

MOVING THE COLLEGE ACCESS NEEDLE FOR THE NEW MAJORITY:

Lessons From Leading Communities



**NATIONAL
COLLEGE
ATTAINMENT
NETWORK**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for supporting effective approaches to increasing college access and success.

We also thank the many school district and community partners who shared insights on this important work.

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OUR MISSION IS TO BUILD, STRENGTHEN, AND EMPOWER COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS TO CLOSE EQUITY GAPS IN POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS.

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WE NEED TO MOVE THE NEEDLE ON COLLEGE ATTAINMENT FOR THE NEW MAJORITY

There are deep and often institutionalized root causes for persistent equity gaps in postsecondary access and attainment in the United States. Many data sources, as well as the dozens of practitioners interviewed for this paper, affirm this.

The majority of K-12 public school students are now students of color, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the majority of all Americans will be people of color by 2043.¹ But the proportion of college students of color was just 43.7% in 2018.² As our nation's demographics continue shifting, we must increase attention and energy on ensuring this new majority is set up to succeed in education and training after high school. Our economic future depends upon it.

The work of increasing students' readiness for postsecondary education and training is complex. It is multifaceted and requires the support of many community stakeholders. No one person, team, or organization alone can transform postsecondary outcomes in a substantial or sustainable fashion.

This paper provides insights to guide the work of stakeholders throughout the system: those in classrooms and schoolhouses, district offices, partner organizations, and statehouses. Whatever the starting point, there is something for everyone interested in moving the needle for the new majority.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Determined efforts by National College Attainment Network (NCAN) member organizations and partners over the past 25 years have resulted in substantial changes in policy and practices in the college access field around the U.S. **The percentage of undergraduate students of color (the non-White share of undergraduates) increased by about 50% between 1996 and 2016.**³

Equity gaps in enrollment by race/ethnicity have been closing substantially for Hispanic students, though the narrowing of gaps for Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students has slowed in recent years.

The college access field's focus has shifted to ensure the promising growth in college enrollment also proceeds to attainment. Even though they have made up a lot of ground, students of color still face significant attainment gaps. By 2019, just 40% of Black students, 36% of Pacific Islander students, and less than a third of Hispanic and American Indian/Native American students (from ages 25 to 29) had earned a postsecondary credential, according to recent statistics.⁴ The gap is even more evident for four-year degree attainment. Less than 30% of young adults from Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander backgrounds have earned a bachelor's degree.⁵

Closing access, opportunity, and attainment gaps requires not only the familiar collaboration and corresponding action of traditional collective impact, but also addressing issues of social and economic injustice and structural racism.⁶ By surfacing these issues and including traditionally underrepresented groups in determining a collaborative agenda and resource allocation, communities can work to build leadership and power among those who have been disenfranchised.

K-12 AWARENESS AND CAPACITY TO PROMOTE COLLEGE ATTAINMENT

Three assertions guide how this report thinks about K-12 systems' approaches to college and career readiness:

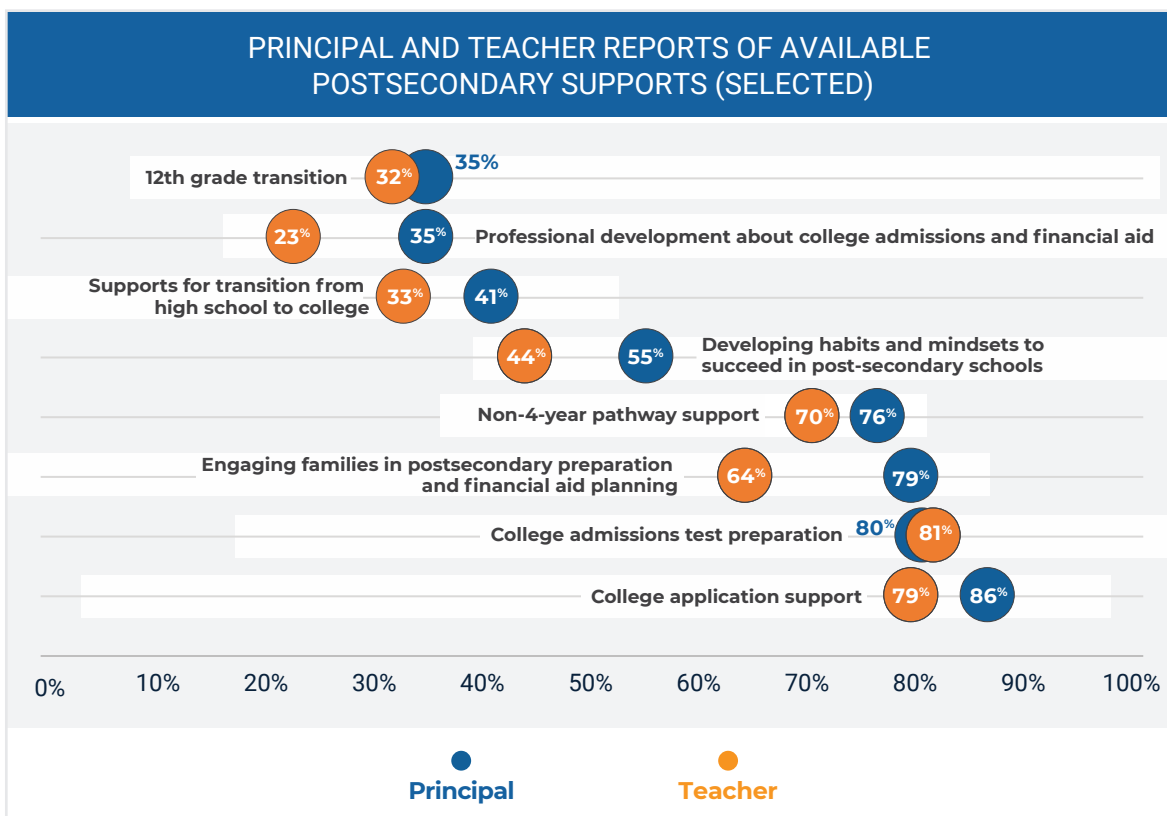
1. Most school districts are not looking at data to understand matriculation, persistence, and completion patterns after high school, but such data are easily and affordably available through the National Student Clearinghouse.
2. Preparation for college requires students and staff to have a thoughtful approach to classes in high school; support for navigating the college process; and helping each student find the right postsecondary pathway. Many schools do not presently have this capacity.
3. Schools do not have to do this alone. Many community-based organizations can help with providing student supports.

