ACHIEVEMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN NEW YORK STATE

TO THE POINT

- New York has fallen from the top half of states to the bottom half. And within New York, large achievement gaps separate the “haves” from the “have-nots.”
- New York is investing the least resources in the students with the greatest needs and providing inequitable access to rigorous, college- and career-prep coursework.
- New York needs an agenda for opportunity and achievement that begins with high quality early childhood education, extends to K-12, and culminates with completion of a college degree and entry into the workforce.
Across New York State, only 40 percent of ninth-grade students graduate from high school on time and with the skills they need to succeed in college and the workforce.¹ New York’s public schools are the most segregated in the nation.² And gaps in educational justice characterize every stage of the education pipeline — from inequitable access to quality early care and learning; to K-12 public schools, where large gaps in funding continue unabated and higher standards remain under attack; to a higher education system where the route to successful degree attainment is essentially blocked for the students who need it the most.

These challenges are all solvable, and New York’s future depends on addressing them. In fact, there are shining examples of success from early childhood through college completion — communities, school districts, and colleges that are achieving powerful results for the highest need students and demonstrating that the ZIP codes where children start their lives do not have to determine where they end up.

But across New York State, these bright lights are too often the exception, not the rule. They mask the fact that overall performance for New York students generally lags other states — for all students, not just those who are low-income or of color — and, further, that within New York, massive systemic inequities in educational access, opportunity, and performance hold back millions of low-income children and children of color by depriving them of the essential skills that are required for success in the 21st century. The 6.2 million New Yorkers under the age of 25 deserve better — and the state’s vitality and competitiveness depend on state policymakers doing better.³

To identify the changes in policy and practice that will make the greatest difference in transforming the lives of young people, we start by asking:

**WHAT IS THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN NEW YORK TODAY?**

New York trails most of the country on reading and math achievement, and its performance relative to other states is declining.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measures the progress of students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, New York ranks 40th in fourth-grade math, 28th in fourth-grade reading, 33rd in eighth-grade math, and 31st in eighth-grade reading.⁴

It hasn’t always been this way. In 2003, New York ranked among the top half of states on all four NAEP assessments. By 2015, that statement is no longer true in any grade or subject (Figure 1). In eighth-grade reading, for example, the performance of white students ranked second in the nation in 2003 but just 25th in 2015, African American performance ranked 15th in 2003 and dropped to 21st by 2015, and Latino performance fell from the top third of states to 30th place.⁵

Most alarming, New York’s progress improving math and reading scores on NAEP since the early 2000s appears to have stalled, with backsliding or stagnancy on all four reading and math tests over the last two years (Figure 2).⁶ Based on the state’s current trajectory, it would take decades, or even centuries, for the large majority of students to perform at grade level — consigning millions of students to failure.

Even within New York, large achievement gaps separate the “haves” from the “have-nots,” providing a clear picture of inequity from the earliest grades through high school graduation.

New York has two major advantages that — despite massive and unrelenting political pressure — create the potential for strong academic gains. Since 2010,
Figure 1: From leader to laggard
New York has fallen from the top half of states to the bottom for the percentage of students at or above proficient.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MATH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>#24</td>
<td>#40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>#18</td>
<td>#33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READING</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>#12</td>
<td>#28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>#15</td>
<td>#31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 2: New York trails the nation in performance and progress
New York ranks #40 in grade 4 math...

...and is making far less progress than other states.

New York has been implementing new standards that set expectations for the knowledge and skills that all students will need in order to succeed in college and careers; these standards are currently being reviewed and revised, and the revised version will hopefully maintain or strengthen the standards’ rigor and quality. And linked to the new standards, the state has created assessments that measure students’ abilities to demonstrate their understanding and problem-solving and that are recognized as the most rigorous in the nation.

These assessments now reveal the stark gaps that separate New York’s students and underscore the lack of opportunity that is blocking so many New Yorkers from meeting the standards (Figure 3). In grades three through eight, low-income students are approximately half as likely to perform on grade level as are their peers. Likewise, white students are nearly twice as likely to score on grade level in math as are African American and Latino students.

