THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

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

#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH

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At the heart of this report are real students, their aspirations and dreams, and how school sets them up—or doesn’t—to reach those goals.
Students like Isaac.

Isaac, 17, attends a small public high school in the western part of the country. He plans to attend college to study nursing and become an RN.

“I can’t give up on this dream that I’ve had since I was a little boy. I’m willing to take any chance in my life for this dream.”

—Isaac, 11th grade

Isaac did what school asked of him. Has school held up its end of the deal?

SOURCE: Student Interviews
For many students, the answer is no. Nationwide, nearly 70 percent of high school graduates go on to college—but far fewer are succeeding once they get there.

40% of all college students take at least one remedial course

60% of African-American and Hispanic college students take at least one remedial course

Graduates who opt for a career straight out of high school aren't faring much better. Many employers report that high school graduates enter their roles missing the skills they need to do their jobs well.
We wanted to understand why. To do that, we partnered with five school systems to look closely at what students are doing in school—and how to improve those experiences at scale.

**Understand students’ academic experiences**

**in schools nationwide**

**to advance student learning.**

**RESEARCH**
Survey students in real time throughout a school year; pair with schoolwork, observations and achievement data.

**SCOPE**
Work with 4 diverse districts and 1 charter network; follow about 250 teachers and almost 4,000 students.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**
Define concrete next steps for policies and practices in classrooms, schools and districts.
Here’s what we found:

1. Students have big, clear plans for college and career.

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

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

4. 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.

5. Greater access to the four resources can and does improve student achievement—particularly for students who start the school year behind
The "opportunity myth" is the false promise that if students do what they're asked in school, they'll be set up for success—and that if they don't succeed, they must've done something to blow their chance.

It's on all of us, not just teachers, to give students better school experiences that set them up for success. We can choose to upend the opportunity myth.
The students we met and surveyed have ambitious goals for themselves—and they expect school to add up to something practical: readiness to meet those goals.

"I'm hoping to be a neurologist."  
-Hajima  
12th grade

"I want to go to police academy."  
-Raymond  
5th grade

"I want to do something with kids."  
-Luz  
11th grade

"I want to be a trauma nurse."  
-Maggie  
10th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews
Almost all of them—regardless of who they are—intend to go to college or beyond.

Seventy percent of high schoolers aspire to careers that require at least a college degree.

SOURCE: Student background surveys
Students expect that school will set them up to meet their goals if they do what's asked of them—and they generally do just that.

- **88%** of the time, students are working on activities related to class.
- **71%** of the time, students met the expectations of assignments they're given.
- **83%** earned As, Bs, and Cs in English language arts.
- **78%** earned As, Bs, and Cs in math.

**SOURCE:** Student surveys (for time on task); Student work samples (for meeting assignment expectations); District extant data (for grades)
But even when they do what school asks, they're not set up for success to reach their long-term goals.

Students succeeded on 71% of their assignments

They met grade-level standards on 17% of those exact same assignments

Even though most students are meeting the demands of their assignments—and many are earning As and Bs—they're not prepared for college-level work.

SOURCE: Student work samples
That's not because they're not capable.

When given the chance to try grade-level work, students meet the bar more than half the time.

SOURCE: Student work samples
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...

56%
Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly students of color

65%
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.

38%
Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly students of color

12%
Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly white students
But most students get those chances far too infrequently. We found four key resources that influence a student's school experience and outcomes.

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

Unfortunately, these resources are few and far between for most students—and particularly for students of color, those from low-income families, English language learners, and students with mild to moderate disabilities.
These four resources make a difference. When students get greater access to them, their outcomes improve.

In our sample, all students made:

- 1.7 months: more months of academic progress when they had access to **better assignments**.
- 0.2 months: more months of academic progress when they had access to **stronger instruction**.
- 2.5 months: more months of academic progress when they reported being **more engaged in class**.
- 4.6 months: more months of academic progress when their teachers had **higher expectations**.

