

THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

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

#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH

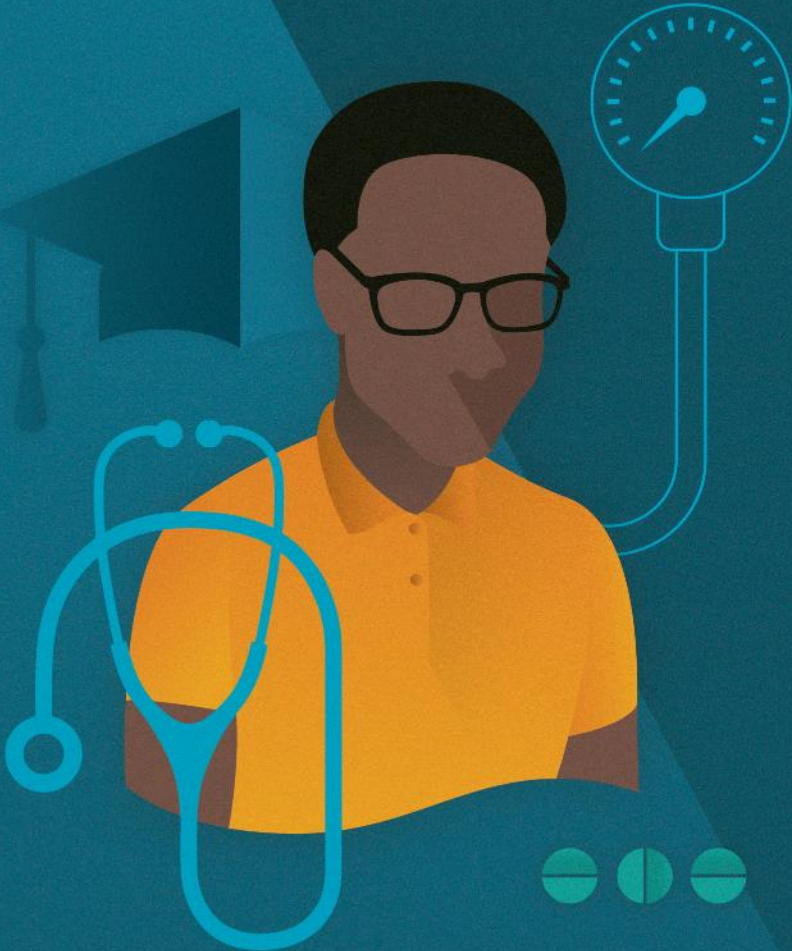
opportunitymyth.tntp.org

TNTP's latest report, *The Opportunity Myth*, examines the quality of students' academic experiences in school—and its effect on their long-term success.



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?

We partnered with five school systems to look closely at what students are doing in school and how to improve these 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.



