

THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

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

#THEOPPORTUNITYMYTH


opportunitymyth.tntp.org

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



At the heart of this report are real students, their aspirations and dreams, and how school sets them up—or doesn't—to reach those goals.

Students like Isaac.



Isaac, 17, attends a small public high school in the western part of the country. He plans to attend college to study nursing and become an RN.

“I can’t give up on this dream that I’ve had since I was a little boy. I’m willing to take any chance in my life for this dream.”

–Isaac, 11th grade

Isaac did what school asked of him.
Has school held up its end of the deal?

For many students, the answer is no. Nationwide, nearly 70 percent of high school graduates go on to college—but far fewer are succeeding once they get there.



Graduates who opt for a career straight out of high school aren't faring much better. Many employers report that high school graduates enter their roles missing the skills they need to do their jobs well.

We wanted to understand why. To do that, we partnered with five school systems to look closely at what students are doing in school –and how to improve those 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.

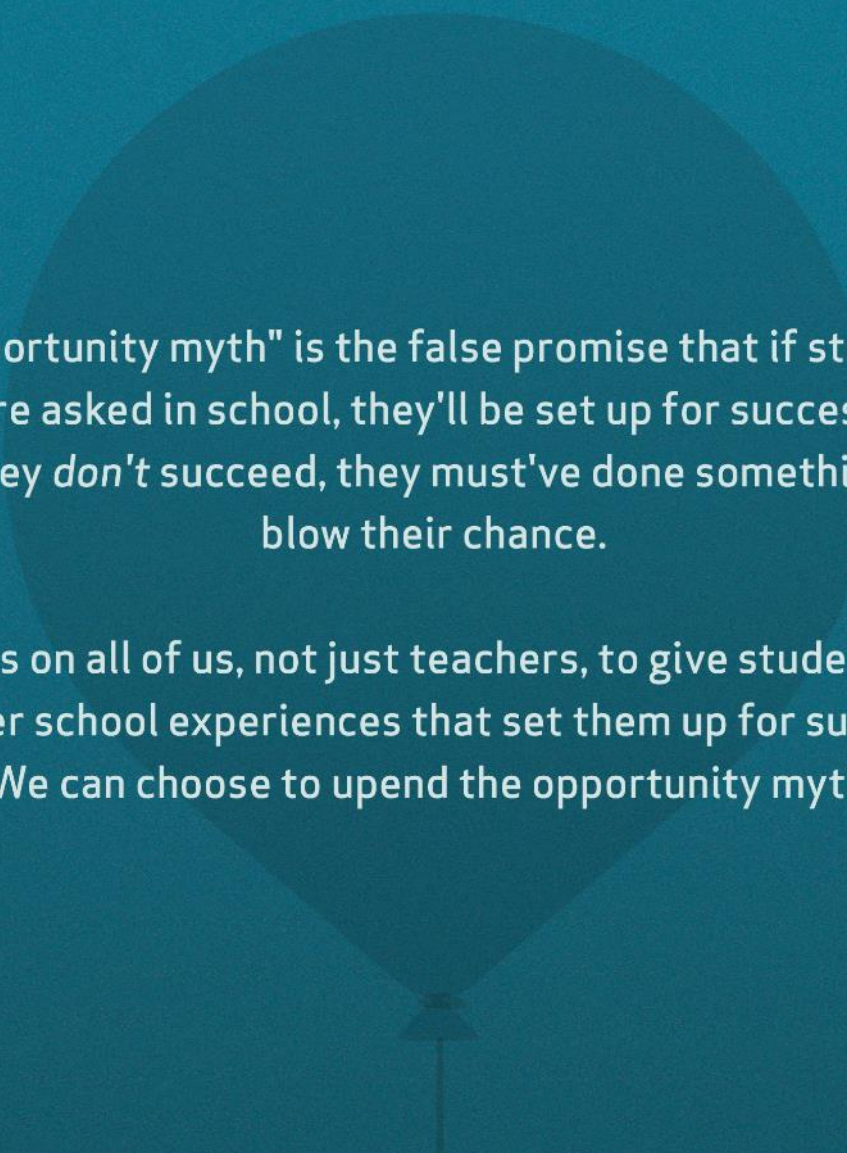


RECOMMENDATIONS

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



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.

The students we met and surveyed have ambitious goals for themselves
—and they expect school to add up to something practical:
readiness to meet those goals.



