

# TROUBLING TRENDS, PROMISING OPPORTUNITIES

*Moving Forward with  
a Focus on Equity*



***The disparities in achievement on MCAS, NAEP, and other student outcome measures are no accident. They are the result of choices made on Beacon Hill, in district offices, and in school buildings across the state.***

***We must start making different choices.***

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# Troubling Trends, Promising Opportunities

## *Moving Forward with a Focus on Equity*

This fall saw the release of two sets of data that highlight, once again, how deeply we shortchange students from economically disadvantaged families and students of color in Massachusetts—and the consequences of these inequities for the future of our young people, their families and communities, and our state as a whole.

First, 2019 MCAS results showed that our elementary and middle school students continue to lack access to the resources, educational experiences, and support they need to reach grade-level expectations, with little progress in sight. At the high school level, a more rigorous assessment revealed far bigger disparities in student preparation for college and career readiness than were visible on the test's predecessor.

More recently, the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that Massachusetts is losing ground in every grade and subject tested—with especially large declines for some of our most underserved student populations. In fact, while the state has retained its top ranking for students overall, our rankings for Latinx eighth-graders have slipped to 21st in the nation in math and 28th in reading.

As the Commonwealth stands poised to make the biggest new investment in education in decades

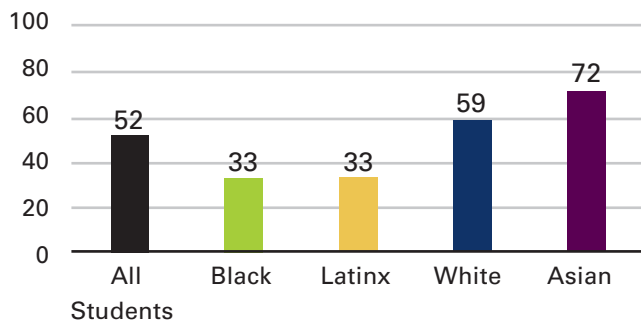
under the just-passed Student Opportunity Act, these data—alongside the many disparities in opportunity and outcomes highlighted in the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership's [Number 1 for Some](#) report—reaffirm the imperative for a laser-sharp focus on equity in implementing the act's provisions. With \$2.2 billion in new investments in our districts and schools and clear requirements that districts use this funding to address disparities in student achievement, this landmark piece of legislation lays the groundwork for major improvements in learning experiences and outcomes for historically underserved students. As with any legislation, however, the Student Opportunity Act's ultimate impact will depend on the quality of implementation. In this brief, we highlight key trends for historically underserved students in Massachusetts, and lay out a set of ideas for how education leaders can seize this once-in-a-generation moment.

## MCAS RESULTS: LARGE DISPARITIES, LITTLE PROGRESS IN SIGHT

MCAS results from 2019 show that only about half of elementary and middle schoolers in our state scored on grade level in English language arts and math last year. But for historically underserved students—students of color, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities—the situation is far more

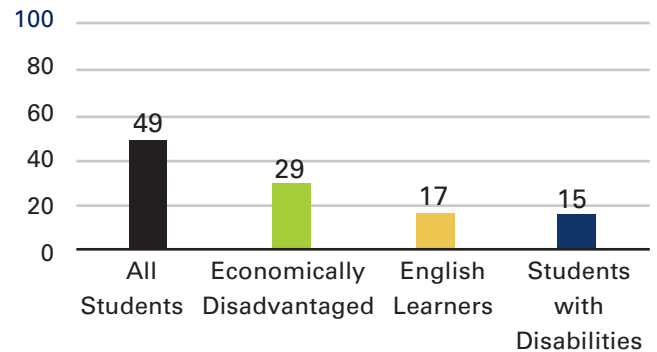
dire. In fact, 2019 results show that our schools are getting only *a third* of Black, Latinx, and economically disadvantaged elementary and middle schoolers to grade level in English language arts (ELA), and only 28% to 29% in math. The numbers for English learners and students with disabilities are even lower, with fewer than 1 in 5 meeting grade-level expectations (Figures 1 and 2). What’s more, in most grades, student outcomes have barely budged since 2017 (Figure 3).

