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

#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH

opportunitymyth.tntp.org
Dr. Tequilla Brownie: But, who am I... Really?

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.
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
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
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** 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
Solution #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.

Source: Assignments
Teachers report spending **7 HOURS PER WEEK** developing or selecting instructional materials and reported **CREATING OR FINDING 57% OF THEIR ASSIGNMENTS**, but those assignments tend to be **LOWER QUALITY** than those taken from any district or state provided curriculum.
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% for grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly students of color
- 65% for 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
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.
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.
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, tankers, 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.

Long ago, oysters thrived in the waters around NYC. Have you ever heard of Pearl Street in downtown Manhattan? That street was named for all the oysters that swarmed the nearby river. But as NYC became a shipping hub, the rivers became polluted. The oyster population nearly disappeared. This impacted the whole ecosystem, because oysters were a key ingredient.

As oysters eat, they filter the water supply by removing nitrogen. We see great biodiversity around oyster reefs, because the oysters’ filtering ability attracts life. Around NYC’s oyster reefs, there were large habitats of fish and marine creatures. Even whales were a common sight here. Oyster reefs also helped to buffer Manhattan from erosion. They limited the damage from storms and waves. As NYC’s oysters died off, so did many other creatures, and so did the protective quality of the reefs. This was a big loss for the city.

The Billion Oyster Project has set out to address this loss. The project works to bring oysters back to NYC’s waters. The project began with students at New York Harbor School. It has since expanded to include many schools in the city. Thousands of NYC students have participated in reef construction and oyster planting. So far, over 26 million oysters have been planted in the waters around NYC. And it’s working! With the oysters, many more fish and marine creatures have returned as well. Even whales have been spotted again.

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

Sample question from this assignment:

Add vowels (a, e, i, o, u) to complete the words from the reading.

It’s hard to imagine that this river was once an unspoiled marine H_B_T_T.

SOURCE: Assignments
Solution #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.

SOURCE: 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 \textit{25\% LESS LIKELY} to receive grade-appropriate assignments.

They also received \textit{LESS THAN HALF THE AMOUNT} of high-quality lessons.

\textbf{SOURCE:} Assignments and observations
Solution #3: Ask students about their school experiences. Listen to what they share and act on what they tell you.
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

Note: All comparisons based on risk ratios, and thus represent the probability of the outcome for highly engaged students divided by the probability of the outcome for disengaged students. Only students with at least 4 valid surveys in a class are included. All outcomes and engagement quartiles calculated at the student-by-class level. Numeric class grade was estimated using the rule that A+ = 98%, A = 95%, A- = 91%, B+ = 88%, ..., F = 50%.
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 engagement rates that were 34% higher.

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.
Solution #4: Ensure educators enact high expectations for students' success 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
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
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.
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.
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
WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO MAKE OPPORTUNITIES MORE THAN A MYTH?
Think about the solutions profiled today:

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

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. Ensure educators enact **high expectations** by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with rigorous material.

How could *you* begin to implement one of these solutions?
Solution #5: Conduct an equity audit to determine whether your students have equitable access to grade-appropriate assignments, rigorous instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations.

Use TNTP’s free tools to assess access in your own classroom, school, or community.

**tntp.org/studentexperiencetoolkit**

Find a step-by-step guide for conducting an equity audit 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.
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.
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.
Connect with us.

- tequilla.brownie@tntp.org
- tntp.org
- facebook.com/theneuwteacherproject
- twitter.com/tntp
- linkedin.com/company/tntp