

EQUITY ALERT

# STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN NEW YORK:

Some progress, but schools must improve opportunity for students of color and low-income students



The Education Trust—New York

New York State’s Spring 2017 achievement results for students in grades 3-8 show continued modest progress statewide, with the greatest gains for Black and Latino students. Yet significant inequities in key opportunities to learn — including gaps in expectations, resources, and access to strong educators — continue to translate into massive achievement gaps for low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners (See Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

understanding whether each student is meeting grade-level learning expectations and mastering the knowledge and skills they need for success in high school and beyond;

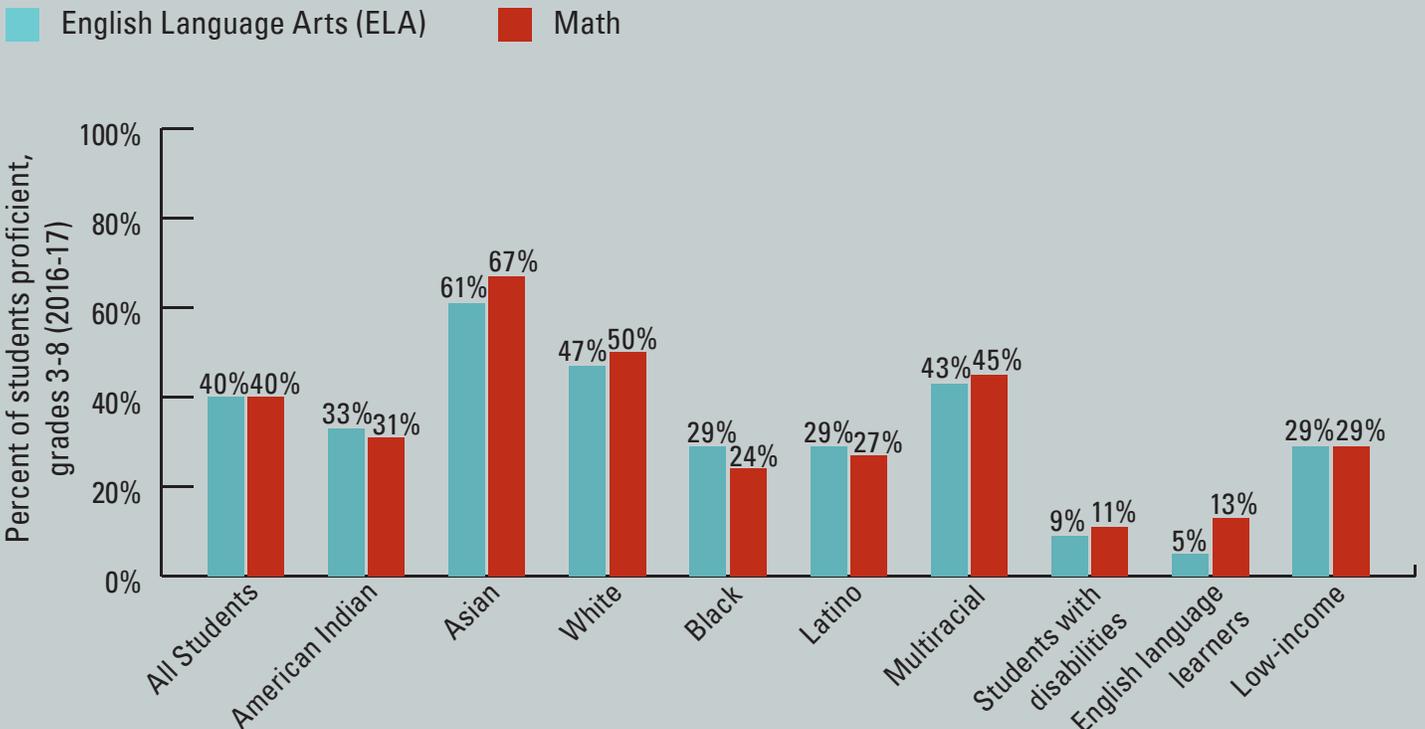
## THE CONTEXT

The 2017 assessment results are particularly important for several reasons:

- They are a vital piece of the puzzle in

- They are directly comparable to the 2016 assessment results — enabling us to measure year-to-year progress at the school, district, and state levels after changes were made following the 2015 assessments; and
- As the state approaches the adoption of a revised set of Next Generation Learning Standards, the 2017 assessment results provide a detailed picture of improvement and remaining needs since higher standards were first adopted in 2010 — when last year’s 8th graders were preparing to enter 2nd grade.

