



Right Direction. Miles to Go:

Closing the Widening Achievement Gaps
in Washington State



The Education Trust

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NOVEMBER 2020

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, WASHINGTON HAS EXPERIENCED SIGNIFICANT JOB GROWTH — so much so that Washington had the fastest growing economy in 2018.¹ In acknowledgement of the pressing need to invest in education to maintain the state’s growing economy and ensure student success, Washington took several promising steps to tackle disparities in opportunity and achievement, including the following:

- Investing \$110 million in early childhood education
- Ensuring that students who meet standards on state-level exams are automatically placed into advanced courses
- Prohibiting districts from imposing long-term suspensions and expulsions as a form of discretionary discipline
- Expanding dual-language education
- Investing \$250,000 in a pilot program that supports five school districts to create early warning systems that ensure ninth grade students are on track to graduate

While these policy changes are something to celebrate, Washington hasn’t done enough to ensure that all of its students are prepared to succeed in college and career. This is especially true for the state’s historically marginalized communities. Washington is actually faring much worse for historically underserved students than many other states. The reality is that Black students, Latino students, Native students, and students from low-income backgrounds have dramatically different experiences in Washington’s schools than their White and higher income peers — and these disparities have real consequences for students.

Washington has a moral and economic imperative to take bold and targeted action to address the growing disparities in Washington’s education system. These disparities in achievement and opportunity are a direct result of systems that continue to underserve all of Washington’s students,

especially Washington’s students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. The state has taken steps in the right direction in recent years, but Washington still has work to do to ensure all of the state’s students have the foundation they need to thrive in and beyond high school.

Taking targeted action is even more pressing now because, in recent years, Washington has become more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.² In just the past five years, the population of students of color in Washington has grown 18%,³ and in the past 10 years, the population of English learners has grown by 22%.⁴ The state’s rapid economic growth and growing population of students of color makes it all the more imperative that Washington take urgent and targeted action to lay a strong foundation in the P-12 years that prepares all students, especially historically marginalized populations, for success. These students’ future — and the future of the state — depends on it.

WASHINGTON IS NOT PREPARING ENOUGH STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED STUDENTS, TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL.

Today, more than 9 in 10 of Washington’s fastest growing jobs require a postsecondary credential.⁵ Because the future of Washington’s students and economy are on the line, the disparities in Washington’s schools require drastic and rapid change. The state, and the students and families who depend on the state’s education system, cannot afford to wait for change; solutions are needed now.

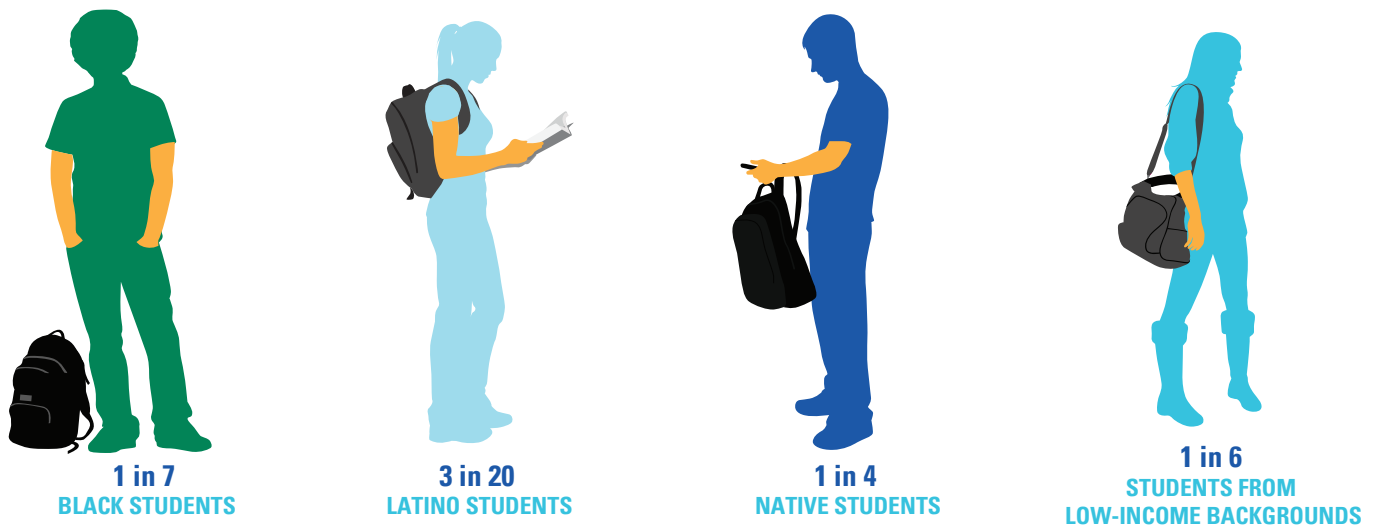
The legislature recently passed the Workforce Education Investment Act, which aims to

increase college affordability and access. While this is an important step, many of Washington’s high schoolers do not graduate high school. In 2019, 1 in 9 students did not graduate.⁶ Washington is doing even worse for its students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. One in 7 Black students, 3 in 20 Latino students, 1 in 4 Native students, and 1 in 6 students from low-income backgrounds did not graduate high school (**Figure 1**).

It’s not just that Washington isn’t supporting students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to graduate. It’s also that Washington is performing much worse than other states. Washington ranks 41nd and 43rd

MANY OF WASHINGTON’S HIGH SCHOOLERS DO NOT GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL. IN 2019, 1 IN 9 STUDENTS DID NOT GRADUATE. WASHINGTON IS DOING EVEN WORSE FOR ITS STUDENTS OF COLOR AND STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS.