"I'm hoping to
be a neurologist."
—Hajima
12th grade



"I want to go to
police academy."
—Raymond
5th grade

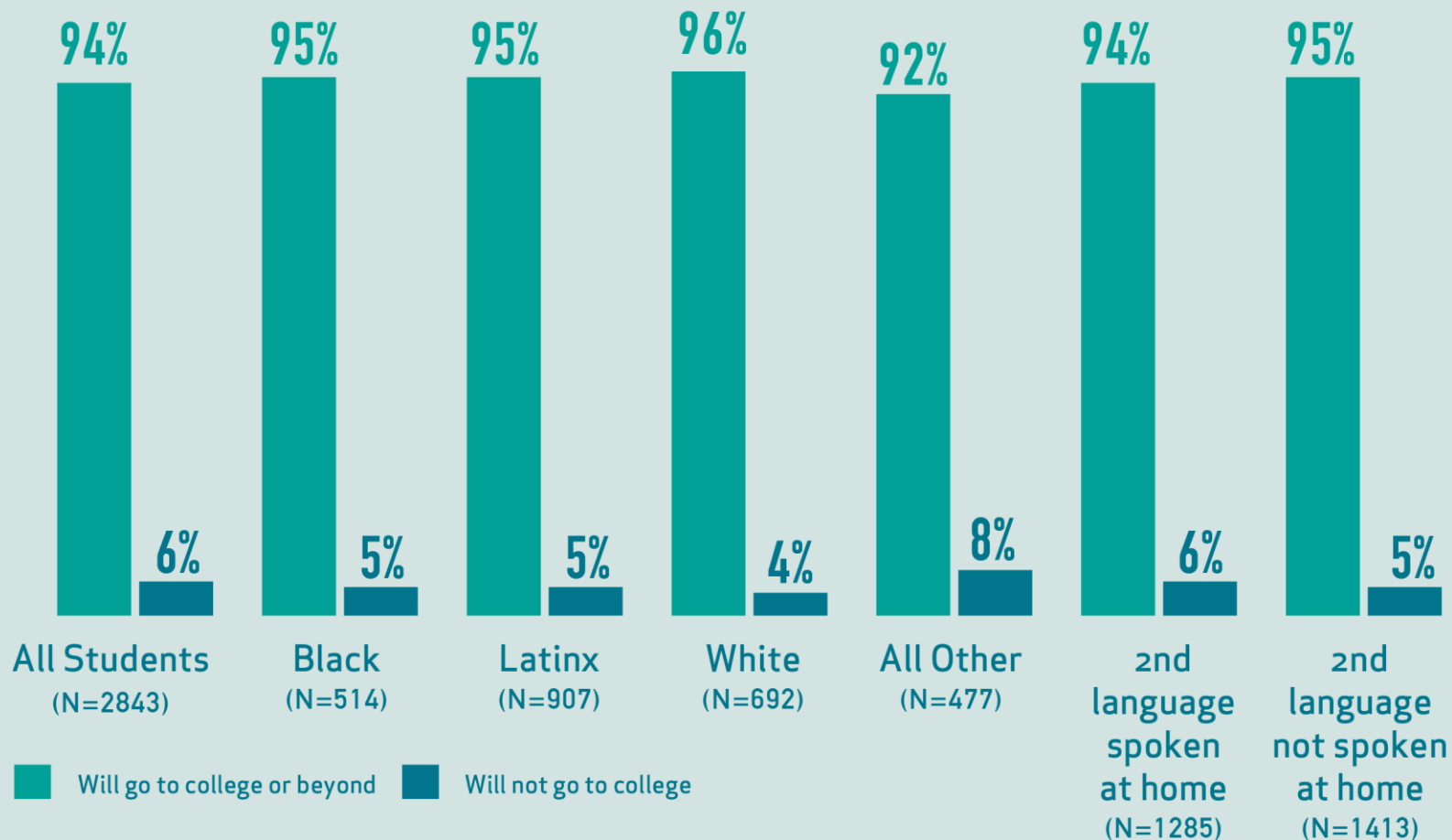


"I want to do
something with kids."
—Luz
11th grade



"I want to be
a trauma nurse."
—Maggie
10th grade


Almost all of them—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.

That's not because they're not capable.

When given the chance
to try grade-level work,
students meet the bar more
than half the time.

All students tended to succeed on grade-level work, but many students of color were denied any opportunity to even try it.

Success rates on grade-level work were similar...



Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly students of color

Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly white students

...but 4 out of 10 classrooms with a majority of students of color never received a single grade-level assignment.



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

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

But most students get those chances far too infrequently.
We found four key resources that influence a student's school
experience and outcomes.

1 Consistent opportunities
to work on
**GRADE-APPROPRIATE
ASSIGNMENTS**

2 **STRONG INSTRUCTION,**
where students do
most of the thinking
in a lesson

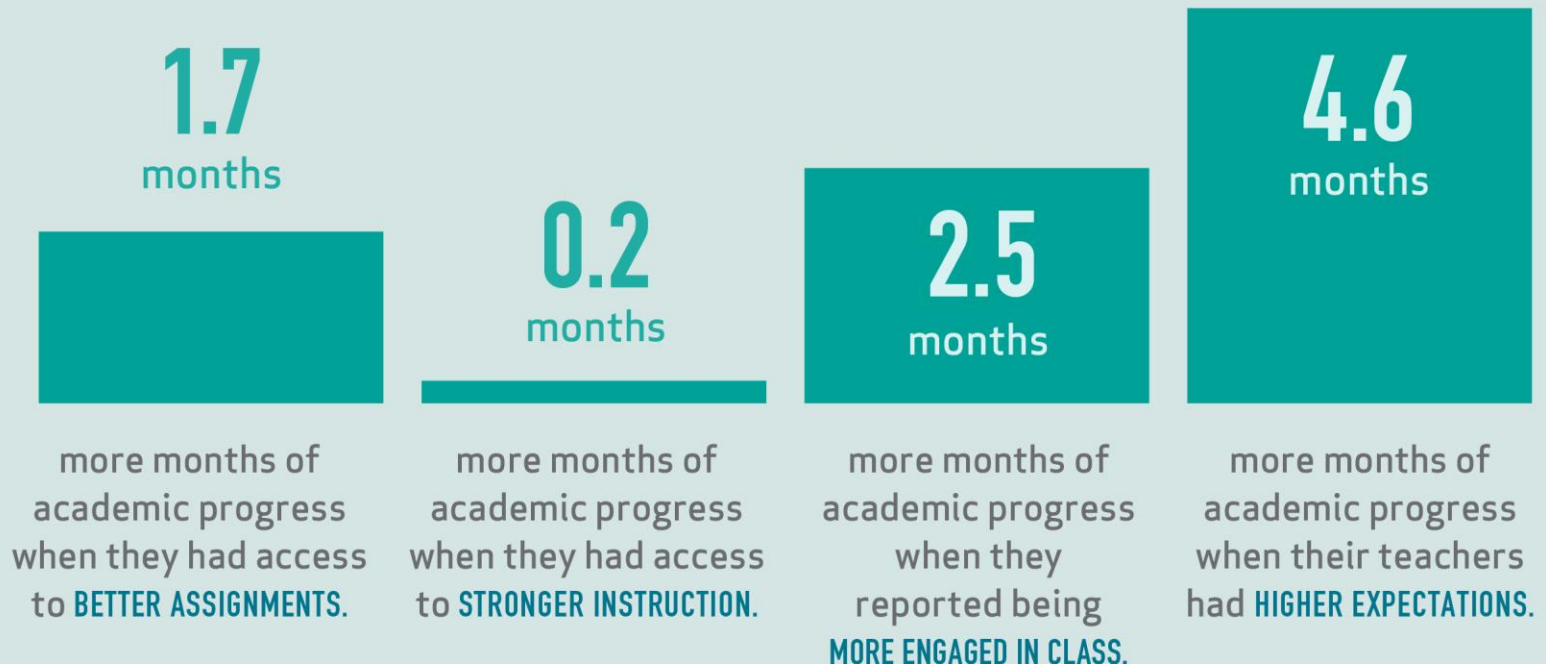
3 **DEEP ENGAGEMENT**
in what they're
learning

4 Teachers who hold
HIGH EXPECTATIONS
for students and
believe they can
meet grade-level
standards

Unfortunately, these resources are few and far between for most students
—and *particularly* for students of color, those from low-income families,
English language learners, and students with mild to moderate disabilities.

