Insights 2020

What Makes a District Succeed?

A closer look at school districts that are preparing their underserved students for college and beyond

INTRODUCTION

Many of the nation's more than 13,500 public K-12 school districts can point to individual schools where students perform well on standardized measures of achievement. However, the reality is that school boundaries and the neighborhoods they draw from have always explained much of the success of individual schools.

Looking beyond this long-standing dynamic to identify schools that excel at preparing all students for college has been a driving goal of GreatSchools.org. To that end, we created the College Success Awards in 2018 to identify high schools that are helping students succeed in college, based on newly available data on preparation, enrollment, persistence, and remediation. The following year, we revised our methodology to better highlight those successfully preparing students from low-income families students to get into — and persist in — college.

Across the nation, we found many examples of schools that were preparing students for college — including students from low-income families. At nearly 4 in 10 of 2019's 1,722 College Success Award winning schools, 40 percent or more of the students come from low-income households. That's more than 670 high schools with significant numbers of students from low-income households with the data to show that they are doing a good job of preparing them to go to — and stay in — college. But among these winners, many of these schools select their student populations in some way. When we sought to identify *nonselective high schools in which students from low-income families* outperform state averages in college enrollment and college persistence for the first paper in this series (see Box 1), we found only 132 schools in 11 states.

We also wanted to see how often entire school districts with sizable numbers of students from low-income families manage to prepare students for college across the majority of the high schools within their larger geographic boundaries. At first glance, the results weren't encouraging: When we sought to identify socioeconomically diverse districts that had at least half of their high schools qualify for a CSA, we found just a handful — 16 districts in just eight of the 25 states where we had enough data to track students into college.

Beyond that headline number, though, the findings are more encouraging. These high-performing districts represent all kinds of schools and systems — rural, urban, and suburban. Some are very small — the Smith County School District in Mississippi has 2,600 students, while with more than 271,000 students, Broward County Schools in Florida is one of the 10 largest districts in the nation. Some are socioeconomically diverse, but in others virtually every student receives free or reduced-price lunch. This paper takes a closer look at these districts and offers insights on ways that states, districts, and schools across the country can implement changes to ensure that greater numbers of students from low-income households are prepared for success in college and life.

BOX 1

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This paper is part of a series of reports which identify promising practices among high schools and districts based on findings from GreatSchools.org's 2019 College Success Awards.

FINDING DISTRICTS THAT WORK

The College Success Awards were created by GreatSchools.org to recognize and celebrate schools that excel in preparing students for postsecondary success. The 2019 College Success Awards examined data from more than 8,100 high schools in 25 states to identify which ones were preparing their students for college based on preparation, enrollment, persistence, and remediation data provided by the states. The methodology was revised from the previous year to place greater emphasis on the schools doing an exceptional job preparing students from low-income backgrounds for success (see appendix). Just over one in five — 21 percent — of the eligible high schools ultimately qualified for the 2019 CSA award.

While the 2019 CSA award winners, like virtually all measures of student performance, are tilted towards schools with higher proportions of students from more affluent families, 39 percent had significant numbers of students from low-income families. This means that at least 40 percent of the student populations qualified for free and reduced-price lunches. The first paper in this series focused on individual high schools without selective entrance requirements in which students from low-income families were outperforming state averages in college enrollment and college persistence.

For this paper, we wanted to shift the lens from individual schools to public school districts, which typically draw from broader geographic areas that include a wider range of student and family demographics than the neighborhoods that each of their individual schools serve. To identify districts that appear to be effectively preparing all of their high school students — and in particular low-income high school students — we eliminated nontraditional school districts, such as charter management organizations or magnet school districts with more than one school serving multiple districts or jurisdictions. (However, we did include districts with a combination of traditional and charter schools.)

We then identified public school districts with the following criteria:

- **The district has at least three high schools** to ensure its success reflects more than the success of a single high school.

- **At least 40 percent of the district's students are low-income**, representing a student population with a diverse socioeconomic background.

- **At least half of the district's high schools qualified for a College Success Award** to ensure that success in college preparation and performance is reflected in a wide cross-section of the district's students.