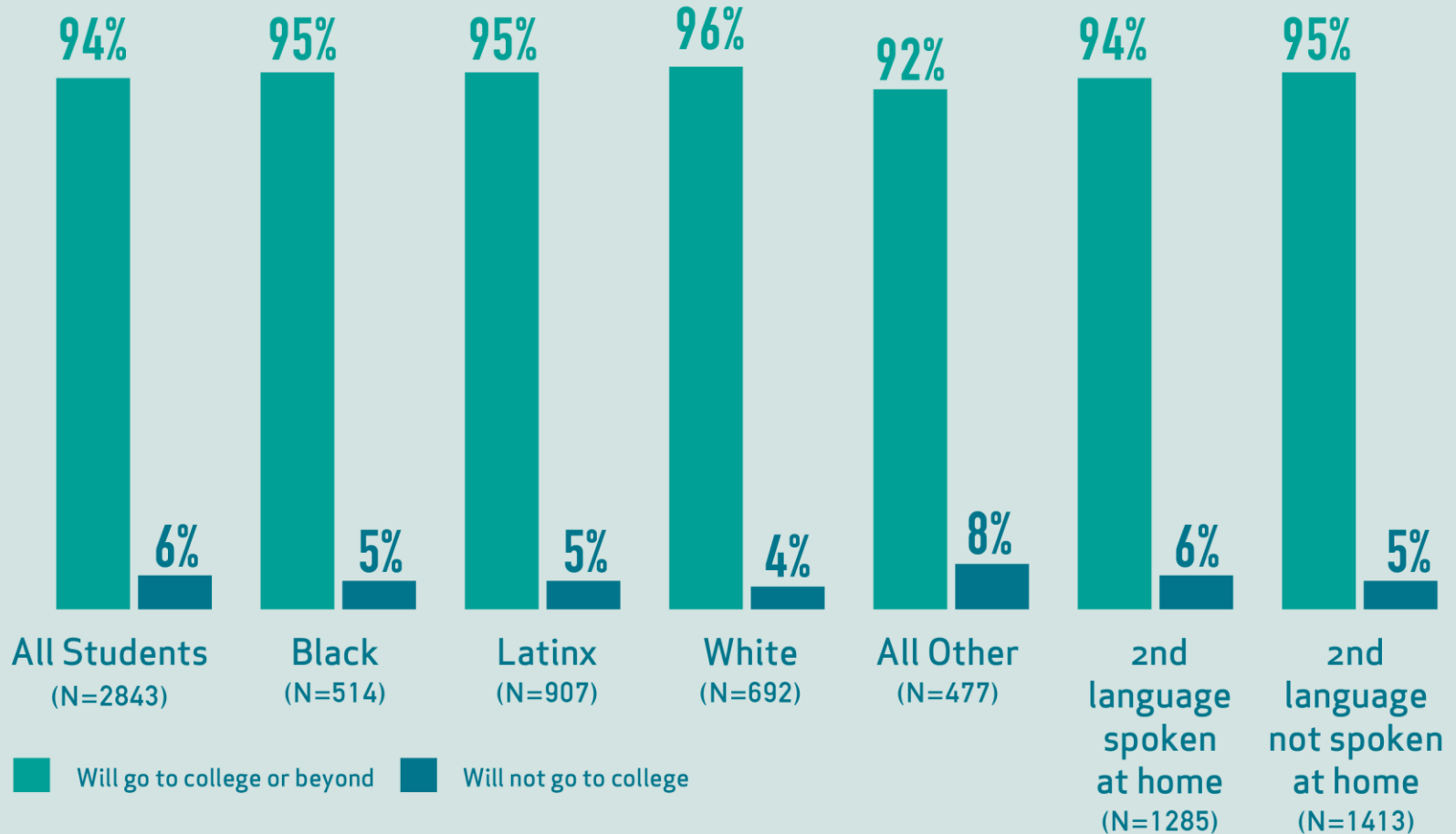
RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Almost all students—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

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

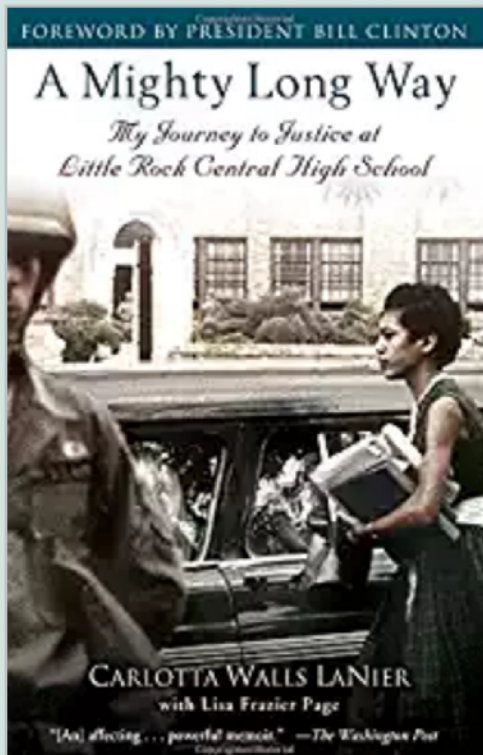
They met grade-level
standards on

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.

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.



Education

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

Informational Essay Planner

Name:

Date:

Focusing Question: 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 in what ways did it give an incomplete or even inaccurate picture of events?

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.

But most students are spending most of their time working on low quality assignments that are not preparing them for the challenges ahead.

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.

