



Opportunities Lost:

The urgent need to improve
Pittsburgh's schools

A PENNCAN RESEARCH REPORT

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The urgent need to improve
Pittsburgh's schools

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Table of Contents

Preface	4
Introduction	6
1 The Lack of Quality Schools in Pittsburgh	8
2 The Lack of Quality Schools Disproportionately Harms Black Students	17
3 Low-Performing Schools Exacerbate the Income Gap and Hurt Pittsburgh’s Long-Term Economic Prosperity	25
4 Debunking Myths About School Improvement	28
5 Learning from Successes in Other Cities	31
Conclusion	33
Graph Sources	34
Endnotes	35

Preface

My father believed that education was the single greatest gift we could pass on to our children, because an education could never be taken away from us. I believe education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start.

I have come a long way from 111 Railroad Avenue in Kissimmee, FL. I grew up with an outhouse, on a dirt road nestled invisibly behind middle-class white neighbors who lived on a paved street with indoor plumbing. Where I lived and the conditions of my environment did not matter to society. I was given the same tests and judged by the same criteria as my more advantaged classmates. My grandmother, who raised me, was a domestic worker who did not possess a formal education, but insisted that I go to school and excel so that I could have the doors of opportunity opened for me to achieve the “American Dream.”

Thirty-five years ago, during the second half of my senior year in high school, a single conversation changed the course of my life. I was walking down my school hallway when Mr. Samuel Eaves, an African-American guidance counselor, asked me if I was planning to go college. I told him that I couldn’t afford college and I didn’t even know how to apply. He sat me down and told me that I was a good student, with good grades and that I could go to college. He told me about Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. It was the only school I applied to, and five years later I was walking across the stage to accept my degree.

I feel so strongly about what education has done for me, that my wife and I are starting LIFE Male Science Technology Engineering Arts and Math Academy (K–12) to change the trajectory of the lives of young men, with an emphasis on African-American males in the Pittsburgh region. LIFE stands for Living Intelligently Fulfilling Expectations.

We will emphasize to the young scholars the words of former Morehouse College President, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, “It’s not your environment, it is you—the quality of your minds, the integrity of your souls, and the determination of your wills—that will decide your future and shape your lives.”

As the Senior Pastor of Rodman Street Missionary Baptist Church, which is located in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh, I witness hopelessness and despair on the one hand, and success and prosperity on the other hand. Gentrification is rapidly changing the neighborhood and pushing those on the fringes farther away from the prosperity, hope and resources that each child and citizen deserves to participate in.

I too was raised on the fringes, but education became the equalizer that changed the course of my life, and now the lives of my own children. For someone who never expected to go to college, I watched in awe as my children considered a multitude of college options. In just one generation, we have shifted from not even considering college to turning colleges down because we have so many options and opportunities. That's the power of education!

Education is key to breaking the vicious cycle of hopelessness, poverty and despair. I strongly believe that it “takes a village to raise a child.” In Pittsburgh, it is imperative that our parents, faith leaders, schools, policymakers and the business community work together to provide hope and opportunity to the diamonds in the rough, like me, who are being left behind.

Quality teachers and schools that support, challenge and love their students can change the trajectory for children who believe they will never go to college and help them grab the limitless opportunities that are rightly theirs.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darryl T. Canady". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Darryl T. Canady
Senior Pastor
Rodman Street Missionary Baptist Church

Introduction

Two years ago, PennCAN released the *Allegheny County Opportunity Schools* report, which celebrated the schools in the Pittsburgh region that are breaking the link between poverty and low academic achievement and proving that poverty is not destiny. The purpose of the report was to demonstrate what we know to be true—that with the right leadership, the right instruction and the right supports—all children regardless of ZIP code can learn and excel academically.

Although our report highlighted successes, it also revealed a sobering reality: an overwhelming 94 percent of high-poverty schools in Allegheny County were *not* Opportunity Schools. This report, *Opportunities Lost: The Urgent Need to Improve Pittsburgh's Schools*, looks specifically at the city of Pittsburgh and its desperate need for more Opportunity Schools. In Pittsburgh, far too many students are stuck in schools where academic achievement is low, students are denied the chance to succeed in college and career, and where countless opportunities are lost.

Pittsburgh is currently receiving national acclaim for its resurgence from a post-industrial town, devastated by the collapse of the steel industry, into a city that has reinvented itself with an innovative economy, based on the growth of new industries. Ironically, while Pittsburgh's economy is surging ahead, the city's public schools are falling further behind when compared to other urban centers. In fact, based on the findings of a recent comprehensive report on the state of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), the city's school district has made little to no improvement in student achievement over the past decade, and racial achievement gaps are about the same, if not wider, than they were a decade ago.¹

Overwhelmingly Pittsburgh's public schools, both district and charter, are failing to prepare students for college and career. Over half the city's students are unable to demonstrate grade-level math and reading skills and, based on existing trends, only one out of every four ninth-graders in a district school will go on to earn a two- or four-year college degree.

These statistics are even more devastating when viewed in light of our rapidly changing economy. Low-skilled jobs that require no more than a high school degree are not coming back. On the contrary, it is predicted that the Pittsburgh region will require 34,000 new workers per year through 2025, mostly in sectors that require advanced skills.² Pittsburgh's public schools are not preparing our children, especially

those who are black and those who come from low-income families, to seize these 21st-century opportunities.

Pittsburgh's educational challenges are not unique, but what is unique is our failure to improve and the absence of a vision to transform Pittsburgh's public schools into a system our families and our taxpayers deserve. Many cities, with even more hurdles and less resources, are demonstrating what's possible when districts, charter schools, the philanthropic community and elected officials come together to focus on creating high-quality schools. Whether through in-district turnarounds or the expansion of high-quality charter schools, cities like Denver and Newark are proving that progress is possible when communities refuse to accept the status quo and are motivated by a belief that all children deserve the opportunity to live up to their boundless potential.

Acknowledging failure is not about assigning blame, but rather about catalyzing change. Too often the conversation about how we improve education looks for a scapegoat rather than a solution. If we really want to improve outcomes for students, the conversation needs to be singularly focused on what has worked to improve academic achievement in urban schools across the country and figuring out how to rapidly implement those initiatives to ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive.

The Lack of Quality Schools in Pittsburgh

School choice is the norm in Pittsburgh

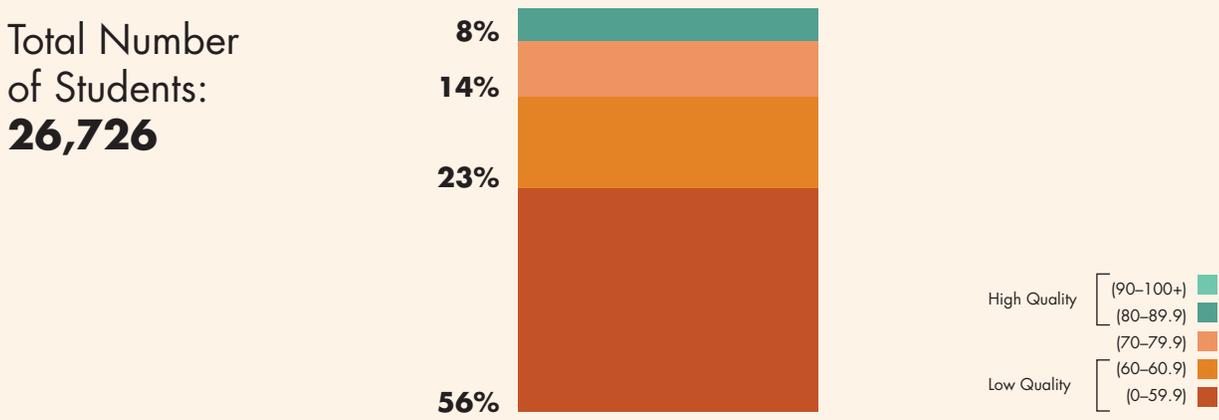
In today's political climate, "school choice" is a controversial and hotly debated concept. In the city of Pittsburgh, however, with 60 percent of students not attending their zoned neighborhood school, school choice is the norm.³ The fact that the majority of students in Pittsburgh are opting out of their assigned school indicates that many families recognize that their neighborhood school is not meeting the needs of their children and they want better options. The problem is there are not nearly enough high-quality public school options (district or charter) to serve the 26,726⁴ students currently attending Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS)⁵ and Pittsburgh's brick-and-mortar charter schools.⁶ Parents in Pittsburgh are desperately trying to get their children into the handful of higher-performing district magnet schools or Pittsburgh's charter schools. Currently, over 2,600 students sit on charter school waitlists.⁷