In the 25 states that have school-level data on college preparation, college enrollment, and college performance, we found 16 districts in eight states which met these criteria:

FLORIDA

Broward County Public Schools
- Approximately 271,000 students *(sixth-largest school district in the country, second largest school district in Florida)*
- 66 percent low-income
- 21 of 39 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Fort Lauderdale High School, Nova High School, Cooper City High School, South Plantation High School, J.P. Taravella High School, Western High School, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Charles W. Flanagan High School, Pompano Beach High School, City of Coral Springs Charter School, College Academy @ BCC, City/Pembroke Pines Charter High School, Cypress Bay High School, Somerset Academy Charter High School, Everglades High School, Monarch High School, McFatter Technical College and High School, Somerset Arts Conservatory, International School of Broward, West Broward High School, Somerset Academy Charter High School)

Seminole County Public Schools
- Approximately 67,000 students
- 47 percent low-income
- 5 of 10 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Seminole High School, Oviedo High School, Lake Brantley High School, Crooms Academy of Information Technology, Hagerty High School)

GEORGIA

Fulton County Schools
- Approximately 93,500 students
- 44 percent low-income
- 9 of 16 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Riverwood International Charter School, Milton High School, North Springs Charter High School, Chattahoochee High School, Centennial High School, Northview High School, Alpharetta High School, Johns Creek High School, Cambridge High School)

Gwinnett County Public Schools
- Approximately 180,000 students *(Georgia's largest district)*
- 46 percent low-income
- 12 of 20 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Collins Hill High School, Parkview High School, North Gwinnett High School, Dacula High School, Brookwood High School, Grayson High School, Peachtree Ridge High School, Mill Creek High School, Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology, Lanier High School, Mountain View High School, Archer High School)

KENTUCKY

Floyd County Schools
- Approximately 6,000 students
- 75 percent low-income
- 3 out of 4 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Allen Central High School, Betsy Layne High School, Prestonsburg High School)

Warren County Public Schools
- Approximately 17,000 students

- 51 percent low-income
- 3 of 4 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Warren East High School, Greenwood High School, South Warren High School)

LOUISIANA

Lincoln Parish Schools
- Approximately 6,000 students
- 58 percent low-income
- 2 of 3 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Choudrant High School, Ruston High School)

MICHIGAN

Dearborn Public Schools
- Approximately 20,600 students
- 56 percent low-income
- 3 of 4 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Dearborn High School, Fordson High School, Henry Ford Early College)

Warren Consolidated Schools
- Approximately 14,300 students
- 53 percent low-income
- 2 of 3 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Cousino Senior High School, Sterling Heights Senior High School)

MISSISSIPPI

Lamar County School District
- Approximately 10,600 students
- 46 percent low-income
- 2 of 3 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Oak Grove High School, Sumrall High School)

Lincoln County School District
- Approximately 3,050 students
- 59 percent low-income
- 3 of 4 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Bogue Chitto School, Loyd Star School, West Lincoln School)

Madison County School District
- Approximately 13,300 students
- 49 percent low-income
- 3 of 4 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Madison Central High School, Ridgeland High School, Germantown High School)

Smith County School District
- Approximately 2,600 students
- 70 percent low-income
- 2 of 3 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Mize Attendance Center, Raleigh High School)

NORTH CAROLINA

Anson County School
- Approximately 3,175 students
- 99 percent low-income
- 2 of 3 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Anson County Early College High School, Anson New Technology School)

Rutherford County School District
- Approximately 8,060 students
- 99 percent low-income
- 3 of 5 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Chase High School, East Rutherford High School, Rutherford Early College high School)

TEXAS

Spring Branch Independent School District
- Approximately 34,700 students
- 49 percent low-income

- 3 of 5 eligible high schools were 2019 CSA winners (Memorial High School, Stratford High School, Westchester Academy for International Studies)

WHAT WE LEARNED

Focusing on students from low-income families is no longer an optional goal for schools and districts; it is essential to their mission and the success of the nation as a whole. For the first time in 2013, more than half of all public school students nationwide were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and in all but 10 states, students from low-income backgrounds made up at least 40 percent of the public school population — the same criteria we used to identify the districts highlighted in this report. [1]