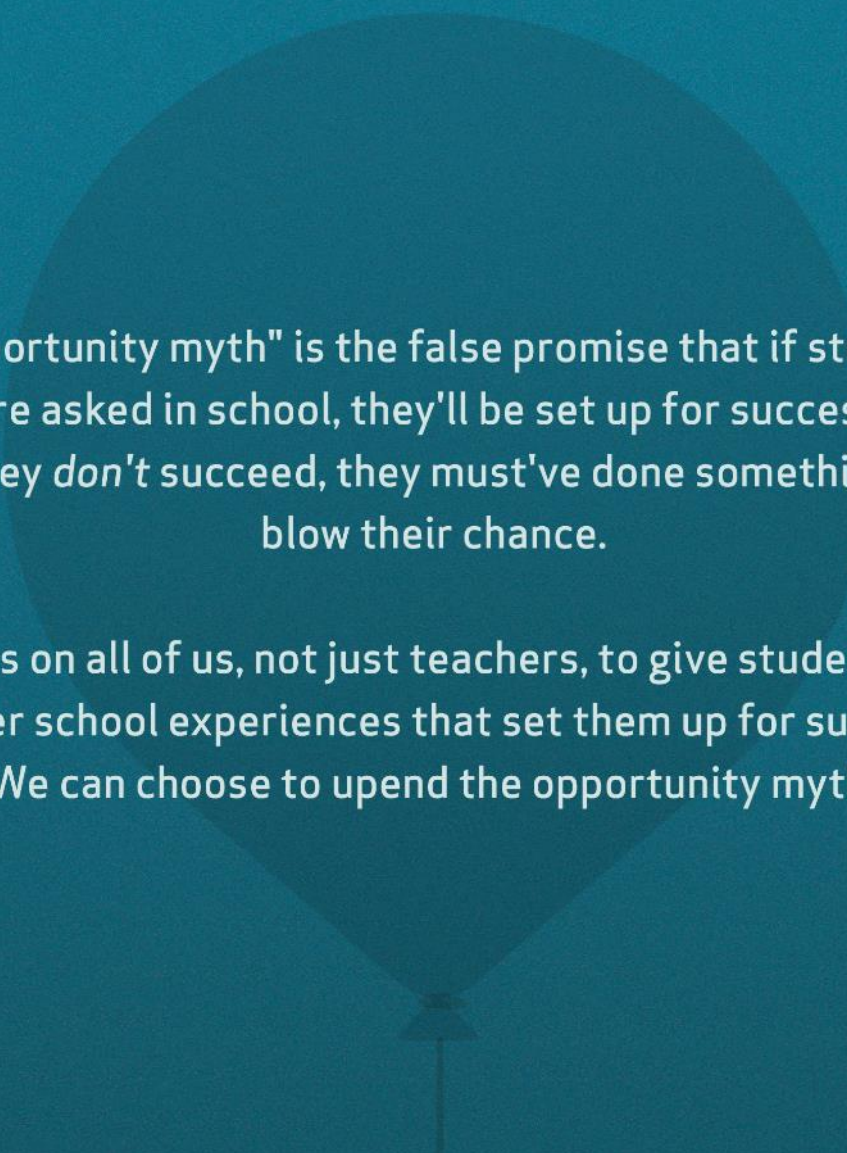
These NYC waterways and harbors will always be some of the world’s busiest. But with the help of the Billion Oyster Project, the dynamic natural world that once thrived here is beginning to return and to coexist more peacefully with the ferries, barges, cars and trains.

After reading a fifth-grade level text, eighth graders in this class completed multiple-choice questions and filled in the missing vowels in words.

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.



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.

How do we begin to disrupt the Opportunity Myth?
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