Pittsburgh has very few high-quality public school options

Each year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education issues report cards for every public school through the School Performance Profile (SPP). The SPP measures school quality using the following rubric: 50 percent of the score is based on academic performance on standardized tests (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams) and progress towards eliminating historical achievement gaps; 40 percent is based on academic growth of students from one year to the next; and the remaining 10 percent of the SPP score is based on other factors that contribute to academic progress, such as attendance and graduation rates.⁸

In 2016, as shown in Figure 1, an overwhelming 78 percent of Pittsburgh students attended a low-performing public school (either district or charter) as identified by the SPP.⁹ In other words, approximately four out of every five public school students in Pittsburgh attended a school that failed to pass the state's minimum benchmark for quality. Conversely, a mere 8 percent of students in Pittsburgh attended a public school that was deemed high quality by the state's annual report card. Compare this with the other 42 districts in Allegheny County, in which almost 50 percent of students attended a high-quality school.

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Students at Each Quality Rating Level



Far too many students fall off the college track by elementary and middle school

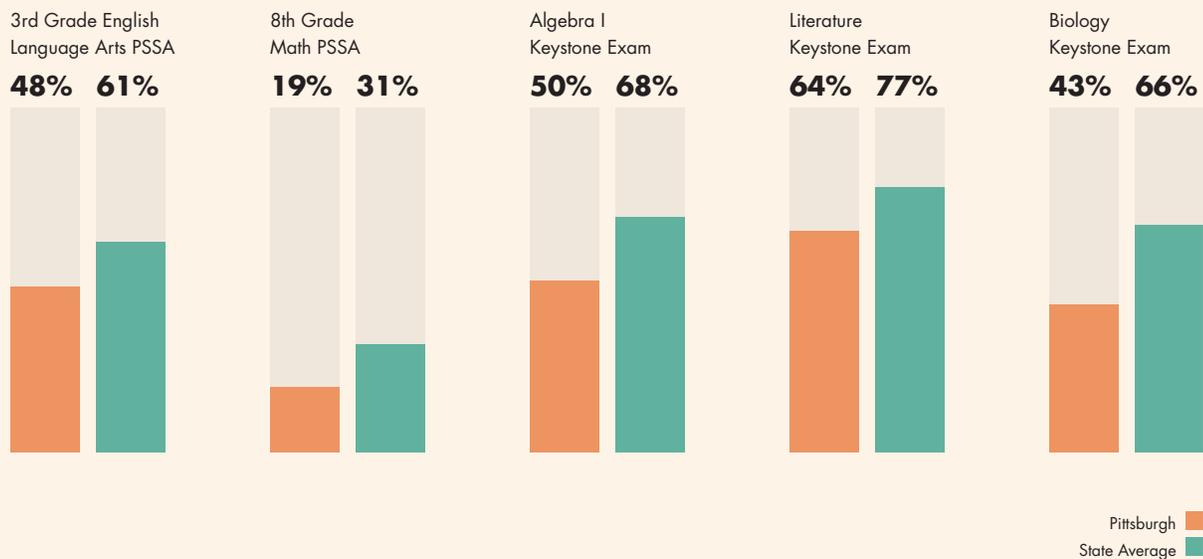
What these sobering SPP ratings reveal is that the overwhelming majority of the public schools in Pittsburgh are failing to meet the most basic educational requirement, namely to ensure that all students are proficient in literacy, math and science. Figure 2 presents data on the following key milestones for academic achievement for all district and brick-and-mortar charter schools in Pittsburgh: third-grade English Language Arts, eighth-grade math, and high school literature, algebra and biology.

School improvement efforts often focus on struggling high schools but, as the data illustrates, Pittsburgh’s educational system is failing to keep even the youngest students on track for college and career success. Less than half of all third-graders in Pittsburgh’s public schools can read at grade level. Third-grade reading proficiency is considered a pivotal milestone because it is the time when students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Studies have shown that children who cannot read on grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school.¹⁰ For those students who cannot master even basic reading skills by third grade, the dropout rate is nearly six times greater.

Results on the eighth-grade PSSA math exam,¹¹ a key indicator for success in higher-order math classes in high school, are even more

Notes, Figure 1: Includes PPS and charter schools. This analysis applied “A–F” letter ratings to the School Performance Profile (SPP) scores that the PA Department of Education (PDE) issued for the 2015–16 school year. The A–F ratings were aligned with the score bands PDE uses (e.g. 90–100, 80–89.9, etc.). “A” & “B” were then designated “high quality,” and “D” & “F” were designated “low quality.”

FIGURE 2 Percent Proficient or Advanced on State Exams: Pittsburgh v. State



sobering with only 19 percent of Pittsburgh students demonstrating proficiency. Perhaps more troubling is the fact that most Pittsburgh students are not even close to passing the exam: 55 percent of all eighth-graders scored below basic, the lowest possible scoring category. Without math competency, many of the 21st-century jobs, which are increasingly reliant on specialized math skills, will be out of reach for the overwhelming majority of Pittsburgh students.

For those Pittsburgh students who attend schools in the lowest-performing quartile, only one out of every five students is reading at grade level, and only one out of 10 is demonstrating grade-level math skills.

The majority of Pittsburgh students are not prepared to succeed in college

Although relying solely on standardized test results to assess school quality has its limitations, recent studies show that results on state exams, which are aligned to the Common Core (like Pennsylvania’s PSSAs and Keystone Exams), are strong predictors of college readiness and performance.¹² Thus, the fact that so many Pittsburgh students do not meet minimum proficiency requirements on state exams indicates that many students are woefully underprepared to succeed and persist in college.

Notes, Figure 2: Includes PPS and charter schools. Results from the 2015–16 school year.

For those Pittsburgh students who attend schools in the lowest-performing quartile, only one out of every five students is reading at grade level, and only one out of 10 is demonstrating grade-level math skills.

Performance on college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT, are also correlated with college outcomes and college readiness.¹³ Among high school students in Pittsburgh’s district and charter schools, just 26 percent met the minimum College Ready Benchmark set by the state on either the SAT or ACT.¹⁴ Compare this to suburban districts in Allegheny County, like North Allegheny or Mt. Lebanon, in which all district twelfth-graders met the benchmark on either the SAT or ACT.

In Pittsburgh, the dismal results on college entrance exams and state standardized tests correlate to the number of students who are prepared for college-level courses and who go on to earn a college degree. A full 90 percent of PPS graduates who enrolled in the Community College of Allegheny County needed at least one remedial class in one of three subjects: math, reading or writing.¹⁵ These remedial courses increase the amount of time and money it takes to earn a degree because they do not count towards graduation. This could explain, in part, why more than one in five PPS students will not persist from their first year to their second year in college.¹⁶

Overall, about one in three PPS high school graduates earn a two- or four-year college degree within six years.¹⁷ As concerning as that number appears, it actually overstates the number of college graduates that PPS is producing because the district has only a 70 percent graduation rate.¹⁸ Thus, if 30 percent of PPS students do not graduate from high school, the probability that a current PPS ninth-grader will earn a college degree in 10 years is effectively 25 percent.

Note, Figure 3: Includes PPS and charter schools.