**Figure 1: Proficiency rates for students overall and groups of students in New York State**



Source: New York State Education Department. Public School 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessments (2016-17).

## STATEWIDE TRENDS

Since 2016, the percent of students scoring proficient in grades 3-8 increased by 1.9 percentage points in English language arts (ELA) and by 1.1 percentage points in math. As a result, 39.8 percent of students are now proficient in ELA and 40.2 percent of students are proficient in math.

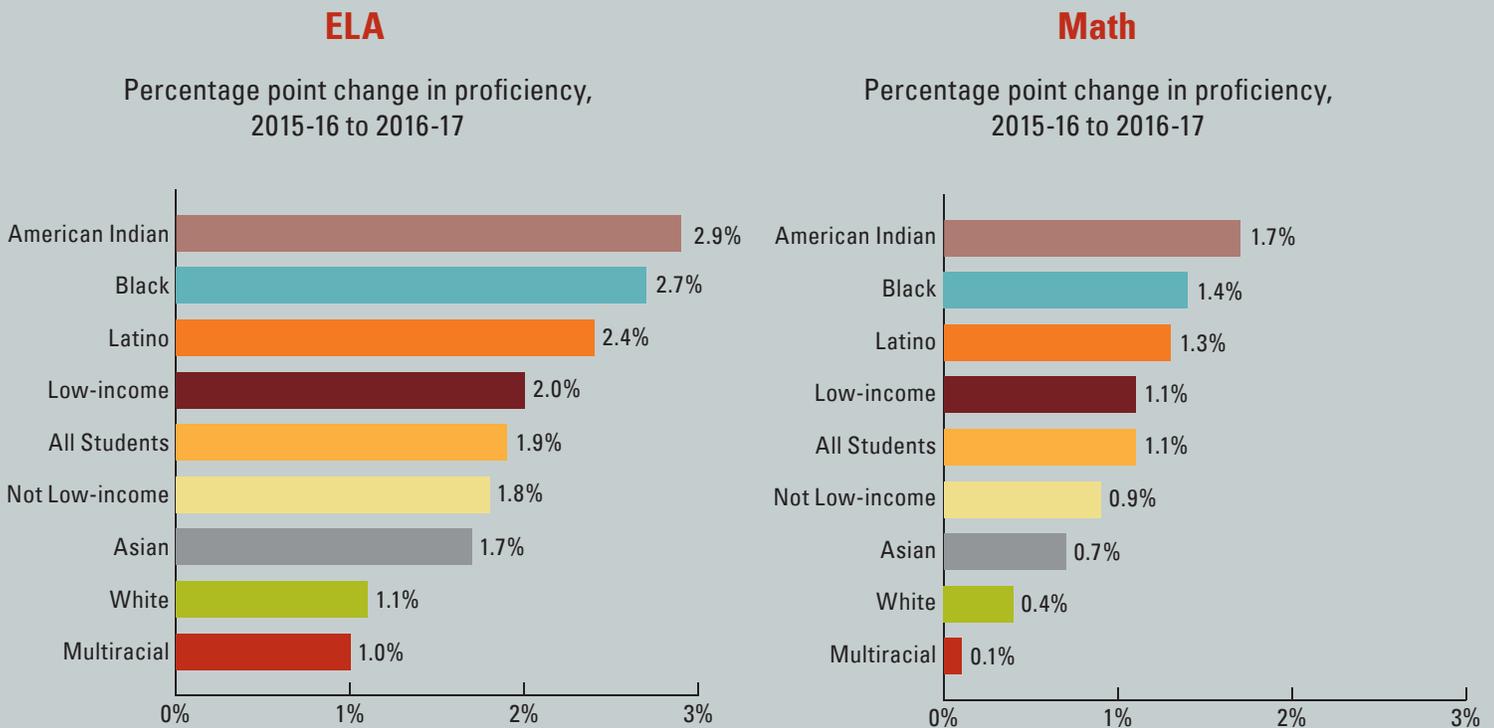
Although this academic progress is incremental, it is nearly universal for all types of schools. Gains occurred in ELA and math for all Big 5 school districts; for high, average, and low-needs district categories; and for charter schools.

