

# THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

## Action Guide: System Leaders



As a system leader, whether in a district or charter management organization, you have the opportunity to raise the bar and improve experiences for all students across your school system. Ensuring all schools and school leaders in your district are prepared to support teachers, offer grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction, and prioritize high expectations can make meaningful improvements to students' daily experiences.

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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 doable change in your schools and system as you work to implement *The Opportunity Myth's* recommendations:

### 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 in different schools, 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.

**Collect data on students' goals and daily academic experiences.** What do your students aspire to beyond high school? What do families expect from school? Are you setting your students up to reach those aspirations? Are you providing parents clear, accurate information about students' progress towards those goals? [These tools](#) are a useful place to start.

**Check for observable disparities in the data you've collected.** When you see gaps in the opportunities you are providing to groups of students (such as students of color, English language learners, or students from low-income backgrounds) on a daily basis, address them urgently.

**Improve transparency with families about students' progress.** Work with parent representatives from your school system 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, 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 these gaps.

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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.**

**Assess how your current assignments stack up across schools.** Collect at least a week's worth of assignments from a representative subset of your classrooms, compare the assignments you collected to benchmarks for each grade level using tools like our [student work protocol](#) and [student work library](#), and then assess how much time your students are spending on grade-appropriate work. Use this to give your school leaders consistent, actionable feedback about the quality of assignments in their buildings.

**Adopt and purchase only high-quality instructional materials.** Take advantage of the materials adoption process as a training opportunity for teachers and school leaders. Make sure everyone understands what makes materials high-quality in each subject area. Consider the materials vetted [here](#).

Once you've adopted high-quality materials, **make sure you have a multi-year training and implementation plan for teachers and leaders** that supports educators in using the materials to fully engage students and meet the expectations you've set for all students' experiences.

**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. Wherever possible, opt for aligned assessments and ensure teachers have adequate training to use the information provided by those assessments to inform their instructional practice. Student Achievement Partner's [Assessment Evaluation Tool](#) can offer helpful guidance.

**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.**

**Assess who is doing the majority of the thinking and talking in your classrooms.** Use our [observation protocols](#) or [other available tools](#) to gather concrete data about who is doing most of the talking and thinking in your classrooms. Give your teachers consistent, actionable feedback about who is doing the thinking in their classroom.

**Administer a brief student engagement survey, then set goals to improve students' daily engagement across your schools.** Use [this survey](#) to collect information on students' levels of engagement during lessons. Use the survey data to coach and support school leaders to improve practice in their buildings. Report out on your results. After you gather data about students' engagement, explore the link between your students' engagement and their academic growth, as well as other important measures like teacher retention and school culture.

**Support teachers and school leaders to scaffold more effectively, putting the thinking on kids in the classroom.** Make effective strategies that support

students' access of rigorous content a focus of professional development efforts, emphasizing that effective teaching isn't simply doing the hard work for students, nor is it watering down work that could be otherwise rich and challenging. Identify exemplars within your district, then use them to support improvements in other classrooms. Use the [strategies in our toolkit](#) to get started.

**Support educators to consider students' starting points.** Give teachers the tools to support students with unfinished learning from previous grades to access grade-level content, by training them in scaffolding strategies that maintain the demands of grade-appropriate work. It's important to acknowledge that as a field, we have struggled to scaffold without gutting rigor. So as you support your teachers to do this work, recognize those failures—it's not all on teachers—and when you find models that work, share them broadly. Use the [strategies in our toolkit](#) to get started.

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

**Understand expectations in your school.** Administer [this brief survey](#) to your teachers and instructional staff. Examine the data to consider what supports your teachers will need to hold all students to high expectations, regardless of students' race, ethnicity, or other parts of their identity.

**Create professional learning opportunities that showcase what students can achieve when given the chance to access rigorous, grade-appropriate assignments.** Following those experiences, provide opportunities for your staff (including teachers and your

instructional leaders) to reflect on how they might have different expectations for different groups of students. [This professional learning approach](#) can serve as a starting point.

**Give all educators sustained and regular opportunities to reflect on the biases they have that might cause them to hold lower expectations for some subgroups of students.** While reflecting directly on bias is only one piece of addressing it, it is an important first step. Consider using this [toolkit from UnboundED](#) as a starting point.

**RECOMMENDATION 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.**

**Set a concrete goal to increase the diversity of your teacher workforce.** Start by assessing the current demographics of your workforce, using [these questions](#) as a starting point. If your educator workforce is largely white, commit to changing that. (This certainly matters if your schools serve largely students of color, as more teachers of color are critical for improving outcomes for students of color. But even if your study body is largely white, research shows that a more diverse teacher workforce benefits students of all races.<sup>1</sup>) Set a concrete goal for diversifying your workforce (e.g., 10 percent more teachers of color in the next school year) and share this goal publicly. Finally, address the systemic barriers that keep teachers of color out of the profession and commit to a staffing model that values diversity and maintains a focus on social justice and equity.<sup>2</sup>

**Partner with local community organizations and even high schools to identify new pipelines of prospective teachers.** Collaborate with local teacher preparation programs to identify particular areas of need, and hold prep programs accountable for providing a more diverse pipeline of new teachers.

**Analyze which students in your district are taking advanced or honors courses** (or qualify for gifted or magnet programs in younger grades), looking for patterns that are mismatched with your student demographics. For example, are 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.

**Examine the relationship between course grades and exam scores at the school level**, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, English language learner status, and socioeconomic background. Publish this data with the goal of ensuring that grades provide accurate information to students and parents about how prepared students are for the next grade level and ultimately, for college and careers.

**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.

<sup>1</sup> Cherng, H. and Halpin, P. (2016). The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 45(7), pp 407–420. Retrieved on July 31st, 2018 from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X16671718>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.