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## A Tale of Two School Systems

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## A Tale of Two School Systems

*In New York City, children are sorted into two vastly different public school systems, condemning low-income minority students to unequal and inferior schools.*

### Executive Summary

There are two public school systems in New York City.

Some families, many of them white, pay high rents in order to live near high-quality elementary schools. They receive a bargain: access to not only one great school, but also to the strong middle and high schools that enroll the same pool of children. This school system ensures that the sons and daughters of economically privileged parents move along a smooth track of educational excellence, from kindergarten into college.

Poor, Black, and Hispanic families travel a different route. In their neighborhoods, high-quality elementary schools are scarce or nonexistent. As a result of where they live—where they can afford to live—their children are trapped in failed elementary schools, schools that ironically often receive equal or better funding than schools in richer neighborhoods. Launched along the failed pathway, these children emerge from chronically low-performing elementary schools with little option but to continue to broken middle schools, then on to disastrous high schools. No matter how hard they work or what their academic achievement, they are unlikely to escape this network of failed schools. Hundreds of thousands of children emerge from this downward spiral onto the precipice of poverty. The easy thing to do is blame societal factors for this unacceptable status quo; this excuses us from action. The truth is much harder: we condemn these children to a lifetime of playing catch-up.

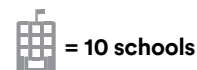
Families for Excellent Schools analyzed city data on educational mobility to trace common paths traveled by NYC students, following these children as they moved through elementary, middle, and high school. The routes between these schools are well worn—so much so that families of color are confined to a separate and unequal system of public education.

From the analysis, it's clear that New York City's public schools have two vastly different educational pathways, one a ladder to prosperity and one a tunnel to failure:

- **Pathway #1—A Ladder to Prosperity.** This pipeline is made up of 141 schools where more than 60% of the students meet academic standards. There are only 116,000 students within this system, and they are mostly white or Asian, and more than half are well off. All are almost guaranteed success because their elementary school feeds them into the city's best middle and high schools.
- **Pathway #2—A Tunnel to Failure.** Originating in NYC's poorer neighborhoods, this pipeline is made up of 850 schools where no more than 30% of students meet academic standards. This system serves 478,000 students. Of these, 90% are Black or Hispanic and 89% live in poverty. And they are locked into this system regardless of their performance.