FIGURE 1: Number of Students Who Did Not Graduate in Washington's Class of 2019



Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Graduation by Student Demographics" 2019

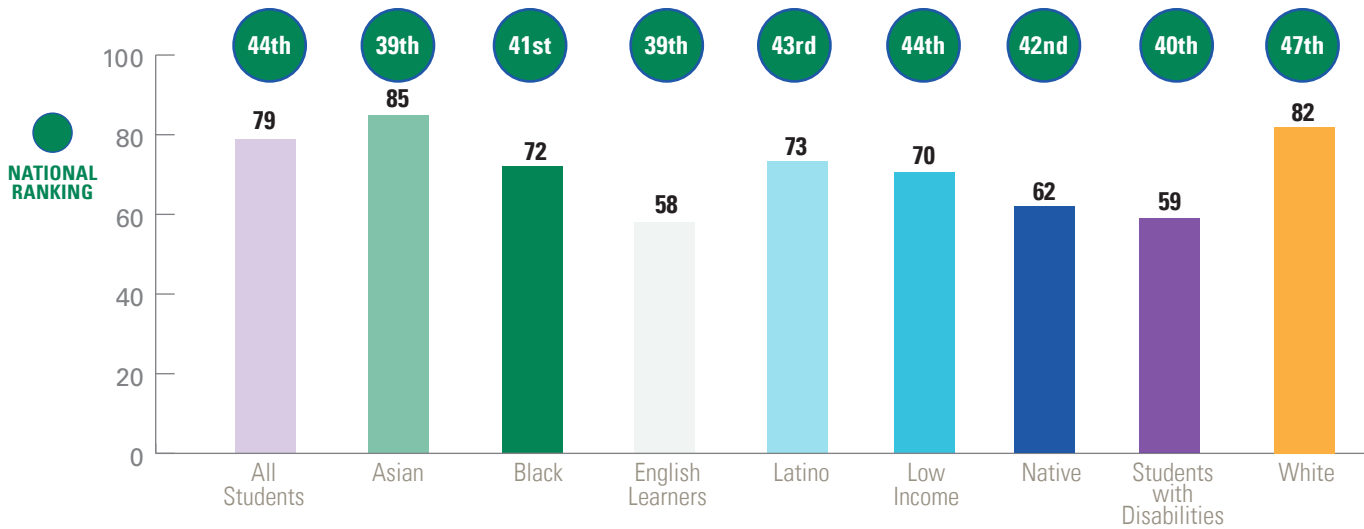
for graduation rates for Black and Latino students, respectively, among all states in 2017 (**Figure 2**). For students from low-income backgrounds, the state’s graduation rate places Washington 44th among all states. Clearly, Washington can do better — the vast majority of states are.

In addition to failing to prepare many students to graduate high school, Washington is failing to prepare many of them for postsecondary education. In 2019, more than 1 in 4 Latino students who took the SAT and 1 in 5 Black students who

took the SAT met the college-ready benchmarks in reading (**Figure 3**).

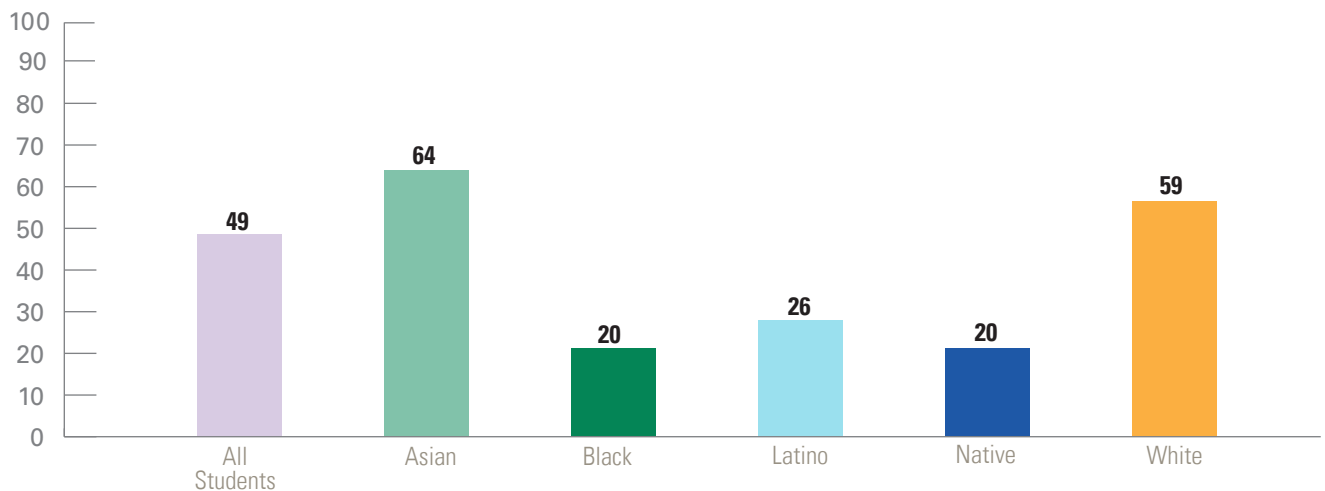
These inequities are not new. They have existed in Washington for years — and they start well before high school. Washington must not only pass legislation that makes college more accessible to students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, but also offer support for districts and schools to provide a strong foundation for students well before they enter the ninth grade.

FIGURE 2: Four-Year Graduation Rate for the Class of 2017 and National Ranking



Source: National Center for Education, Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, 2016-17

FIGURE 3: Percentage of SAT Test-Takers Meeting College-Readiness Benchmarks in Reading and Math, 2019



Source: College Board, 2019 Washington SAT Suite of Assessment Annual Report

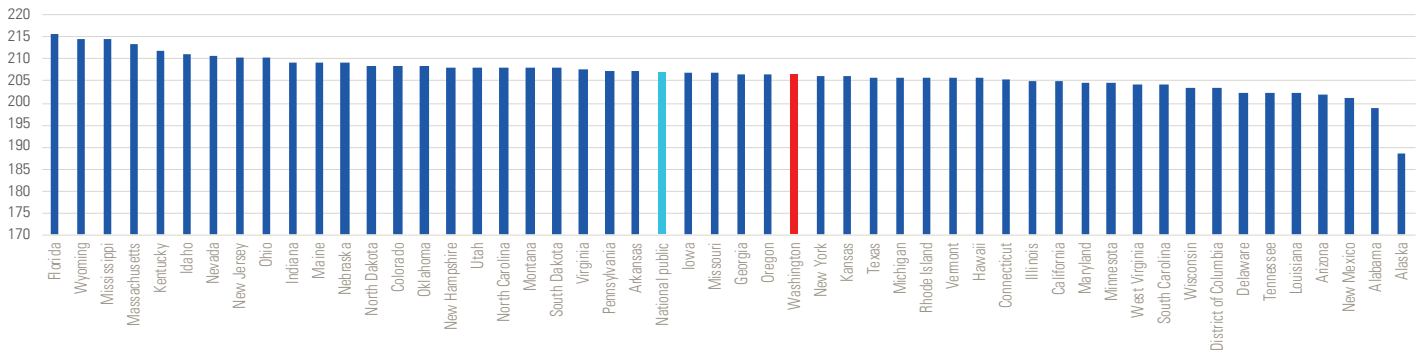
DISPARITIES IN ACHIEVEMENT BEGIN IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND CONTINUE THROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL.