Relatively few districts monitor and report their students' postsecondary outcomes. While actual college outcome data could and should serve as a critical guide to gauging the success of college readiness efforts, many school leaders lack this information. A 2020 review of the nationally representative American Educator Panels showed 51% of high school principals reported having no access to college graduation data for their graduates.⁷

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is the country's sole comprehensive source for college enrollment data. It covers 98% of U.S. postsecondary enrollments across more than 3,600 colleges and universities. The NSC StudentTracker for High Schools service offers both aggregate and student-level files on enrollment and degree attainment outcomes. These data can help schools make data-informed decisions about their college advising and better understand their students' postsecondary pathways.

Despite the availability of low-cost data reports from the NSC⁸, **nearly half of schools that serve 12th graders do not receive the NSC's StudentTracker data to affirm whether their graduates are enrolling, persisting, and completing a college education.**⁹

Mapping backward from college success to college readiness brings us to postsecondary advising. This is work that should involve a greater cross section of school staff than it presently does in many districts and schools. Although expanding postsecondary advising beyond the school counseling department is still relatively new work in the field, there is growing awareness of the need. The 2020 RAND report on the American Educator Panels also highlighted areas where teachers and principals see both progress and urgent needs in terms of postsecondary supports (see the chart below).¹⁰ Just 41% of principals and 33% of teachers report the availability of supports for the transition from high school to college. The reported availability of professional development about college admissions and financial aid was even lower for both groups.



School counselors and other staff are not alone in preparing students for college and career readiness. Community-based organizations of all shapes and sizes across the country lend critical capacity to districts and schools in providing college and career readiness services and helping students complete key college-going milestones. What these relationships look like in practice varies widely in scope and implementation. Some successful partnerships also incorporate the colleges and universities where a district's students most often matriculate. No matter the arrangement, the fact remains that there are a number of supports students need in order to successfully pursue a postsecondary pathway, and partnerships are a viable and valuable way to provide them.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FEATURED COMMUNITIES

The communities highlighted in this paper are moving the needle on good postsecondary outcomes for students in the new majority by using data and partnerships in thoughtful and innovative ways.

This work, important for equity and our country's future, starts with critical fundamentals. Districts need to collaborate internally and externally. Too often, staff are so focused on their respective "lanes" that they can miss K-12 education's big picture: successfully preparing students to identify, pursue, and thrive in a viable, fulfilling postsecondary pathway of their interest.

NCAN selected the featured communities because they represent the new majority of students and because they have committed to providing students with access to learning experiences, credentials, and supports.

While none of the featured communities has all of their challenges figured out, each is coming to them with a data-informed lens and a must-do attitude while creatively problem-solving with their partners.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

SCHOOL-BASED PRACTITIONERS

- As you begin to plan for the upcoming school year, take stock of your current college and career readiness partners, programs, and practices.
- Ask for National Student Clearinghouse data if they are not currently available to you.
- Bring your staff (school counselors, college and career advisers, career and technical education (CTE) teachers, and teacher leaders involved with advisory period programming) and partners (colleges/universities and college access organizations) together to get clear on roles, responsibilities, and ways to monitor progress.

- Take time to share facilitation responsibilities to build capacity. For starters, be sure this school-based college and career readiness team is familiar and comfortable with the postsecondary data available through whatever systems or platforms you are using.
- Request training sessions from district staff as needed for new systems, data, practices, and/or school staff.

DISTRICT PRACTITIONERS

- Establish a cross-departmental college and career readiness team that can help design, maintain, promote, and train on understanding a postsecondary success dashboard with key metrics that include available postsecondary data by school. Help schools use backward mapping to understand whether students are on track to succeed after high school.
- Get National Student Clearinghouse data if they are not currently available.
- Allocate district resources, or find a community partner, to support postsecondary data analysis.
- Help current and prospective partners understand the district's college and career readiness strategy and key metrics, and how these partners can best connect to support that vision.
- Signal to schools and school leaders that this is a district priority (through accountability, key performance indicators (KPIs), etc.).

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Take time to understand the priority areas in your school district's strategic plan, so you can better convey the alignment of your work.
- Ask the district to obtain and analyze National Student Clearinghouse data if they are not currently, and offer support to do so.
- Learn what steps your organization can take – such as keeping copies of parent release forms for students' academic data and a roster of the students you serve, with their school ID numbers – to make it easier to discuss possibilities for streamlining data collection, reporting, and sharing for your organization's work.
- Stay connected to existing collaborative networks to identify and generate partnership opportunities, thereby ensuring more efficient use of resources in your organization and community.



