Key Takeaways: June 2018

Memphis is a city with two education systems: Shelby County Schools (SCS) and the charters it authorizes, and the mostly charter Achievement School District (ASD). Both systems are turning around low-performing schools, but over the past year community members report that these efforts may be slowing, and they worry that new ESSA plans will reduce urgency by pushing out intervention timelines. Improving education will be a slow climb given where Memphis started, and must include a citywide vision and commitment to addressing the challenges that students in poverty bring with them to school. Other critical next steps for education leaders are making the choice process easier to navigate and developing skilled teachers and leaders in high-poverty schools.

Challenges Ahead

▶ **Addressing school quality and coherence to improve long-term outcomes for students**

Nearly a fifth of all schools in Memphis have expanded, opened, restarted, or closed in the past four years. District schools have been continually closing or consolidating in response to enrollment declines, but excess seats still remain. Performance across both district and charter schools is still generally low. City education leaders have developed a new school performance framework that will give district and charter leaders a more strategic, data-driven, and public process to address school quality. The state, through its new ESSA plan, has outlined what performance interventions will look like but not yet how ASD schools will return to SCS. ASD's interim leadership provided an opportunity for it to work with communities to determine the best management of schools—whether through ASD or not—helping to reset ASD's relationship with those communities. The ASD has recently hired a highly skilled turnaround leader out of SCS as the next ASD superintendent, providing a fresh opportunity to work collaboratively on a more robust and coherent vision for the portfolio of schools in Memphis.

▶ **Improving information and enrollment to make choice easier for families**

Memphis families need more support to understand their school options. The parent-created Memphis School Guide will not be updated, so education leaders must explore new options to inform families about their school choices. SCS's new school scorecard provides information on SCS schools, but not ASD schools. The city's district-charter collaboration compact can direct a nonprofit to facilitate development of a unified school guide for SCS, charter, and ASD schools. SCS's new school performance framework can be the basis for providing common school accountability ratings. Other improvements should include more consistent curricular, programmatic, and student service information. Printing copies of the guide and having it on SCS and ASD websites will also improve accessibility. Families will still need more in-person support to understand how to use the information once it is more widely available.

SCS and ASD together have several different enrollment processes, and independent charter schools each have their own applications. While a single, unified enrollment system would be easiest for families, simply streamlining processes within SCS and coordinating timelines with ASD would go a long way toward improving families' experience. Moving toward coordinated choice fairs will also help families better understand the options available to them.

▶ **Reassessing talent pipelines**

Memphis has multiple pipelines for teachers and principals, but education leaders still perceive that these are not meeting the city's needs in terms of quantity or quality, especially when it comes to the hard work of turning around the lowest-performing schools. In order to improve recruitment and development efforts, education leaders must first collect better data across SCS and ASD charter schools, conduct focus groups and exit surveys with teachers, and collect principal feedback to drive improvements on recruitment and development strategies.

Spotlight

Elevating High School Graduation Rates in Impoverished Communities

Because so many Memphis students live in poverty—over 40,000 students have an annual family income of $10,000—the vision for school improvement must also include addressing student needs. The city must come together with a vision and creative strategies to respond to the student achievement deficits, trauma, and struggles of families.

One new nonprofit is taking on this challenge. In late 2017, Whole Child Strategies (WCS), a new community-based nonprofit in Memphis, opened its doors to pilot a new model for improving students' chances at graduating from high school.

The group is using a community model to improve student attendance and behavior, while decreasing the number of suspensions and expulsions. WCS created a Neighborhood Council made up of key local stakeholders, including small businesses, support organizations, school staff, parents, and the faith community. The model brings all of a community's assets to bear while addressing the array of challenges students face outside of school. WCS provides supports and training for the council. In turn, the council is tasked with creating a long-term community engagement plan that coordinates resources and small grants in support of local students and their families.

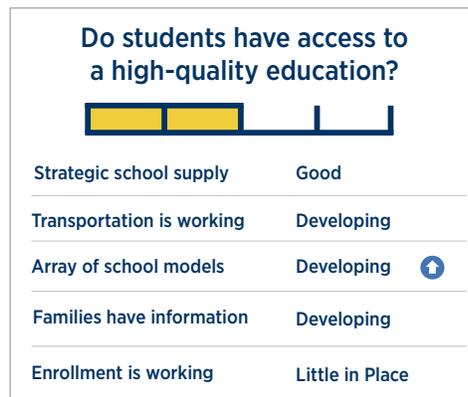## Training Families to Hold Charter Schools Accountable

A California-based charter school operator wanted to open a new school in Memphis. Newly trained community members reviewed the application and gave critical feedback, which made the operator realize it should take more time to improve the application before submitting it to Shelby County Schools.

