



National
Urban League

*Empowering Communities.
Changing Lives.*

The Equity & Excellence Project

EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY
VIA REFORM AND INNOVATION

*The Division of
Education & Youth
Development*

*The
Washington
Bureau*

The National Urban League's initiatives support local, state, and national advocacy, engagement, and reform/innovation efforts by leveraging our greatest asset, the Urban League Affiliate Movement along with the presidents and chief executive officers that lead it.



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In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled, ‘Education must be made available to all on equal terms.’ Yet, fifty-one years later, we are neither honoring nor bringing justice to the spirit of the law or to the future of our nation’s children.

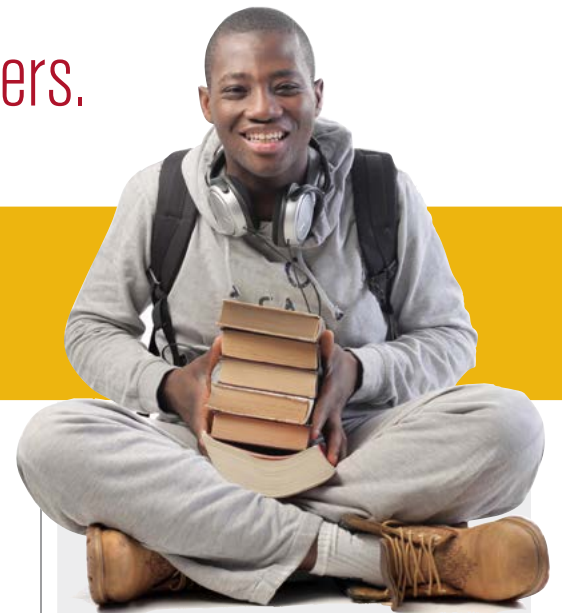
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—MARC H. MORIAL
*President and Chief Executive Officer,
National Urban League
2005*

The National Urban League's Equity and Excellence Project, which launched in 2010, explicitly supports local, state, and national advocacy, engagement, and education reform efforts throughout the Urban League Affiliate Movement and with local, state, and national partners.

2025 EMPOWERMENT GOAL

Every American child is ready for college, work and life.



Making The Case For Change. In the United States, public education is viewed as the best and most impactful way to create equal opportunities for families, children, and youth to advance and succeed. However, as long as policymakers continue to exacerbate inequities by investing less in those with the greatest need and fewest assets, then for many urban students and communities, access to high-quality public education remains an unrealized and distant dream.

All too often, communities of color, as well as their institutions and their stakeholders, are “left outside” of education reform efforts and innovations, just as students of color are “left behind” in their education. Regrettably, reform is something that happens TO these students, families, and communities, instead of something that happens FOR them as a result of their own agency, engagement, and leadership.

Going forward, as states and districts become even more responsible for education reform and innovation under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), urban communities must be sufficiently and meaningfully engaged in setting goals, as well as in measuring and reporting progress, to ensure that the public education system truly delivers on its high expectations for its children. As such, the National Urban League believes students, parents, and community stakeholders should opt in to a vision of education reform and innovation that expands and deepens opportunity, upends inequity, accelerates progress, and delivers more fully on the promise of education.

18%

*of our nation's African American
4th graders were reading
at “proficient” levels in 2015*

Half

*of our nation's 50.1 million P-12 public
school students are children of color*

31%

*of our nation's 20 million
higher education students are
African American or Latino*



Few things matter more to a community’s well-being than the quality of its public education. You can see its long-range impact in virtually every aspect of daily life, from our employment rates to crime rates, from the number of houses being bought to the number of teen pregnancies. Education is the civil rights issue of our time.”

–**ESTHER L. BUSH**, *President and CEO, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh*



Our Intention.

TO BUILD more inclusive advocacy and engagement efforts that will generate additional and deeper support for educational equity, opportunity, and excellence.

TO STRENGTHEN the ability of the civil rights community and those we serve to effectively advocate for equity and excellence at scale in order to ensure the equitable and high-quality implementation of critical education reforms and investments.

TO IMPROVE educational outcomes for underserved students.

TO HIGHLIGHT the investments, policies, practices, reforms, and innovations which explicitly confront historic inequality and to open new paths to success for urban children, underserved children, and youth.

TO INNOVATE via increased strategic investments, reform, enhanced content, policy change, and improved educational practice.

TO UPEND inequity and instead provide additional access to and investment in expanded opportunity and better student outcomes.