STATE POLICYMAKERS

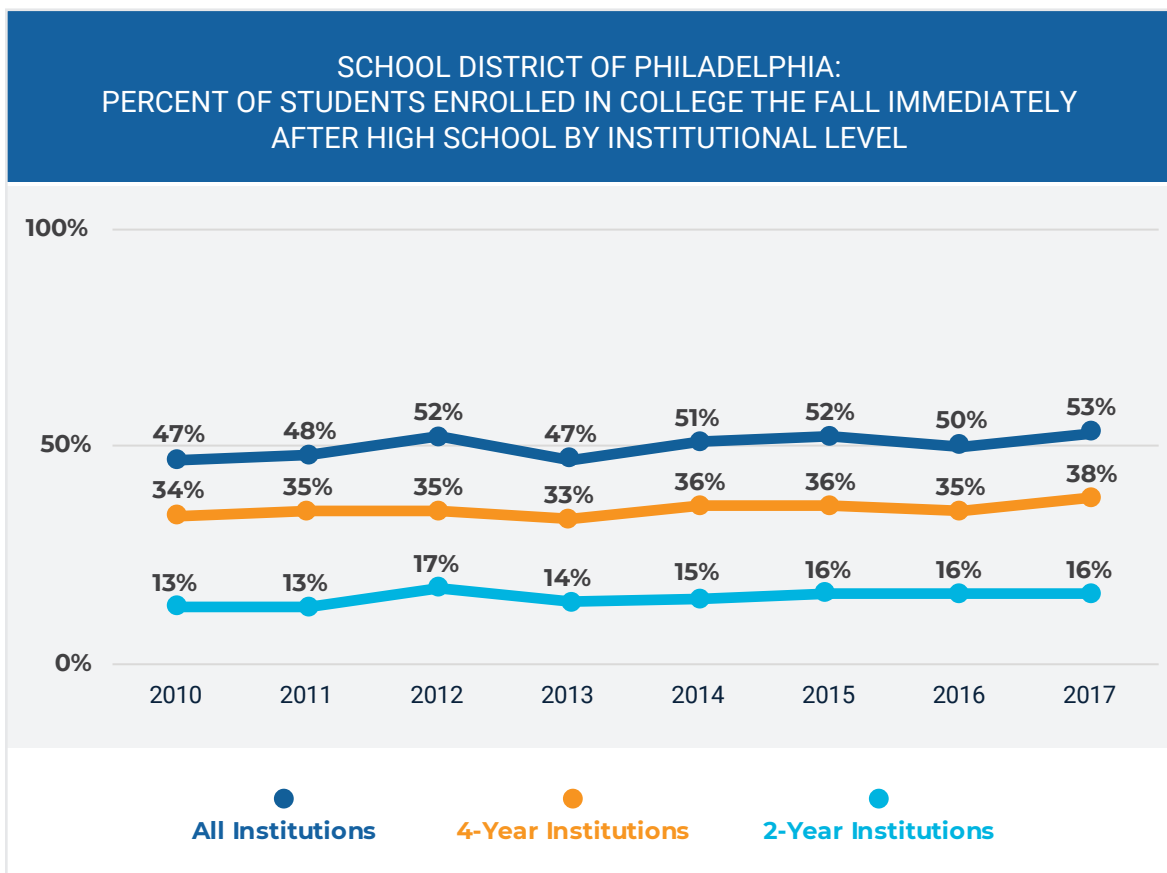
- Consider opportunities to:
 - Leverage policy to increase college access through setting the expectation that all high school seniors complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in order to graduate.¹¹ Provide completion data to schools and community-based organizations that can support families who need assistance.
 - Smooth the road to postsecondary success by establishing expectations and providing support for earlier and more equitable access to college and career credentials, including dual enrollment and early college opportunities, as well as funding support for credentialing exams.
 - Incentivize school and staff success in supporting students' earning postsecondary credentials (cf. Florida's articulated acceleration programs¹²).
 - Ensure free college programs are equitable. An equitable program will cover all tuition and fees before applying federal or other state grant aid, and allow federal and state need-based aid to cover non-tuition and fee expenses at both the associate and bachelor's degree levels for students, whether dependent or independent, full-time or half-time.
 - Permit undocumented students (including DACA recipients) to attend public colleges and universities, at in-state tuition levels, and provide need-based financial aid for those who are income-eligible.
 - Obtain NSC StudentTracker data at the state agency and distribute this information to all school districts and high schools.



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

PENNSYLVANIA





Source: School District of Philadelphia

STRATEGIC GOAL 1:

Getting 100% of graduating students college and career ready

GUIDING PRACTICES:

1. MAKE POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS A CLEAR PRIORITY.

2. MAKE IT EASY TO UNDERSTAND THE VISION.

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is a large, complex system, serving nearly 203,000 students across 342 schools. From 2010 to 2018, SDP's college-going rate increased from 47% to 53%.

Although not substantially different from the college enrollment rates of districts with similar populations, the 3 percentage-point improvement in enrollment into four-year institutions and overall enrollment from 2016 to 2017 are notable for a large district. Further investigation revealed lessons that can inform other districts' work.

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Philadelphia has successfully leveraged catalytic funding to establish enduring structures. In addition to high-impact programming funded through the federal GEAR UP grant, SDP has benefited from strategic philanthropic support.

To help strengthen SDP's data infrastructure, the Neubauer Family Foundation in Philadelphia spurred a collaboration that allowed SDP to learn and adapt tools from the Chicago Consortium for School Research (CCSR). SDP's adaptation of CCSR's well-known 9th Grade On-Track system served as a strong starting point for a new era of increasing transparency. In 2014, SDP began reporting postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion through the use of NSC data.

GEAR UP remains a highly competitive grant opportunity that no district can be certain of winning, but the benefits of SDP's work with a local foundation are informative for other communities to consider how to develop strategic capacity for data-driven decision-making.

Since fall 2018, SDP's District Performance Office has built on the original set of NSC data published in the 2014-15 school year. The office now shares college readiness, matriculation, and persistence data in several ways, ranging from a robust set of dashboards and reports for internal use by school and district leaders, to publicly available data reports and displays. The SDP data team also worked with colleagues overseeing schools more directly to build data literacy for understanding the NSC data.

PUBLICLY AVAILABLE SDP DATA REPORTS AND DISPLAYS:

- [District Scorecard](#)
- [School Progress Reports](#)
- [School Profiles](#) (see "College/Career" tab)
- [School Performance Data](#)

While SDP Superintendent Dr. William Hite's team utilized catalytic investments to generate a better understanding of SDP's college access and success outcomes, a period of financial austerity limited the district's capacity to ensure comprehensive advising services were available to all students. Especially during the difficult financial times, SDP relied on a variety of college access providers from the community to supplement the work of the district's school counselors, whose primary focus has been trauma-responsive practices and other aspects of the social-emotional domain of school counseling.

ADVISING, PARTNERSHIPS, AND LOCAL CONTEXT

SDP also made investments to establish stronger postsecondary advising structures. In 2019, SDP dedicated a significant portion of increased city funding to creating a new Office of Postsecondary Readiness (OPSR). This new office is a strong support structure for college and career readiness based on a strategic plan for improving high schools¹³ that calls for all middle and high school students to have learning resources and experiences that ensure postsecondary planning. SDP invested in creating a new leadership position, a new focus on coordinating effective partnerships, and the addition of full-time, school-based college and career coordinators to supplement and support the work of school counselors. Given counselors' focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), and the variability in the range of partner resources by school, the new OPSR team has been instrumental in introducing and supporting new expectations for more consistent college and career advising and experiences.