These four resources make a difference.
When students get greater access to them, their outcomes improve.

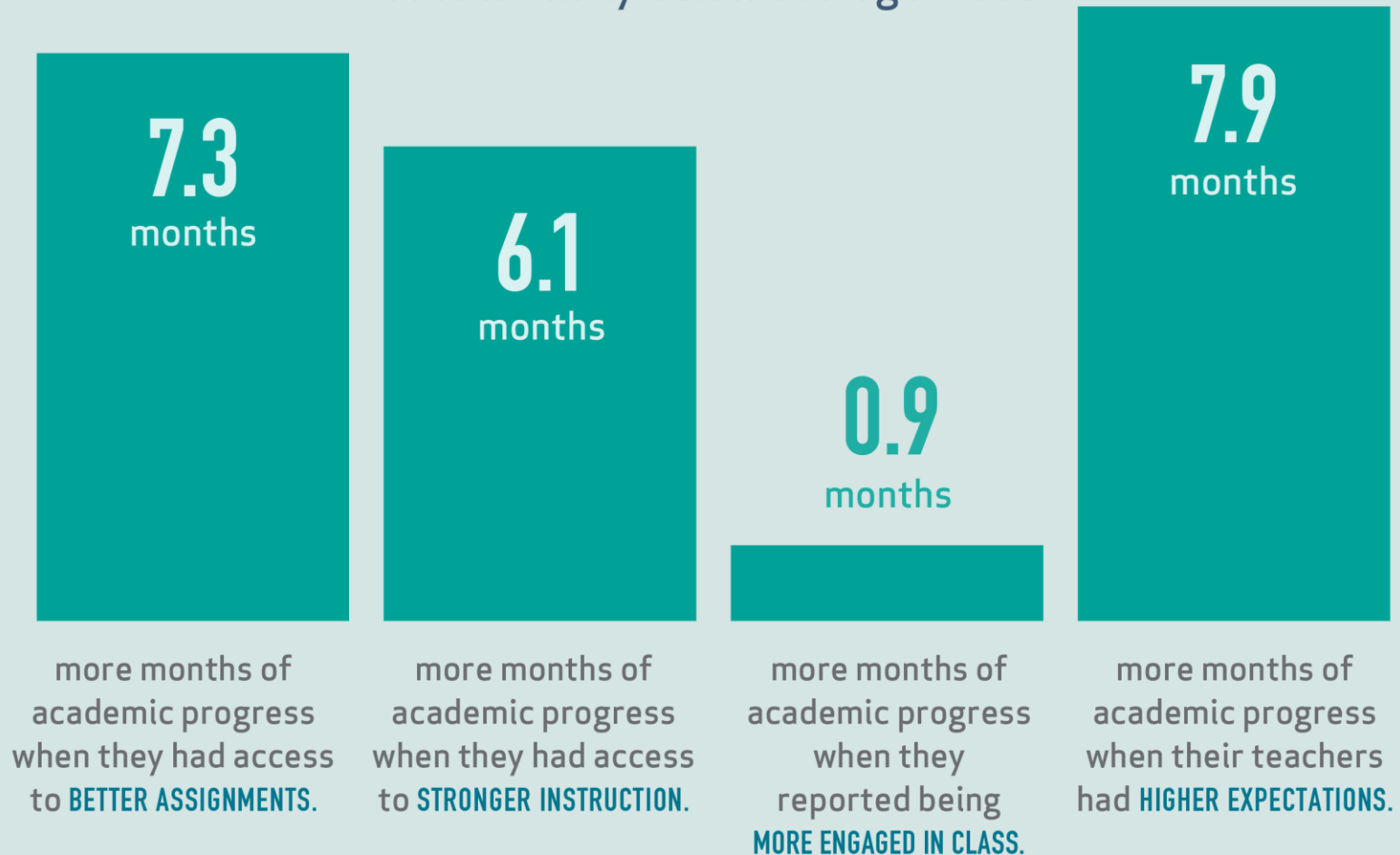
In our sample, all students made:



SOURCE: Value-added models

..That's especially true for students who started the year below grade-level.

In our sample, students who started the year performing substantially below average made:



SOURCE: Value-added models

We found classrooms across the country that offered greater access to the four key resources. These environments looked different in every setting but they shared common traits.

IN SCHOOLS

A consistent focus on a relatively small set of academic priorities that represented a high bar for students' success.

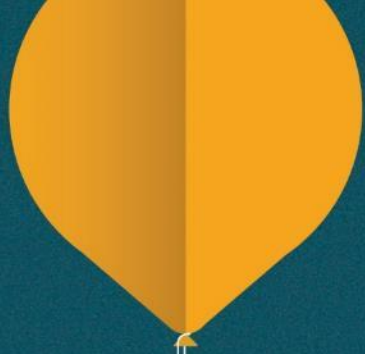
A high level of support for teachers in order to reach that bar.

IN CLASSROOMS

Assignments and instructional practices that reflected high expectations for students.

A positive, respectful environment where students were enjoying their learning.

Teachers who believed their students could be successful against rigorous standards.