**Figure 1.**  
Percentage of Third- to Eighth-Graders on Grade Level in English Language Arts, 2019 MCAS



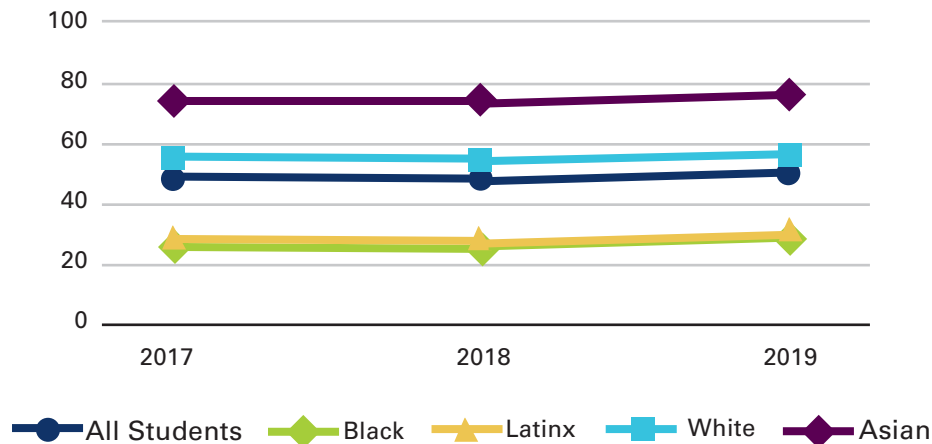
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019,” <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>.

**Figure 2.**  
Percentage of Third- to Eighth-Graders on Grade Level in Math, 2019 MCAS



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019,” <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>.

**Figure 3.**  
Percentage of Third- to Eighth-Graders on Grade Level in Math, 2017-2019 MCAS

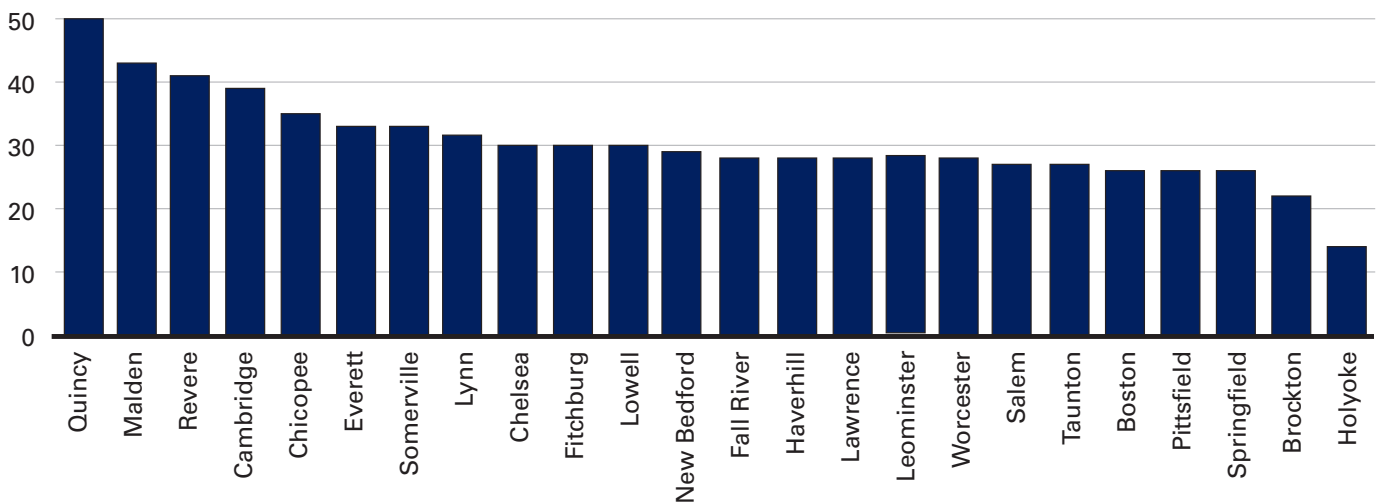


Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2017- 2019,” <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>.

All students can achieve at high levels when they have access to the learning experiences and support they need to succeed. Differences in MCAS results for similar groups of students across districts show that some of our districts are meeting students' academic needs far better than others. Quincy Public