To better ensure alignment in advising resources and practices across the city, the OPSR team teamed up with the SDP Office of Strategic Partnerships to convene a quarterly College and Career Readiness (CCR) Forum in 2019. The founding partners consist of nonprofit organizations that have used outside funding to provide CCR services at no cost to SDP over the years, including 12PLUS, College Possible, Philadelphia Academies, Inc., the Philadelphia Education Fund, Steppingstone Scholars, Uncommon Individual Foundation, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Youth Policy Institute.

The mayor fully supports increased investment in college access, proposing significant new investments in dual enrollment and in students who matriculate to the Community College of Philadelphia after graduation. The city's new Catto Scholars program will provide \$63 million over five years for scholarships to cover not only last-dollar tuition needs but also provide \$1,500 per semester for food, books, and transportation. The program also includes \$20 million over five years for staff and support.

Philadelphia is adapting the Catto Scholars model from the City University of New York (CUNY) system's successful ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) model. ASAP helps students earn associate degrees within three years by providing a range of financial, academic, and personal supports. Among other positive outcomes, ASAP students graduate at more than double the rate of their non-ASAP peers, and students from underrepresented groups appear to see even greater benefits than other students.¹⁴

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

TAMIR HARPER





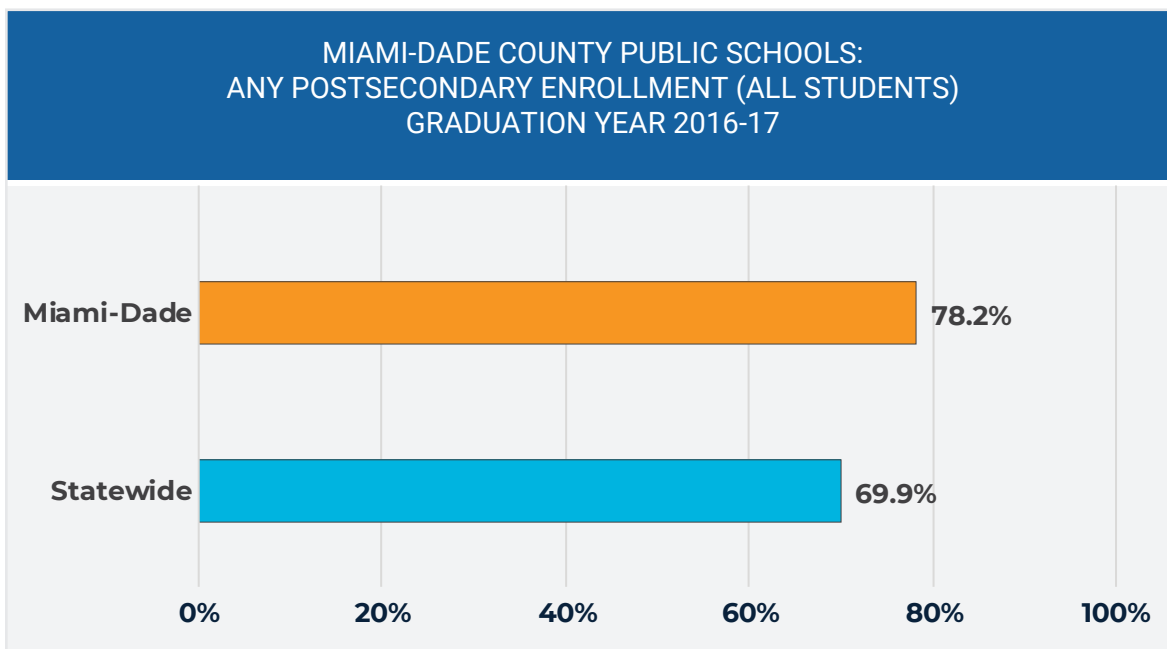
As in any community, Philadelphia's best evidence of success is in the experiences of their graduates. Class of 2018 graduate Tamir Harper, a member of the School District of Philadelphia Superintendent's Advisory Council and the District's K-12 Counseling Advisory Group, credits a dual enrollment experience in 11th grade with helping him develop the self-management and interpersonal skills needed for college success. Tamir is currently thriving as a student at American University in Washington, D.C.

Photo credit: <https://tamirdharper.com>



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

FLORIDA



Source: Florida Department of Education

The Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) “Vision 20/20” strategic plan’s goal for student achievement envisions students succeeding “academically, personally, and civically,” as measured in part by having a postsecondary plan and “successfully entering the higher education arena and/or the workforce.”¹⁵

GUIDING PRACTICES:

1. STATES CAN PLAY A BIG ROLE IN MAKING CCR A FOCUS BY INCENTIVIZING ACCESS AND SUCCESS.
2. TAKE A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO PROGRAMS AND TO UNDERSTANDING THE DATA.
3. BE OPEN TO LOCAL NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING.

ADVISING, PARTNERSHIPS, AND LOCAL CONTEXT

For over a decade, Superintendent Alberto Carvalho has led M-DCPS to national distinction, with innovative schools offering a wide variety of academic and career-themed options for students and families (over 380 magnet programs, at 114 schools).¹⁶ Magnet options include STEM schools like BEAT (Bio-Medical Environmental Agricultural Technology) and COAST (Ocean Academy of Science & Technology); schools focused on film, interior design, and fashion; health magnets for veterinary science, pre-medicine, and sports medicine; and programs focused on aviation, architecture, construction design, multimedia entertainment technology, and many other fields.

This personalized approach is paying off. In January 2020, for the ninth straight year, M-DCPS received more national magnet merit awards (67) than any other school district. In 2018, Carvalho was named National Urban Superintendent of the Year, as the state of Florida awarded the district an “A” grade for the first time. This was based on two M-DCPS cities rating as No. 1 and No. 3 on the Education Equality Index from Education Cities and Great Schools rankings, respectively. M-DCPS achieved high levels of student academic success while serving an overall student body ranked No. 1 among the state’s large districts in proportion of students of color (93%), No. 4 in percentage of students from low-income backgrounds (66%), and No. 1 in proportion of English learners (20%).¹⁷ Superintendent Carvalho’s response to these achievements?

