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THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

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

TNTP reimagine teaching

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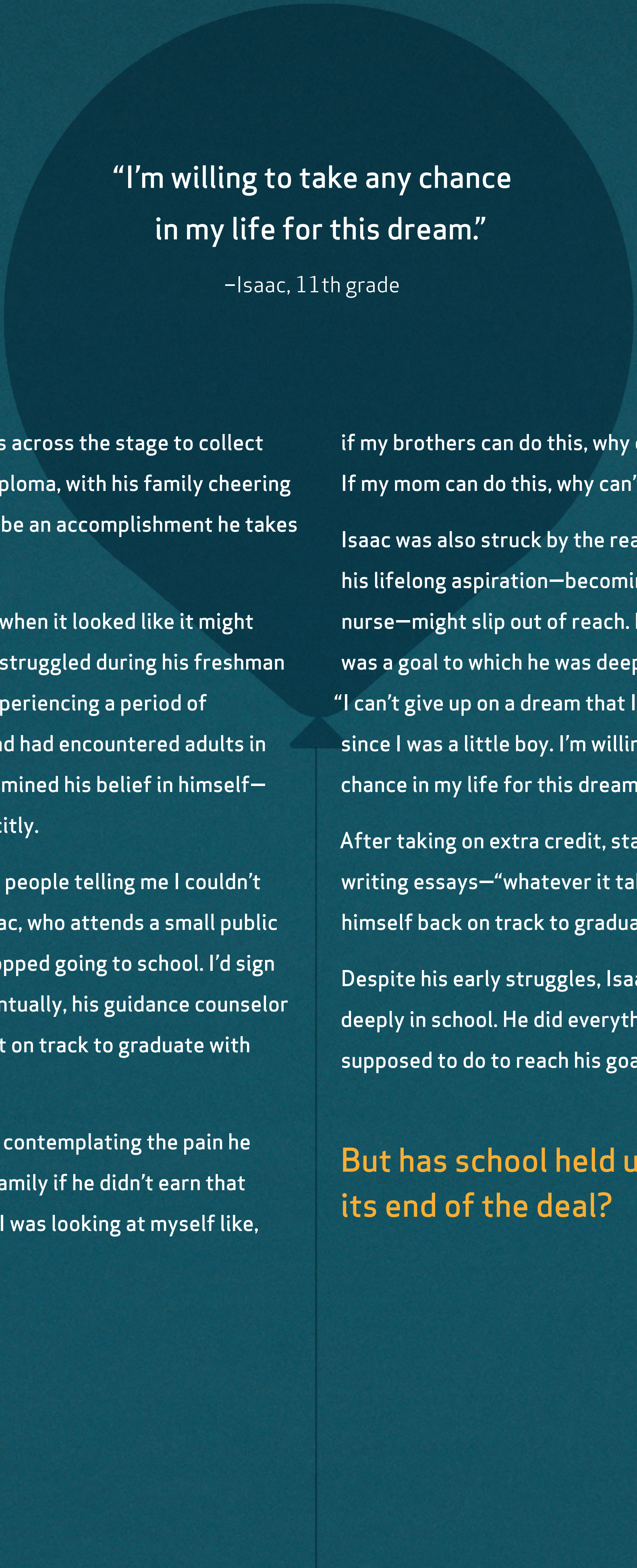


> “I’m willing to take any chance in my life for this dream.”
>
> –Isaac, 11th grade

When Isaac[1] walks across the stage to collect his high school diploma, with his family cheering him on, it will not be an accomplishment he takes for granted.

There was a time when it looked like it might not happen. He’d struggled during his freshman year, including experiencing a period of homelessness, and had encountered adults in school who undermined his belief in himself—some quite explicitly.

“There were many people telling me I couldn’t make it,” says Isaac, who attends a small public high school. “I stopped going to school. I’d sign in and leave.” Eventually, his guidance counselor told him he wasn’t on track to graduate with his class.

He found himself contemplating the pain he would cause his family if he didn’t earn that diploma. “It hurt. I was looking at myself like, if my brothers can do this, why can’t I? If my mom can do this, why can’t I?”

Isaac was also struck by the realization that his lifelong aspiration—becoming a registered nurse—might slip out of reach. For Isaac, it was a goal to which he was deeply committed. “I can’t give up on a dream that I’ve always had since I was a little boy. I’m willing to take any chance in my life for this dream.”

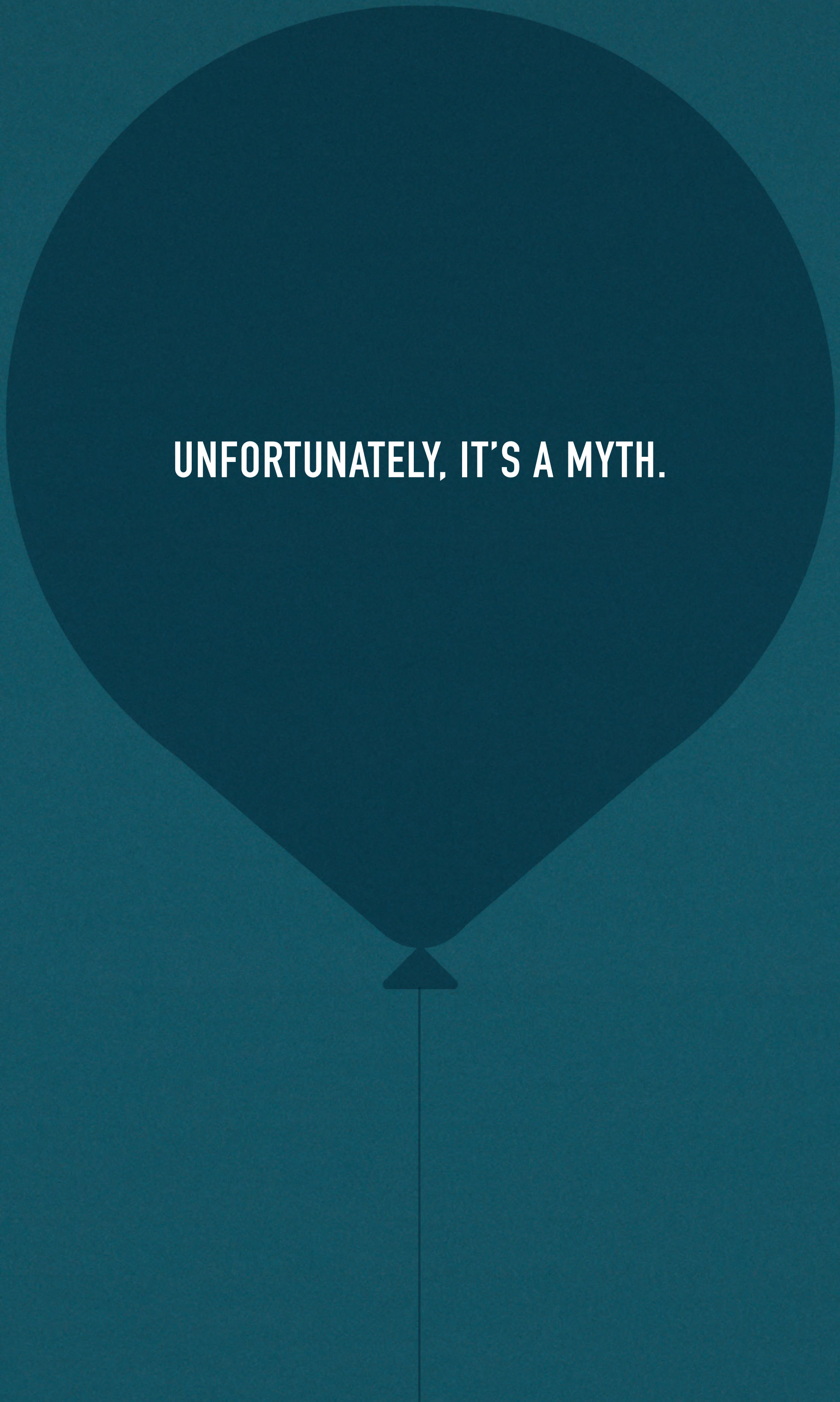
After taking on extra credit, staying late, writing essays—“whatever it takes”—he got himself back on track to graduate.

Despite his early struggles, Isaac invested deeply in school. He did everything he was supposed to do to reach his goals.

But has school held up its end of the deal?

It's a question that has to be asked because for too many students today, the answer is no. While more students than ever before are enrolling in college,[2] far fewer are succeeding once they get there. Nationwide, 40 percent of college students (including 66 percent of Black college students and 53 percent of Latinx[3] college students) take at least one remedial course,[4] where they spend time and money learning skills they were told they'd already mastered in high school. A recent study found that college remediation costs students and their families $1.5 billion annually, with one in four students spending an average of $3,000 extra to earn their degrees—and since first-time bachelor's degree candidates who take a single remedial course are 74 percent more likely to drop out, many of these students are sinking dollars into degrees they'll never see.[5] Graduates who opt for a career straight out of high school aren't faring much better, with many employers reporting that high school graduates enter their roles missing the skills they need to do their jobs well.[6]

In other words, Isaac and millions of students across the country are working hard to get through school, only to find themselves ill-prepared to live the lives they hope for. They're planning their futures on the belief that doing well in school creates opportunities—that showing up, doing the work, and meeting their teachers' expectations will prepare them for what's next. They believe that for good reason: We've been telling them so.



UNFORTUNATELY, IT’S A MYTH.

INTRODUCTION

How can so many students be graduating from high school unprepared to meet their goals for college and careers?

Three years ago, we set out to answer that question. We suspected that we could gain a better understanding of students' daily experiences by observing those experiences in action, looking closely at the work students were doing, and most importantly, by asking students directly. We hypothesized that a clearer picture of students' daily experiences could point the way toward changes to policy and practice that would bridge the gap between what students need and what they're getting every day in their classrooms.

We partnered with five diverse school systems, rural and urban, district and charter, to listen to students' views on their educational experiences and observe how those experiences played out, in real time, in their classrooms. While "student experiences" include many things within and outside school, we chose to focus on a set of in-school elements that offered a window into what students were doing in their classes and how they perceived that time.

Above all, we wanted to understand students' aspirations for themselves, what kind of lives they wanted to lead, and how school was preparing them to live those lives—or letting them down.

When students who started the year behind grade level had access to stronger instruction, they closed gaps with their peers by six months.

HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND:

Students have big, clear plans.

They want to be doctors and lawyers, teachers, artists, and athletes. Ninety-four percent of students we surveyed aspire to attend college, and 70 percent of high schoolers have career goals that require at least a college degree.

Most students do what they're asked in school—but are still not ready to succeed *after* school.

In the nearly 1,000 lessons we observed, students were working on activities related to class 88 percent of the time. They met the demands of their assignments 71 percent of the time, and more than half brought home As and Bs. Yet students only demonstrated mastery of grade-level standards on their assignments—a benchmark for being on track for the lives most of them want as adults—17 percent of the time. That gap exists because so few assignments actually gave students a chance to demonstrate grade-level mastery.

Students spend most of their time in school without access to four key resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations.

Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren't appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn't ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject. And students reported that their school experiences were engaging just 55 percent of the time overall (among high schoolers, only 42 percent of the time). Underlying these weak experiences were low expectations: We found that while more than 80 percent of teachers supported standards for college readiness in theory, less than half had the expectation that their students could reach that bar.

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.

For example, classrooms that served predominantly students from higher-income backgrounds spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments and five times as much time with strong instruction, compared to classrooms with predominantly students from low-income backgrounds.

Greater access to the four resources can and does improve student achievement—*particularly* for students who start the school year behind.

When students did have the chance to work on content that was appropriate for their grade, they rose to the occasion more often than not. Those chances paid off: In classrooms where students had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they gained nearly two months of additional learning compared to their peers. Classrooms with higher levels of engagement gained about two-and-a-half months of learning. In classrooms where teachers held higher expectations, students gained more than four months. The relationships between the resources and student outcomes were even stronger in classrooms where students started the year off behind. When students who started the year behind grade level had access to stronger instruction, for example, they closed gaps with their peers by six months; in classrooms with more grade-appropriate assignments, those gaps closed by more than seven months.

In short, students and their families have been deeply misled. We talk about school as a series of small opportunities for students—to show up, work hard, earn good grades—that add up to much bigger ones later in life. When students don't find the opportunities they were promised on the other side of the graduation stage, we assume they or their families must have done something to blow their big chance, or that they were simply reaching too high.

Yet we found classroom after classroom filled with A and B students whose big goals for their lives were slipping further away each day, unbeknownst to them and their families—not because they couldn't learn what they needed to reach them, but because they were rarely given a real chance to try.

That's the opportunity myth. It means that at every grade level, in every district, for students of every demographic background, school is not honoring their aspirations or setting them up for success—in their next grade, in college, and in whatever they want to do down the road. This has a cumulative effect, particularly for the students who receive the very least of what our schools have to offer.

Let's be clear: Teachers alone are not responsible for this myth—either creating it or fixing it. In many ways, teachers too have been subject to a false promise. Their time has been wasted on expensive and lengthy teacher preparation programs that don't prepare them for the realities of the classroom[7] and development opportunities that don't help them improve;[8] on having to sift through far too many mediocre materials;[9] with guidance that pulls them in a thousand directions but doesn't help them do their jobs well—all while being undervalued and under-compensated. While they make many individual decisions in their classrooms, those choices are often dictated by the incentives of the system they work within.

At every level of the education sector, from classrooms to statehouses, from schools of education to nonprofit offices, adults make daily choices that perpetuate a cycle of inequity and mediocrity in our schools. Consciously or not, we choose to let many students do work that's far below their grade level. We choose to leave teachers without the skills and support they need to give all their students access to high-quality academic experiences. We choose to act on assumptions about what students want and need out of school, without really listening to them and their families. We choose, in essence, which students are more deserving of reaching their goals.

Yet our research also makes clear that gaps in students' school experiences and outcomes are not inevitable. We could make different choices—choices that could make a real difference in the short term, without an infusion of new funding, as well as those that will lay the groundwork for deeper structural change. These are the kinds of choices that could make the difference between students like Isaac becoming a nurse, or leaving that dream unfulfilled. We could choose, in other words, to upend the opportunity myth.

We wanted to understand how.

We partnered with **FIVE** diverse school systems

We observed nearly **1,000** lessons

We reviewed nearly **5,000** assignments

We analyzed more than **20,000** student work samples

We collected nearly **30,000** real-time student surveys

METHODOLOGY

More than 50 million children each spend roughly 1,200 hours every year in public school classrooms in this country.[10] Over the course of their K-12 careers, that amounts to more than 15,000 hours in the lives of each child. During those hours, adults have nearly all the power. They decide everything from what work goes in front of students to how they spend their time; from what their classrooms and school buildings look and feel like to what tests they need to pass and what courses they need to graduate. Ultimately, those choices determine how well-equipped students are to meet the goals they set for themselves when they leave school.

But these decisions are rarely based on concrete information about how students actually experience school—because those of us in and out of schools who consider ourselves education "experts" rarely bother to ask. Instead, the crucial work of getting students the education they need and deserve is built on a lot of guessing, based on adults' experiences and implicit biases: guessing at what kids want out of their lives; what kind of content and instruction will engage them deeply and therefore allow them to learn; what factors truly influence academic outcomes.

Filling our collective information gap about what students really think and feel is an essential piece of helping more students succeed. We have to stop guessing and inform our decisions—on everything from teacher training to curriculum to resource allocation—with input from students and clearer information about their daily experiences.

That's what we set out to do in this study. In our work in schools and districts across the country, we'd seen so many dedicated educators working hard, often in deeply challenging conditions, to give students what they need and deserve. Yet in many of these same classrooms, we observed lessons that weren't nearly challenging or engaging enough to prepare students for academic or professional success after high school. We didn't know how to help our partners address these issues because the solutions weren't clear to us, either. We wondered if we could improve the support we provided to schools and districts if we ourselves had a better grasp on the student experience. We came to the conclusion that the only way to do that was to look closely at what students were doing in school every day, and ask students themselves how they perceive it.

ARE "COLLEGE-READY STANDARDS" THE RIGHT BAR?

In our research, we've used academic standards for college and career readiness as an important bar against which we assessed assignments and classroom practices.

We believe that bar is the right one because it defines what students should be able to do at each grade level. Standards are not curriculum: They do not, for example, identify an explicit set of texts students must read, or tell teachers how to help students master the target skills. Instead, they seek to clarify the thinking and problem-solving abilities students need in order to be ready—by the end of their K-12 careers—for the expectations of college-level work. Since the vast majority of students told us they aspired to attend college, that bar matters: It is the very one students themselves have defined.

To do this, we collected nearly 30,000 in-the-moment student surveys. Using a technology that prompted students in grades six through 12 to answer a few questions at random times during class, we captured a snapshot of their real-time reactions to school. We also surveyed third through fifth graders during the last five minutes of class, and found that elementary students were just as capable as their older schoolmates of providing rich and telling insight into their lives at school.

Across our five partner school systems, we also observed nearly a thousand full-length lessons at all grade levels from K-12, and reviewed almost 5,000 assignments and more than 20,000 individual student work samples. We visited each participating school daily for a week straight at three points in the year, which gave us the chance to see the same teachers and students at the beginning, middle, and end of their time together (and offered a much more comprehensive lens on the learning environment than a single day's lesson could have). These classrooms were not substantially different than the others in their districts, and they represented a wide range: those with new teachers and veterans; those at all age levels; a diverse range of subjects; mixed-ability classes and tracked ones. Four of these school systems were located in states that use standards aligned to the Common Core State Standards; one was not.

To assess the quality of content students worked on, we looked at four elements of every assignment: (1) whether the content in the assignments was aligned to relevant grade-level academic standards; (2) whether the assignments gave students the chance to engage in important content-specific practices, like citing evidence from rigorous texts in literacy, or discussing mathematical ideas using precise mathematical language; (3) whether the assignments gave students a chance to learn relevant content that built their knowledge of the world or helped them see how what they were learning could be applied in the real world; and (4) student performance on both the assignments themselves and against the bar for their grade-level standards.

To study instruction, we observed full-length class periods and assessed (1) whether students were doing what they were asked; (2) whether they were being asked to work on grade-level content; and (3) whether teachers were using instructional practices that gave students the chance to do most of the thinking in the lesson.

We surveyed teachers to capture their knowledge of grade-level standards, their opinions on those standards, and their beliefs about their classroom practices and their students' abilities. We conducted focus groups with nearly 100 teachers and interviewed 24 school leaders at multiple times throughout the year. And we assessed a large set of extant data provided to us by our partner districts on course access, enrollment policies, and district policies on curriculum adoption, among others.

We hypothesized that students' experiences of school were influenced by a confluence of factors—among them, the quality of the work they were doing, the instruction they received, and the expectations of their teachers—and that those factors would interact to have an impact on their academic growth. Taken together with students' in-the-moment survey responses, we were able to triangulate students' perspectives with the classes they were in, the work they were doing and instruction they were receiving, and their academic outcomes.