Unfortunately, those bright spots were in short supply. In most classrooms, students spent far too much time on content that was not appropriate for their grade.

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.

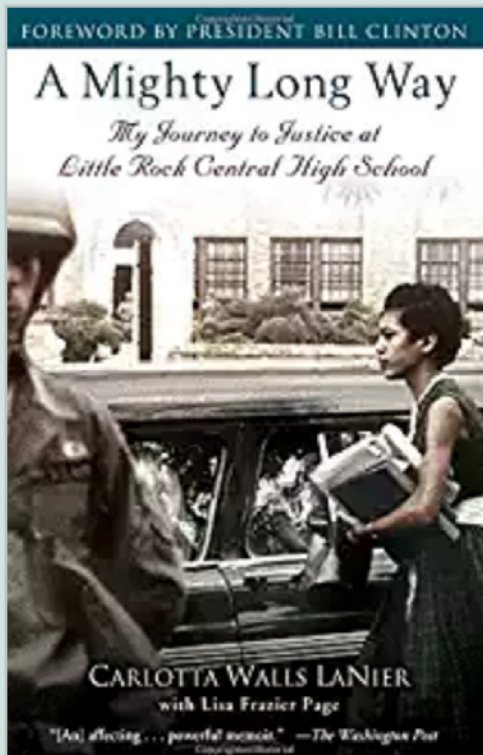
That's worrying for students like Hajima.



"I don't want to feel like
I'm behind when I walk into a class
on the first day of college.
The teacher is not going to
wait for me."
-Hajima, 12th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Assignment quality varied widely. Some students—like the eighth graders in this language arts class—did have the opportunity to grapple with high-quality assignments.



Education

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

Informational Essay Planner

Name:

Date:

Focusing Question: In the events surrounding the Little Rock Nine and the struggle to integrate Central High, the press played a newly powerful role. In what ways did it serve to illuminate events for a national audience, and in what ways did it give an incomplete or even inaccurate picture of events?

Students read *A Mighty Long Way* and wrote an informational essay analyzing historical events, getting the chance to fully meet the depth of multiple standards and learn relevant content.

But eighth graders in another language arts class—
in the same district—did not have that same chance.

The “Billion Oyster Project” Brings Life Back to NYC Waters

Gazing at Manhattan’s East River, you will see huge cargo ships, ferries, and barges. You’ll see a stream of cars and trains zooming over the city’s bridges. It’s hard to imagine that this river was once an unspoiled marine habitat. Years of industrial development have taken a toll. Much of the natural ecosystem here was lost or damaged. But today, with the help of the Billion Oyster Project and lots of New York City students, that’s starting to change.



OYSTER BOATS, NEW YORK.

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

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

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

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

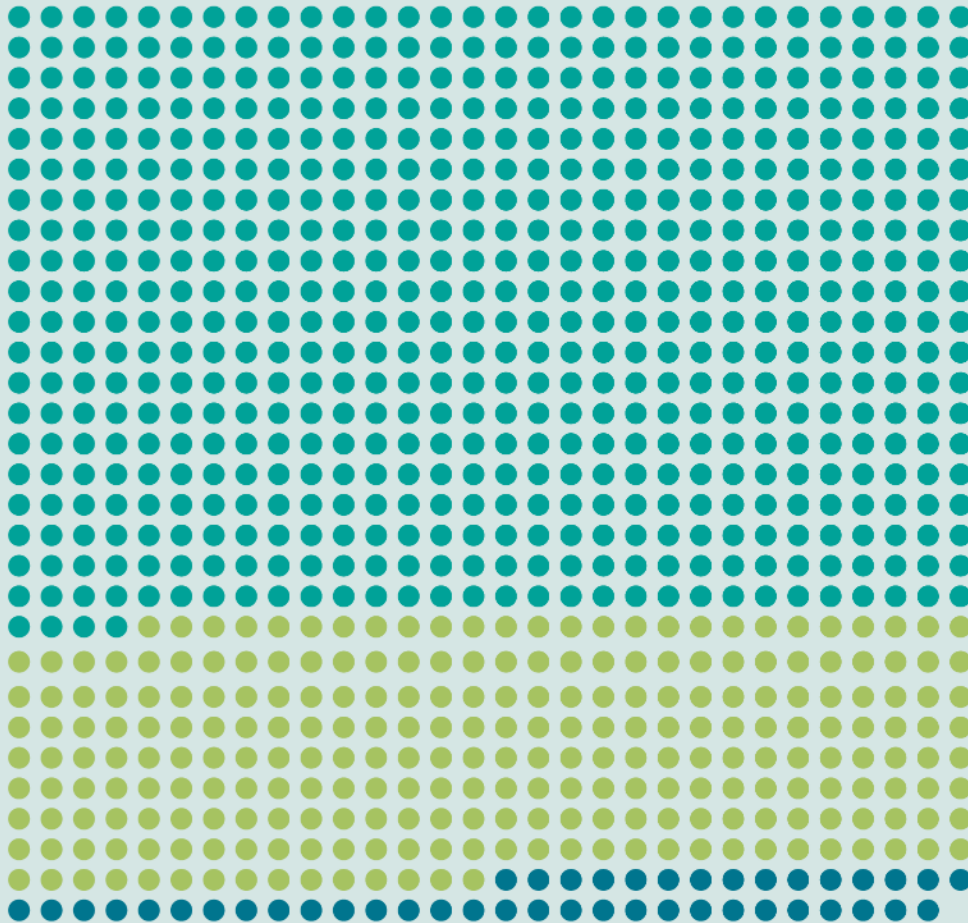
After reading a fifth-grade level text, students completed multiple-choice vocabulary questions and filled in the missing vowels in words, which is not aligned to any eighth-grade literacy standard.

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.

Even in classrooms where students did have grade-appropriate assignments, we often saw students missing out on strong instruction—particularly opportunities to "do the thinking" in their lessons.



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.

That's frustrating for students like Raymond.

