

Key Takeaways: June 2018

There are reasons for optimism about the potential for improvement in Kansas City schools. District enrollment is on the upswing after years of declines, and the superintendent has the support of his board, city leaders, and the community. Some of Kansas City's charter schools, which comprise about half of the city's public schools, are among the best in Missouri. However, much work remains—one in three city schools scored in the bottom 5% of the state in 2016-17 and it appears that neither sector has a strong and coherent improvement strategy. The relationship between the district and charters is competitive, making it challenging for leaders to collaborate on systemic solutions to the many common problems facing their schools and families. Systemwide improvement is only possible if leaders come together to focus on increasing families' access to high-performing schools, attending to the city's most struggling schools, and providing ongoing and authentic opportunities for family and community engagement.

Challenges Ahead

► Intervening in the city's many struggling schools

One of the biggest challenges facing Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) is how to improve low-performing schools in both sectors. In 2016-17, one in three Kansas City schools performed in the bottom 5% of the state. While some low-performing charters have closed in recent years, overall, few low-performing schools in both sectors are improving, closing, or restarting. SchoolSmart KC, a new harbormaster organization, has started pushing for better state enforcement of consequences for low-performing schools in both sectors and initiated state-level conversations about improving the quality of charter sponsors. However, no action has yet occurred to resolve these issues. Despite the pressure of missing the performance growth needed last year to achieve full accreditation, KCPS has not yet developed a strategy for addressing its most struggling schools. A plan for targeting the district's chronically low-performing and under-enrolled schools for intervention, including closure, is critical. Finally, all of this work must be done in collaboration with the community. Sharing data about enrollment patterns, performance, and operational costs and inviting the community to weigh in on approaches will help build a sense of shared accountability for school quality and provide families with time to adjust to the outcome.

► Developing a citywide strategy and vision for education in Kansas City

The city benefits from having many nonprofits, an active faith community, several local foundations, and civic leaders that are all invested in and working to improve education and the lives of youth and families. However, stakeholders agree that there is no shared strategy for improvement, vision for education, or common set of goals to work toward. Better communication and collaboration is required from those working on behalf of the city's schools, including district and civic leaders, local authorizers and charter networks, nonprofits, the faith community, and local businesses. KCPS' superintendent has expressed more openness than his predecessors to working with charter leaders, but finding common ground has been challenging. One possibility is working together to ensure Kansas City schools are represented in state-level conversations about accountability and funding. As education and civic leaders address system-wide issues, school leaders across (and within) the district and charter sectors should share good practices and solutions to common problems. A few charters have collaborated to share transportation costs out of necessity, a practice other charters could replicate to resolve expensive busing or other issues.

► Helping families learn about their options and choose best-fit schools

Enrollment in Kansas City has stabilized and is slowly growing after years of decline. But to retain existing families and attract new ones, education leaders must further simplify enrollment procedures and help families find good options. The city may not be ready to unify enrollment across charter and district schools, but education leaders can take steps to streamline processes within each sector. The district took a positive step forward in implementing

online-only enrollment and aligning the timelines for applying to its Signature Schools (specialized schools with enrollment requirements) for the 2017-18 school year, but information about applying to these schools remains confusing. Four Kansas City charter schools accept the KC Central Application, a common form that enables families to apply to some or all of these schools using one application, and several charters offer online enrollment. These solutions simplify enrollment for some families, but the majority of Kansas City charters have their own processes and timelines that don't align with one another and the district. Show Me KC Schools, a local nonprofit that maintains an online and printed school guide and organizes school tours and enrollment fairs, also began providing one-on-one navigation services to 50 families seeking schools for the 2018-19 year, with plans to increase capacity. Their work reaches many families, but other organizations, as well as leaders in both sectors, could do more to help families—especially the city's most underresourced families—navigate the choice process. Simplifying the enrollment process could also improve equitable access to good options while education leaders work to improve quality citywide.