By the time students reach high school, earlier achievement differences are translating into even larger graduation and college preparedness gaps. The on-time graduation rate for white students is 20 percentage points higher than that for Latino or African American students, and only 52 percent...
Figure 4: New York’s graduation gap is dwarfed by its college readiness gap


of students with disabilities graduate from high school on time. Even for those students who earn a diploma, far too many do not receive the highest levels of preparation for future success: Just over 17 percent of low-income students, fewer than 10 percent of African American students, and 14 percent of Latino students graduate on time and earn a Regents diploma with Advanced Designation (Figure 4).12

New York is investing the least resources in the students and communities with the greatest needs, depriving low-income students and students of color of the educational opportunities that can transform their lives.

Skeptics of greater education investment often point to the state’s status as the highest spending state in the country. While New York indeed ranks first in average per-pupil spending, that is only the case because extraordinary levels of resources in the wealthiest New York school districts — some of the richest anywhere in the country — raise the average and mask the glaring inequities across communities.13

Because New York relies on local taxes and other local revenue for a greater proportion of total school district funding than all but 11 other states, disparities in local wealth lead to a dramatically uneven playing field from one school district to another.14 Urban and suburban high-need school districts invest an average of 26 percent less per pupil than low-need school districts. The difference is even greater for rural high-need districts, which spend an average of 30 percent less than the state’s low-need districts (Figure 5).15 In a typical high-need school, this results in approximately $3 million in lost investment that could be used to recruit and retain excellent teachers, hire guidance counselors, support advanced coursework and subjects like art and music, and provide the health and other services that low-income children often need.

Resource gaps especially impact the state’s low-income students. In the school districts with the highest proportion of low-income students, the average per-pupil investment is $4,554 less than in the school districts that serve the fewest low-income students (Figure 6). This translates into an equity
shortfall of more than $113,000 for every classroom of 25 students.  

New York’s resource gaps and uneven academic expectations quickly become opportunity gaps for students, who lose access to higher level courses and advanced learning opportunities that prepare them for college and high-skill careers.

Middle schools with the lowest shares of low-income students are more than twice as likely to have an Algebra I course — a critical benchmark for college and career readiness and gateway to advanced math coursework — than middle schools with the highest shares of low-income students.  

While some of this gap is explained by the concentration of low-income students in New York City — where just 26 percent of the highest-poverty middle schools offer Algebra — middle schools that serve the most low-income students in the rest of the state are also less likely to have students enrolled in Algebra than middle schools that serve the fewest low-income students.  

Students of color across the state are also less likely than their white peers to enroll in Algebra courses in middle school — which in turn limits their access to advanced mathematics courses in high school. African American and Latino students together represent 42 percent of middle school enrollees but just 23 percent of middle school students enrolled in Algebra (Figure 7).

The opportunity gap is even more pronounced at the high school level.

Figure 6: School districts that serve the greatest proportion of low-income students spend 24 percent less per pupil than school districts that serve the fewest low-income students

Source: New York State Education Department, 2017-18 School Year Databases (downloaded January 19, 2017).

Figure 7: Students of color are under-represented in critical math and science courses...

...in middle school Algebra classes

...in high school Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes

The lack of access to advanced coursework is reflected in students’ access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, which both prepare students for college-level work and often enable them to earn college credits. Seventy percent of the high schools that serve the fewest number of low-income students have students enrolled in at least six AP or IB courses, compared to 11 percent of the schools that serve the greatest proportion of low-income students. Moreover, Latino and African American high school students are less than half as likely to be enrolled in math and science AP or IB courses as their share of the high school population.

Overall, in order to be prepared for college and careers, students should have access to a rich high school curriculum that includes advanced math, science, English language arts, social studies, foreign language, and arts and music coursework (see sidebar). In New York City, 28 percent of schools that serve the smallest share of low-income students had students enrolled during the 2015-16 school year in the full set of courses that would constitute a robust course complement, compared to just 9 percent of schools that serve the greatest share of low-income students. In contrast, 74 percent of schools that serve the smallest share of low-income students had students enrolled in the full set of courses that would constitute a robust course complement, compared to 36 percent of schools that serve the greatest share of low-income students.

**What Classes Prepare a Student to Be “College and Career Ready”?**

For the purpose of this analysis, we defined a full course complement to include:

1. **Math:** Regents Algebra I, Regents Geometry, Regents Algebra II or any Trigonometry/Math Analysis course, and Calculus or Integrated Math and Calculus;
2. **Science:** Physics and at least one of the following: Biology, Chemistry, or Earth Science;
3. **English language arts:** Regents ELA or an AP or IB English course;
4. **World languages:** Any Level III or higher foreign language course (including AP or IB courses);
5. **History and social studies:** At least one U.S. history and one government course and at least one other history course, and a geography course or a world history and geography course; and
6. **Arts and music:** At least one course in the fine or performance arts or music.

