

# New York City's Middle-Grade Schools

Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?

*A Report by the*

NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

*a coalition of member organizations of*

Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools

Brooklyn Education Collaborative

Brooklyn-Queens 4 Education Collaborative



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January 2007

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# The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

**T**he New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) has launched a campaign to transform the city's middle-grade schools into platforms for success, rather than pathways to failure, for all our city's students.

CEJ was initiated in 2005 by the twelve community-based organizations and unions that form the coalition's three constituent collaboratives: the Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools (CCB), the Brooklyn Educational Collaborative (BEC), and the Brooklyn-Queens 4 Education Collaborative (BQ4E).

While CEJ is a new coalition, its member organizations (see page 22) have long track records of strengthening their communities through organizing, social services, and housing development. In education reform, these organizations have united to create neighborhood collaboratives dedicated to leading school-improvement efforts. CEJ's mission statement defines the goal of the coalition's efforts.

Led by parents, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice is organizing a movement to end the inequities in the city's public school system. We are a collaborative of community-based organizations and unions whose members include culturally diverse parents, community members, students, and educators. We are motivated by the urgent need to obtain a quality and well-rounded education for all students. We will mobilize the power of parents and the community to effect policy change and create a more equitable educational system.

The collaboratives and their member organizations have won important victories in securing new programs and resources for historically neglected school districts and forming new kinds of collaboration among parents, teachers, and school staff:

- CCB led the effort to create the first Lead Teacher program in the history of the school system in District 9 in the South Bronx, which has been expanded to low-performing schools throughout the city.
- As a result of BEC's campaign for science equity, forty-seven middle-grade schools in East Brooklyn now have basic science equipment that allows for hands-on learning, and the New York City Department of Education has made a commitment to build fourteen new science labs in low-performing middle-grade and high schools across New York City by the fall of 2007.
- BQ4E organizations played a leading role, with the New York Immigration Coalition, in winning a new Department of Education policy mandating translation and interpretation services for parents in schools and allocating the resources to implement it.

CEJ's community organizations and unions represent hundreds of thousands of New York City residents organizing for excellence and equity in education.

This report was written for the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice by the Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. John Beam of the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University provided invaluable conceptual and editorial assistance.

The charts and graphs in this report were produced by Deinya Phenix, Tara Bahl, Dana Lockwood, and Megan Hester (Annenberg Institute), and Beth L'Haim (National Center).

Copyediting, layout, design, and production were carried out by Susan Fisher, Haewon Kim, and Margaret Balch-Gonzalez of the Annenberg Institute.

We acknowledge the invaluable assistance of all the New York City middle-grade parents, teachers, principals, and other staff who helped us conceive and prepare this report.

# Summary

In neighborhoods across New York City, parents share the hope that their children will graduate from high school and succeed in college. But there is a huge gap between that hope and the reality for hundreds of thousands of students and their families in New York City. Only one out of three students graduates with a Regents diploma, which is essential for success in most four-year colleges. Worse, only one in four of the city's African American and Latino students receives a Regents diploma. The critical turning point in reversing this failure lies in the middle grades.

This report, which is part of the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice's (CEJ) campaign to transform the city's middle-grade schools into platforms for success for all our city's students, demonstrates that New York City's middle-grade schools are failing to prepare students for the rigorous high school work that will enable them to succeed in college. That failure assumes crisis proportions for African American and Latino students. Consider these statistics from the 2005-2006 school year:

- At three out of four middle-grade schools in New York City, a majority of eighth-graders cannot read at the New York State standard.
- While half of White and Asian eighth-graders meet the New York State standard in English Language Arts (ELA), only one-quarter of African American and Latino students do. This means that nearly 40,000 out of 53,000 African American and Latino eighth-graders fail to read at state standard.
- The gap is even greater when high-poverty and low-poverty schools are compared. In high-poverty middle-grade schools, only 22 percent of the eighth-grade students meet the New York State standard in ELA, compared with 58 percent in low-poverty schools.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of all middle-grade schools failed to meet their federal No Child Left Behind requirements in 2004-2005, compared with 19 percent of elementary schools and 26 percent of high schools.

The small number of middle-grade schools in which a majority of eighth-graders read at New York State standard are mostly selective and choose their students through grades, test scores, interviews, and/or writing samples. Thus, the average sixth-grader who attends his or her neighborhood middle-grade school is almost guaranteed to attend an institution where the majority of students will graduate unprepared for high school.

Damaging patterns of low academic expectations and unequal resource distribution characterize many of the city's low-performing middle-grade schools serving African American and Latino students. These include:

- None of the low-performing schools studied in this report offered Accelerated Math A, an important gatekeeper course to high school math, compared with 66 percent of the high-performing middle-grade schools.
- More than one-quarter of the teachers in low-performing middle-grade schools were not fully licensed in their subject area, compared with 17 percent in the high-performing schools.
- More than half of teachers in high-performing schools have permanent certification, compared with only one-third of teachers in low-performing schools.

New York City has consistently failed to improve middle-grade education. While fourth-grade ELA scores have risen 27 percentage points since 1998-1999, the increase in eighth-grade scores during that period is only 1 percentage point. Furthermore, since the Bloomberg-Klein systemic reform effort, Children First, was fully implemented, eighth-grade scores have risen an equally dismal 1 percentage point.

This crisis requires bold action to transform our middle grades, action that goes beyond changing the grade configuration in our schools. CEJ calls for comprehensive reform to ensure that all middle-grade students have access to:

- well-rounded and rigorous curriculum that puts them on the road to college;
- strong academic, social, and emotional supports for all students;
- highly qualified teachers and principals who understand early adolescent development;
- smaller class size.

This report is the next stage in CEJ's campaign to mobilize the energies of parents, students, community organizations, advocacy and policy groups, youth and social service agencies, and religious organizations to transform our middle-grade schools from pathways to failure into platforms for success for all our city's public school students.

# New York City's Middle-Grade Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?

Growing up in the United States includes a landmark event in which the young person moves from a primary, small intimate environment to a secondary, large, impersonal environment. Children pass this landmark when they make the transition from elementary school to middle grades school – to junior high school or middle school. . . . This transition occurs at the same time that most adolescents are experiencing rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes.

There is a crucial need to help adolescents at this early age to acquire a durable basis for self-esteem, flexible and inquiring minds, reliable and close human relationships, a sense of belonging in a valued group, and a way of being useful beyond one's self.

— David A. Hamburg, M.D., in *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*

## The Crisis in Middle Grades in New York City

The middle grades should support two crucial transitions in students' intellectual growth and development. First, students in middle grades face demanding intellectual challenges as they move from acquisition of basic skills to the conceptual application of those skills. They must learn how to critically analyze text; problem solve in mathematics, science, and social studies; and, most important, develop their writing skills to effectively express their evolving thought processes.

Second, students begin the move from childhood to adolescence in the middle grades. This transition generates intense emotional volatility and extreme personality fluctuation, caused by the growth spurts and rapid hormonal changes that characterize adolescent development.

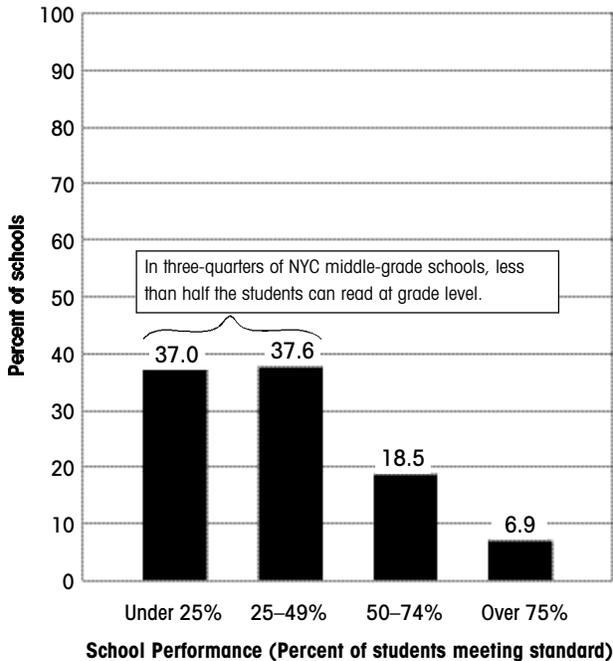
When middle-grade education helps students make these transitions effectively, students grow in confidence, capacity, and competence and develop into capable adolescents prepared for the rigors and challenges of high school, the transition to college, and, eventually, the rewards of satisfying careers and effective citizenry. If they fail to develop the intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities they need to negotiate adolescence successfully, middle-grade students can drift into self-destructive trajectories – risk-taking behaviors, dropping out of school, or pathways to prison.

