

## Key Takeaways: June 2018

Since a state takeover in 2013, Camden has undergone a number of changes to improve the quality of schools and family access to different school options. A cornerstone of this strategy has been the city's [Renaissance schools](#), neighborhood schools operated in partnership with high-quality charter operators. Over the past several years, Camden has also invested in a unified [enrollment system](#), intensive community outreach, and differentiated support for traditional district schools. Early results of Camden's reforms [have been promising](#), but the city's education, nonprofit, and civic leaders must push forward on improving the quality of all schools—district, charter, and Renaissance—while maintaining families as key partners in the strategy.

### Challenges Ahead

#### ► Using a variety of strategies to continue district school improvement

At the end of the 2017-18 school year, the Camden City School District lost the only superintendent it has known since the state takeover in 2013. New leadership will reassess the city's education strategy, but any plan forward must focus on traditional district schools, especially at the high school level. The district has already started to revamp curriculum, and has implemented a gifted and talented program for all its schools, along with career and college readiness supports in high schools. Local nonprofits have been involved in addressing the emotional and mental health needs of students. New district leadership should continue to push forward on a differentiated, wrap-around approach using district resources and nonprofit partners. The district should also improve advanced academic opportunities while meeting struggling students at their level. Given the success the district has seen with autonomous Renaissance schools, district leadership should also consider providing greater decisionmaking authority to a set of schools or all schools through greater budgeting flexibility.

#### ► Being strategic about school expansion

Interviewees and CRPE survey data have identified that families in Camden want curricular and instructional variety, not just academic rigor. With safe passage a concern in Camden, the placement of new schools and the expansion of grade levels must be strategic and centered on family demand for curricular variety. The district should involve all charter schools in strategic discussions and planning. But charter operators at stand-alone and Renaissance schools will need incentives and RFPs, not just information, to adjust growth plans to accommodate community need. And the city may benefit from having a local board to guide portfolio management decisions for district, charter, and Renaissance options.

#### ► Developing avenues for school-based engagement

Directly engaging families has been a strength in Camden since the state takeover. And some schools, like Renaissance [Mastery](#) schools, are becoming an important part of the community by sharing resources, such as libraries and sports facilities. But identifying ways to improve the education experience citywide will require a more intentional effort to reach families in all schools. Parent/teacher organizations in many schools are underdeveloped. Interviewees report that families are not clear about how to access school leadership to discuss their concerns. [Camden Enrollment](#) and [Parents for Great Camden Schools](#) already work with families, so they are well-positioned to facilitate the development of more robust parent leadership teams. These teams can help families make sense of school quality information, train families in how to advocate for their student's needs, and collect family concerns about citywide issues. This will be an invaluable resource for Camden moving forward—an engaged community will inform system leaders of percolating issues, such as problems with school disciplinary processes. Families would also be informed partners in the city's push for improvement.

## Spotlight

### Nonprofit's New Trauma Model Key to Student Success

An unassuming row house in Camden has been training youth in coding for nearly two decades. The young people who come to [Hopeworks Camden](#) are 17 to 25 years old: dropouts, victims of violence, or struggling to stay in college or jobs. After a short training, youth are placed in an internship with one of Hopeworks enterprises or internship partners. At the end of the internship, Hopeworks places interns with local employers. If youth want to go to college instead, Hopeworks staff are on hand to help them navigate the process.

But for many years, two-thirds of all youth would finish their training only to drop out of the internship, job, or college courses.

After looking at their low success rate, leadership pivoted to focus on students and their experiences. To do that, the nonprofit added new staff roles and changed how services were delivered so that everything—from tech training to employment support—was infused with a trauma-informed approach.

Now, when youth come to the row house for training classes, Hopeworks asks how they are doing and what kind of support they need. Since incorporating a trauma model into their education programming, Hopeworks' success rates have risen to 90%, which means students complete their internship and go on to college or a job. Companies are coming to the nonprofit asking to be internship partners. The director, Dan Rhoton, says there is no secret sauce: "Connecting with kids where they are, helping them heal, and giving them skills. That's it—that's the whole trick."

