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Inequity and The Opportunity Myth

By TNTP

Abstract

Millions of K-12 students across the country are working hard to get through school, only to find themselves ill-prepared to live the lives they hope for. They're planning their futures on the belief that doing well in school creates opportunities—that showing up, doing the work, and meeting their teachers' expectations will prepare them for what's next. They believe that for good reason: We've been telling them so.

In this excerpt from the TNTP report "The Opportunity Myth,"[1] we explore the role inequity plays in this challenge, and how the education system can better set students up for success after high school.

Inequity and The Opportunity Myth

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

We set out to answer that question through a three-year-long project entitled, "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down–and How to Fix It."[2] 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.

And we learned quite a bit about what was holding kids back. Specifically, we found that 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.

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.

The following is an excerpt from our report that shows how the opportunity myth can affect the lives of individual students—and how people at every level of the education system can take steps to create better, more equitable school experiences.

Maggie's Experience: "We're Supposed to Be the Smart Class."

Maggie believes that high school is supposed to get her ready for what she wants to do in life. "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, to be a trauma nurse," she says. "I don't expect [school] to be fun, but I also don't expect it to be the mountain that it is." She describes class periods where she finishes her work early and sits there with nothing else to do, and those where she's assigned a lot of work to get through, but doesn't feel she has the support or guidance to do the work.

"Sometimes, if it's not something I feel stimulated by, I feel like taking a nap, honestly," Maggie says. ("But I don't," she adds quickly.) "Or if it's something I don't understand how to do, I feel frustrated. I would rather be given the tools to solve the problem, instead of just being told 'you need to do this by tomorrow.' It's frustrating or it's boring. That's about it."

Maggie understands that she and her schoolmates have been tracked by ability (or perceived ability) since they were young. She's been in class with the same kids for years. "We're always stuck together."

In this small school district, there is just one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. But even so, that doesn't guarantee that every student has the same opportunity to work on assignments that challenge them appropriately. "We're supposed to be the smart class," she says, putting "smart class" in air quotes. ("I don't mean to sound conceited," she says. "It's just the way it is.")

From Maggie's perspective, her teachers have fairly high expectations for her and her classmates. Our data support that observation: Maggie's high school offers some of the best academic opportunities we saw. (It also has among the highest percentages of white and higher-income students in our sample.)

But Maggie isn't convinced that opportunities are the same for classes with the "other students." They may not be asked to work as hard, she says, or things that are extra credit in their

class, for example, might not be considered extra for her, "because [the teacher] expects us to be able to do it in comparison to them."

She also has an inkling that this might not be fair. "I feel like everybody's capable of the same thing. I think they can do it just as much as I can do it."

Choosing The Opportunity Myth

We've seen that most students don't have access to the key resources that lead to better outcomes in school. But we also found that access to those resources varies widely.

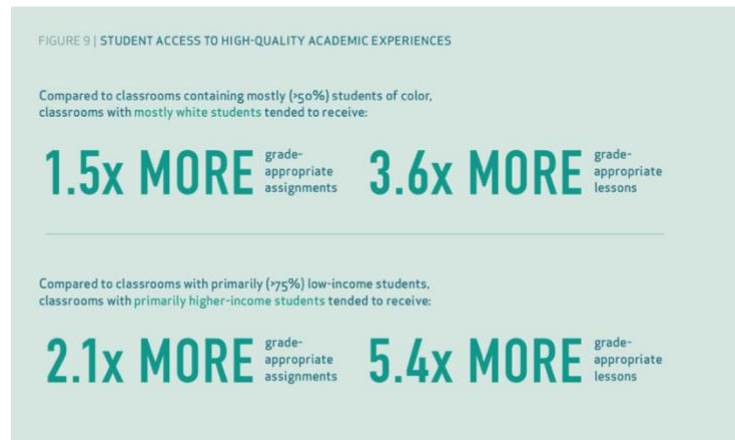
Notably, there was more variation in access to the four key resources between classrooms than between districts or schools. The average classroom in our top quartile for assignment quality, for example, provided students grade-appropriate assignments 49 percent of the time. But within the same school, the average bottom-quartile classroom did so only 13 percent of the time. When given the chance to work on grade-appropriate assignments, students in both kinds of classrooms were equally likely to rise to the bar—but some students received far more of those opportunities than their peers right down the hall. It's what parents and students know but can't control: Which class you land in can make or break a school year. Over time, it can mean the difference between a student being prepared to meet their goals—or not.