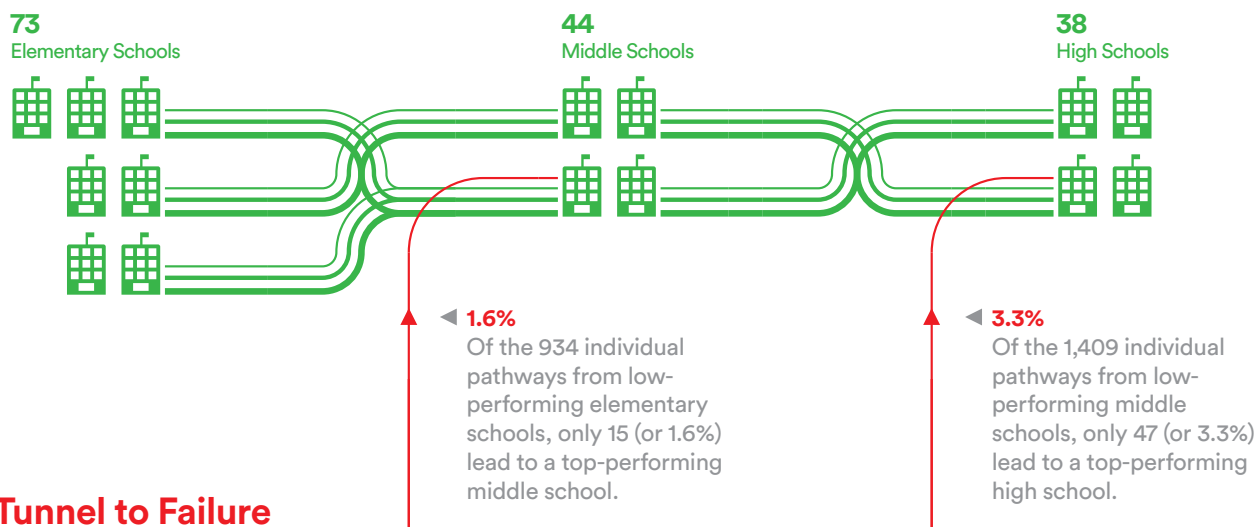
# New York City's Two School Systems

An analysis of city data on educational mobility reveals two vastly different educational pipelines for NYC's students as they moved through elementary, middle, and high school—one a ladder to prosperity and the other a tunnel to failure. Each system is deeply interconnected, with almost no possibility of crossover.



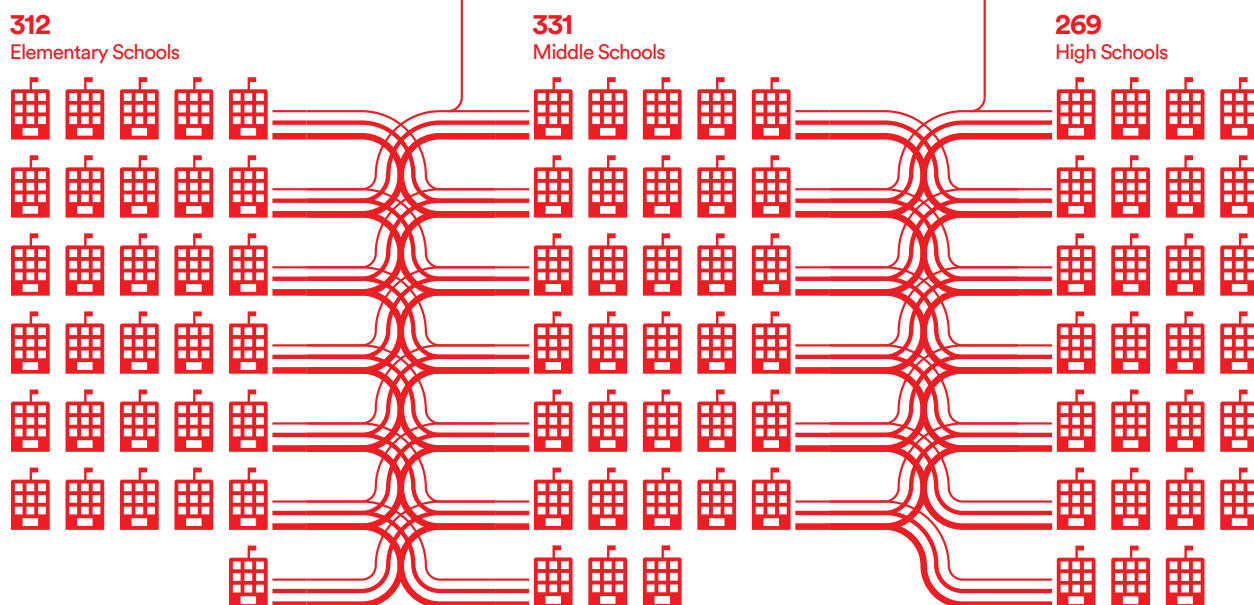
## A Ladder to Prosperity

Kids who start in this system get to attend a good elementary school that feeds them into the city's best middle and high schools. At the top 141 schools, students are mostly white or Asian, and more than half are economically secure.



## A Tunnel to Failure

Originating in NYC's poorer neighborhoods, this pipeline is made up of 850 schools where 70% of students fail to meet academic standards. This system serves 478,000 students—90% are Black or Hispanic and 89% live in poverty.



Note: The sub-totals for elementary, middle, and high schools add up to more than 141 for the ladder to prosperity and more than 850 for the tunnel to failure. Schools serving grades 6–12 are counted as both middle and high schools.

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The rigid divide between these school systems deepens over time. Students who begin at low-performing elementary schools have limited chances of escaping. Of all the individual pathways originating from schools in the tunnel to failure, only **1.6%** lead to a middle school on the ladder of prosperity.