Spotlight

New Organization Invests \$5 million, Creates Fellowships to Engage Families

SchoolSmart KC, an education-focused nonprofit, launched in spring 2017 with support from local foundations. The organization aims to increase access to quality schools by expanding capacity at high-performing schools and investing in good schools that have the potential to improve and to close the proficiency gap between the city's schools and the state average by 2026.

In the year since their launch, SchoolSmart KC has invested significant resources in over half of the city's schools across the district and charter sectors, as well as directly in KCPS. They have invested over \$5 million into expanding and improving schools, created a fellowship to help seven schools develop and pilot plans for engaging families around academics, and started important conversations with critical stakeholders about issues ranging from providing wraparound services at schools for needy families to creating a common framework for holding all city schools accountable.

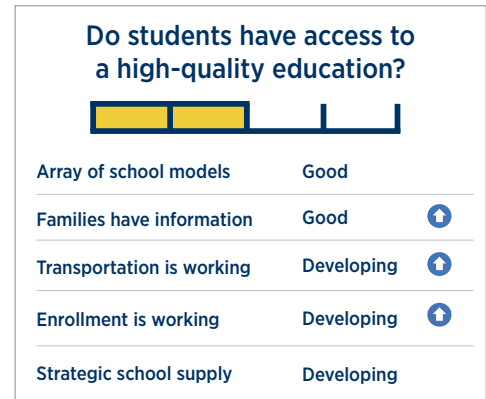
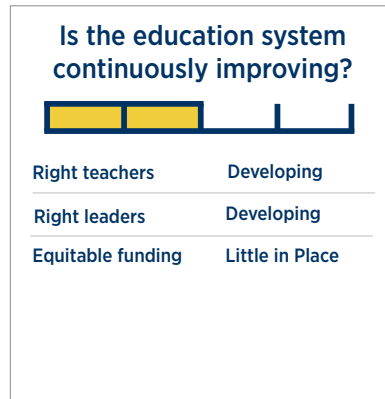
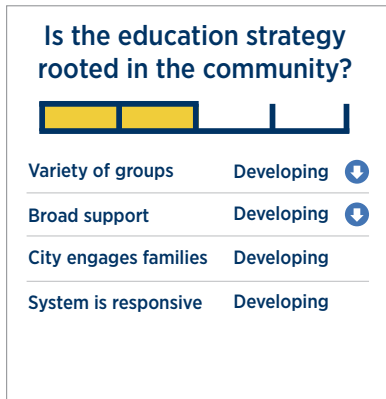
It is too early to identify the impact of SchoolSmart KC's investments and work in the community, but conversations with community, education, and civic leaders suggest appreciation for the resources and coordination SchoolSmart KC brings. Stakeholders share hope that SchoolSmart KC can build bridges within the fractured education community and provide needed leadership on strategy for improving education citywide.

Nonprofit's Myriad Approaches Help Parents Choose Schools

Show Me KC Schools, a nonprofit founded in 2009 by a local parent, helps families make sense of the schooling options available to them across traditional district schools, district magnets, public charter schools, and private schools. Show Me KC Schools hosts an online school guide that provides families with information about school academic performance, curriculum, after school programs, transportation options, and special education services. They also hosts school fairs and tours of schools and early childhood centers for parents, educators, and community members.

Recognizing the importance of their work, local funders provided grants to Show Me KC Schools in 2017 that enabled them to expand their staff and resources for families. With this added capacity, they developed a printed version of their school guide and distributed 6,000 copies throughout the city to reach more families, and began offering one-on-one support to families to help them choose a school. When a charter school slated for closure in 2018-19 delayed informing families about the plan until after some key enrollment deadlines had already passed, Show Me KC Schools helped many families understand the options available for the next year and supported them through the enrollment process.