This list should be considered a baseline and does not reflect other important coursework that contributes to student readiness, such as civics and high-quality career and technical education programs.

See endnote 20 for additional information.

---

**Figure 8: The schools that serve the most low-income students are least likely to have students enrolled in a robust college- and career-ready set of courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of schools that serve the smallest share of low-income students</th>
<th>28%</th>
<th>74%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In New York City...</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rest of the State...</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of schools that serve the greatest share of low-income students</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: New York State Education Department, unpublished 2015-16 data analyzed by The Education Trust–New York. See endnote 20 for additional information on this analysis.*
students. And the difference in low-income students’ opportunity to take college- and career-prep courses is starker in the rest of the state, where 74 percent of schools that serve the fewest proportion of low-income students had this full complement of courses while just 36 percent of schools that serve the greatest proportion of low-income students did (Figure 8).²⁰

Inequitable access to excellent teachers and school leaders further institutionalizes the state’s achievement and opportunity gaps.

Research demonstrates that effective teaching is the single most important determinant of a student’s success in school.²¹ Among New York students who scored at the lowest level on the state test in math, 65 percent improved at least one level if they were assigned to teachers rated highly effective for two years in a row.²² Yet across New York, low-income students and students of color have the most inequitable access to highly skilled teachers (Figure 9).

In 2012-13 and 2013-14, New York state required that teachers be evaluated on multiple measures, including the achievement gains of their students based on state assessments. African American students in grades four through eight were 45 percent more likely than white students and Latino students were 15 percent more likely than white students to be assigned to a math teacher who had been rated ineffective on this critical measure.²³

The state has enacted a moratorium on using these data for teacher evaluations for the next several years, but there are no such limits on low-income students and students of color being assigned to teachers who are, in fact, ineffective. When combined with an insufficient commitment to providing the necessary support to help teachers improve their effectiveness, this is a recipe for disaster.

While leading states and school districts are developing new ways to create a positive school climate, too many New York schools still rely on ineffective and disproportionate disciplinary policies.

African American elementary and middle school students are nearly four times as likely as their white peers to have at least one out-of-school suspension, and African American high school students are twice as likely as are their white peers to be suspended per year (Figure 10). In addition, elementary and middle school students who attend the highest poverty schools statewide are nearly four times as likely to be suspended as their peers in the lowest poverty schools.²⁴

This overreliance on suspension and expulsion in response to even minor behavioral problems creates what has been described as a “school-to-prison pipeline.”²⁵

Several school systems — including New York City — have taken positive steps to reduce suspensions. Additional action at the state level is needed to transform these limited gains into sustained policy and to build on them by adopting research-based approaches that support teachers and school
leaders in enacting restorative justice practices and establishing positive school environments.

The problems don’t stop at the end of high school. Too few New York students make it to college and even fewer make it successfully through college to earn a degree or industry credential and achieve standing in the workforce.

The highest paying jobs and lowest unemployment rates are reserved for workers with a college degree or postsecondary certification. The good news is that approximately 4 out of every 5 students in New York plan to pursue postsecondary education after high school. But without significant changes in policy, programs, and practice, they will not be able to realize their dream of a college degree.

Academic, financial, and other non-academic factors frequently complicate students’ best-laid plans and — without structures and clear programs of study that encourage completion — lead them to drop out. In fact, just 63 percent of first-time, full-time students pursuing an associate degree in New York return for the second year, while only 85 percent of students pursuing a bachelor’s degree enroll in their sophomore year.

Even fewer students make it all the way to graduation (Figure 11). At public four-year institutions, 60 percent of students seeking a bachelor’s degree successfully completed their program within six years — a figure that drops to less than half for African American and Latino students. At public two-year institutions, 37 percent of associate degree-seeking students earn their degree or transfer within three years of starting.

Figure 10: Out-of-school suspensions disproportionately reduce instructional time for African American and low-income students

In New York State, African American elementary and middle school students are nearly four times as likely as are their white peers to have at least one out-of-school suspension, and African American high school students are twice as likely as are their white peers to be suspended per year.
Among Latino and African American students, it is less than 30 percent. By one measure, New York now has the sixth-largest college attainment gap in the country between Latino and white students.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It will take major interventions in early childhood education, K-12 public schools, and higher education to solve New York’s challenges. Closing the opportunity gap requires highly organized and aligned policies and initiatives across multiple sectors — public, private, and nonprofit — that are built on a coordinated commitment to high levels of achievement for all children and extend from early childhood through college completion and participation in the workforce.