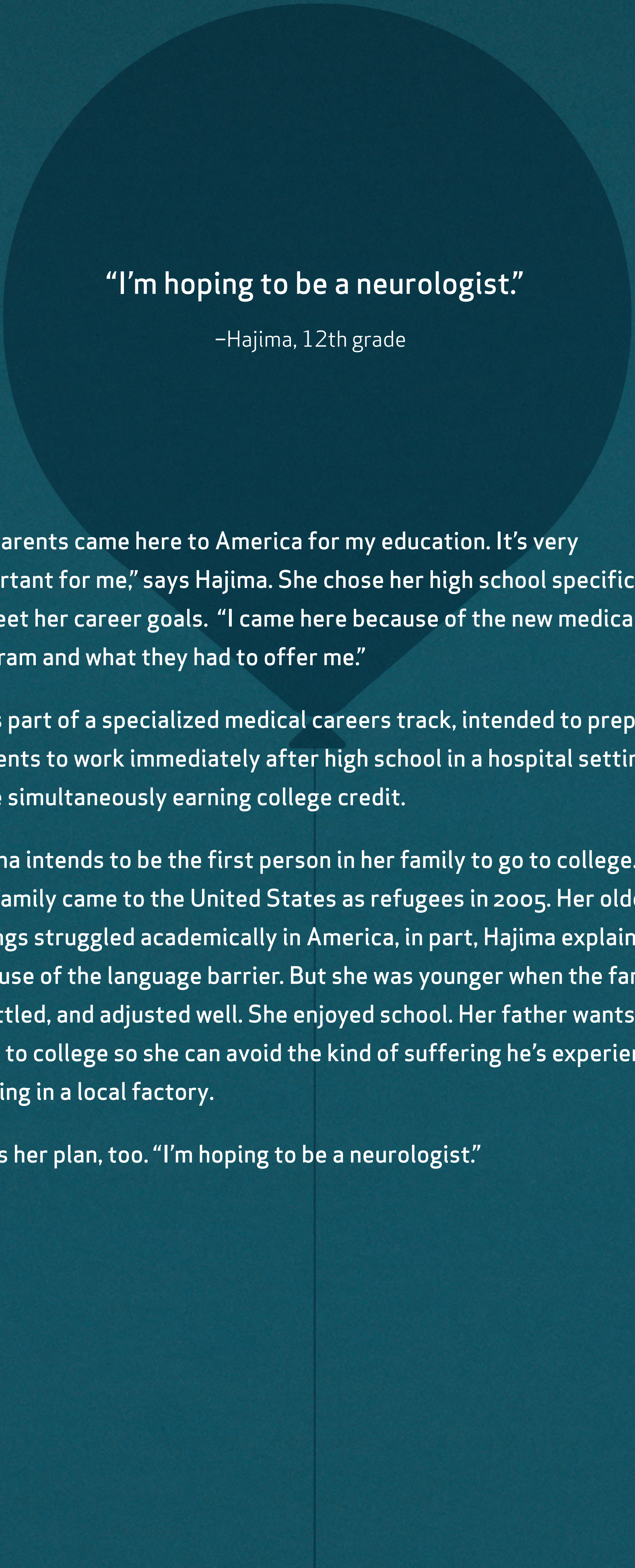
In addition to amassing this rich data set, we also sat down with a smaller subset of students (more than 50 over two school years), and got to know them. We observed them in class and spoke to them about their experiences, their likes and dislikes, their families, their goals. Just a few of those students are profiled here. While their names and identifying characteristics have been changed throughout this report, their stories help us understand what the data means in the real lives of individual young people.

They also help us understand what real, tangible changes school systems can make—starting tomorrow and over the long haul—to provide more students with school experiences that are meaningful, that honor their aspirations for themselves and their families, and that give them a fighting chance to meet those goals.

For our complete methodology, including further explanation of our analytical approaches and full analysis results, see the Technical Appendix at tntp.org/opportunitymyth

THE OPPORTUNITY SEEKERS

We've already met Isaac. Here are four other students who shared their stories with us. Their names have been changed, but their words are their own. They come from different backgrounds and communities across the country, but they share a common thread: They have ambitious goals, and they expect and believe school will help them get there.



"I'm hoping to be a neurologist."

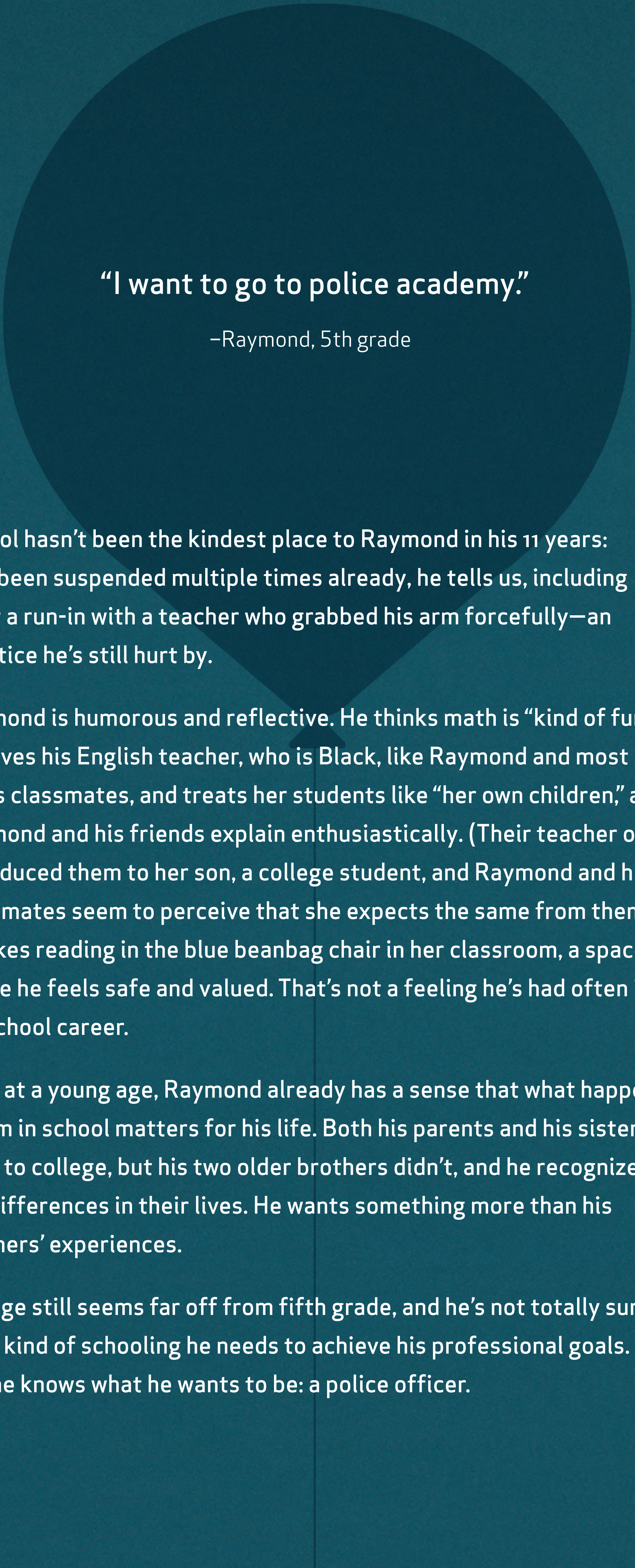
–Hajima, 12th grade

"My parents came here to America for my education. It's very important for me," says Hajima. She chose her high school specifically to meet her career goals. "I came here because of the new medical program and what they had to offer me."

She's part of a specialized medical careers track, intended to prepare students to work immediately after high school in a hospital setting while simultaneously earning college credit.

Hajima intends to be the first person in her family to go to college. Her family came to the United States as refugees in 2005. Her older siblings struggled academically in America, in part, Hajima explains, because of the language barrier. But she was younger when the family resettled, and adjusted well. She enjoyed school. Her father wants her to go to college so she can avoid the kind of suffering he's experienced working in a local factory.

That's her plan, too. "I'm hoping to be a neurologist."



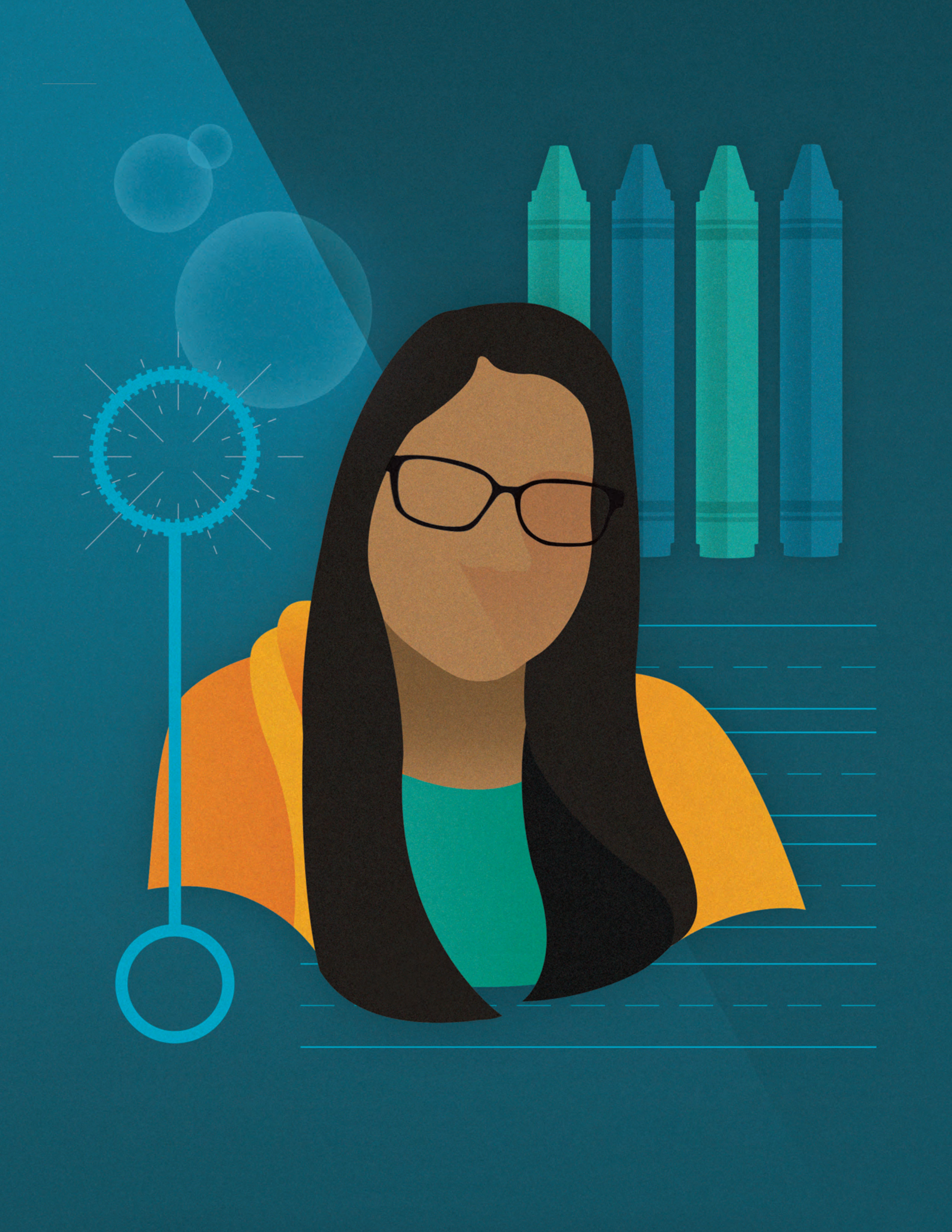
> “I want to go to police academy.”
>
> –Raymond, 5th grade

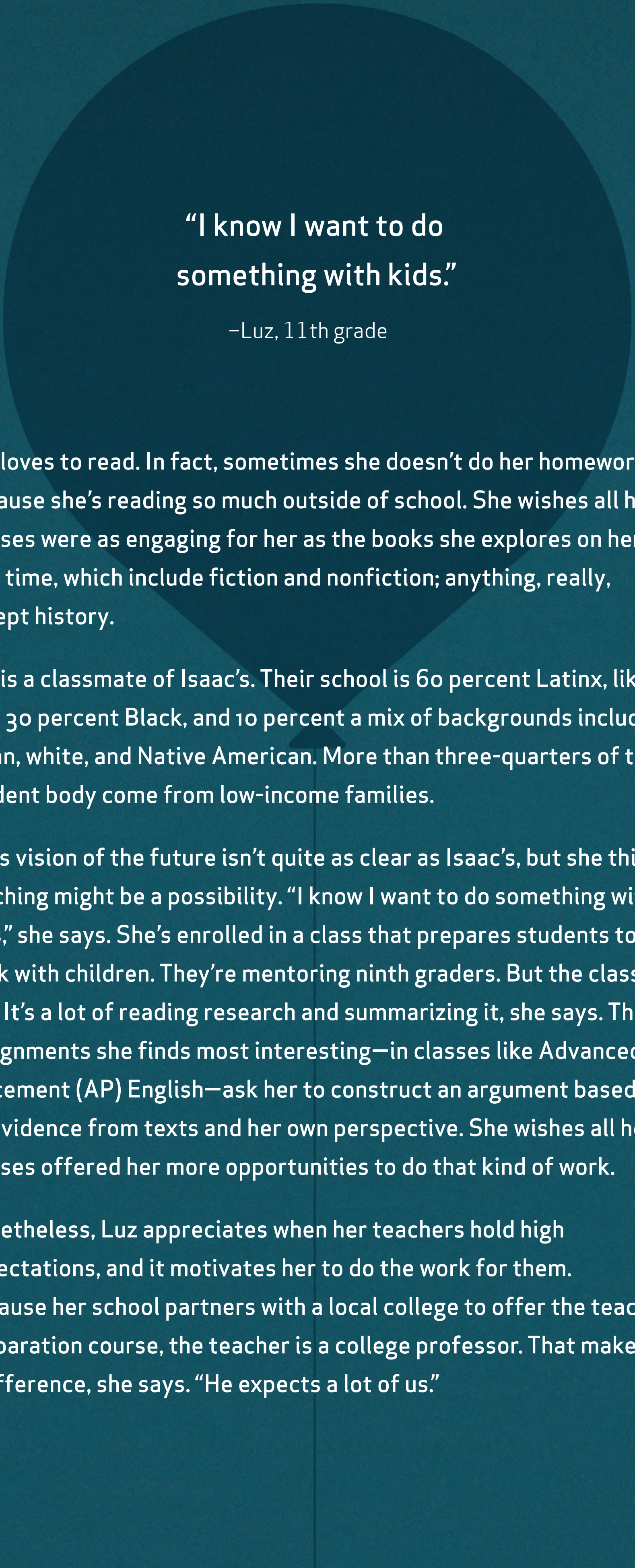
School hasn’t been the kindest place to Raymond in his 11 years: He’s been suspended multiple times already, he tells us, including after a run-in with a teacher who grabbed his arm forcefully—an injustice he’s still hurt by.

Raymond is humorous and reflective. He thinks math is “kind of fun.” He loves his English teacher, who is Black, like Raymond and most of his classmates, and treats her students like “her own children,” as Raymond and his friends explain enthusiastically. (Their teacher once introduced them to her son, a college student, and Raymond and his classmates seem to perceive that she expects the same from them.) He likes reading in the blue beanbag chair in her classroom, a space where he feels safe and valued. That’s not a feeling he’s had often in his school career.

Even at a young age, Raymond already has a sense that what happens to him in school matters for his life. Both his parents and his sister went to college, but his two older brothers didn’t, and he recognizes the differences in their lives. He wants something more than his brothers’ experiences.

College still seems far off from fifth grade, and he’s not totally sure what kind of schooling he needs to achieve his professional goals. But he knows what he wants to be: a police officer.





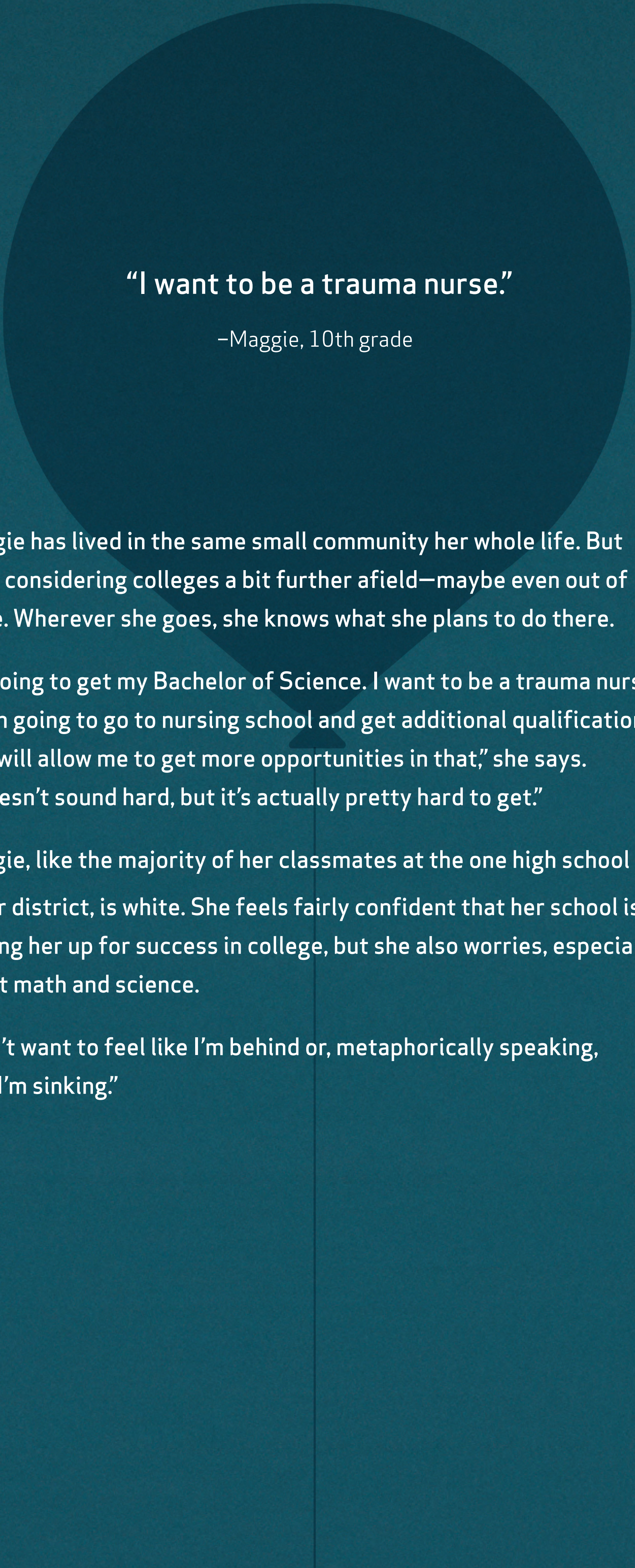
> "I know I want to do something with kids."
>
> –Luz, 11th grade

Luz loves to read. In fact, sometimes she doesn't do her homework because she's reading so much outside of school. She wishes all her classes were as engaging for her as the books she explores on her own time, which include fiction and nonfiction; anything, really, except history.