*“That sounds like mission impossible.
But we turned it into mission inevitable.”*

To achieve this mission, M-DCPS applies a wraparound approach to postsecondary readiness. In addition to school counselors, who lead monitoring and support of key early warning indicators like attendance and progress toward graduation; most Miami-Dade high schools have College Assistance Program (CAP) advisers to help students create, refine, and follow individual postsecondary plans. Many schools also have graduation coaches to assist struggling learners to stay on track with a variety of related indicators, such as state test requirements, SAT testing, and GPAs. **External partnerships are key to Miami-Dade’s approach to addressing outside-school factors that present challenges to students and families.**

One model partnership program that promotes postsecondary access and success is Project UP-START, a Title I-funded wraparound support program for youth facing homelessness. Superintendent Carvalho continues to support Project UP-START because he, too, was once homeless. “I know what it’s like to feel the harsh concrete as your mattress and the stars as your blanket,” Carvalho said. “I don’t want kids in our community to feel that same experience.”¹⁸

While Miami is a travel destination for many, a recent study showed it is also the most unaffordable rental market in the country, ranking higher than even San Francisco. As a result, Project UP-START is serving 10,000 students who lack fixed, regular, or adequate housing. Carvalho is known for his effective work fostering productive partnerships in the community, and Project UP-START is a prime example. M-DCPS and its partners in the Helping Our Miami-Dade Youth (HOMY) Collective – a collaborative of 100 agencies, including Miami-Dade College, Florida International University, and Florida Atlantic University, working together to ensure all Miami-Dade youth have safe and stable housing – have taken a design-thinking approach to identifying real needs and opportunities for the students served through Project UP-START.

HOMY committees meet monthly to build on a growing array of supports, ensuring shelter and food for youth, with a focus on providing personal liaisons for smooth transitions from a shelter to a college dorm. The collective uses social media and innovative approaches for outreach. The Office of Partnerships at M-DCPS leads fundraising to ensure the graduating high school seniors have the materials and supplies they need for college. HOMY raises funds to continue to provide support through and even after college graduation, through their AOK Scholars program.

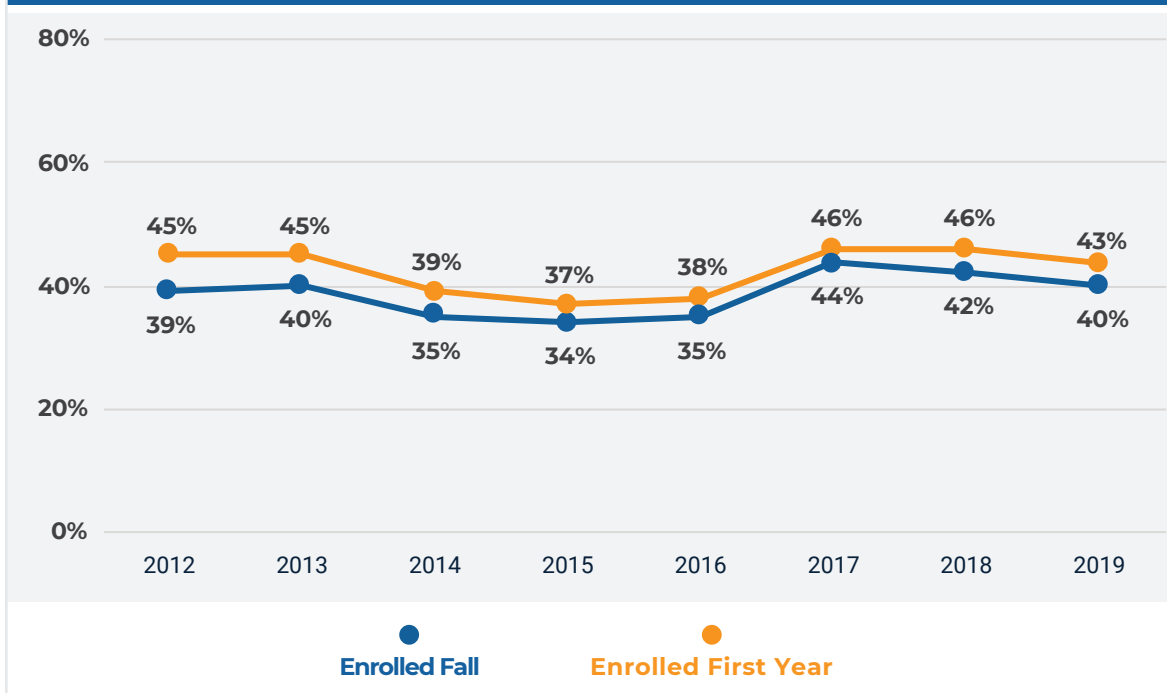
Another reason M-DCPS has such a high postsecondary enrollment rate is that in the Florida P-20 system, school districts themselves include technical college programs for graduates, allowing for a smoother transition after graduation. Additionally, the majority of 2017 M-DCPS graduates (67%) who went on to public colleges or universities in Florida enrolled in Miami Dade College (MDC), which confers more associate degrees than any other community college in the country. The institution is also No. 1 in associate degrees awarded to both Hispanic and African American students. MDC enrolls more students of color than any other college or university in the U.S., and the college's 89% success rate reflects that 45% of full-time students have graduated after three years, another 25% are still enrolled in good standing, and 19% left with transferrable credits.



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LANCASTER

PENNSYLVANIA

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LANCASTER: PERCENT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE THE FIRST FALL AND FIRST YEAR FOLLOWING HIGH SCHOOL



Source: School District of Lancaster

VISION: Every child will be academically and emotionally prepared to successfully enter college or the workforce.