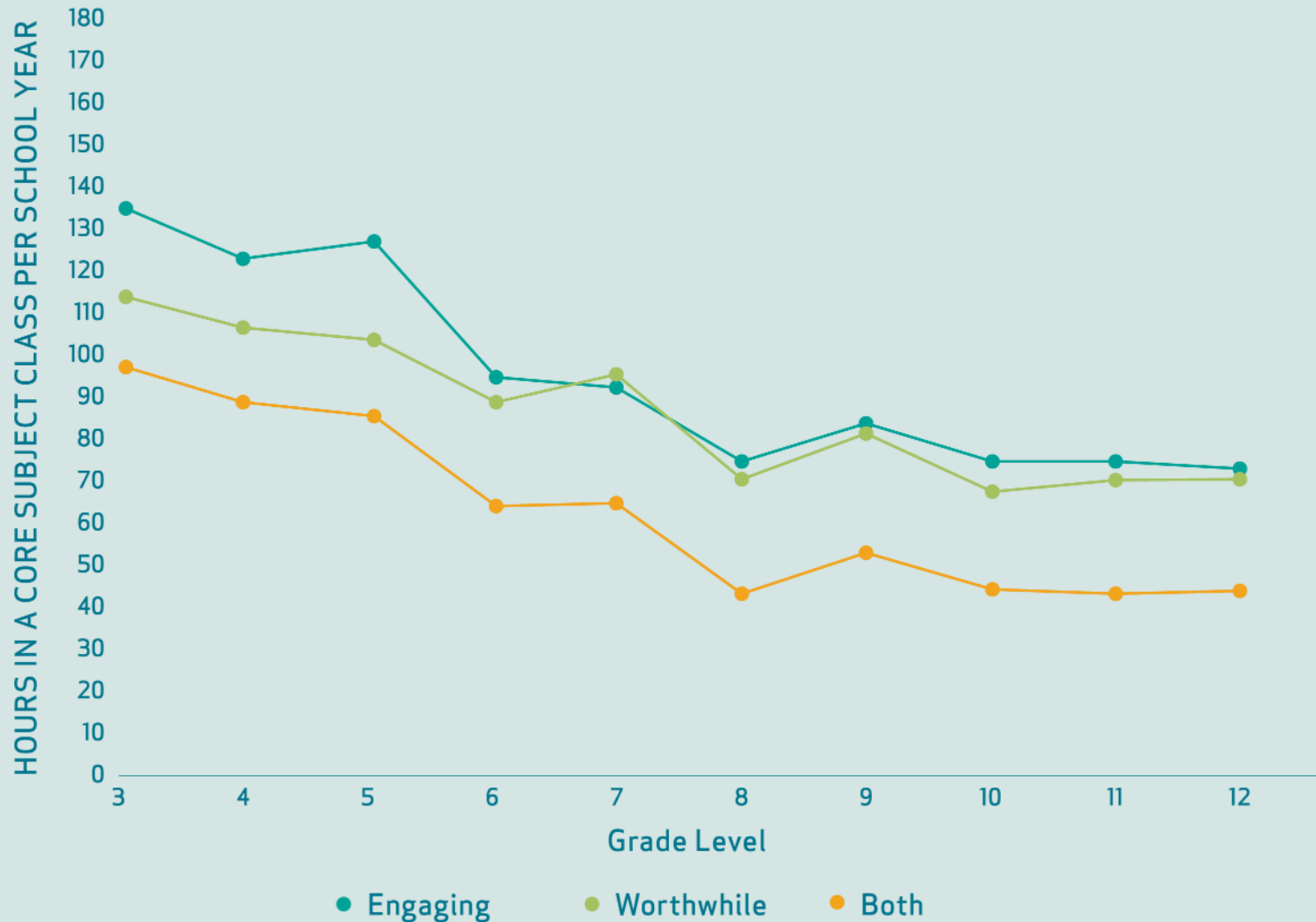


“I think math is kind of fun.”

–Raymond, 5th grade

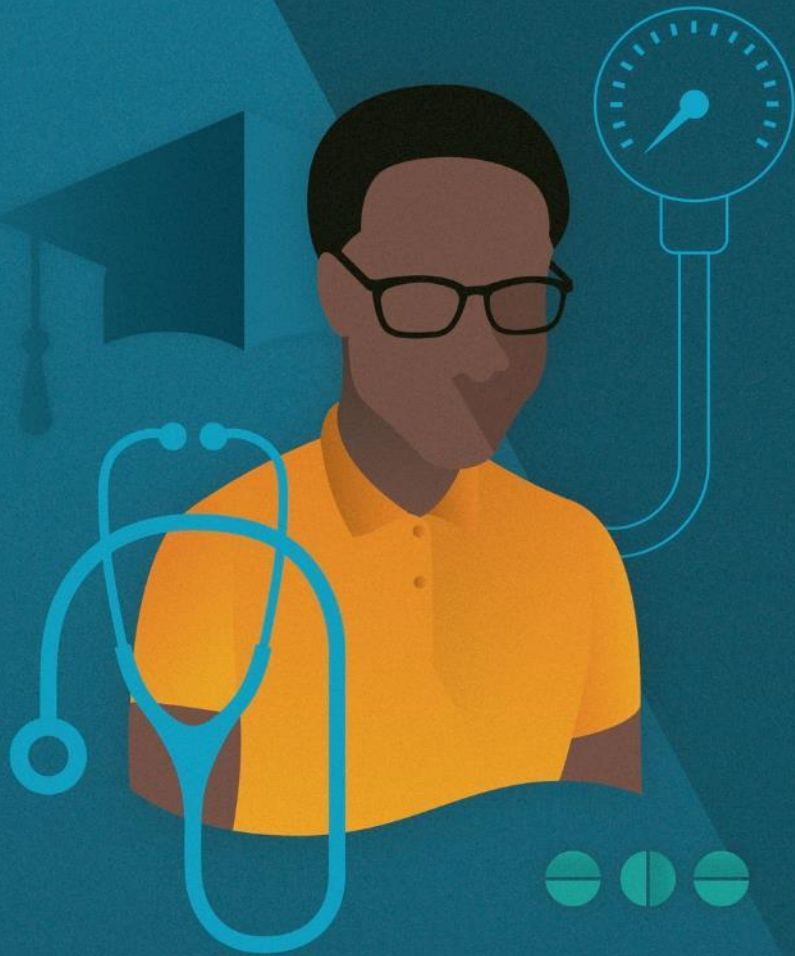
But in his math class, he and his classmates are repeatedly interrupted and corrected by their teacher. Eventually, Raymond—who likes math—rests his head on his desk.