Luz is a classmate of Isaac's. Their school is 60 percent Latinx, like Luz, 30 percent Black, and 10 percent a mix of backgrounds including Asian, white, and Native American. More than three-quarters of the student body come from low-income families.

Luz's vision of the future isn't quite as clear as Isaac's, but she thinks teaching might be a possibility. "I know I want to do something with kids," she says. She's enrolled in a class that prepares students to work with children. They're mentoring ninth graders. But the class is dry. It's a lot of reading research and summarizing it, she says. The assignments she finds most interesting—in classes like Advanced Placement (AP) English—ask her to construct an argument based on evidence from texts and her own perspective. She wishes all her classes offered her more opportunities to do that kind of work.

Nonetheless, Luz appreciates when her teachers hold high expectations, and it motivates her to do the work for them. Because her school partners with a local college to offer the teacher preparation course, the teacher is a college professor. That makes a difference, she says. "He expects a lot of us."



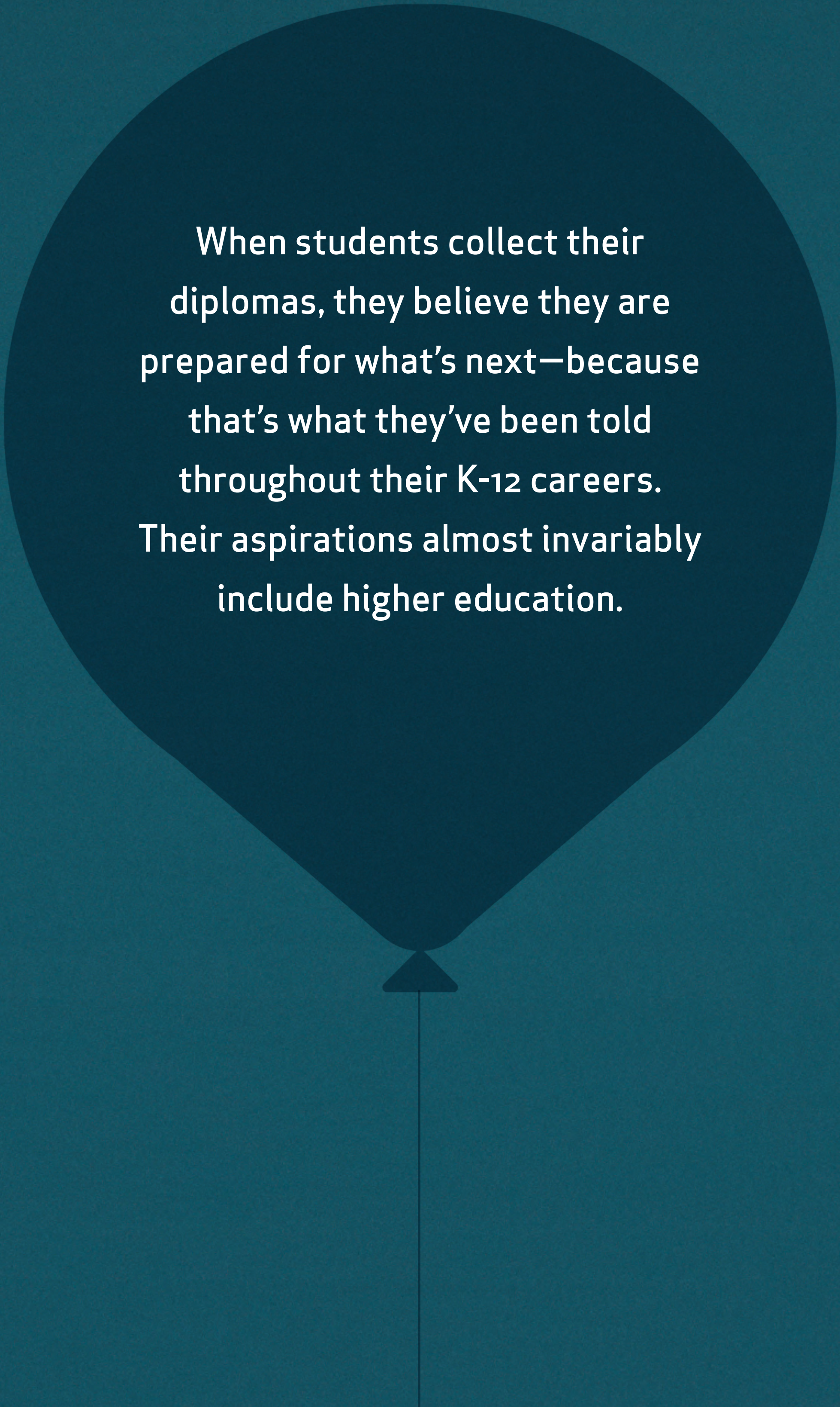
> “I want to be a trauma nurse.”
>
> –Maggie, 10th grade

Maggie has lived in the same small community her whole life. But she’s considering colleges a bit further afield—maybe even out of state. Wherever she goes, she knows what she plans to do there.

“I’m going to get my Bachelor of Science. I want to be a trauma nurse, so I’m going to go to nursing school and get additional qualifications that will allow me to get more opportunities in that,” she says. “It doesn’t sound hard, but it’s actually pretty hard to get.”

Maggie, like the majority of her classmates at the one high school in her district, is white. She feels fairly confident that her school is setting her up for success in college, but she also worries, especially about math and science.

“I don’t want to feel like I’m behind or, metaphorically speaking, that I’m sinking.”



When students collect their diplomas, they believe they are prepared for what's next—because that's what they've been told throughout their K-12 careers. Their aspirations almost invariably include higher education.

For years, getting more students through high school has been a huge goal of educators and policymakers across the country. The effort has largely paid off: High school graduation rates have risen steadily, past 80 percent.[11] When students collect their diplomas, they believe they are prepared for what's next—because that's what they've been told throughout their K-12 careers.

Their aspirations almost invariably include higher education. Enrollment in degree-granting institutions grew by 23 percent between 1995 and 2005, and a further 14 percent between 2005 and 2015—fueled by increasing numbers of Black, Latinx, and Asian students.[12] For the first time, students coming of age today are doing so in a nation where higher education is viewed not as the purview of a privileged few, but as a baseline expectation for most families.

The students in our sample embody this trend. Ninety-four percent said college was part of their plan. That held true across all five school systems we studied: In each district, more than 90 percent of the third- through 12th-grade students we surveyed planned to go to college. It also held true across all demographic groups: 95 percent of Black students, 95 percent of Latinx students, and 94 percent of students from families where a language other than English is spoken at home told us they want and expect to go to college.

It isn't an arbitrary goal. Like Hajima and her peers, these students want to go to college so they can achieve their career goals. Roughly 70 percent of high school students told us they aspired to career pathways that required at least a college degree. The thousands of students we surveyed intend to become everything from doctors and lawyers to teachers and hair stylists, musicians and athletes. Across all grade levels, healthcare and public/social service were among the top three sectors in which students aspired to work, and by high school, careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) had risen to the top of the list as well. Nearly a third of high schoolers across all five school systems told us they hoped to work in healthcare.

These students expect their K-12 education to add up to something practical: readiness to meet their goals, to have the careers they dream of, to support their families and communities. That's the promise of school.

But is school delivering on that promise?

DIFFERENT RESOURCES, DIFFERENT RESULTS

In the hundreds of classrooms we observed, we found that the majority of students were doing the work that was asked of them. Contrary to popular narratives about disruptive kids who don't put in much effort, we saw classroom after classroom where students appeared to be doing the academic work given to them.

Nearly 90 percent of the time, students told us they were doing activities related to classwork. Seventy-one percent of the time, students met the demands of the assignments their teachers gave them, and more than half of the third- through 12th-grade students in our partner school systems earned As and Bs in English language arts (ELA) and math; 80 percent earned at least a C.

Moreover, the courses students were enrolled in—on paper—should be putting them on track for college. We looked at the course trajectories of all high school students in each district we studied, and assessed them against the approach set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).[13] Nearly 80 percent of students were on trajectories categorized as standard, mid-level, or rigorous, based on course access—all of which could get students accepted into a four-year college or university.

On the whole, then, most students we studied were "doing well" in school—one of the most important keys to success later in life, according to American mythology.

But when we looked at how these students were doing based on the bar set by actual standards for college readiness—the bar students themselves said they aspired to—the opportunity myth emerged. While students succeeded on more than two-thirds of their assignments, they only demonstrated success against the grade-level standards 17 percent of the time on those exact same assignments *(Figure 1)*. That gap exists because so few assignments actually gave students a chance to demonstrate grade-level mastery.

To be clear, "grade-level mastery" doesn't mean students must have read a particular list of books. It means they have had the chance to practice a core set of grade-level-appropriate competencies for processing information, thinking critically about texts, and solving problems using evidence. Those are essential skills that can make the difference between graduating ready for college or the workplace, or not.

FIGURE 1 | STUDENT SUCCESS ON ASSIGNMENTS VERSUS MASTERY OF GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS ON THOSE ASSIGNMENTS

Students succeeded on	They met grade-level standards on
71%	**17%**
of their assignments	of those exact same assignments

Even though most students are meeting the demands of their assignments, they're not prepared for college-level work because those assignments don't often give them the chance to reach for that bar.

Students need these four key resources in their daily school experiences:

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

That readiness is something for which students themselves yearn. When we asked students what they hoped to achieve after high school, Hajima and her peers spoke of college degrees and the meaningful careers that follow. But a large percentage of those students were being woefully underprepared to meet their ambitious goals.

What explains this gap between the good work students put into school and their long odds of graduating ready to achieve their goals?

Our research suggests that the answers lie, in part, in a set of resources students have—or don't have—access to in school each day, which distinguish high-quality academic experiences from weak ones. Typically, when we talk about "resources" in education, we think of tangibles like funding, space, technology, or supplies. Those matter, of course. But here, we have identified four key resources beyond the predictable must-haves, which are critical to students' success and are correlated to better academic outcomes.

The four key resources at the heart of high-quality academic experiences for students are:

- Consistent opportunities to work on **grade-appropriate assignments**;
- **Strong instruction** that lets students do most of the thinking in the lesson;
- A sense of **deep engagement** in what they're learning;
- Teachers who hold **high expectations** for students and truly believe they can meet grade-level standards.

When students had access to *more* of these resources, their outcomes tended to improve. On average, students in classrooms with stronger assignments *or* higher levels of engagement experienced about two additional months of learning *(Figure 2)*.[14] And the resources interact with each other in ways that also influence students' experiences and outcomes: We saw a relationship, for example, between stronger instruction and higher levels of engagement. In classrooms in the top quartile for instructional practices, engagement was 31 percent higher than in classrooms with weaker instruction.

Notably, these resources were particularly influential for students with the most to gain academically. In classrooms serving high proportions of students behind grade level, stronger instructional practices amounted to about six months of additional learning. When students who started the year behind had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they closed the outcomes gap with their peers by more than seven months *(Figure 3)*.[15] Those classrooms did not set an unattainable bar for assignment quality: On average, they offered grade-appropriate assignments 52 percent of the time, compared to 26 percent of the time across all classrooms. In fact, across all classrooms in our study, the average top-quartile classroom typically used grade-appropriate assignments only about 50 percent of the time. Relatively small improvements in assignment quality, instruction, and engagement offer a real chance for students who have been previously under-served by school to begin catching up to their peers.

The fourth key resource—teacher expectations for students' success against grade-level standards—demonstrated the strongest relationship to student growth in our study. In part, this may be due to the way expectations interact with the other resources and inform students' access to them. For example, teachers who agreed that their students could meet the bar set by grade-level standards tended to offer stronger assignments and instruction. Teachers who held the lowest expectations tended to offer lower-quality assignments. Those choices have consequences: Across all classrooms, students in those in the top quartile for teacher expectations gained about an additional five months of learning, compared to students in classrooms in the bottom quartile for teacher expectations.

When students who started the year behind had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they closed the outcomes gap with their peers by more than seven months.

Students' perceptions of their teachers' beliefs also aligned to stronger academic outcomes. Students who agreed that their teachers "think it's important that they learn a lot" did better on all assignments than students who did not think their teachers held this belief. On assignments that were standards-aligned, where students were stretched to do their very best thinking, students who agreed with this statement about their teachers' beliefs met the bar 54 percent of the time, compared to 38 percent of the time for students who did not.[16]

In classrooms where we observed more grade-level assignments, we also found that students met the bar on those assignments more often than not, even though the bar was higher. When students were tasked with assignments that were appropriate for their grade, they met the demands of those assignments a little more than half the time *(Figure 4)*. That was true of students in nearly all groups—regardless of race or language background. It was also true in nearly all types of classrooms, including those that are often identified as "high-need." In all of these classrooms, students were more likely than not to have success on assignments that were grade-appropriate—when they were given the opportunity to try.

The Bright Spots

What did these classrooms look like, where students had greater access to high-quality content and instruction and were deeply engaged with their learning?

The truth is, each one looked different. There was the 12th-grade English classroom in the western half of the country, where students read a high-quality, grade-appropriate memoir. In small groups, students discussed the book using evidence from the text, pushing each other to use academic language, guided by a rubric. Their teacher floated from group to group, listening and encouraging students to disagree respectfully and use evidence to support their points of view. All the while, she gently reinforced the tools and skills they needed to participate in college-level discourse.

Or there was the fourth-grade math class where students were engaged for an entire period in an active exploration of equivalent fractions. In this joyful classroom, the teacher supported each student's understanding and provided individualized support so each student could access this grade-level content. Students explained their own thinking, and their teacher offered clarity and praised their process as she moved them along.

Where we saw entire schools that were bright spots, there were clear patterns. At an elementary school in the south, for example, teachers and administrators shared a consistent definition of what good instruction and student learning should look like. They articulated a common expectation that students would have access to rigorous content and would be responsible for doing the thinking and learning in the classroom, with teachers acting as facilitators. They also expected that students would be deeply engaged in reading, writing, and discussion across subjects. Students in this school spent 24 percent more time with grade-appropriate assignments, 61 percent more time with strong instruction, and reported being engaged 18 percent more of the time than the average elementary classroom in our study.

Those shared expectations were not accidental: In fact, they were consistent up and down this district, starting with the superintendent. Teachers, school leadership, and district leadership all articulated shared expectations for the kind of instruction and engagement students should have access to. There were structures in place to support and maintain that high bar: Teachers received walk-throughs of their classrooms every week or two.

FIGURE 2 | **DIFFERENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT GROWTH BETWEEN BEST (TOP QUARTILE) AND WORST (BOTTOM QUARTILE) CLASSROOMS**

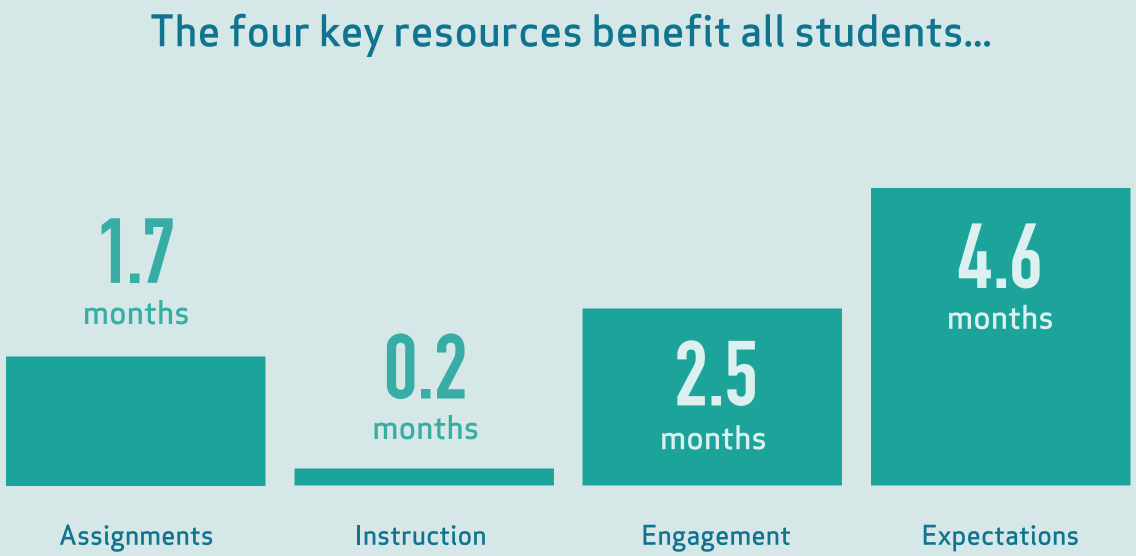
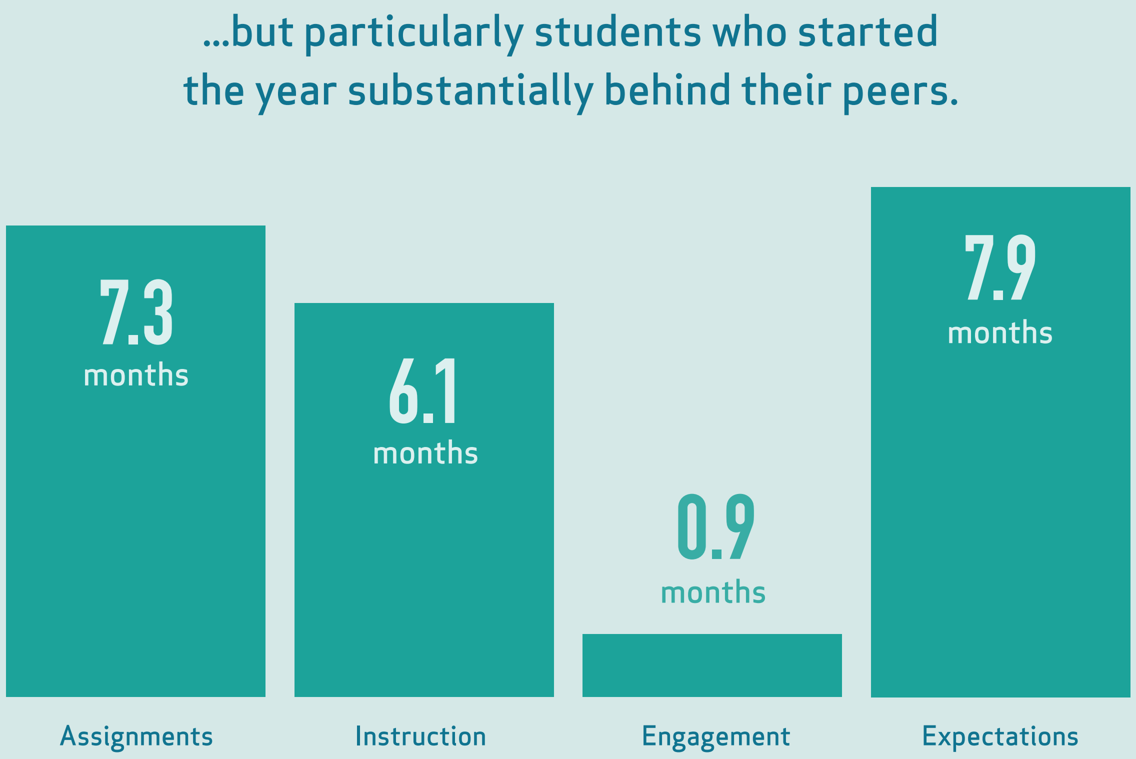


FIGURE 3 | **DIFFERENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT GROWTH BETWEEN BEST (TOP HALF) AND WORST (BOTTOM HALF) CLASSROOMS AMONG CLASSROOMS WHERE AVERAGE STUDENT IS SUBSTANTIALLY BEHIND GRADE LEVEL**



In these observations, administrators expected to see students working on grade-appropriate content, and that teachers would be able to explain exactly how they were addressing the full scope of the instructional shifts and the standards.