The state is also doing far worse than most other states for these groups of students, especially Latino students. On the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) — a highly regarded measure of academic achievement — results for the state’s fourth graders overall were about average nationally. However, results for students from low-income backgrounds fell below the national average and were worse than the scores for the same group of students in 27 other states

(**Figure 4**). Although Washington made some progress for Black students compared with other states, results for Latino students are still lagging; the state’s results for Latino students put it behind 44 other states (**Figure 5**).

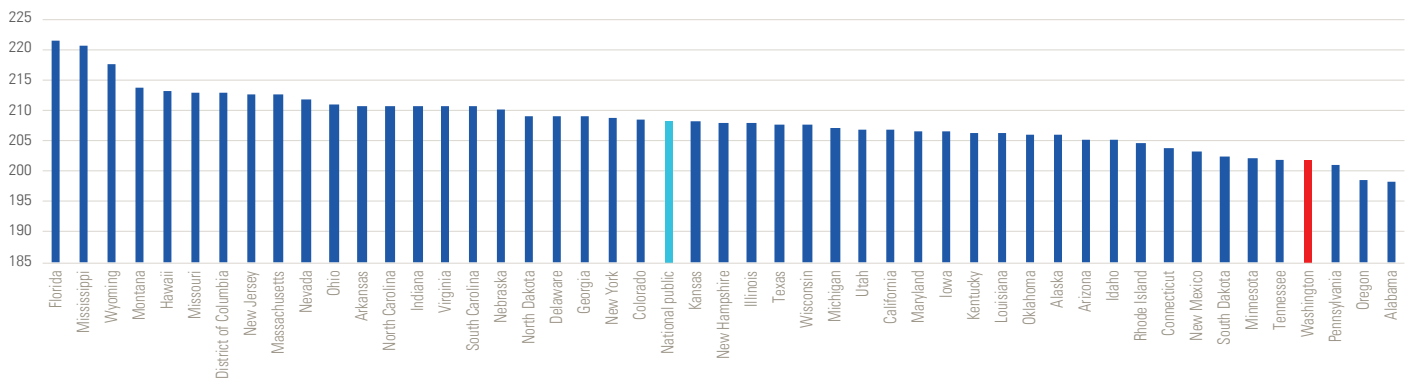
For middle school, Washington fares much better for students overall in eighth grade compared with other states but continues to underserve some groups of students. For example, Washington’s eighth graders overall placed 12th in the country on eighth grade math, but the scores for Washington’s Black and Latino eighth graders were about average

FIGURE 4: 4th Grade Reading NAEP Results by State, Students from Low-Income Backgrounds, 2019



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer

FIGURE 5: 4th Grade Reading NAEP Results by State, Latino Students, 2019



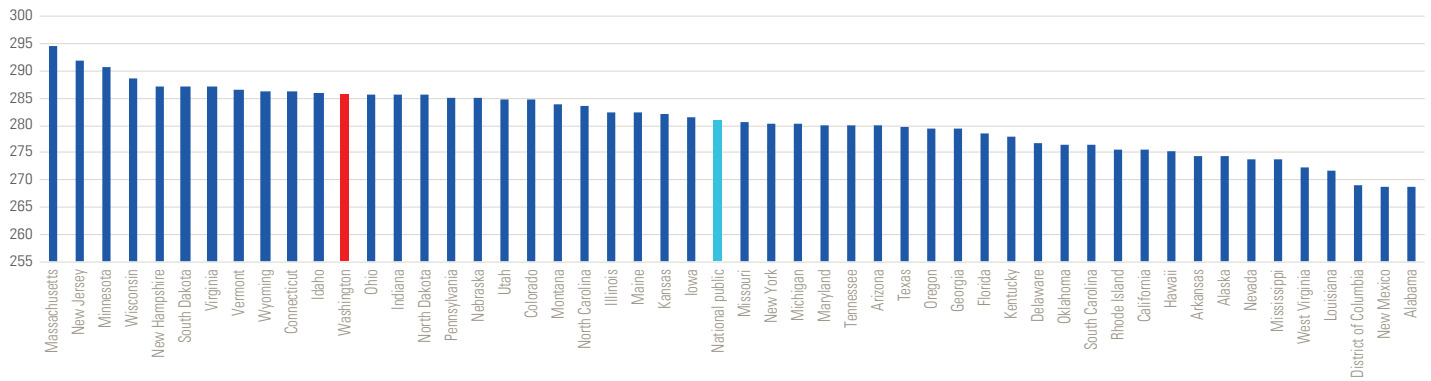
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer

nationally (**Figures 6 and 7**). The story is similar for eighth grade reading where Washington fares much better overall, but places third from the bottom of all states on eighth grade reading scores for Black students.