GUIDING PRACTICES:

1. MAKE IT FUN AND EASY FOR TEACHERS AND OTHERS TO GET INVOLVED WITH POSTSECONDARY ADVISING.
2. ADD CAPACITY THROUGH RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS, E.G., WITH LOCAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

From listening to students, staff, and the community in her first year as superintendent of the School District of Lancaster (SDOL), Dr. Damaris Rau heard a clear need for a focus on postsecondary success. To act on this need the following year, Rau established a requirement for all high school seniors to develop a postsecondary plan. She began identifying opportunities to build a culture of high expectations – a belief that all students could thrive in life after high school – and the necessary support for students and staff to live out that belief. One of those supports included the establishment of an office focused on college and career services; Rau hired Dr. Jeremy Raff to lead it.

In terms of culture building, what began with “College and Career First Fridays,” when teachers were encouraged to dress up in apparel from their alma maters, has steadily grown into a strong system of comprehensive advising across school staff roles at SDOL’s sole high school: J.P. McCaskey High School.



*Dr. Jeremy Raff, coordinator of College & Career Services, (left)
with Dr. Damaris Rau, SDOL superintendent, on a College and Career First Friday.*

Along the way, Rau went to her school board and garnered support for investing in the start of a district structure to support those high expectations. With the backing of Rau and the school board, Raff built a team of advisers to partner with McCaskey’s school counselors. These advisers provide dedicated time and expertise for key tasks in the college exploration, application, and enrollment processes.

ADVISING, PARTNERSHIPS, AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Momentum for college and career readiness has been building in SDOL's lone high school. Raff's team, with input from teachers and other SDOL staff, organized a set of "teacher-ready" college and career readiness resources. During the 2019-20 school year, nearly 200 teachers, counselors, principals, and other administrators completed a new online college and career readiness support course. An encouraging 69% of teachers surveyed mid-year indicated they have used the information they learned with students.

SDOL has done some innovative work leveraging its graduates' postsecondary outcomes to inform the services that Raff and his team provide to current students. NCAN featured SDOL's work on summer melt prevention¹⁹, but the capacity to inform advising does not lie in an outsized research and evaluation office. SDOL's coordinator of assessment, evaluation, and research, Ryan Stralo, points out that the postsecondary access and success work stays a priority as a result of the focus given to it by him and Raff.

Before diving into the data, Raff took the time to work with Stralo and colleagues to understand which data measures were most pertinent for their students and graduates. To handle some of the heavy analytical lifting, Raff expanded the district's capacity by tapping into local partners. SDOL's work with Franklin and Marshall College's Center for Opinion Research informed and focused SDOL's interactions with students and families. Using the results they garnered from predictive analytics, Raff and his team ensure that students who are interested in college but most at risk for not enrolling get the additional attention and support they need.

To make the data actionable for supporting students, the SDOL team created an index for tracking the completion of tasks associated with specific postsecondary pathways: college, military, short-term training, or the workforce. Students earn points for the "quality" of their plan, based on completion of the tasks. For the college pathway, students would be flagged for additional support if they had anything lower than a high-quality plan, defined as scoring more than 70 points on the following scoring system:

- **Identify college(s) of interest: 5 points**
- **Submit college application: 10 points**
- **Accepted to college: 15 points**
- **Confirm college enrollment: 25 points**
- **Complete FAFSA: 20 points**
- **Complete Pennsylvania State Grant form: 15 points**
- **Submit scholarship application: 10 points**

Each fall, the high school's counselors identify approximately 100 students who need additional, in-depth postsecondary planning support. These students then receive extra help from one of Raff's college and career staff members, who takes over accountability for post-graduation planning and support. SDOL maintains a dashboard for reporting the post-graduation planning progress for each "caseworker," including college and career staff and counselors (for the students not flagged in the fall for additional support).

SDOL has also expanded its advising capacity through higher education partnerships. In addition to working closely with their local scholarship fund to ensure students have the resources they need for college, SDOL established partnerships for expanded in-school advising support. Advisers from the Pennsylvania College Advising Corps – a consortium of Dickinson College, Franklin & Marshall College, Gettysburg College, and Millersville University, and a branch of the national division of the College Advising Corps – work primarily with the district's juniors and seniors.

SDOL's thoughtful approach to strengthening postsecondary advising supports demonstrates how partnerships can maximize a community's resources without reliance on significant outside funding.



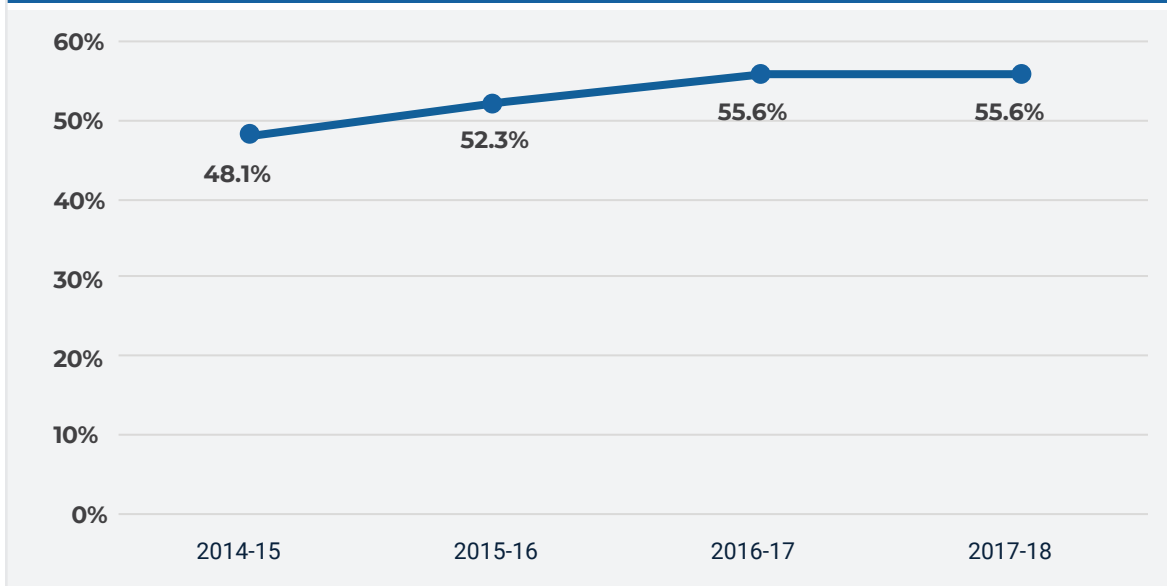


BROWNSVILLE
INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEXAS



BROWNSVILLE ISD: PERCENT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE THE FALL IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL



Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

MISSION STATEMENT: Brownsville Independent School District will graduate students who are prepared to excel in higher education and successfully pursue career opportunities in a changing global society by maximizing resources to ensure equitable opportunities for all students.