In this school, we heard from teachers and administrators alike that a consistent vision for great instruction, a strong curriculum, professional development aligned to that curriculum and designed to support teachers to implement it successfully, and a culture of high expectations for everyone were key. As one teacher explained, "Professional development didn't used to be helpful, but we started focusing on standards and what good instruction should look like." Another noted, "We are held to high expectations and we hold our kids to high expectations." Relative to the other schools in our sample, this elementary school showed higher levels of student engagement and strong instruction—suggesting that their focus on increasing access to those two resources in particular has paid off.

> We found classrooms and schools like this across our sample, serving a diverse range of students and families. They looked different, but their spirit was the same: students who were enjoying their learning; teachers who believed their students could do well; content and instructional practices that demanded students stretch themselves and honored their abilities to do just that.

The other schools that jumped out as positive outliers shared many of these characteristics. At one small high school, adults in the building were similarly focused on a core set of academic priorities: in their case, literacy across all subjects. (For example, students used a consistent writing protocol across all their classes.) Teachers and administrators articulated a common vision of what instruction should look like and spent a lot of time addressing how to fully implement the standards. The school also prioritized a high level of both support and accountability for teachers, through weekly observations and debriefs, and regular data meetings with administrators.

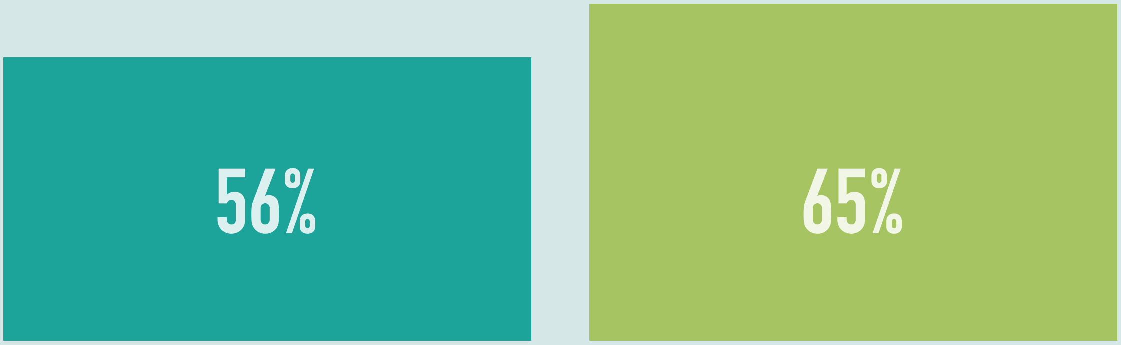
We found classrooms and schools like this across our sample, serving a diverse range of students and families. In about 70 of the classrooms we observed, students spent most of their time with grade-appropriate assignments; in nearly 30 classrooms, we saw strong instruction throughout all the lessons we observed; in 25 classrooms, students were engaged at least 80 percent of the time.[17] These classrooms looked different, but their spirit was the same: students who were enjoying their learning; teachers who believed their students could do well; content and instructional practices that demanded students stretch themselves and honored their abilities to do just that. We met teachers in these classrooms who were making conscious decisions to take a leap of faith and offer students more challenging assignments than they might once have attempted. There were teachers who were forcing themselves to step back and let their students do hard work (and sometimes stumble), and those who were holding themselves and their students accountable to a high bar. At the school level, we repeatedly saw a consistent focus on a relatively small set of academic priorities, and a high level of support for teachers to meet those priorities.

Unfortunately, classrooms and schools like these were the exception. School experiences that included ample access to the four key resources—grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations—were few and far between for most students.

FIGURE 4 | **STUDENT SUCCESS ON GRADE-LEVEL WORK VERSUS OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GRADE-LEVEL WORK**

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

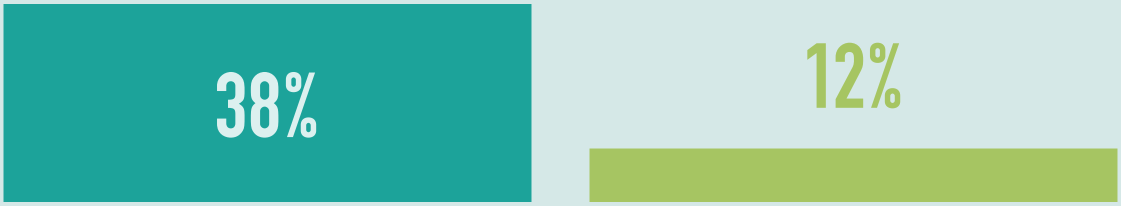
Success rates on grade-level work were similar...



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.

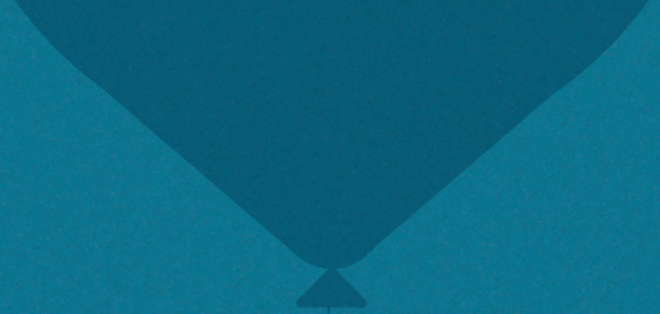


Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly students of color

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

NOTE: "Grade-level" assignments are assignments that earned our highest rating on the content domain. See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we rated assignments. To calculate the success rate in both types of classrooms, we combined all grade-level assignments from eligible classrooms. Because some classrooms provided more grade-level assignments than others, and because some classrooms never provided grade-level assignments, some classrooms (and students) are represented more heavily than others in this analysis. Only core subject classrooms with at least five days of assignments are included.

THE WEIGHT OF WASTED TIME



“I don’t want to feel behind.”

HAJIMA’S EXPERIENCE

When she arrived at her new high school, Hajima’s hope was that the medical careers program would put her on the right path for medical school, both in terms of academic readiness and with some college credit already under her belt. In fact, she had transferred from another public high school—one with higher test scores and more advanced course offerings—explicitly because she’d been enticed by the promise of this program.

Considering that Hajima joined her new school based on the promise that it would prepare her for pre-med studies in college, she was shocked to learn upon arrival that there were *no* AP math or science courses available to her.

She maxed out on the school’s math offerings as a junior. “They only have up to pre-calc,” she says. “I took that last year. If we feel the classes they have aren’t challenging for us, there are no other options.”

It isn’t lost on Hajima that the academic experiences she has access to at her current school—where her classmates are primarily Black—are weaker than those at her previous school (in the same district), which is primarily white. The tradeoffs have been painful. She reflects on her choice to move schools, in pursuit of *better* preparation for a medical career: “I don’t really regret moving here because of all the new friends. It’s just education-wise, I do, because it’s not challenging.”

She’d jump at the opportunity to learn more. “We *want* to be more prepared,” she says.

When Hajima and her best friend talk about how it feels to sit in classes that aren’t challenging enough, they speak of watching the clock. “The time goes super slow,” Hajima’s friend explains. In their physics class, for example, they might get through all the content in the first 20 minutes—and then have nothing to do. It worries Hajima deeply when she considers her future.

“I don’t want to feel like I’m behind when I walk into a class on the first day of college,” she says. “The teacher is not going to wait for me. I’m just going to be a small number in a class, and I don’t want to feel behind or left out.”

GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS

Hajima and her classmates will never get their time back—and it adds up. In the four core subjects—ELA, math, science, and social studies—an average student spent almost three-quarters of their time on assignments that were not grade-appropriate *(Figure 5)*.[18] In a single school year, that's the equivalent of more than *six months* of learning time.[19]

Consider the experience of the eighth graders in an ELA classroom who were asked to fill in missing vowels in a vocabulary worksheet. Or the students in an AP physics classroom, who spent an entire class period making a vocabulary poster. These sound like extreme examples, but they were far more the norm than the exception.

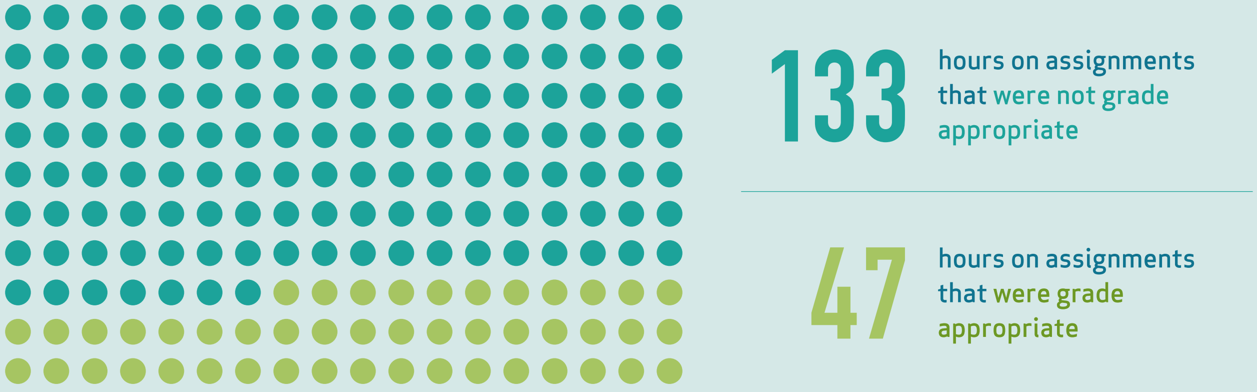
When students are consistently forced to do work below their grade level, they're missing opportunities to learn and practice the skills they'll need to make their life goals achievable. But they're also being denied a chance to prove—to themselves as much as anyone else—what they are capable of. Consider the student in one of our partner districts who was asked to solve a variety of word problems using addition and subtraction (a first-grade standard) and multiplication and division (a third-grade standard). That might be all right, except for one problem: This student was in fourth grade.

He did the work he was assigned, and answered 87 percent of the questions correctly. But the assignment offered him only the opportunity to grapple with content that was more appropriate for younger students.

Another assignment in the same classroom offered a better opportunity: The same student was asked to identify equivalent fractions using visual models, meeting a fourth-grade standard. Here, on the more challenging assignment, he answered 100 percent of the questions correctly.

FIGURE 5 | TIME SPENT ON GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS VERSUS NON-GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS

Of the 180 classroom hours in each core subject during the school year, students spent...



THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT POLICIES

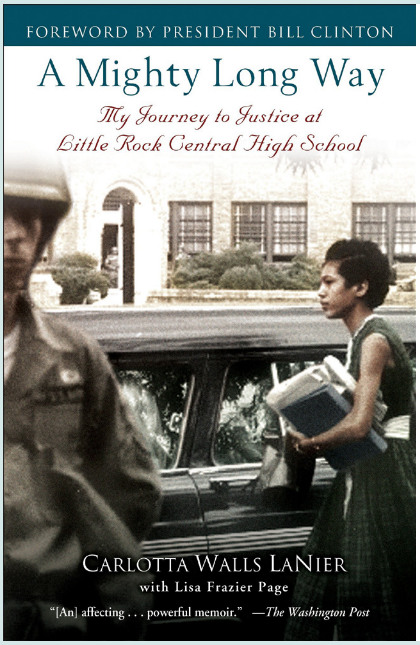
The content in front of students on a daily basis isn't good enough—simple as that. While improving content isn't a quick fix, giving students better assignments that are appropriately challenging will give more students the chance to get on track to meet their goals. Given the variation from classroom to classroom and the disheartening level of materials overall, a key question is: Where do these assignments originate? Who defines what students are asked to do and when?

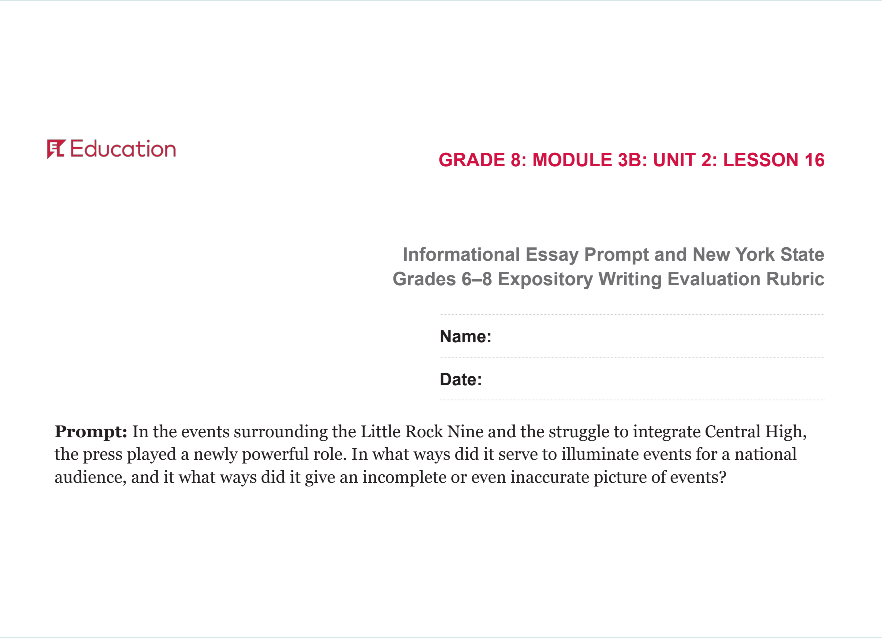
We looked at state- and district-level policies on curriculum adoption, as well as the quality of the materials districts chose. On the whole, we found that our partner districts were adopting materials of widely varying quality—and that in spite of having these district-provided materials, teachers were spending a significant amount of their planning time creating or selecting their own. The typical teacher in our sample reported spending seven hours per week on this, which adds up to more than 250 hours a year—hugely valuable time for teachers who are already stretched thin.

This might be time well-spent if there were evidence that teacher-created materials were giving students access to stronger content than those provided by districts. But this wasn't the case. In fact, materials created or selected by teachers were generally less likely than those provided by the district to meet academic standards in ELA and math. On average, teacher-created or selected materials aligned to academic standards, meaning they earned our highest content rating, 20 percent of the time, while district-adopted materials aligned 34 percent of the time. This alignment was even higher when districts had adopted high-quality materials: When teachers reported that their assignments came from high-quality district offerings, the assignments were grade-appropriate 53 percent of the time. Districts' choices, in other words, were far from universally great—but they were a stronger start than materials teachers found or created from scratch.

We also looked at district-mandated interim assessments to understand what kind of feedback they were providing teachers about their students' performance against grade-level state standards. All of our districts required their teachers to administer at least quarterly interim assessments in both math and ELA—but none of these assessments met the bar for full alignment to the standards: Of a sampling of 38 interim assessments in math and ELA, just two were "partially aligned" to appropriate benchmarks. The remaining 36 were "not aligned," largely because they did not ask students grade-appropriate questions. We heard overwhelmingly from teachers that they used these assessments to drive adjustments to their instruction—as they should, as that is a fundamental goal of measuring student progress. But in our partner districts, teachers were receiving misinformation from the mandated assessments, undermining teachers' efforts to adjust their instruction in ways that would improve student outcomes (and quite possibly confusing teachers about what grade-appropriate content looks like).[20]

While some students had access to grade-appropriate assignments...


FOREWORD BY PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON
A Mighty Long Way
My Journey to Justice at
Little Rock Central High School
CARLOTTA WALLS LANIER
with Lisa Frazier Page
"[An] affecting . . . powerful memoir." —The Washington Post


EL Education

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

Informational Essay Prompt and New York State
Grades 6–8 Expository Writing Evaluation Rubric

Name:

Date:

Prompt: 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 it what ways did it give an incomplete or even inaccurate picture of events?

These eighth-grade 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.

The fourth-grade student who performed better on the grade-appropriate assignment compared to the easier one does not necessarily indicate that students are more likely to do better on tougher content; overall, students are still more likely to meet the demands of less challenging assignments versus more challenging ones. But his experience debunks the common assumption that students can't do more rigorous work. This student was ready, willing, and able to complete whatever assignment he was offered. Even more importantly, his example upends the belief that achievement mainly reflects students' abilities. The key variable is actually adults' decisions.

Neither this student nor his teacher would have known he could do well on the tougher assignment if he hadn't been given the chance—a chance he and every other student must rely on the adults in their schools to give them. In our observations, we saw hundreds of students demonstrating their ability to do grade-level work when asked to do so, including students with low prior achievement. But most—especially students of color and those from low-income families—don't get those opportunities nearly often enough.

…many others did not.

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.

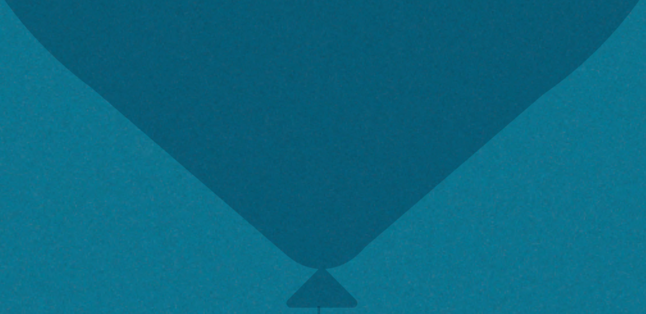
These NYC waterways and harbors will always be some of the world’s busiest. But with the help of the Billion Oyster Project, the dynamic natural world that once thrived here is beginning to return and to coexist more peacefully with the ferries, barges, cars and trains.

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, other eighth-grade students completed multiple-choice vocabulary questions and filled in the missing vowels in words, which is not aligned to any eighth-grade literacy standards.



“Are we still on number two?”

RAYMOND’S EXPERIENCE

Fifty minutes into math, Raymond and his fifth-grade classmates are still working on the warmup: four homework problems their teacher put on the board when they came in (multiplication and division operations that meet a fourth-grade standard). Their teacher explains that the warm-up problems are “to calm [them] down from gym”—though they appeared perfectly calm when they filed into the room. Early on in the lesson, she issues an ominous warning: “What happens when we struggle in math class? All sorts of bad things.”