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### Boundary Spanner Supports Ambitious District Projects, Elevates Families' Concerns

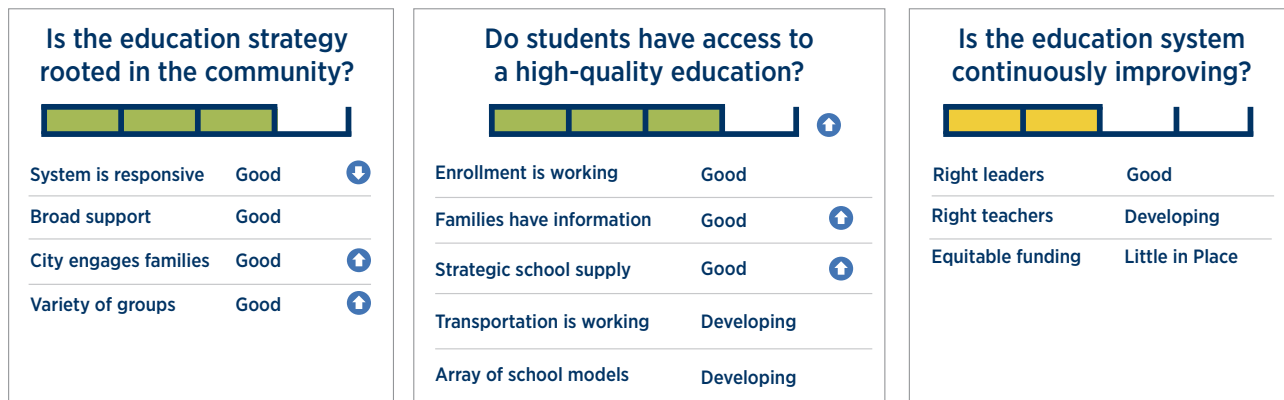
In Camden, one former little league organizer is now helping families be part of the strategy to improve the city's education.

The parent-led and staffed nonprofit, [Parents for Great Camden Schools](#) (PGCS), does advocacy work with charter, district, and Renaissance school families. The group has a close working relationship with the district and the families it represents. Its unique positioning allows PGCS to act as a boundary spanner between education leaders and family members.

PGCS has supported some of the district's more controversial moves, such as demolishing and rebuilding Camden High School. PGCS also elevates concerns that are percolating in the community. In 2018, the group helped families make sense of growth versus proficiency rates in a city where most schools are still at less than 10% proficiency across all grade levels.

The group also helps families navigate the choice process, but staff say they need many more boots on the ground to do the one-on-one outreach necessary to help families understand the options available to them.

## System Reforms



Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. An arrow shows increase or decrease from the 2017 score.

## Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Camden has made it possible for families to enroll in any school in the city and has improved many low-performing schools. These changes were only possible through intentional partnership with the community. Talent and school-level budget flexibility remain challenges, as does having a variety of new school models.

### Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



**Is the whole community engaged?** Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.



### Does the education system respond to community feedback?

During the 2014 rollout of the [Camden Commitment](#), families helped shape the citywide school discipline policy and reduced the city’s walk zone. Since then, the district has continued outreach efforts through social media and home visits. In addition, the district has a [Parent Advisory Council](#) that meets monthly. But interviewees said that more still needs to be done. One interviewee said that neighborhoods with failing district schools do not have many ways of engaging in the education strategy. And there is a perception that good avenues don’t yet exist for parents of charter and Renaissance schools to elevate their concerns.



**Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?**

In the past, the superintendent, mayor, city council, and governor have been well-aligned in their support of the city’s education strategy. As of June 2018 Camden has a new mayor and governor and will soon have a new superintendent. It remains to be seen what this means for the education strategy. The new mayor, Frank Moran, [publicly supports](#) Renaissance schools. The new governor, Phil Murphy, visited Camden before swearing in, but [has given](#) mixed messages about his support of charter schools.



**Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?**

On a case-by-case basis, the district has responded to community feedback about school closures, school reconstitution, and school operators for Renaissance schools. When a school closes, [Camden Enrollment](#) and [Parents for Great Camden Schools](#) help families transition to a new school. No charter schools have opened in the past several years, but interviewees remember that communities were not involved in opening schools, and a [2017 charter closure](#) was announced late in the school year.



**Are a variety of groups engaged in education?**

At the school level, organizations offer enrichment activities, and nonprofits and health-care providers support students suffering from trauma. However, interviewees noted that students need more organizational support to offer emotional and mental health services. Churches and local businesses are involved in the education strategy to some extent. The city has one active family advocacy group, Parents for Great Camden Schools, that operates in the north and east of Camden, and several other smaller organizations work with families in other parts of the city.

**Do students have access to a high-quality education?**



**Do school choice and supply meet family needs?** This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.



**Is the enrollment process working for families?**

In the 2015-16 school year, Camden implemented a unified enrollment system, [Camden Enrollment](#), which uses a single application for all magnet, traditional, Renaissance, and charter schools. The system is easy to use, with school maps and family resources. One charter operator, [LEAP Academy University School](#), has pulled out of the enrollment system. All other schools in the city are represented.



**Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?**

Camden Enrollment released a new school information guide for 2016-17, and has made improvements every year since then. In 2017-18, student growth rates and early childhood programs were added to existing proficiency rate, curriculum, and family service information. Camden Enrollment and Parents for Great Camden Schools have partnered to host community meetings and guide families through the choice process. 2018 interviewees noted that more nonprofits need to step in to help families make sense of their options. Families reportedly struggle to find a school that is a good fit, especially families with children who need special education and English language learner services.



**Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?**

Since 2015, Camden’s new school growth has been driven by [Renaissance schools](#) operated by Mastery, KIPP, and Uncommon charter networks. The expansion of Renaissance schools has slowed but still continues. Throughout this process, the district has been investing in traditional district schools. Early results are [promising](#). However, low-performing high schools persist, and interviewees noted a tension between how and where charter operators wanted to expand and what the community needs. Criteria for making closure, restart, and new school decisions exist but are not publicly available.



**Is transportation working for families?**

Camden offers free transportation to any school in the city outside a two-mile walk zone, via yellow school buses for K–8 students and bus passes for high school students. Many, but not all, Renaissance and charter schools provide courtesy busing. Despite these policies, interviewees reported that transportation is a major barrier for families, especially for families living within the two-mile walk zone. Camden has limited public transportation, and few families own cars. Abandoned buildings and no sidewalks in many neighborhoods make it unsafe for students to walk or wait for a bus.



**Does the school supply represent an array of models?**

Of the 10 schools that have opened in Camden since 2014-15, all of them have been Renaissance schools, which use a traditional instructional approach. Some variety exists among district and charter options, like [Big Picture](#), but 2018 interviewees noted that there are few Montessori, dual-language, and vocational school options.

**Is the education system continuously improving?**



**Do schools have the resources they need?** School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



**Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?**

2017 interviewees noted that Camden had enough principals for district and Renaissance schools, and were mostly satisfied with the quality of applicants. Renaissance partners, which include Mastery, KIPP, and Uncommon charter networks, have been using their own pipelines to develop leaders. However, system leaders worry that school leadership may be an issue as Renaissance schools expand. We did not have information about the quality or fit of charter leaders.



**Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?**

In 2017, district leaders identified some trouble filling teacher positions, especially in science, math, and special education. Camden has some teacher pipelines in place, and education leaders are currently working on a citywide recruitment campaign to attract teachers for district and charter schools.



**Does funding equitably follow students?**

The district does not use a student-based allocation formula, although it does weight funds based on student needs using New Jersey’s student-based allocation recommendations. Renaissance schools have control over their budgets (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2017-18).