*Source: Value-added models*
...That's especially true for students who started the year below grade-level.

In our sample, students who started the year performing substantially below average made:

- **7.3 months** more months of academic progress when they had access to **better assignments**.
- **6.1 months** more months of academic progress when they had access to **stronger instruction**.
- **0.9 months** more months of academic progress when they reported being **more engaged in class**.
- **7.9 months** more months of academic progress when their teachers had **higher expectations**.

SOURCE: Value-added models
We found classrooms across the country that offered greater access to the four key resources. These environments looked different in every setting but they shared common traits.

**IN SCHOOLS**

A consistent focus on a relatively small set of academic priorities that represented a high bar for students’ success.

A high level of support for teachers in order to reach that bar.

**IN CLASSROOMS**

Assignments and instructional practices that reflected high expectations for students.

A positive, respectful environment where students were enjoying their learning.

Teachers who believed their students could be successful against rigorous standards.

SOURCE: Teacher focus groups and school leader interviews
Unfortunately, those bright spots were in short supply. In most classrooms, students spent far too much time on content that was not appropriate for their grade.

In a single school year, the average student spends about 530 hours of the approximately 720 hours in their core classes on assignments that are not grade appropriate.

Source: Assignments
That’s worrying for students like Hajima.

"I don’t want to feel like I’m behind when I walk into a class on the first day of college. The teacher is not going to wait for me."

–Hajima, 12th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews
Assignment quality varied widely. Some students—like the eighth graders in this language arts class—did have the opportunity to grapple with high-quality assignments.

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.

*SOURCE: Assignments*
But eighth graders in another language arts class—in the same district—did not have that same chance.

The “Billion Oyster Project” Brings Life Back to NYC Waters

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 covered 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 20 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.

After reading a fifth-grade level text, students completed multiple-choice vocabulary questions and filled in the missing vowels in words, which is not aligned to any eighth-grade literacy standard.

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.
Even in classrooms where students did have grade-appropriate assignments, we often saw students missing out on strong instruction—particularly opportunities to "do the thinking" in their lessons.

Of the nearly 900 core lessons...

only 295 had grade-level content...

and only 74 had grade-level content and asked students to do the thinking.

SOURCE: Observations
That’s frustrating for students like Raymond.

“I think math is kind of fun.”
– Raymond, 5th grade

But in his math class, he and his classmates are repeatedly interrupted and corrected by their teacher. Eventually, Raymond—who likes math—rests his head on his desk.

SOURCE: Student Interviews
Perhaps as a result, students did not often view their school experiences as engaging or worthwhile, particularly in middle and high school.

**SOURCE:** Student surveys
That’s unfair to students like Isaac.

“Some classes are really dry. You take nothing but notes. That’s not going to help me learn what I need in the long term.”

–Isaac, 11th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews
And most students were in classrooms where the teachers did not hold high expectations for them.

82% of teachers support their state’s academic standards

44% of teachers expect students can meet those standards

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

SOURCE: Teacher Surveys
That matters to students like Luz.

“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.”

—Luz, 11th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews
Low expectations contribute to a mismatch between grades students receive and their actual readiness to meet their long-term goals.

Among B students in math and English courses...

- 65% were not at grade-level on grade 3-8 state tests. 94% of C students and 29% of A students were not at grade-level.
- 52% did not meet the ACT or SAT’s benchmark for college readiness. 77% of C students and 18% of A students did not meet the benchmark.
- 80% did not pass the AP test. 91% of C students and 50% of A students did not pass the AP test.

SOURCE: District-provided grades and assessment scores
That concerns students like Maggie.

“I feel like everybody’s capable of the same thing. I think they can do it just as much as I can do it.”

– Maggie, 10th grade
Access to the four key resources varies widely from classroom to classroom—and we choose to give some students more access than others.