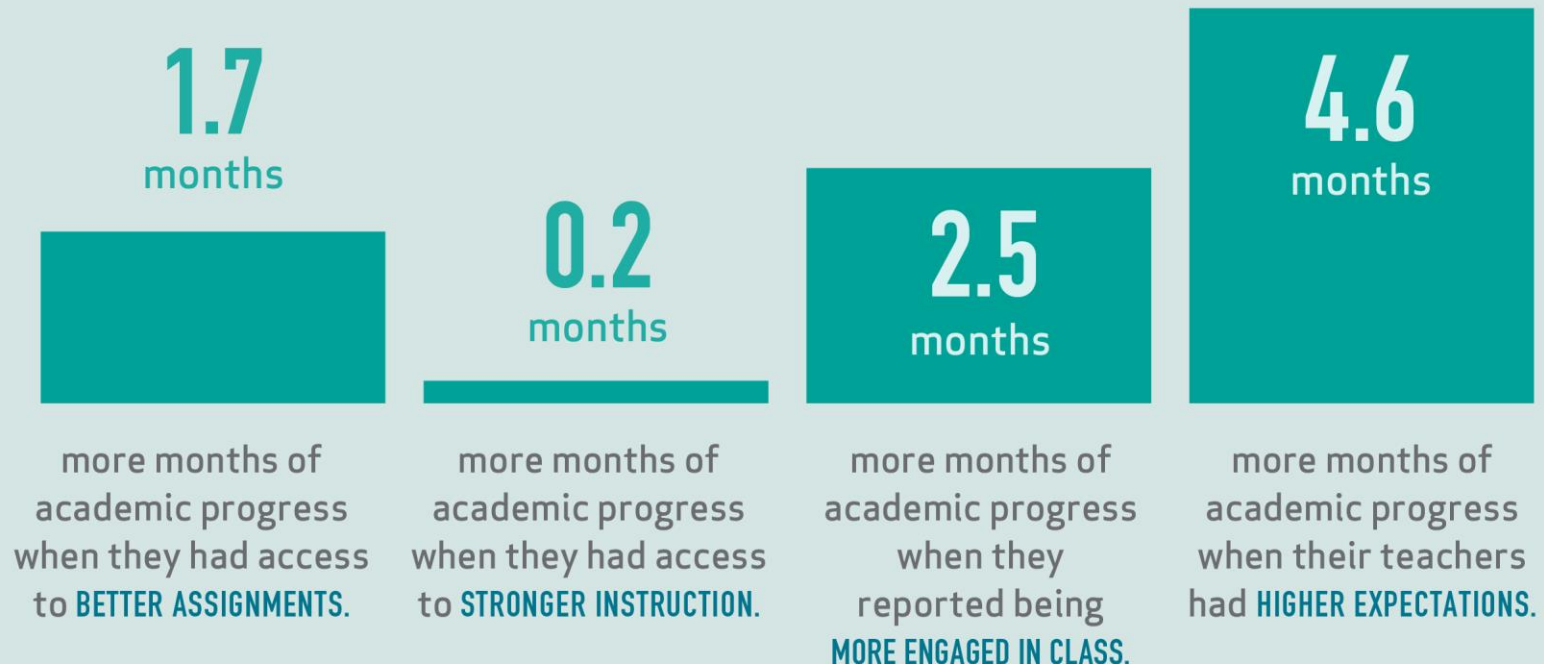
3 **DEEP ENGAGEMENT**
in what they're
learning

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:



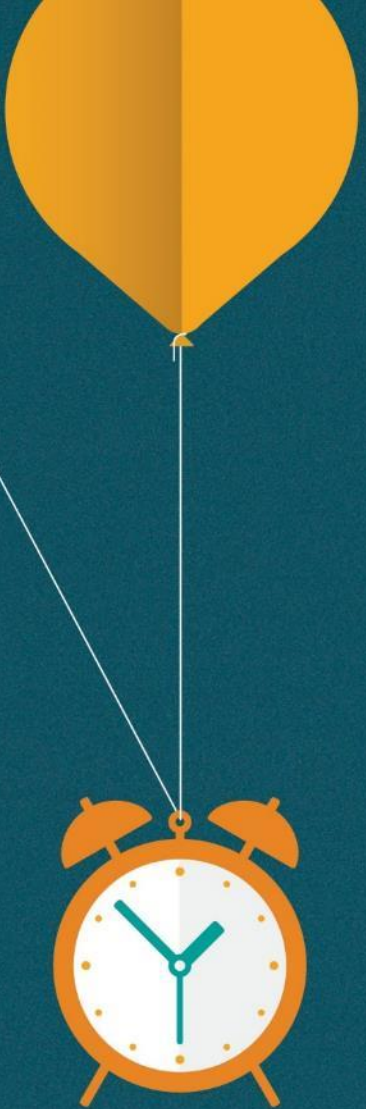
SOURCE: Value-added models

..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:



SOURCE: Value-added models



Recommendation #1: Make greater access to grade-appropriate assignments an urgent priority for *all* students.

