

# THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

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



## How can so many students be graduating from high school unprepared to meet their goals for college and careers?

Three years ago, we set out to answer that question. We suspected that we could gain a better understanding of students' daily experiences by observing those experiences in action, looking closely at the work students were doing, and most importantly, by asking students directly. We hypothesized that a clearer picture of students' daily experiences could point the way toward changes to policy and practice that would bridge the gap between what students need and what they're getting every day in their classrooms.

We partnered with five diverse school systems, rural and urban, district and charter, to listen to students' views on their educational experiences and observe how those experiences played out, in real time, in their classrooms. While "student experiences" include many things within and outside school, we chose to focus on a set of in-school elements that offered a window into what students were doing in their classes and how they perceived that time.

Above all, we wanted to understand students' aspirations for themselves, what kind of lives they wanted to lead, and how school was preparing them to live those lives—or letting them down.

We partnered with  
**FIVE** diverse school systems

We observed nearly  
**1,000** lessons

We reviewed nearly  
**5,000** assignments

We analyzed more than  
**20,000** student work samples

We collected nearly  
**30,000** real-time student surveys

## HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND:

### Students have big, clear plans.

They want to be doctors and lawyers, teachers, artists, and athletes. Ninety-four percent of students we surveyed aspire to attend college, and 70 percent of high schoolers have career goals that require at least a college degree.

### Most students do what they're asked in school—but are still not ready to succeed *after* school.

In the nearly 1,000 lessons we observed, students were working on activities related to class 88 percent of the time. They met the demands of their assignments 71 percent of the time, and more than half brought home As and Bs. Yet students only demonstrated mastery of grade-level standards on their assignments—a benchmark for being on track for the lives most of them want as adults—17 percent of the time. That gap exists because so few of their assignments actually gave them the chance to demonstrate grade-level mastery.

### Students spend most of their time in school without access to four key resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations.

Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren't appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn't ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject. And students reported that their school experiences were engaging just 55 percent of the time overall (among high schoolers, only 42 percent of the time). Underlying these weak experiences were low expectations: We found that while more than 80 percent of teachers supported standards for college readiness in theory, less than half had the expectation that their students could reach that bar.

### 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.

For example, classrooms that served predominantly students from higher-income backgrounds spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments and five times as much time with strong instruction, compared to classrooms with predominantly students from low-income backgrounds.

### Greater access to the four resources can and does improve student achievement—*particularly for students who start the school year behind.*

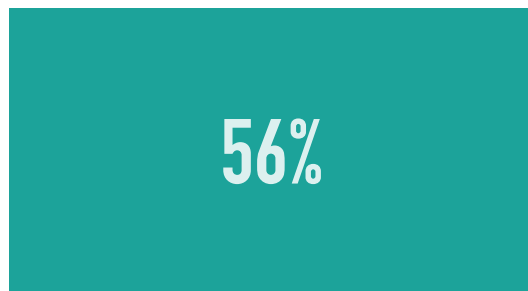
When students did have the chance to work on content that was appropriate for their grade, they rose to the occasion more often than not. Those chances paid off: In classrooms where students had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they gained nearly two months of additional learning compared to their peers. Classrooms with higher levels of engagement gained about two-and-a-half months of learning. In classrooms where teachers held higher expectations, students gained more than four months. The relationships between the resources and student outcomes were even stronger in classrooms where students started the year off behind. When students who started the year behind grade level had access to stronger instruction, for example, they closed gaps with their peers by six months; in classrooms with more grade-appropriate assignments, those gaps closed by more than seven months.

**When students who started the year behind grade level had access to stronger instruction, they closed gaps with their peers by six months.**

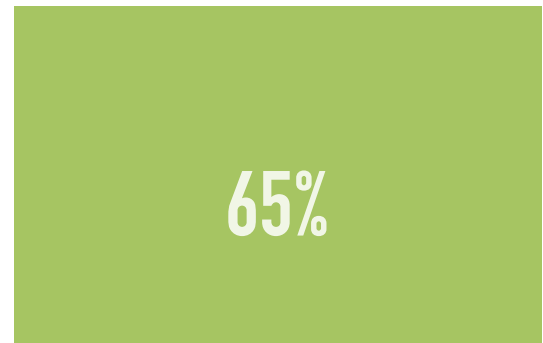
FIGURE 1 | STUDENT SUCCESS ON GRADE-LEVEL WORK VERSUS OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GRADE-LEVEL WORK

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...

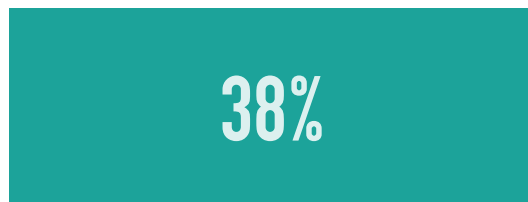


Success rates on all grade-level assignments from classrooms with mostly students of color



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

NOTE: "Grade-level" assignments are assignments that earned our highest rating on the content domain. See the Technical Appendix at [tnnp.org/opportunitymyth](http://tnnp.org/opportunitymyth) for more details on how we rated assignments. To calculate the success rate in both types of classrooms, we combined all grade-level assignments from eligible classrooms. Because some classrooms provided more grade-level assignments than others, and because some classrooms never provided grade-level assignments, some classrooms (and students) are represented more heavily than others in this analysis. Only core subject classrooms with at least five days of assignments are included.

In short, students and their families have been deeply misled. We talk about school as a series of small opportunities for students—to show up, work hard, earn good grades—that add up to much bigger ones later in life. When students don’t find the opportunities they were promised on the other side of the graduation stage, we assume they or their families must have done something to blow their big chance, or that they were simply reaching too high.