Perhaps as a result, students did not often view their school experiences as engaging or worthwhile, particularly in middle and high school.



SOURCE: Student surveys

That's unfair to students like Isaac.



“Some classes are really dry.
You take nothing but notes. That’s
not going to help me learn what
I need in the long term.”

–Isaac, 11th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

And most students were in classrooms where the teachers did not hold high expectations for them.



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

That matters to students like Luz.



“The teachers that have high expectations for you in their class, you actually try harder, because you want to show you can meet those expectations.”

–Luz, 11th grade

Low expectations contribute to a mismatch between grades students receive and their actual readiness to meet their long-term goals.

Among B students in math and English courses...



65%

were not at grade-level on grade 3-8 state tests. 94% of C students and 29% of A students were not at grade-level.



52%

did not meet the ACT or SAT's benchmark for college readiness. 77% of C students and 18% of A students did not meet the benchmark.



80%

did not pass the AP test. 91% of C students and 50% of A students did not pass the AP test.

That concerns students like Maggie.



“I feel like everybody’s
capable of the same thing.
I think they can do it just as
much as I can do it.”
–Maggie, 10th grade

SOURCE: Student Interviews

Access to the four key resources varies widely from classroom to classroom—and we choose to give some students more access than others.

WITHIN THE SAME SCHOOL AND SUBJECT AREA:

In the highest-rated classrooms,
49% OF STUDENTS' TIME
was spent on grade-appropriate
assignments, and
44% OF LESSONS
had strong instruction.

In the lowest-rated classrooms,
13% OF STUDENTS' TIME
was spent on grade-appropriate
assignments, and
1% OF LESSONS
had strong instruction.

In a school year, the highest-rated classrooms tended to spend
64 more hours on grade-appropriate assignments and
78 more hours with strong instruction
than the lowest-rated classrooms.

Inequitable access isn't random. White students and those from higher-income families were more likely to be in classrooms that offered the four key resources.



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

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

SOURCE: Assignments and observations

Classrooms serving mostly students of color or low-income students typically had vastly fewer opportunities.

Classrooms with mostly white students (>50%) tended to receive:

1.5x MORE grade-appropriate assignments

3.6x MORE high-quality lessons

1.2x MORE engaging experiences

...than classrooms with mostly students of color

Classrooms with primarily high-income students, (>75%) tended to receive:

2.1x MORE grade-appropriate assignments

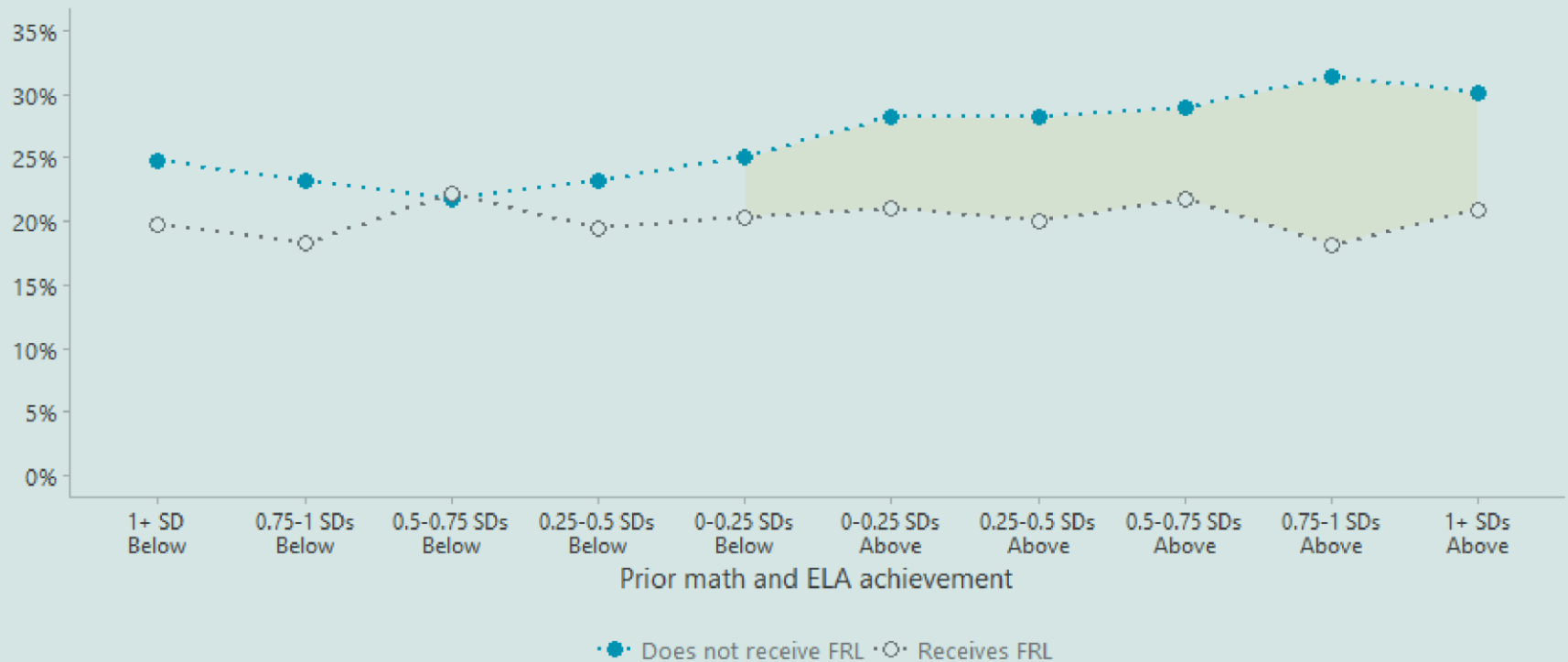
5.4x MORE high-quality lessons

1.2x MORE engaging experiences

...than classrooms with mostly students from low-income backgrounds

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

PERCENT GRADE-APPROPRIATE ASSIGNMENTS BY PRIOR ACHIEVEMENT AND INCOME STATUS



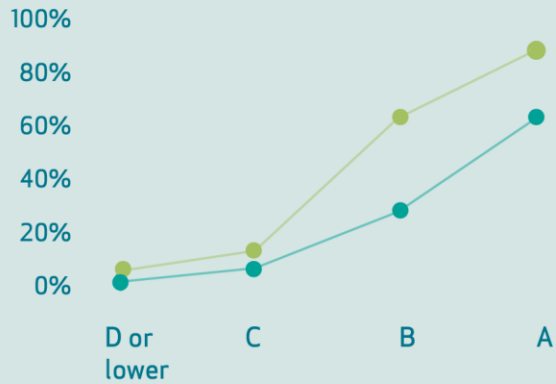
Even among students performing better than the average student in the state, low-income students still spent 30% less time—nearly 1 fewer month per year—with grade-appropriate assignments.

We also saw a lower grading standard for students of color, resulting in even more misleading signals about students' readiness to achieve their goals.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON STANDARDIZED TESTS BY LETTER GRADE AND STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY

GRADES 3-8 STATE TESTS

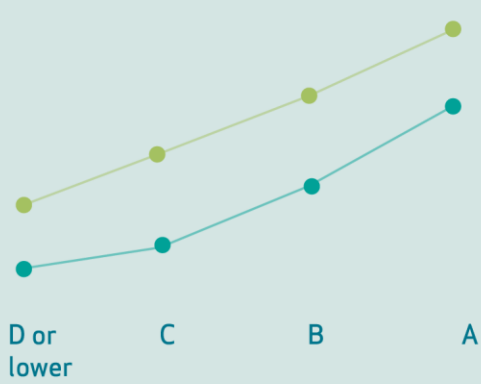
PERCENT MEETING
GRADE-LEVEL EXPECTATIONS



Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 4 out of 5 districts.

ACT & SAT

PERCENT MEETING COLLEGE
READINESS BENCHMARKS



Students of color received significantly worse test scores for the same grades in 2 out of 2 districts.

AP TESTS

PERCENT SCORING
3 OUT OF 5 OR HIGHER



Students of color received significantly worse AP scores for the same grades in 3 out of 3 districts.

● White students ● Students of color

SOURCE: District-provided grades and assessment scores

Among classrooms with at least 75% Black
or at least 75% Latinx students...



For students of color working at all achievement levels,
teachers of color tended to have higher expectations.

When students get access to more of the key resources, they grow more compared to their peers—especially students who started the year below grade-level.

MEAN ACHIEVEMENT BY DEMOGRAPHIC AND ASSIGNMENT QUALITY, AND EXTRAPOLATED GROWTH

STUDENTS OF COLOR



STUDENTS BEGINNING SUBSTANTIALLY BEHIND GRADE LEVEL



The "achievement gap" is not inevitable. It's baked into a system where some students get more than others.

SOURCE: Student achievement data

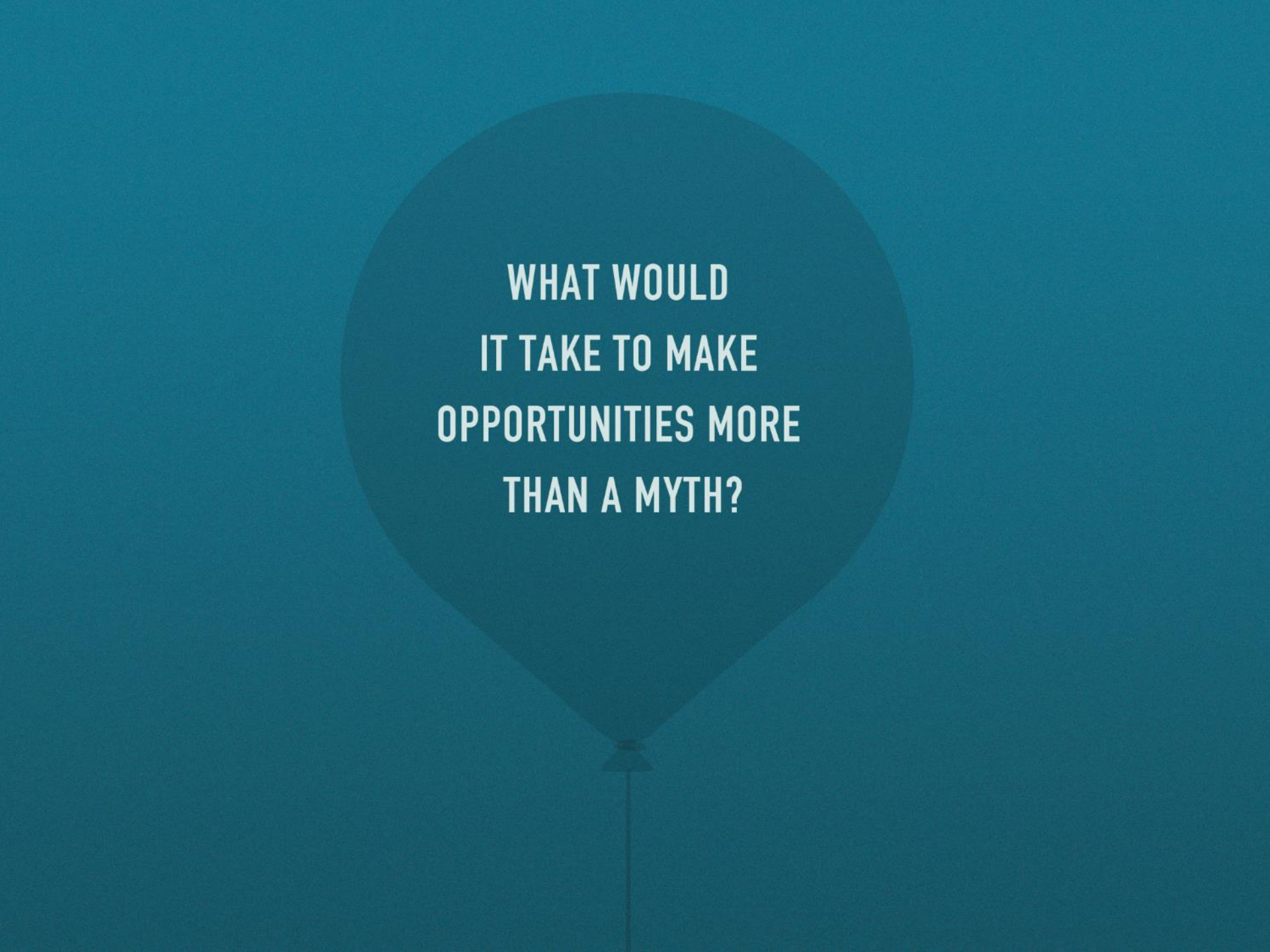
In the spring, Isaac graduated with his class. He's enrolled in nursing school.