These community members participate in a Community Launch initiative developed by the Tennessee Charter School Center. Each cohort includes students, parents, and community members. The initiative helps to make sure families have more say in how reforms are implemented, especially those that most impact them—new schools opening in their neighborhoods.

The Community Launch six-month training program prepares its participants to provide feedback on prospective charter operators before approval and trains them to hold the approved charter schools accountable for quality results. Participants also visit Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles to see what quality schools look like.

Through this effort, families are trained and empowered to give input on school models and school quality, making them part of the effort to improve school fit and quality citywide.

System Reforms

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?

Variety of groups	Good
City engages families	Good
Broad support	Developing
System is responsive	Developing

Is the education system continuously improving?

Equitable funding	Developing
Right leaders	Developing
Right teachers	Developing

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Strategic school supply	Good
Transportation is working	Developing
Array of school models	Developing ⬆
Families have information	Developing
Enrollment is working	Little in Place

| Little in Place | Developing | Good | Exemplar | ⬆⬇ Increase or Decrease |

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

Many organizations in Memphis are trying to improve educational opportunities for students, and both Shelby County Schools and the state-run Achievement School District are better engaging families around school closures and restarts. However, the lack of a unified enrollment system or an up-to-date school information guide remain barriers to the choice process in a city where 47 schools have opened in the last four years. Attracting and preparing school talent also requires continued focus.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?

Developing

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.

Good

Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

Multiple community groups in Memphis are working to provide better information to families about school performance and boost community engagement. Over the past year, some groups in the city were tapped to be part of ESSA planning. A new group, Whole Child Strategies, has formed to align neighborhood and community resources to combat the effects of poverty and support achievement. Though Memphis lacks an organization that works specifically with parents of students with disabilities, the local nonprofit Memphis Lift has a staff person dedicated to supporting these families. The NAACP, the faith community, and the teachers union are also engaged in education in the city. However, local businesses have not been encouraged to be involved.

Good

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

Feedback from the community has spurred Shelby County Schools (SCS) to give some schools more time to improve before closing them, and family input helps shape the SCS school improvement plans. SCS has a new school performance framework which includes alerts to the school community when the school could be headed for closure. When the Achievement School District (ASD) takes over a school, one of six Neighborhood Advisory Committees works with school communities to determine the best match for a future school operator. Over the past year, the ASD and a local school community worked closely together to make sure a charter restart worked for the community that was being impacted. New ESSA regulations have clarified what triggers an ASD restart and how SCS schools can receive an iZone distinction, but there is still an additional step to make sure the process is understandable to families.

Developing

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

The local funding community supports education in the city, and the public is generally positive about the direction of SCS. But the mayor and county commissioners are not involved in education in the city, and the school board is not always united in its decisions. Though improving, relations between SCS and charter schools still tend to be competitive rather than collaborative. The newly appointed superintendent of the ASD was the leader of SCS's iZone and could help to bridge the two sectors.

Developing

Does the education system respond to community feedback?

SCS is just beginning to develop systems to collect and respond to community feedback on an ongoing basis, while the ASD has slightly more in place. Memphis Lift has been supporting families in the choice process and helping to elevate parent concerns. But family engagement led by SCS or the ASD is happening only at the school level or when an initiative is being rolled out.

Is the education system continuously improving?

Developing

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.

Developing

Does funding equitably follow students?

During the 2016-17 school year, SCS allocated less than 5% of its budget through a student-based allocation formula. The SCS school board voted to implement student-based allocation budgeting in a pilot of eight schools starting in July 2017 and then expanding to all SCS schools within three years. The ASD allocates funding equitably across all school types, and has a special education tiered funding model to support schools with high concentrations of high-needs students (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2017-18).

Developing

Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

Some schools still face problems with vacancies, quality, and fit. Quality school leaders are especially needed at the secondary level. Memphis has external and internal pipelines, but existing efforts do not yet fully address school needs or low retention rates across both SCS and ASD schools.