FIGURE 3 Percent of Twelfth-Graders Meeting the College Ready Benchmark

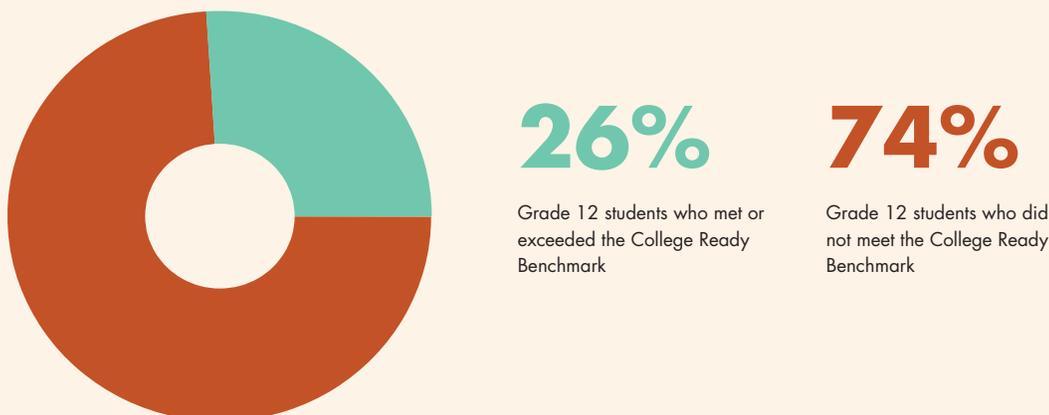
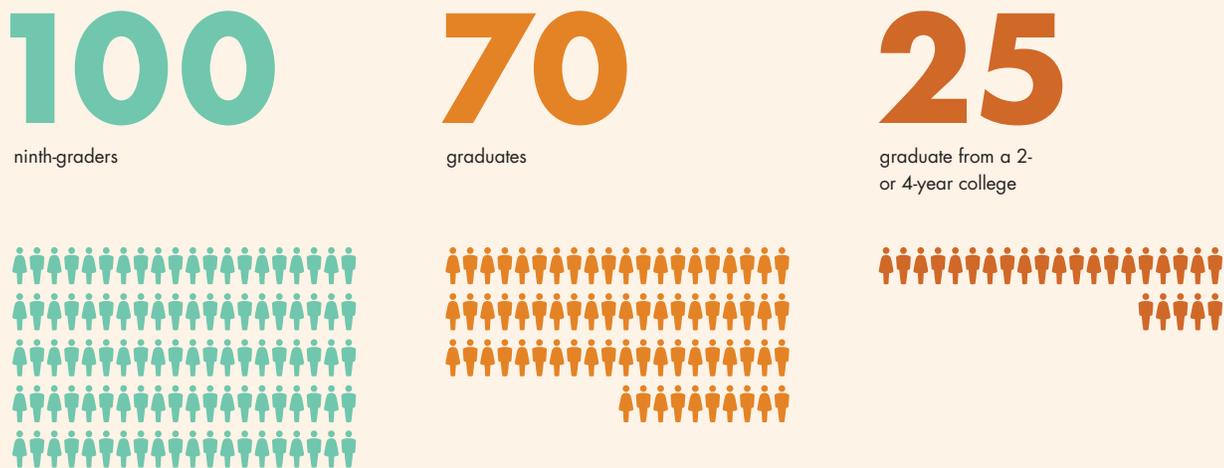


FIGURE 4 **College Completion Rates for PPS Students**



These average high school graduation and college completion rates mask the results in many high schools that have dramatically lower numbers. For example, at Perry High School, which has a graduation rate of 65 percent and a college completion rate of 25 percent, on average, only 16 out of every 100 ninth-graders will earn a college degree. At Westinghouse Academy, which has a graduation rate of 63 percent and a college completion rate of 10 percent, on average, only six out of every 100 ninth-graders will earn a college degree. As described in greater detail later in this report, the consequences of failing to equip so many students with the tools for college success effectively leaves students without a passport to the middle class and has dire consequences for our students, our communities and, ultimately, our entire region.

Note, Figure 4: Includes PPS schools only.

Unlike many other urban districts, Pittsburgh has failed to make meaningful progress in decades

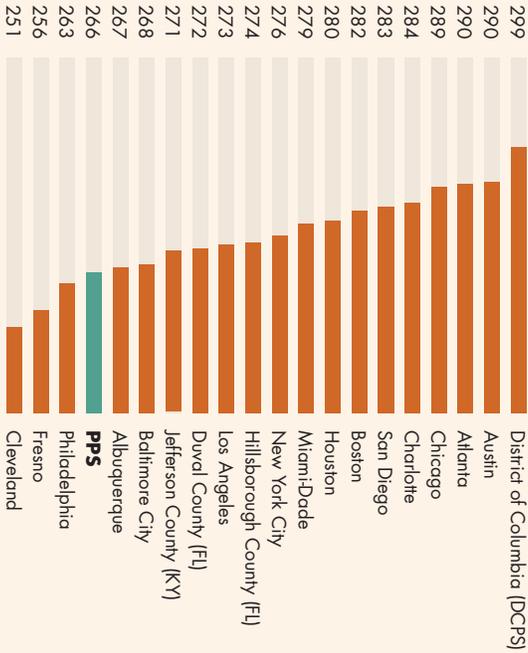
In many ways, the lack of high-quality public schools in Pittsburgh and the bleak academic outcomes described previously are not particularly shocking. It is well documented that socioeconomic status is highly correlated with student achievement and, like many struggling urban school districts, PPS has a high percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged (62 percent).¹⁹ However, unlike many comparable urban districts, Pittsburgh has made little to no improvement in student achievement over the past decade.²⁰ Moreover, racial achievement gaps are about the same, if not wider, than they were a

FIGURE 5

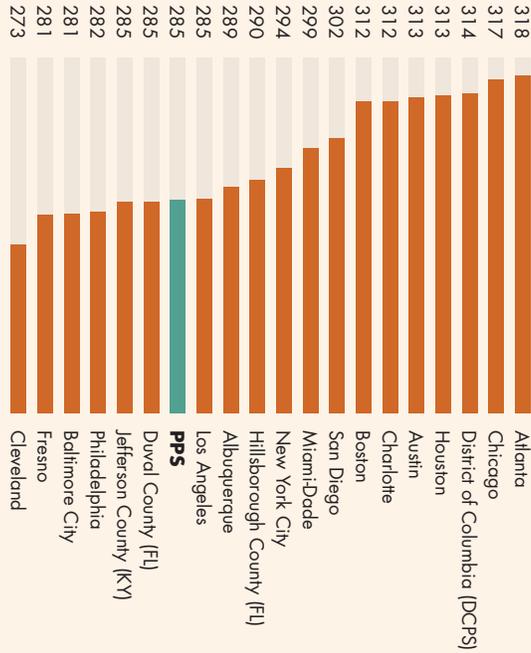
Comparison of PPS White Student Performance to White Student Performance in Other Major Cities

Notes, Figure 5: These scores represent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) average scale score performance in Pittsburgh and in other cities. To accurately compare Pittsburgh with other cities on a common metric, the CGCS report converted the district's PSSA scores into NAEP scale scores.

8th Grade Reading

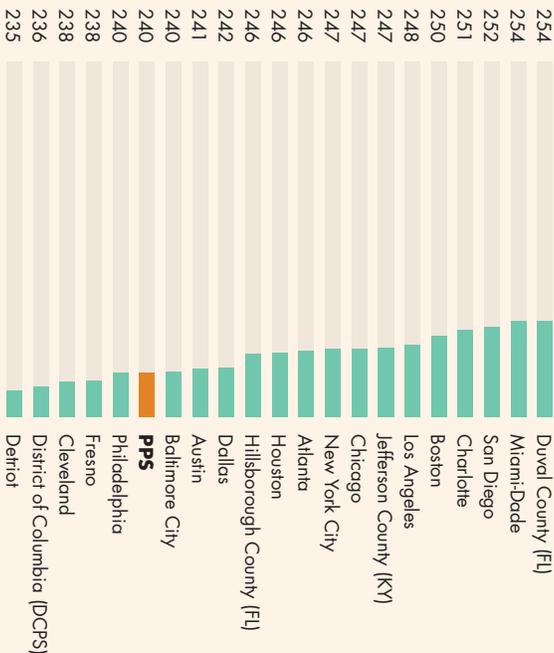


8th Grade Math

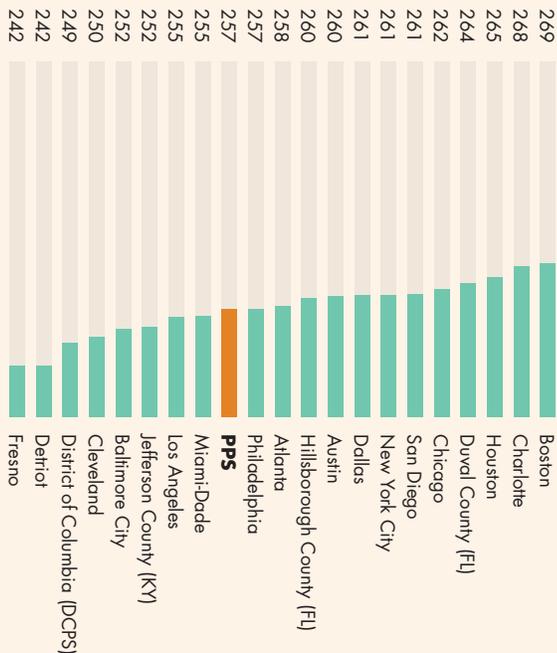


Comparison of PPS Black Student Performance to Black Student Performance in Other Major Cities

