

# THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

## Action Guide: State Education Agency Leaders and Staff



As a state education agency leader, you have the opportunity to prioritize equity in schools statewide. Your choices around how to shape policy, as well as what you measure and how you use that data, can make meaningful improvements to school experiences for all students and can ultimately have a measurable impact on your state's economic growth.

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Here are some tools to get there, and more. This is not a checklist. Rather, it is a collection of resources to support change in your schools and school systems as you work to implement *The Opportunity Myth's* recommendations in your state:

**RECOMMENDATION 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.

**Shadow a student at least a few times a year.** Build empathy for the student experience in school by truly trying to walk in the shoes of a student for one day (and by shadowing students at different grade levels and from diverse backgrounds over time). Ask them about their goals, and consider whether the assignments, instruction, and other interactions create a positive, encouraging experience that will set them up to meet the goals they shared. For younger students or those whose goals may be less formed, learn about their hopes for their future. By taking an immersive deep-dive through shadowing, you'll get a taste of a student's day-to-day reality that will open up new, powerful insights you might miss in a conversation. [These materials from K-12 Labs](#) can support you in shadowing a student.

**Incentivize school and system leaders' collection of data on the quality of students' daily academic experiences with the four key resources (grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations)—then begin to hold schools accountable for students' access to those four resources.** Pilot data collection and public communication about how often students receive access to the four resources in your districts, then consider how you could incorporate that data into your state accountability system or public reporting. Use this data to identify opportunity gaps by triangulating this data by student subgroup, and prioritize the development of systems and policies that will address the root causes of those gaps, particularly in schools where gaps are greatest. Additionally, support schools and systems to use this data as a part of their continuous improvement processes, and fund research on the links between the daily student experience and student success in your state.

**Support districts in your state to make sure that students, parents, and families know whether students are on grade level.** Work with parent representatives from your state to pilot new report cards that offer clear information about how students' grades reflect their mastery of grade-level standards.

**Investigate disparities in grading.** Look at data on students' grades and their demonstration of mastery of grade-level standards, based on your state assessment data. Disaggregate this data by race/ethnicity, gender, English language learner status, and socioeconomic background to determine if some groups of students are getting grades that more accurately reflect their mastery of grade-level work. If you find gaps, set aggressive goals to eliminate them by looking at grading protocols and educators' expectations of students.

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**RECOMMENDATION 2: Make access to grade-appropriate assignments an urgent priority for all students, no matter what their race, income level, or current performance level.**

**Publicly identify high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials, assessments, and intervention materials for each grade and subject, and create incentives for their adoption.** Ensure that all stakeholders, including families, educators, and staff responsible for curriculum, assessment, and intervention materials adoption, can see which resources are truly aligned to your state's rigorous standards, potentially using rigorous third-party evaluations [like those from EdReports](#) or rigorous review processes like those outlined in [this case study of Louisiana's work](#). Provide funding support for districts that choose to adopt high-quality materials and support their teachers in using them well, ensuring that your districts build a coherent and robust professional learning system for teachers and leaders.

**Inventory your current assessments and identify any gaps in alignment.** Measure the quality of your assessments against your state's college- and career-ready standards to ensure that all students are being assessed against the right bar for their grade level. Opt for aligned assessments and ensure teachers have adequate training to use the information provided by those assessments to inform their instructional practice. If districts have autonomy over assessments in your state, offer guidance on choosing aligned assessments and create a bank of well-aligned options for districts to choose from. Student Achievement Partner's [Assessment Evaluation Tool](#) can offer helpful guidance.

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**RECOMMENDATION 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.**

**To support strong instruction for all students, ensure that your teacher preparation programs are focused and accountable for preparing their teacher candidates to deliver high-quality instruction and content.** Gather data about the quality of instructional practice from the graduates of each of your teacher preparation programs, and make that data publicly available.

**Set the precedent that continuous feedback on instruction should be part of the culture in all of your schools.** Support schools statewide to create systems for regular, informal feedback for teachers and make sure they have the resources, in terms of time and people, to make that happen. Collect survey data from across schools to identify exemplars and create opportunities for schools to learn from each other's practices.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Ensure educators have high expectations for student success by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with more rigorous material.**

**Provide funding for programs proven to increase teachers' and leaders' expectations for students—and for research into which programs actually do raise expectations.** Many programs that purport to raise teachers' and leaders' expectations have not yet been

rigorously studied. Work to change that in your state, and then provide district-level funding to support programs and interventions that have a discernible impact on adults' expectations for students.

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**RECOMMENDATION 5: Examine 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.**

**Examine training, licensure, and hiring policies for potential barriers to candidates of color competing for roles at the classroom, school, and system level.**

Address those barriers through changes to policy and practice.

**Hold your teacher preparation programs accountable for training a diverse set of teachers who authentically partner with students and their families.** Set clear goals for the diversity and quality of your workforce coming from each in-state teacher preparation program, then report out on results. Hold your teacher licensure programs accountable for producing a diverse, highly skilled set of teacher candidates who authentically partner with students and their families and provide them access to the four resources.

**Examine teacher compensation policies and consider how your compensation tools can be used to improve equitable access to the four key resources.**

Before we can ask teachers to do *more* for their students, we need to pay them a fair wage for their incredibly challenging work. That means prioritizing funding to pay all teachers a living wage, beginning in their first year in the classroom, with opportunities for career and financial growth. In addition, if you're not already, consider ways to reward strong instruction and incentivize high-performing teachers to work in schools or districts where you currently see a gap in high-quality instruction.

**Analyze which students in your state are taking advanced or honors courses, or qualify for gifted or magnet programs in younger grades.** Look for patterns that are mismatched with your student demographics. For example, are your gifted programs or your advanced placement classes disproportionately white compared to your student body? Address practices and barriers that might prevent some groups of students from accessing rigorous course offerings. Use [these questions](#) as a starting point.