Thus, the middle grades represent critical platforms for success in high school, college, and career – or pathways to failure and diminished lives. Unfortunately, in the New York City school system, the middle grades become pathways to failure for far too many students. The majority of middle-grade schools fail to help students develop the critical intellectual and academic skills they need for maturation and educational advancement.

In this report, we use the term *middle-grade school* to indicate any school that includes the middle grades, whether it be a sixth- to eighth-grade school, K–6, 6–12, or other configuration. Regardless of how grades are grouped, the developmental and academic challenges of the middle grades

persist, and neglecting to address these challenges results in widespread school failure. In 2006, for example, 63 percent of the city’s eighth-graders, or 45,000 students, failed to achieve the state standard in English Language Arts (ELA).

Figure 1. Distribution of schools on eighth-grade ELA results, 2005–2006



EDSource: NY State Education Department (NYSED), Grade 8 English Language Arts (Media file)

NOTE: Meeting the standard means scoring at level 3 or 4 on the ELA exam.

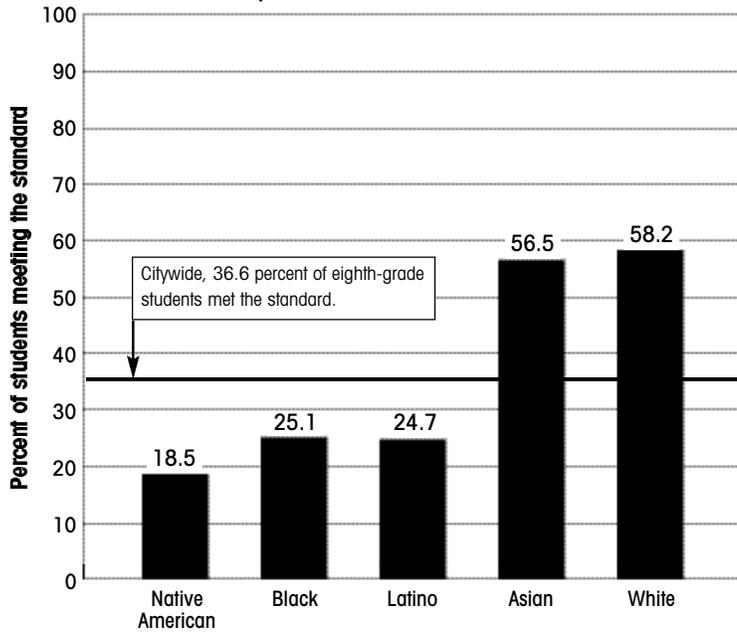
As Figure 1 demonstrates, at three out of four of the city’s middle-grade schools (270 schools), a majority of eighth-graders are not performing at the state standard on the ELA exam.

Analysis of the 25 percent of middle-grade schools where more than half of eighth-graders meet the state standard reveals that the vast majority of these schools select their student body through a combination of grade or test-score cut-offs, interviews, or writing samples. An average sixth-grader who is not accepted into one of these selective middle-grade schools is almost guaranteed to end up at a school where the majority of students will graduate unprepared for high school.

The city’s middle-grade schools also fail to meet performance targets set by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Almost half (47 percent) of middle-grade schools citywide did not meet their performance targets in the 2004–2005 school year, compared with 19 percent of elementary schools and 26 percent of high schools (NYSED 2006).

A close examination of the dismal academic performance of our city’s middle-grade schools reveals evidence of a very sizable race and class achievement gap (see Figure 2). Twice as many White and Asian eighth-graders meet the New York State standard in ELA than African American and Latino students; this means that nearly 40,000 out of 53,000 African American and Latino eighth-graders leave middle-grade school unprepared for high school-level reading and writing. That gap is almost threefold when we compare students in high- and low-poverty schools. (Note: *African American*, in this report, refers to all children of African descent. In the NYCDOE data referenced in the study, the equivalent term used is *Black*.) As Figure 3 indicates, race and class factors are tightly intertwined in New York City schooling, because persistent segregation and discrimination have characterized that schooling.

Figure 2. Eighth-grade ELA related to race and ethnicity in New York City schools

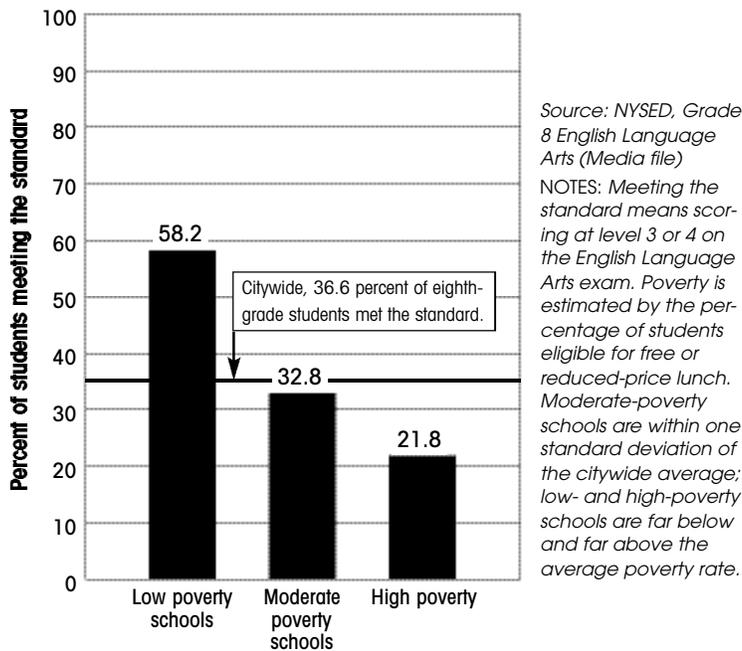


Source: NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE), 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

This abysmal eighth-grade performance intensifies the probability of student failure in high school. Almost half the city's middle-grade students, for example, fail to meet the intellectual challenges of graduating from high school in four years. Worse, only one out of three students attains the Regents diploma essential to college success. Because the requirements of a knowledge economy and the demands of effective citizenry mandate college-level skills for all our students, we must confront – and transform – our middle-grade schools' inability to prepare students effectively for high school and college.

Given the Campaign for Fiscal Equity court judgment and the infusion of more than \$2 billion in new funds, New York City has a historic opportunity to transform middle-grade education. New York City's middle-grade schools could be platforms for success for all students. Currently, however, for at least half our city's students, they are pathways to failure.

Figure 3. Eighth-grade ELA related to poverty in New York City schools



Source: NYSED, Grade 8 English Language Arts (Media file)

NOTES: Meeting the standard means scoring at level 3 or 4 on the English Language Arts exam. Poverty is estimated by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Moderate-poverty schools are within one standard deviation of the citywide average; low- and high-poverty schools are far below and far above the average poverty rate.

### Middle-Grade Schools as the Traditionally Neglected Turning Point

Middle-grade schools have long been defined as the critical turning point in students' educational careers. But they have largely been ignored as sites for systematic reform by many states and school districts. Carnegie Corporation's groundbreaking report *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* was published in 1989. But as David Hamburg, president emeritus of Carnegie Corporation, observes in his foreword to *Turning Points 2000*, which summarizes the results of eleven years' effort to implement the middle-grade school reform recommendations of the 1989 report:

Most American middle grades schools have for decades been unable to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. These institutions have the potential to make a powerfully beneficial impact on the development of their students, yet they were largely ignored as the educational reform movement ignited in the 1980s. (Jackson & Davis 2000)

This national failure to initiate meaningful reform in the nation's middle-grade schools is mirrored in New York City's recent school reform experience. The school system initiated the New York City Middle School Initiative in 1996 as a pilot program and subsequently expanded it to all the city's middle-grade schools over the next four years. The initiative's evaluation, by the Academy for Educational Development, defined some gains in teaching and learning and school organization but found that the overall systemic support for the initiative was weak and not sustained.