**Data & Scoring**

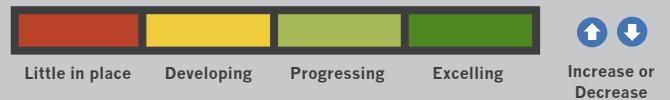
**Where did we get this information?**

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

**How did we score the system reforms and goals?**

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

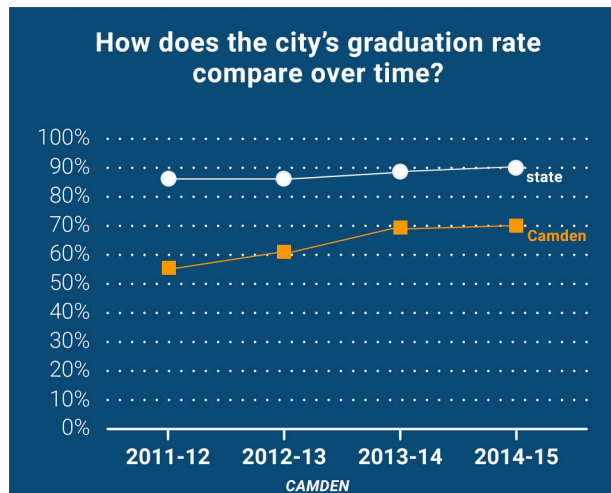
**Score Levels**



## Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

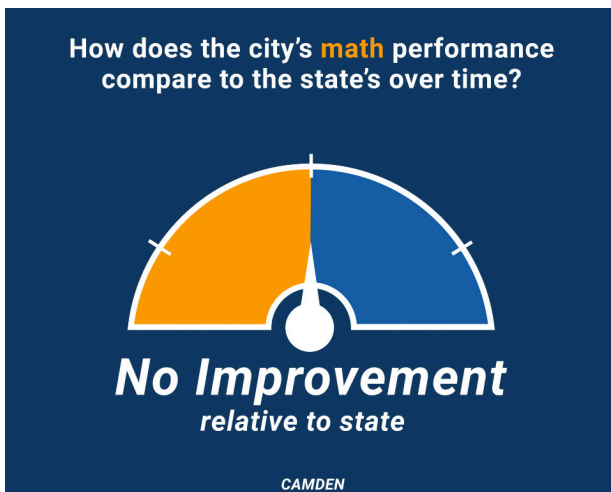
School proficiency rates in reading improved across the city, relative to the state. Graduation rates also improved, and student sub-groups enrolled in high school advanced math coursework at similar rates as the high school population. However, both proficiency and graduation rates remain far below state averages.

### Is the education system continuously improving?



- ▶ The city's graduation rate has been increasing, although in 2014-15 it still lagged behind the state's.

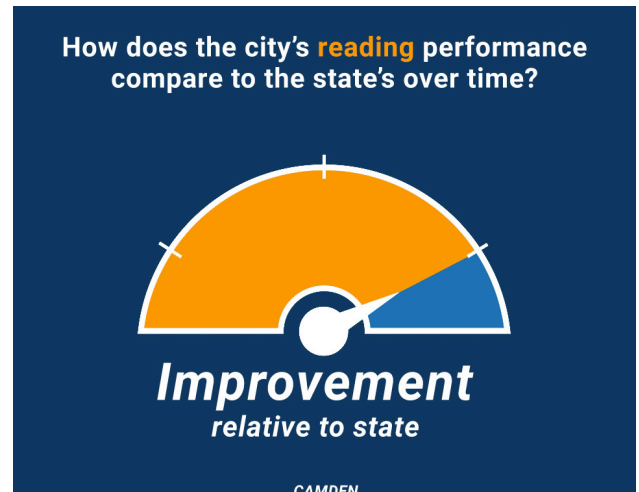
Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.  
Source: ED Facts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.



- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city's math trends in proficiency rates mirrored the state's performance trends. In 2014-15, the city's proficiency rate was 20 percentage points below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: New Jersey performance data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

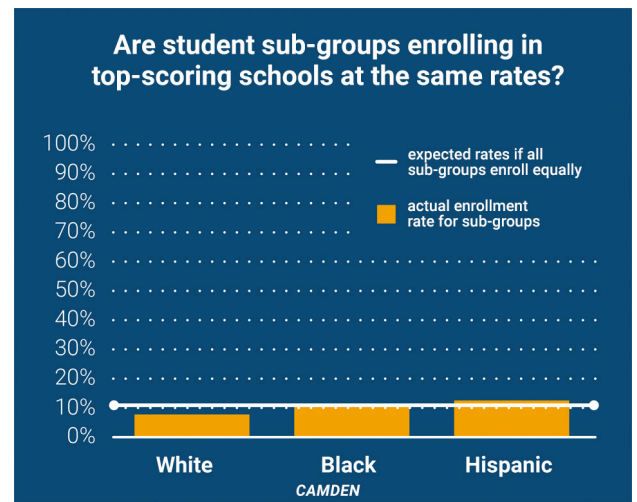
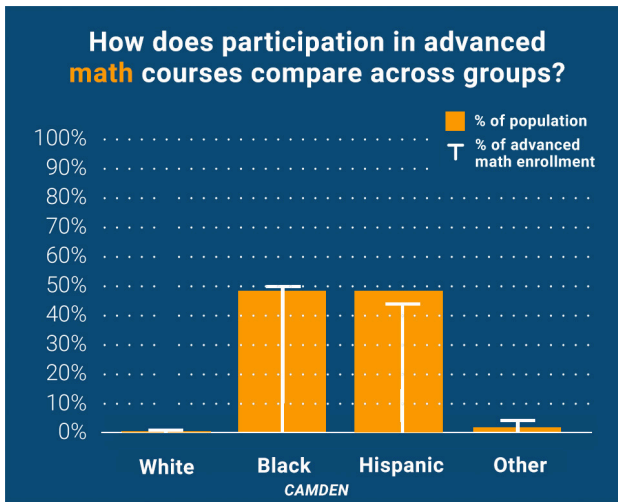


- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the proficiency gap between the city and state was closing in reading. In 2014-15, the city's proficiency rate was 25 percentage points below the state's proficiency rate was 25 percentage points below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: New Jersey performance data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

## Do students have access to a high-quality education?



► In 2013-14, black students enrolled in advanced math coursework at rates above their enrollment, while Hispanic students had disproportionately low enrollment.

*Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.*

*Source: U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.*

► In 2014-15, 12% of students in Camden enrolled in the city’s top-scoring schools. All students enrolled in top-scoring schools at similar rates as in medium- and low-scoring schools.

*Data: This figure shows whether students are equitably enrolled in the city’s top 20% performing schools, based on student proficiency in state reading assessments. Within a single student sub-group, we identify what percent is enrolled in top-, middle-, and low-performing schools. If the share of students enrolled in top-scoring schools citywide and the share of a particular sub-group are similar, this means that the sub-group is equally distributed across low-, middle-, and top-scoring schools.*

*Source: New Jersey Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011-12 to 2014-15.*

## Data & Scoring

### Where did we get this data?

- Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

### What makes the data citywide?

- We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.



## About Camden

In 2012, Camden schools had some of the worst student outcomes in New Jersey: not one school among the city’s 26 was meeting state standards. In 2013, the New Jersey Department of Education took over the district. Camden launched a unified enrollment and information system, Camden Enrollment, to provide families with better information and access to school options. To improve school quality, low-performing district schools joined in partnership with high-quality charter operators who manage these “Renaissance” schools as neighborhood district schools.

## School Choice in the City

All of the city’s schools are available for choice, although students are guaranteed a seat at their neighborhood school. By law, Renaissance schools must give preference to neighborhood students.

## Governance Model

The New Jersey Department of Education manages the city’s district schools and authorizes all charter schools.

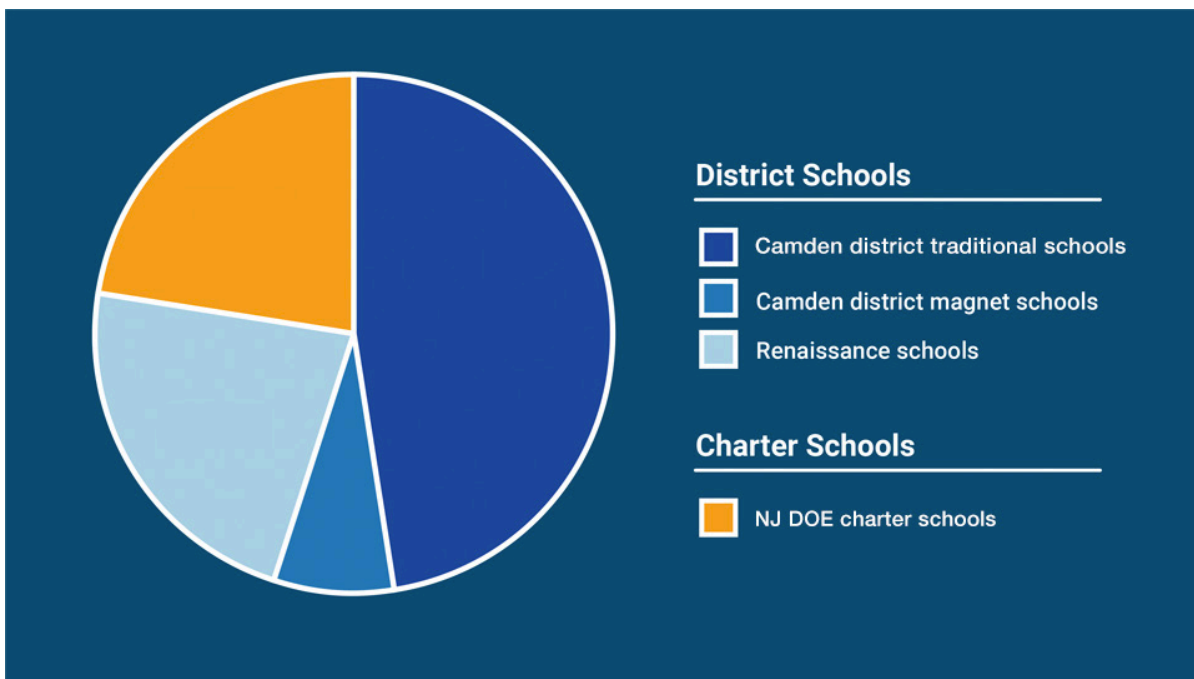
## 2016 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 14,975 students

Race and ethnicity: 54% Hispanic, 44% black, 1% white, 1% other

Low-income: 89% free and reduced-price lunch

## 2017 School Composition



Source: Enrollment data from the New Jersey Department of Education, 2014-15.  
School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

## About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies for the 2017-18 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through June 2018. These are updates to our original reports from the 2016-17 school year.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:  
[research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up](https://research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up)



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