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.

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.

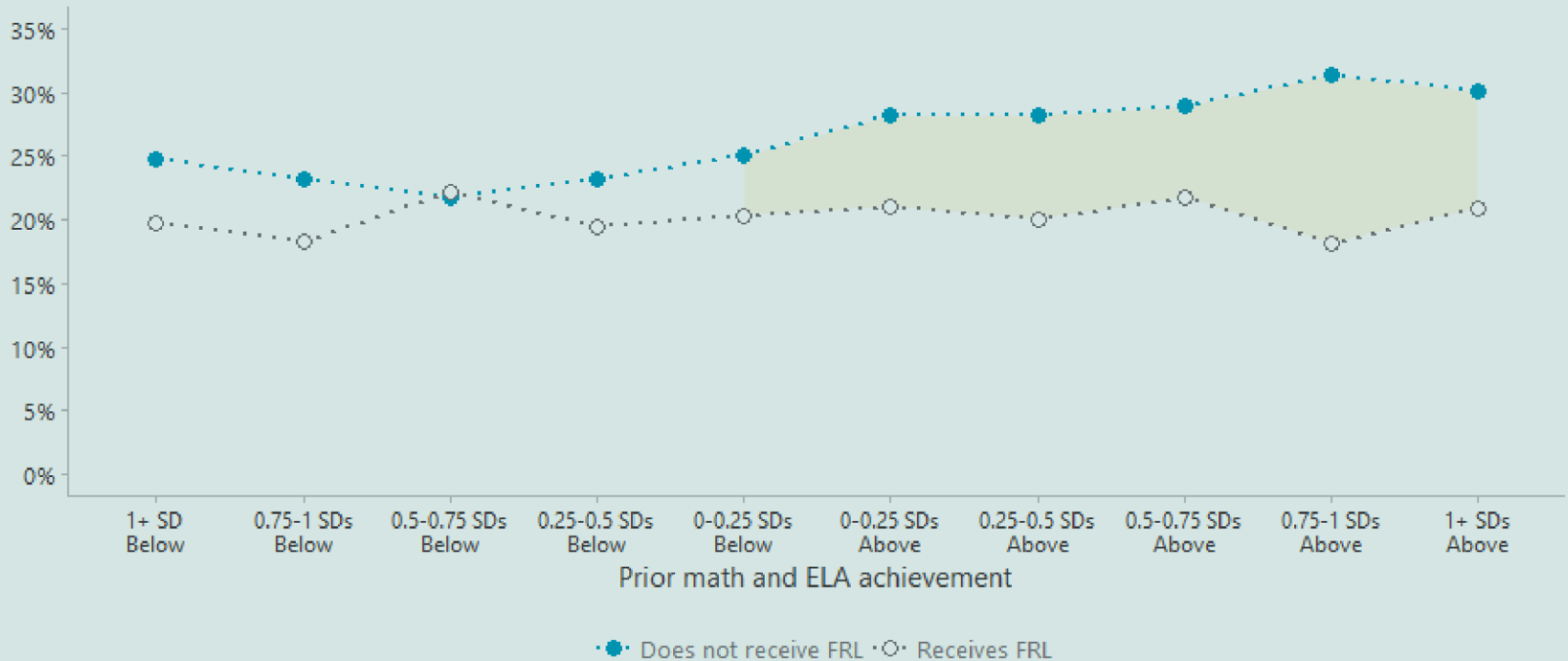


Percent of classrooms that had no grade-level assignments in classrooms with mostly students of color

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

Even when we controlled for prior achievement, low-income students had fewer high-quality academic experiences.