Our Guiding Questions.

GOAL

In what specific ways do particular reforms, used singularly or in combination with other reforms, innovations or investments move the nation closer to our 2025 goal?

BENEFIT

How might this reform or innovation benefit students in P-16 educational settings and meaningfully support and expand their opportunities for success?

SUCCESS

What does educational success look like under this reform and innovation?

INCLUSION

How might the inclusion of additional and diverse stakeholders and attendant perspectives advance equity, progress, and opportunity?

ADVANCEMENT

How might advances and progress best be measured and communicated?



Our Areas of Focus.

The Equity and Excellence Project (EEP) targets seven areas that are highly and tightly related to the historic mission of the National Urban League. Improvements in any one of these seven areas would help some students across the P-16 education spectrum.

However, we can help many more students by intentionally and meaningfully combining reform approaches in order to systematically address the complex problems that students, parents, and communities continue to face.

- One. FAIRNESS: Equity and excellence at scale
- Two. INVESTMENT: Early childhood learning and education
- Three. PROMISE: Equitable implementation of college and career-ready standards
- Four. ADVANCEMENT: Expanded access to high-quality curricula, teachers, and administrators
- Five. MEASUREMENT: Comprehensive, transparent, and aligned data systems for early learning through employment
- Six. OPPORTUNITY: Out-of-school time learning with an emphasis on expanded day and summer learning
- Seven. FULFILLMENT: College completion and attainment

1600 African American parents were polled on College and Career-Ready Standards.

76% Understood that it was a state-led effort that established the Standards

70% Were under the misconception that the federal government was involved in creating the Standards

68% Believed that the Standards would improve student achievement

66% Believed that the Standards would better prepare their children for college or the workforce

58% Agreed that the schools their children attend lack the resources and facilities to effectively teach the Standards

Source: Dr. Silas Lee for the National Urban League (March 2014)

NO CEILINGS ON SUCCESS IS THE NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE'S CAMPAIGN TO HOLD STATES ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR PLANS FOR ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY UNDER THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA).

Derived from the concept of breaking glass ceilings that prevent individuals from reaching their highest potential, No Ceilings on Success builds on the work of the League's Equity and Excellence Project by providing parents, teachers, students, and communities with the necessary knowledge to be able to remove the barriers that prevent students from achieving academic excellence.



Our Approach.

Having a local, statewide, and national reach allows the National Urban League to best leverage its greatest asset, the Urban League Affiliate Movement along with the presidents and chief executive officers that lead it. This wide scope allows us to implement a multi-pronged approach to the Equity and Excellence Project, which includes:

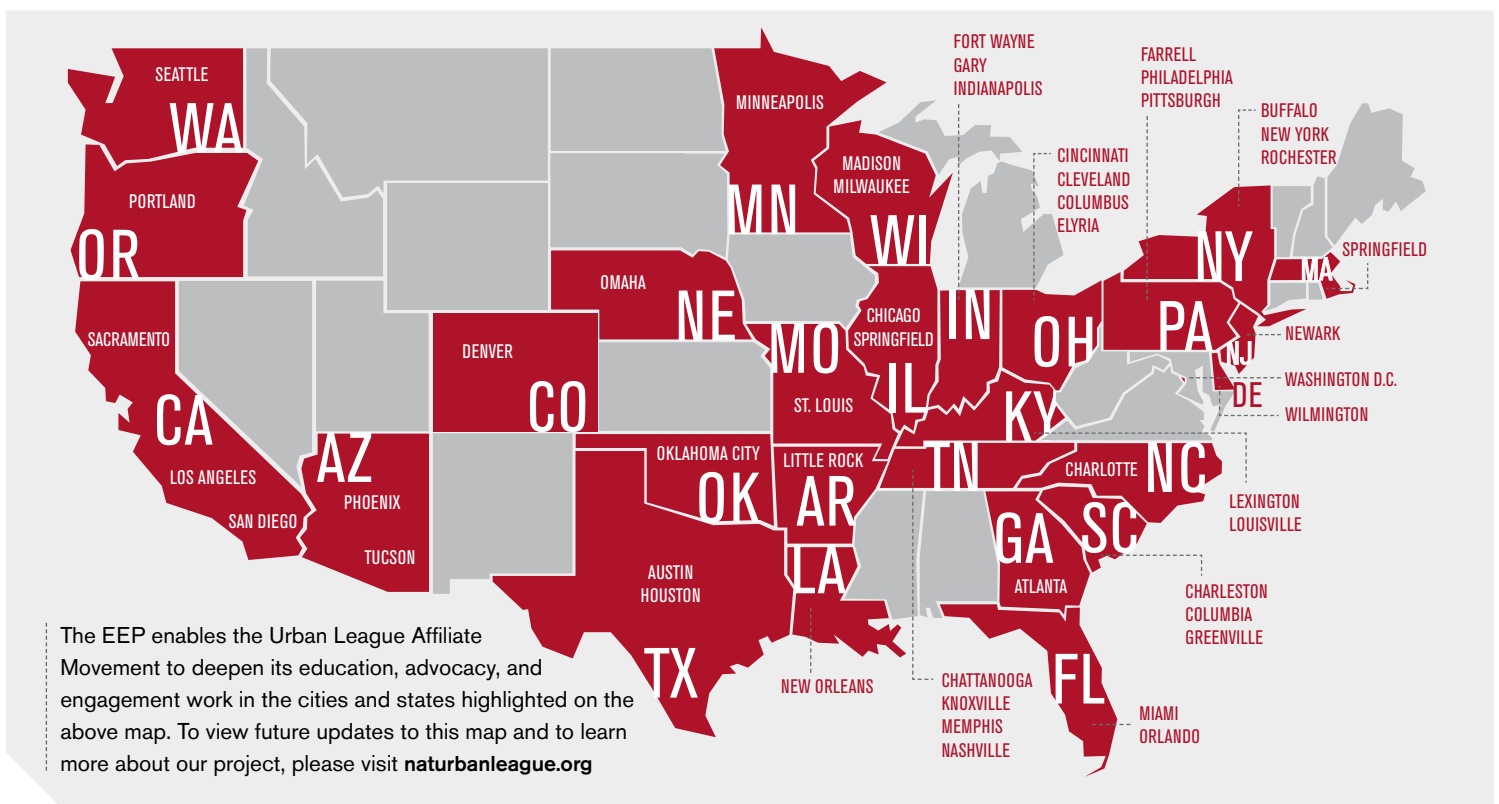
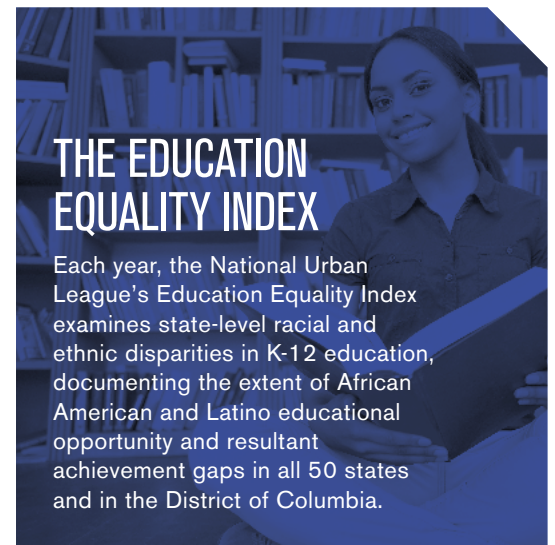
- Engaging Urban League affiliates and partners in local, state, and national education reform efforts.
- Ensuring integration across our postsecondary/workforce development and college completion and attainment agendas.
- Broadening and deepening our communication efforts to build a different education reform/innovation narrative in—and concerning—communities of color.
- Building the capacity and executive leadership of the Affiliate Movement, the National Urban League, and the National Urban League Washington Bureau to work more effectively and comprehensively with civil rights/equity partners and the national education reform/innovation community.
- Organizing local, state, and national convenings centered on equity and excellence.
- Creating opportunities for meaningful student, parent, and stakeholder engagement to build a sense of agency and efficacy that can drive local education reform/innovation by building a more robust set of stakeholders and developing effective advocates, including both parents and students, for our areas of emphasis.

Education reformers and innovators must be able to clearly explain what will be different for students who are presently and have been historically underserved by current policy and practice. **We challenge reformers and innovators to ask:**

ARE THESE INVESTMENTS and interventions robust and flexible enough to meet the needs of both current and near-future students?

HOW MIGHT THE NATION avoid restructuring age-old problems of inequity, differentiated expectations, and privilege via today's reforms and innovations?

