-level  
standards on

**17%**

---

of those exact  
same assignments

Even though most students are meeting the demands of their assignments—and many are earning As and Bs—they're not prepared for college-level work.

SOURCE: Student work samples

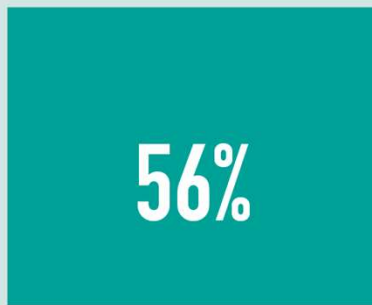
That's not because they're not capable.

When given the chance  
to try grade-level work,  
students meet the bar more  
than half the time.

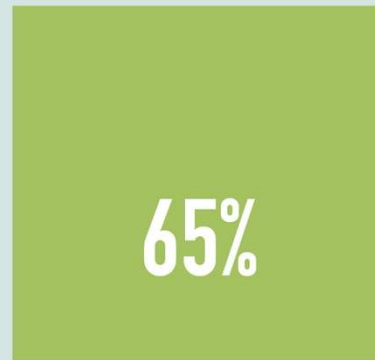
SOURCE: Student work samples

All students tended to succeed on grade-level work, but many students of color were denied any opportunity to even try it.

Success rates on grade-level work were similar...



Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly students of color



Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly white students

...but 4 out of 10 classrooms with a majority of students of color never received a single grade-level assignment.



Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly students of color



Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly white students

But most students get those chances far too infrequently.  
We found four key resources that influence a student's school  
experience and outcomes.

1 Consistent opportunities  
to work on  
**GRADE-APPROPRIATE  
ASSIGNMENTS**

2 **STRONG INSTRUCTION,**  
where students do  
most of the thinking  
in a lesson

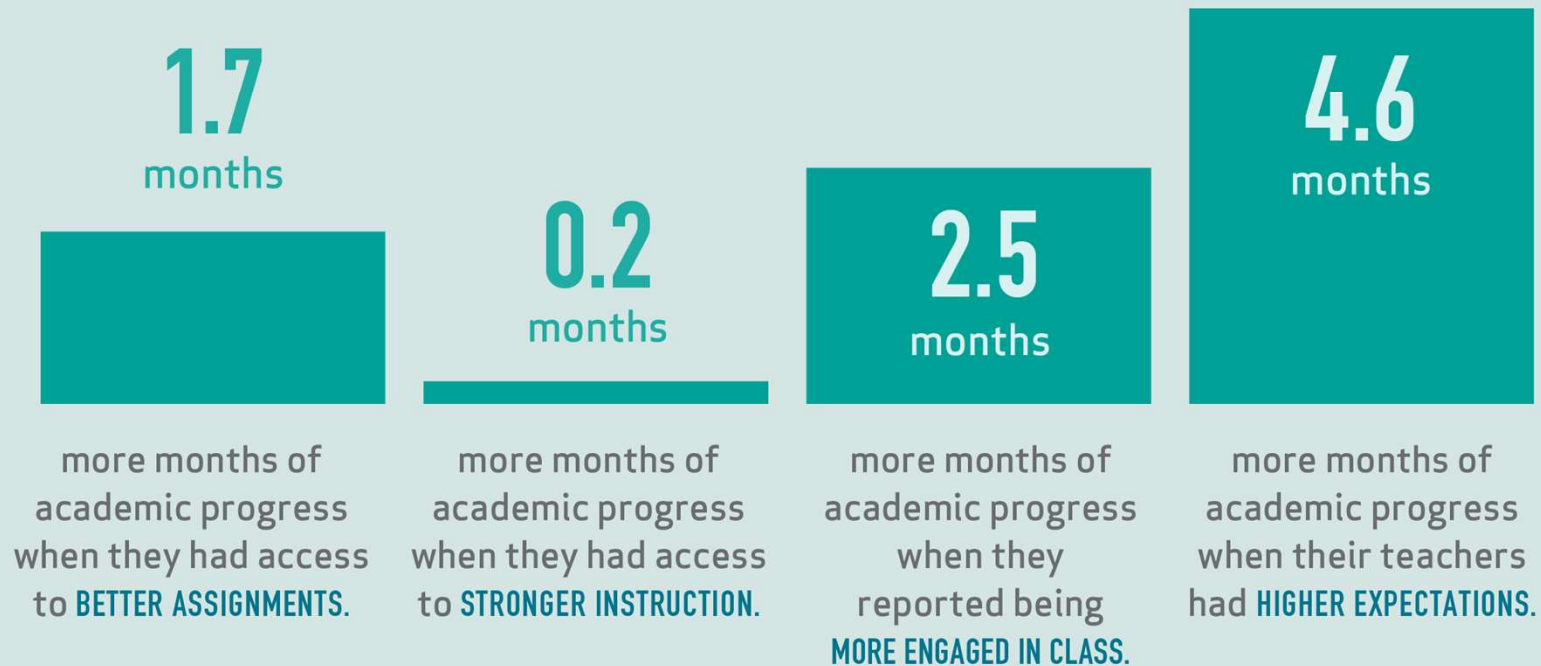
3 **DEEP ENGAGEMENT**  
in what they're  
learning