To make matters worse, this isn't generally a matter of luck, with a relatively random and equal distribution of good and mediocre school experiences across all student subgroups. Positive experiences are few and far between overall, but they're also distributed inequitably.

While we found that students of all backgrounds were capable of doing grade-appropriate work when given the opportunity—and we did find classrooms that could be considered positive outliers serving students of all backgrounds—some groups of students were consistently given fewer of those opportunities. Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were less likely than their white and higher-income peers to be in classrooms with grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction.

These gaps are not explained by the fact that a disproportionate number of students in those subgroups start the year behind grade level. It's conceivable, for example, that teachers would peg their assignments to their students' prior levels of achievement—giving a fourth-grader an assignment meeting first-grade standards if that student has previously been working at a first-grade level. But that did not prove to be the case. Even when we controlled for prior academic achievement, classrooms with more low-income students, for example, had fewer high-quality academic experiences than others.[3] Among all students who began the year with achievement above the state average, students from low-income families were in classes that typically provided grade-appropriate assignments only 20 percent of the time, compared to 30 percent of the time for students from higher-income families. Both groups of students were outperforming the average student in the state, but those from low-income backgrounds still spent about one month less on grade-appropriate assignments.

In other words, students who seek challenge and have generally excelled at whatever is put in front of them, are less likely to have opportunities that will ready them to meet their academic goals—not because they're not able to do the work, but because they are Black, or Latinx, or come from low-income families. And students who need support to catch up don't have adequate opportunities to do that, either, even though our research shows they benefit more



from those opportunities than their peers who have previously been better served by school and have been higher-achieving as a result.

Across all districts, classrooms with stronger academic offerings had higher proportions of white students and those from higher-income backgrounds. Classrooms with more than 50 percent white students had 53 percent more grade-appropriate assignments, while classrooms serving more than 75 percent students from higher-income backgrounds had more than twice as many *(Figure 9).*

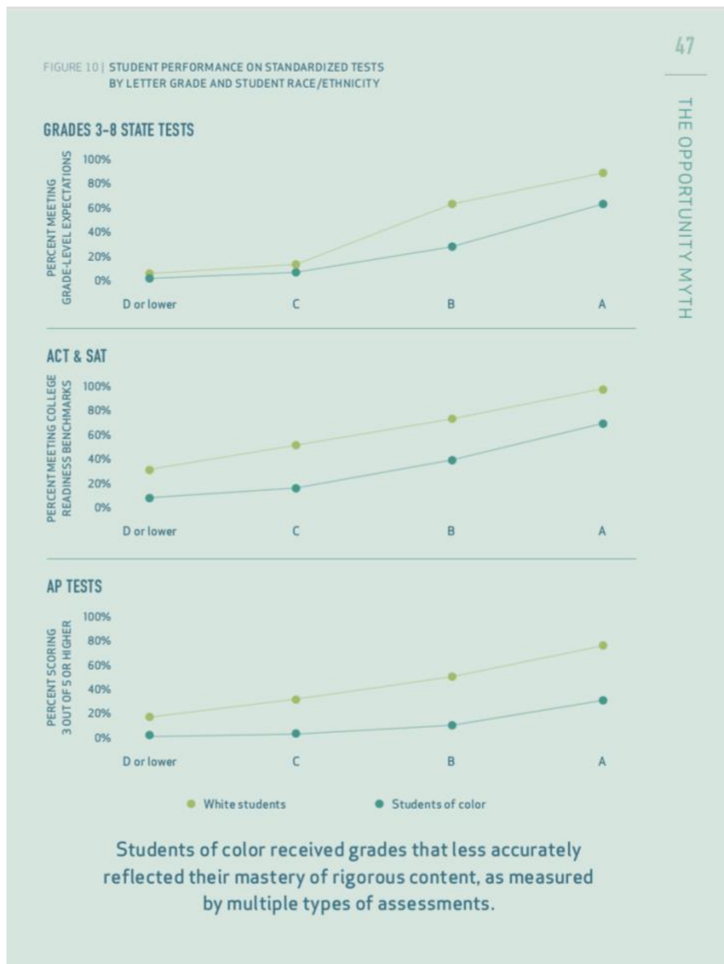
Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were disadvantaged again when it came to opportunities to do the deep thinking in their classrooms. Mostly white classrooms offered about three-and-a-half times as many strong instructional practices, and higher-income classrooms offered more than five times as many. Students in mostly white and higher-income classrooms also reported higher levels of engagement: 23 percent more engaging experiences in mostly white classrooms, and 21 percent more engaging experiences in mostly higher-income classrooms.[4]

Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were not only offered weaker academic experiences, they were also subject to an even more pronounced mismatch between the information they brought home about their performance in school and their actual mastery of critical, grade-appropriate skills.