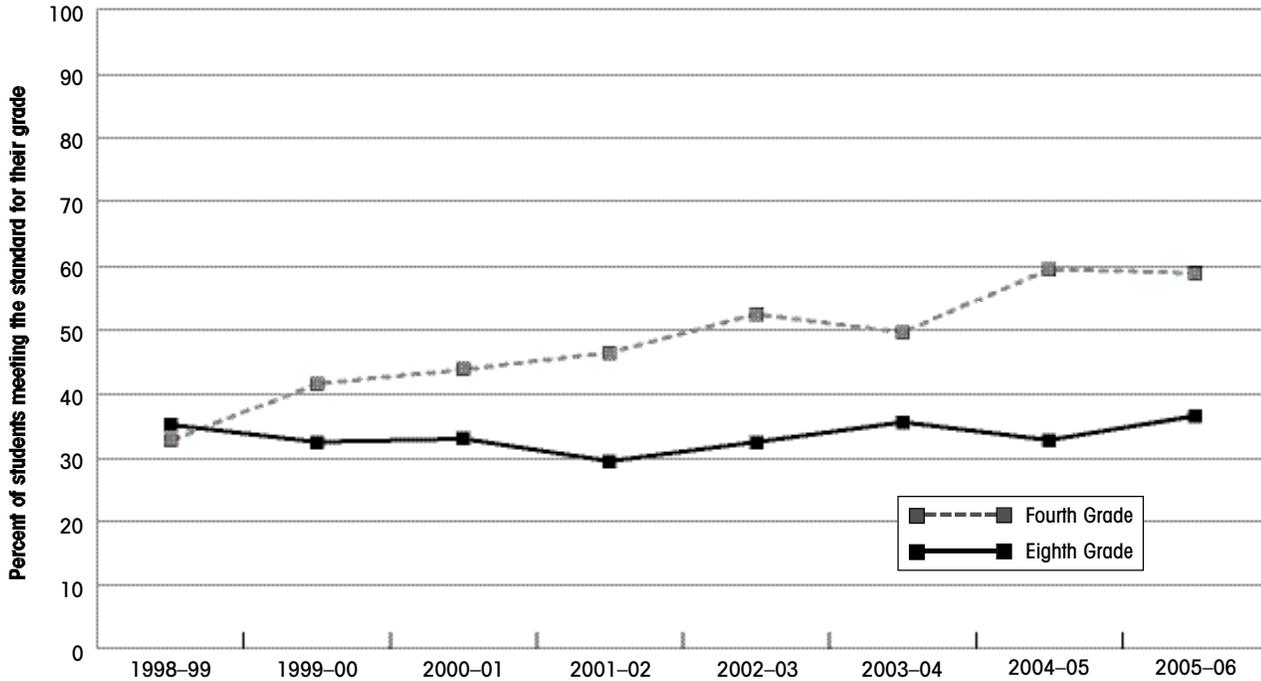
In 2001, the Board of Education initiated the Task Force on Improving Middle Grade Schools, which made a series of recommendations in spring 2002. As a result of administration change, no actions were taken to implement the recommendations.

Most recently, the Committee on Education of the Council of the City of New York (2004) issued a report that severely criticized the failures of the school system's science instruction. One of the report's most trenchant indictments was the failure of teaching and learning in the city's middle-grade school science courses. The report found that more than a third of the city's middle-grade schools had no science labs, and that while more than 80 percent of eighth-grade students in low-needs schools passed the state science test, only 40 percent passed in high-needs schools. Finally, the report indicated that "middle school science teachers must make up lost ground, but many lack the support, training, and basic facilities to do so" (p. 16).

Thus, middle-grade education in New York City, though acknowledged as a critical turning point in students' academic and developmental careers, has been consistently ignored as a target for systemic reform. The Bloomberg-Klein administration has essentially continued this pattern of neglect. The current administration has committed itself to a limited middle-grade reform effort that focuses on some targeted skills intervention and has indicated a policy preference for transforming traditional middle-grade schools into K-8 or 6-12 schools. Although some forty elementary schools have become K-8 schools and another forty 6-12 schools have been created, it is unclear whether the necessary physical space can be mobilized to carry this policy to scale across the city. But far more than structural change is needed to resolve the crisis in middle-grade education.

Moreover, the administration has directed far more energy, resources, and organizational change efforts toward elementary and high school transformation than to middle-grade reform. The results of such concentration of efforts are predictable; both K-5 test scores and high school graduation rates have improved. Consider the evidence. The Bloomberg-Klein administration initiated the planning for its Children First reform in the 2002-2003 school year; the first year of actual implementation was 2003-2004. As figures 4 and 5 indicate, eighth-grade English Language Arts test scores have remained distressingly low and flat, as opposed to fourth-grade scores. The Children First reform has failed to register any sustained gains in ELA across the system's middle grades.

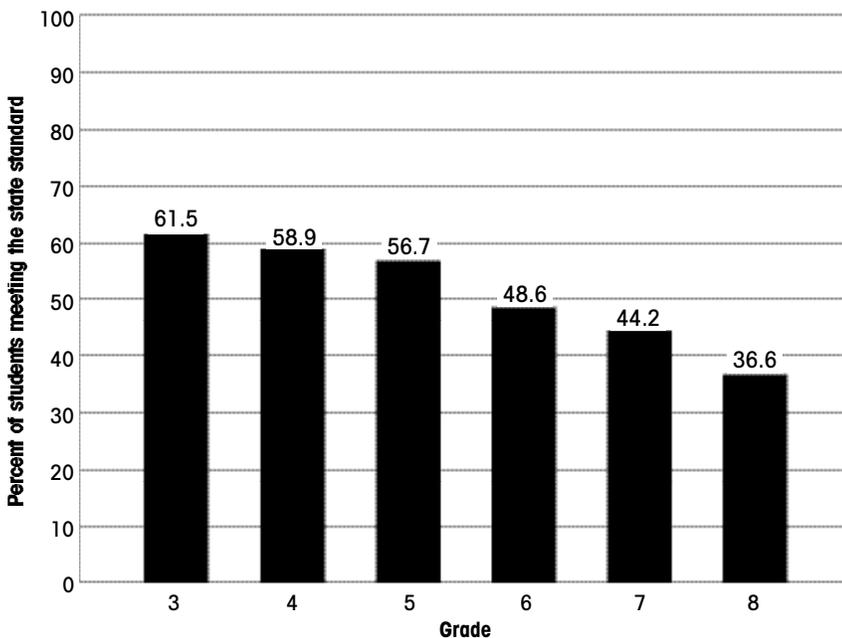
Figure 4. Fourth- and eighth-grade ELA test results since 1999



Source: NYCDOE, results on the state ELA test

NOTE: Meeting the standard means scoring at level 3 or 4 on the English Language Arts exam.

Figure 5. 2005-2006 ELA performance in New York City by grade level



Source: NYSED, Grade 8 English Language Arts (Media file)

Note: Meeting the standard means scoring at level 3 or 4 on the ELA exam.

Moreover, as seen in Figure 5, 2005-2006 test scores demonstrate a consistent decline in ELA proficiency from elementary through the middle grades.

### Resource Inequalities in the Middle Grades

The failure of our middle-grade schools to effectively educate our students – particularly low-income African American and Latino students – is grounded, in part, in patterns of segregated schooling that have dominated the provision of public education in New York City for almost a century. But unequal curriculum offerings and inequitable distribution of

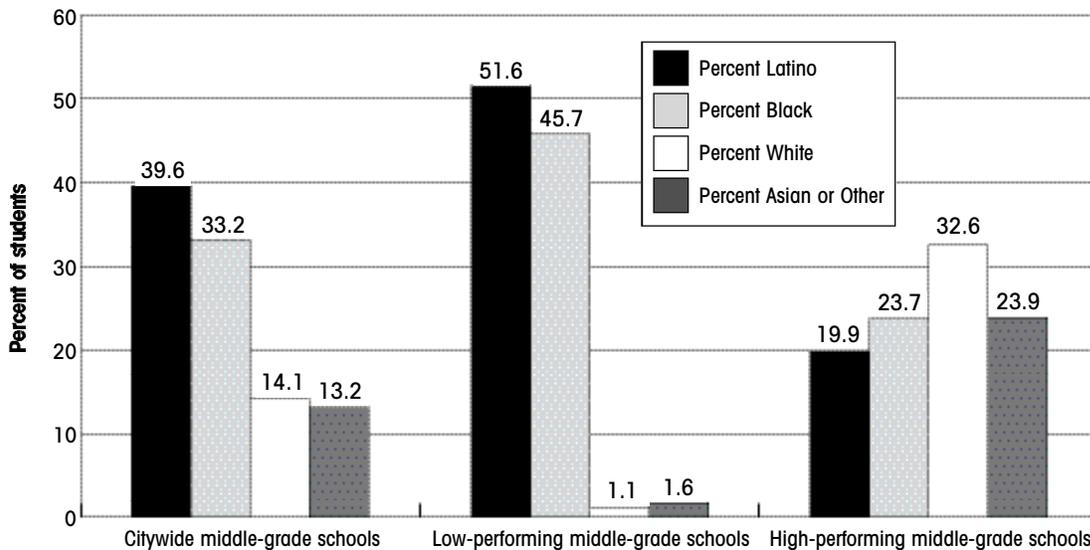
teacher resources have also contributed to creating a race and class achievement gap in our middle-grade schools.