4 Teachers who hold  
**HIGH EXPECTATIONS**  
for students and  
believe they can  
meet grade-level  
standards

Unfortunately, these resources are few and far between for most students  
—and *particularly* for students of color, those from low-income families,  
English language learners, and students with mild to moderate disabilities.

These four resources make a difference.  
When students get greater access to them, their outcomes improve.

In our sample, all students made:



SOURCE: Value-added models



...That's especially true for students who started the year below grade-level.

In our sample, students who started the year performing substantially below average made:



SOURCE: Value-added models



In most classrooms, students spent far too much time on content that was not appropriate for their grade.

In a single school year, the average student spends about 530 hours of the approximately 720 hours in their core classes on assignments that are not grade appropriate.

That's worrying for students like Hajima.

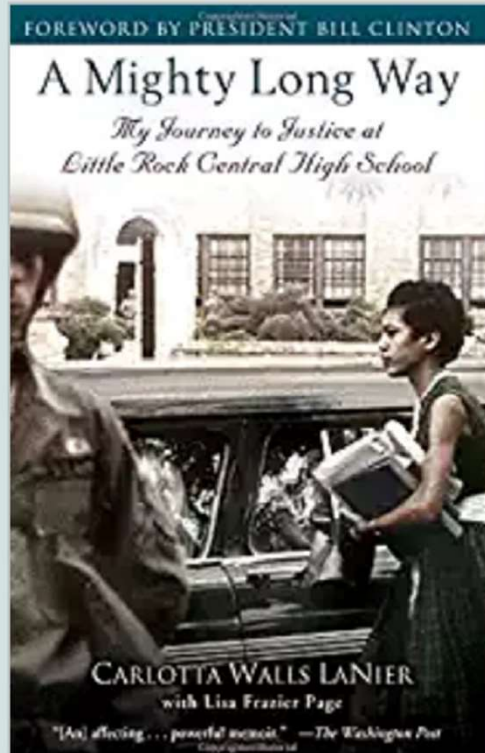


"I don't want to feel like  
I'm behind when I walk into a class  
on the first day of college.  
The teacher is not going to  
wait for me."

-Hajima, 12th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Assignment quality varied widely.  
Some students—like the eighth graders in this language arts class—  
did have the opportunity to grapple with high-quality assignments.



Education

GRADE 8: MODULE 3B: UNIT 2: LESSON 16

Informational Essay Planner

Name:

Date:

**Focusing Question:** In the events surrounding the Little Rock Nine and the struggle to integrate Central High, the press played a newly powerful role. In what ways did it serve to illuminate events for a national audience, and in what ways did it give an incomplete or even inaccurate picture of events?

Students read *A Mighty Long Way* and wrote an informational essay analyzing historical events, getting the chance to fully meet the depth of multiple standards and learn relevant content.

SOURCE: Assignments

But eighth graders in another language arts class—  
in the same district—did not have that same chance.