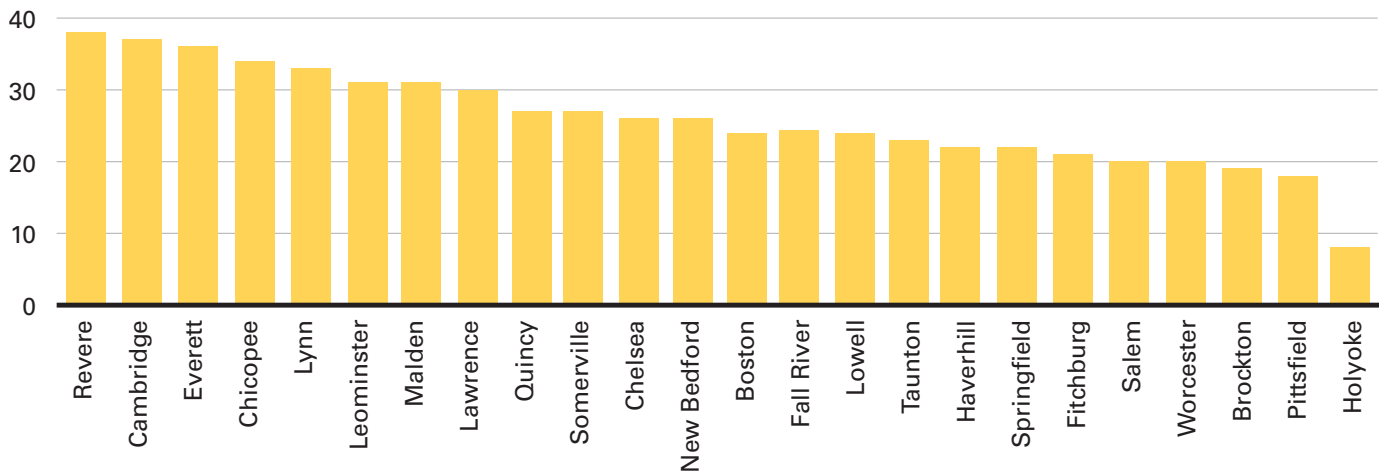
Schools, for example, got 50% of its economically disadvantaged students to grade level in English language arts, while Brockton did the same for only 22% (Figure 4). And while Revere got 38% of its Latinx students to grade level in math, Worcester did the same for just 20% (Figure 5).

**Figure 4.** Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on MCAS, 2019 ELA (Grades Three to Eight), by Urban District



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>. Where results for two or more districts are the same, districts appear in alphabetical order.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of Latinx 3-8th Graders on Grade Level in Math by Urban District, 2019 MCAS



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>. Where results for two or more districts are the same, districts appear in alphabetical order.

At the high school level, Massachusetts 10th-graders took the Next Generation MCAS for the first time. Unlike its predecessor, the new assessment reflects the knowledge and skills students need to be prepared for college or the workforce. The change is an important step forward in determining whether students are getting the preparation they need for success after high school.

Given that the new assessment is harder, it's not surprising that fewer students scored at the "meeting expectations" or "proficient" levels. But in addition to showing that fewer students are prepared for college and careers than previously thought, the assessment also revealed larger disparities in preparation.

The old MCAS gave the false impression that most students were getting the preparation they needed. In 2018, for example, 91% of all students had been considered proficient in English language arts, including 85% of Black students and 78% of Latinx students. The new assessment, however, reveals that only 38% of Black students and 37% of Latinx students are getting the preparation they need for college and careers—about half the rates for their

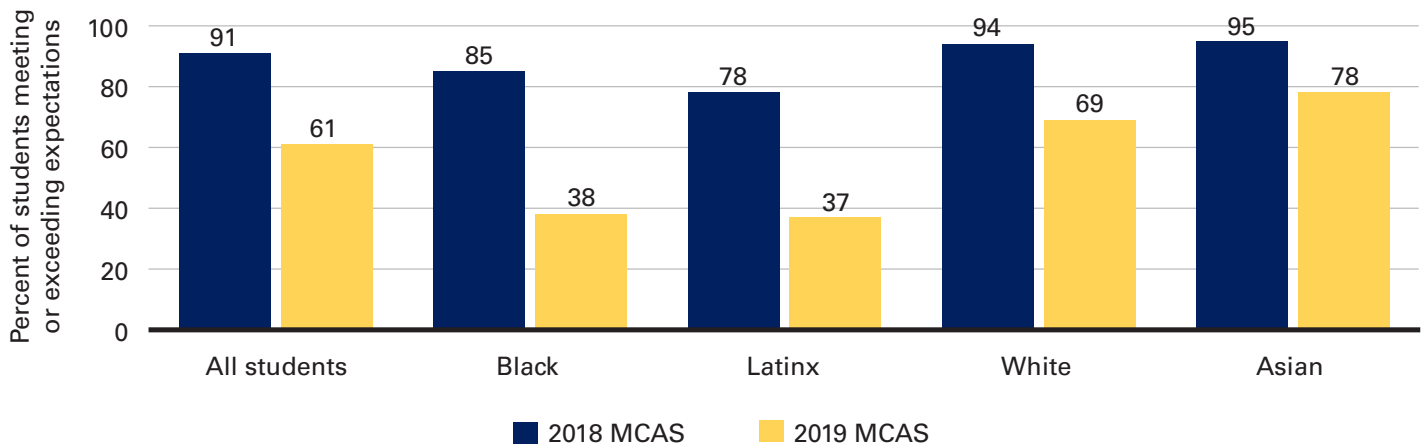
White and Asian peers (Figure 6). Similarly, in math, only 35% of economically disadvantaged students are prepared to meet state expectations, compared with nearly 70% of their higher income counterparts (Figure 7).