The state’s own assessments also show large disparities starting in elementary school. According to Washington’s Smarter Balanced Assessment,

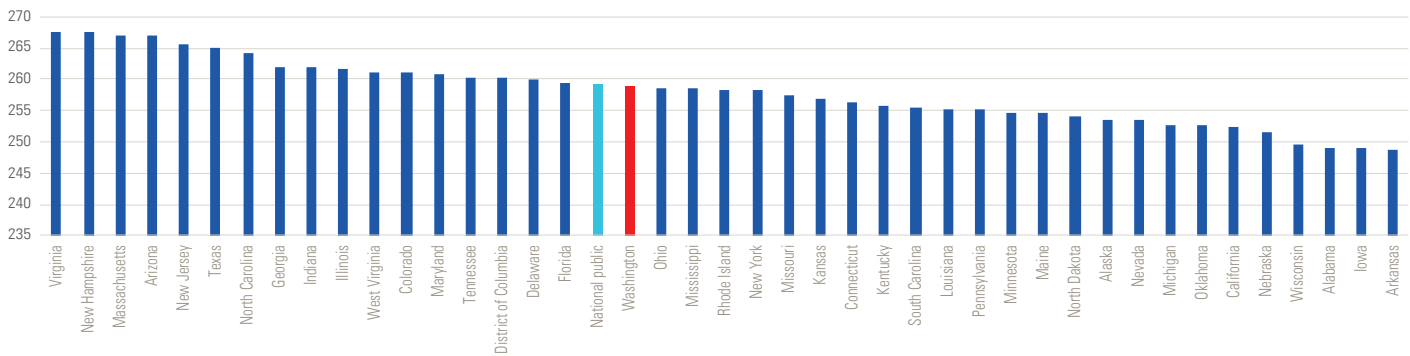
fewer than two-thirds of the state’s fourth graders are reading on grade level. Results for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, and migrant students are substantially lower (**Figure 8**). For example, only 40% of Washington’s Black fourth graders and 39% of its Latino fourth graders are proficient in reading.

FIGURE 6: 8th Grade Math NAEP Results by State, All Students, 2019



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer

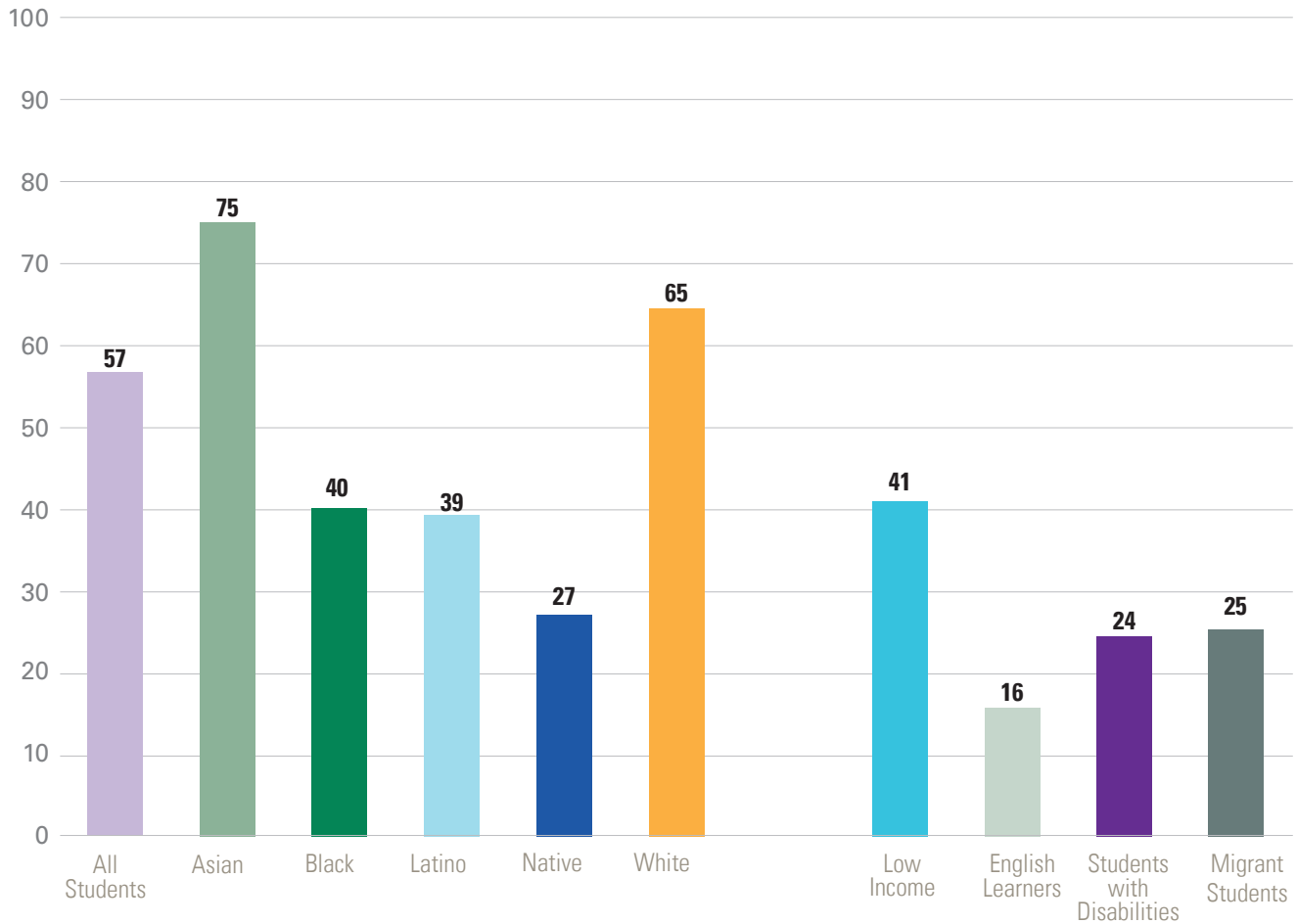
FIGURE 7: 8th Grade Math NAEP Results by State, Black Students, 2019



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer

FEWER THAN TWO-THIRDS OF WASHINGTON'S FOURTH GRADERS ARE READING ON GRADE LEVEL. RESULTS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR, STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS, STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, ENGLISH LEARNERS, AND MIGRANT STUDENTS ARE SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER.

FIGURE 8: 4th Grade Reading Proficiency, 2019



Source: Washington Smarter Balanced Assessment Results, 2019

WASHINGTON ENROLLS ONLY 13% OF BLACK AND LATINO 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS IN THE STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL PROGRAM.

By middle school, these gaps haven't narrowed on the state's assessment. Too few of Washington's historically marginalized populations are performing on grade level on the state's tests. For example, just more than a quarter Latino students, 1 in 4 Black students, and 1 in 5 Native students are proficient in math in eighth grade (**Figure 9**).

The bottom line is that there has not been enough progress for Black, Latino, and Native students. Although achievement in Washington may appear to be improving over time, the achievement gap in Washington is actually widening. Results on the NAEP exam over the past 14 years show that Black, Latino, and Native students' scores in Washington have been flat or even falling for some groups (**Figure 10**). The glaring and persistent disparities that separate Washington from the rest of the country, and that separate students from low-income backgrounds and students of color from their peers, require drastic and urgent change. These disparities in achievement are a result of disparities in opportunity.