The lesson moves at an almost unbearably slow pace. The teacher moves through the operations on the board, not checking whether her students understand, pausing to answer questions, or asking students to do much of the work. She solves most of the problems herself, and on one occasion does so incorrectly.

“I know you just came from gym where you got to run around and talk,” the teacher says, frazzled. “It’s math time now. We need to focus.”

One student is asked to leave after talking out of turn, but there’s nowhere for him to go. Booted from his classroom, he paces aimlessly in the hallway, periodically peering through the window to see what’s happening in class. Inside the classroom, students check out, one by one.

“Are we still on number two?” asks another student. She seems astonished. The class period is nearly over. As she starts to explain the tape diagram she’d used to solve the problem, her teacher cuts her off. “Stop. I know what you’re going to say and that’s not why six is broken into three.”

One wonders how it feels—at 11 years old—to be interrupted by a teacher and corrected, before you’ve even had the chance to finish answering a question or explain your thinking. The message students receive, day in and day out, is that they should pay attention in school, respect their teachers, and do what they’re asked. And yet, they undoubtedly internalize a very different message when they are shut down while trying to learn, repeatedly, in the very classrooms where they are expected to be giving their best effort.

Remember, Raymond actually likes math. He thinks it’s “kind of fun.” But today in math class, he rests his head on his desk.

STRONG INSTRUCTION

In assessing the quality of instruction, we looked at classrooms' cultures and whether students were doing the work of the lesson. We also considered whether students had a chance to work on grade-level content during the lesson, and whether teachers' instructional practices allowed students to do the thinking about that grade-level content.

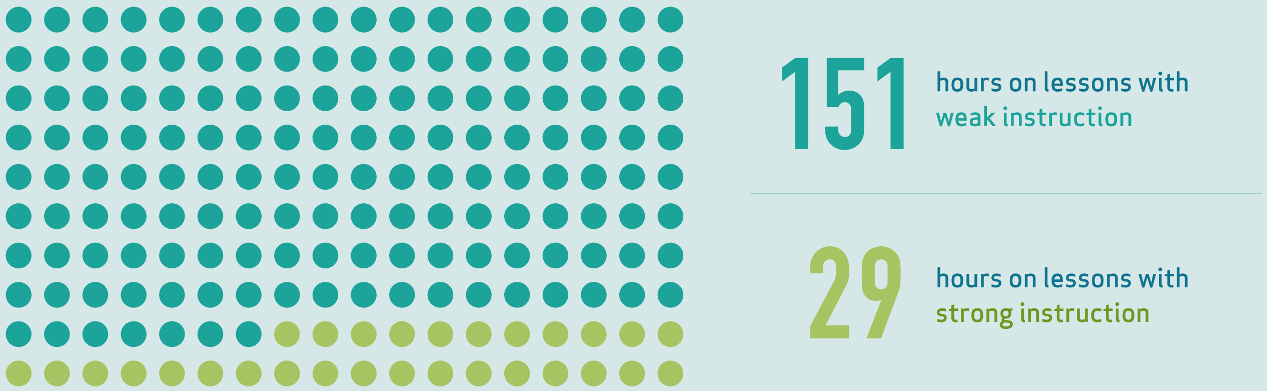
Only 16 percent of the lessons we observed in core subjects offered strong instruction: instructional practices that allowed students to grapple with appropriate material in robust ways. Out of 180 hours per school year in each core subject, that means students spent just 29 hours with strong instruction *(Figure 6)*.

The problem is not just that the content in front of students isn't strong enough—although as we've already seen, that is often the case. It's also that when content *is* high-quality and grade-appropriate, many students still don't have the opportunity to actually do the work themselves. Too often, we saw teachers making choices that protected—or prevented—students from doing the thinking of the lesson. Even if those instructional choices were motivated by a desire to see students succeed, they undermined the benefits of high-quality content in the first place. If these lessons represented students' typical experiences, they were spending the equivalent of fewer than two months experiencing strong instruction, and more than seven months doing something else.

Even when we did see students offered grade-appropriate assignments, their teachers engaged them effectively with that content less than half the time, and students had the chance to do the deep thinking of the lesson just a quarter of the time. That means in the 295 lessons that offered grade-level content—already just a fraction of the nearly 900 core subject lessons we observed in total—only 74 lessons also focused on developing understanding *and* required students to do the thinking.[21] In other words, in many classrooms where the content had potential, students weren't actually reaping the benefits because they were not doing the hard work themselves.

FIGURE 6 | TIME SPENT ON STRONG INSTRUCTION VERSUS WEAK INSTRUCTION

Of the 180 classroom hours in each core subject during the school year, students spent...



When students "do the thinking" in a lesson, they grapple with the process of solving problems. They might be applying prior knowledge to answer new kinds of questions, or working in small groups to discuss different ways to solve a grade-level math problem. They might be writing an argument after reading and evaluating multiple texts that shared different perspectives about an issue. In classrooms where students don't have these kinds of opportunities, they are often doing more listening than talking. They are writing their teachers' answers verbatim, plugging numbers into a formula they've been supplied, or filling in blanks.

In many classrooms where the content had potential, students weren't actually reaping the benefits because they were not doing the hard work themselves.

Ownership in the classroom matters.[22] It's not only how the brain learns best—by trying out new skills and wrestling with new knowledge and experiences ourselves, rather than just receiving information—but it's also how students build the confidence to take on new challenges. When students are asked to *try* in school, when they are asked to push their thinking even when they're stuck, to explain why they've arrived at an answer, to help a classmate, they also have the chance to stretch their sense of their own capabilities and see themselves grow.

Strong instruction that asks students to grapple with challenging content—and that cultivates a classroom-wide expectation that it's okay to be wrong—has the potential to increase students' natural drive to learn, rather than squander it. That can in turn deepen students' engagement in school.

“This might be our last chance.”

ISAAC’S EXPERIENCE

Physics is Isaac’s favorite class. For one thing, he says, it’s clear how the concepts apply in real life—“how you can use it outside of school.” With his aspiration toward a career in nursing, Isaac is aware that he needs a strong math and science background. Not only that, but he likes testing different concepts through experiments. In contrast, in classes where his teachers do all the talking, he struggles to stay focused, because they just don’t engage him deeply.

“Some classes are really dry,” he explains. “You take nothing but notes. That’s not going to help me learn what I need in the long term. What if I need this in my long-term memory? When a class is really dry, the teacher is not helping us learn more about the subject.”

Isaac reflects that he is most interested in classes where the content is useful for what he wants to do with his life. “Let me learn something that’s going to help me in nursing school,” he says. “[It should be] something that’s harder for you, something that’s going to help your lifestyle that you’re living.”

His physics class also rates highly from Isaac’s perspective because his teacher, Mr. Adams, knows how to crack a joke, while also taking students’ learning seriously. “There’s not many classes like that,” Isaac observes.

In contrast to Raymond’s math class, Isaac’s physics class is a positive, enjoyable place to learn. For Isaac, his favorite class seems to occupy the sweet spot between schoolwork that matters in real life, learning experiences he can own himself, and teachers who care for him and his classmates as people.

“I don’t think they want to see us fail,” Isaac says of most of his teachers. “They want to see us move on in life.” But he is also acutely aware of how vital the relationships between teachers and students are, and how they can keep a student’s progress on track—or derail it. While he has several strong relationships with teachers, Mr. Adams among them, he has also experienced the opposite: adults who undermined his self-belief. On several occasions, Isaac describes hearing a teacher belittle him or his classmates on account of their race. As a freshman, he says, one of his teachers told him that he wouldn’t amount to anything because he was Black.

It’s a painful experience to recall. “I told her, ‘It don’t matter the color of my skin. As long as I put in an effort, I can do it,’” he recalls. “I know I can.”

From his perspective, what happens in his current school—and the relationships he has with his teachers there—have a significant impact on his future. “Some of us come to school, and we’re dying. We have a lot going on at home, a lot going on here, but we have to focus here because this might be our last chance at life.”

If he could change anything about his high school experience, it would be more people like Mr. Adams: adults who know him, recognize and respect his life experiences, and support his goals. They teach in ways that help him engage with interesting content and commit it to his long-term memory, which matters to him. And they know how to have an occasional laugh while they’re at it.

DEEP ENGAGEMENT

We know that the majority of students were "on task" in the classrooms we observed. Being on task and doing what's asked in class certainly matter; it should be a baseline expectation that students are working on activities related to their lessons during class time. This is necessary, but it is not sufficient, because "engagement" at first glance—behavioral compliance—doesn't mean students are truly engaged, cognitively and emotionally, with the work they're doing.

When we measured "engagement," we wanted to look at whether students were making a deeper cognitive and emotional investment in their schoolwork. We considered whether students were (1) enjoying what they were doing; (2) interested in it; and (3) concentrating deeply on it.[23] When we looked at "worth," we considered whether students found the content (1) usable outside of school; (2) important now; or (3) important in the future.[24] Though most students we observed were completing their work (and even doing well on those assignments), middle and high school students found their school experiences engaging and worthwhile less than half the time *(Figure 7)*.

Deep engagement is not a nice-to-have in school. Isaac's reflections on what it feels like to sit in a "dry" lesson, where he's not learning anything that will stick with him or help him later in life, should not be dismissed as a teenager's complaints. His observations are supported by neuroscience: Deep learning only happens when people are cognitively and emotionally engaged with the material in front of them (and when people feel safe in their environment).[25] Students do better academically when they feel engaged like this. In our sample, students were likely to earn better grades and find greater success in classrooms where they also reported feeling engaged.

But most students don't have that opportunity regularly. More than 2,000 students told us about their experiences in school on at least five separate occasions. Among them, nearly half *rarely or never* had an experience that they believed was both engaging and worthwhile.[26]

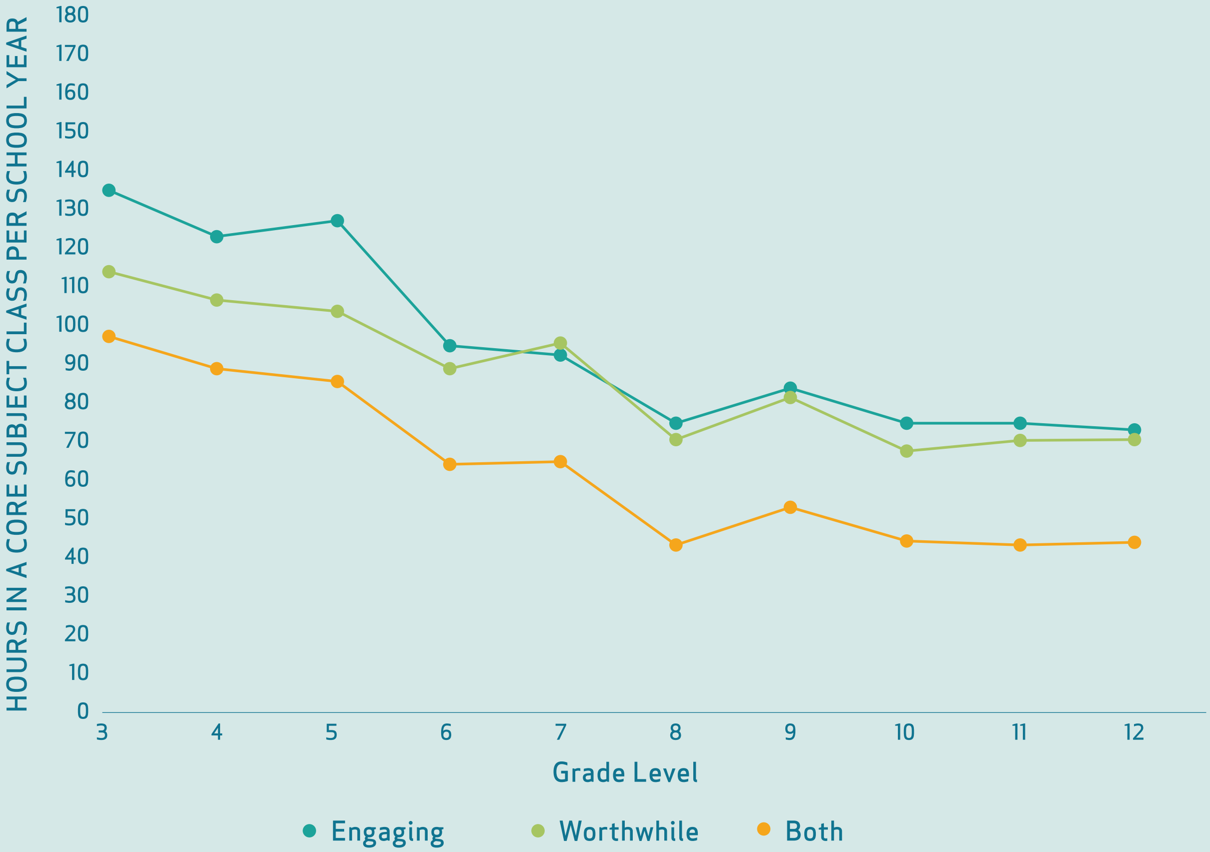
And the further students get into their school careers, the less engaged they're likely to be. Elementary students were more engaged and considered their schoolwork more worthwhile than their older peers. By the time they reached high school—just as their identities and career aspirations started to solidify and students began to recognize the content and skills they would need to meet their goals—more and more students perceived their schoolwork to be disconnected from their futures. High school students reported that 58 percent of their experiences were not engaging and 60 percent were not worthwhile: They were disconnected from their realities and irrelevant for their futures. Perhaps it's not a surprise, then, that nearly half a million students drop out of high school every year.[27]

When we surveyed students in real time in their classrooms, we found them thinking about a variety of things beyond the lesson. When asked "What are you thinking about right now?" students in low-engagement classrooms reported musings on everything from "lunch" to "sleep" to "Beyoncé." This range of responses was true even when students were, in practice, on task in class. They were doing the work in front of them, but their assignments did not require their full focus.

This was in contrast to classrooms that scored higher on our measure of engagement. In these classrooms, students reported thinking about things like "our group work" or "what I was working on." Clearly, students were prepared to focus on the work at hand, but it needed to be intellectually stimulating and worthy of their attention to engage them.

On the whole, we found that the notion that many teenagers "hate school" simply wasn't the case. They were far from uniformly negative about school, nor were they consistently disengaged across all their classes, every day of the week. In fact, students were attuned

FIGURE 7 | **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BY GRADE**



Middle and high school students found their lessons engaging or worthwhile less than half the time.

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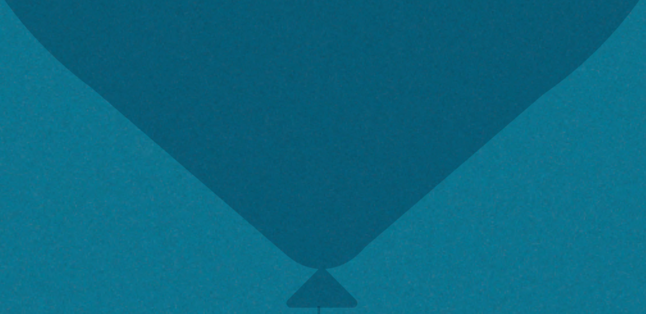
to improvements in instruction, in particular. When we looked at individual students' experiences of the same classroom, we found that students who were disengaged on a day with weak instruction tended to report higher levels of engagement on a day when we observed stronger instruction.[28]

Disengagement, day after day, has an impact on how students feel about not only school, but also themselves. We asked students to respond to a variety of survey prompts to get a sense of how often they feel things like "proud" and "successful" in school. While we can't know for certain how students define these feelings, the results were telling: 63 percent of the time, high school students reported that they did *not* feel a sense of pride during the school day. Students in classrooms with weaker instruction were less likely to report feeling proud than their peers in classrooms with stronger instruction.

Perhaps most important of all for students' engagement, as Isaac inferred, are the relationships between teachers and students. When students believed their teachers expected them to learn a lot, they were twice as likely to find class engaging. Classrooms where teachers reported frequently talking with their students about their interests and goals—getting to know their students, beyond the assignments they do in class—had 34 percent higher rates of engagement.[29]

That's what Mr. Adams does for Isaac. Luz, his schoolmate, agrees that this matters.



“They got to help me when I need help.”

LUZ’S EXPERIENCE

Luz loves school—or she used to.

“Throughout elementary and middle school, I tried really hard,” she says. “Straight A student, perfect attendance, that kind of thing. Then freshman year happened, and I got some Ds and Cs. I cried. I cried. I had never gotten a C at the end of the year, or a D. When I saw it happen in freshman year, I was like, ‘Wow. What happened?’”

Luz is a junior in high school. Her school, which serves roughly 500 students, was part of a larger public high school that was closed for poor performance and broken into four smaller schools several years ago. She is reflective about what happened in her transition to high school. Some of the dip in her grades, she says, was because she was unprepared for the challenge of her high school classes.

“I feel like it was a struggle between the difference between the expectations that were given to you in middle school, and then the expectations at high school. I feel that messed me up.”

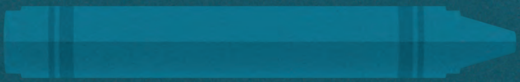
As she adapted to high school (and with some pressure at home from her father), she raised those grades back up to As and Bs. But she also describes the importance of having teachers who not only push her but also support her.

“[In] biology, there was a lot of words I didn’t understand,” she says. “When I needed help, my teacher didn’t really help me. I would ask questions. She would answer them, but they weren’t what I wanted, so I would have to go to other students. Sometimes they didn’t understand it, so I didn’t understand it.”

For Luz, getting help when she asks for it is an essential component of success in the classroom. “They got to help me when I need help. Actually help me. I feel like having a relationship with your student is important.”

She elaborates. “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. But when teachers give up on their students, you’re like, ‘Why should I try if my teacher’s not giving it a try?’”

Now, in the second semester of her junior year, just as Luz is starting to consider college, her grades are starting to slip again. She feels herself disengaging from school more often, and she’s missing the positive relationships with teachers that anchor her to school. “If I don’t really connect with that teacher, then it’s like, why am I in your class?”



HIGH EXPECTATIONS

The vast majority of students (93 percent of those we surveyed) agreed that it's important to their teachers that they learn a lot. And students like Luz correctly intuit that what their teachers expect of them in class has an impact on what they learn: When teachers have high expectations for students' success against grade-level standards, it informs their choices about the content they put in front of students, and the instructional practices they employ.

