THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH
What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It
#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH

opportunitymyth.tntp.org

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

SOURCE: Value-added models
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.
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.
TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Visit *The Opportunity Myth* online to get a personalized action guide with advice and tools you can use to help more students have worthwhile experiences in school.

[OPPORTUNITYMYTH.TNTP.ORG/ACT-NOW](OPPORTUNITYMYTH.TNTP.ORG/ACT-NOW)
Connect with us.

Shanequa.yates@tntp.org

tntp.org

facebook.com/thenewteacherproject

twitter.com/tntp

linkedin.com/company/tntp