### NAEP: TROUBLING TRENDS FOR THE STATE AS A WHOLE AND FOR INDIVIDUAL GROUPS OF STUDENTS

Unlike the MCAS, which changed in 2017, the National Assessment of Educational Progress allows us to look at student outcomes over time and to compare them to other states. In fact, NAEP performance is one of the indicators that earned Massachusetts its reputation as a leader in education. This year, however, the results show troubling trends both for the state as a whole and for individual groups of students.

Although Massachusetts for the most part held on to its top rankings, since 2017 our state's results have declined faster than national averages in every

**Figure 6.** 2018 MCAS vs. 2019 Next Generation MCAS Results: 10th Grade English Language Arts (by Race/Ethnicity)



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "MCAS Achievement Results, 2018," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx>.

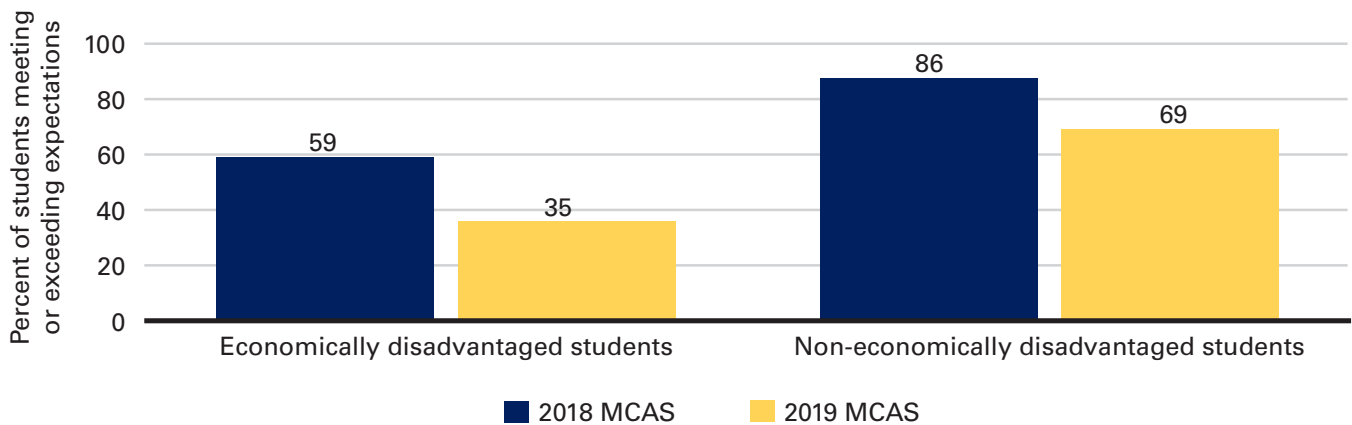


subject and grade tested on NAEP, falling to levels not seen in over a decade. Our fourth-graders today are performing at about the same level as they were in 2005 (Figures 8 and 9).

Trends for historically underserved students are even more worrying. In both eighth-grade reading and math, results for Latinx students fell at two

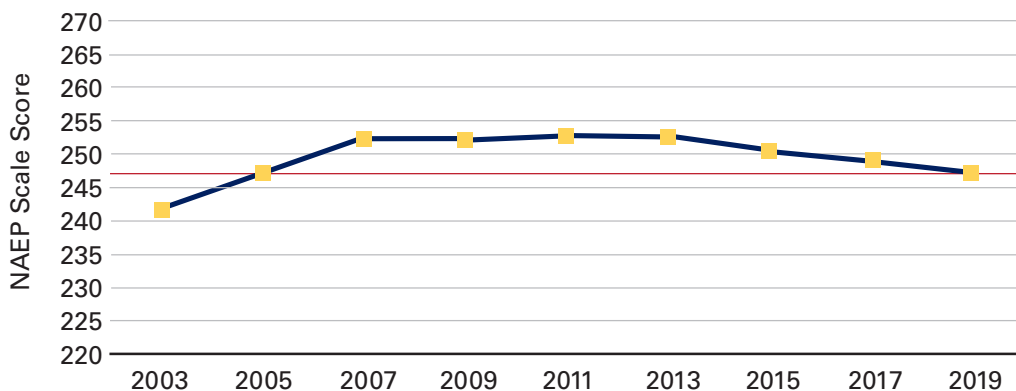
or more times the rate for their White peers since 2017. In fact, while Massachusetts again ranks first for students overall in eighth-grade math and reading, the Commonwealth now ranks 21st and 28th, respectively, for Latinx students (Figure 10). In three of the four subjects and grades tested on NAEP, results for economically disadvantaged students declined more than for their higher income