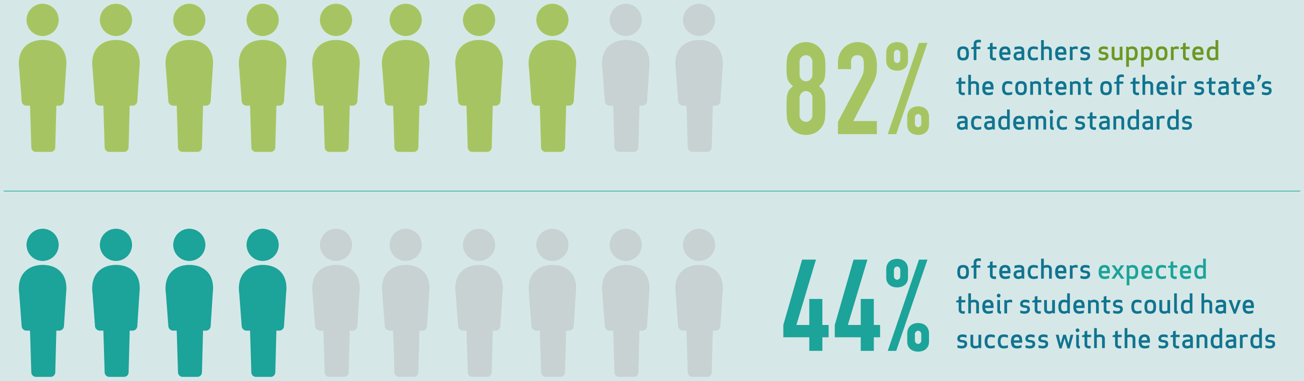
That sounds like common sense, and it plays out in the data. In classrooms where teachers had higher expectations, we also saw stronger assignments, instruction, and ultimately greater student growth, compared to classrooms where teachers reported the lowest expectations for their students.

But those low expectations for student success were rampant. While 82 percent of teachers were supportive of state-level standards in theory, just 44 percent of teachers believed their own students could meet such high demands *(Figure 8)*. When that translates into choices about content and instruction—and into the messages those choices send to students—it makes a meaningful impact on students' school experiences and outcomes.

When teachers have low expectations, it may also contribute to a mismatch between the grades students bring home and their actual mastery of grade-level work and skills, because those grades often fail to reflect their success on work that is appropriately challenging. While nearly two-thirds of students across our partner districts earned As and Bs over the last few years, far fewer met the grade-level bar set by their state's standardized assessments. In one partner district, less than 20 percent of B students did so.[30]

While higher grades did correspond to a greater chance that students could do grade-level work on these assessments, that chance was not especially great, even for students who were bringing home As and Bs. On the whole, students who were earning Bs on their math and ELA coursework had a *less than 35 percent chance* of having met their state assessment's grade-level bar. Even an A was far from a guarantee: 29 percent of A students did not meet their

FIGURE 8 | TEACHER EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AGAINST GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS



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

state assessment's grade-level bar. And we found the same disconnect when we compared students' grades to college entrance exams and AP tests: Roughly half of students who typically received a B in math and ELA met the ACT's or SAT's college readiness benchmarks, and only 20 percent of students who earned a B in their AP math or English course actually passed the AP exam.

This is not purely about teachers' individual expectations and the choices that flow from them. The reality is that teachers are themselves acting within a system that shapes and confines the choices they make for students. Although we know that some teachers *do* make decisions that buck systemic trends, and that teachers have the power to be vigilant about what goes on in their own classrooms, their choices are also heavily influenced by the training, development, and support they're offered. For example, when the importance of high expectations (and the influence of teachers' unconscious biases on those expectations) is not prioritized in teacher preparation programs, it's unreasonable to expect most teachers to prioritize it on their own. The system sends teachers the message that the material they teach and the practices they employ in their classrooms matter far more than the expectations they hold for their students. Yet in our partner districts, these expectations had a stronger relationship to student achievement growth than any other factor we studied.

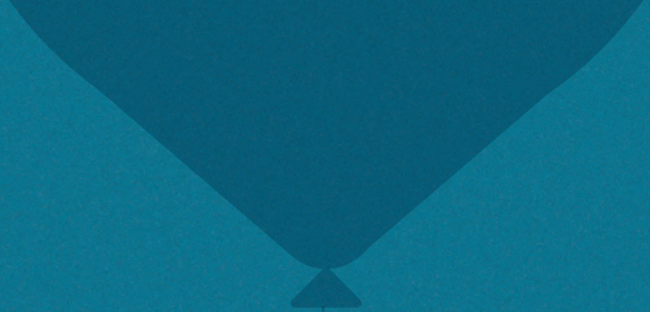
Moreover, in a system where many students pass from year to year under-prepared for what comes next, teachers often find themselves teaching students who truly aren't yet working at grade level. They feel forced to choose between assigning grade-level work that's beyond their students' current skillset, or assigning work that matches those skills—but is below grade level.

In principle, the solution to this is "scaffolding": Teachers should provide students the support they need to access grade-level work, regardless of their starting point, and do so as quickly as possible during the school year. But in practice, scaffolding—not to mention differentiating that support in a classroom with students who start at *many* different levels—is a complex skill to master. Many teachers simply don't have the training and support in place to do it effectively. Even with the right skills and best intentions, meeting 25 or 30 individual students where they are isn't possible without additional adults in the room, the right kinds of resources and technology, and a host of other resources that most teachers don't have.

The result is the continuation of a cycle in which students who are behind grade level—who are all too often students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, students with mild to moderate disabilities, or English language learners—are continuously exposed to work that never gives them the chance to catch up.

> The system doesn't send teachers the message that their mindset matters nearly as much as the material they teach or the practices they employ in their classrooms. Yet teacher expectations had a stronger effect on student achievement growth than any other factor we studied.

CHOOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP



“We’re supposed to be the smart class.”

MAGGIE’S EXPERIENCE

Maggie believes that high school is supposed to get her ready for what she wants to do in life.

“I expect to be getting the knowledge I need to go to college and get a career, to do whatever it is I plan on doing, to be a trauma nurse,” she says. “I don’t expect [school] to be fun, but I also don’t expect it to be the mountain that it is.” She describes class periods where she finishes her work early and sits there with nothing else to do, and those where she’s assigned a lot of work to get through, but doesn’t feel she has the support or guidance to do the work.

“Sometimes, if it’s not something I feel stimulated by, I feel like taking a nap, honestly,” Maggie says. (“But I don’t,” she adds quickly.) “Or if it’s something I don’t understand how to do, I feel frustrated. I would rather be given the tools to solve the problem, instead of just being told ‘you need to do this by tomorrow.’ It’s frustrating or it’s boring. That’s about it.”

Maggie understands that she and her schoolmates have been tracked by ability (or perceived ability) since they were young. She’s been in class with the same kids “for years. We’re always stuck together.”

In this small school district, there is just one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. But even so, that doesn’t guarantee that every student has the same opportunity to work on assignments that challenge them appropriately. “We’re supposed to be the smart class,” she says, putting “smart class” in air quotes. (“I don’t mean to sound conceited,” she says. “It’s just the way it is.”)

From Maggie’s perspective, her teachers have fairly high expectations for her and her classmates. Our data supports that observation: Maggie’s high school offers some of the best academic opportunities we saw. (It also has among the highest percentages of white and higher-income students in our sample.)

But Maggie isn’t convinced that opportunities are the same for classes with the “other students.” They may not be asked to work as hard, she says, or things that are extra credit in their class, for example, might not be considered extra for her, “because [the teacher] expects us to be able to do it in comparison to them.”

She also has an inkling that this might not be fair. “I feel like everybody’s capable of the same thing. I think they can do it just as much as I can do it.”

We've seen that most students don't have access to the key resources that lead to better outcomes in school. But we also found that access to those resources varies widely.

Remember the eighth graders who were asked to fill in the vowels in vocabulary words? In another eighth-grade English class in the very same district, students the same age, living in the same city, read *A Mighty Long Way*, a memoir by one of the Little Rock Nine. Then they wrote an informational essay analyzing historical events. Unlike their peers, these students had the chance to do work that will set them up for high school English, the next step on their school journeys.

Notably, there was more variation in access to the four key resources between classrooms than between districts or schools. The average classroom in our top quartile for assignment quality, for example, provided students grade-appropriate assignments 49 percent of the time. But *within the same school*, the average bottom-quartile classroom did so only 13 percent of the time. When given the chance to work on grade-appropriate assignments, students in both kinds of classrooms were equally likely to rise to the bar—but some students received far more of those opportunities than their peers right down the hall. It's what parents and students know but can't control: Which class you land in can make or break a school year. Over time, it can mean the difference between a student being prepared to meet their goals—or not.

To make matters worse, this *isn't* generally a matter of luck, with a relatively random and equal distribution of good and mediocre school experiences across all student subgroups. Positive experiences are few and far between overall, but they're also distributed inequitably.

While we found that students of all backgrounds were capable of doing grade-appropriate work when given the opportunity—and we did find classrooms that could be considered positive outliers serving students of all backgrounds—some groups of students were consistently given fewer of those opportunities. Students of color and

FIGURE 9 | **STUDENT ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES**

Compared to classrooms containing mostly (>50%) students of color, classrooms with mostly white students tended to receive:

1.5x MORE grade-appropriate assignments

3.6x MORE grade-appropriate lessons

Compared to classrooms with primarily (>75%) low-income students, classrooms with primarily higher-income students tended to receive:

2.1x MORE grade-appropriate assignments

5.4x MORE grade-appropriate lessons

those from low-income backgrounds were less likely than their white and higher-income peers to be in classrooms with grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction.

These gaps are *not* explained by the fact that a disproportionate number of students in those subgroups start the year behind grade level. It's conceivable, for example, that teachers would peg their assignments to their students' prior levels of achievement—giving a fourth grader an assignment meeting first-grade standards if that student has previously been working at a first-grade level. But that did *not* prove to be the case. Even when we controlled for prior academic achievement, classrooms with more low-income students, for example, had fewer high-quality academic experiences than others.[31] Among all students who began the year with achievement above the state average, students from low-income families were in classes that typically provided grade-appropriate assignments only 20 percent of the time, compared to 30 percent of the time for students from higher-income families. Both groups of students were outperforming the average student in the state, but those from low-income backgrounds still spent about one month less on grade-appropriate assignments.

Even when we controlled for prior academic achievement, classrooms with more low-income students had fewer high-quality academic experiences than others.

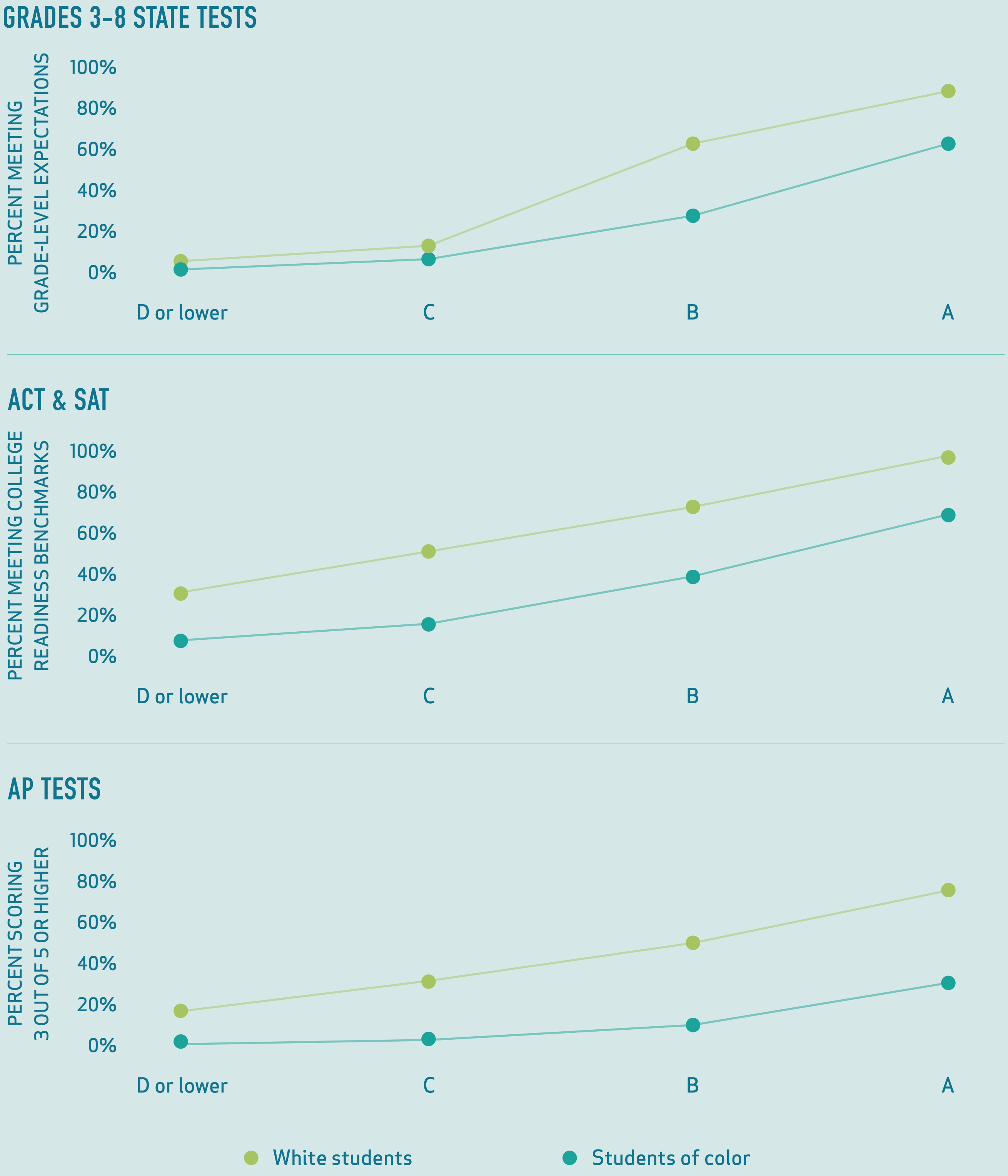
In other words, students like Hajima, who seek challenge and have generally excelled at whatever is put in front of them, are less likely to have opportunities that will ready them to meet their academic goals—not because they're not able to do the work, but because they are Black, or Latinx, or come from low-income families. And students who need support to catch up don't have adequate opportunities to do that, either, even though our research shows they benefit *more* from those opportunities than their peers who have previously been better served by school and have been higher-achieving as a result.

Across all districts, classrooms with stronger academic offerings had higher proportions of white students and those from higher-income backgrounds. Classrooms with more than 50 percent white students had 53 percent more grade-appropriate assignments, while classrooms serving more than 75 percent students from higher-income backgrounds had more than twice as many *(Figure 9)*.

Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were disadvantaged again when it came to opportunities to do the deep thinking in their classrooms. Mostly white classrooms offered about three-and-a-half times as many strong instructional practices, and higher-income classrooms offered more than five times as many. Students in mostly white and higher-income classrooms also reported higher levels of engagement: 23 percent more engaging experiences in mostly white classrooms, and 21 percent more engaging experiences in mostly higher-income classrooms.[32]

Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were not only offered weaker academic experiences, they were also subject to an even more pronounced mismatch between the information they brought home about their performance in school and their actual mastery of critical, grade-appropriate skills.

FIGURE 10 | STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED TESTS BY LETTER GRADE AND STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY



Students of color received grades that less accurately reflected their mastery of rigorous content, as measured by multiple types of assessments.

In four out of five districts we studied, white students receiving Bs were *at least* 10 percentage points more likely to have mastered grade-level standards on state tests than their classmates of color who also received Bs. In two districts, white students earning As had more than a 25 percentage point higher rate of grade-level mastery than students of color who also earned As. Across all districts, white students who earned Bs were nearly as likely to have mastered the standards as students of color *who earned As*. This trend was even more pronounced in courses and tests directly aimed at college: Whereas 78 percent of white students who earned an A in a math or English AP class passed the AP exam, only 30 percent of students of color who earned the same grade did so *(Figure 10)*.[33]

Again, this doesn't reflect different abilities; we've already seen that students of all backgrounds are capable of meeting the bar set by grade-level standards, given the opportunity. Instead, it reflects the fact that at every turn, some groups of students get fewer opportunities to even try to reach that bar. Those disparities are rendered largely invisible to students and families because the grades they bring home don't capture an honest picture of their readiness to meet their goals. Opportunity is a scarce resource, and it's not doled out equitably.

When students who started the year off behind grade level were given more grade-appropriate assignments, stronger instruction, deeper engagement, and higher expectations, the gap between these students and their higher achieving peers began to narrow substantially.

More research is needed to fully understand the root causes of these inequities. But in the districts we studied, we saw a pattern related to teachers' expectations of students of color that is worth unpacking: Among classrooms where students were at least 75 percent Black or at least 75 percent Latinx, 66 percent of teachers who were the *same* race or ethnicity as the majority of their students had high expectations. In classrooms with similar student demographics but with teachers who were a *different* race or ethnicity than the majority of the class, just 35 percent of teachers reported high expectations *(Figure 11)*. Those results held true when we controlled for students' prior achievement.

As we've seen, expectations influence what happens in the classroom. Remember Raymond's fifth-grade math class, where the teacher interrupted her students and offered so few opportunities for them to explain their thinking? Most of the students in that classroom, including Raymond, were Black. Their teacher was white. This teacher, like many others, reported support for grade-level standards in theory, but said she did *not* believe her students could meet such a bar. Her instruction gave them few opportunities to try. Of course, it is impossible to say with certainty what motivated the choices around content and instruction in this or any particular classroom—but the choices matter regardless.

It's also worth further exploring the ways teacher demographics influence engagement. Black and Latinx students who had a teacher of their same racial or ethnic background were 19 percent more likely to feel engaged, compared to students who did not have that experience. Isaac's engagement in his physics class, and his relationship with the teacher, Mr. Adams, illustrates this. Mr. Adams, like Isaac, is Black. Their shared background is certainly not the only factor that informs their relationship: Some of Isaac's most influential teachers, like his English teacher, are white. But from Isaac's perspective, what these teachers have in common is a deep belief in his potential, which has helped him invest in school. "They always tell me, 'You can do it. You can do it,'" Isaac says.