For comparison, the city's school-aged Black and Hispanic kids have a **greater than 10%** chance of being stopped by the police.<sup>i</sup>

The reality is that before a 4-year-old child even starts pre-k, her outcomes have been preordained by the series of failed schools awaiting her arrival. This educational tunnel to failure deprives poor kids of knowledge and intellectual skills needed for college and career, deepening the chasm between rich and poor that New Yorkers know all too well.

Two years ago, Mayor de Blasio ran on a campaign to end what he coined “a tale of two cities,” yet his actions to date have not reduced the educational inequality for New York City’s children of color. He kept his promises to the teachers union, but he’s kept the city’s school children waiting. Close to half a million children of color fare no better today than a year ago. As recent state test results make painfully clear, the academic futures of Black and Hispanic students are being ignored. These children have little hope of gaining an education that will propel them out of poverty.

## Methodology

This study analyzes educational mobility patterns using data from School Quality Reports, published by the city Department of Education.<sup>ii</sup> Specifically:

- The three most common middle schools for graduates of each elementary school.
- The five most common high schools for graduates of each middle (or K-8) school.

We focus on two groups of schools, each of which the data show to be deeply interconnected, with almost no possibility of crossover to the other group:

- Elementary and middle schools with an average ELA and math proficiency rate of 30% or less, and high schools with a college readiness rate of 30% or less.<sup>iii</sup>
- Elementary and middle schools with an average ELA and math proficiency rate of 60% or more (roughly double the city average), and high schools with a college readiness rate of 60% or more.<sup>iv</sup>

## A Tale of Two Students: Emma and Brian

Emma and Brian live in the same Brooklyn school district. But the paths they’ll travel through New York City public schools could not be more different.

Emma lives in Carroll Gardens, an increasingly wealthy and mostly white enclave of brownstone buildings. On the blocks next to P.S. 29, the school Emma is zoned to attend, families have a median annual income of \$202,708—among the top 1% in the borough.<sup>v</sup> This is her VIP entrance into NYC’s upper echelon of public schooling.

P.S. 29 is among the highest-performing elementary schools in the city, and its students reap the benefits. Emma and many of her classmates advance—after an admissions interview—to M.S. 51, a similarly strong middle school. When it’s time for high school, Emma qualifies to attend Brooklyn Technical High School, the celebrated, highly selective program where admission depends on acing an entrance exam.

Brian lives just six subway stops away in Sunset Park, on a block where most families are Hispanic. Their median household income is \$32,544.<sup>vi</sup> He attends P.S. 24, where the academic proficiency rate is 16%. Brian sits for no

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middle school admissions interviews. Instead, he moves on to I.S. 136, a local middle school with classroom resources that rival many private schools—a fact that defies the notion that low-performing schools are simply a result of a lack of funds. Brian wears a uniform and uses a school laptop; his classrooms have SMART-boards and wireless Internet as well as 3D printers. Supported by special grants and community groups, I.S. 136 can offer Brian opportunities to travel to Mexico, play basketball or take part in other after-school and weekend programming. Yet despite these resources, I.S. 136 is failing to equip Brian and his classmates with basic reading and mathematical skills: just 9% of students are proficient in math and English.

When it's time for high school, Brian proceeds to Sunset Park High School, another school that is not lacking resources. The school is housed in a modern new building with state-of-the-art science laboratories, a full-competition gymnasium, art and dance studios; it offers a daily after-school and extended-year program, and in partnership with a community-based organization, provides social emotional development. In the classroom, however, Brian is failed again: there's only one advanced placement course and few other high-level courses. Only 8% of Sunset Park High School students graduate college-ready—or 11 times fewer than those attending Brooklyn Tech.