### The “Billion Oyster Project” Brings Life Back to NYC Waters

Gazing at Manhattan’s East River, you will see huge cargo ships, ferries, and barges. You’ll see a stream of cars and trains zooming over the city’s bridges. It’s hard to imagine that this river was once an unspoiled marine habitat. Years of industrial development have taken a toll. Much of the natural ecosystem here was lost or damaged. But today, with the help of the Billion Oyster Project and lots of New York City students, that’s starting to change.



OYSTER BOATS, NEW YORK.

Long ago, oysters thrived in the waters around NYC. Have you ever heard of Pearl Street in downtown Manhattan? That street was named for all the oysters that swarmed the nearby river. But as NYC became a shipping hub, the rivers became polluted. The oyster population nearly disappeared. This impacted the whole ecosystem, because oysters were a key ingredient.

As oysters eat, they filter the water supply by removing nitrogen. We see great biodiversity around oyster reefs, because the oysters’ filtering ability attracts life. Around NYC’s oyster reefs, there were large habitats of fish and marine creatures. Even whales were a common sight here. Oyster reefs also helped to buffer Manhattan from erosion. They limited the damage from storms and waves. As NYC’s oysters died off, so did many other creatures, and so did the protective quality of the reefs. This was a big loss for the city.

The Billion Oyster Project has set out to address this loss. The project works to bring oysters back to NYC’s waters. The project began with students at New York Harbor School. It has since expanded to include many schools in the city. Thousands of NYC students have participated in reef construction and oyster planting. So far, over 26 million oysters have been planted in the waters around NYC. And it’s working! With the oysters, many more fish and marine creatures have returned as well. Even whales have been spotted again.

These NYC waterways and harbors will always be some of the world’s busiest. But with the help of the Billion Oyster Project, the dynamic natural world that once thrived here is beginning to return and to coexist more peacefully with the ferries, barges, cars and trains.

#### Sample question from this assignment:

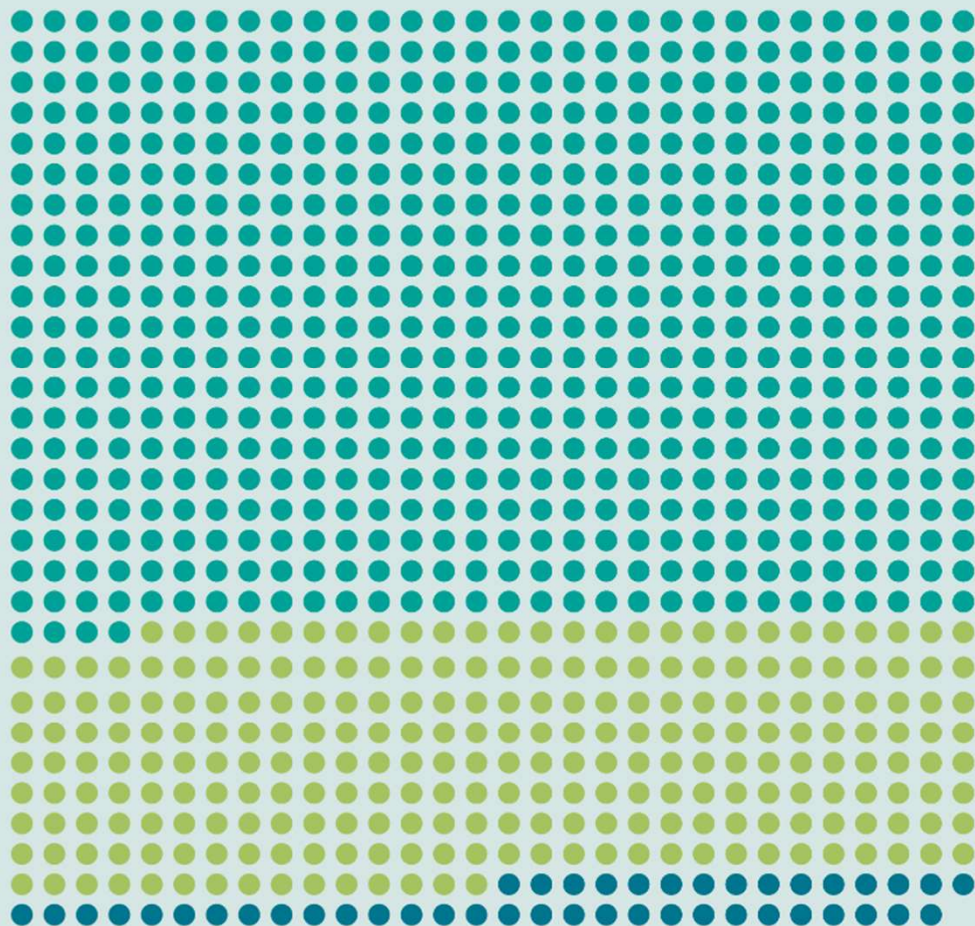
Add vowels (a, e, i, o, u) to complete the words from the reading.