**Figure 7.**  
2018 MCAS vs. 2019 Next Generation MCAS Results: 10th Grade Math (by Family Income)



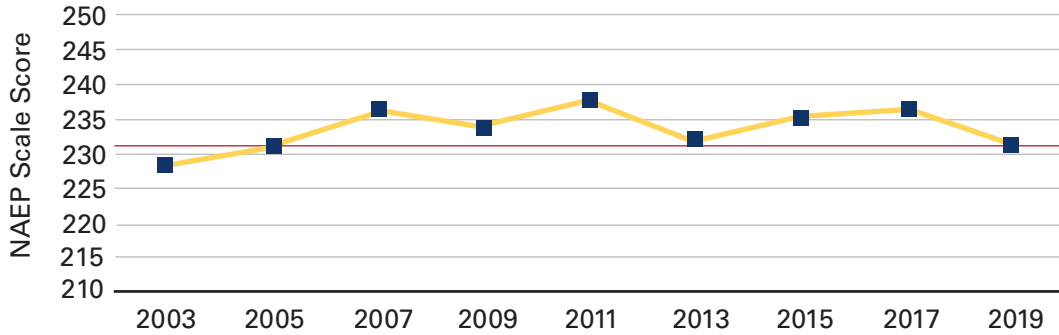
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, 2019," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "MCAS Achievement Results, 2018," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx>.

**Figure 8.**  
Massachusetts' 2003-2019 NAEP Results: 4th Grade Math



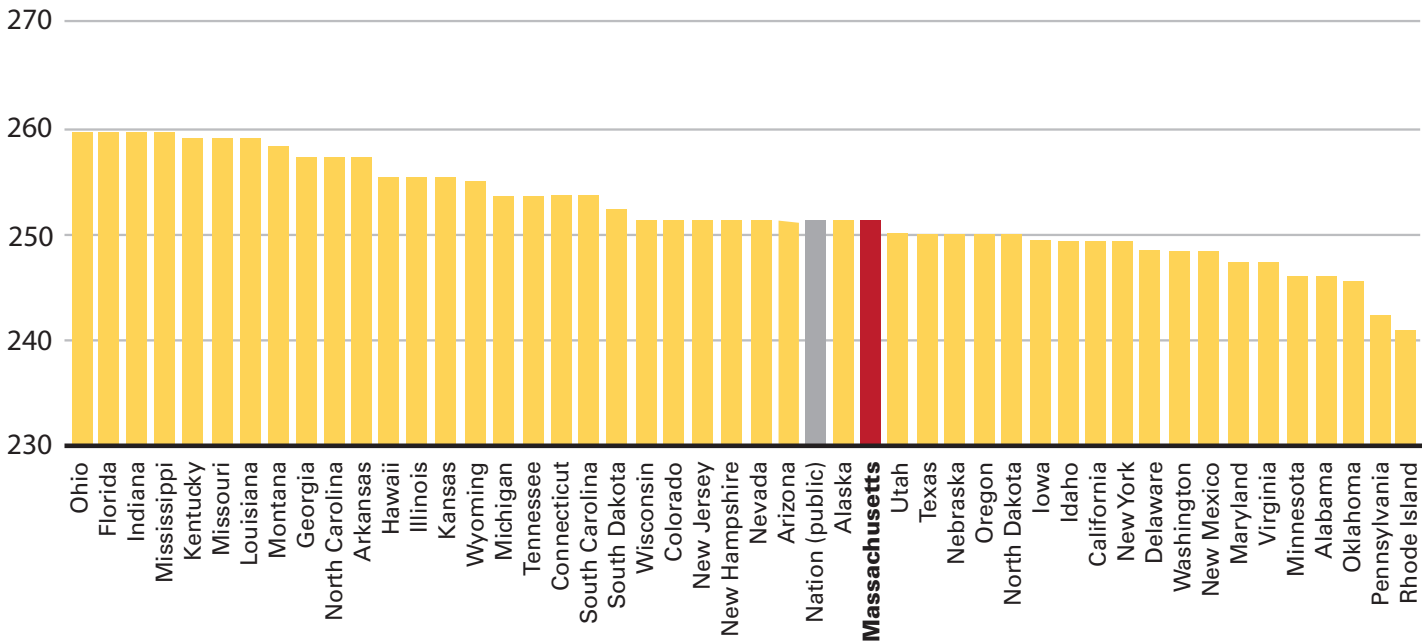
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Data Explorer," 2019, available at: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing>.

**Figure 9.**  
**Massachusetts' 2003-2019 NAEP Scale Scores: 4th Grade Reading**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Data Explorer," 2019, available at: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing>.