**Within the same school and subject area:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the highest-rated classrooms,</th>
<th>In the lowest-rated classrooms,</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49% of students’ time was spent on grade-appropriate assignments, and</td>
<td>13% of students’ time was spent on grade-appropriate assignments, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44% of lessons had strong instruction.</td>
<td>1% of lessons had strong instruction.</td>
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In a school year, the highest-rated classrooms tended to spend 64 more hours on grade-appropriate assignments and 78 more hours with strong instruction than the lowest-rated classrooms.

**Source:** Assignments and observations
Inequitable access isn't random. White students and those from higher-income families were more likely to be in classrooms that offered the four key resources. Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were about 25% LESS LIKELY to receive grade-appropriate assignments. They also received LESS THAN HALF THE AMOUNT of high-quality lessons.

SOURCE: Assignments and observations
Classrooms serving mostly students of color or low-income students typically had vastly fewer opportunities.

Classrooms with mostly white students (>50%) tended to receive:

- 1.5x MORE grade-appropriate assignments
- 3.6x MORE high-quality lessons
- 1.2x MORE engaging experiences

...than classrooms with mostly students of color

Classrooms with primarily high-income students, (>75%) tended to receive:

- 2.1x MORE grade-appropriate assignments
- 5.4x MORE high-quality lessons
- 1.2x MORE engaging experiences

...than classrooms with mostly students from low-income backgrounds

SOURCE: Assignments, Observations, Student Surveys
Even when we controlled for prior achievement, low-income students had fewer high-quality academic experiences.

Even among students performing better than the average student in the state, low-income students still spent 30% less time—nearly 1 fewer month per year—with grade-appropriate assignments.
We also saw a lower grading standard for students of color, resulting in even more misleading signals about students’ readiness to achieve their goals.

**Student Performance on Standardized Tests by Letter Grade and Student Race/Ethnicity**

**Grades 3-8 State Tests**
Percent meeting grade-level expectations

**Act & SAT**
Percent meeting college readiness benchmarks

**AP Tests**
Percent scoring 3 out of 5 or higher

- Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 4 out of 5 districts.

- Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 2 out of 2 districts.

- Students of color received significantly worse AP scores for the same grades in 3 out of 3 districts.

**Source:** District-provided grades and assessment scores
Among classrooms with at least 75% Black or at least 75% Latinx students...

66% of teachers who shared their students’ race or ethnicity held high expectations

35% of teachers who did not share their students’ race or ethnicity held high expectations

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

SOURCE: District-provided assessment scores and teacher surveys
When students get access to more of the key resources, they grow more compared to their peers—especially students who started the year below grade-level.

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

SOURCE: Student achievement data
In the spring, Isaac graduated with his class. He's enrolled in nursing school.

“That diploma means I worked hard. 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.”

—Isaac,
High School Graduate

IS HE READY?
OR HAS HE BEEN MISLED?

SOURCE: Student Interviews
WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO MAKE OPPORTUNITIES MORE THAN A MYTH?
We’re asking all adults whose choices affect students’ experiences to make two big commitments—and follow through on them.

**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.

**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 their child’s 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.
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.

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.
Upholding those commitments in practice means undertaking five major actions.

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.

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

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.

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

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.
Reflection and Application

This research was not done in your community. But we believe it is symptomatic of school communities across the country. As an advocate, have you heard stories from your parents or students that mirror those of the report. Think of one story and turn to neighbor and share.

How do these results align with the four priorities of the TN Educational Equity Coalition? How will you bring these findings to your work in the field?

As an advocate, you are in relationship with parents and students. We are asking that all adults commit to all children getting access to the 4 resources. If you make that commitment, how would it shape/reshape your work?
opportunitymyth.tntp.org

Explore *The Opportunity Myth* online, add yourself to the map, and request a personalized action guide.

tntp.org/studentexperiencetoolkit

Browse resources designed to help educators, policymakers, and families improve students' daily experiences in school.