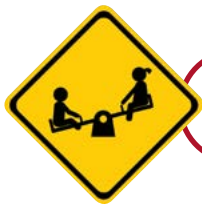
WILL STUDENTS actually experience different and improved results if we simply and unreflectively layer new education approaches, innovations, and reforms on top of institutions and systems that might be too weak to bear the weight?





Moving from gaps to caps— and beyond

QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND APPROACHES
SURROUNDING THE EEP'S SEVEN AREAS OF FOCUS



1. Fairness

FOCUS. Equity and excellence at scale

KEY Q. How might education investments, reforms, and innovations support and drive a shift from a focus on programmatic fixes (a few students) to systemic impacts (all students)?

CONCERN. As a nation, we have struggled to ensure that public schools provide not only access but also excellence to all students despite where they live or what their parents earn. In too many cases, however, community and family income are all-too-accurate predictors of the quality of educational environments, effectiveness of teaching, and the kinds of educational and life outcomes that families, students, and communities can expect.

APPROACH. The Urban League Movement believes that any working definition of excellence must clearly state that more than a

minimum level of competency is expected as a desired and intended outcome for all students. To that end, what we ultimately want for our youth is for them to achieve a level of mastery and proficiency that will thoroughly prepare them for college, work, and life.

Equity reforms do not seek identical outcomes but instead hold equivalent or equally empowering results as desirable and critically important. Equity will truly exist when ALL students are supported by equitable resources, such as fiscal, curricular, teaching, and leadership, and have access to the opportunities that make them ready to enter and thrive in the most demanding and rewarding educational and professional settings the 21st century has to offer.

In our vision, with an equitable distribution of resources and investments, student performance would no longer neatly follow identifiers such as race, language, socioeconomic status, or gender.

The success of any student should not be a matter of chance due to the extraordinary efforts of solitary teachers and programs, no matter how well-intentioned. Instead, what is required are systemic approaches and investments that have demonstrable and specific benefits for EACH and EVERY vulnerable and underserved student.



The Urban League Movement has specifically designed our approach to identify partners willing to collaborate on a shared and actionable education agenda that explicitly disrupts inequity via the elevation of community stakeholder voices and the identification of opportunities for collective work that improves education outcomes for the students, families, and communities that we serve.”

—HAL SMITH, *Senior Vice President, Education, Youth Development and Health, National Urban League*



2. Investment

FOCUS. Early childhood learning and education

KEY Q'S. How do we best ensure that children, from their earliest days of infancy, receive a holistic, developmentally appropriate, and supportive education? In what ways should this educational experience explicitly link to the K-12 system and in what ways should it be more focused on non-traditional classroom achievement?

CONCERN. Research demonstrates that access to high-quality early learning and early childhood education makes a clear difference in the lives of children,¹ but access to content and curricula varies widely from community to community and state to state.

APPROACH. What is needed is a clear investment in providing a range of child-centered settings where deep and meaningful development and learning can take place and better prepare children for the expansive opportunities that we wish for them and for their families. Furthermore, helping parents to understand their roles as their children's first and most long-serving teachers meaningfully empowers them as their children begin to build their vocabulary and to establish their own sense of self, curiosity, independence, and ability.²

The Urban League's vision is that meaningful developmental and educational progress for historically underserved students is possible only through increased investments in opportunity; enhanced and multi-dimensional approaches to curricula and content; improved practices stemming from both qualitative and quantitative data; a renewed and ongoing commitment to equity and excellence at scale; and an informed sense of what is possible for students and families—rather than a misguided deficit focus that too often dominates discussions of urban education reform and innovation.

Community stakeholders, policymakers, education leaders, and families must come together to determine the right set of investments, partnerships, and innovations necessary to improve the quality of early learning and early childhood education across all settings and to work to support and develop educators prepared to help children thrive.

1. Duncan, G. J.; Ziol-Guest, K. M.; Kalil, A. 2010. Early-Childhood Poverty and Adult Attainment, Behavior and Health. *Child Development* 81(1): 306-325.

2. Harter, S. (1999). *The construction of self: A developmental perspective*. New York: Guilford.



3. Promise

FOCUS. Equitable implementation of college and career-ready standards

KEY Q. What specific investments, additional alignments, or changes in policy and practice have to occur in order for all students to meet and exceed the Standards?

CONCERN. It is increasingly clear that a high school diploma does not demonstrate that a graduate, regardless of race, gender, language, ethnicity, or income, has been adequately prepared for higher education or for the world of work. Parents and students want to know—no matter their state, district, school, or classroom—that all students have equitable access to opportunity and success.