In four out of five districts we studied, white students receiving Bs were at least 10 percentage points more likely to have mastered grade-level standards on state tests than their classmates of color who also received Bs. In two districts, white students earning As had more than a 25 percentage-point higher rate of grade-level mastery than students of color who also earned As. Across all districts, white students who earned Bs were nearly as likely to have mastered the standards as students of color who earned As. This trend was even more pronounced in courses and tests directly aimed at college: Whereas 78 percent of white students who earned an A in a math or English AP class passed the AP exam, only 30 percent of students of color who earned the same grade did so (*Figure 10*).[5]

Again, this doesn't reflect different abilities; we've already seen that students of all backgrounds are capable of meeting the bar set by grade-level standards, given the opportunity. Instead, it reflects the fact that at every turn, some groups of students get fewer opportunities to even try to reach that bar. Those disparities are rendered largely invisible to students and families because the grades they bring home don't capture an honest picture of their readiness to meet their goals. Opportunity is a scarce resource, and it's not doled out equitably.

More research is needed to fully understand the root causes of these inequities. But in the districts we studied, we saw a pattern related to teachers' expectations of students of color that is worth unpacking: Among classrooms where students were at least 75 percent Black or at least 75 percent Latinx, 66 percent of teachers who were the same race or ethnicity as the majority of



their students had high expectations. In classrooms with similar student demographics but with teachers who were a different race or ethnicity than the majority of the class, just 35 percent of teachers reported high expectations (*Figure 11*). Those results held true when we controlled for students' prior achievement.

As we've seen, expectations influence what happens in the classroom. One student we discuss in "The Opportunity Myth," fifth-grader Raymond, was in a math class where the teacher interrupted her students and offered few opportunities for them to explain their thinking. Most of the students in that classroom, including Raymond, were Black. Their teacher was white. This teacher, like many others, reported support for grade-level standards in theory, but said she did not believe her students could meet such a bar. Her instruction gave them few opportunities to try. Of course, it is impossible to say with certainty what motivated the choices around content and instruction in this or any particular classroom—but the choices matter regardless.

It's also worth further exploring the ways teacher demographics influence engagement. Black and Latinx students who had a teacher of their same racial or ethnic background were 19 percent more likely to feel engaged, compared to students who did not have that experience.

Another student from our report, Isaac, is an example of this. Isaac's engagement in his physics class, and his relationship with the teacher, Mr. Adams, illustrates this. Mr. Adams, like Isaac, is Black. Their shared background is certainly not the only factor that informs their relationship: Some of Isaac's most influential teachers, like his English teacher, are white. But from Isaac's perspective, what these teachers have in common is a deep belief in his potential, which has helped him invest in school. "They always tell me, 'You can do it. You can do it,'" Isaac says.

That opportunity—to have a teacher who does what Mr. Adams does for Isaac—is vital. We found that students who believed their teachers expected them to learn a lot were also more engaged in their lessons. In our sample, a student of color was more likely to have a teacher with high expectations when they had the chance to learn in a classroom led by a teacher who shared their race or ethnicity. But given the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce nationwide, many students will never have that chance.

Many students also miss out on the opportunity to be held to high expectations (and have access to the other key resources) simply because they haven't had those opportunities in the past, and opportunity begets opportunity. Our research affirms Maggie's intuition that students' prior achievement influences the quality of their school experiences moving forward. Across all our partner districts, students who started the year higher-achieving generally had stronger academic opportunities than those who started the year behind. In classrooms with the most grade-appropriate assignments, students started off the year more than five months ahead of those in classrooms with the least grade-appropriate assignments.[6]

It's an entirely logical but unacceptable result of inequitable access to the four key resources. Students who don't have grade-appropriate assignments or strong instruction never even have a chance to show they can do grade-level work, so they're pegged as "low achievers." These students and their families are blamed for being "low-performing," and they're punished with yet more unacceptable experiences. They will have few opportunities to ever catch up.

The students who start each school year with an edge based on their prior experiences and achievement—and who are therefore most likely to get better experiences going forward—are disproportionately white. They come disproportionately from higher-income families, are native English speakers, and are considered general education students. Those who start off the year needing an extra boost—and who are therefore the least likely to get it— are disproportionately students of color, from low-income families, new English speakers, or those with mild to moderate disabilities.