It’s hard to imagine that this river was once an unspoiled marine H\_B\_T\_T.

After reading a fifth-grade level text, students completed multiple-choice vocabulary questions and filled in the missing vowels in words, which is not aligned to any eighth-grade literacy standard.

Teachers report spending **7 HOURS PER WEEK** developing or selecting instructional materials and reported **CREATING OR FINDING 57% OF THEIR ASSIGNMENTS**, but those assignments tend to be **LOWER QUALITY** than those taken from any district or state provided curriculum.

Even in classrooms where students did have grade-appropriate assignments, we often saw students missing out on strong instruction—particularly opportunities to "do the thinking" in their lessons.



Of the nearly 900  
core lessons...

only 295 had  
grade-level content...

and only 74 had grade-level  
content *and* asked students  
to do the thinking.

SOURCE: Observations

That's frustrating for students like Raymond.



“I think math is kind of fun.”

–Raymond, 5th grade

But in his math class, he and his classmates are repeatedly interrupted and corrected by their teacher. Eventually, Raymond—who likes math—rests his head on his desk.

SOURCE: Student Interviews



Perhaps as a result, students did not often view their school experiences as engaging or worthwhile, particularly in middle and high school.



SOURCE: Student surveys

That's unfair to students like Isaac.



“Some classes are really dry.  
You take nothing but notes. That’s  
not going to help me learn what  
I need in the long term.”

–Isaac, 11th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

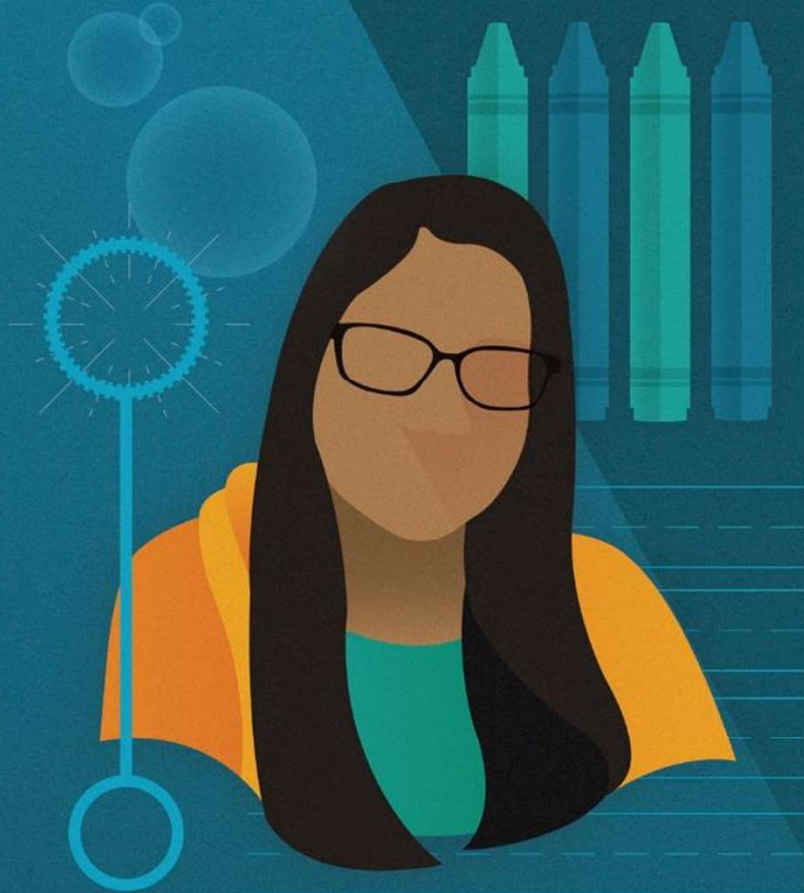
And most students were in classrooms where the teachers did not hold high expectations for them.