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

Kansas City is making progress, but much work remains. The city benefits from a strong civic sector committed to educational improvement, but nearly one-third of the city’s schools are performing well below the state average. Both the district and charter sectors face challenges with hiring and retaining talented educators. Family engagement varies across schools within both sectors. Some aspects of enrollment have been simplified, but unaligned timelines and processes present challenges for families. Collaborating to identify a common strategy and vision for improving education citywide should be a top priority for leaders in order to resolve the city’s pressing systemic challenges.

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.



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

After years of mistrust stemming in part from low-performing schools, a failed desegregation policy, and controversial reform efforts, the public’s confidence in the education system is starting to return. Civic leaders in Kansas City are generally aligned around education initiatives, although most are either school-level support programs or focused on the school district, rather than cross-cutting citywide reforms. The mayor’s office is involved in education efforts, but Kansas City still has only a few citywide initiatives. The nonprofit Communities in Schools, which began providing academic and social supports in 11 Kansas City Schools in the 2017-18 school year, hosted a [well-attended forum](#) in spring 2018 that focused on the out-of-school challenges facing Kansas City students. Two additional community conversations followed that focused on identifying possible solutions to the challenges raised, resulting in an idea to create wraparound “Circles of Care” at city schools to better support students and families.



Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

Several local organizations support education work in Kansas City, including education nonprofits, local foundations, and the faith community. However, community, education, and civic leaders say the city lacks an agenda or strategy for coordinating education initiatives and programs so they work in tandem rather than in parallel (or at odds). Conversations about how to collaboratively and strategically move education forward in the city are just beginning. Several leaders of schools where Communities in Schools (CIS) began working in 2017-18 were positive about how their CIS site coordinator helped to improve school climate and the daily academic and social experience for the students in their caseload. With some exceptions (like Show Me KC Schools and other nascent efforts), few education-focused organizations work directly with families, and none currently focus specifically on organizing historically disadvantaged families to advocate for improved education across the city.



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

The degree to which families are involved in hot-button questions, like school closings or openings, is uneven across Kansas City and often depends on the issue at hand. This is especially true within the charter sector, where engagement and communication strategies and how they are prioritized vary widely by school. For example, a charter school knew it would be closing for the 2018-19 school year but did not inform families about the impending closure until after important deadlines for enrolling in other schools had passed. This left families scrambling to find spots elsewhere for their students.



Does the education system respond to community feedback?

When a new superintendent took office in July 2016, he and his staff knocked on doors, held town halls, then used what they learned to inform a new strategic plan. Community and education leaders reported that the superintendent has made engagement a priority and continues providing opportunities for community input. However, there are no grass-roots community engagement organizations focused specifically on education that can provide a coherent and powerful voice for families. Charter families in particular have no clear avenue for elevating concerns: information about local meetings and grievance procedures is not posted on the Missouri Public Charter School Association website.

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 teachers they need?

In 2017 KCPS’ human resources office created the “All Hands On Deck” staffing plan to involve additional KCPS employees in their sourcing efforts, including bringing the superintendent and current principals on recruiting visits to colleges of education. However, it remains to be seen whether these efforts translate into significant changes in KCPS’ ability to find, hire, and retain high-quality teachers. A few pipelines in the city exist for sourcing and placing teachers in both the traditional and charter sectors, but these programs are fairly limited in scope and are not part of a coherent, comprehensive talent strategy for the city. In the charter sector, each school or network has their own approach to finding and developing teachers, which can be very resource-intensive, especially for the many smaller, homegrown charters in Kansas City who lack the staff or external connections to tap for help with recruitment and professional development.



Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

KCPS has made some progress on reducing principal turnover and developing internal pipelines for leaders, and some charter schools have been successful at recruiting strong leaders, but the quality of school leadership is uneven across the city. [Kansas City PLUS](#) (Pathways to Leadership in Urban Schools) launched for the 2017-18 school year and is part of TNTP’s national network of school leader residency programs. In the program’s inaugural year, 11 aspiring leaders were placed in leadership positions in KCPS and charter schools (as well as one private school) to gain practical experience as they work toward their two-year principal certifications. Though it is a new program and the first cohort of residents are not yet certified, Kansas City PLUS has promise as a pipeline for school leader talent for the city’s schools.