**Figure 10.**  
**2019 NAEP Results (in Scale Scores) for Latinx Students by State: Eighth-Grade Reading**



Note: Maine, Vermont and West Virginia are not included because they have too few Latinx students to enable score reporting.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Data Explorer," 2019, available at: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing>. Rankings are based on unrounded scale scores.

peers—further evidence that instead of narrowing disparities in student outcomes, our education system is allowing them to widen.

## NOT JUST NUMBERS ON A PAGE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE DISPARITIES

The personal, economic, and civic consequences of educational preparation—or lack thereof—are well documented. In Massachusetts, a high school dropout stands to earn about \$26,000 per year; a college graduate stands to earn over \$60,000.<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts cities with lower percentages of adults with bachelor’s degrees have higher unemployment rates.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, voting and other forms of civic engagement are directly correlated with education as well.<sup>3</sup>

These relationships matter not just for individual students but for the Commonwealth’s future. Massachusetts’ population is becoming more and more diverse. Twenty-five years ago, students of color made up about 20% of the student body; today, they make up more than 40% of the state’s students.<sup>4</sup> Massachusetts is one of just six states that can attribute all of its population growth between 2000 and 2010 to the increase in its Latinx population, and that growth is expected to continue.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, it’s no exaggeration to say that the future of the commonwealth rests on how we serve our state’s economically disadvantaged students and students of color today.

## A ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION OPPORTUNITY TO TURN THESE PATTERNS AROUND

The disparities in achievement on MCAS, NAEP, and other student outcome measures are no accident. They are the result of years of providing our students of color, students from economically disadvantaged families, English learners, and students with disabilities less of every kind of resource that matters for student success — from funding to early

## ABOUT THE STUDENT OPPORTUNITY ACT

The Student Opportunity Act is a new Massachusetts law that seeks to remedy inequities in opportunity and achievement in the state’s schools. The law commits to increasing state spending on Pre-K-12 education by an estimated \$2.2 billion over the next seven years. It directs most of that funding to the highest-need districts — those with the largest percentages of economically disadvantaged students and English learners and the least property wealth.

The law also requires all districts in the state to take steps to address disparities in opportunity and achievement. District leaders have to work with their local community — families, students, educators, and other community stakeholders — to develop three-year plans for how they will improve learning experiences and outcomes for historically underserved students. In these plans, which will be updated every year, district leaders have to specify the following:

- the evidence-based strategies they will implement
- how they will measure progress, including specific goals and improvement targets for each student group

Districts have to submit their first three-year plans to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education by April 1, 2020.

Importantly, not every district will receive a large amount of new funding, especially not right away. However, all districts should take this opportunity to reexamine how they use their resources and to see how they can better leverage them to improve opportunity and achievement for underserved students.



education, to strong and diverse educators and rigorous learning experiences, to culturally affirming and inclusive learning environments. They are the result of choices made on Beacon Hill, in district offices, and in school buildings across the state.

We must start making different choices. As state and local education leaders work to implement the Student Opportunity Act, we urge them to keep the interests of historically underserved students at the center. Specifically, we recommend that education leaders do the following:

- 1. Demonstrate that resources actually reach the students they are meant to support.**
- 2. Meaningfully engage with historically underserved families and communities in developing and implementing Student Opportunity Act plans.**
- 3. Invest in improvement strategies that research and evidence show work for students.**
- 4. Ensure all students have mirrors and windows**—opportunities to see themselves reflected in their schools and classrooms, as well as to learn about the experiences of others.



- 5. Go beyond the averages** to track and report on progress for each group of students.

Below we describe each of these recommendations in more detail.

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## **1. Demonstrate that resources actually reach the students they are meant to support.**

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Even before the Student Opportunity Act, Massachusetts' school funding formula called for spending about \$4,000 more per economically disadvantaged student, and about \$2,000 more per English learner, than per the average student. But data shows that these resources don't always reach the students for whom they are intended. One recent [analysis](#), for example, found that many districts spend roughly the same—and sometimes less—in schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students.<sup>6</sup>

Under the Student Opportunity Act, funding to support economically disadvantaged students will increase substantially, especially in districts with the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Funding for English learners will increase as well. It is critical that new funding actually reaches these students. In the plans and subsequent reporting required by the Student Opportunity Act, district leaders should do the following:

- Demonstrate that schools serving more economically disadvantaged students and English learners are receiving proportionately more funding.
- Document how this funding translates into additional resources and support for students in each school.

*Too often, decisions about improvement strategies and resource allocations are made behind closed doors, without including the voices of the people most affected by them.*

- Demonstrate that any district-wide programs (such as acceleration academies or summer learning initiatives) are targeted to historically underserved students.