8th Grade Reading



8th Grade Math



decade ago. These are the conclusions of an extensive analysis of PPS conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a consortium of the nation's 70 largest urban school districts. The CGCS report, which provided a scathing critique of the school district, revealed that over the past decade other large urban districts have generally outpaced PPS in gains in student achievement.²¹

The data contained in Figure 5 from the CGCS report, which compares PPS to 20 large urban school districts, reveals that PPS is lagging behind many comparable urban districts. The CGCS report, which disaggregated student outcomes by race, shows that PPS' overall poor performance cannot simply be explained by a persistent racial achievement gap: white students in PPS are also trailing their white peers in comparable urban districts.

PPS also has lower than average graduation rates. According to the CGCS report, PPS' graduation rate of 70 percent placed the district in the lowest 20 percent when compared to the other major urban school systems.²²

PPS' terrible record on suspensions and absenteeism makes it an outlier

The CGCS report also laid bare PPS' alarming record on student suspensions and absenteeism. Compared to the major urban school districts for which CGCS had data (38 other large urban districts), PPS had the third highest overall suspension rate and the highest rate for students who were suspended between one and five days.²³ Suspension patterns also revealed that students of color, students with disabilities and English-language learners are suspended at disproportionately high rates.²⁴

Figures 6 and 7 indicate not only how overly reliant the district is on using suspensions, but also the fact that PPS has an extraordinarily high percentage of students involved in a state-reported disciplinary incident.²⁵ Its rate of disciplinary incidents is twice as large as Philadelphia's and three times as large as the state average. Shockingly, almost 100 percent of disciplinary incidents in PPS result in suspension compared to less than 50 percent in Philadelphia and a state average of 62 percent.²⁶

Suspension patterns also revealed that students of color, students with disabilities and English-language learners are suspended at disproportionately high rates.

PPS' abysmal attendance record is also concerning because frequent absences have a significant impact on academic achievement. In fact, students who are chronically absent in any year between eighth and twelfth grades are seven times more likely to drop out.²⁷ In PPS, as shown in Figure 8, a significant number of students are chronically absent (*i.e.* absent for at least 10 percent of school days).²⁸ In high school, 41 percent of students are chronically absent.

Note, Figures 6 & 7: Includes PPS schools only.

FIGURE 6 Percentage of State-Reported Incidents Resulting in Out-of-School Suspensions

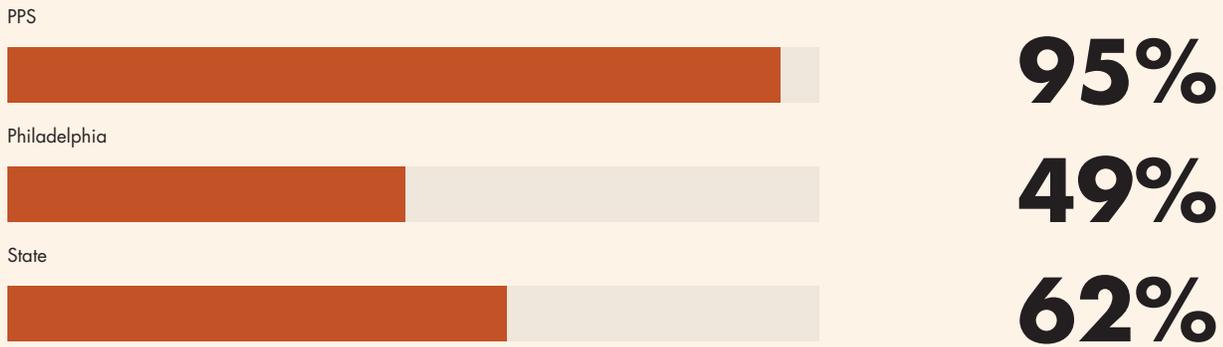
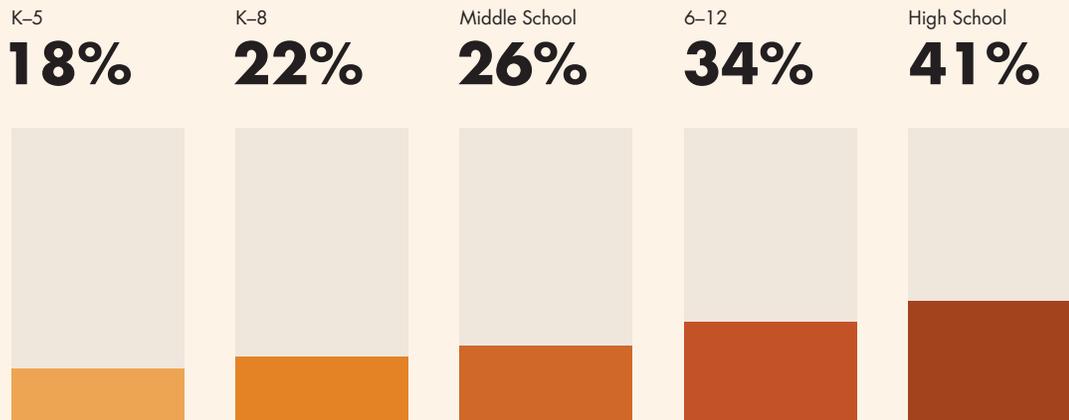


FIGURE 7 Percentage of All Students with a State-Reported Disciplinary Incident



FIGURE 8 Percent of Students in PPS that Are Chronically Absent



While many are quick to blame lagging attendance on families and students, the “unusually high” absenteeism rate in PPS, as measured by CGCS, demonstrates that much more could be done at the school or district level to improve attendance.²⁹ To illustrate how high PPS absenteeism rates are compared to other districts, CGCS researchers found that 73 percent of PPS sixth-graders were absent from school for five or more days during the 2014–15 school year. Among the 40 districts that CGCS compared to PPS, sixth-grade absentee rates ranged from a low of 19 percent to a high of 75 percent, putting PPS at the very high end of the range. PPS was also at the high end of the range for third- and ninth-grade absenteeism.

Notes, Figure 8: Includes PPS schools only. Chronically absent is defined as students that are absent at least 10% or more of the days they were enrolled in school.

The Lack of Quality Schools Disproportionately Harms Black Students

Examining enrollment patterns in the city of Pittsburgh reveals that the majority of families are actively seeking better school options. Only a little more than a third of all students in Pittsburgh opt into their zoned neighborhood district school. This pattern holds true for black and white students alike. Yet, the similarities end there. As shown in Figure 9, of the nearly two-thirds of white families that exercise school choice, the majority (67 percent) leave PPS altogether to attend private or charter schools. For black families, the converse is true: of those black students who exercise choice, the majority (66 percent) remains within PPS.³⁰

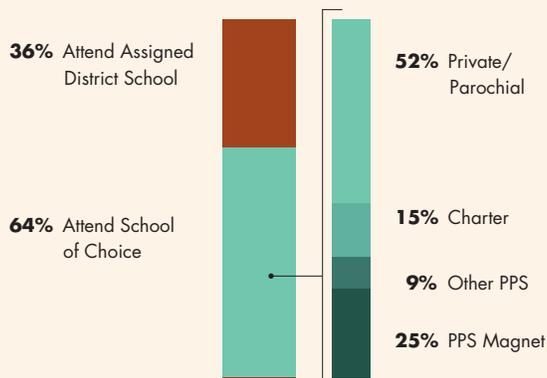
Put another way, 42 out of every 100 white students in the city of Pittsburgh opt out of PPS, while only 20 out of every 100 black students opt out of PPS. This explains why black students make up over half (53 percent)³¹ of PPS' enrollment but account for only a quarter (24 percent) of the city population.³² The converse is true for white families, who account for 65 percent of the overall city population, but only 33 percent of PPS.³³ These citywide numbers fail to capture the thousands of predominately white families who have moved to the suburbs

Notes, Figure 9: Data in these graphs are from 2013. "Other PPS" includes open enrollment, school choice, and transfers to non-feeder schools, and enrollment within special schools.