Does funding equitably follow students?

KCPS is not currently pursuing a student-based allocation formula (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2017-18).

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.



Does the school supply represent an array of models?

In general, education and community leaders reported that improving academic quality across schools is a far more pressing issue than increasing curricular variety. Families are able to choose from a variety of school models in both sectors, including schools offering Montessori, bilingual, project-based, STEM-focused and other approaches. Among the six

district and charter schools that have opened since 2014-15, two schools (both of them charter) offer a non-traditional instructional model. The first district-sponsored charter school opened in 2016 and has embraced a community-centered approach. In 2018, one of Kansas City’s two alternative schools, DeLaSalle Education Center, was in financial distress and facing closure. Recognizing the importance of alternative models for serving at-risk students, local philanthropies are providing funding for operating and redesigning the school to focus on building important workforce skills through career pathways.



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

A Kansas City nonprofit, [Show Me KC Schools](#), has developed a user-friendly online school guide for all city schools. Families can search for schools based on a variety of criteria and can compare up to four schools on academic performance, curriculum, and availability of special programming or special education services. With support from local funders, Show Me KC Schools recently hired additional staff that allowed them to further build out their online tools, distribute 6,000 printed copies of their previously online-only guide, host tours of schools and early childhood centers for parents, educators, and community members, and begin providing one-on-one school choice navigation services to families. While data show that families are accessing Show Me KC Schools’ materials (their website user count grew by 50% to over 35,000 users in 2017), questions remain about whether the most under-resourced families know about the information or how to use it. The district’s website also does not link to Show Me KC Schools’ website.



Is transportation working for families?

KCPS recently responded to community feedback by reducing school walk zones; students living half a mile or more from the district school they attend (including KCPS magnets, called Signature Schools) are eligible for free busing. However, district-provided information about transportation is hard to understand, and transportation to charter schools remains spotty, creating a significant barrier to accessing choice for many families. One charter leader reported that state funding to charters for busing has gone down, further limiting the ability of many charters to offer transportation. In response, some charters have collaborated to share buses and saved significant money by doing so, but this is a partial solution to a systemic access problem.



Is the enrollment process working for families?

The district implemented online-only enrollment for the 2017-18 school year, which community leaders say helped streamline the process. KCPS set up computer stations in their central office with staff on hand to help families enroll. However, the mid-January deadline for applying to KCPS Signature School magnets is very early and well in advance of charter school deadlines. As for the charter sector, most charters have their own enrollment processes and deadlines, which means families have to keep track of many systems, requirements, and key dates if they apply to multiple schools. Several charters do offer online enrollment and four charter schools participate in the [KC Central Application](#), which allows families to apply to multiple schools by completing one online application.



Developing

Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?

KCPS commissioned external studies in the last few years to identify areas where high-quality schools are most needed. However, charters face challenges accessing facilities and often open where space is available, rather than where they are most needed, and a lack of coordination between the district and charter schools means that charter schools don't necessarily know where high-quality seats are most needed. This results in a high concentration of schools opening in some neighborhoods, while neighborhoods that need high-quality options have no new schools. [SchoolSmart KC](#) launched in 2017 and has so far invested over \$5 million to expand five high-performing charter and district schools, adding over 2,000 new seats across these schools by 2020. While these are not new schools, the additional capacity allows more students access to strong schools in both sectors. SchoolSmart KC is also pressing for state-level action on the creation of a common accountability framework for Kansas City charter and district schools and for enforcement of consequences for low performance in both sectors. Some low-quality charters are shut down, with one closing for the 2018-19 year due to chronic underperformance, but many education and community leaders say too many such schools remain open in the absence of clear strategies or incentives for turnaround or closure.