THE BARRIERS FACING STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON ARE SIGNIFICANT AND MUST BE ADDRESSED HEAD-ON

More than one-third of Black and Native children and more than a quarter of Latino children live below the federal poverty line in Washington, which is an income of slightly above \$24,000 for a family of four.⁷ Furthermore, almost half of the state's students have faced some type of trauma.⁸ In 2019-20, more than 28,000 students experienced homelessness.⁹ Schools need more resources and supports to help students overcome these barriers. Washington gives slightly more funding to the highest poverty districts (8%

more) than the lowest poverty districts, but when adjusting for the additional needs of those students, that's only 1% more — not enough to ensure all students are receiving the support they need. (See [State of Funding Equity Tool](#) at [edtrust.org](#).) Additionally, there are pervasive and systemic inequities within schools and districts that education leaders and policymakers have a responsibility to confront and correct.

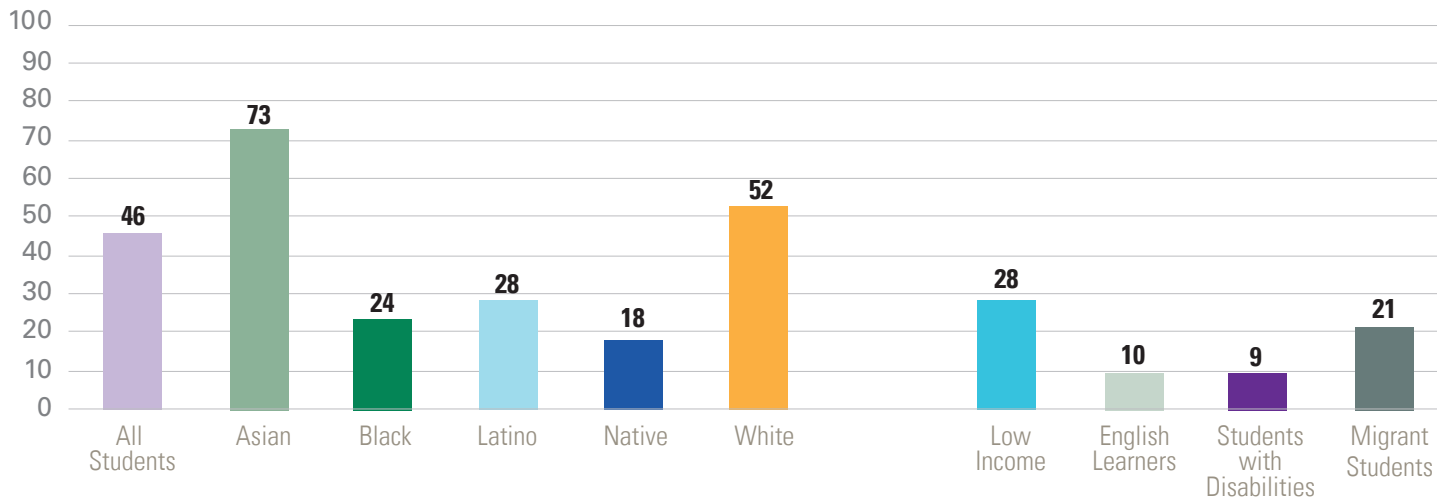
The following are four opportunity gaps in Washington's education system that need to be closed.

OPPORTUNITY GAP #1: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Research shows that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) has lasting effects, including increasing the chances that a child will graduate high school, earn a college degree, and secure a fulfilling career.¹⁰ Yet, children in Washington experience these educational inequities early, even before they enter kindergarten. Although the state increased state funding for early childhood education by 11% in 2018 and enrolled 800 more children in state-funded preschool programs, many of Washington's 3- and 4-year-olds still do not have access to a high-quality early childhood program that will lay the foundation for the rest of their academic careers.¹¹ For example, Washington enrolls only 13% of Black and Latino 3- and 4-year-olds in the state-funded preschool program.¹²

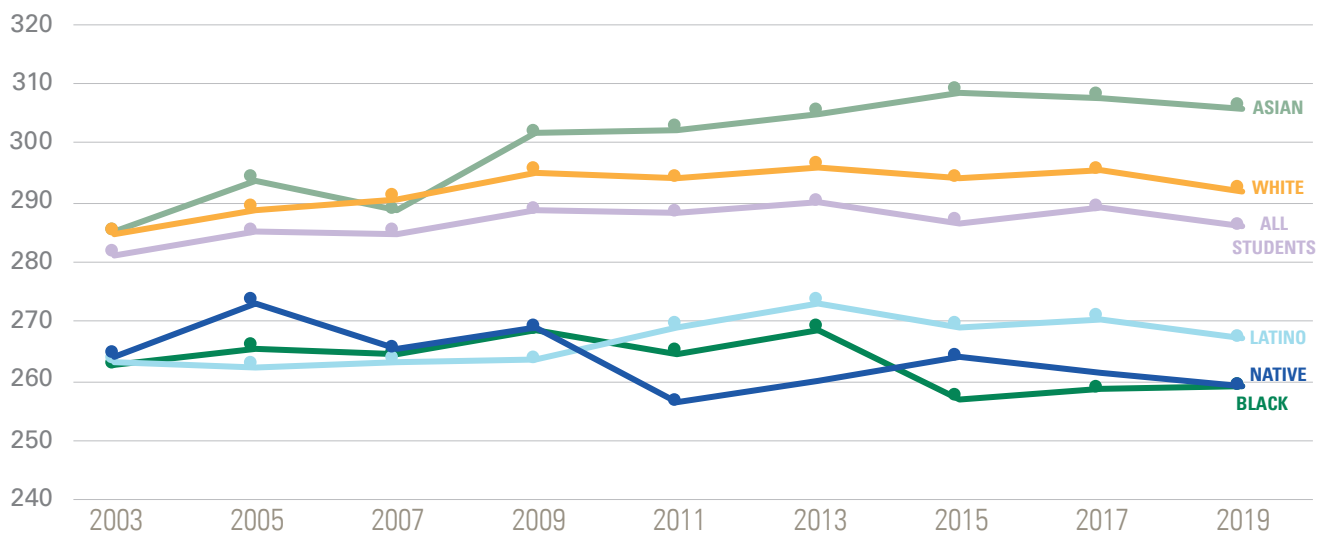
These gaps in opportunities continue throughout elementary, middle, and high school, where students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities receive less of all kinds of resources that are critical to their success.