## Pathway #1: A Ladder to Prosperity

In one New York City public school system, children are destined for top-rated high schools and college acceptance from the moment they enter a classroom. In these 141 deeply interconnected schools, at least 60% of students meet academic standards. Of the 116,000 students within this system, only 29% are children of color—compared to 78% for all other public schools.<sup>vii</sup> The poverty rate for schools in this system is 45%, far below the 82% average for the rest of the city.

In fact, more than one third of white students and one fifth of Asian students in New York City attend an elementary school on the ladder to prosperity, compared to just 5% of Black and Hispanic students. These students are zoned for success by virtue of where their parents can afford to live—the median household income of families who live near high-performing elementary schools is \$120,651, nearly three times higher than that of families near low-performing schools (\$40,707).

One of the best examples of this trend is in District 3, at **M.S. 245 - The Computer School**. At M.S. 245, 62% of students are proficient in reading and math; it is ranked in the top 10% citywide. There are six feeder elementary schools for M.S. 245, all of which are nearby: P.S. 75, P.S. 9, P.S. 87, P.S. 163, P.S. 166, and P.S. 199.

The average reading and math proficiency rate for these six feeder schools is 68%, more than double the rate for students citywide. Three of the six feeder schools were among the top ten most popular non-charter elementary schools anywhere in the city.<sup>viii</sup>

The most common destination for graduates of M.S. 245 is the **NYC iSchool**, an innovative program known for its broad array of course offerings, where “advanced students have plenty of options.”<sup>ix</sup>

The second most common high school for students leaving M.S. 245 is **Fiorello H. Laguardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts**, the highly sought-after high school that admits students on the basis of both high academic achievement and audition or showcase—and where 80% of students graduate prepared for college.

Third on the list of commonly attended high schools: **Beacon High School**, another selective program that receives thousands of applications for about 250 ninth grade seats,<sup>x</sup> and where 80% of students graduate college-ready (among the highest rates in the city).

M.S. 245's pipeline to prosperity is far from the only one in the city. Seats at **The New York City Lab Middle School for Collaborative Studies** are highly prized; 89% of students are academically proficient, which ranks near the top of all the city's approximately 500 middle schools. The most commonly attended high schools for those who complete eighth grade at Lab Middle are all highly exclusive: **Bronx High School of Science**,

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**Stuyvesant High School, Brooklyn Tech, and Eleanor Roosevelt High School** on the Upper East Side. These four high schools have an average college readiness rate of 93% and a college attendance rate of over 90%.

In order to gain admission to Lab Middle, it helps enormously to live in an expensive neighborhood with a top elementary school. There are eight elementary schools, all situated on the ladder to prosperity, that routinely send students to Lab Middle. In these schools, the average proficiency rate is 75%—more than double the citywide average.

Across these eight high-performing elementary schools, just 11% of students are Black or Hispanic—compared to an average of 76% across all New York City public schools.

## Pathway # 2: A Tunnel to Failure

There is another school system in New York City—the one most children of color attend. These students are pushed through a very different pipeline of public schools, beginning and ending in educational dysfunction. From the very first day of pre-k or kindergarten, these students' likelihood of success isn't based on merit.

Across this network of 850 city public schools, which are tightly linked together, fewer than 3 students out of 10 meet academic standards. This school system enrolls 458,000 students. Of these, 90% are Black or Hispanic and 89% live in poverty.

Such results are deeply worrying, in and of themselves. But it's equally disturbing that children have almost no chance of climbing out of the tunnel to failure—no matter how well they do.

The tunnel to failure includes about 300 elementary schools. Taking the three most common sixth grade destinations for each of them, Families For Excellent Schools arrived at a list of about 900 middle school landing spots. **Only 15 of these, or 1.6%**, are middle schools on the ladder to prosperity, schools where 60% of students are proficient in math or English. The likelihood of a Black or Hispanic student moving from a low-performing elementary school to a high-performing middle school is vanishingly small.

In fact, children of color are dramatically more likely to attend a tunnel to failure school regardless of how well they perform. At schools that enroll more than half Black and Hispanic children, students are much more likely to go on to a failing school, regardless of academic accomplishments. The odds are stacked against a minority child from pre-k on. For example, a Black student attending an elementary school in a minority neighborhood where 70% of students are passing, has a one in three chance of ending up in a failing middle school. At a school that's predominately white with the same proficiency rates, a student has a one in ten chance of ending up in a failing middle school.