This gap is clearly revealed when we examine the distribution of course offerings and instructional resources at high- and low-performing middle-grade schools. When the city's middle-grade schools are arrayed by how many score more than one standard deviation above or below the citywide average in eighth-grade ELA and Math tests, the results are fifty-two high-performing and fifty-one low-performing schools.

To select the highest- and lowest-performing middle-grade schools, all schools with an eighth grade and with sufficient 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 data were included in the analysis. The percentages of eighth-graders meeting the ELA and Math state standards for 2005-2006 were averaged, and the distribution of this average for all middle-grade schools was determined. Any schools that had an average eighth-grade ELA and Math score more than one standard deviation above the mean (the top 17 percent scorers) were included in the highest-performing group of schools. Schools with an average score more than one standard deviation below the mean for all middle-grade schools were included in the lowest-performing schools (the bottom 16 percent of scorers).

These high-performing and low-performing schools differ in student composition (see Figure 6). The high-performing middle-grade schools are more than 30 percent White and almost 20 percent Asian, and less than 25 percent African American and 25 percent Latino. Fewer than 50 percent of their students are eligible for free lunch, a standard measure of family poverty, and fewer than 5 percent of their population are English-language learners (ELLs). In contrast, the low-performing middle-grade schools serve a student body that is almost 100 percent African American and Latino, of whom almost 80 percent are free-lunch eligible and 15 percent are ELLs. These differences are especially pronounced, given the racial/ethnic composition of the New York City school system.

Figure 6. Racial/ethnic composition of New York City middle-grade schools



Source: NYCDOE, 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

Moreover, the high-performing schools are predominantly selective, recruiting their students through magnet, gifted, or other selection processes. The low-performing schools are all neighborhood-serving middle-grade schools.

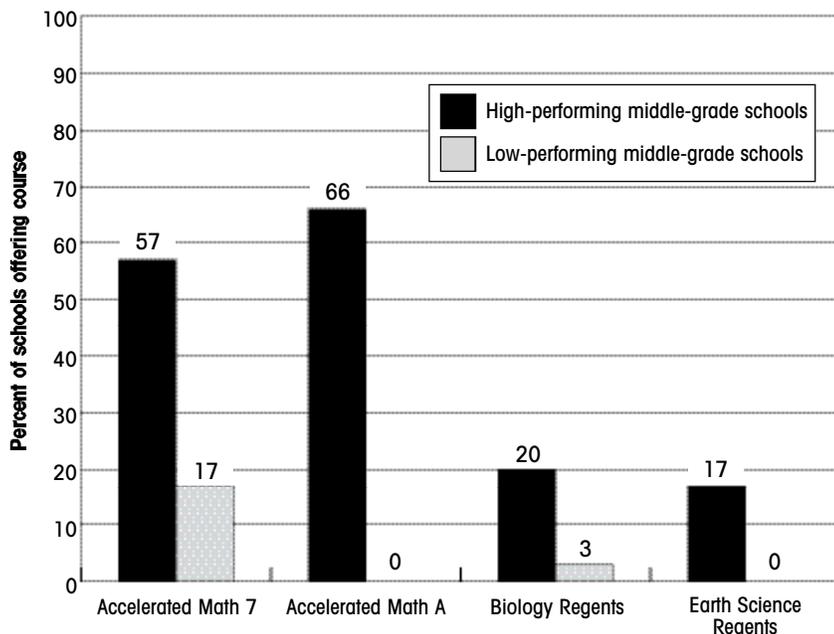
Consider the results of this analysis for these high- and low-performing schools.

### Curriculum

Low-performing schools generally fail to offer some of the critical courses students need to succeed in high school and prepare for college, as shown in Figure 7. Accelerated Math 7, for example, is one of the foundational courses critical to success in high school math. That course is offered in 57 percent of the high-performing schools but in only 17 percent of the low-performing schools. Another key course – Accelerated Math A – is offered at both the middle and high school levels. Passing the Regents exam in Math A in the middle grades gives students one of the five Regents passes required for high school graduation, as well as the opportunity to take an Advanced Placement course in high school. While almost 66 percent of the high-performing middle-grade schools offer Accelerated Math A, none of the low-performing schools offer it.

Similarly, taking Regents Science courses – either Biology (Living Environment) or Earth Science – in the middle grades gives students the opportunity to pass a required Regents examination in eighth grade and then to take an Advanced Placement course in high school. Yet, while 20 percent of the high-performing schools offer Biology Regents courses and 17 percent of those schools offer Earth Science Regents courses, only 3 percent of the low-performing schools offer the Biology Regents, and none offer the Earth Science Regents.

Figure 7. Advanced math and science course offerings



Source: NYSED, 2005-2006 course offerings data

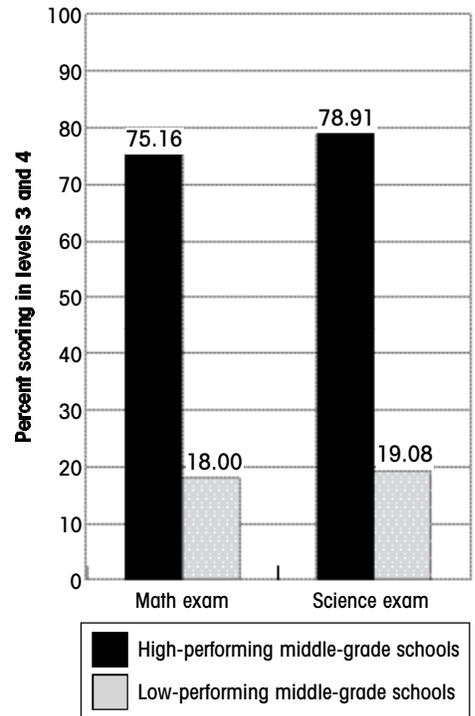
The course offerings, however, do not reveal the full inequity of academic preparation at low- and high-performing schools, because many students at the high-performing schools take the Regents Science exam without taking the Regents courses. In the high-performing schools, 1,028 students (10 percent) took the Regents Science exam, but only 26 students (less than 1 percent) in the low-performing schools took the Regents Science exam in 2005.

The disparities in course offerings contribute to highly inequitable academic outcomes in these subject areas (see Figure 8). While 75 percent of the students in the high-performing schools reach proficiency (Levels

3 or 4) on the eighth-grade Math test, only 18 percent of the students in the low-performing schools reach Levels 3 and 4 on the same test. Almost 80 percent of the students in the high-performing schools reach proficiency on the eighth-grade Science test, compared with fewer than 20 percent of the students in the low-performing schools. Thus, at least four out of every five students leave low-performing middle-grade schools without attaining the minimal levels of Math and Science capacity necessary to meet the demands of high school.