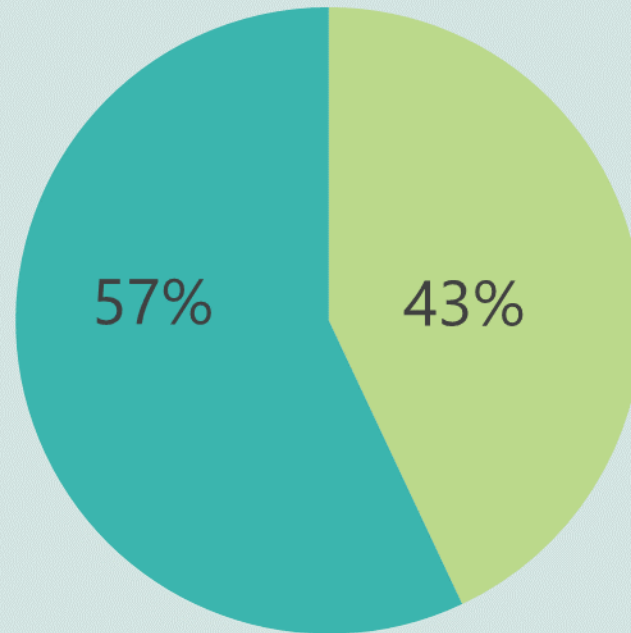
PERCENT GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS BY PRIOR ACHIEVEMENT AND INCOME STATUS



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.

Teachers' access to—and choices about curriculum use—exacerbate the problems of student access to grade-appropriate content.

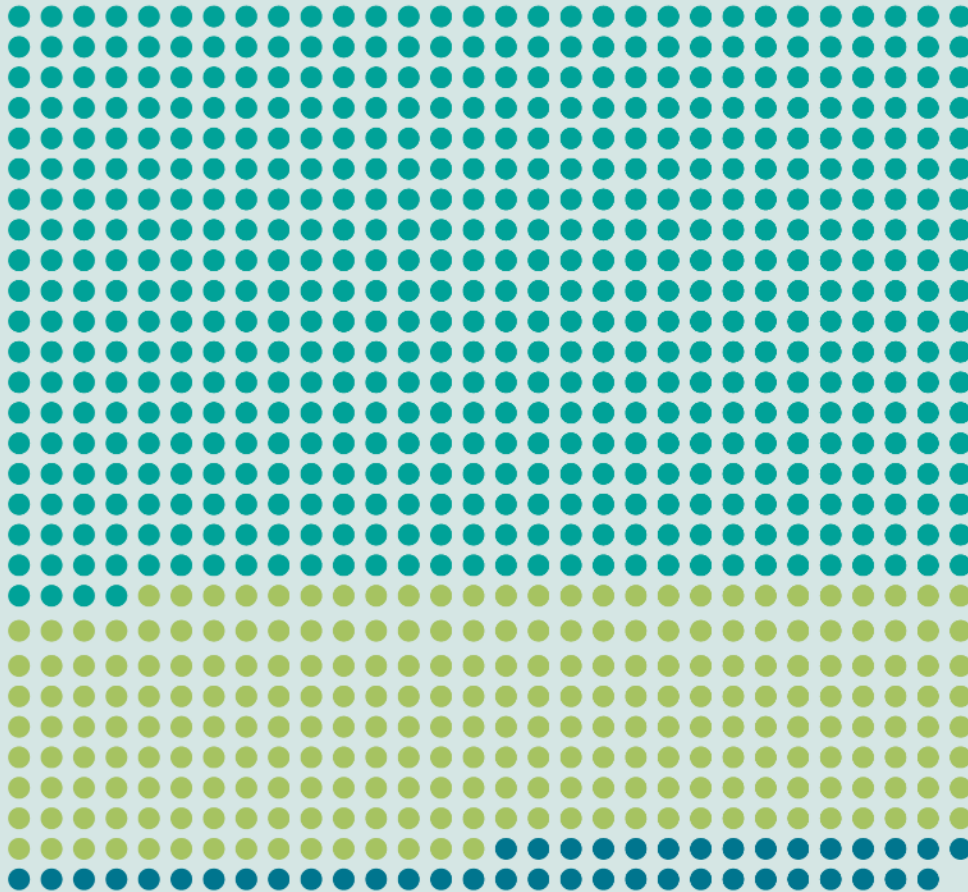
Where did assignments come from?



■ District Adopted Materials ■ Teacher-Created Materials

Just **20% of teacher created assignments were on grade-level**, compared to 34% from district-adopted materials.

Recommendation #2: Give all students—especially those who are behind grade level—access to instruction that asks them to think and engage deeply with challenging material.



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.

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.