## SOME PROGRESS, BUT MAJOR GAPS REMAIN

We would hope to see all groups of students making progress, with the most significant and sustained gains over multiple years for those groups of students that are furthest behind.

Indeed, the good news is that Black, Latino and American Indian students and low-income students made the greatest gains in both ELA and math (See Figure 2). However, the modest pace of these improvements means that our education system is still leaving far too many historically underserved

**Figure 2: Latino, Black, and American Indian students made the greatest – though still generally modest – gains in ELA and math**



Source: New York State Education Department. Downloaded from [data.nysed.gov](http://data.nysed.gov).

students dramatically underprepared for success in high school and beyond.

In addition, major gaps persist for students of color, regardless of whether or not they are low-income. Although schools perform worse for low-income students of all races and ethnic groups than for

their non-low-income peers, the assessment results indicate that schools underserve students of color *regardless of their income level*. In fact, the differences in schools' performance for non-low-income students of color and their non-low-income white peers are *larger* than those for their low-income counterparts (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Achievement levels by low-income status and race/ethnicity**



Source: New York State Education Department. Downloaded from [data.nysed.gov](http://data.nysed.gov).

Our education system must confront both the systemic inequities and effects related to poverty and the systemic educational inequities and opportunity gaps that impact students of color at all income levels. New York’s achievement data demonstrate that they are not one in the same, and both deserve attention from policymakers and educators.

## BRIGHT SPOT SCHOOLS SHOW HIGHER ACHIEVEMENT IS POSSIBLE

Despite glaring opportunity and achievement gaps, we know that many schools and school districts are achieving much better results for historically underserved groups of students.

For example, when we examined all schools where at least 54 percent of students who were assessed are low-income (the state average) and the share of Black or Latino students is at least 25 percent of total enrollment, we found dozens of schools where *Black or Latino proficiency rates* exceeded the *statewide average for the all students* group in ELA (39.8 percent) or math (40.2 percent).

Likewise, among schools where at least 75 percent of students who were assessed are low-income, dozens of schools have ELA or math *proficiency rates for low-income students* that exceed the *statewide average for the all students* group.

These bright spot schools can be found throughout the state and include both district-run and charter schools. Over the next year, Ed Trust–NY will take a closer look at a number of these schools to spotlight their successes and identify promising practices that could help inform state policy and school and district practices.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE OF ‘OPT-OUT’ DATA

Despite overwhelming attention on “opt-outs,” the vast and growing majority of students — approximately 80 percent — participate in annual state assessments.

Parents who have opted their children out of state assessments tend to be white, more affluent and from low- and average-needs school districts.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is also another side to the test participation issue, which the New York State Education Department (NYSED) calls “institutional exclusion” because it results “directly or indirectly from actions taken by the school or district.”<sup>3</sup>

One sign that institutional exclusion may be an issue is a disproportionately high opt-out rate among historically underserved groups of students, such as children from low-income families. A conservative analysis of opt-out rates indicates that in 48 low- and average-needs districts in ELA and 83 low- and average-needs districts in math, a disproportionately high percentage of low-income students “refused” to take the test. This is not the case in any urban-suburban high needs district, New York City district, other Big 5 school district, or charter school.<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, these data alone cannot be used to conclude whether “institutional exclusion” is occurring in a particular school district, but they point to the need to ensure that attention is paid to test participation rates for historically underserved groups of students. This is an important issue as the state implements its accountability plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

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## ACCELERATING NEW YORK'S PROGRESS

As policymakers and educators review this year's assessment results, we recommend that they consider five key opportunities:

### 1 **Adopting and successfully implementing high expectations for all students**

The Board of Regents is expected to adopt the state's Next Generation Learning Standards at its September meeting. Finalizing updated high standards is critical to providing schools and educators with clarity about the knowledge and skills we expect students at all levels to master. As important as the standards themselves is the state's plan to provide intensive support, at scale, to ensure that educators are prepared to teach the revised standards to all students with high-quality training that prepares teachers to provide differentiated and rigorous instruction to English language learners, students with disabilities, and students who are academically behind.