FIGURE 9 Pittsburgh School Choice Patterns Vary by Race

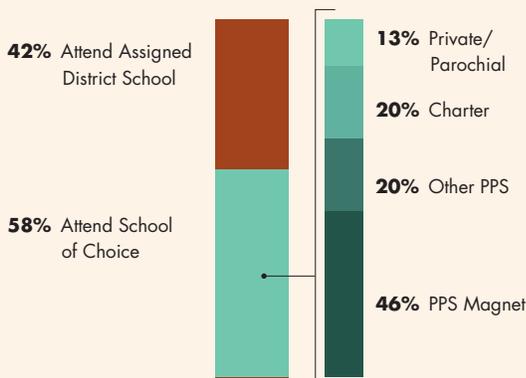
White Students' Use of School Choice

Total Number of Students: 14,323



Black Students' Use of School Choice

Total Number of Students: 15,936



in pursuit of better school options. For many black families in Pittsburgh, who lack the means to move to a better school district or attend private school, access to high-quality options is severely limited.

Therefore, black students are disproportionately trapped in Pittsburgh’s struggling schools. In the lowest-performing 25 percent of public schools in Pittsburgh³⁴ (both charter and district), 77 percent of students are black and just 9 percent are white. Conversely, in the top 25 percent of public schools in Pittsburgh, just 32 percent are black and 49 percent are white.

PPS has failed to make any progress in closing the persistent racial achievement gaps

Despite decades of reform, multiple strategic plans and initiatives intended to close the racial achievement gap, the CGCS report confirmed that the gaps in PPS are about the same if not wider than 10 years ago.³⁵ Figures 10 and 11 show the substantial racial achievement gaps between white and black students in PPS on key academic indicators: third-grade English Language Arts, eighth-grade math, and proficiency in literature, algebra and science in high school.³⁶

Notes, Figures 10 & 11: Includes PPS schools only.

FIGURE 10 PPS Achievement Gap—Percent Proficient or Advanced on PSSAs

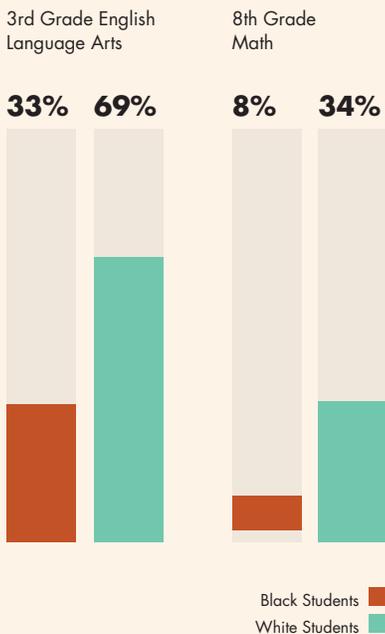
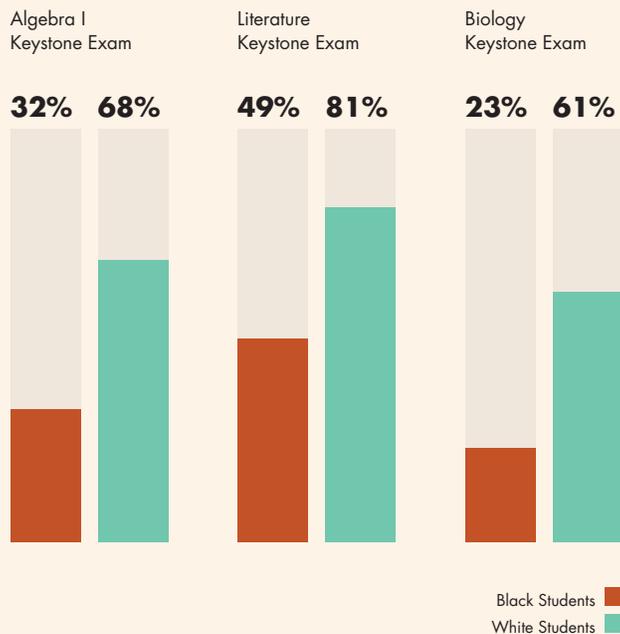


FIGURE 11 PPS Achievement Gap—Percent Proficient or Advanced on Keystone Exams



Standardized state exam results fall into four categories: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. Proficient and advanced are considered passing while basic and below basic are considered below grade level. Advocates and policymakers often focus on test passage rates (*i.e.* the percent of students who score proficient or advanced). However, this focus ignores a key data point, namely the percent of students who score below basic, the lowest possible scoring category. The percent of students scoring below basic is important in assessing how much progress schools need to make to ensure that all students are meeting the minimum state standards.

Looking at state assessment scores, it's clear PPS is failing to meet the academic needs of black students. Of the black students who took the third-grade English Language Arts PSSA, over a quarter (26 percent) scored below basic. On the eighth-grade math PSSA, two-thirds (66 percent) of black students scored below basic.³⁷ On the Literature and Algebra I Keystone Exams the results were more encouraging with only 19 percent of black students scoring below basic on these two exams. However, on the Biology Keystone Exam, almost half (45 percent) of black students scored below basic.³⁸

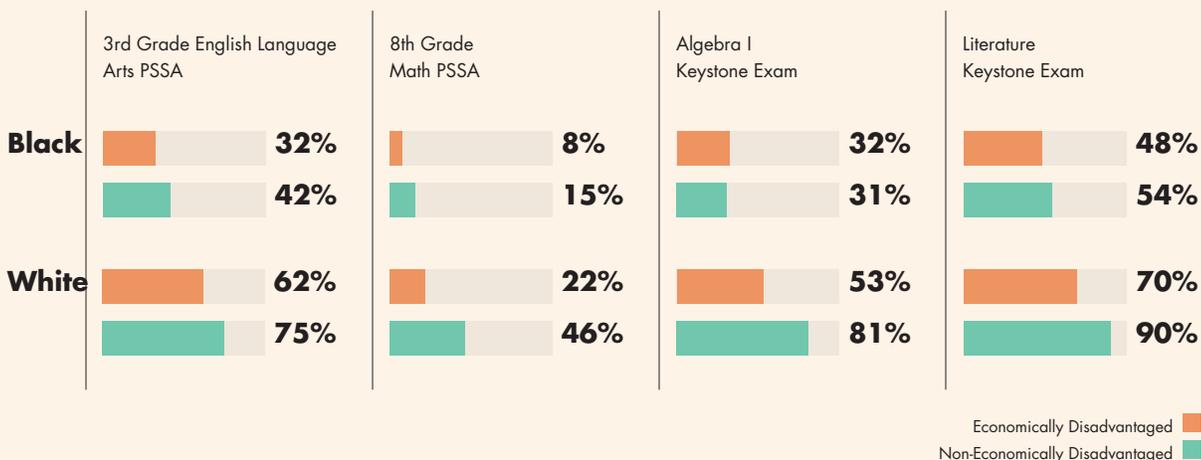
Racial achievement gaps cut across socioeconomic lines

Because socioeconomic status is so closely linked to academic achievement, the fact that less than a third of black students perform at grade level is often attributed to their low socioeconomic status. However, the data reveals something more troubling about the unequal education

Notes, Figure 12: Includes PPS schools only. Economically disadvantaged is defined by the USDA free/reduced lunch guidelines.