GUIDING PRACTICES:

1. FORMALIZE STRUCTURES THAT INCREASE ACCESS AND SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS THROUGHOUT THE PIPELINE.
2. WHOLE COMMUNITY EFFORTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
3. IDENTIFY A CONCRETE GOAL, SUCH AS INCREASING FAFSA COMPLETION, AND BUILD FROM THERE.

Brownsville ISD (BISD), located in the Rio Grande Valley on the U.S.-Mexico border, serves about 45,000 students, 98% of whom are Hispanic, 89% of whom are economically disadvantaged, and 35% of whom have limited English proficiency. It is also the home of a longtime effort focused on postsecondary readiness. A 2011 postsecondary planning and success grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation spurred planning and action for community partners to work in concert with BISD. This resulted in a collaborative initiative called Partners for Postsecondary Success, more commonly known as “All In.”²⁰ In addition to federal financial aid available through the FAFSA, Texas has a corresponding funding mechanism – TASFA – that helps ensure all students, even the 13% in BISD who cannot complete the FAFSA due to being undocumented, can get the support they need for college.²¹ While increasing the rate of BISD students completing the FAFSA and TASFA was the initial focus of All In, thanks to stable, shared leadership, the initiative has continued to grow in reach and impact.

The All In Partners for Postsecondary Success initiative has a clear and comprehensive, data-driven framework.²² The partnership’s long-term focus and commitment has allowed All In to grow its reach from an initial focus on increasing FAFSA completion to addressing root causes and next steps through the postsecondary pipeline. At each step, the partnership has used data to drive interventions to support student persistence and success.

The framework now includes six key steps from high school through employment, providing inspiration for the ultimate potential of partnerships in other communities.

1. Preparation: Ready and motivated for postsecondary success

- High school and postsecondary curriculum
- Career, college, and financial aid counseling, including FAFSA orientation and assistance
- SAT prep
- Coaching toward high academic expectations
- Job shadowing/internship opportunities

2. Connection: Interest to application

- Consistent college and career ready standards
- Foster college-going norms supported by peers and trusted adults
- Increase understanding of college requirements, application and financial aid processes; improve information
- Dual enrollment and Early College High Schools (on-ground, online options), AP, etc.
- Take college placement exam in high school
- Enrollment directly from high school

3. Entry: Enrollment to gatekeeper courses

- Diagnostic assessment and placement tools
- Mandatory “intrusive advising, attendance, life skills courses, declared courses of study linked to career pathways”
- Improved academic catch-up (prevention, acceleration, supplemental instruction, concurrent enrollment, contextualization, and competency-based digital prep)
- Aggressive financial aid application support
- Course redesign to go further, faster, cheaper

4. Progress: Entry into course of study to 75% requirements completed

- Innovative programs to incent optimal (e.g., high intensity, continuous) attendance
- Leverage technology to make real-time feedback; intensive advising; and accelerated, flexible, and student-centered learning more available
- Intentional, accelerated competency-based programs of study leading to credentials in high-demand fields like STEM, health care
- Provide emergency aid to deal with unexpected life events

5. Completion: Complete course of study

- Mandatory “intrusive” advising
- Transfer with credential incentives
- Remove barriers to graduation (e.g., fees, forms)
- Learn and Earn programs that combine credential attainment and work experience in field of study toward career pathway

6. Employment: Obtaining a living wage job

- Enrollment in One-Stop system
- Paid internships and local hiring incentives
- Supervisory training
- Career and financial coaching toward job retention and advancement
- “Soft skills” training for resume preparation, job search, and interviewing
- Industry partnerships with postsecondary to create employment pathways

Close collaboration between Merrill Hammons, BISD's director of college and career readiness, and Traci Wickett, president and CEO of the United Way of Southern Cameron County (Rio Grande Valley), has helped guide the work of many higher education and community partners in support of BISD staff and students. Over time, the focus of the coalition advanced from FAFSA completion to 100% college acceptance. Apply Texas, the state's one-stop online portal for researching and applying to Texas public colleges and universities²³, aided this shift, which is now advancing to ensuring institutional verification of enrollment. In addition to several leaders from BISD and the United Way, the All In leadership team includes the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, Texas Southmost College, Workforce Solutions Cameron, the Community Development Corporation of Cameron, and businesses including Wells Fargo and Schneider Electric.

In terms of supports, the collaboration resulted in the establishment of College Go centers open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. These centers are staffed with support from area universities, including a full-time staff member from Texas A&M, as well as a partnership with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, which provides a cadre of college students through an AmeriCorps/work-study structure.

Like their peers in Lancaster, the Brownsville team has successfully enlisted all school faculty and staff in supporting students' postsecondary planning. In the words of Hammons and Wickett, what makes Brownsville stand out is:

"It's now embedded in policy and practice – not a one-off, not just something we did for a grant and stopped after the funding went away.

All In has changed the culture of the district – and the community – it's just an expectation that students will continue their education or training after high school. It can't just be a district doing this work."

The background features a dark blue field with a light blue diagonal stripe running from the top-left to the bottom-right. A thick orange diagonal stripe runs parallel to the light blue one, positioned above it. The text is centered in the dark blue area.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

While resources and approaches vary across these four communities, several common elements emerged through our investigation.

	CCR in Strategic Plan	CCR District Office	Data System incl. NSC	Advisers + School Counselors	Early College Learning at Scale	Community Partnerships
Philadelphia	X	X	X	X		
Miami-Dade	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lancaster	X	X	X	X	X	
Brownsville	X	X	X	X	X	X

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS, POLICYMAKERS, AND FUNDERS

CLEAR, SHARED VISION OF COLLEGE, CAREER, AND LIFE READINESS

There are a multitude of viable postsecondary pathways, options after high school that can lead to rewarding, fulfilling, family-sustaining careers: skilled trades apprenticeships and related training programs, associate degrees and certificate programs at community and technical colleges, four-year college and university programs, and military and civil service. This inclusive vision should be clear enough for internal and external stakeholders, including students and the broader community, to understand and embrace.