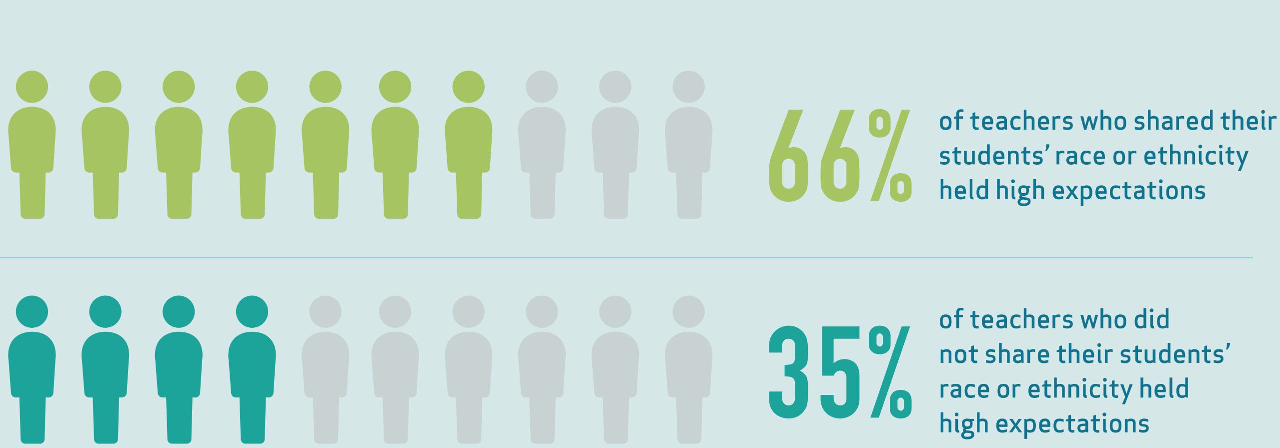
That opportunity—to have a teacher who does what Mr. Adams does for Isaac—is vital. We found that students who believed their teachers expected them to learn a lot were also more engaged in their lessons. In our sample, a student of color was more likely to have a teacher with high expectations when they had the chance to learn in a classroom led by a teacher who shared their race or ethnicity. But given the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce nationwide, many students will never have that chance.

Many students also miss out on the opportunity to be held to high expectations (and have access to the other key resources) simply because they haven't had those opportunities in the past, and opportunity begets opportunity. Our research affirms Maggie's intuition that students' prior achievement influences the quality of their school experiences moving forward. Across all our partner districts, students who started the year higher achieving generally had stronger academic opportunities than those who started the year behind. In classrooms with the most grade-appropriate assignments, students started off the year more than five months ahead of those in classrooms with the least grade-appropriate assignments.[34]

It's an entirely logical but unacceptable result of inequitable access to the four key resources. Students who don't have grade-appropriate assignments or strong instruction never even have a chance to show they can do grade-level work, so they're pegged as "low achievers." These students and their families are blamed for being "low-performing," and they're punished with yet more unacceptable experiences. They will have few opportunities to ever catch up.

The students who start each school year with an edge based on their prior experiences and achievement—and who are therefore most likely to get better experiences going forward—are disproportionately white. They come disproportionately from higher-income families, are native English speakers, and are considered general education students. Those who start off the year needing an extra boost—and who are therefore the least likely to get it—are disproportionately students of color, from low-income families, new English speakers, or those with mild to moderate disabilities.

FIGURE 11 | TEACHER EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS BY TEACHER/STUDENT RACE MATCH



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

The bottom line is this: Students who have greater access to the four key resources that comprise high-quality academic experiences tend to do better in school. They're likely to rise to a higher bar, even if they start the school year with barriers. And just as the allocation of those resources creates and reinforces opportunity gaps, it also has the power to begin to close those gaps. When students who started the year off behind grade level were given more grade-appropriate assignments, stronger instruction, deeper engagement, and higher expectations, the gap between these students and their higher-achieving peers began to narrow substantially—by more than seven months of learning in a single school year based on better assignments alone.

If that growth remained steady and cumulative, year after year, we can extrapolate that students who started the year behind grade level would catch up to their state average within five years *(Figure 12)*. Students of color and those from low-income families would do the same. Their classrooms would not need to be perfect: In the classrooms where we saw the most growth, students worked on grade-appropriate assignments just 52 percent of the time (compared to 26 percent across all classrooms). Even raising the floor by a reasonable amount can make a meaningful difference.

The "achievement gap," then, isn't inevitable. It's baked into the system, resulting from the decisions adults make, consciously and unconsciously, about which students get what resources. It's a gap of our own design.

FIG. 12 NOTE: Each panel represents all students in participating classrooms with a prior-year test result in the same subject. Starting Point represents the average test score, standardized against all students in the state, in a school year prior to the year in which the study took place (e.g., the 2015-2016 school year). Year 1 represents the average standardized test score at the end of the school year during our study (i.e., 2016-2017). Years 2 – 5 represent how these averages would change if the rate of growth (or decline) seen from Starting Point to Year 1 continued indefinitely at the same rate. To reduce the effect of outliers, students beginning more than 2.5 standard deviations away from the state mean were dropped (3% of all students). "Students beginning the year substantially behind grade level" are students whose starting point test score was at least 0.5 standard deviations below the state average. See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we standardized test scores and how we identified students' prior achievement.

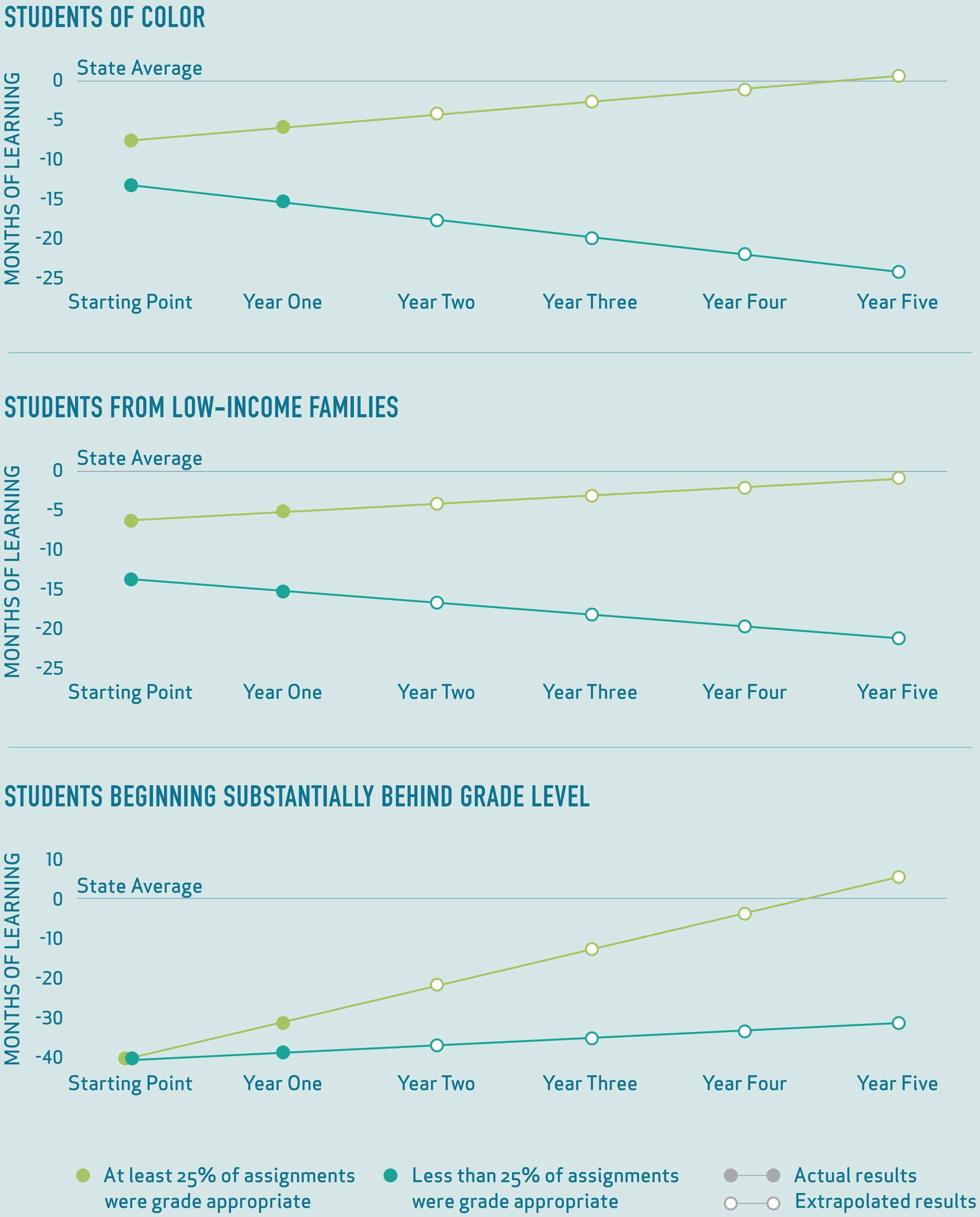
GOOD INTENTIONS AREN'T ENOUGH

At TNTP, we believe those of us working in schools have a responsibility to design a better system, to create the programs and structures that disrupt the inequities of the status quo. There is an urgent need to authentically engage students and families in creating paths that honor the aspirations, talents, and needs of each student.

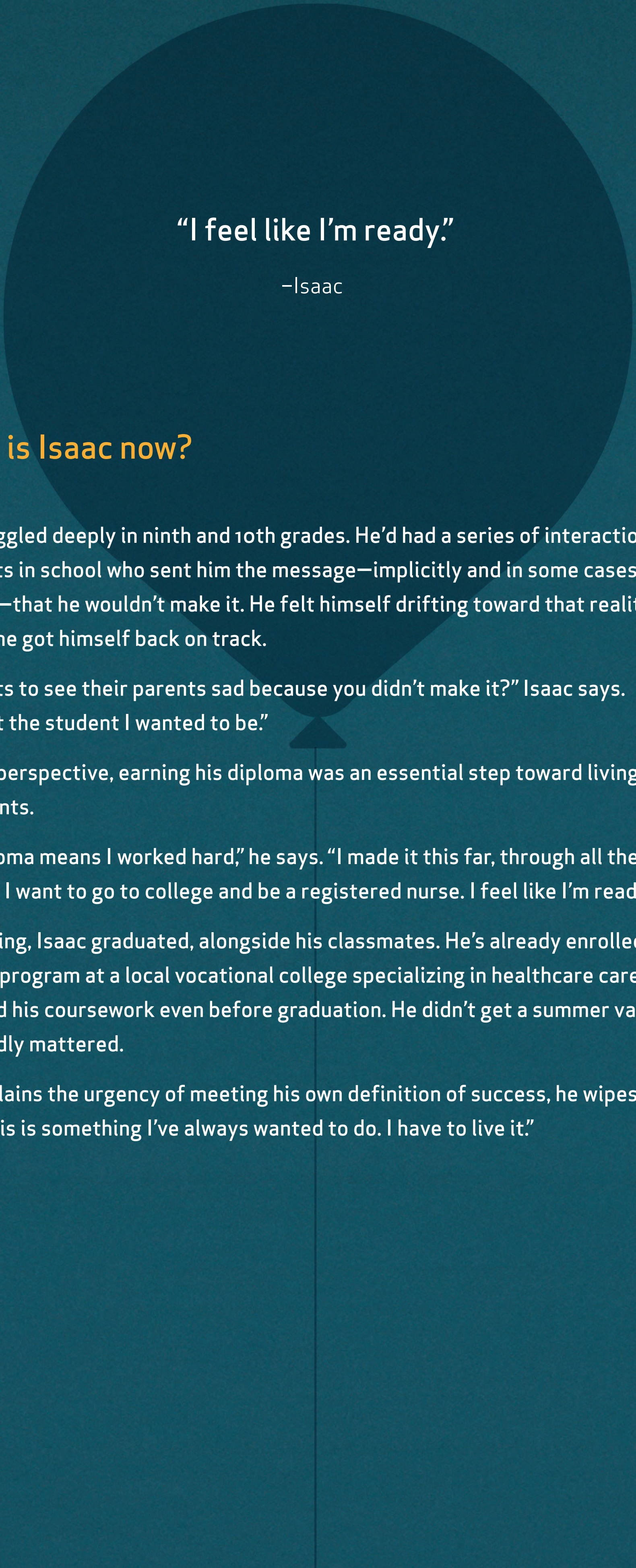
But the hard truth is that we have also seen a lot of "innovation" that continues to fall short of our basic promise to students. All too often, "meeting kids where they are" becomes an excuse for holding persistently low expectations, and ineffective "differentiation" means some students get less and never have the chance to catch up.

No matter what the tagline, any curriculum, program, or model that does not allow students consistent opportunities to engage with grade-appropriate assignments, to do the thinking in their lessons, and to engage deeply with what they are learning is effectively perpetuating the opportunity myth. Good intentions aside, if we aren't giving all students those opportunities regularly, we are systematically denying them the chance to even try to master the skills they need to reach their goals.

FIGURE 12 | MEAN ACHIEVEMENT BY DEMOGRAPHIC AND ASSIGNMENT QUALITY, AND EXTRAPOLATED GROWTH



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



> “I feel like I’m ready.”
>
> –Isaac

Where is Isaac now?

He’d struggled deeply in ninth and 10th grades. He’d had a series of interactions with adults in school who sent him the message—implicitly and in some cases very explicitly—that he wouldn’t make it. He felt himself drifting toward that reality. But then he got himself back on track.

“Who wants to see their parents sad because you didn’t make it?” Isaac says. “That’s not the student I wanted to be.”

From his perspective, earning his diploma was an essential step toward living the life he wants.

“That diploma means I worked hard,” he says. “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.”

In the spring, Isaac graduated, alongside his classmates. He’s already enrolled in a nursing program at a local vocational college specializing in healthcare careers; he started his coursework even before graduation. He didn’t get a summer vacation, but it hardly mattered.

As he explains the urgency of meeting his own definition of success, he wipes away tears. “This is something I’ve always wanted to do. I have to live it.”

CONCLUSION

Students like Isaac are planning their lives around the promises we attach to the diplomas they work so hard to earn. And yet we know that for far too many of them, those diplomas will let them down. The opportunity myth promises that success in school is the first step on the path to success in life, but the system we've built undermines that promise at every turn.

That system reinforces the flip side of the opportunity myth, too: the pernicious assumption that if students fail, it's because they didn't take the chance they'd been offered. It is the result of their abilities, their race, their socioeconomic background, or their choices. For those of us working in school systems, the opportunity myth makes life comfortable. It allows us to operate in good faith to help kids succeed, while accepting the false belief that for many of them, there's nothing more we can do.

Our research lays that all bare. It shows that while many students *do* have barriers to overcome to succeed in school, some of the biggest barriers are created by decisions very much within our control: whether students get the opportunity to work on grade-appropriate assignments, or are systematically assigned work that is appropriate for kids several years younger; whether they have teachers who ask them to find the answers to challenging problems, or who think it's acceptable to assign them the task of copying answers; whether adults ask students and parents about their goals, or assume that because they're Latinx or Black or don't have a lot of money, college is probably unrealistic. And then, as a field, we've covered up the racist, classist, and just plain unfair choices we've made, by telling parents and students—particularly students of color—that they are doing fine, when all the evidence from their classroom work and their exam scores suggests that they are not.

What would it take to make students' school opportunities more than a myth?

We can start by acknowledging and understanding the unacceptable experiences we've created for millions of students: three-quarters of the school year or more wasted in classes that are boring, too easy, or irrelevant to their life goals; worse experiences for students who need better ones the most; the tacit belief that some students are less capable and less deserving than others.

We can own up to our role in perpetuating these problems—because if you're reading this and you work in education in any capacity, you bear some of the responsibility. That includes teachers, whose daily choices influence students' outcomes in the most visible ways, but it includes others as well. Teachers often find themselves forced to implement poor choices made by school leaders, superintendents, legislators, schools of education, textbook companies, and others; or asked to implement better decisions without adequate training and support.

It certainly includes us at TNTP. These conclusions have been painful because we've been part of the problem. For many years, for example, we trained new teachers to lead compliant students through a standard curriculum, using standard instructional techniques, and believed that if they did so, students would succeed at high levels. We are actively working to shift our approach to ensure that all students—and particularly those who have been historically under-served, including in our own work—get the resources we write about that they need to succeed.

Most importantly, we can listen to students and learn from their experiences. Across all five districts we studied, we saw a promising trend: When we make different choices about how resources are allocated—when all kids get access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations, but particularly when students who start the year behind receive these resources—achievement gaps shrink. They shrink substantially enough that if we extrapolate the results we saw in one year over five years, achievement gaps would disappear, given more equitable access to the four key resources. If we made different choices, millions of students with big goals for themselves, most of whom are already doing what they're asked in school, would be prepared to live the lives they aspire to.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Of all the students we spoke to, perhaps Maggie explained the opportunity myth most explicitly: "I expect to be getting the knowledge I need to go to college and get a career, to do whatever it is I plan on doing." It shouldn't be an unreasonable expectation. And yet, most students will find themselves let down.

It's time to change that.

What we've learned from students about their experiences has created a new center of gravity for our work. We hope it will do the same for others seeking fundamental changes to our school systems. We now have clearer answers than ever about how and why we're failing to provide so many students with the experiences they need to reach their goals. If we stay focused on those experiences, we'll be on a path to sustainable change because the work will be rooted in the experiences of those we serve.

We readily acknowledge that we don't have a detailed operational plan to improve student experiences at scale. But we believe it's time to move beyond important but narrow debates—from how to measure teacher performance to charter versus district to the role of standardized testing—and return to the basic guiding principle that brings us to this work: the right of every student to learn what they need to reach their goals. Over the next several years, we will partner with school systems, educators, students, and parents to build our expertise about how to give all students more of the key resources they need and deserve, in different communities and contexts. We'll certainly share what we learn as we go, and we hope you will, too.

But we think we know where to begin, and it starts with making students' daily experiences the center of our work.

We call on all adults whose choices affect students' experiences in school—particularly school, district, and state leaders, as well as external partners like ourselves—to make two core commitments to students and families:

1 | 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.

2 | 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 students' 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.

Students are at the heart of this report, and we learned some profound lessons through the process of asking them about their goals and experiences. They don't have all the answers, to be clear—nor is it their job to tell us how to do ours better. But they proved again and again, through their nuanced, sophisticated, and practical observations, that they are the best experts we have about the current state of our schools. Above all, we heard from students that they want to be challenged in school, enjoy their learning, and be treated with respect, care, and dignity. They're asking us to do better, so we should.

Many of us believe in these commitments already, but in practice we have maintained the status quo. We think we're not part of the problem, but the evidence says otherwise. If you have influence over the school experience of even a single student who is not being prepared to meet their goals, this applies to you. If you don't know specifically, with direct evidence, how these commitments are being upheld in your classroom, school, system, or state, then they are not being upheld.

We can be this categorical because we made this mistake ourselves. We have often *thought* we were upholding these commitments, while settling for less in practice. For example, we thought we recognized the need to give all students access to grade-appropriate content, but we have trained new teachers with ineffective scaffolding practices that gutted the rigor of assignments. We have talked about the importance of listening to students, but we have failed to support teachers to use student survey data to make improvements.

Making these commitments means doing things differently. What follows is a list of five big things students told us they want in school. This is not a checklist; it's a collection of challenging but workable solutions that school and system leaders need to dig into, implement in the ways that make sense for their school communities, and continually revisit.

For action guides for students, parents and families, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, and state policymakers, visit opportunitymyth.tntp.org/act

FIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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.

Currently, we operate on assumptions about students' goals and what students want from school. So many decisions about school are made in administrative offices that are far from the real daily experiences of students. In our research, we saw that the vast majority of students have big goals for themselves beyond high school, but we also found that school isn't setting up most students to meet those goals—and that different choices at the classroom, school, and system levels can change that. To start, asking students explicitly about their experiences can glean indispensable data.