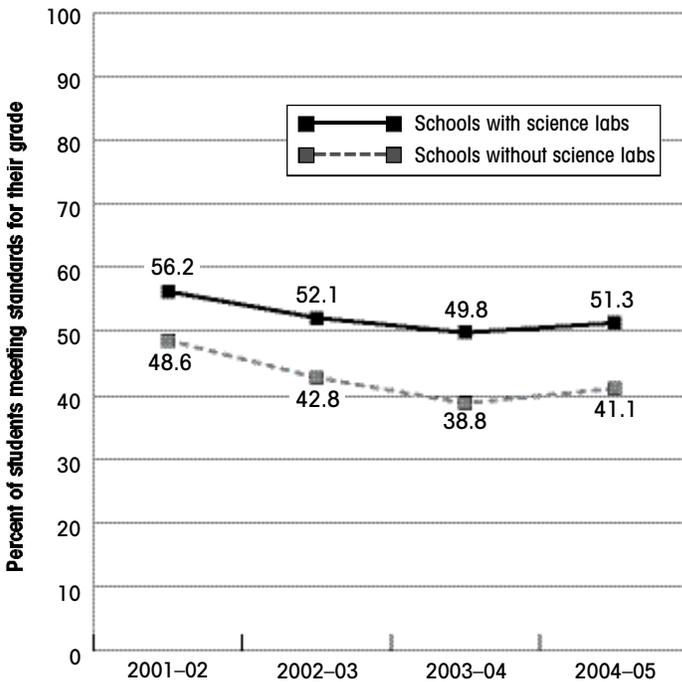
Some of these disparities may also be linked to other forms of inequitable resource distribution. A study undertaken by the Brooklyn Education Collaborative comparing the test scores of middle-grade schools with and without science labs in Brooklyn found that students in schools without labs scored 10 percentage points lower on the eighth-grade New York State Science test. State regulations prohibit students in schools without science labs from taking the Science Regents exams. Thus, all the New York City middle-grade schools without science labs cannot officially allow their students even to take a Science Regents.

Figure 8. 2004–2005 eighth-grade test results for highest- and lowest-performing schools



Source: NYCDOE, 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

Figure 9. Eighth-grade Science results for Brooklyn schools with and without science labs



Sources: NYCDOE, 2001-2002 through 2004-2005 Annual School Reports; science lab information based on calls to schools and survey by NYCDOE

Figure 9 indicates how the failure to provide an essential learning resource such as a science lab contributes to reducing academic outcomes. To the extent that all the disparities in course offerings demonstrated in this section contribute to reducing academic outcomes in low-performing schools, they begin to explain the race-class achievement gap in our middle-grade schools.

These disparities also demonstrate a highly inequitable set of standards and expectations for the city's middle-grade students. They suggest that middle-grade schools serving relatively high percentages of

White, Asian, and non-poor students set high standards in course offerings that lead to effective high school matriculation and successful pathways to college. But for middle-grade schools serving students who are overwhelmingly poor, African American, and Latino, low standards and low expectations result in course offerings that preclude students from the academic preparation they need to succeed in high school and college.

Educators sometimes claim that these differences in academic outcomes between high- and low-performing schools result from poor preparation by the previous schooling level. Thus middle-grade educators argue that they cannot provide advanced courses to students whose skills have not been adequately developed by their elementary schools. There is truth to the claim that many of our city's elementary schools do not adequately prepare low-income African American and Latino students for success in the middle grades. But the city's high schools have begun to address the problem of entering students' limited academic preparation and low entry skills by implementing a variety of strategies, from enhanced literacy and math instruction to multiple pathways to graduation. Some of the city's middle-grade schools are also developing effective basic-skills acquisition programs. Limited entry-level skills are no novelty, at either high school or middle-grade levels. Therefore, all middle-grade schools have the responsibility – just as all high schools do – to revise curriculum, instruction, and school organization to simultaneously recuperate and advance their students' skills development. The argument that because students' skills are low, we will offer them only low-level courses is a self-fulfilling prophecy that stunts students' academic growth and helps produce the stark achievement disparities that characterize our city's public schooling.

### ***Instructional Resources***

Differences in the quality of instruction also contribute to the race and class achievement gap. Despite the critical need for expert teaching at struggling middle-grade schools, teaching staffs at low-performing schools have less experience and less training than teaching staffs at high-performing schools.

Consider the evidence. Teacher certification, a key indicator of instructional quality, is problematic throughout the city school system. New York State classifies teachers as “not appropriately certified” if they are teaching without having acquired their certification credentials, which include graduating from a state-approved teacher-preparation program and passing the state or national teacher examinations.

The state also considers teachers not appropriately certified if they have no certification or temporary certification or if they are teaching in a subject area they have not been appropriately trained or certified for. The percentage of teachers not appropriately certified is far higher in the city's five boroughs than in other school districts throughout the state (see Figure 10). (Note: The New York State Education Department [NYSED] recently released a report showing increases in teacher certification in New York City and the state at large. This new information may affect the middle-grade school data mentioned in this document, but the NYSED report does not disaggregate numbers for middle-grade school certification and does not include school-level data.)

But differences in instructional quality are particularly severe in the city's middle grades. The percentage of New York City teachers teaching out of certification area or out of license is higher in the city's middle-grade schools than in the city's elementary or high schools. Moreover, teacher experience – the length of time teachers have been teaching – is far lower in the city's middle-grade schools than in either elementary or high schools (see figures 10 through 14).

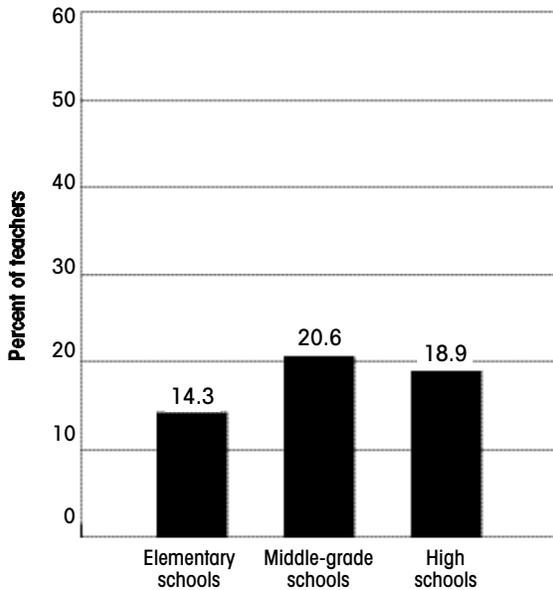
These shortfalls in teacher certification and experience disadvantage all the city's middle-grade-school students. But the low-income African American and Latino students in the city's poorly performing middle-grade schools suffer even more from this inequitable distribution of instructional quality. In the low-performing middle-grade schools whose disparities in course offerings were reviewed earlier, there are fewer teachers with permanent certification and more teachers who are teaching out of license. Permanent certification, the advanced teaching license offered by New York State, requires teachers to have at least two years' teaching experience and a master's degree and to have passed all the relevant exams. More than half of teachers in high-performing schools had permanent certification in 2004-2005.

Figure 10. Percentage of teachers not appropriately certified



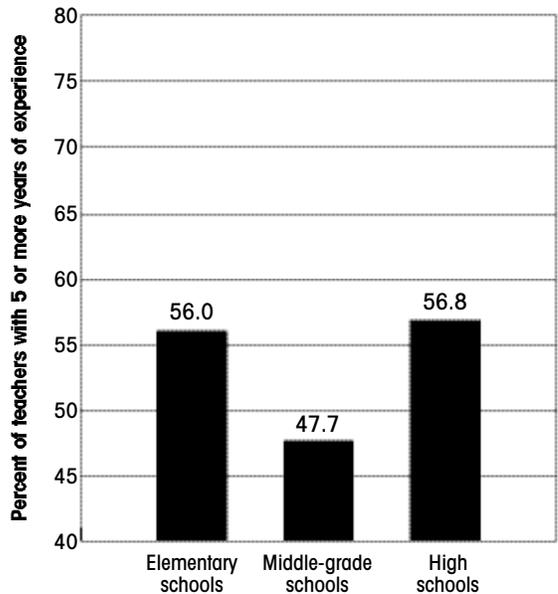
Source: NYSED, Information, Reporting and Technology Services, Certification Distributions for Classroom Teachers 2004-2005. <[www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/pmf/2004-05/2005\\_Stat-13.pdf](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/pmf/2004-05/2005_Stat-13.pdf)>

Figure 11. New York City teachers teaching out of license



Sources: NYSED, personnel Master File; NYCDOE 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

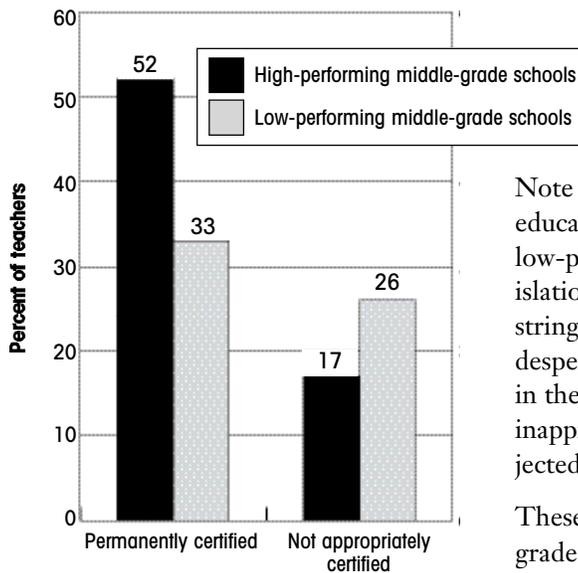
Figure 12. Teacher experience in New York City schools



Source: NYCDOE, 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

NOTE: This figure displays a range of 40% to 80%, rather than 0% to 100% or 0% to 60%, as the other figures display, to highlight the variation among the different types of schools.