FIGURE 12 Achievement Gaps by Race and Income in PPS

Percentage of students proficient or advanced



of black and white students in PPS. Black students in a district school who are not economically disadvantaged achieve at significantly lower levels than PPS white students who are economically disadvantaged.³⁹ As Figure 12 illustrates, only 42 percent of black students who are *not economically disadvantaged* passed the third-grade English Language Arts PSSA compared to 62 percent of *economically disadvantaged* white third-graders. This pattern is consistent across other grades and subjects.

Racial achievement gaps exist in higher performing schools

One of the most important and lasting reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act, which passed in 2001 and provided a sweeping overhaul of federal education law, is that states are now required to disaggregate student performance data into subgroups such as race, socioeconomic status, native language and disability. By disaggregating data, schools and school districts can no longer mask the lower performance of certain struggling and underserved subgroups.

Within PPS, many of the “best schools” have some of the widest racial achievement gaps in the district. The same highly desirable schools for white families produce terrible outcomes for black students. The three schools shown in Figure 13 all perform in the top 25 percent of PPS schools based on SPP and are in high demand.

As the data illustrates, these “good schools” have substantial achievement gaps that range anywhere from 30 to 77 percentage points. While some schools within PPS are proving successful at closing achievement gaps (such as selective magnets like Science and Technology Academy

Note, Figure 13: Includes PPS schools only.

FIGURE 13 Achievement Gap in PPS’ “Good Schools”

Percentage of students proficient or advanced

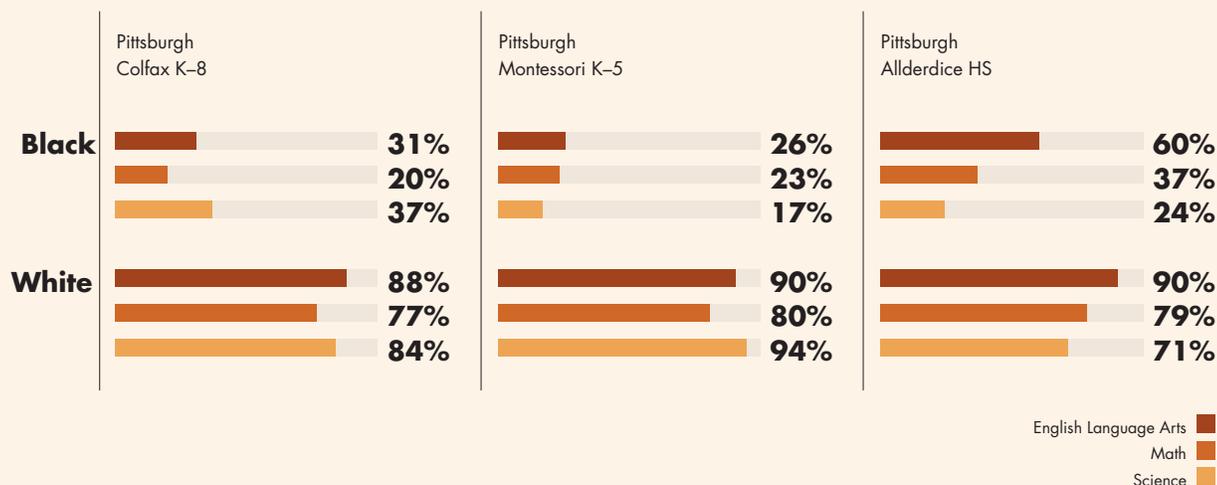


FIGURE 14 Graduation and Promise-Ready Rates

Graduation Rate

Black

68%



White

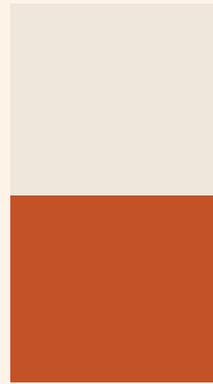
82%



Percent Promise-Ready*

Black

49%



White

77%



and Obama Academy), Figure 13 reveals that simply being in a “good school” does not guarantee equal treatment or equal opportunity.

Racial achievement gaps can be seen across other metrics of school quality

While performance on state standardized tests is one of the most objective ways to measure student achievement and school performance, there are other ways to illustrate whether schools are preparing students for college and career. On all of these key metrics—percent eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise, performance on college entrance exams, graduation rates, suspension rates, access to more rigorous courses and enrichment for gifted students—Pittsburgh schools are shortchanging black students.

The Pittsburgh Promise is a college scholarship program available to all eligible PPS and Pittsburgh charter school graduates who are headed to two- or four-year colleges. To be eligible, high school students must maintain a grade point average of 2.5 or higher and an attendance rate of at least 90 percent. Last year, only 49 percent of all black high school graduates in Pittsburgh qualified compared to 77 percent of white students.⁴⁰

Notes, Figure 14: Includes PPS and charter schools. *Promise Ready—refers to the eligibility requirements to receive a Pittsburgh Promise Scholarship, which requires Pittsburgh seniors to have an overall grade point average of 2.5 or higher.

These gaps in Pittsburgh Promise eligibility rates for black and white students are even starker when the disparate high school graduation rates are considered. For every three black students in Pittsburgh, only two will go on to graduate from high school.⁴¹

For those black students who do graduate from a PPS high school and matriculate into a two- or four-year college, the overwhelming majority are woefully underprepared to succeed. At this time, college readiness and college completion data disaggregated by race is not publicly available. However, because many district high schools are so deeply segregated by race, it is possible to get a general understanding of how black students fare on these measures of success.

At Westinghouse Academy, for example, where 97 percent of the school’s population is black, *not a single senior* met the minimum College Ready Benchmark⁴² set by the state on either the SAT or ACT.⁴³ As shown in Figure 15, with a 63 percent graduation rate and a 10 percent college completion rate, for every 100 ninth-graders at Westinghouse, on average, only six will go on to graduate from a two- or four-year college.⁴⁴

At two other predominately black high schools in PPS, Milliones/UPREP (91 percent black) and Perry High School (75 percent black), outcomes are similarly bleak. At Perry, only 5 percent of students met the state’s College Ready Benchmark and at UPREP it was just one percent.⁴⁵ At Perry, for every 100 ninth-graders, on average, just 16⁴⁶ will earn a college degree.⁴⁷

Note, Figure 15: Westinghouse Academy is a district school.

FIGURE 15 College Completion Rates for Westinghouse Academy

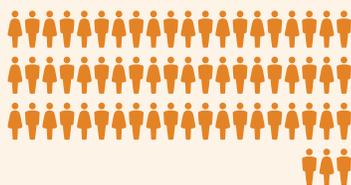
100

ninth-graders



63

graduates



6

graduate from a 2- or 4-year college



**In 2016,
black students
in PPS were
suspended at
three times the
rate of white
students.**

Unequal results for black students come from unequal treatment

Disparate outcomes for students based on race, like those described previously, are fairly easy to quantify. Disparate treatment, however, is more difficult to reliably measure because it involves so many qualitative factors, such as quality of teaching and leadership, school culture, and relationships with students and families.

Black students are suspended at disproportionately high rates

As noted previously, the CGCS report revealed that PPS has an abysmal record of student suspensions when compared to similar urban districts. The report also determined that students of color are suspended at “disproportionately high rates.”⁴⁸ In 2016, black students in PPS were suspended at three times the rate of white students. Just 8 percent of white students were suspended, while almost a quarter (24 percent) of all black students were suspended.⁴⁹

Black students in PPS have less access to rigorous coursework and programming

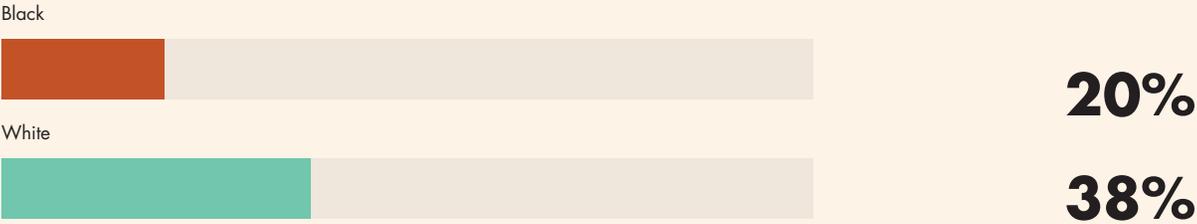
One reliable way to measure disparate treatment of students is to look at how course offerings and other programming are distributed across racial lines. Access to and participation in rigorous coursework in high school is vital because it is the strongest predictor of whether a student will succeed in college.⁵⁰

In PPS, black students have substantially less access to and participation in rigorous coursework. For example, enrollment of black students in calculus is very low compared to their white counterparts. Black students make up only 21 percent of those students enrolled in calculus compared to 65 percent represented by white students.⁵¹ Additionally, the percent of black students taking Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate classes is almost half that of white students.⁵²

The number of AP course selections offered also varies widely by school, ranging from 24 offerings at Allderdice High School⁵³ (48 percent black) to three offerings at Westinghouse Academy⁵⁴ (97 percent black).