By listening to students, we have access to rich and nuanced information that could help us shift away from focusing on the success of groups of students (generally pegged to the average) to focusing on the success of individuals. While students don't have all the answers, their perspectives provide a critical bellwether for how well we're doing our jobs. When their experiences are consistently lousy and unchanging, whatever interventions are presently in place are not working. Continued inaction in the face of that evidence—given that we can point to the relationship between different access to high-quality academic experiences and different outcomes for students—is no longer defensible.

This doesn't mean we should jump to the typical student and family engagement process, where those of us with power ask for input about decisions that have largely already been made. Instead, we are advocating for students and parents to be equipped with the tools they need to pressure their school systems to replace the opportunity myth with real opportunity and transparency, and for educators and system leaders to put students' daily experiences and access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations at the center of decision-making.

To hold ourselves accountable for this work, the views of students and parents should not only be public, but easily accessible to all stakeholders. We should share with students and parents how we are changing our approach based on their valued input. And report cards, in addition to providing more detailed information about student progress, should answer one simple question for parents: Is my child on track to graduate high school ready for college, and if not, when and how will they be on track?

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

Students who get assignments that are appropriate for their grade have stronger academic outcomes. But the students in our sample spent more than 500 hours per school year in core subjects on assignments that did not meet that bar. Moreover, students that school has let down in the past—like students of color and those from low-income backgrounds—were even less likely to get access to grade-appropriate assignments. When they did, that high-quality content helped close academic gaps between them and their peers. We found that classrooms with students who tended to start behind that worked on grade-level assignments, on average, even 50 percent of the time gained seven months of learning in a single year.

Getting better assignments in front of all students more often will raise the floor for students' experiences, particularly for students of color and those from low-income families. A higher baseline would mean that many more students are getting good enough experiences in school.

To ensure that all students have access to grade-appropriate assignments, stakeholders should first assess how the assignments their students are currently working on stack up. How much time are students spending on grade-appropriate content? After that gut check, stakeholders should make sure that teachers are using high-quality, aligned instructional materials on a daily basis. But we cannot leave teachers to sink or swim; helping students with vastly different needs, some of whom may be several grade levels behind, to succeed with grade-level materials requires a lot of experience and skill. So we must provide teachers materials-based professional learning to ensure that teachers know the value in grade-appropriate assignments and how to use them well.

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.

Requiring students to own the thinking in their lessons asks students to take a risk in front of their peers, since it's possible they could be wrong. Even in classrooms where we saw high-quality assignments, we often observed students missing out on opportunities to take that risk and do the thinking with rigorous content. This included classrooms where teachers did most of the talking, where students were asked only closed-ended questions that didn't require critical thinking, where students were interrupted by teachers as they were sharing their answers, or where they weren't given ample "think time" before the teacher stepped in with the answer. We found that students who started the school year behind academically particularly benefitted from strong instruction: In these classrooms, greater access to strong instruction led students to close the gap with their peers by about six months. In addition, students appreciated lessons where they were given the chance to do the thinking: In classrooms where we observed strong instruction, we also saw a 31 percent increase in engagement levels.

Once students have access to grade-appropriate assignments, stakeholders should work to make sure that students have the chance to do the kind of hard thinking with that content that they'll be expected to do in college or in their careers. Make sure all teachers and leaders realize that is the expectation—and then provide coaching supports and clear, actionable feedback to teachers about whether or not students are consistently experiencing engaging, strong instruction.

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

We found that when teachers have high expectations for students' success, they have a meaningful positive impact on academic achievement. We also saw that a majority of teachers do not report having high expectations for their students' success. Significantly, among classrooms where students were at least 75 percent Black or at least 75 percent Latinx, 66 percent of teachers who were the *same* race or ethnicity as the majority of their students had high expectations. In classrooms with similar student demographics but with teachers who were a *different* race or ethnicity from the majority of the class, just 35 percent reported high expectations. Those results held true when we controlled for students' prior achievement. Since teachers with lower expectations were more likely to provide weaker assignments and ask less of their students, low expectations translated into some groups of students getting less access to grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction. This inequitable allocation of key resources in turn produces inequitable outcomes for students.

Raising expectations certainly isn't on the shoulders of teachers alone. We studied expectations of teachers here, but there is no evidence that we would see different results had we studied principals, central office personnel, or non-profit leaders. As a field, we have failed to acknowledge that the expectations decision-makers hold affect students. Choices about everything from staffing to instructional materials are informed by the biases, both implicit and explicit, of the adults making those choices. When we expect some students to do less, in school and in life, we offer them less, in everything from the quality of their assignments to the weight their parents' opinions are given.

At every level of the system, we need to reckon with this fact, acknowledge the ways in which our expectations affect the choices we make for students, and develop strategies to ensure that all students have access to adults with consistently high expectations for their success. This has to include work up and down the school system. Teachers need ample opportunities to develop the skills necessary to give students (including those who are working below grade level) grade-appropriate work. That includes opportunities to collaborate with peers and learn from educators with track records of success. But if we're going to make this huge ask of teachers, it should be accompanied by fair compensation and investments in better working conditions, from strong school leadership to adequate facilities and resources.

We're all steeped in a culture of racism and systemic inequity, and undoing implicit bias is incredibly difficult work. So we know that as a field, we have a significant amount to learn here. We also know that many existing attempts to address racialized low expectations are ineffective or have never been rigorously studied[35] and may even cause adults to double down on their low expectations.[36] But addressing specific behaviors that influence students' experiences can serve as a path toward unraveling implicit bias, rather than the other way around. In our own teacher and principal training work, for example, we have seen evidence that once teachers and school leaders see that students who are behind *can* be successful on rigorous assignments, they are much more willing to provide rigorous experiences to their students.

For further ideas and resources, see our action guides for students and families, teachers, school leaders, system leaders, and state policymakers. Visit opportunitymyth.tntp.org/act to download your action guide.

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.

All students deserve and need equitable access to the four key resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations. But we've seen that some groups of students—namely students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with mild to moderate disabilities, and English language learners—have less access than their peers. They are more likely to be in classrooms with weaker assignments and instruction, less likely to be engaged, and are subjected to lower expectations. Given that we know that greater access to the four key resources improves outcomes for students—and especially students who start the year behind academically—the status quo is not morally defensible.

The root causes of this inequitable allocation of resources are complex, and there's no quick fix. But identifying and then actively working to dismantle structures that privilege already advantaged groups of students at the expense of their peers is non-negotiable work. This is not solely the work of addressing individual implicit biases. It requires addressing systemic choices and decisions that result in schools being "places with predictable, systematic inequalities in experience and outcomes based on people's social group memberships—advantaging people from some social groups while disadvantaging people from others."[37]

It is also incumbent that we work to diversify the education workforce, particularly by hiring and retaining staff in counter-stereotypical roles (for example, ensuring that men, particularly men of color, are represented among teachers in elementary grades). To do this, we need to address the systemic barriers that keep teachers of color out of urban and rural classrooms and commit to a staffing model that values diversity. This will support us all in raising the bar for what we expect for students of color, but can also provide a powerful model of high expectations for *all* students.[38] We must also look at the policies and systems that determine things like course access, curriculum adoption, and grading—all of which can and do contribute to the inequitable allocation of high-quality school experiences.

ENDNOTES

[1] All students' names have been changed throughout.

[2] McFarland, J., Hussar, B., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Wang, K., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Forrest Cataldi, E., & Bullock Mann, F. (2018). *The condition of education 2018* (NCES 2018-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018144

[3] Latinx is a gender-neutral term that refers to individuals of Latin American origin or descent.

[4] College remediation rates based on students starting at a four-year college. These rates are 60% among all students, 78% among Black students and 75% among Latinx students beginning at a two-year college. See Table 2 in Chen, X. (2016). *Remedial coursetaking at US public 2-and 4-year institutions: Scope, experiences, and outcomes*. Statistical Analysis Report (NCES 2016-405). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf

[5] Barry, M.N. & Dannenberg, M. (2016). *Out of pocket: The high cost of inadequate high schools and high school student achievement on college affordability*. Washington, DC: Education Reform Now and Education Post. Retrieved from https://edreformnow.org/policy-briefs/out-of-pocket-the-high-cost-of-inadequate-high-schools-and-high-school-student-achievement-on-college-affordability/

[6] Achieve. (2015). *Rising to the challenge: Are high school graduates prepared for college and work?* Washington, DC: Achieve. Retrieved from https://www.achieve.org/rising-challenge

[7] Drake, G., Pomerance, L., Rickenbrode, R., & Walsh, K. (2018). *Teacher prep review*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from https://www.nctq.org/publications/2018-Teacher-Prep-Review

[8] TNTP. (2015). *The Mirage: Confronting the hard truth about our quest for teacher development*. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP. Retrieved from https://tntp.org/publications/view/evaluation-and-development/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development

[9] Herold, B. & Molnar, M. (2014). Research Questions Common-Core Claims by Publishers. *Education Week* (March 3, 2014).

[10] 1,200 hours every year is based on a typical school year of 180 days, with 6.64 hours per school day. See National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Number of hours in the school day and average number of days in the school year for public schools, by state: 2007–08*. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). U.S. Department of Education Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables_list.asp. See also McFarland, J., Hussar, B., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Wang, K., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Forrest Cataldi, E., & Bullock Mann, F. (2018). *The condition of education 2018* (NCES 2018-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018144

[11] The adjusted cohort graduation rate in 2015-2016 was 84%, the highest it's ever been. McFarland, J., Hussar, B., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Wang, K., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Forrest Cataldi, E., & Bullock Mann, F. (2018). *The condition of education 2018* (NCES 2018-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018144

[12] National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Digest of education statistics, 2016* (NCES 2017-094), Chapter 3. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017094

[13] NAEP defines four categories of trajectories based on the type and amount of credits earned in each core subject: rigorous, mid-level, standard, and below-standard. Across all our partner systems, 17% of students were in a rigorous trajectory, 45% were in a mid-level trajectory, 20% were in a standard trajectory and 17% were in a below-standard trajectory. See the Technical Appendix for more details about how we applied these definitions to our participating districts' data. For the NAEP study, see: Nord, C., Roey, S., Perkins, R., Lyons, M., Lemanski, N., Brown, J., & Schuknecht, J. (2011). *The nation's report card: America's high school graduates* (NCES 2011-462). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2011462.pdf

[14] We estimated the amount of learning in a classroom by comparing its students' actual state standardized test scores to the state standardized test scores that were expected of them given how they had scored historically, as well as other characteristics like their race/ethnicity and family income. See the Technical Appendix for more details about this approach and additional analysis results. Throughout the report, we make the commonly used assumption that a difference of 0.25 standard deviations represents 9 months of learning. See Kane, T. J., & Staiger, D. O. (2012). *Gathering feedback for teaching: Combining high-quality observations with student surveys and achievement gains*. Research Paper. MET Project. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED540960

[15] We defined classrooms where students started the year behind as those classrooms where students' average state standardized test score in the previous school year was at least 0.5 standard deviations (or 18 months) below the average score among all students in the state. For each key resource, we split this subset of classrooms in half so that one group represented the 50% of these classrooms with the highest-rated assignments, lessons, engagement, or expectations, and the other represented the 50% of classes with the lowest scores on these resources. See the Technical Appendix for more details about this approach.

[16] Because only grade 3-12 students completed student surveys, these percentages exclude K-2 students.

[17] Only classrooms that had a minimum number of submitted assignments, observed lessons, or student surveys were included. See the Technical Appendix for how we set these minima.

[18] Assuming a single class contains 180 instructional hours in a school year, the average ELA, math, science, and social studies classroom in our study spent, respectively, 122, 127, 164, and 166 hours on assignments that were not appropriate for the grade. See the Technical Appendix for details on how we estimated the amount of class time spent with grade-appropriate assignments, with strong instruction, or engaged.

[19] Though the amount of time in school varies state to state, in all analyses, we assume a single class requires 180 hours in a school year, or 9 months. See National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Number of hours in the school day and average number of days in the school year for public schools, by state: 2007–08*. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables_list.asp

[20] See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we reviewed and analyzed districts' curricular and assessment policies, as well as how we rated materials and assessments themselves.

For our complete methodology, including further explanation of our analytical approaches and full analysis results, see the Technical Appendix at tntp.org/opportunitymyth

[21] Our definition of strong instruction did not require teachers to earn perfect scores on the four domains we observed—classroom culture, content, instructional practices, and student ownership—so it was possible for a lesson to be classified as "strong" but not have high ratings on every domain. In this example, many lessons (295) had the highest possible ratings on content, but lower ratings on instructional practices and student ownership. See the Technical Appendix for how we defined "strong instruction."

[22] Scherer, M. (2008). Learning: Who's job is it? *Educational Leadership, 66*(3), p.7. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/Learning@-Whose-Job-Is-It%C2%A2.aspx.

[23] The interest, enjoyment, and concentration approach to measuring engagement is based on Shernoff, D., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Schneider, B., & Shernoff. E. (2003). Student engagement in high school classrooms from the perspective of flow theory. *School Psychological Quarterly*, 18(2), pp. 158–176. https://doi.org/10.1521/scpq.18.2.158.21860

[24] The survey questions we used to represent worth were partly adapted from Uekawa, K., Borman, K. & Lee, R. (2007). Student engagement in U.S. urban high school mathematics and science classrooms: Findings on social organization, race, and ethnicity. *The Urban Review*, 39(1), pp. 1–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-006-0039-1. See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we used survey questions to categorize students' perceptions of engagement and worth.

[25] Romero, C. (2015). *What we know about belonging from scientific research*. Palo Alto, CA: Mindset Scholars Network. Retrieved from http://mindsetscholarsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/What-We-Know-About-Belonging.pdf

[26] "Rarely" defined as having no more than one experience perceived as engaging and worthwhile. 28% never had an engaging and worthwhile experience and 13% rarely did (N = 2,427 students).

[27] Rate based on 2012 "event dropouts," which represent the "percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential (e.g., a GED)." See Table 1 in Stark, P., & Noel, A.M. (2015). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2012* (NCES 2015-015). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015015.pdf

[28] On the other hand, the same student tended to be less engaged on days when they received higher-quality assignments. See the Technical Appendix for results on how engagement varied on different days based on the quality of assignments and lessons.

[29] Teachers' perceptions of the extent to which they talked to students about their interests and goals based on four survey items: To what extent do you engage in the following practices: (1) meet with students to discuss their learning progress; (2) meet with students to discuss their strengths and interests; (3) set learning goals with students; (4) communicate with individual students and their families about the aspirations they have for a student's future. Teachers had four choices for each item: Never, Sometimes, Often, Daily or Almost Daily. We integer-coded teachers' responses so that Never was a 1 and Daily or Almost Daily was a 4, took the average across all four items, and then classified this composite value into quartiles. Classrooms in the top quartile had an average engagement rate of 62% while classrooms in the bottom quartile had an average engagement rate of 46%.

[30] All analyses using students' letter grades were based on all grade 3-12 students in the participating district or participating CMO school, not just the subset of classrooms we visited. See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we used data on course grades for all students in the participating districts.

[31] We ran a series of linear regression models predicting the typical quality of assignments and lessons provided to classrooms based on their demographic characteristics as well as a host of other controls, including prior achievement. Notably, there was still a statistically significant negative relationship between the percent of students from low-income families in a class and the average quality of assignments, even after controlling for prior achievement ($p<0.01$). See the Technical Appendix for our model specifications and Table A.13 in the Appendix for full model results.

[32] For classes where at least 50% of the students were students of color, the typical percent of time spent with grade-appropriate assignments, with strong lessons, and engaged were respectively 23%, 9%, and 50%, while for classes with mostly white students, these values were 34%, 33%, and 62%. For classes where at least 75% of students were from low-income families, these values were respectively 20%, 8%, and 52%, compared to 44%, 41%, and 63% for classes where at least 75% of students were not from low-income families. Only classrooms that contained enough data to meet our inclusion rules were included; see the Technical Appendix for more details on these rules and further analysis comparing access to these key resources by student characteristics.

[33] Some of the racial/ethnic disparities in test outcomes between students is likely due to "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is an experimentally established phenomenon that represents the negative effect on performance when students feel like they must perform well or risk confirming negative intellectual stereotypes. For example, female students have been stereotyped to be less intellectually strong in math, and thus female students' math test performance likely underestimates their true abilities because the anxiety of having to disprove this negative stereotype lowers their performance on tests. This is particularly true when the student knows the test will be used for comparative purposes, as is the case in state standardized tests, ACT and SAT tests, and AP tests. Research has shown that stereotype threat can underestimate Black and Latinx students' total SAT math and reading scores by about 40 points. Though this is a large effect, across our participating districts the difference between students of color and white students with the same course grade was about 100 points on both the SAT math and reading components. Thus, while stereotype threat plays a role in our findings, it likely does not explain them entirely. For a thorough understanding of stereotype threat, see Steele, C. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi: And other clues to how stereotypes affect us*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. See also Logel, C. R., Walton, G. M., Spencer, S. J., Peach, J., & Mark, Z. P. (2012). Unleashing latent ability: Implications of stereotype threat for college admissions. *Educational Psychologist*, 47(1), 42-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.611368

[34] Classrooms with the most grade-appropriate assignments were defined as those classrooms whose average assignment score ranked in the top quartile; classrooms with the least grade-appropriate assignments were those who ranked in the bottom quartile.

[35] Wilson, T. (2011). *Redirect: The surprising new science of psychological change*. New York, NY: Little Brown.

[36] Wenzlaff, R. & Wagner, D. (2000). Thought suppression. *Annual Review of Psychology, 51*(1), pp. 59-91. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.59

[37] Murphy, M.C., Kroeper, K., & Ozier, E. (2018). Prejudiced places: How contexts shape equality and how policy change them. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 5*(1), pp. 66-74. https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732217748671

[38] Cherng, H. & Halpin, P. (2016). The importance of minority teachers: Student perceptions of minority versus white teachers. *Educational Researcher, 45*(7), pp. 407–420. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16671718

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DISCLOSURE

The school systems studied for this report include those with which TNTP is currently engaged as a consultant and/or service provider, as well as those that are unaffiliated with TNTP's work. None of these school systems held editorial control over this report, and the report was independently funded. All participation was voluntary and school systems were not compensated.

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ABOUT TNTP

TNTP believes our nation's public schools can offer *all* children an excellent education. A national nonprofit founded by teachers, we help school systems end educational inequality. We work at every level of the public education system to attract and train talented teachers and school leaders, ensure rigorous and engaging classrooms, and create environments that prioritize great teaching and accelerate student learning. Since 1997, we've partnered with more than 200 public school districts, charter school networks, and state departments of education. We have recruited or trained more than 50,000 teachers, inspired policy change through acclaimed studies such as *The Mirage* (2015), *The Irreplaceables* (2012), and *The Widget Effect* (2009), and launched the Bridge Fellowship, our signature program for diverse leaders with bold ideas for public schools. Today, TNTP is active in more than 50 cities.

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