Ensuring that more of these students go on to postsecondary education — whether it is a 2- or 4-year degree or vocational training that results in a credential with value in the workforce — is equally essential. Already, more than half of all jobs require some postsecondary education, yet fewer than one-quarter of high school graduates ultimately receive a college degree.[2] Focusing on the outcomes of students from low-income backgrounds is particularly important, because only 9 percent of low-income high school graduates are considered fully college and career ready, and only 26 percent earn a college degree within six years.[3]

In short, serving students from low-income families well means serving all students well. Five of the

[1] Southern Education Foundation. "A New Majority Low Income Students Now a Majority In the Nation's Public Schools" 2015. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED555829.pdf

[2] Center for American Progress, "College For All: Strengthening Our Economy Through College For All" Feb. 19, 2015. College matriculation rate for high school graduates is 65.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts.display.asp?id=51) and college completion rate is 52.9% (National Student Clearinghouse, https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport10-statesupplement/).

[3] ACT, the Condition of College and Career Readiness 2019, https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr-2019 National-CCCR-2019.pdf; Pell institute, "Indicators of Higher Education Inequity in the United States," 2018, https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/high_school_and_beyond/COE-18-Pell-Indicators-f.pdf

districts highlighted in this report were home to at least one of the individual schools featured in the first report of this series, which focused on nonselective public schools that are particularly successful at helping students from low-income backgrounds succeed in college. In fact, Gwinnett County Public Schools accounted for the majority of Georgia high schools recognized by GreatSchools.org in another report in this series for having students from low-income backgrounds who perform above the state average in measures of college enrollment and college persistence (see Box 2, below).

These districts also reinforce the idea that there's no one model for serving all students well. CSA-winning schools within some of the highlighted districts include early college high schools, charter schools, and K-12 schools, but all the highlighted districts also had traditional high schools among their CSA

winners — and many had only traditional schools. Nor is the size of the district or the jurisdiction it serves an impediment to ensuring that all students succeed. The districts highlighted in this report range from rural to suburban to urban, including the sixth-largest district in the nation (Broward County in Florida) and the largest district in its state (Gwinnett County in Georgia).

CONCLUSION

Each of the districts highlighted in this report have managed to provide large numbers of their high school students with the kind of preparation that will allow them to succeed in college and life. While more research is needed to identify the specific strategies that have allowed these districts to serve socioeconomically diverse students well, their diversity — in size, community type, and

BOX 2

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A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS

Located in suburban Atlanta, Gwinnett County Public Schools is the state's largest school district, serving more than 180,000 students. Its students represent more than 180 countries and speak 100 different languages, which is reflected by its demographic makeup (32 percent African American, 32 percent Hispanic or Latino, 21 percent Caucasian, 11 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4 percent multiracial). It is a district of choice, with two charter schools, seven specialty high schools with academy programs, and nine schools offering dual-language immersion programs. It has been recognized within the state and nationally, winning the Broad Prize for Urban Education twice. One of its CSA-winning high schools, Collins Hill High School, also is home to the 2020 National Principal of the Year.[4]

In the foothills of western North Carolina, Rutherford County Schools serve just over 8,000 students. While the county it serves has a median household income of $50,629, nearly all of its students (99 percent) qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The district prioritizes college and career success in its strategic plan, with the goal of providing personalized learning for each student. To that end, the district launched an early college high school in 2005 on the campus of Isothermal Community College, which focuses on economically disadvantaged and first-generation college students and has had a 100 percent graduation rate for nine years running. Rutherford Early College High School won a CSA, but so did two of the district's comprehensive high schools, East Rutherford and Chase, which serve approximately 700 students each.

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[4] https://www.nassp.org/recognition/principal-of-the-year/national-principal-of-the-year-winners/2020-national-principal-of-the-year/

BOX 3

MAGNET DISTRICTS: A PROMISING MODEL?

Many districts offer magnet schools — selective or aspirationally focused schools that specialize in a specific career field or discipline. But public magnet districts, which oversee a range of these schools with diverse themes for students across a larger geographic region, represent a potentially promising model.

Two magnet school districts — one in New Jersey and one in Texas — met the same criteria as the districts highlighted in this report. (They were excluded from the full list because they are not traditional school districts drawing students from a single community, but instead draw students from multiple districts.) In both cases, every one of their respective high schools qualified for a 2019 College Success Award.