Developing

Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

Both SCS and the ASD face teacher shortages and have started recent school years with vacant positions. The ASD does not have talent data, in part because charters implement their own teacher observation models which prevents aggregating data about teacher quality. Anecdotally, observers note that ASD schools seem to have a shortage of teachers of sufficient quality, particularly for the work of improving priority schools. The city has pipelines to prepare teachers, a local, citywide recruitment group (Teach901), and a teacher development initiative with Relay. These efforts will need to be reevaluated to meet current and future talent needs in the city's lowest-performing schools. SCS is now hiring earlier, and year-round, to better address teacher shortages.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Developing

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.

Developing

Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?

Both SCS and ASD use a data-informed process to improve, restart, and close schools, but interviewees expressed some concern that low-quality charter schools are not closing at an acceptable rate. In addition, troubles with the online version of the state tests prompted the Tennessee Department of Education to postpone evaluations, which paused ASD conversions. As a result, no schools have converted to the ASD in over two years. In most cases, SCS and the ASD have also worked strategically to identify schools for intervention and have a new school performance framework that helps drive intervention and closure decisions. More could be done with restarts and new schools, however: there are no data about where quality seats are needed across the city, and SCS does not publish the criteria it uses to restart iZone schools. Between a new ESSA accountability plan that pushes intervention out to five years and the pause on ASD takeovers, some community leaders expressed concern that the sense of urgency to improve school options has dwindled in a city with too few high-performing schools. In a 2017 parent survey, fewer than half (45%) of the 400 families surveyed said that they had confidence that the city would make sure all neighborhoods have a good school. Only a fifth believe that schools in the city are getting better.

Developing

Is transportation working for families?

Memphis students are not guaranteed transportation to a school of their choice, and community members continue to cite this as a major barrier to families who want to use the choice process. Without yellow buses, families have to drive their children or send them on a public transportation system that does not have routes to every school. Despite these issues, families surveyed in 2017 said that finding transportation was no more challenging than the enrollment process—23% reported it as being a difficulty during the application process.

Developing

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

The parent-created Memphis School Guide used to provide families with a consolidated resource for comparing school options, but it is no longer being updated. SCS launched a school scorecard for all SCS schools, including its charters with accompanying school profile pages. However, it doesn't include ASD charter schools or those chartered by the state. Memphis Lift has a full-time choice counselor and parent liaison to help families, but community members said that families need much more support to make sense of the options available to them and identify the best school for their child. Based on a 2017 survey, 34% of families said that finding enough information was a difficulty during the application process. This was reported as much more of a challenge among charter families than district families (40% of charter families versus 27% of district families).

Developing

Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Over half of families surveyed in 2017 said there was variety between school programs. Nonetheless, finding a school that is a good fit was also cited as a bigger challenge during the application process than finding enough information, navigating the enrollment process, or finding transportation (37% reported it as being a difficulty). Since 2014-15, 47 schools have opened, expanded, or restarted as SCS charters, ASD charters, or iZone schools. Of those, the majority teach students using traditional instructional methods. However, the city as a whole represents more curricular diversity than schools that have opened in recent years, and in the past year, new models featuring dual enrollment/CTE and an arts focus have opened.

Little in Place

Is the enrollment process working for families?

Enrollment processes for school types are not aligned, and community members say that families do not have a good understanding of the options available to them. SCS now has an online enrollment system which puts an end to the annual "campout" by a number of families to try to enroll in magnet and other sought-after optional schools. Among families surveyed in 2017, 23% either had trouble understanding school eligibility or reported difficulty navigating the number of applications they have to complete. About a fifth also said they struggled with filling out paperwork.

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

Little in place	Developing	Progressing	Excelling	Increase or Decrease
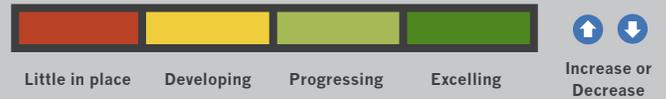
Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

The performance of low–income students in Memphis has been improving at a rapid rate, and student sub–groups are also proportionately enrolled in high school advanced coursework. However, graduation rates have not been improving relative to the state.

Is the education system continuously improving?