Data & Scoring

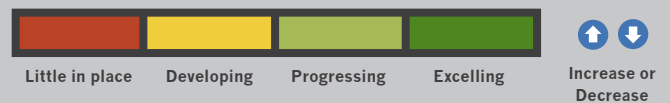
Where did we get this information?

- ▶ 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.

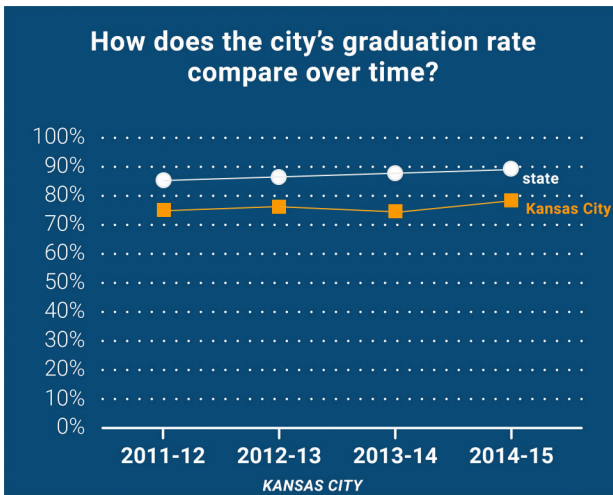
Score Levels



Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the graduation rate across Kansas City remained essentially flat relative to the state. Between 2010-11 to 2015-16, citywide proficiency rates on state assessments did not improve relative to the state overall, and access to top-scoring schools in the city remains uneven.

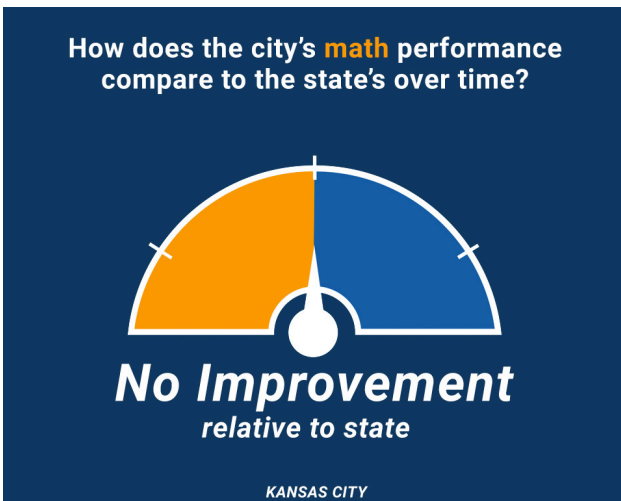
Is the education system continuously improving?



► The city's graduation rate remained flat relative to the state, and still lags behind the state's rates.

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

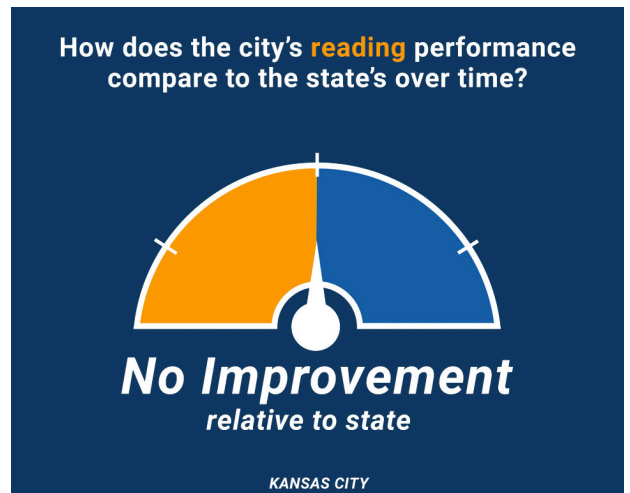
Source: EDFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.