### 2 **Improving access to strong educators for historically underserved students**

Research reinforces that strong educators are the most important in-school determinant of student success.<sup>5</sup> Yet according to NYSED, low-income students and students of color are significantly more likely than their peers to be assigned to a teacher who has been rated Ineffective, who is teaching out-of-field, or who is inexperienced.<sup>6</sup> Improving fairness in access to great teachers (and school leaders) — who are well-prepared, well-supported, and diverse — is essential to closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

### 3 **Enacting a strong and meaningful accountability system**

ESSA provides New York State with a powerful opportunity to advance equity by defining what

it means to be a successful school, setting clear expectations that schools must raise achievement for all of their students — not just some, and helping schools and school districts by targeting attention, resources, and support to the places where students are struggling. New York's draft ESSA plan, which will also be acted on at the September meeting of the Regents, includes many important positive steps as well as several key areas where we hope improvements can be made as the new accountability system is implemented.

### 4 **Addressing the state's glaring resource inequities**

As we described in **our recent report**, 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 essential educational opportunities. Well-invested resources can improve students' access to college- and career-prep coursework, critical student supports like guidance counselors, and strong educators. In addition, increased funding for targeted programs like New York State's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative can accelerate progress for historically underserved groups of students.

### 5 **Improving diversity in order to address school segregation**

New York has the most segregated schools in the country, and national research finds that students of color are overwhelmingly likely to attend schools where the majority of their peers are low-income.<sup>7</sup> We know that greater integration benefits *all* groups of students, and it can help ensure that historically underserved students are no longer disproportionately enrolled in the schools with the least resources and least effective educators. In addition to efforts to remedy these inequities, New York should pursue and prioritize integration strategies.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term “low-income students” is consistently used in place of the technical term “economically disadvantaged” employed by the New York State Education Department. According to NYSED: “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). If one student in a family is identified as low income, all students from that household (economic unit) may be identified as low income.”

<sup>2</sup> New York State Education Department, “Measuring Student Progress in Grades 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics,” available at: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/2017-3-8-test-results.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> New York State Education Department, “New York State’s Draft Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan,” <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/essa.html> (Downloaded July 18, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> New York State Education Department, “District-Level Test Refusal File,” <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/press-release/20170822/home.html> (Downloaded August 22, 2017). In 24% of low-needs districts, 14% of average-needs districts and 5% of rural high needs districts in ELA, and in 38% of low-needs districts, 27% of average needs districts

and 15% of rural high needs districts in math, the percent of low-income students classified as “test refusing” is at least 5 percentage points greater than the district-wide percent of students classified as “test refusing.” School districts were excluded from this analysis if the total number of low-income students assessed was less than 100.

<sup>5</sup> See, among others: (1) The Rand Corporation, “Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement,” <http://www.rand.org/education/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>; (2) Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, and Jonah E. Rockoff, “The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood,” [http://rajchetty.com/chettyfiles/value\\_added.htm](http://rajchetty.com/chettyfiles/value_added.htm).

<sup>6</sup> New York State Education Department, “New York State’s Draft Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan,” <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/essa.html> (Downloaded July 18, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> John Kucsera and Gary Orfield, “New York State’s Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction and a Damaged Future,” (Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project, March 2014), <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/nynorfler-report-placeholder/Kucsera-New-York-Extreme-Segregation-2014.pdf>. Janie Boschma and Ronald Brownstein, “The Concentration of Poverty in American Schools,” *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/concentration-poverty-american-schools/471414/>.



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