The bottom line is this: Students who have greater access to the four key resources that comprise high-quality academic experiences tend to do better in school. They're likely to rise to a higher bar, even if they start the school year with barriers. And just as the allocation of those resources creates and reinforces opportunity gaps, it also has the power to begin to close those gaps. When students who started the year off behind grade level were given more grade-appropriate assignments, stronger instruction, deeper engagement, and higher expectations, the gap between these students and their higher-achieving peers began to narrow substantially—by more than seven months of learning in a single school year based on better assignments alone.

If that growth remained steady and cumulative, year after year, we can extrapolate that students who started the year behind grade level would catch up to their state average within five years (*Figure 12*).[7] Students of color and those from low-income families would do the same. Their classrooms would not need to be perfect: In the classrooms where we saw the most growth, students worked on grade-appropriate assignments just 52 percent of the

time (compared to 26 percent across all classrooms). Even raising the floor by a reasonable amount can make a meaningful difference.

The "achievement gap," then, isn't inevitable. It's baked into the system, resulting from the decisions adults make, consciously and unconsciously, about which students get what resources. It's a gap of our own design.

Good Intentions Aren't Enough

At TNTP, we believe those of us working in schools have a responsibility to design a better system, to create the programs and structures that disrupt the inequities of the status quo. There is an urgent need to authentically engage students and families in creating paths that honor the aspirations, talents, and needs of each student.

But the hard truth is that we have also seen a lot of "innovation" that continues to fall short of our basic promise to students. All too often, "meeting kids where they are" becomes an excuse for holding persistently low expectations, and ineffective "differentiation" means some students get less and never have the chance to catch up.

No matter what the tagline, any curriculum, program, or model that does not allow students consistent opportunities to engage with grade-appropriate assignments, to do the thinking in their lessons, and to engage deeply with what they are learning is effectively perpetuating the opportunity myth. Good intentions aside, if we aren't giving all students those opportunities regularly, we are systematically denying them the chance to even try to master the skills they need to reach their goals.

Conclusion: What Would It Take to Make Kids' School Opportunities More Than a Myth?

Students are planning their lives around the promises we attach to the diplomas they work so hard to earn. And yet we know that for far too many of them, those diplomas will let them down. The opportunity myth promises that success in school is the first step on the path to success in life, but the system we've built undermines that promise at every turn.

That system reinforces the flip side of the opportunity myth, too: the pernicious assumption that if students fail, it's because they didn't take the chance they'd been offered. It is the result of their abilities, their race, their socioeconomic background, or their choices. For those of us working in school systems, the opportunity myth makes life comfortable. It allows us to operate in good faith to help kids succeed, while accepting the false belief that for many of them, there's nothing more we can do.

Our research lays that all bare. It shows that while many students do have barriers to overcome to succeed in school, some of the biggest barriers are created by decisions very much within our control: whether students get the opportunity to work on grade-appropriate assignments, or are systematically assigned work that is appropriate for kids several years younger; whether they have teachers who ask them to find the answers to challenging problems, or who think it's acceptable to assign them the task of copying answers; whether adults ask students and parents about their goals, or assume that because they're Latinx or Black or don't have a lot of money, college is probably unrealistic. And then, as a field, we've covered up the racist, classist, and just plain unfair choices we've made, by telling parents and students—

particularly students of color—that they are doing fine, when all the evidence from their classroom work and their exam scores suggests that they are not.

We can start by acknowledging and understanding the unacceptable experiences we've created for millions of students: three-quarters of the school year or more wasted in classes that are boring, too easy, or irrelevant to their life goals; worse experiences for students who need better ones the most; the tacit belief that some students are less capable and less deserving than others.

We can own up to our role in perpetuating these problems—because if you're reading this and you work in education in any capacity, you bear some of the responsibility. That includes teachers, whose daily choices influence students' outcomes in the most visible ways, but it includes others as well. Teachers often find themselves forced to implement poor choices made by school leaders, superintendents, legislators, schools of education, textbook companies, and others; or asked to implement better decisions without adequate training and support.

It certainly includes us at TNTP. These conclusions have been painful because we've been part of the problem. For many years, for example, we trained new teachers to lead compliant students through a standard curriculum, using standard instructional techniques, and believed that if they did so, students would succeed at high levels. We are actively working to shift our approach to ensure that all students—and particularly those who have been historically under-served, including in our own work—get the resources we write about that they need to succeed.