APPROACH. The National Urban League advocates for the development and implementation of enhanced standards of educational inputs, processes, and supports to drive better student outcomes.

Setting common, high academic standards offers tremendous potential in addressing the achievement/opportunity gaps and dropout crisis facing the nation. Specifically, the equitable implementation of common, high-quality college and career-ready standards should:

- Ensure that all students, regardless of ZIP code, income, race, or ethnicity, will be taught to, and held to, the same high standards that are aligned to college and work expectations.
- Ensure that professional development training for educators is culturally relevant and builds on best practices and the identified assets of the populations of children whom they serve.
- Allow for the development and ongoing support of innovative practices and curricula in the classroom.
- Be sufficiently clear and timely so that all parents and caregivers can more effectively monitor, understand, and assess their children's progress and compare their children's education with the education of children in other communities, states, and nations.
- Trigger an audit of all tests and assessments given at the school, district, and state level in order to eliminate over-testing and duplicative testing, thereby freeing up additional classroom teaching time.
- Use multiple measures in order to track student progress and achievement and to measure the effectiveness of schools, districts, states, and higher education institutions in delivering high-quality education.



“Once children learn how to learn, nothing is going to narrow their mind. The essence of teaching is to make learning contagious, to have one idea spark another.”

—MARVA COLLINS, *Legendary Chicago schoolteacher and education trailblazer*



4. Advancement

FOCUS. Expanded access to high-quality curricula, teachers, and administrators

KEY Q'S. What are the standards of teacher, school leader and district leader preparation, pedagogy, classroom management, and professional training that are required to improve educational outcomes for students? How do we ensure that all students have access to rich and engaging academic content that helps them to develop and thrive?

CONCERN. Having an effective teacher in the classroom and outstanding leadership at the head of a school provides students with the opportunity to succeed in the face of a variety of non-school-related challenges that are often wrongly used to justify and to explain low academic achievement for students of color. Yet, research shows that the students most likely to benefit from a high-quality teacher are not being taught by one.

APPROACH. In order to build a useful set of policies and practices that encourage and support improved teacher and school leader preparation, in-service professional development, excellent instruction, the use of high-quality content, and strong student learning, it is critically important to ensure that the system recruits and retains the right people and prepares them effectively and that the most effective practices are encouraged and the most supportive conditions are provided.

From early childhood education through higher education, intellectually challenging and engaging curricula, as well as strong, invested educators who have deep content knowledge, enthusiasm for teaching, high expectations for students, thoughtful and purposeful leadership, and a commitment to education, should be equitably present and supported in all communities. To achieve these standards, we must:

- Ensure that all students have access to high-quality educational content, supports, and resources that research demonstrates are essential to ensure postsecondary success.
- Encourage the development and equitable distribution and use of high-quality textbooks, digital media, and other teaching materials that will match the levels of other nations with high standards and will keep pace with the latest research on how students learn best.
- Build additional opportunities for the voice and innovations of teachers, principals, and other education leaders to inform educational practice, reform, and content.



5. Measurement

FOCUS. Comprehensive, transparent, and aligned data systems for early learning through employment

KEY Q'S. How far are students from achieving and succeeding at the levels and in the ways that we expect and desire and how do we best measure their progress?

CONCERN. Too often, families, students, and other education stakeholders have a very limited grasp of the data and information about student performance and gaps in both opportunity and achievement. Their lack of understanding precludes them from determining a way to use the information for planning and taking action for improvement that would have an impact on performance.

APPROACH. In order to better inform communities about student achievement and success, the National Urban League recommends the development of an integrated data framework that holds systems accountable for and makes communities more aware of the growth of all students. These systems would contain relevant data drawn from both the P-16 and the employment systems as well as from child and youth-focused data sources. We believe that this data framework will enable stakeholders to coordinate strategies, identify trends, and analyze data more comprehensively as we measure progress toward greater equity and excellence at scale.

Understanding how to support and accelerate individual student learning is only a part of how data should be used to advance educational quality and opportunity. A rigorous analysis of data should also allow education stakeholders and advocates to understand how to improve systems and institutions that shirk their responsibility to students and families or to support them as they make good progress. As such, assessments are a clear equity issue.

An aligned and transparent data system should measure student growth and teacher performance as well as the progress made from investments in educational content, opportunity, supports, and interventions. Through the use of this system, increased graduation rates should reflect not only school academic achievement but also any decrease in risky behaviors amongst teens, improved feelings of youth connectedness, and a rise in the teen employment rate.