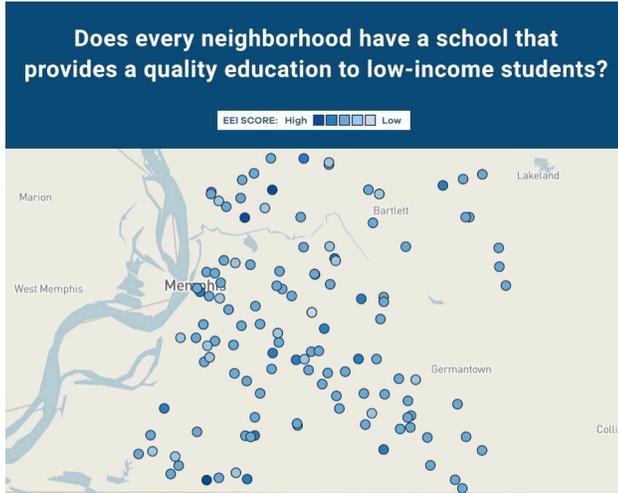**How does the city's graduation rate compare over time?**

MEMPHIS
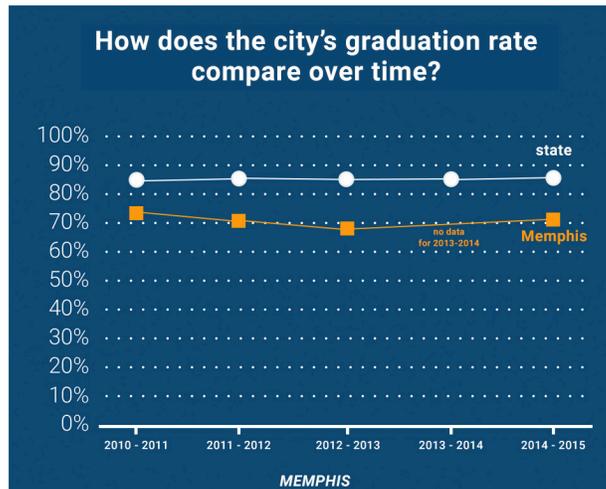
▸ In 2014-15, the city's graduation rate was behind the state's.

Data: The 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, 2010-11 to 2014-15.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Does every neighborhood have a school that provides a quality education to low-income students?

EEI SCORE: High ▮▯▯▯▯ Low

Marion · Lakeland · Bartlett · West Memphis · Memphis · Germantown · Collie

How are low-income students performing relative to the national benchmark?

— National Benchmark

Year	Value
2010-11	28
2011-12	32.8
2012-13	32.7
2013-14	37.8
2014-15	**46.8**

MEMPHIS

▶ The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how students from low-income families 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.
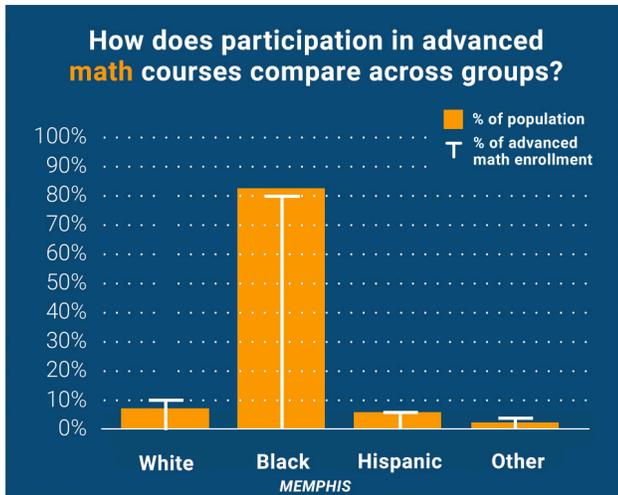
Sources: Tennessee State Board of Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.
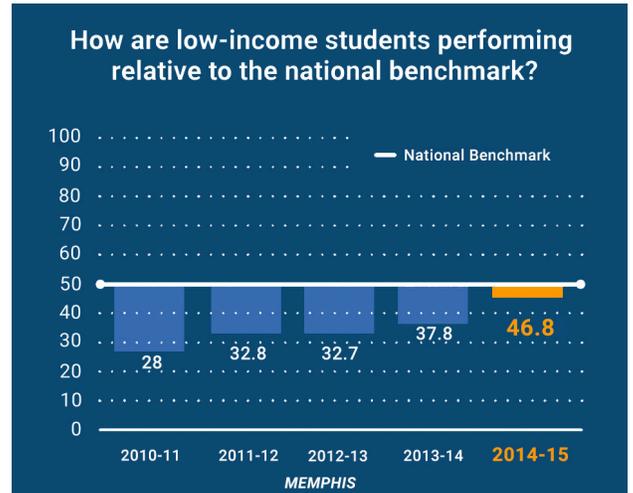
▶ Performance among the city's low-income students has improved 14% over time. Despite these gains, these students are still performing somewhat worse in math and reading than low-income students nationally.