FIGURE 9: 8th Grade Math Proficiency, 2019



Source: Washington Smarter Balanced Assessment Results, 2019

FIGURE 10: NAEP 8th Grade Math Results over Time, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer 2003-2019. There are no data for Native students for 2013 and 2017

OPPORTUNITY GAP #2: STRONG, DIVERSE TEACHERS

Research shows that the quality of a teacher is one of the most important factors for student success. Yet students of color in Washington are less likely to experience a teacher who has had any experience in the classroom or a teacher who looks like them. Nearly half of Washington's public school students are students of color but only 10% of the teachers are teachers of color.¹³ If Washington continues to hire teachers of color at the current rate, it would take the state more than a century to have a teacher workforce that looks like the student body.¹⁴

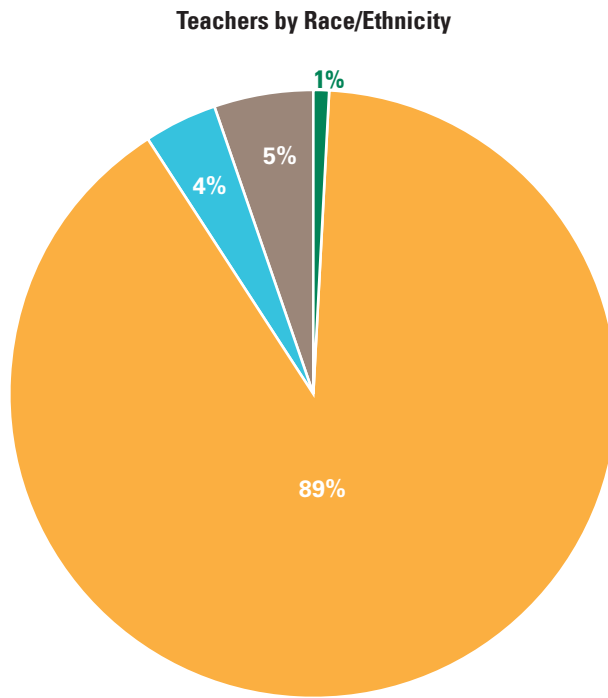
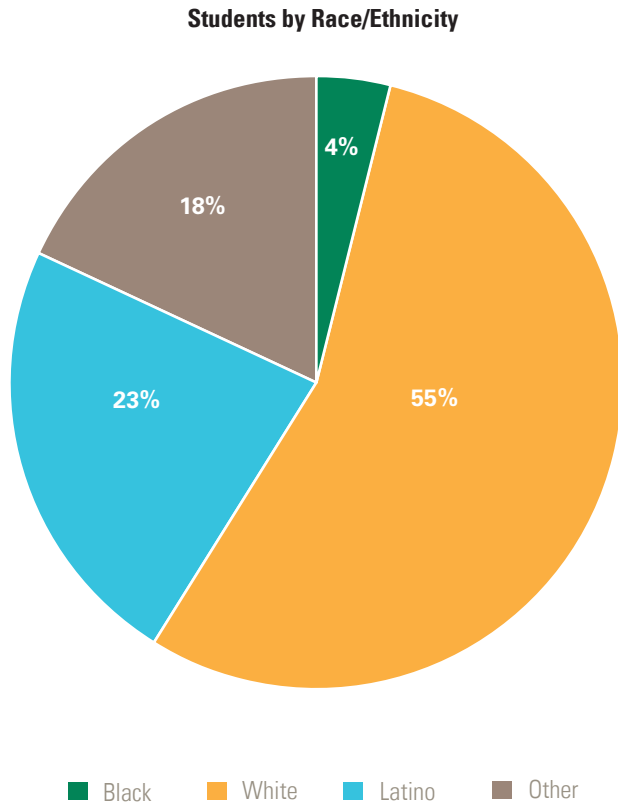
In addition to having too few teachers of color, Washington has experienced a teacher shortage in key areas including: special education, bilingual education, science, and math. A recent survey of Washington educators working with limited teaching certificates found that 70% of those educators were interested in getting fully credentialed to teach in those areas. However, many of those teachers cited financial and cultural barriers as reasons why they had not yet become fully certified.¹⁵ Research also shows that as newer teachers gain experience, students learn more and have better attendance.¹⁶ While

there is no perfect way to measure excellent teaching, nationally, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have access to a strong and consistent teacher workforce than their White and higher income peers.¹⁷

Washington's students of all backgrounds are also missing out on the many academic, social, and emotional benefits of a racially diverse teacher workforce. That's because [Washington's teacher workforce](#) is much less diverse than the student body it serves (**Figure 11**). More than 17,000 Black students, almost 59,000 Latino students, and more than 18,000 Asian students attend schools where they have no teachers who look like them.¹⁸ Hundreds of thousands of White students attend a school without a single teacher of color. The lack of diversity in classroom leadership harms all students, including White students, who undoubtedly benefit from the opportunity to learn from teachers of other races. Diversity is especially critical for students of color. Research shows that students who have had a same-race teacher are more likely to attend school regularly, perform well on end-of-year assessments, graduate high school, and consider college.¹⁹

17,000 BLACK STUDENTS, 59,000 LATINO STUDENTS, AND 18,000 ASIAN STUDENTS ATTEND SCHOOLS WHERE THEY HAVE NO TEACHERS WHO LOOK LIKE THEM.

FIGURE 11: Washington Student and Teacher Demographics



Source: Washington State Department of Education, "Wadata," <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/shanker/files/WAdata.xlsx> (Downloaded September 2018). Analysis excluded schools with no student data, fewer than 10 teachers, pre-K students only, and students above grade 12 only

STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS IN WASHINGTON ARE FAR LESS LIKELY TO BE ENROLLED IN EIGHTH GRADE ALGEBRA THAN THEIR HIGHER INCOME PEERS.