We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”

—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, *Founder and President, Children's Defense Fund*



FOCUS. Out-of-school time learning with an emphasis on expanded day and summer learning

KEY Q'S. Beyond the school hours, what assets do our communities have, what additional investments and connections need to be made, and what strategies do our communities need to develop and enact so that all young people are ready for college, work, and life?

CONCERN. All too often, youth success is mistakenly attributed to school-based factors when, in fact, research demonstrates that a substantial percentage of achievement and academic success for high-income students can be explained by their increased access to educational opportunities in non-school settings.¹

APPROACH. Providing youth with additional productive exposure to an array of learning and developmental opportunities, knowledgeable adults outside their families, and motivated peers can result in very different levels of student development and achievement.² In addition to exposure to high-quality out-of-school time learning opportunities during the academic year, families and communities must make specific and significant additional investments in learning environments and opportunities during the summer in order to drive success for students of color.

Differences in summer learning opportunities and supports during the foundational Pre K–6 school years help explain aspects of the achievement gap in the middle grades and in high school. Young people from low-income backgrounds specifically lag behind their more affluent peers across a number of achievement indicators, thereby perpetuating family advantage and disadvantage across generations through differential access to summer learning and developmental opportunities.³

Critical innovations related to learning time, afterschool and out-of-school time learning and developmental opportunities should substantively reframe teaching and learning to include better content, intentional planning, additional supports, asset-based approaches, and expanded opportunities for students.

1. Gordon, Edmund W., Beatrice L. Bridgall, and Aundra Saa Meroe, (eds). (2004). *Supplementary Education: The Hidden Curriculum of High Achievement*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

2. Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, Linda S. Olson. Source: *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), pp. 171-191.

3. Alexander, Karl L., Entwisle, Doris R., and Olson, Linda (2007). "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap" *American Sociological Review*. Vol.72. April. The Ohio State University. Columbus.

FOCUS. College completion and attainment

KEY Q'S. To be considered "educated," "prepared," and/or "successful," what do higher education students need to know and need to be able to do? In what ways can we construct multiple and equitable pathways that foster additional persistence and success rather than limit opportunity?

CONCERN. The era when a high school diploma was enough to climb the ladder into America's middle class is long gone. In today's increasingly global context, a college degree or market-ready credential has become the minimum requirement to access our nation's social and economic opportunity ladders. Access to higher education, therefore, cannot remain a privilege afforded to a few when it has become a prerequisite to achieving greater success for all.

For generations, the nation has focused on, and rightly celebrated, the increasing number of students who make it to our nation's first class higher education institutions, whether they offer 2-year or 4-year degrees or a market-ready credential. Unfortunately, for too many students, their ultimate goal of graduation, and the surer economic footing that degree attainment provides, has eluded them. The nation must redouble its efforts to ensure that the goal in higher education is not only increased enrollment but also increased graduation, attainment and completion as well.¹

APPROACH. The Urban League believes that public-private-nonprofit partnerships, effective advocacy, and meaningful engagement can drive reform and innovation, spur completion and attainment rates, and foster economic stability and growth in historically underserved urban communities.

In order to increase the number of students who persist to graduation and attain degrees and credentials, we need a clear-cut local, state, and national focus that:

- Supports a range of higher education institutions, including HBCUs, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), Community Colleges, and those that offer market-ready credentials.
- Establishes "early-warning" indicators.
- Explores the potential of innovations, such as individualized instruction, virtual learning, flipped classrooms, stacked and latticed credentials, modern apprenticeships and co-ops, competency-based education, and accelerated degree options.

1. Campaign for High School Equity. *Communities of Color: A Critical Perspective in the Common Standards Movement*. Executive Summary. 2010.



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If we're going to move to a place where family and community engagement is seen as connected to student learning, then we are going to have to build stakeholder capacity, that of parents, community members, and school staff, to be able to support that type of work.

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—DR. KAREN MAPP

Senior Lecturer at Harvard Graduate School of Education and renowned expert in family and community engagement



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To learn more, please visit our No Ceilings on Success website at naturbanleague.org

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The quality of life in any community is directly tied to, and dependent on, the quality of its education systems. Therefore, we have to place a high premium on educational equity and excellence so that academic performance and preparation gaps can be closed and all students, not just some, can enjoy academic success.

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—HENRY M. THOMAS III
*President and CEO,
Urban League of Springfield, MA*