Working with our partners and grounded in a deep commitment to honest data, we aim to focus the public and policymakers on equity, opportunity, and performance gaps, and the solutions that can address them.

We will encourage policymakers to advance four broad strategies that are essential to improving achievement and success in New York:

1. High-quality early care and education for all children

- Significantly expand access to pre-kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds while ensuring quality through strong program standards accompanied by accountability, transparency, resources for improvement, and robust professional preparation. Per-pupil funding levels should be adequate across all programs and settings — both school districts and community-based organizations — and New York can learn from the funding structure and quality improvement mechanisms of New Jersey and other states with long-term, high-quality prekindergarten programs.
- Through policy decisions and resource allocations, make clear that early childhood care and learning begins before birth — not with pre-K.
2. Equitable implementation of high standards for college and career readiness

- Build public support for New York’s academic standards and — following adoption of the state’s revised standards — achieve their equitable and sustainable implementation. States including Massachusetts, Maryland, Louisiana, and Kentucky offer lessons about the importance of long-term fidelity to the implementation of higher standards and the need for significant resources for professional development for teachers and school leaders. Our policy brief, Our Eyes on the Horizon, offers four key recommendations: maintain high standards, update and enhance curricular resources, provide high-quality professional development across the state, and close opportunity and achievement gaps for all students.

- With the enactment of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), establish a strong equity-driven accountability system that creates a pathway for long-term achievement gains — including by establishing a meaningful definition of college readiness; prioritizing achievement and opportunity gaps; and addressing the schools where any group of children is failing to make progress with urgency, data, robust support for improvement, and research-backed solutions. As we describe in the ESSA coalition policy brief, Towards Justice for All?, the state can and must do this while avoiding creation of a “gotcha” accountability framework, on the one hand, or weakening accountability provisions, on the other.

- Expand opportunities for all student to take rigorous college- and career-prep courses in middle and high school. The significant gaps in access to these advanced classes contributes to the postsecondary opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color. Establishing a meaningful College and Career Readiness indicator for school accountability under ESSA can help focus incentives and resources to address this challenge.

- Recognizing that one-size-fits-all approaches do not enable all students to find their learning passions and connect to higher education and the workforce, develop multiple rigorous pathways for students to meet high standards — including by learning from promising practices like the Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) programs and by modernizing career and technical education.

3. Opportunities for all students to learn and succeed

- Given the paramount importance of teacher effectiveness to student learning, maximize access to excellent teachers and school and district leaders, especially for low-income students and students of color, through strategies that prioritize the equitable recruitment, assignment, and retention of strong teachers and leaders.

- Address other critical educator equity issues, including the support and resources that teachers need in order to be successful, the need for a diverse teacher and school leader workforce, the quality of preparation programs, and ongoing professional development.

- Fully implement a school funding formula that finally achieves the goal of providing adequate and equitable resources for all schools — particularly those that serve low-income students and students of color — and ensuring that funds are wisely invested to result in high levels of student achievement.

- Foster empathy in our education system and recognize that social and emotional learning — shorthand for the attainment of skills that enable students to “manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations”32 — is integral to students’ lifelong success.

- End the “school-to-prison pipeline” by reforming disciplinary policies and practices and enacting redemption strategies that enable young people, including those who have dropped out and/or entered the criminal justice
system, to re-engage with education. This requires professional development for educators, as well as investment in counseling, mental health services, and other supports.

4. **College access, affordability, and completion… and workforce success**

- Promote **college access and affordability**, especially for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students, as we address in our policy brief, *To “Excelsior,” and Beyond*. All student populations — including undocumented students, part-time students, and incarcerated individuals — can benefit from postsecondary education and should be eligible for the financial assistance to help make it possible.

- Prioritize **student success** as an essential third pillar alongside access and affordability. The state should hold institutions accountable for improving student success as measured by on-time graduation rates, particularly for the groups of students with persistently low completion rates, and invest in institutional capacity to support evidence-based practices for improving completion.