While most teachers supported academic standards in theory, less than half believed they were right for their students.

SOURCE: Teacher Surveys

That matters to students like Luz.



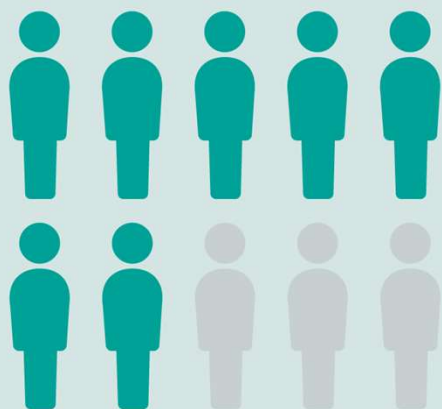
“The teachers that have high expectations for you in their class, you actually try harder, because you want to show you can meet those expectations.”

–Luz, 11th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Low expectations contribute to a mismatch between grades students receive and their actual readiness to meet their long-term goals.

Among B students in math and English courses...



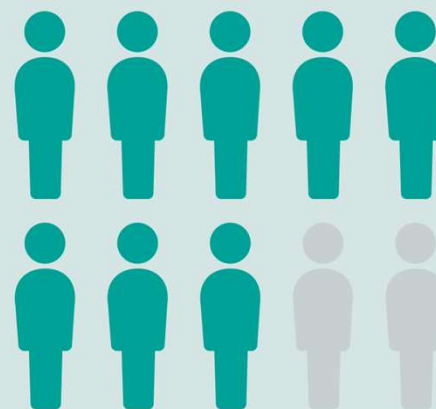
**65%**

were not at grade-level on grade 3-8 state tests. 94% of C students and 29% of A students were not at grade-level.



**52%**

did not meet the ACT or SAT's benchmark for college readiness. 77% of C students and 18% of A students did not meet the benchmark.



**80%**

did not pass the AP test. 91% of C students and 50% of A students did not pass the AP test.

SOURCE: District-provided grades and assessment scores

That concerns students like Maggie.



“I feel like everybody’s  
capable of the same thing.  
I think they can do it just as  
much as I can do it.”  
–Maggie, 10th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Access to the four key resources varies widely from classroom to classroom—and we choose to give some students more access than others.

WITHIN THE SAME SCHOOL AND SUBJECT AREA:

In the highest-rated classrooms,  
**49% OF STUDENTS' TIME**  
was spent on grade-appropriate  
assignments, and  
**44% OF LESSONS**  
had strong instruction.

In the lowest-rated classrooms,  
**13% OF STUDENTS' TIME**  
was spent on grade-appropriate  
assignments, and  
**1% OF LESSONS**  
had strong instruction.

In a school year, the highest-rated classrooms tended to spend  
**64** more hours on grade-appropriate assignments and  
**78** more hours with strong instruction  
than the lowest-rated classrooms.

SOURCE: Assignments and observations

Inequitable access isn't random. White students and those from higher-income families were more likely to be in classrooms that offered the four key resources.



Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were about **25% LESS LIKELY** to receive grade-appropriate assignments.