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## 2. Meaningfully engage with historically underserved families and communities in developing and implementing Student Opportunity Act plans.

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Too often, decisions about improvement strategies and resource allocations are made behind closed doors, without including the voices of the people most affected by them: students and their families — and sometimes even teachers and school administrators. Families of historically underserved students are especially likely to be left out of the decision-making process.

The Student Opportunity Act prompts districts to change that. Under the law, district leaders must develop plans for how they will use their new resources with input from families, including special education and English learner parent advisory councils, and community stakeholders. District leaders should seize this moment and engage in meaningful collaboration and communication with families and community partners. To do so, they should do the following:

- **Target outreach to historically underserved families and communities.** District leaders should consider partnering with community-based organizations that work with historically underserved students and their families to facilitate focus groups, forums, site councils, and working groups. Because these organizations have already established a level of trust with their constituents, they may be better positioned to gather community input.
- **Remove as many barriers to participation as possible.** District leaders should consider holding meetings at a variety of times, including outside traditional work hours; providing food and childcare services; offering stipends and transportation reimbursement; and making sure all materials are translated into the most common languages spoken in the district and that qualified interpreters are available on hand.
- **Engage early and often.** District leaders should engage with stakeholders at least three times: in the beginning of the planning process, to understand their concerns; in the middle, to gather feedback on preliminary decisions; and toward the end, when the plan is close to final. District leaders should then regularly update stakeholders on plan implementation and seek feedback on potential modifications.
- **Strengthen the role of school site councils.** School site councils, which are made up of parents, teachers, and community members, are supposed to play an important oversight and management

role in their schools. But a recent survey shows that these councils currently are deeply underutilized. Fewer than 1 in 3 school site council members reported having a role in principal selection or budget decisions, and even fewer were involved with teacher hiring or curricular choices.<sup>7</sup> State and district leaders should ensure that school site councils play a role in these important decisions and that their membership reflects the demographics of the school community.

- **Provide families and community stakeholders with the information they need to engage in key district decisions.** Information should include data on key indicators of student outcomes and opportunity to learn for each school and district-wide, as well as information on key trade-offs involved in a particular decision. For example, what are the benefits and downsides of selecting a particular curriculum? What are the pros and cons of the different ways the district could support students who are struggling academically?

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### 3. Invest in improvement strategies that research and evidence show work for students.

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Under the Student Opportunity Act, many districts will receive millions of dollars in additional state and local funding to support students from economically disadvantaged families, English learners, and students with disabilities. District leaders must ensure—and

demonstrate—that these dollars are invested in ways that research and evidence show will improve student learning experiences and outcomes. Improvement strategies will, of course, vary from district to district depending on student needs and stakeholder feedback, but could include the following:

- ★ **Expand access to high-quality early education programs** for students in historically underserved groups, in partnership with community-based organizations, and align early education curricula with those of elementary grades to maximize long-term benefits for students.<sup>8</sup>
- ★ **Build a strong and diverse principal pipeline**, including rigorous standards for the knowledge and skills principals need to lead schools that serve all students, high-quality preparation for aspiring leaders; data-informed hiring; and strong support structures, especially for new principals.<sup>9</sup>
- ★ **Increase teacher diversity**<sup>10</sup> by investing in strategies such as grow-your-own programs,<sup>11</sup> career pathways for paraprofessionals<sup>12</sup> and district-university partnerships. District leaders should place special emphasis on hiring linguistically diverse teachers who can help English learners master academic content while learning the English language.
- ★ **Hire additional school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists**<sup>13</sup> to help address students' mental health and academic needs, and

***District leaders must ensure—and demonstrate—that these dollars are invested in ways that research and evidence show will improve student learning experiences and outcomes.***



establish district-level fast-response teams that can help connect students who are experiencing significant challenges outside of school (such as homelessness, medical issues, or food insecurity) with necessary services.

- ★ **Shift from exclusionary discipline to restorative approaches**, and provide teachers, counselors, and other school staff with the professional development and coaching they need to implement these changes.<sup>14</sup>
- ★ **Offer professional development and coaching on research-based reading instruction** to elementary school teachers<sup>15</sup> and on supporting struggling adolescent readers for middle and high school teachers.<sup>16</sup>
- ★ **Purchase evidence-based, culturally relevant curricular materials** aligned to state standards and provide teachers with professional development and coaching to support their implementation.<sup>17</sup>
- ★ **Increase the number and variety of rigorous courses offered**<sup>18</sup> (such as Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate, lab and computer science, early college, or high-quality vocational programs), minimize barriers to entry to these classes, and make available the supports (such as acceleration academies) needed for all students to succeed.<sup>19</sup>
- ★ **Give all ninth-graders and their families information about how to prepare for college or other postsecondary options**, including required classes, application processes, and financial aid options, prioritizing students who would be first in their family to go to college.<sup>20</sup>