Another key data point is passage rates on AP exams. At the three most segregated high schools in PPS, AP passage rates are incredibly low. At both UPREP (91 percent black) and Westinghouse Academy (97 percent black), not a single student passed an AP exam. At Perry High School (75 percent black), just three students received a passing score on an AP exam.⁵⁵

FIGURE 16 Percent of PPS Students Taking One or More Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate Courses



Black students are also severely underrepresented in the school district’s gifted and talented program. Although black students comprise over half of the PPS population, they represent only 26 percent of the students enrolled in its gifted and talented programs. By comparison, white students comprise only a third of PPS enrollment, but represent 60 percent of the gifted and talented enrollment.⁵⁶ Thus, black students are half as likely as white students to be enrolled in PPS’ gifted and talented program.

Note, Figure 16: Includes PPS schools only.

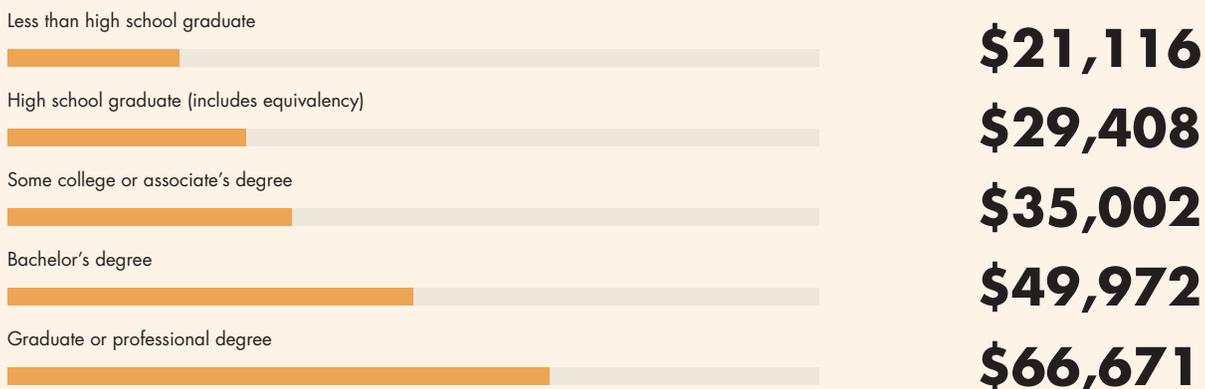
Low-Performing Schools Exacerbate the Income Gap and Hurt Pittsburgh's Long-Term Economic Prosperity

Educational attainment is a strong predictor of future earnings

The failure to equip future generations with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in college and career impacts not only the students who are left behind but our communities, and the broader region.

Even as the national conversation shifts towards highlighting the problem of student debt and questions the mantra of “college for all,” the reality is that people with more education earn more money. As Figure 17 shows, the average annual salary in Pennsylvania for an individual with a bachelor’s degree is nearly \$50,000, compared to \$29,000 for workers with just a high school diploma. Perhaps more importantly, a bachelor’s degree almost guarantees employment. In 2015, the unemployment rate for individuals with at least a bachelor’s degree was 2.8 percent. With an advanced degree, it drops to 1.5 percent.⁵⁷

FIGURE 17 Average Annual Income of Pennsylvanians Based on Education Attainment



Job growth will be concentrated in high-skill sectors

The earnings and unemployment gap will only increase as job growth in the United States, especially in southwestern Pennsylvania, will be in sectors that require more education. Based on data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 11 out of the 14 fastest growing jobs will require more than a high school diploma, and half will require at least a bachelor's degree.⁵⁸

A recent report from Georgetown University revealed that nearly all of the jobs created during the recovery—11.5 million out of 11.6 million—have gone to individuals with some college experience or degree.⁵⁹ Jobs that only require a high school diploma only grew by 80,000. These low-skilled workers have essentially experienced no recovery since the recession wiped out 5.6 million low-skilled jobs.⁶⁰

Pittsburgh's economy is increasingly dependent on high-skilled jobs

What is true for the United States is especially true in Pittsburgh. According to a report by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the Pittsburgh region will require 34,000 new workers per year through 2025.⁶¹ The sectors expected to grow the most rapidly over this period are those that require advanced skills like healthcare support (15 percent), healthcare practitioners (12 percent), and computer and math (11 percent). Fields with flat or negative growth rates are jobs that require less education, such as office and administrative support (0 percent), sales (0 percent), production (-1 percent), and farming, fishing and forestry (-7 percent).⁶²

Automation threatens low-skilled workers

The story of Pittsburgh's renaissance from a post-industrial city to a thriving hub of technology and innovation is well known. However, what is often overlooked is that Pittsburgh can still boast a robust manufacturing sector. The economic output of Pittsburgh's manufacturing sector has actually increased by 10 percent since 2010.⁶³ Nevertheless, overall employment in manufacturing has been flat because high-skilled workers are able to increase productivity in traditional fields while low-skilled jobs are eliminated by automation. This trend is expected to accelerate and will likely become the story for many sectors, not just manufacturing.

Pittsburgh’s changing economy will demand high-quality school options

After so many years of dramatic declines, Pittsburgh’s population has finally stabilized. With major development in booming neighborhoods like East Liberty and Lawrenceville, and companies like Uber and Google attracting millennial talent, the city feels poised to finally see population increases in the 2020 census.

Despite these indicators of growth, enrollment in PPS continues to decline. As Figure 18 shows, PPS enrollment declined an average of 2.2 percent per year between 1993 and 2016,⁶⁴ while the city population declined only .8 percent in the same period.⁶⁵ Kindergarten enrollment is down even more. In 2014, kindergarten enrollment dropped by 11.5 percent.⁶⁶

It is difficult to imagine how the city’s population can sustain substantial growth if enrollment in PPS continues to decline. It is already a challenge to convince young workers to stay in Pittsburgh, according to the director of Uber’s Advanced Technology Center, John Bares.⁶⁷ It will only become more difficult as those twenty-something engineers become thirty-something mothers and fathers.

Note, Figure 18: Includes PPS schools only.

FIGURE 18 PPS Enrollment



Debunking Myths About School Improvement

Before outlining what Pittsburgh needs to do in order to solve these immense challenges, it's necessary to first debunk three myths about school improvement:

Myth 1: Poverty is an insurmountable barrier to student success

There are public schools in Pittsburgh that prove low-income and minority students can achieve at high levels if given the right resources and proper opportunity. In 2015, PennCAN released a report called *Allegheny County Opportunity Schools*, which highlighted a small group of schools “beating the odds.” The report identified six public schools in the region (including three in the city of Pittsburgh) that met PennCAN’s rigorous criteria for proving that schools serving economically disadvantaged students can succeed.⁶⁸ That is six out of 102 high-poverty schools in the region, representing a mere 6 percent of students, that were able to meet the criteria to be an Opportunity School.⁶⁹ But these six schools prove that ZIP code doesn’t have to be destiny, and encourages policy-makers to begin asking what it will take to make Opportunity Schools the norm instead of the exception.

There are public schools in Pittsburgh that prove low-income and minority students can achieve at high levels if given the right resources and proper opportunity.

Myth 2: PPS schools are struggling because they are underfunded

At \$23,065 per student, PPS is already one of the highest-spending school districts in Pennsylvania, exceeding such affluent districts as North Allegheny (\$16,568) and Mt. Lebanon (\$16,916).⁷⁰ In 2016, PPS’ per-pupil spending was almost double the national average of \$12,156 per pupil.⁷¹

As Figure 19 demonstrates, in 2015, PPS’ per-pupil spending was 45 percent greater than the state average and has nearly doubled since 2001.