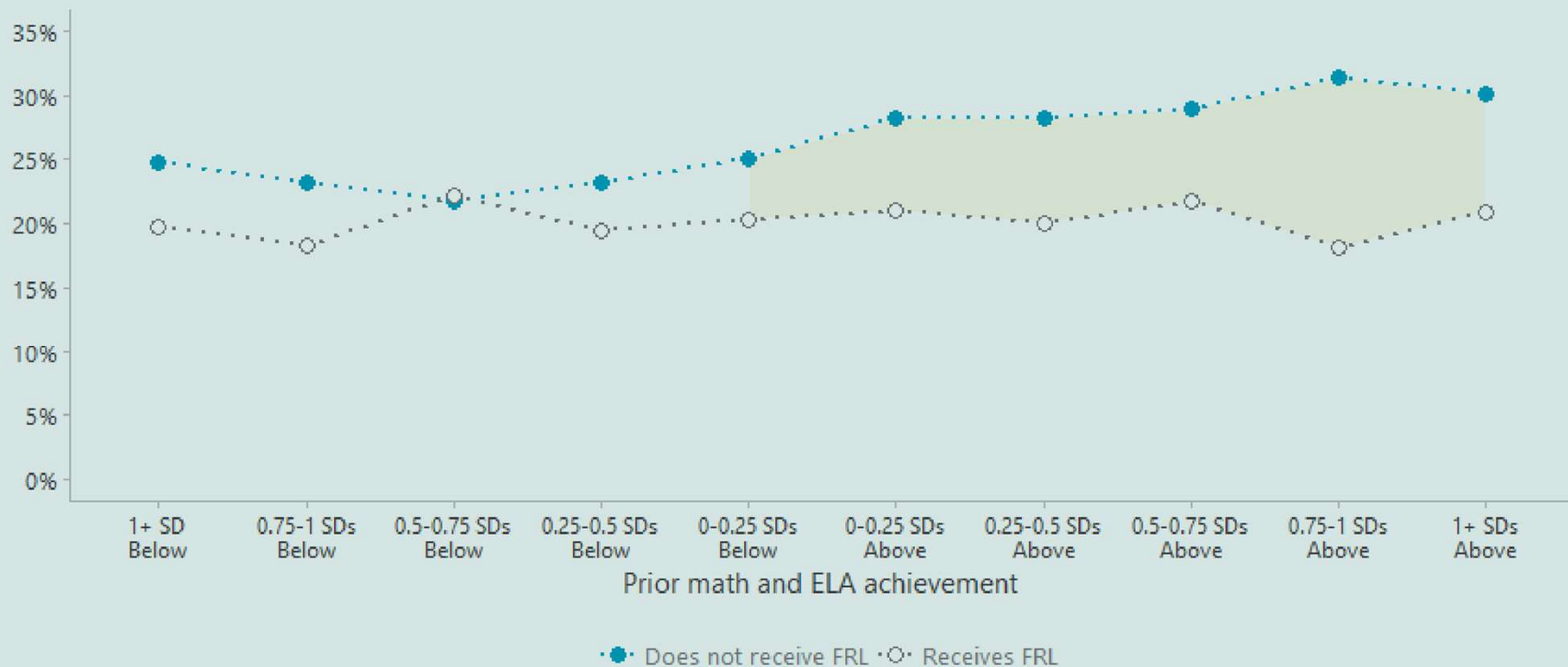
They also received **LESS THAN HALF THE AMOUNT** of high-quality lessons.

SOURCE: Assignments and observations



## Even when we controlled for prior achievement, low-income students had fewer high-quality academic experiences.

PERCENT GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS BY PRIOR ACHIEVEMENT AND INCOME STATUS



Even among students performing better than the average student in the state, low-income students still spent 30% less time—nearly 1 fewer month per year—with grade-appropriate assignments.

We also saw a lower grading standard for students of color, resulting in even more misleading signals about students' readiness to achieve their goals.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED TESTS BY LETTER GRADE AND STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY

**GRADES 3-8 STATE TESTS**

PERCENT MEETING  
GRADE-LEVEL EXPECTATIONS



Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 4 out of 5 districts.

**ACT & SAT**

PERCENT MEETING COLLEGE  
READINESS BENCHMARKS



Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 2 out of 2 districts.

**AP TESTS**

PERCENT SCORING  
3 OUT OF 5 OR HIGHER



Students of color received significantly worse AP scores for the same grades in 3 out of 3 districts.