OPPORTUNITY GAP #3: ADVANCED COURSEWORK

When given advanced coursework opportunities, students work harder and engage more in school, leading to higher graduation rates and lower absenteeism and suspensions rates. Yet, too many of Washington’s students from low-income backgrounds and students of color do not have access to advanced coursework opportunities that can set them up for success in college and careers.

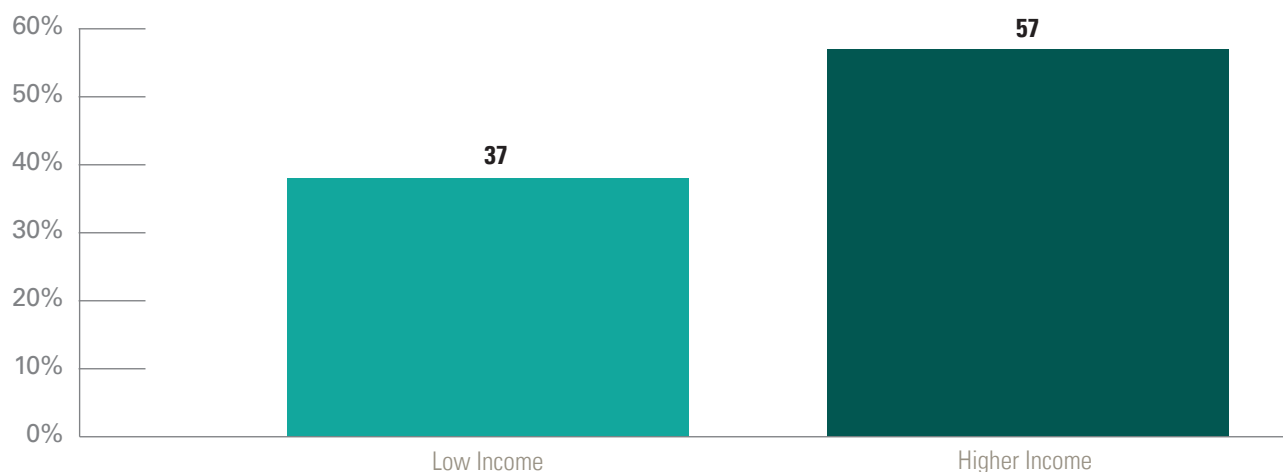
For example, students from low-income backgrounds in Washington are far less likely to be enrolled in eighth grade algebra than their higher income peers (**Figure 12**). While Black and Latino students are as likely as their peers to attend a school that offers Advanced Placement (AP), [they are not given equal](#)

[opportunity to be in those classes](#). This is especially true for Latino students, who represent 19% of students attending schools that offer AP courses but only 13% of students enrolled in those courses. These data show there are within-school gaps in opportunity that are likely caused by gaps in prior preparation or tracking practices.²⁰

OPPORTUNITY GAP #4: SCHOOL CLIMATE

Students who experience a positive school climate – where there are mutually beneficial relationships among and between staff and students, where students feel safe and like they belong, where students and families are involved in the decision-making process, and where students receive the supports they need to meet high expectations – tend to have better educational outcomes. But

FIGURE 12: Percentage of Students in Algebra or Higher in 8th Grade



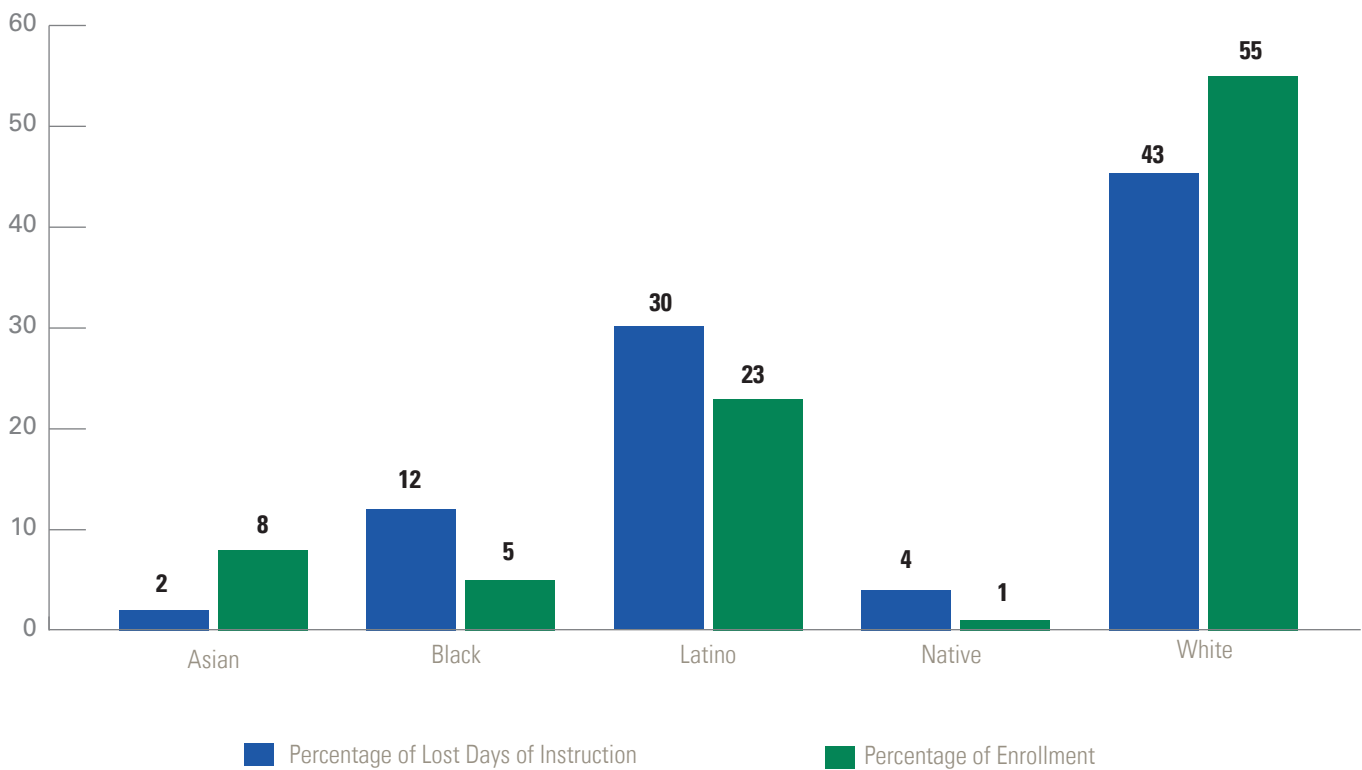
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP, 2019 Mathematics Assessment

school climate can vary drastically from school to school. Many of the gaps in opportunity experienced in Washington’s schools result in poor school climate, especially for students of color.