In other words, it doesn't matter how well minority students perform—they are still at great risk of remaining within, or falling into, the tunnel to failure. At every level of effort and ability, Black and Hispanic children are funneled at dramatically disproportionate rates into low-quality schools.

It's worth noting that this data holds true even as the city attempts to mask the effects of failing schools by returning to social promotion—passing students through the system without providing them the education they deserve.

## The Tunnels to Failure in Action

Among the most troubling example of the city's tunnels to failure is Wadleigh Secondary School, located on West 114th Street in District 3. None of Wadleigh's sixth, seventh or eighth graders can read or do math on grade level. Longstanding problems at the school abound. In 2011, 14- and 15-year-old female students brawled just outside campus.<sup>xi</sup> A 2012 review of Wadleigh observed “haphazardly arranged desks,” little attention to the dress code,

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and consistent disruptions in hallways.<sup>xii</sup> Parents who attended a 2013 public meeting about the school's struggles said they had difficulty contacting teachers and counselors about their children's progress.<sup>xiii</sup>

Two elementary schools feed into Wadleigh: one is P.S. 175 in Harlem, where just 13% of students are on grade level in math and English. During a recent review, the city found that "students are engaged unevenly across classrooms in challenging tasks and demonstrations of higher order thinking."<sup>xiv</sup> At the other feeder elementary school, P.S. 396 in the Bronx, only one in five students are proficient. Across these two elementary schools, 96% of students are Black or Hispanic and 94% live in poverty.

After completing eighth grade at Wadleigh, students commonly remain at the school for grades 9-12. The results are tragic. Fewer than one in four Wadleigh high school students attend college. Even more heartbreaking is that fewer than 1 in 10 graduate with the skills needed to do college-level work.

Those who leave Wadleigh after eighth grade face similarly bleak prospects. Their most common destination is Marta Valle High School on the Lower East Side, where the college readiness rate is 12%. Parents accused the former principal of Marta Valle High of under-reporting violent incidents and over-reporting attendance; one student told the New York Post, "If there were discipline, I'd be in class."<sup>xv</sup>

It should come as no surprise that local demand for seats at Wadleigh has essentially vanished. From 2006 to 2011, no more than ten sixth grade students at Wadleigh came from District 3.<sup>xvi</sup>

Wadleigh is far from the only example of New York City's way stations along the road to failure:

- **At P.S. 297 in Bedford-Stuyvesant**, one of the city's lowest performing elementary schools, 94% of students are Black or Hispanic and 100% live in poverty. P.S. 297 is the only feeder school for The School for the Urban Environment, a middle school in the same neighborhood. No students at Urban Environment are on grade level in reading; 13% are proficient in math. The most common high schools for Urban Environment graduates are University Neighborhood High School on the Lower East Side (where just 13% of students graduate college-ready), Green School: An Academy For Environmental Careers (where 2% graduate college-ready), and School for Legal Studies (just 5% college-ready).
- **At P.S. 194 in Central Harlem**—a school infamous for its violent incidents, including a student being stabbed with a pencil<sup>xvii</sup> and allegations that a student was dragged down the stairs by a teacher,<sup>xviii</sup> both in 2013—the poverty rate is 96%, and 91% of students are Black or Hispanic. Just 6% of students are on grade level in math and reading. Graduates of P.S. 194 most commonly move on to sixth grade at P.S. 123, the Urban Assembly School for New Technologies, or New Design Middle School—none of which has an academic proficiency rate above 7%. The high schools where these middle schools commonly send students are the Academy for Social Action in Harlem (where 4% of students graduate college-ready), High School for Language and Diplomacy in downtown Manhattan (just 7% college-ready), and the High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice on the Upper West Side (6% college-ready).
- After state education officials threatened to close **Boys and Girls High School**, the city Department of Education replaced the principal and forced teachers to re-apply for their jobs. While that may represent a positive first step, all the students destined for Boys and Girls are still stuck in a pipeline to failure. The middle schools that feed into Boys and Girls are M.S. 596 Peace Academy, Dr. Susan S. McKinney Secondary School for the Arts, Satellite East Middle School, P.S. 284 Lew Wallace, and M.S. 584. At none of them did more than 10% of students meet grade-level reading and math standards.