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS DISTRICT OFFICE

Implementing a coherent plan across a comprehensive vision of college, career, and life readiness requires effective coordination of the related work of school counseling, career and technical education, dual enrollment, college access, and school scheduling. Districts can better ensure a dedicated and unified focus on the work of postsecondary readiness by aligning its resources under a clear department and leader. Having a CCR district office sends a clear signal that postsecondary outcomes matter and better ensures those outcomes are considered in discussions of curriculum, programming, data use, and partnership.

DATA LITERACY, SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES, AND PRACTICES

Securing access to graduates' postsecondary outcomes through NSC StudentTracker, or an online system with NSC data included, is a critical step in making data-informed decisions about secondary programming. But having the data is only as useful as ensuring district and school staff can access and understand the information. As in the implementation of any educational effort, planning must include professional learning opportunities and resources for staff. As NSC data become visible and discussed among staff, it is also important to share the information with families and the community in ways they can understand. Ultimately, broader awareness and understanding allows for diversity of thinking, as stakeholders help inform solutions to challenges in postsecondary access and success.

ADVISERS AND SCHOOL COUNSELORS

In many districts, school counselors bear the responsibilities for postsecondary access without much opportunity for collaboration and support. Despite this reliance on school counselors, there are not enough of them in the U.S. Last year, the Education Trust revealed that only 1 in 5 high school students are enrolled in a school with a sufficient number of school counselors. This means there are 11 million high school students in a school without enough counselors.²⁴

Adding to the challenge of the counseling gap, most counselors have not received adequate training on college and career readiness. As highlighted in a recent Hechinger Report article, until recently, the focus of school counselor education has been student mental health.²⁵ While college and career readiness standards have been added to the accreditation requirements for counseling programs, colleges have until 2023 to comply with the change. The National College Attainment Network's resources, including its e-learning courses²⁶, help fill a vital gap in training counselors and college access and success advisers working through colleges and nonprofit organizations. As districts and schools work to maintain mental health supports for students, adding postsecondary advising capacity in the form of CCR specialists who can partner with school counselors is an additive approach to closing current support gaps.

Another potential solution is to build bridges to other departments that can help counselors provide supports to students. These departments' efforts can often be prioritized elsewhere, but a cohesive vision around college and career readiness can command the focus and accountability of other school personnel.

EARLY COLLEGE LEARNING AT SCALE

In a study of 1,000 students attending early college programs in five states, the American Institutes for Research found that 29% of students who participated in early college high school programs earned an associate degree in six years, compared with 11% of their peers who did not enroll.²⁷ By “stacking the deck” on behalf of students, giving them a head start rather than taking a wait-and-see approach, districts can make an impact almost instantly by putting dual enrollment and early college programming into practice at scale.

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Across the districts we investigated, and further illustrated by the NCAN national network, partnerships with local colleges, universities, college access providers, and community-based organizations bring added capacity and value to the work of increasing postsecondary access and success. While some of these partnership structures have become sophisticated over time, they all started with a shared focus, common goals, and a commitment to problem-solving to improve conditions and outcomes for students.

CONCLUSION

Whether via college or a career, it is now an imperative for students to pursue a pathway after high school. The four school districts profiled here offer valuable lessons and insights into different approaches to supporting students along those pathways. There are success stories like those told here all across the United States.

The K-12 education field must understand that it can support students to succeed on these postsecondary pathways, and the field must learn how to better deliver these supports and in so doing close longstanding equity gaps on the basis of income, race, and ethnicity. They don't need to do it alone; community-based organizations, higher education institutions, and employers all represent potential partners to help districts and schools shoulder the load and transform what students do after they cross the graduation stage. The future of the U.S. will be shaped in many ways by how well these stakeholders come together to collectively advance students' postsecondary attainment moving forward.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rudy Ruiz was a first-generation college student who 'beat the odds' in making it out of the low-income, inner-city Milwaukee neighborhood he grew up in, to graduate from Stanford University. Now completing his doctorate at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Rudy has dedicated his nearly 20-year career in education to opening doors and changing the odds for other members of the new majority.

Rudy began his education career as a high school math teacher serving Milwaukee Public Schools, initially working with English learners in the comprehensive public school that served his childhood neighborhood. Over time, he moved into school and district leadership positions, developing and implementing innovative approaches to supporting students at risk for not graduating.

Taking on broader roles leading college and career readiness efforts across MPS, Rudy studied and adapted many of the approaches developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) in their work partnering with the Chicago Public Schools. In addition to applying concepts to improve the success of students as they transitioned to high school, Rudy worked closely with embedded researchers from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin. While at MPS, Rudy refined data reporting systems on postsecondary readiness and success. He also utilized federal GEAR UP grant resources to catalyze collective impact efforts. That involved coordinating the work of 55 organizations across the community, with substantial improvements in key milestones. FAFSA completion in Milwaukee increased from 42% in 2013 to 72% in 2018, with the work having continued well beyond Rudy's tenure.

In later serving Baltimore City Public Schools, Rudy led the district's first college and career readiness department. He established a collective impact network for CCR and worked closely with the Baltimore Education Research Consortium housed at Johns Hopkins University to adapt and develop related tools and approaches. Over a two-year period, this work resulted in a majority of college-going graduates attending four-year institutions, reversing a trend that had developed in the preceding years.

As a close collaborator with NCAN, Rudy Ruiz now works through FourPoint Education Partners to support college, career, and life readiness efforts in communities across the U.S.



ENDNOTES

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2. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics/>
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4. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_caa.asp (May 2020 update).
5. Ibid.
6. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/collaborating-equity-justice-moving-beyond-collective-impact/>
7. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4344.html
8. At the time of this writing, a subscription to the service is \$425 per high school per year. <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/high-schools/studenttracker/>
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