Figure 13. Teacher resources in low- and high-performing middle-grade schools



Source: NYSED, 2004-2005 Personnel Master File

However, only one-third of teachers in low-performing schools had this advanced license. In the high-performing middle-grade schools, some 17 percent of teachers were teaching out of license in the 2004-2005 school year. But in the low-performing middle-grade schools, 26 percent were teaching out of license.

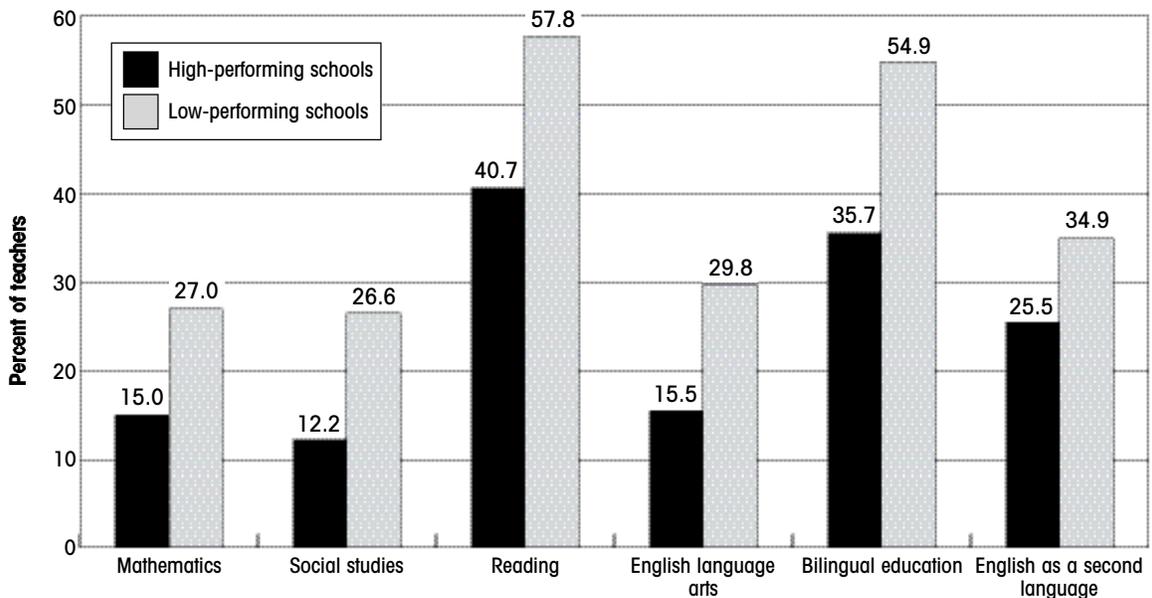
Note particularly in Figure 14 the high percentages of bilingual education teachers not appropriately certified in *both* the high- and low-performing schools. The national No Child Left Behind legislation and the New York State Regent’s examination impose stringent testing requirements on English-language learners, who desperately need effective instruction in both languages to succeed in the middle grades and in high school, rather than the too-often inappropriately certified bilingual teachers they are currently subjected to in the city’s middle-grade schools.

These inequitable distribution patterns demonstrate that middle-grade students are more disadvantaged by poor instructional quality than elementary and high school students. Moreover, among middle-grade schools, those serving predominantly low-income African American and Latino students are even more disadvantaged.

Thus, those middle-grade students with the greatest need for high-quality instruction have the least access to it.

We fear that the inequalities demonstrated by the figures in this report only begin to reveal the inadequacies within the city’s middle-grade schools. Informal surveys of parents, teachers, and administrators in middle-grade schools across the city indicate a systemic failure to provide

Figure 14. Percentage of teachers not appropriately certified, by subject area



Source: NYSED, 2004-2005 Personnel Master File

student support and high school articulation services. School counselors have enormous case-loads that prohibit them from meeting regularly with students to track their academic progress or establish supportive relationships. Additionally, art and music classes, sports teams, and other outlets for creative expression are in short supply.

Within this general failure are stark patterns of inequitable distribution. At high-performing middle-grade schools, for example, the vast majority of students take the admission exam for specialized high schools, while at low-performing schools, only a few students, if any, are even informed of the exam. (CEJ member organizations conducted phone and in-person interviews with a sample of middle-grade schools during the fall of 2006.)

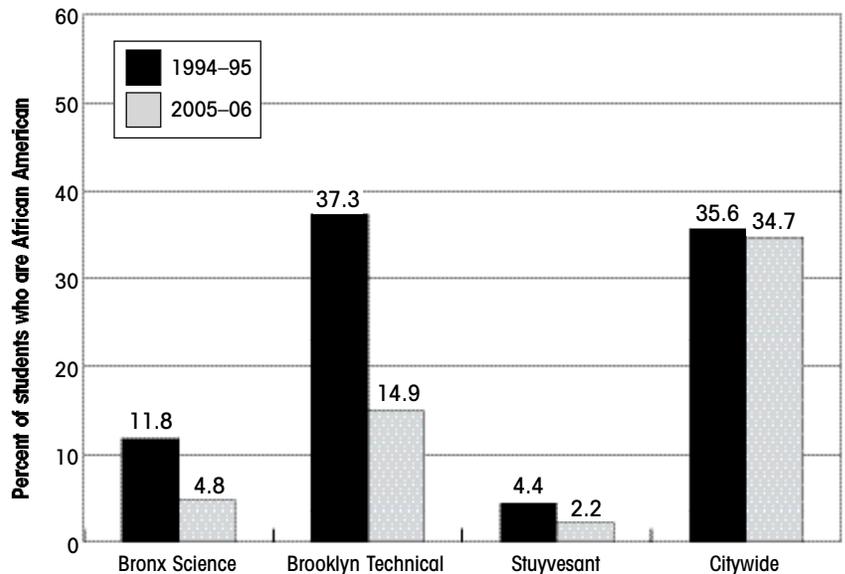
## The Consequences of the City’s Middle-Grades Failure

Several distressing “moments of truth” for students and their families result from this comprehensive middle-grades failure in New York City schools. First, in spite of what may seem adequate middle-grade academic performance, many middle-grade students discover in the spring of their eighth-grade year that they have not gained admission to their choice of high school, primarily because their grades do not correspond to their low levels of standardized-test scores.

Another such moment of truth occurs when students discover that they are not even prepared to take the admission exam for the specialized high schools. A highly critical *New York Times* editorial in the summer of 2006 attacked the very low, and declining, African American enrollment in these highly selective schools (see Figure 15). The editorial indicated that Latino enrollment had also declined. Pervasive low achievement in the city’s middle-grade schools, particularly those serving predominantly African American and Latino students, based on the patterns of low academic expectations and inequitable instructional quality demonstrated in this section, may help explain the disparities the *Times* editorial decried.