## Mayor de Blasio's Broken Promises

Mayor de Blasio is the steward of two vastly different public school systems. In one of these school systems, well-off students are lifted up a ladder to prosperity—from kindergarten to college and beyond. The other system traps an outrageous number of disadvantaged minority students in a series of schools that fail them, dumping vulnerable children into futures where poverty, incarceration, and a lifelong struggle to make ends meet are virtually inevitable.



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The scope of this crisis is staggering. These 478,000 students have little hope of attending a high-quality school—pathways within the failed system lead to strong schools less than 3% of the time. Yet somehow, this crisis remains hidden—ignored or glossed over by an administration that is unwilling to act boldly for our kids.

We can no longer sit idly by while entire cities' worth of our poorest and most vulnerable students are funneled through a system where they will be failed—year after year, school after school. Mayor de Blasio ran on a promise to close the divide between rich and poor in New York. Yet nearly two years into his term, nothing has changed for the children trapped in the tunnel to failure.

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- <sup>i</sup> Based on a [detailed database](#) of stop and frisk activity in 2012 as reported by NYPD and published by the NYCLU, as well as estimates of the city's demographics [published](#) by the U.S. Census Bureau.
  - <sup>ii</sup> School Quality Reports are published by the city Department of Education [here](#).
  - <sup>iii</sup> Academic proficiency rates are published by the city Department of Education [here](#).
  - <sup>iv</sup> College readiness rates cited in this paper refer to the percentage of students who meet the state Education Department's Aspirational Performance Measure; all figures are published [here](#).
  - <sup>v</sup> Based on Census tract level data from the 2013 [American Community Survey](#) (5-year estimate), published by the U.S. Census Bureau.
  - <sup>vi</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>vii</sup> Demographic data for all NYC public schools are published [here](#).
  - <sup>viii</sup> ["These are the most popular elementary schools in New York City"](#) by Amy Zimmer of DNAinfo, Sept. 2, 2014
  - <sup>ix</sup> Based on a [review of NYC iSchool](#) by Nicole Mader of InsideSchools, a project of the Center for New York City Affairs, March 2015
  - <sup>x</sup> Based on a [review of Beacon High School](#) by Lydie Raschka of InsideSchools, October 2014
  - <sup>xi</sup> ["Rise of the Girl Gangs"](#) by Brad Hamilton of the *New York Post*, Dec. 4, 2011
  - <sup>xii</sup> Based on a [review of Wadleigh](#) by Skip Card of InsideSchools, December 2012
  - <sup>xiii</sup> ["At Department of Education meeting, talk of how to fix school"](#) by Eva Kalikoff of *The Columbia Spectator*, Dec. 3, 2013
  - <sup>xiv</sup> Based on the school's Quality Review, conducted by the city Department of Education; the complete findings are published [here](#)
  - <sup>xv</sup> ["HS Students' Plea: MORE Discipline!"](#) from the *New York Post*, Dec. 19, 2011
  - <sup>xvi</sup> Based on the [Educational Impact Statement](#) accompanying a proposal in 2011 to eliminate the school's sixth through eighth grades; the proposal was not adopted
  - <sup>xvii</sup> ["First-grader stabbed with point of a pencil at out-of-control Public School 194"](#) by Barry Paddock and Oren Yaniv of the *New York Daily News*, Nov. 15, 2013
  - <sup>xviii</sup> ["Teacher allegedly throws first-grader down stairs at out-of-control Harlem school"](#) by Ben Chapman of the *New York Daily News*, Dec. 1, 2013