The South Texas Independent School district is the state's only all-magnet district. It represents three counties and nearly 30 school districts across 3,600 square miles in an impoverished, largely rural region. Its four magnet high schools focus on medical professions, the sciences, and world studies. All four are nonselective: any student in the three counties the district serves can attend regardless of past academic performance. Nearly 60 percent of those who do are low-income.

In New Jersey, the three high schools that make up the Hudson County School District of Technology have won state and national honors, including a Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. The district serves about 2,500 students from districts throughout the largely urban county, nearly half (48 percent) of whom are low-income.

composition of high schools — suggests that none of these factors are in and of themselves unsurpassable barriers to helping students from low-income families succeed.

As with our analysis of individual schools that have done an exceptional job helping students from low-income families succeed, we believe these districts aren't outliers — the fact that they run the gamut from small rural districts to among the nation's largest urban school systems suggests their successes are, and can be, replicated elsewhere. The first challenge is identifying the rest.

Only half of the nation's states — the 25 listed in the Appendix below — provide sufficient school-level measures of performance in college and beyond, including preparation, enrollment, persistence, and remediation data. This is the data that tells us whether students enroll in college, are ready for college-level coursework, and move on to their

second year of college. And while we focused on districts where at least 40 percent of the students are low-income for this report, only 11 states disaggregate school-level student performance data in ways that allow us — and them — to track the performance of students from low-income families into college to determine whether they are doing as well as their more affluent peers.

The only way to understand where equity gaps persist and how schools and districts like the ones profiled in the reports in this series are succeeding in supporting disadvantaged student populations is for all states to break down data by student group, including race and income levels.

Politicians and policymakers alike have long said that a student's zip code shouldn't determine his or her destiny. We hope that highlighting the districts that are helping students from diverse backgrounds go on to college will provide insights that can

improve the lives of every K-12 student, regardless of where they live, where they go to school, and their parents' levels of income and education.

APPENDIX: CSA METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

BACKGROUND

The objective of the College Success Awards is to recognize and celebrate public high schools that are successfully preparing students to succeed in college. Award winners are determined by a methodology that evaluates school-level data on college preparation, college enrollment, and college performance.

STATES INCLUDED

After a national data collection effort, GreatSchools. org collected sufficient data to calculate the award in 25 states: Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Vermont, and Wyoming.

Eleven of the states where schools are eligible for a 2019 College Success Award provided additional data on measurements of college success for students from low-income families, which allowed GreatSchools.org to review the schools' college-success efforts with a greater lens on equity. The states providing this additional data for students receiving free and reduced-price lunch are Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, and North Dakota. For more information about state-by-state eligibility rates, see Appendix A on the GreatSchools.org website.

DATA INCLUDED

Award winners are determined by calculating a school-level score and applying a threshold to delineate which schools receive an award and which do not. This school-level score is comprised of three components:

1. The **College Preparation** component includes the percent of students from a 4-year cohort who graduate from high school, the SAT or ACT participation rate, and the average performance on the SAT or ACT.

2. The **College Enrollment** component includes school-level metrics that vary by state. Some states report this data as "Percent Enrolled in College Immediately Following High School," others as "Percent enrolled in any institution of higher learning in the last 0-16 months," or "Graduating seniors pursuing either a 2-year or 4-year college/university."

3. The **College Performance** component includes remediation and persistence metrics, which also vary in availability by state. The remediation metric is "Percent of students needing remediation for college" and is sometimes disaggregated by subject. The persistence metric is "Percent enrolled in college and returned for a second year."

DATA LIMITATIONS

There are three principal limitations to the data:

1. College enrollment and persistence data do not take into account institution quality, thus college preparation data is included as a proxy for quality.

2. In some states, data are not disaggregated by student groups, so results may not be equally distributed across groups. When disaggregated student data is provided by states, we calculate college success metrics for students receiving free and reduced-price lunches (FRL student group) and incorporate this data for students from low-income families into the methodology.

3. Data are "point in time" data, not longitudinal data, so results will not necessarily isolate the value added by the school from any out-of-school factors that may be influencing performance.

AWARDS CALCULATION METHODOLOGY

Initial score calculation methods

First, each of the inputs available for a particular school is standardized. To do this, the school's position in the statewide distribution for each metric is calculated as a percentile.