- ★ **Strategically partner with after-school and summer learning programs** to maximize curricular alignment and provide struggling students with support and enrichment.<sup>21</sup>
- ★ **Establish dual language education programs** that help English learners master academic content while learning the English language, allow monolingual English speakers to gain a second language,<sup>22</sup> and increase opportunity for all students to earn the Seal of Biliteracy upon graduation.
- ★ **Extend the school day to create more paid time for teacher collaboration and common planning**, and offer teachers and school leaders training on how to use that time.<sup>22</sup>

*State, district, and school leaders must work together to build a strong pipeline of teachers of color and foster school climates supportive of educators of color to improve retention rates.*

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#### 4. Ensure all students have mirrors and windows.<sup>23</sup>

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Research consistently shows that students' academic and social-emotional development requires both mirrors and windows—opportunities to see themselves reflected in their schools, classrooms, and curricula, as well as to learn about the experiences of others.<sup>24</sup> But in today's education system, which tends to overemphasize the experiences and accomplishments of White people while often ignoring those of people of color, students of color and English learners encounter windows far more frequently than mirrors, while the trend for White students is just the opposite. Turning these patterns around is important not only for students' individual success and development, but for the future of the Commonwealth.

Education leaders should do the following:

- **Invest in culturally relevant curricular materials—and support teachers in using them.** The books students read and the historical figures and events they study offer an important opportunity to provide both mirrors and windows. Education leaders should ensure that, in addition to being rigorous and aligned with state standards, curricular materials reflect the diversity of Massachusetts' students. They should also offer educators high-quality

coaching and professional development that prepares them to engage with this material effectively.

- **Recruit and retain more educators of color.** People of color make up just 8% of Massachusetts' teacher workforce, compared with 40% of students.<sup>25</sup> While research shows that students of color who have at least one same-race teacher are more likely to graduate high school and go on to college, thousands of Black and Latinx students in our state attend schools—and in some cases, districts—that don't have a single teacher who looks like them. State, district, and school leaders must work together to build a strong pipeline of teachers of color and foster school climates supportive of educators of color to improve retention rates.
- **Hire/ensure families have access to qualified interpreters.** In many of our districts and schools, non-English-speaking families do not have access to qualified interpreters, limiting their ability to receive critical information about and to advocate on behalf of their children. In addition to hindering family engagement, this lack of qualified interpreters also sends a message to both families and their children that non-English-speaking individuals are not welcome inside the school building. Districts should hire or contract with qualified interpreters to ensure that linguistically diverse families are able to participate fully in their children's education.

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## 5. Go beyond the averages.

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As our *Number 1 for Some* report and the data presented in this report demonstrate, averages often hide big disparities in opportunity and achievement. Improving learning experiences and outcomes for historically underserved students will require looking beyond the averages and monitoring progress for each student group. State and district leaders should do the following:

- **Set numeric, time-bound goals for improving learning experiences and outcomes for each student group**, including economically disadvantaged students, students from each major racial/ethnic group, current, former and ever English learners, respectively, and students with disabilities. Goals should require schools and districts to make more progress for groups that are currently underserved and should clearly lead to eliminating disparities in opportunity and achievement.
- **Monitor progress for each student group on each indicator.** For example, if district and school leaders decide to reduce barriers to AP classes, they should monitor how this change affects enrollment rates for students overall, as well as for each group of students. If, for example, the shift in policy results in increased enrollment for higher income students but not for their economically disadvantaged peers, district and school leaders will need to take additional steps to address this disparity.
- **Make information on how well schools and districts are performing easily accessible for families.** Today, it is far too challenging for the average Massachusetts parent or resident to understand how well districts and schools are serving each group of students. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should leverage the data it already collects, as well as the



college/career readiness data it is required to collect under the Student Opportunity Act, to provide the following:

- » an easy way of comparing per-pupil expenditures (including actual personnel salaries) between schools serving more students with higher needs and those serving fewer such students within the same district
- » an easy way of comparing data on learning experiences and outcomes (including discipline rates, chronic absenteeism rates, access to and success in rigorous courses, MCAS results, and graduation rates) by student group within each district and school
- » a transparent method of measuring and reporting how well districts and schools are serving each group of students — including whether they are meeting the goals and progress targets required under the Student Opportunity Act

There is no excellence without equity. Massachusetts has a unique opportunity in coming years to not only solidify its top overall ranking but also to shift from being number 1 for *some* to number 1 for *all*. It's up to all of us to work together to seize that opportunity. Our students cannot afford anything less.



## ENDNOTES

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