► Between 2009-10 and 2015-16, the city's math proficiency rate trends mirrored 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: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009-10 to 2015-16.

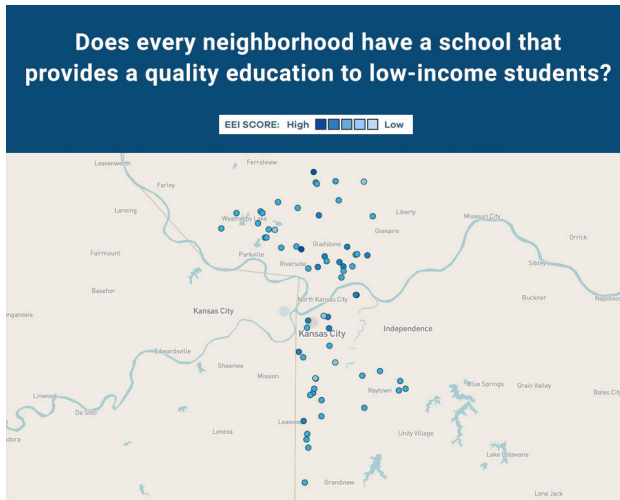


► Between 2009-10 and 2015-16, the city's reading proficiency rate trends mirrored the state's.

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: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009-10 to 2015-16.

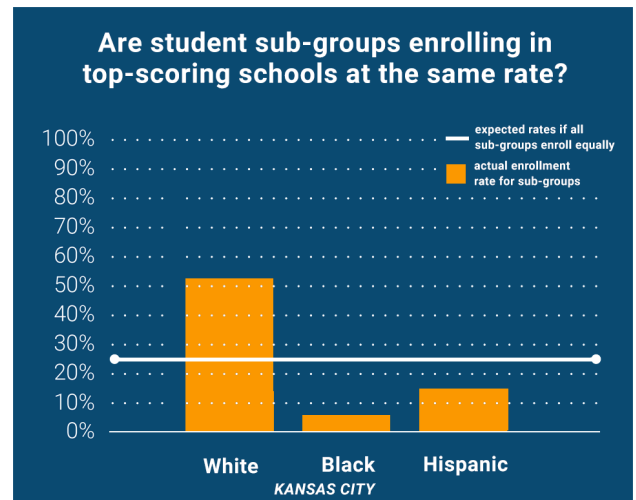
Do students have access to a high-quality education?



► The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how low-income students are performing in cities and schools across the country. See this interactive tool to explore individual school performance.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

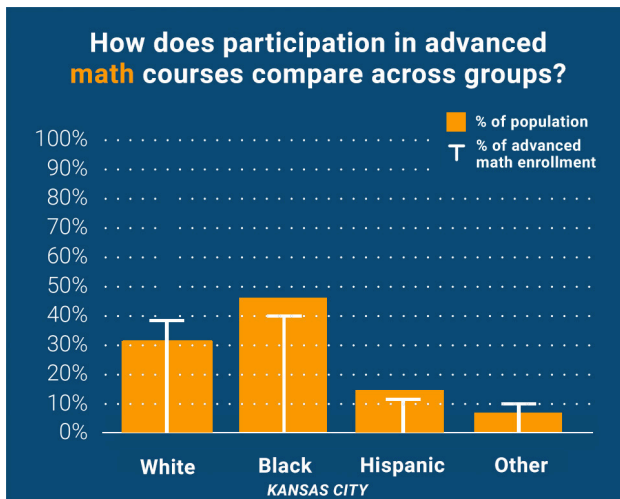
Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



► In 2014-15, 26% of students enrolled in the city’s top-scoring schools. Black and Hispanic students enrolled in top-scoring schools at lower rates than they enrolled in medium- and low-scoring schools. White students enrolled in top-scoring schools at higher rates.

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 subgroup is equally distributed across low-, middle-, and top-scoring schools.

Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009-10 to 2015-16.