Some states mandate that a specific college entrance exam is taken by all high school graduates. In these states, if data for multiple college entrance exams is obtained, only the data for the mandated exam is used. In states that do not require a specific exam to be taken, and there is data for more than one college entrance exam available, the data for the exam with the higher participation rate statewide is used. If participation rates are not available, the exam on which the school's students performed better is used.

Within each component, we calculate an average of the percentiles of the available metrics, resulting in a score for each of the three categories (College Preparation, College Enrollment, College Performance) for each school. This approach ensures that we give equal weight to all three components in the final school-level score. For schools with no available data in one of the metrics, the average across the other metrics is taken. For example, if a school does not have graduation data, then the College Preparation component's average percentile is based only on College Entrance Exam Performance and Participation data.

The last step in calculating the single school-level score is to calculate the average of the subscores of the three components. To limit the advantage of missing data, schools that do not have data in all three categories are considered ineligible for the award. Once these schools are removed, the eligible schools in each state receive a single school-level score calculated from the three components. We adjust the single school-level score to account for student income levels during the subsequent equity-focused score adjustments.

Equity-focused score adjustments

To ensure that GreatSchools.org's 2019 College Success Awards recognize success through different lenses, including equity, we revised the 2019 College Success Award methodology to identify schools that are "beating the odds" by better serving students from low-income families who might otherwise not be prepared for or attending college. Our equity-focused methodology includes: 1) adjusting a school's single school-level score based on how the school performs relative to expected levels based on their low-income student enrollment to create a final College Success Award score for each school; 2) assigning awards to the top 20 percent of schools based on those scores; and 3) calculating the school-level scores for students from low-income families in the 11 states where low-income student group data is made available. Schools in the top 25 percent for students from low-income backgrounds statewide (whether or not the school was previously awarded) are included; schools in the bottom 50 percent for students from low-income families statewide (even if the school was previously awarded) are disqualified.

We adjusted the average College Success Award scores to boost the rankings of schools that are better serving students from low-income families. We estimated how well a school would do by exploring the relationship between average school-level scores and student income levels and awarded schools credit for doing better than predicted. After calculating the adjusted scores for each school, we awarded the top 20 percent of schools based on this final College Success Award score.

Finally, for states providing low-income student group data, we applied thresholds based on the performance of students from low-income families at each school. Using the same methods as for initial overall College Success Award scores, we calculated College Success Award scores for students from low-income backgrounds (defined as those enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs) in the 11 states that provided student group performance data. We adjusted the award assignments in these states based on low-income performance thresholds

of 50 percent for low scores and 75 percent for high scores. For schools earning initial awards based on adjusted scores, schools retained the award if low-income student group performance is in the top half of scores for students from low-income backgrounds in that state. If the low-income group performs in the bottom half, then the award is removed. For schools not earning awards in the initial steps, if low-income students at a school perform better than 75 percent of the low-income students at other schools in the state, the school earns the final College Success Award. Award assignments are not altered by these methods for schools in states where low-income student group performance data are not available. All schools earning awards after the equity-focused methodology is applied are the final College Success Award winners.

A visual of the methodology

Component	College Preparation		College Enrollment		College Performance	
Raw score	High School Graduation Rate	College Entrance Exam Performance And Participation	Percent enrolled in college immediately following high school	Percent enrolled in any institution of learning in the last 0 - 16 months	Remedia-tion	Persistence
Convert to percentiles	⇩	⇩	⇩	⇩	⇩	⇩
	Metric-level percentile	Metric-level percentile	Metric-level percentile	Metric-level percentile	Metric-level percentile	Metric-level percentile
Average percentiles components	⇘ ⇙ ⇩		⇘ ⇙ ⇩		⇘ ⇙ ⇩	
	Component-level average percentile		Component-level average percentile		Component-level average percentile	
Average across components	⇘		⇩		⇙	
	School-level combined average percentile					
Equity adjustments	⇩					

1) Adjusted average based on analysis of scores vs. low-income measure	
2) Assign initial CSA awards to schools with adjusted averages in the top 20%	
3) Re-assign awards with FRL Thresholds where subgroup data available	

Final Awards   ⇩

College Success Award Schools