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

Source: Tennessee State Board of Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.

How does participation in advanced math courses compare across groups?

■ % of population
⊤ % of advanced math enrollment

(Groups: White, Black, Hispanic, Other)

MEMPHIS

▶ In 2013-14, all student sub-groups in the city were enrolled in advanced math coursework at similar rates as 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 Memphis

The education landscape in Memphis radically changed in 2010. The state's Race To The Top award created the Achievement School District (ASD), a new state-run takeover district that chartered the lowest 5% of schools in the state, many of which were in Memphis. The next year, the urban Memphis City Schools merged with the suburban Shelby County Schools (SCS) for financial reasons. Several regions de-merged from SCS in 2014. What exists now are two competing and at times cooperating systems—Shelby County Schools and the Achievement School District.

School Choice in the City

Shelby County Schools has three types of schools students can opt into regardless of where they live: iZone schools, which are open enrollment, Optional schools, which have specialized admission criteria, and charter schools. Other SCS and all ASD schools are zoned as neighborhood schools, but open to families on a space-available basis.

Governance Model

The Shelby County School District School Board and the Achievement School District superintendent oversee their respective district schools. SCS is the main authorizer of non-ASD charter schools.
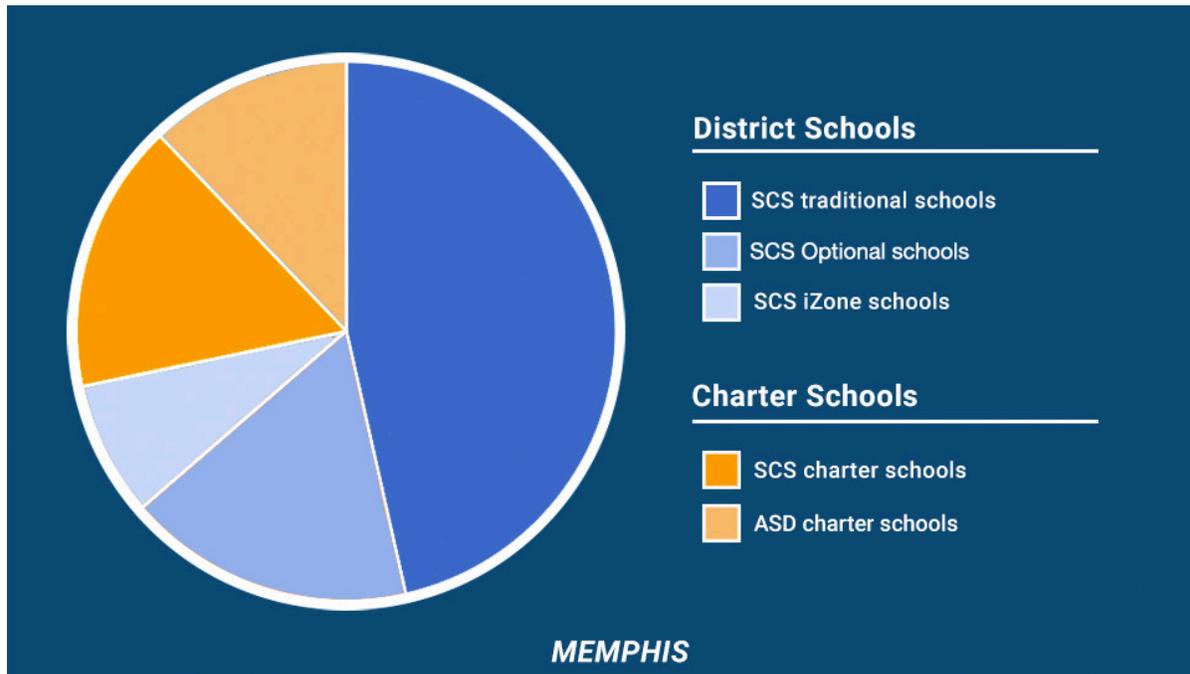
2015 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 105,254 students
Race and ethnicity: 81% black, 11% Hispanic, 5% white, 3% other
Low-income: 85% free and reduced-price lunch

2017 School Composition

Source: Enrollment data from Education Equality Index, 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

The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.