Yet we found classroom after classroom filled with A and B students whose big goals for their lives were slipping further away each day, unbeknownst to them and their families—not because they couldn’t learn what they needed to reach them, but because they were rarely given a real chance to try.

That’s the opportunity myth. It means that at every grade level, in every district, for students of every demographic background, school is not honoring their aspirations or setting them up for success—in their next grade, in college, and for whatever they want to do down the road. This has a cumulative effect, particularly for the students who receive the very least of what our schools have to offer.

Let’s be clear: Teachers alone are not responsible for this myth—either creating it or fixing it. In many ways, teachers too have been subject to a false promise. Their time has been wasted on expensive and lengthy teacher preparation programs that don’t prepare them for the realities of the classroom<sup>1</sup> and development opportunities that don’t help them improve,<sup>2</sup> on having to sift through far too many mediocre materials;<sup>3</sup> with guidance that pulls them in a thousand directions but doesn’t help them do their jobs well—all while being undervalued and under-compensated. While they make many individual decisions in their classrooms, those choices are often dictated by the incentives of the system they work within.

At every level of the education sector, from classrooms to statehouses, from schools of education to nonprofit offices, adults make daily choices that perpetuate a cycle of inequity and mediocrity in our schools. Consciously or not, we choose to let many students do work that’s far below their grade level. We choose to leave teachers without the skills and support they need to give all their students access to high-quality academic experiences. We choose to act on assumptions about what students want and need out of school, without really listening to them and their families. We choose, in essence, which students are more deserving of reaching their goals.

Yet our research also makes clear that gaps in students’ school experiences and outcomes are not inevitable. We could make different choices—choices that could make a real difference in the short term, without an infusion of new funding, as well as those that will lay the groundwork for deeper structural change. These are the kinds of choices that could make the difference between students realizing their dreams, or leaving them unfulfilled. We could choose, in other words, to upend the opportunity myth.

<sup>1</sup> Drake, G., Pomerance, L., Rickenbrode, R., & Walsh, K. (2018). *Teacher prep review*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from <https://www.nctq.org/publications/2018-Teacher-Prep-Review>

<sup>2</sup> TNTP. (2015). *The Mirage: Confronting the hard truth about our quest for teacher development*. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP. Retrieved from <https://tntp.org/publications/view/evaluation-and-development/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development>

<sup>3</sup> Herold, B. & Molnar, M. (2014). Research Questions Common-Core Claims by Publishers. *Education Week* (March 3, 2014).



## RECOMMENDATIONS

**“I expect to be getting the knowledge I need to go to college and get a career, to do whatever it is I plan on doing.”**

**—Maggie, 10th grade**

It shouldn't be an unreasonable expectation. And yet, most students will find themselves let down. It's time to change that.

What we've learned from students about their experiences has created a new center of gravity for our work. We hope it will do the same for others seeking fundamental changes to our school systems. We now have clearer answers than ever about how and why we're failing to provide so many students with the experiences they need to reach their goals. If we stay focused on those experiences, we'll be on a path to sustainable change because the work will be rooted in the experiences of those we serve.

We readily acknowledge that we don't have a detailed operational plan to improve student experiences at scale. But we believe it's time to move beyond important but narrow debates—from how to measure teacher performance to charter versus district to the role of

standardized testing—and return to the basic guiding principle that brings us to this work: the right of every student to learn what they need to reach their goals. Over the next several years, we will partner with school systems, educators, students, and parents to build our expertise about how to give all students more of the key resources they need and deserve, in different communities and contexts. We'll certainly share what we learn as we go, and we hope you will, too.

But we think we know where to begin, and it starts with making students' daily experiences the center of our work.

Students are at the heart of this report, and we learned some profound lessons through the process of asking them about their goals and experiences. They don't have all the answers, to be clear—nor is it their job to tell us how to do ours better. But they proved again and again, through their nuanced, sophisticated, and practical observations, that they are the best experts we have about the current state of our schools. Above all, we heard from students that they want to be challenged in school, enjoy their learning, and be treated with respect, care, and dignity. They're asking us to do better, so we should.

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**We call on all adults whose choices affect students' experiences in school—particularly school, district, and state leaders, as well as external partners like ourselves—to make two core commitments to students and families:**

**1 |** 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.

**2 |** 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 students' 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.

We can be this categorical because we made this mistake ourselves. We have often thought we were upholding these commitments, while settling for less in practice. For example, we thought we recognized the need to give all students access to grade-appropriate content, but we have trained new teachers with ineffective scaffolding practices that gutted the rigor of assignments. We have talked about the importance of listening to students, but we have failed to support teachers to use student survey data to make improvements.

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.

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 what 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.

For an interactive experience and additional resources, visit  
[opportunitymyth.tnntp.org](http://opportunitymyth.tnntp.org)



# THE OPPORTUNITY SEEKERS

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In *The Opportunity Myth*, five students' stories offer a window into the experiences we saw replicated across hundreds of classrooms. These students, like their peers across the country, have ambitious goals for themselves and expect school to prepare them to meet those goals. You'll hear from:

**"I want to go to college and be a registered nurse."**

–Isaac, 11th grade

**"I'm hoping to be a neurologist."**

–Hajima, 12th grade

**"I want to be a trauma nurse."**

–Maggie, 10th grade

**"I want to go to police academy."**

–Raymond, 5th grade

**"I know I want to do something with kids."**

–Luz, 11th grade

## ABOUT TNTP

A national nonprofit founded by teachers, TNTP works at every level of the public education system to attract and train talented teachers and school leaders, ensure rigorous and engaging classrooms, and create environments that prioritize great teaching and accelerate student learning. [TNTP.org](https://www.tntp.org)