Sufficient and equitable access to school counselors is just one of the systemic factors that contribute to a positive school climate. Research shows that a lower student-to-school-counselor ratio can lead to better academic outcomes, improved attendance, fewer disciplinary incidents, and higher graduation rates. But [Washington does not have enough school counselors](#): The student-to-school-counselor ratio in Washington is 470²¹ to 1. What’s more, high schools with the most students of color have fewer school counselors per student than schools with fewer students of color.

Exclusionary discipline practices are another critical factor of school climate. Students who are not in the classroom are not learning, and students who are suspended from school become less engaged, less connected, and, too often, do not graduate from high school.²² In 2017, Washington’s students missed an average of one week of school because of exclusionary discipline. This adds up to nearly 300,000 lost school days due to exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately impact Black, Latino, and Native students, students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities, despite no evidence that these students are more disruptive or commit more serious infractions.²³ For example, Black and Latino students make up 28% of students in Washington, but 42% of exclusion days are given to those students (**Figure 13**). Black and Native students were

FIGURE 13: Percentage of Lost School Days in 2018 vs. Percentage of Enrollment by Race



Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Discipline Rates, 2018

more than two times as likely as White students. to receive short-term suspensions. (Figure 14). These students are at risk of falling further behind every day they are excluded from school. The achievement gaps affecting these groups of students will not close until Washington makes schools safer and welcoming to historically marginalized students.

Although Washington has taken steps in the right direction in recent years, there is still work to do and a focus on equity is critical. The overall performance of Washington’s students falls below the performance of students in other states. For most historically marginalized populations, Washington fares even worse.

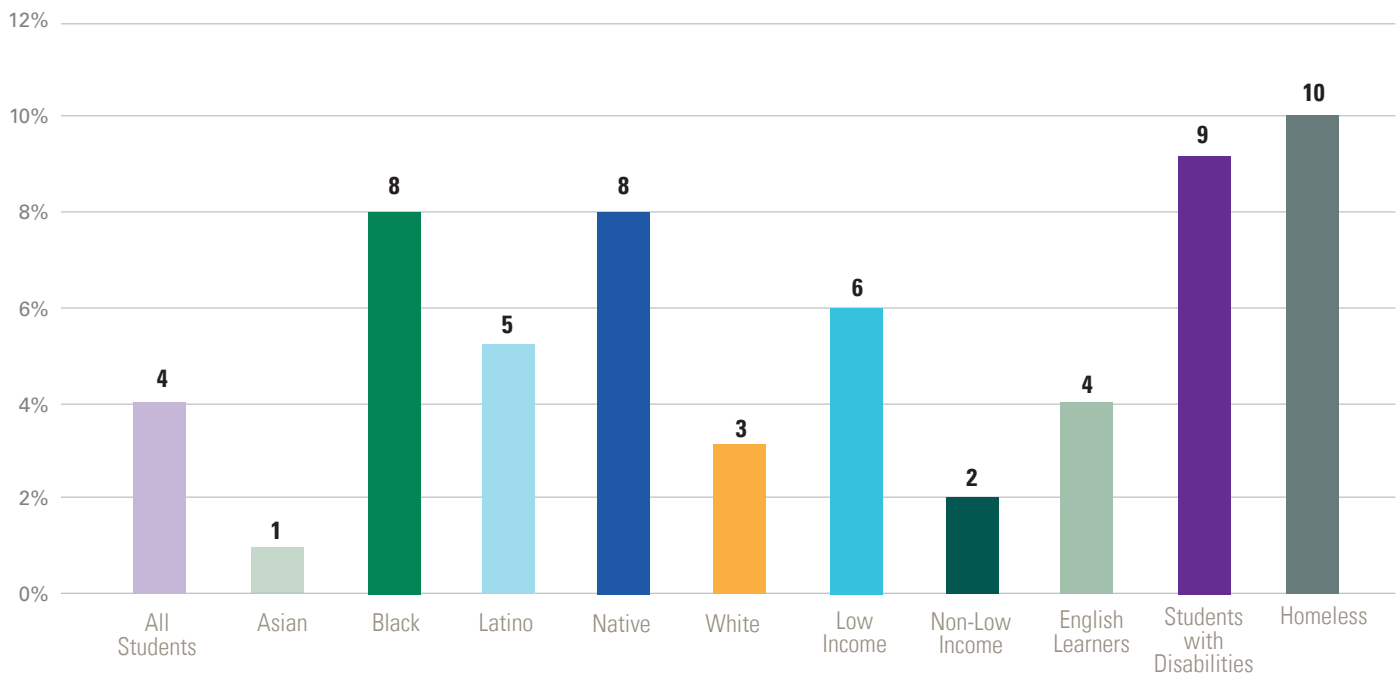
There can be no academic excellence for Washington without a specific focus on equity. Washington must do better for students and

families who have been underserved, to prepare them for the jobs in Washington’s growing economy. Addressing these issues requires clear, targeted, research-based solutions.

The good news is that Washington has a track record of identifying and working with advocates to tackle pressing education issues. Washington can — and must — continue to focus on closing opportunity gaps for its students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, and English language learners.

To move the state forward, Washington must deploy energy and experience in ways that increase opportunity and achievement not just for the state overall but specifically for low-income students, students of color, and English learners. This is the charge as the state of Washington looks to the future.

FIGURE 14: Percentage of Students Subjected to Exclusionary Discipline



Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Discipline Rates, 2019

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization that promotes closing opportunity gaps by expanding excellence and equity in education for students of color and those from low-income families from pre-kindergarten through college. Through research and advocacy, the organization builds and engages diverse communities that care about education equity, increases political and public will to act on equity issues, and increases college access and completion for historically underserved students.



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