● White students    ● Students of color

SOURCE: District-provided grades and assessment scores

Among classrooms with at least 75% Black  
or at least 75% Latinx students...



66%

of teachers who  
shared their students'  
race or ethnicity held  
high expectations



35%

of teachers who did  
not share their students'  
race or ethnicity held  
high expectations

For students of color working at all achievement levels,  
teachers of color tended to have higher expectations.

SOURCE: District-provided assessment scores and teacher surveys

When students get access to more of the key resources, they grow more compared to their peers—especially students who started the year below grade-level.

MEAN ACHIEVEMENT BY DEMOGRAPHIC AND ASSIGNMENT QUALITY, AND EXTRAPOLATED GROWTH

### STUDENTS OF COLOR



### STUDENTS BEGINNING SUBSTANTIALLY BEHIND GRADE LEVEL



The "achievement gap" is not inevitable. It's baked into a system where some students get more than others.

SOURCE: Student achievement data

In the spring, Isaac graduated with his class. He's enrolled in nursing school.

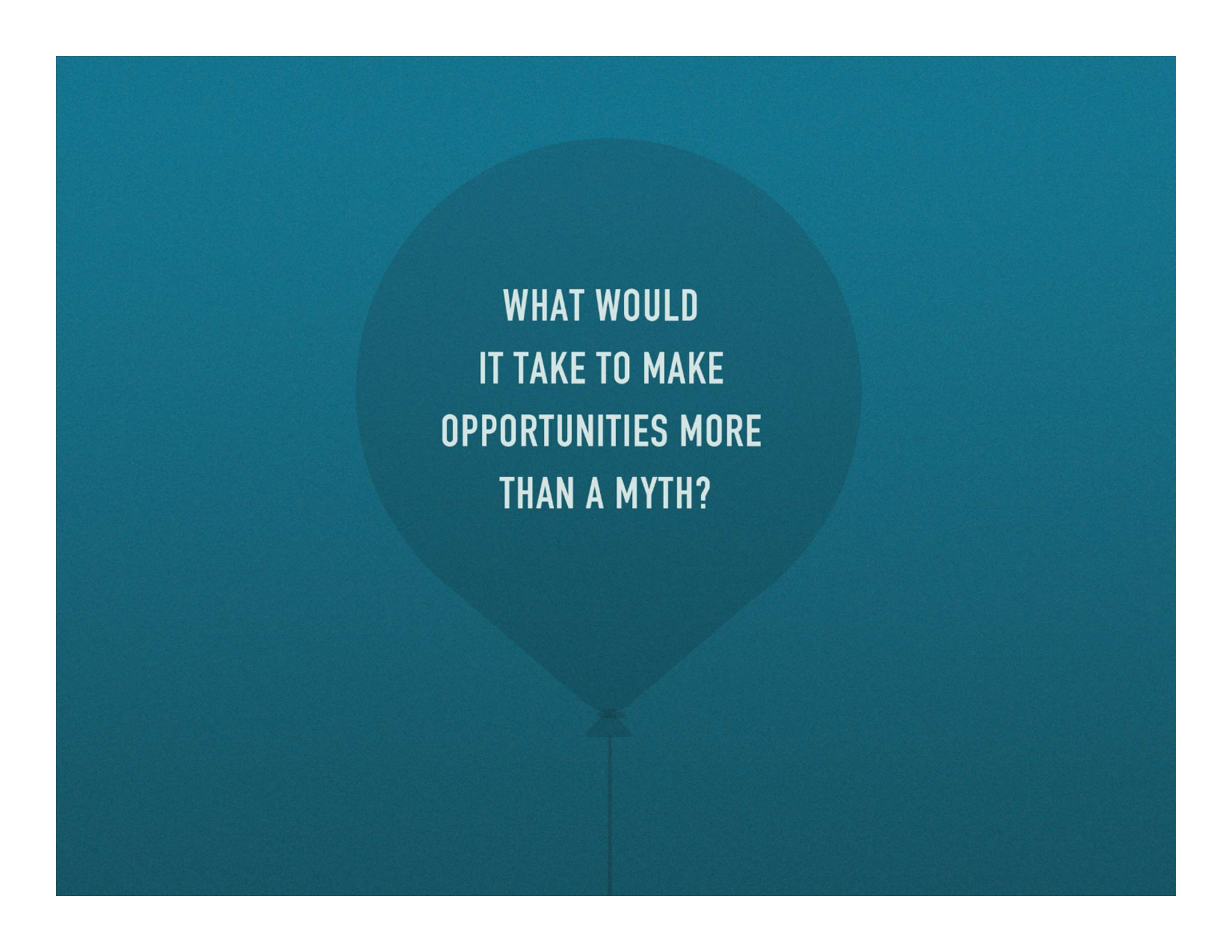


“That diploma means  
I worked hard. I made it this far,  
through all these years of school.  
I want to go to college and be  
a registered nurse. I feel like  
I’m ready.”

–Isaac,  
High School Graduate

**IS HE READY?  
OR HAS HE BEEN MISLED?**

SOURCE: Student Interviews



**WHAT WOULD  
IT TAKE TO MAKE  
OPPORTUNITIES MORE  
THAN A MYTH?**

We found classrooms across the country that offered greater access to the four key resources. These environments looked different in every setting but they shared common traits.

## IN SCHOOLS

A consistent focus on a relatively small set of academic priorities that represented a high bar for students' success.

A high level of support for teachers in order to reach that bar.

## IN CLASSROOMS

Assignments and instructional practices that reflected high expectations for students.

A positive, respectful environment where students were enjoying their learning.

Teachers who believed their students could be successful against rigorous standards.

**We can—and should—learn from these bright spots.**

SOURCE: Teacher focus groups and school leader interviews

We're asking all adults whose choices affect students' experiences to make two big commitments—and follow through on them.

## EVERY STUDENT SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO...

...grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations, every day, in every class—regardless of their race, ethnicity, or any other part of their identity.

We will continually investigate the extent to which our students receive this access and report on our progress.