Most importantly, we can listen to students and learn from their experiences. Across all five districts we studied, we saw a promising trend: When we make different choices about how resources are allocated—when all kids get access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations, but particularly when students who start the year behind receive these resources—achievement gaps shrink. They shrink substantially enough that if we extrapolate the results we saw in one year over five years, achievement gaps would disappear, given more equitable access to the four key resources. If we made different choices, millions of students with big goals for themselves, most of whom are already doing what they're asked in school, would be prepared to live the lives they aspire to.

End Notes

[1] TNTP, "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It," 2018, https://tntp.org/publications/view/student-experiences/the-opportunity-myth.

[2] TNTP, "The Opportunity Myth."

[3] We ran a series of linear regression models predicting the typical quality of assignments and lessons provided to classrooms based on their demographic characteristics as well as a host of other controls, including prior achievement. Notably, there was still a statistically significant negative relationship between the percent of students from low-income families in a class and the average quality of assignments, even after controlling for prior achievement ($p<0.01$). See the Technical Appendix in the full-length report for our model specifications and Table A.13 in the Appendix for full model results.

[4] For classes where at least 50% of the students were students of color, the typical percent of time spent with grade-appropriate assignments, with strong lessons, and engaged were respectively 23%, 9%, and 50%, while for classes with mostly white students, these values were 34%, 33%, and 62%. For classes where at least 75% of students were from low-income families, these values were respectively 20%, 8%, and 52%, compared to 44%, 41%, and 63% for classes where at least 75% of students were not from low-income families. Only classrooms that contained enough data to meet our inclusion rules were included; see the Technical Appendix for more details on these rules and further analysis comparing access to these key resources by student characteristics.

[5] Some of the racial/ethnic disparities in test outcomes between students are likely due to "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is an experimentally established phenomenon that represents the negative effect on performance when students feel like they must perform well or risk confirming negative intellectual stereotypes. For example, female students have been stereotyped to be less intellectually strong in math, and thus female students' math test performance likely underestimates their true abilities because the anxiety of having to disprove this negative stereotype lowers their performance on tests. This is particularly true when the student knows the test will be used for comparative purposes, as is the case in state standardized tests, ACT and SAT tests, and AP tests. Research has shown that stereotype threat can underestimate Black and Latinx students' total SAT math and reading scores by about 40 points. Though this is a large effect, across our participating districts the difference between students of color and white students with the same course grade was about 100 points on both the SAT math and reading components. Thus, while stereotype threat plays a role in our findings, it likely does not explain them entirely. For a thorough understanding of stereotype threat, see Steele, C. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi: And other clues to how stereotypes affect us*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. See also Logel, C. R., Walton, G. M., Spencer, S. J., Peach, J., & Mark, Z.

P. (2012). Unleashing latent ability: Implications of stereotype threat for college admissions. *Educational Psychologist*, 47(1), 42-50. https:// doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011 .611368

[6] Classrooms with the most grade- appropriate assignments were defined as those classrooms whose average assignment score ranked in the top quartile; classrooms with the least grade-appropriate assignments were those who ranked in the bottom quartile.

[7] Each panel represents all students in participating classrooms with a prior-year test result in the same subject. Starting Point represents the average test score, standardized against all students in the state, in a school year prior to the year in which the study took place (e.g., the 2015-2016 school year). Year 1 represents the average standardized test score at the end of the school year during our study (i.e., 2016-2017). Years 2 - 5 represent how these averages would change if the rate of growth (or decline) seen from Starting Point to Year 1 continued indefinitely at the same rate. To reduce the effect of outliers, students beginning more than 2.5 standard deviations away from the state mean were dropped (3% of all students). “Students beginning the year substantially behind grade level” are students whose starting point test score was at least 0.5 standard deviations below the state average. See the Technical Appendix for more details on how we standardized test scores and how we identified students’ prior achievement.

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TNTP. "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It." *TNTP,* 2018. https://tntp.org/publications/view/student-experiences/the-opportunity-myth.

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About TNTP

TNTP's mission is to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. We know that student learning starts with great teachers—but doesn't end there. We work at every level of the public school system to create engaging classrooms, focused schools, and strategic school systems and states.

School systems hire TNTP to solve their unique problems. This encourages TNTP to provide valuable, cost-effective services, and literally "invests" our clients in the success of the partnerships. As a nonprofit, we also receive some philanthropic support, which funds policy research and new service development.