Meanwhile, this increased investment has not yielded meaningful results in schools, especially the ones with a predominantly black student population. As Figure 20 depicts, since 2013, student performance at highly segregated schools (*i.e.* 75 percent black) have seen flat or declining results on the Keystone Exams, even as the per-pupil spending increased.

In addition, other urban districts are able to achieve similar or better academic outcomes than PPS while spending significantly less. Examples include: Albuquerque—\$7,161;⁷² Austin—\$11,473;⁷³ and Los Angeles—\$12,910.⁷⁴ It is unrealistic to think that more money without real reforms will translate into better outcomes because Pittsburgh is already outspending most of its neighbors and most of its peer cities.

Note, Figure 19: Includes PPS schools only.

FIGURE 19 Average Per Pupil Spending



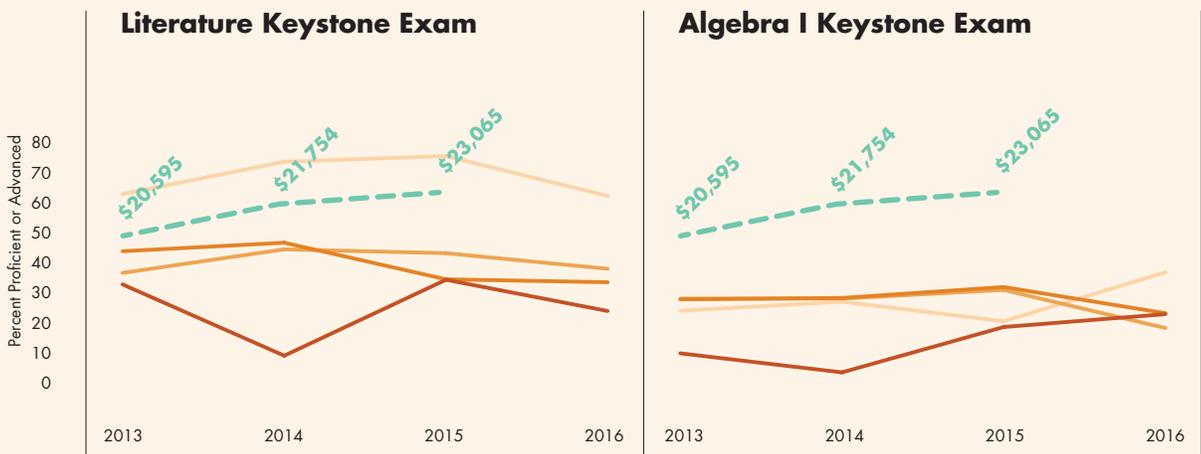
Myth 3: Chronically underperforming schools can improve without dramatic changes

The federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) provides a cautionary tale of what happens when low-performing districts choose to merely tinker around the edges of reform. Under the program, the U.S. Department of Education began awarding \$3.5 billion in grants in 2010 to schools that agreed to implement one of four intervention models (restart, closure, transformation and turnaround). The softest of the interventions, transformation, required minimal changes. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of schools pursued this least-aggressive intervention. The U.S. Department of Education released an independent, multi-year evaluation of SIG at the end of the Obama Administration, which concluded that receiving a SIG award had no overall effect on student achievement.⁷⁵ Just like SIG, the chronically underperforming schools highlighted in this report demonstrate that low-performing schools remain low performing until meaningful reforms are implemented.

Notes, Figure 20: Includes PPS and charter schools. These high schools were selected because they have a black student population of 75% or higher. 2016 Average Per Pupil Spending was not available at the time of this report.

FIGURE 20 The Relationship Between Spending in District/Charter Schools and Academic Performance

Westinghouse Academy
 Pittsburgh Milliones 6-12
 Pittsburgh Perry HS
 Urban Pathways 6-12 CS
 Average Per Pupil Spending—Pittsburgh School District



Learning from Successes in Other Cities

Several mid-size U.S. cities have acknowledged these myths and implemented a reform strategy that invests in new school models through a combination of authorizing charter schools, replicating successful schools and restarting struggling schools. While each approach is unique to the region's local context, what these cities all have in common is a belief that all students can learn and a willingness to strongly depart from the status quo.

Newark has grown a high-quality charter school sector

While much of the national attention on Newark, NJ's school reform has centered on Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million gift and the district's performance-driven teachers' contract, the real story of Newark's improvement has been the steady growth and quality of its charter sector. The sector has quadrupled since 2008 and now serves nearly a third of Newark students.⁷⁶ The city's charter schools ranked second out of 41 urban districts in both reading and math achievement, according to a 2015 study conducted by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO).⁷⁷ These results have disproportionately benefited black students. The share of black students in Newark attending a school that beats the state average has nearly tripled in the past 10 years. This increase in performance "can be attributed almost entirely to the growth of the charter sector."⁷⁸ These results help explain why parent demand for charters in Newark is so high. The city recently adopted a unified enrollment system to make enrolling in both traditional public schools and charter schools easier. Within the first year, 12,000 families submitted applications through the system, and the seven most popular elementary and middle schools were charter schools.⁷⁹

The share of black students in Newark attending a school that beats the state average has nearly tripled in the past 10 years.

Massachusetts has successfully focused on district turnarounds

In 2010, Massachusetts passed legislation that gave the department of education the authority to take over both schools and districts. In several underperforming districts—most notably, Lawrence and Springfield—the state partnered with the teachers' union and the district to allow most schools to remain under district control while implementing bold reforms. Many of these reforms mirror the common practices of high-performing charter schools, such as increasing the length of the

school day/year, recruiting talented leaders, and giving those leaders more flexibility over staffing, curriculum and budget. The results have been promising, earning praise from both sides of the education reform debate, such as the President of the American Federation of Teachers Randi Weingarten and former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.⁸⁰

Denver has pursued both new schools and turnarounds

Denver has made progress by embracing both charter schools and in-district turnarounds. In 2014, the district unveiled a new vision for the city's public schools, which included a commitment to get 80 percent of students in each region of the city into a high-quality school by 2020. With this new vision, the district established "The Call for New Quality Schools" which solicits proposals from new providers on an annual basis. Over the last two school years, the district has recruited two new providers in high-needs regions, as well as two turnaround providers for particularly low-performing schools. The approach is already working. In a study released in March of 2017, Education Resource Strategies (ERS) found that the Denver Public Schools posted the second highest rate of academic growth among U.S. school districts with 25,000 or more students.⁸¹

It's time for Pittsburgh's schools to experience a renaissance

Pittsburgh has many of the same challenges as other urban centers so it's appropriate to seek solutions from the cities that have made real progress. These cities, whether through in-district turnarounds or the expansion of high-quality charter schools, have refused to accept the status quo and are driven by the belief that change, while difficult, is possible. It is now Pittsburgh's turn to accept the challenge of growing high-quality schools, whether district or charter, to ensure that no child is deprived of the opportunity to succeed.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of reports making the case that Pittsburgh schools are struggling. Every year, A+ Schools publishes its annual *Report to the Community*, which provides a wealth of data on everything from student achievement to school climate. In the fall, PPS released a report conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools that offered a scathing critique of the district's performance and highlighted the district's persistent racial inequities.

While there may be no shortage of data, there is a shortage of outrage. As this report outlines, there aren't enough high-quality public school options to meet the needs of Pittsburgh's families or the demands of Pittsburgh's economy. It's time for Pittsburgh's civic leaders to acknowledge the problem and rally around a vision of increasing the number of high-quality school options. The original promise of America's bold experiment in universal public education is to provide all students with an equal opportunity to get ahead. Today in Pittsburgh, for the thousands of students stuck in low-performing schools, it's an opportunity lost. We can and must do better.

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FIG. 10

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FIG. 11

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- 5 Throughout this report Pittsburgh Public Schools is referred to as PPS and "the district" interchangeably. Please note that the brick-and-mortar charter schools in the city of Pittsburgh (which are also discussed in this report) are not considered part of the district in our analysis. When we present data on both district and charter schools that will be noted for clarity.
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