## EVERY STUDENT AND FAMILY IS...

...an authentic partner and should have real opportunities to shape the experiences students have in school, receive accurate and accessible information about their child's progress, and have a legitimate role in decision-making.

We will continually seek feedback from all students and families about whether we're living up to this commitment.



## Upholding those commitments in practice means undertaking five major actions.

- 1** Ask students and families directly about their goals and school experiences; listen to what they share; and then act on what they tell you.
- 2** Make greater access to grade-appropriate assignments an urgent priority for all students, no matter their race, income level, or current performance level.
- 3** Give all students, especially those who are behind grade level, access to instruction that asks them to think and engage deeply with challenging material.
- 4** Ensure educators enact high expectations for student success by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with more rigorous material.
- 5** Conduct an equity audit to identify school and district-level decisions—from the diversity of staff at all levels to which students are enrolled in honors courses—that give some students greater access than others to key resources.

How can state leaders lead the way toward making students' opportunities less myth and more reality?

## THROUGHOUT TODAY'S DISCUSSION, CONSIDER...

Do you know how often students in your state have access to the four key academic resources we discuss?

Are there any of the four resources that schools in your state need to provide your students more access to?

If there are, how can you improve that area of your state's practice?

What supports do your teachers, school leaders, and district leaders need to give students greater access to all four key resources?

## A FEW FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES

- 1 Collect data on your students' goals and the quality of their daily experiences across your districts. Use our "Student Experience Assessment Guide" for ideas about how to start.
- 2 After you assess the current state of your students' daily academic experiences, build a plan to address gaps that you see. Use our Policymaker Action Guide to plan next steps.
- 3 Improve transparency with your parents and students about their progress towards mastering grade-level standards.
- 4 Set a concrete goal to increase the diversity of your workforce.

# TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Visit *The Opportunity Myth* online to get a personalized action guide with advice and tools you can use to help more students have worthwhile experiences in school.

[OPPORTUNITYMYTH.TNTP.ORG/ACT-NOW](https://opportunitymyth.tntp.org/act-now)