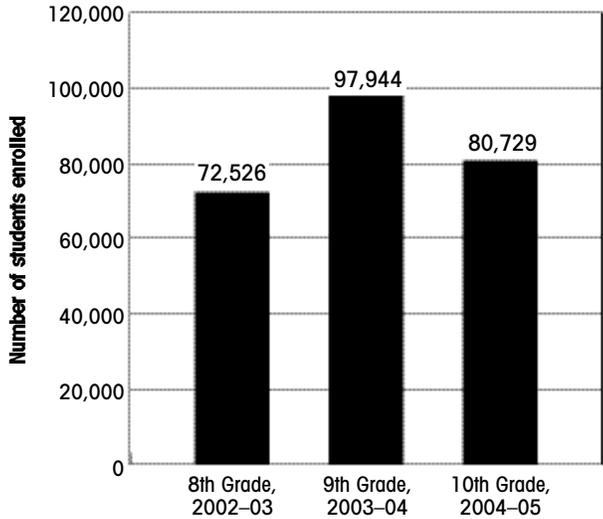
This dramatic failure to prepare African American and Latino students to test into the city’s specialized high schools is not new. More than a decade ago, a series of “Secret Apartheid” reports, researched and published by NYC ACORN (1997), demonstrated the processes of discrimination and poor academic preparation that produce the appallingly low percentages of African American and Latino students in the specialized high schools.

Figure 15. African American student enrollment in New York City specialized high schools



Sources: “In Elite N.Y. Schools, a Dip in Blacks and Hispanics,” *New York Times* (August 18, 2006); NYCDOE, 1994-1995 Annual School Reports

Figure 16. "Ninth-grade bulge"



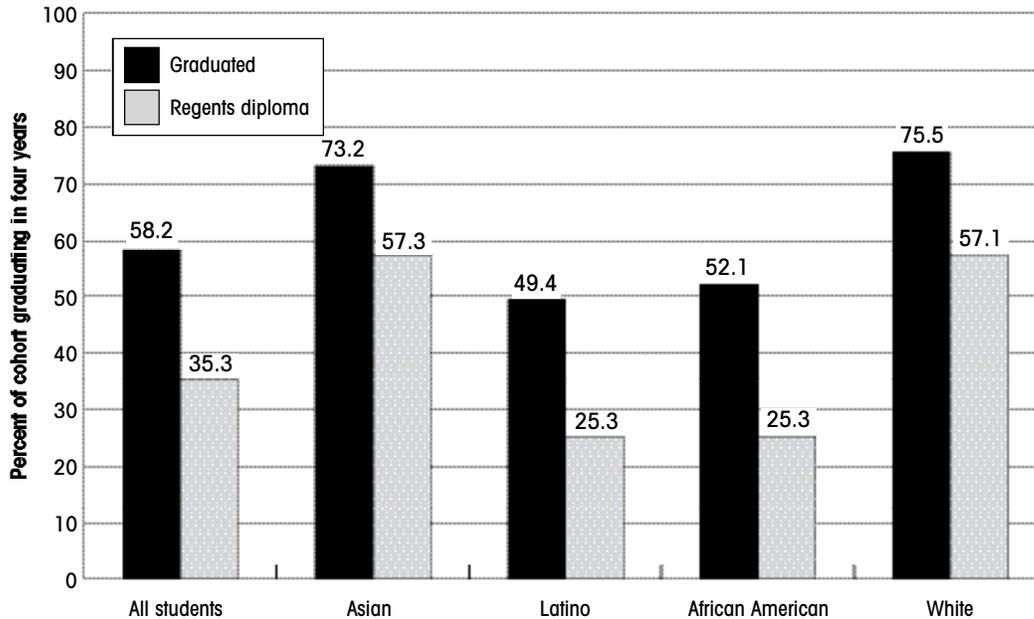
Sources: NYCDOE, 2002-2003 through 2004-2005 Annual School Reports

Another moment of truth occurs for too many middle-grades graduates when they discover that their reading, writing, math, and critical-thinking skills cannot adequately meet their high school's curriculum and instructional demands. The notorious "ninth-grade bulge" in urban districts throughout the country, as well as in New York City, indicates the large numbers of middle-grade graduates who are unable to progress academically in high school because of their inadequate skills development and are held back repeatedly in ninth grade (see Figure 16). Trapped in a recurring cycle of poor performance, course failure, and limited credit accumulation, too many of these students begin the process of disengagement that leads to dropping out.

The cumulative results of the process of disengagement that begins in poorly performing middle-grade schools are devastating for far too many of the city's

African American and Latino students. Though the overall high school graduation rate for the New York City class of 2005 was almost 54 percent, the disparities in graduation rates by race/ethnicity are startling and dispiriting. White and Asian students, for example, graduate at almost twice the rate of African American and Latino students (see Figure 17). Only 35 percent of English-language learners graduate high school in four years. When we examine Regents diploma rates, the disparities by race are even starker. While 57 percent of White and Asian stu-

Figure 17. Four-year graduation rates in New York City, class of 2005



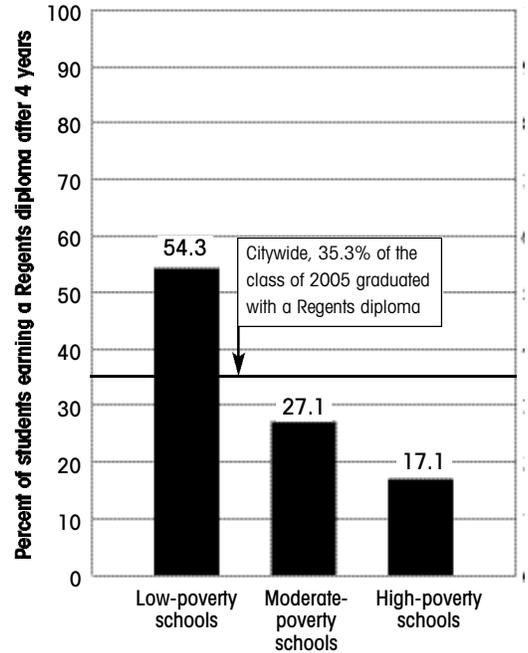
Sources: NYCDOE, Class of 2005 Four-Year Longitudinal Report

dents graduate with Regents diplomas, only 25 percent of African American students and Latino students acquire a Regents diploma. (Note: The New York City Department of Education reports a 58.2 percent graduation rate for the class of 2005. Several national reports calculating graduation rates in urban districts cite rates for New York City that are considerably lower. The city's calculation includes student acquisition of a General Education Diploma (GED) in its graduation rate; most experts object to such inclusion. Thus, the rate we cite is the city's rate minus the GED rate.)

The disparity in graduation rates by poverty status is equally disheartening. When the city's Regents graduation rate is disaggregated by level of student poverty, high schools with low percentages of student poverty graduate more than three times as many of their students as do high schools with high levels of student poverty (see Figure 18). These high-poverty high schools are the recipients of students from the great majority of the city's low-performing middle-grade schools serving low-income African American and Latino students.

These graphs demonstrate that the patterns of performance that differentiate students by race and class in the city's middle-grade schools culminate in sharply different rates of graduation and dropping out in the city's high schools. The more advantaged students who attend the city's high-performing middle-grade schools tend to acquire the academic skills they need to graduate from high school, often with Regents diplomas. The low-income African American and Latino students who attend the city's poorly performing

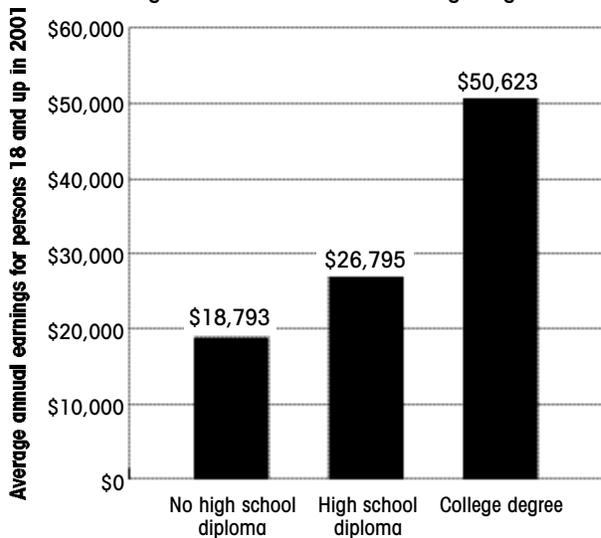
Figure 18. Regents diploma rates related to poverty in New York City schools



Sources: NYCDOE, *Class of 2005 Four-Year Longitudinal Report* and *2004-2005 Annual School Reports*

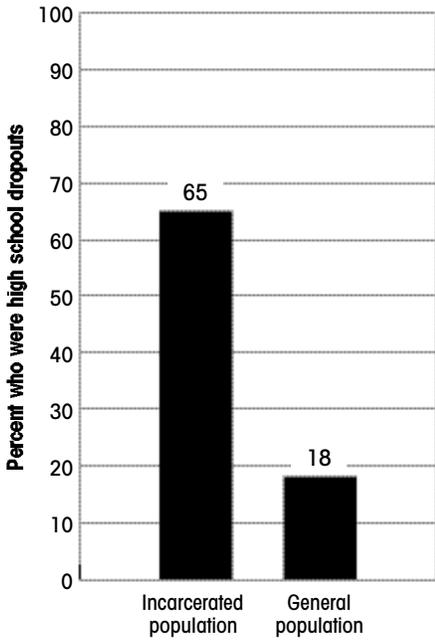
NOTE: Poverty is estimated by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Moderate-poverty schools are within one standard deviation of the citywide average; low- and high-poverty schools are far below and far above the average poverty rate.