“That diploma means
I worked hard. I made it this far,
through all these years of school.
I want to go to college and be
a registered nurse. I feel like
I’m ready.”

–Isaac,
High School Graduate

**IS HE READY?
OR HAS HE BEEN MISLED?**



**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...

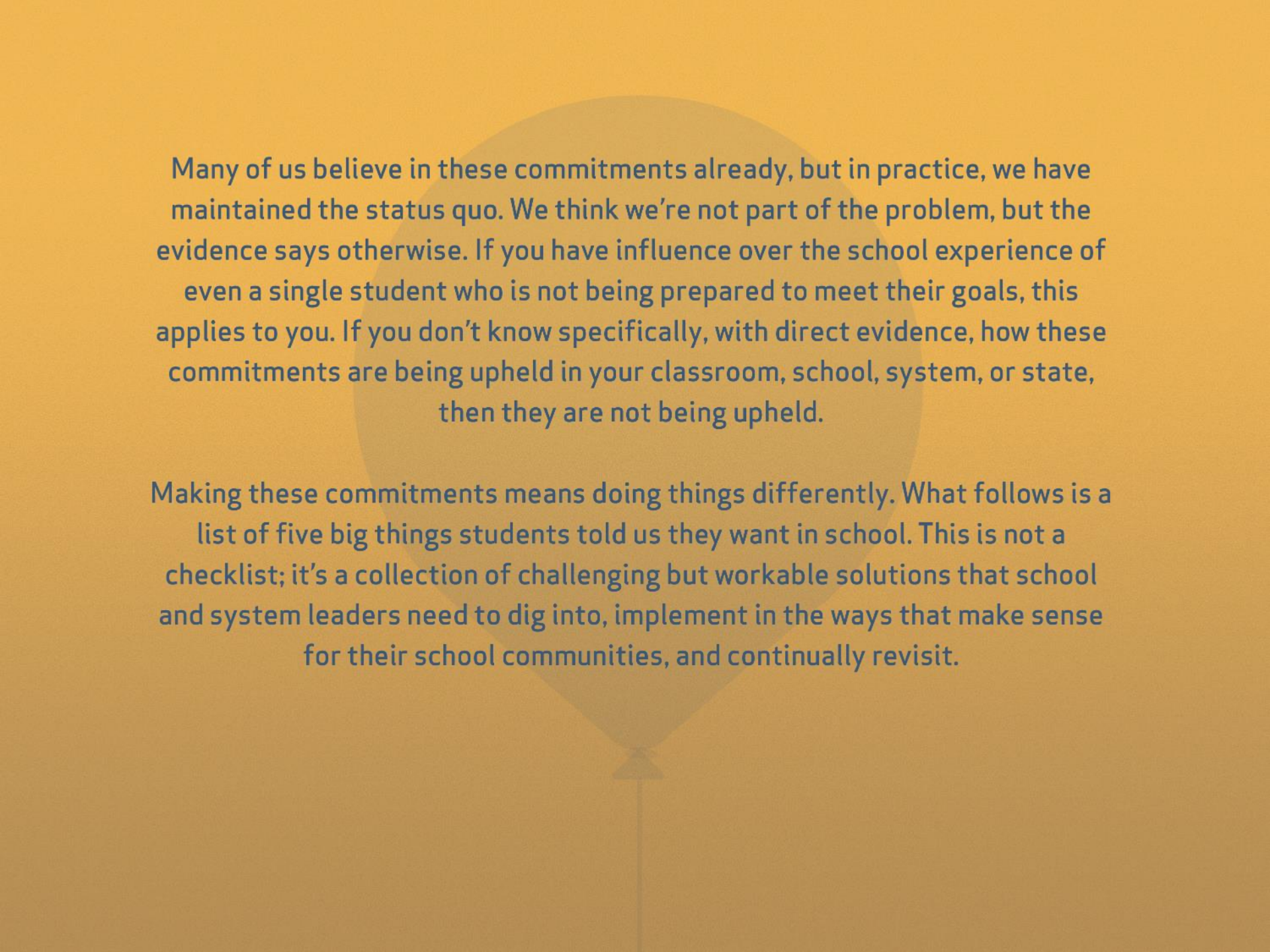
...grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations, every day, in every class—regardless of their race, ethnicity, or any other part of their identity.

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.



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.

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.

opportunitymyth.tntp.org

Explore *The Opportunity Myth* online, add yourself to the map, and request a personalized action guide.

tntp.org/studentexperiencetoolkit

Browse resources designed to help educators, policymakers, and families improve students' daily experiences in school.