- Enhance the **focus on equity** at the postsecondary level. The state should encourage high-performing colleges to improve access by enrolling more low-income students, ensure equitable levels of per-student funding for the institutions that serve the most low-income students and students with the greatest needs, and encourage — and fund — implementation of the programs most likely to improve student outcomes.

___

**THE STATUS QUO IS FAILING NEW YORK. BUT IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.**

New York state is home to some of the world’s leading thinkers and doers. We have educators hitting it out of the park for poor children and state and local elected and appointed officials who are making tough and courageous decisions on behalf of children every day. And New Yorkers of every sort are increasingly seeing the connection between better education and greater opportunity.

This can be the beginning of a new collaborative agenda for New York — one rooted in a shared commitment to equity and the understanding that all children have the extraordinary potential to succeed … if only we adults do our part.
The term “low-income students” is consistently used in research and policy discussions. This term is often employed by researchers and policymakers to refer to students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 mathematics and reading assessments, (accessed December 30, 2015).


The term “low-income students” is consistently used here in place of the technical term “economically disadvantaged” employed by the New York State Education Department. “Economically disadvantaged” students are those who participate in, or whose family participates in, economic assistance programs, such as the free or reduced-price lunch programs, Social Security Insurance (SSI), Food Stamps, Foster Care, Refugee Assistance (cash or medical assistance), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or Family Assistance: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). See: https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=assessment.


New York State Education Department, 2017-18 School Year Databases (downloaded January 19, 2017).

Based on comparison of 2015-16 Approved Operating Expenditure per 2015-16 Total Aidable Pupil Unit for Expenditure. New York State Education Department, 2017-18 School Year Databases (downloaded January 19, 2017).

New York State Education Department, unpublished 2015-16 data analyzed by The Education Trust–New York.

New York State Education Department, unpublished 2015-16 data analyzed by The Education Trust–New York. Schools were excluded from the analysis if Algebra course enrollment was at least 1 and less than 15 pupils. As a result, these findings reflect the inclusion of 96 percent of middle schools in New York City and 94 percent of middle schools in the rest of state.

New York State Education Department, unpublished 2015-16 data analyzed by The Education Trust–New York. All Special Act and District 75 schools were excluded from the analysis. In addition, 12 schools with only 9th or only 9th and 10th grade enrollment, and six schools with 6th-10th grade enrollment were excluded from the analysis. Finally, schools were only given credit for an AP/IB course if enrollment in that course exceeded 5 pupils, and schools were excluded from the analysis if enrollment in all AP/IB courses offered at the school was at least 1 and less than 5 pupils in total. As a result, these findings reflect the inclusion of 98 percent of high schools.

New York State Education Department, unpublished 2015-16 data analyzed by The Education Trust–New York.
All Special Act and District 75 schools were excluded from the analysis. In addition, 12 schools with only 9th or only 9th and 10th grade enrollment, and six schools with 6th-10th grade enrollment were excluded from the analysis. Finally, schools were also excluded from the analysis if enrollment in any single subject’s relevant coursework was at least 1 and less than 5 pupils. As a result, these findings reflect the inclusion of 92 percent of high schools in New York City and 91 percent of high schools in the rest of state.


The data provided represent the number of students in K-12 schools who received at least one out-of-school suspension during the 2014-15 school year. If a student was suspended multiple times, the student is only counted once. Data were reported for 4,751 schools. It was possible to match suspension data with race/ethnicity enrollment data for 4,708 schools, of which 6 were excluded because they only provide prekindergarten programs. In addition, in 91 of the matched schools, the reported number of students suspended exceeded the total number of students enrolled in the subgroup; these schools were therefore excluded from the analysis. Further excluding Special Act school districts, the remaining schools included in the statewide analysis represent 97.7 percent of total K-12 enrollment. For the school-level analysis, subgroups were excluded if their total size was below 10 students. The elementary/middle and high school analysis was determined by labeling schools as high schools if they had a listed high school graduation accountability indicator in the 2014-15 School Report Card Database; all other schools were counted as elementary/middle schools. Six schools with a high school graduation accountability indicator but no Adequate Yearly Progress result and no enrollment in grades 9-12 or ungraded secondary were excluded from the high school count and counted as elementary/middle schools.


ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST–NEW YORK

The Education Trust-New York promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We pursue educational justice by building awareness of equity, achievement and opportunity gaps and marshaling public and political will for solutions that will enable every child in New York State — especially those who are low-income or students of color — to achieve his or her full potential.