Figure 19. How much is a college degree worth?



Source: The College Board, *U.S. Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, no. 129

Figure 20. High school dropout rate related to incarceration in the U.S.



Source: *Education and Correctional Population*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, special report, January 2003.

middle-grade schools often attend overcrowded and poorly performing high schools. If they graduate from those schools, they rarely attain a Regents diploma, the necessary credential for success in college.

But all too often, such students fail to graduate at all. Once they drop out without the necessary high school diploma, they are often forced to enter the city's low-skilled, low-wage service economy. Too many of these students may choose to resolve their limited economic and career options by engaging in varieties of risk-taking behaviors that ultimately become pathways to prison. Figures 19 and 20 indicate the relationship between dropping out and lower lifetime earning and dropping out and incarceration (based on national data). If data for New York City outcomes were available, they would in all likelihood show even starker disparities.

# What's Needed: A Marshall Plan for Middle-Grade Schools

Nearly a decade ago, organized public school parents, led by NYC ACORN (1997), released a report documenting the “secret apartheid” in our middle-grade schools that resulted in abysmally low numbers of African American and Latino students attending the specialized high schools in New York City. The grim reality, as this current report reveals, is that the situation has not changed. Our city’s middle-grade schools continue to function as pathways to failure, rather than platforms for success, for far too many of our students.

This report demonstrates that our middle-grade schools are characterized by low expectations and inadequate and inequitably distributed resources in curriculum and instruction. We believe this extends to a much larger set of resources in middle-grade schools, including:

- art, music, and drama classes
- school counseling services
- technology
- preparation for the specialized high school exam

The Coalition for Education Justice calls for a Marshall Plan for middle-grade schools that will transform the organization, instruction, resource allocation, and teacher quality in the city’s middle-grade schools and alter the pervasive patterns of failure documented in this report. (The term *Marshall Plan for middle-grade schools* was introduced in a *New York Times* editorial on September 3, 2006.)

Our findings, along with extensive research, suggest that the plan should include the following elements:

## ***1. Well-rounded and rigorous curriculum that puts students on the road to college***

All our middle-grade students should have access to a rigorous and varied curriculum that includes Regents-level math and science courses, art, music, health and physical education, technology, quality ESL, bilingual and dual-language programs, and excellent science programs with well-equipped labs.

## ***2. Strong academic, social, and emotional supports for all students***

To help middle-grade students successfully meet the challenges of early adolescence, our schools should have additional school counselors, college and career exploration programs, effective advising for undocumented students, sports teams, and a student support network, including advisories that track individual student progress and provide interventions when necessary.

## ***3. Highly qualified teachers and principals who understand adolescent development***

To support school staff in helping students meet the challenges associated with the transition to adolescence, our middle-grade schools need a comprehensive program of professional development focusing on the academic and developmental needs of middle-grade students; time for teachers to meet; mentors who work with teachers and principals for three years; and lead teachers in each grade and/or subject area. Additionally, new incentive strategies must be developed to attract and retain highly qualified teachers and principals in middle-grade schools, particularly low-performing ones.

***4. Smaller class size, with no more than twenty students in a class***

To provide effective pathways to college, middle-grade schools must have smaller classes to support differentiated instruction.

***5. A deputy chancellor for postsecondary education and careers***

Change must also occur at the top of the school system. A new position in the New York City Department of Education should focus exclusively on ensuring proper coordination and alignment between our middle-grade schools, our high schools, and college and the world of work.

Considerable recent media discussion has focused on the most effective grade configuration for schools serving middle-grade students. While this is important, it obscures the most critical issues shaping student achievement in the middle grades. Whatever the configuration, all middle-grade students need a rigorous and engaging education in a supportive setting, led by adults with the knowledge and experience to work well with young adolescents.

In the next stage of our campaign to transform the city's middle-grade schools, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice will engage key constituencies and stakeholders across the city. Through concerted organizing, CEJ will build the dialogues necessary to expand these general recommendations into a bold and specific action plan to transform our city's middle-grade schools from pathways to failure into platforms for success.

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## Member Organizations of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

ACORN is a national membership organization of low- and moderate-income families with a thirty-year history of organizing for social change. The NYC ACORN Schools Office was established in 1990 and has developed new public schools and issued policy studies demonstrating racial and economic inequities in the school system. ACORN has been organizing for school improvement in the Bronx and Brooklyn for the last ten years.

Citizens Advice Bureau has been providing a wide array of services to South Bronx residents for almost thirty years in the areas of early childhood education, after-school and summer programs, adolescent development, homelessness prevention and shelter, and immigrant rights. It initiated and supports a local parent organizing group, Standing Together Organizing Parents (STOP).

Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation has been organizing parents in the northern part of the old District 19 for the last nine years around overcrowding issues, operates after-school programs in many schools in the neighborhood, and has collaborated with New Visions for Public Schools to develop a dual-language school, the Cypress Hills Community School. Their parent organizing group, the Cypress Hills Advocates for Education, or CHAFE, has led successful efforts to increase access to tutoring services.

Highbridge Community Life Center has been providing a wide range of educational and social services since 1979, including job training programs and entitlement assistance to families living in the Highbridge neighborhood. Most recently, it helped parents to establish United Parents of Highbridge.

Latin American Integration Center (LAIC) provides a wide range of services and support to low-income immigrants and people of color in Queens and Staten Island. Since 1992, LAIC has helped over 12,000 immigrants become American citizens and has built leadership and community power through voting and civic participation activities.

Make the Road by Walking is a major force for social change in Bushwick, with more than 2,100 members who lead the organization. Make the Road offers a variety of services and strategies for neighborhood improvement, including organizing for civil rights and economic justice, legal services, educational programs, and youth development.

Mid-Bronx Council, established in 1973, is one of the largest CBOs in the South Bronx controlled and operated by people of color. It provides a comprehensive range of services, including housing, employment training and job referrals, after-school programs, and child care. It provides organizing support to a local parent group, Steps Toward Empowering Parents and Students (STEPS).

New Settlement Apartments owns and operates almost 1,000 units of low- and moderate-income housing in the Mount Eden neighborhood and provides educational and community service programs to area residents. It initiated and provides organizing support to the Parent Action Committee.

New York Civic Participation Project is a collaboration of labor unions and community groups organizing and mobilizing union members in the neighborhoods where they live. The member organizations - SEIU Local 32BJ, AFSCME DC-37, HERE Local 100, the National Employment Law Project, and Make the Road by Walking - represent hundreds of thousands of workers and decades of success fighting for immigrant and worker rights in New York.

Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition unites several neighborhood groups organizing to obtain and preserve decent and affordable housing, promote safe streets and reduce crime, and enhance the quality of life for all residents. The Coalition's Education Committee has successfully organized to reduce school overcrowding, improve school facilities, and increase student achievement. Sistas and Brothas United, its youth group, opened a NYCDOE-approved school in 2005, the Leadership Institute.

United Federation of Teachers has created the Brooklyn UFT Parent Community Outreach Committee, which works to strengthen home-school collaborations and increase parent involvement and responsibility.

1199 Child Care Fund has established the Public Education Advocacy Project to organize Hospital and Health Care Workers Union members, many of whose children attend public school, to participate in school-improvement activities. Thousands of Local 1199 members live in Central Brooklyn districts.

The work of the Coalition and its member collaboratives is supported by the Community Involvement Program (CIP) of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. CIP, which is based in New York City, has supported community organizing for school reform in New York since its inception in 1995. It provides a wide range of strategic support to the collaboratives, including data analysis, research, and training.