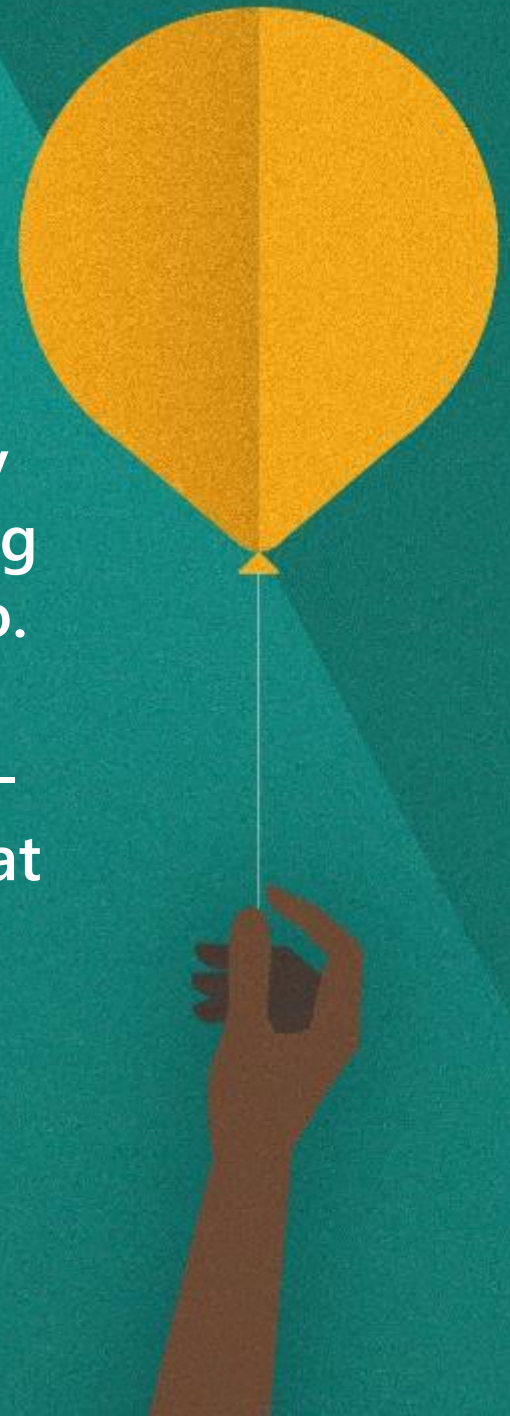
Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were about **25% LESS LIKELY** to receive grade-appropriate assignments.

They also received **LESS THAN HALF THE AMOUNT** of high-quality lessons.

SOURCE: Assignments and observations

The opportunity myth wasn't created by teachers, who are working hard and doing what they've been trained and told to do.

Most students—**93% OF THOSE WE SURVEYED**—told us it's important to their teachers that they learn a lot.



Recommendation #3: Ask students about their school experiences.
Listen to what they share and act on what they tell you.



SOURCE: Student surveys

Engaged students had better classroom outcomes and were more likely to aspire to attend college.

Compared to students whose engagement was in the bottom quartile, students whose engagement was in the top quartile were more likely to...



