



An Urban School System

# Collects the Data

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As a New Hampshire school district focuses on boosting student success, it is diagnosing its toughest challenges through a new embrace of data.

Over the past 15 years, Manchester, New Hampshire, has undergone an impressive revival. The city's sprawling Amoskeag Millyard, which fell into decline in the last century after the textile industry departed, is now home to high-tech companies, upscale restaurants, galleries, and new college classrooms. Elm Street bustles with bistros and coffee shops. A minor league baseball park, a performing arts arena, and an expanded art museum draw visitors to the city year-round.

## **Schools and the Economy**

One critical segment of Manchester, however, has not experienced the same turnaround: the public school system. A new report from the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies indicates that although standardized-test scores and other success measures have seen some gains over the past decade, there are increasingly worrisome trends.

Achievement gaps by students' economic status and race, a decline in the college-going rate of high school graduates, and a steady rise in economic hardship for students districtwide are concerning. At some grade levels, the achievement gaps are actually growing. Student results also vary considerably within the district, often reflecting differences in the number of low-income students or English-language learners from building to building.<sup>1</sup>

Manchester is not alone. Many midsize cities nationwide are struggling with the same concerns. Every child deserves access to opportunity, and local economies need educated workers. In Manchester, we know that if we're to compete for the innovative, highly skilled workers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a thriving school system is essential. Good schools attract new residents, improve the local labor pool, and help stem social problems such as drug use, teen pregnancy, and crime.

Until now, a lack of data on long-term trends has been a barrier to success. Data are needed to help residents and officials understand the connections between broad demographic patterns, district spending, and student outcomes. How can schools map out strategies for improvement otherwise?

That is why, for the past year, the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies has been working with officials in Manchester's school district and with community leaders from across the city to bring clarity to the discussion. Our starting point was simple: provide an objective, data-driven overview of the city's schools so policymakers can diagnose the roots of problems and set priorities. We looked at a range of information: state reports, internal district assessments, U.S. census data, state vital records, public health records, and more. (See "Understanding the Population.")

Collecting data, however, is only the first step. Through public disclosure and discussion of that data, we aimed to garner the interest and energy of a broader set of participants—people and organizations that would normally never find their way to a school board meeting. We reached out to business groups, institutions of higher education, social-service providers, immigrant communities, young professionals, and nonprofits, among others, to understand their expectations for the city's students. That helped build shared goals such improving outcomes for all students, closing gaps in performance along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines, and achieving both equity and accountability across the school system. Ideally, the data will serve as a springboard to action and engagement from the entire community.

## The Time Is Now

Why the urgency? To be sure, Manchester's schools are vibrant places with lots of innovative approaches to education. The diversity of the student body and the 70-plus languages spoken add to the district's vitality. Many city businesses and nonprofits have partnered with the district to provide mentoring opportunities or to expand science and technology courses. And local colleges offer options for high school students to participate in challenging, college-level classes.

Some cities use data rigorously as part of improving student performance. The Strive Partnership, which originated in Cincin-

nati and now has affiliations with communities nationwide, has pioneered one model. In New England, the Boston Opportunity Agenda tracks data with the goal of increasing educational success for all residents. The Portland, Maine, school district in early 2014 unveiled its own "district scorecard," which sets targets for two dozen indicators of student success.

In Manchester, the data-collection goal has been to provide demographic trends as context and, in doing so, to suggest the importance of engaging a broader array of participants. As one of the most homogenous states in the country, New Hampshire did not undergo the kind of wide-scale integration of its school system that much of the rest of the Northeast experienced over the past two generations. Instead, the state initially saw immigration from highly educated, high-income families who were able to provide strong support for their children at home, boosting test scores, graduation rates, and other measures of success. In those decades, Manchester, the state's only urban center, experienced the same trends.

But in recent years, both the state and the city have seen changes in long-term migration patterns. In Manchester, the population is increasingly diverse. Measures of poverty, especially for children, have risen. Nonwhite and Hispanic students now make up 35 percent of the student body, up from less than 20 percent a decade ago. And in nearly one in five of Manchester households, English is not the primary language. Although that is roughly the national rate, it is more than twice the state figure. Manchester's diversity adds to

the richness of the school experience, but adapting the educational system to such diversity is a relatively new challenge for the city.

## Fielding All Perspectives

Any improvement campaign must involve the setting of concrete goals, collaboration among partners from government, business, and nonprofits, and the transparent reporting of results. Such efforts are already afoot in Manchester. The city health department, for instance, has been working to understand neighborhood-based health

outcomes and gather data to design a strategy for improving living conditions in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods. It's an initiative that has drawn in leaders from the city's public and private sectors to promote collective action toward a range of health, education, and economic policy changes.

Similarly, the Granite United Way, recognizing that reading at grade level at age 8 is correlated with higher high school graduation rates, has been working to improve reading levels for struggling third graders at a handful of Manchester schools. Administrators collect data on student outcomes to track exactly which students are succeeding, and how quickly, in order to understand how to expand the outreach to other schools most effectively. Such efforts have served as examples of how to unite parties from different sectors around a common problem. On the state level, meanwhile, many other organizations are working to improve understanding of the links between education, health, and other factors that determine early childhood well-being.

Of course, presenting data on Manchester's schools is one thing,



## Understanding the Population

Among the questions that the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies data review was intended to answer are: which groups of students are most at risk; which changes in instruction and spending might yield the greatest benefit; and how are forces outside the school walls affecting outcomes?

The center looked into the following: births data (including births to unwed mothers and low-income mothers, and low-weight newborn trends); changes in low-income status, homelessness, and low English proficiency by school; and variations in test scores, graduation rates, and college-going by race/ethnicity, economic status, and student disability.

### Population Characteristics

	2000		2012 (estimates)		
	Manchester	NH	Manchester	NH	United States
Total population	107,006	1,235,786	110,209	1,320,718	316,128,839
Median age	34.9	37.2	37.4	41.9	37
Median household income	\$40,774	\$49,467	\$54,644	\$63,280	\$53,046
	percent				
Population under 18	23.7	25.0	21.1	20.8	23.5
Poverty rate	10.6	6.5	17.0	10.0	14.9
Unemployment rate (April 2014)	2.6	2.7	4.6	4.3	5.9
Population with high school diploma or higher	80.7	87.4	88.0	91.8	85.7
Population with a bachelor's degree or higher	22.3	28.7	26.5	34.6	28.5
Foreign-born population	9.4	4.4	11.1	5.4	12.9
English not primary language at home	19.6	8.3	17.6	7.9	20.5
Hispanic	4.6	1.7	7.2	3.0	16.9
Non-Hispanic White	89.3	95.1	82.2	91.8	63.0
Black	2.1	0.7	4.8	1.3	13.1
Asian	2.3	1.3	3.7	2.3	5.1
Owner-occupied housing units	46.0	69.7	48.5	70.9	65.5

Sources: U.S. Census and the American Community Survey.

Figuring out how to use the data to improve student outcomes is an altogether different challenge and will be hashed out in the coming months in public forums and in meetings with policymakers. School improvement is a challenge that has to be tackled by the entire community. Although we are still in the early stages of this effort, we fully intend to bring many more voices into the conversation.

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Barrick, "Manchester's Education Benchmarks: Using Data to Map a Pathway to Success" (report, New Hampshire Center for Policy Studies, Concord, New Hampshire, September 2014).

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