► In 2013-14, black students were enrolled in advanced math coursework at a slightly lower rate than the high school population.

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.

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 Kansas City

After many years of decline, enrollment across Kansas City is starting to increase and Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) received provisional accreditation in 2016. KCPS narrowly missed achieving full accreditation in 2017. KCPS' current superintendent took office in July 2016 with the support of education leaders across the city. Some of the city's charter schools rank among the highest in the state. The city has many nonprofits and foundations focused on improving school quality and families' access to good schools, but these organizations don't have a common vision or shared set of goals to work toward together.

School Choice in the City

No matter what school they are zoned to, families can enroll in charter schools or district Signature Schools—specialized schools with enrollment requirements.

Governance Model

The Kansas City Board of Education oversees KCPS district schools. The Missouri State Board of Education is the sole authorizer of charter schools, but accountability and oversight for Kansas City charter schools resides with five local sponsors.

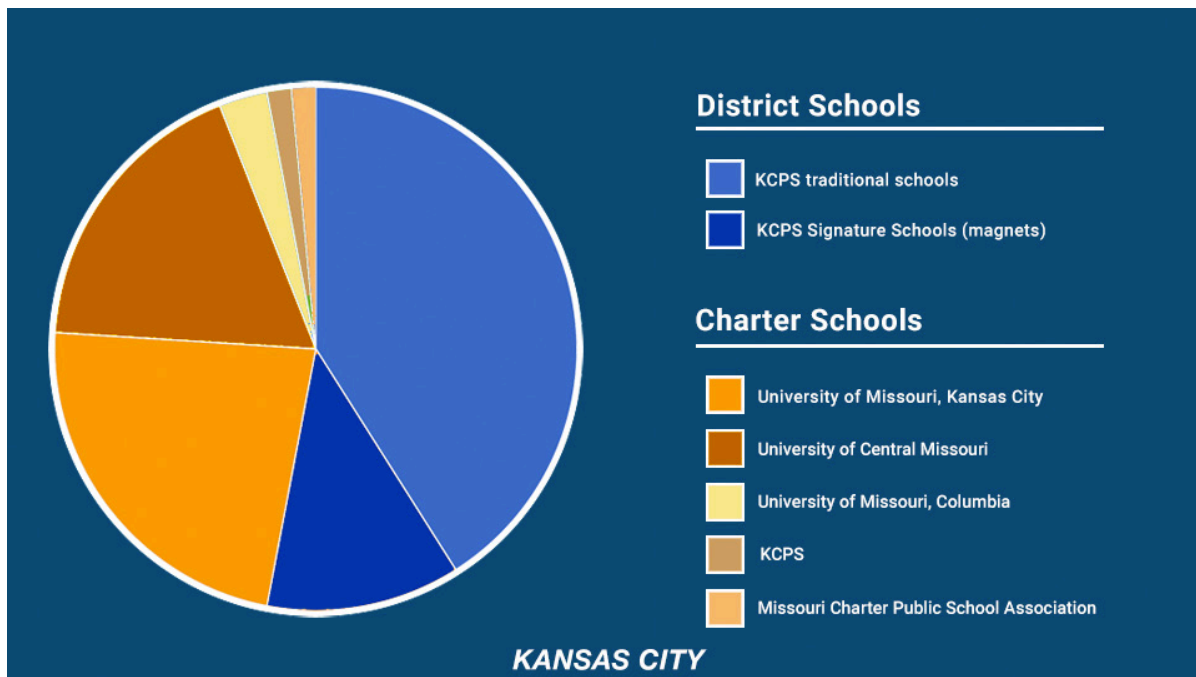
2017 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 24,740 students

Race and ethnicity: 57% black, 28% Hispanic, 9% white, 6% other

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

2017 School Composition



Note: Enrollment data for KCPS and charter schools. Demographics data for KCPS schools only.

Source: Kansas City Public Schools, 2017.

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



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