Earn Better Grades

34% more likely to earn an A



Successfully Complete Assignments

15% higher success rates



Aspire to Finish College

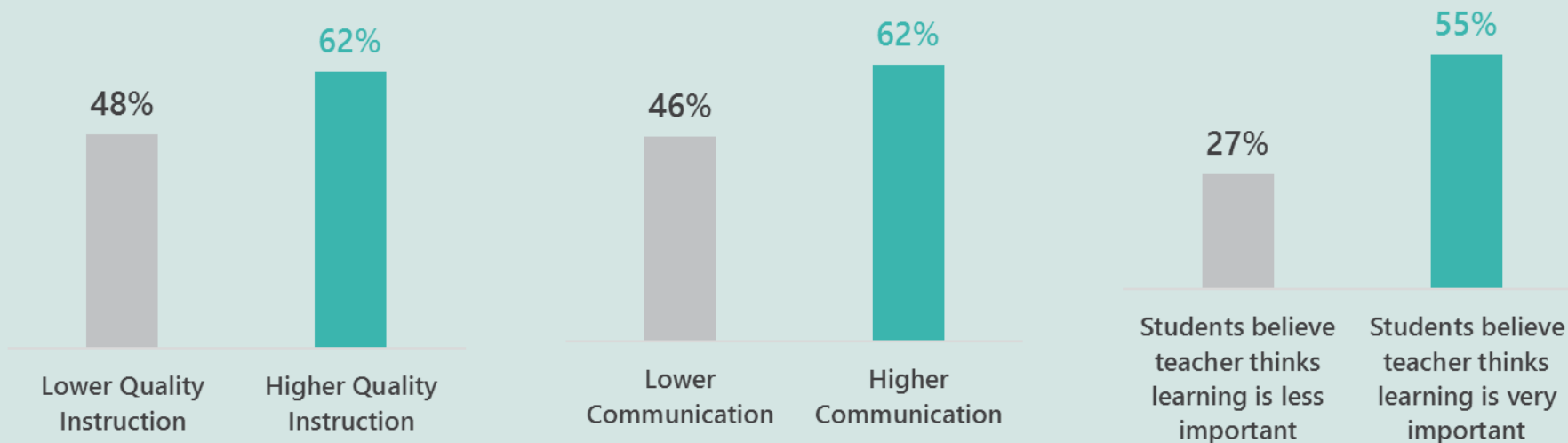
16% more likely to believe they will finish college

Students were more engaged when they had better instruction, had teachers who spoke to them about their goals, and believed their teachers held high expectations.

Classrooms with higher rated instruction had engagement rates that were **28% higher** than the lowest rated classrooms.

Teachers who talked to students about their interests and goals had **34% higher engagement rates**.

When students believed their teachers had higher expectations, they were **nearly twice as likely to be engaged**.



Note: Students' perceptions of teacher expectations based on survey item "It is important to my teacher that I learn a lot in this class". Responses of Mostly True or Very True classified as very important, and responses of A Little True or Not True classified as less important. Percentages represent percent of experiences rated engaging among students in each group. Higher/Lower quality instruction based on shrunk classroom level observation composite scores separated into quartiles: Higher = the top quartile and Lower = bottom quartile. Communication based on a simple composite of four teacher survey questions asking the extent to which teachers meet with students and families to discuss goals and interests. Higher communications are classrooms that ranked in the top quartile of most self-reported time spent doing these activities; Lower communication was the bottom quartile. For the latter two analyses, for each classroom that had at least 20 survey responses on 4 different days, we calculated the classroom engagement rate, and then averaged this rate across classrooms within the quartile.

Recommendation #4: Support educators to enact high expectations for students by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with more rigorous material.



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

SOURCE: Teacher Surveys

The schools that provided students with the best classroom experiences tended to be the ones that supported their teachers to *be able to* hold high expectations.

These “bright spot” schools:

Held a clear vision of excellent instruction that focused on a small set of academic priorities for students’ success.

Paired that vision with strategic supports to help teachers meet the high bar called for in the school’s vision of excellence.

We can—and should—learn from these bright spots.

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

Teachers of color held higher expectations for students of color, regardless of achievement.

We must begin to diversify the teacher workforce.

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.

MEAN ACHIEVEMENT BY DEMOGRAPHIC AND ASSIGNMENT QUALITY, AND EXTRAPOLATED GROWTH

STUDENTS OF COLOR



STUDENTS BEGINNING SUBSTANTIALLY BEHIND 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?**

Think about the recommendations profiled today:

1. Make greater access to **grade-appropriate assignments** an urgent priority.
2. Give *all* students access to **rigorous instruction** that asks them to think and engage deeply with challenging material.
3. Ask students about their school **experiences**. Listen to what they share and act on what they tell you.
4. Support educators to enact **high expectations** by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with rigorous material.

**Which of these recommendations feel most urgent to you?
What could you do to begin to implement those
recommendations in your program?**

Recommendation #5:

Conduct an equity audit to determine whether program graduates and pre-service teachers consistently provide equitable access to the four resources.

Use TNTP's free tools to help.

tntp.org/studentexperiencetoolkit

Find a step-by-step equity audit guide along with other resources for improving student experiences, including all tools used in the report and a full student work library.

opportunitymyth.tntp.org/act-now

Receive a personalized action guide with concrete resources to help you improve student experiences, access and outcomes.

