

Champaign Schools: Fighting the Opportunity Gap

OCTOBER 14, 2016 – HALLEY POTTER

Champaign, Illinois, is a medium-sized city of over 80,000 people located 135 miles south of Chicago, known by many in the state for being home to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A majority (65 percent) of residents are white, with black residents making up the next largest share of the population (16 percent), followed by Asian residents (11 percent), and Hispanic residents (6 percent). Median family income is below the state average, at roughly \$42,000 compared to \$57,000 statewide.¹

Champaign Community Unit School District #4 (Champaign Schools) serves roughly 10,000 students in Champaign and neighboring towns of Savoy and Bondville.² While Champaign city is majority white, the public school population is more racially diverse. As of fall 2015, 37 percent of students were white, 35 percent black, 11 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian, 8 percent other races and ethnicities. Over half (58 percent) of students are low-income, 8 percent are English language learners, and 14 percent of students have disabilities.³

Champaign has implemented a successful plan to desegregate schools, first instituted in response to litigation and now continued voluntarily. However, persistent struggles to address disparities in academic offerings, school

discipline, and perceptions of school climate for students of color have resulted in large academic achievement gaps across both race and socioeconomic status. Perhaps the lesson of Champaign's progress and continued challenges is that desegregating schools is only the beginning of work on equity. In order to improve student outcomes across the district, Champaign must address the opportunity gap that currently prevents all students in the district from having access to the educational resources they need.

History of School Integration Efforts in Champaign

Champaign is a community with a long history of racial tension, geographically divided between the North End, where most black residents live, and the South End, which is largely white.⁴ In 1961, the League of Women Voters found that Champaign had the worst housing segregation in the state of Illinois.⁵ And when the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board* came down in 1954, ending legal segregation of schools, Champaign still had all-black and all-white schools, despite Illinois laws prohibiting school segregation. The district bussed white students in the north part of town past their neighborhood schools to an all-white school instead.⁶

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/champaign-schools/>

During the 1960s and 1970s, Champaign began desegregating its schools by creating a magnet school in the North End to attract more white families to a school in that part of town and establishing attendance patterns that sent most black students from the North End to predominantly white schools in the southern part of town.⁷

In the 1990s, black community members began raising concerns about the district's enrollment practices and the opportunities afforded black students. In 1996, led by advocate John Lee Johnson, they filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights arguing that the district was placing an undue travel burden on black families and raising concerns about achievement gaps, underrepresentation of black students in high-level courses and programs, and overrepresentation of students in special education.⁸

In response to these complaints and impending litigation, Champaign instituted a choice-based, diversity-conscious enrollment plan in 1997, modeled after Cambridge, Massachusetts' "controlled choice" strategy.⁹ The district replaced geographic zone-based enrollment in elementary schools with a system in which families ranked their school choices and were assigned to schools according to an algorithm that looked at families' choices and also ensured racial balance in each of the schools. The district created a planning committee including a racially diverse group of community members to help establish a Parent Information Center (later renamed the Family Information Center) to help families navigate the new choice system and establish plans for outreach.¹⁰

In 2002, the district entered into a consent decree with the black plaintiffs who had issued the complaint against the district requiring the district to take a number of actions to address racial inequality in the district. The controlled choice assignment process continued. In 2009, in response to the 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools*, which limited school districts' ability to consider individual students' race in school assignments, Champaign revised its policy to use free and reduced-price lunch eligibility as a socioeconomic indicator replacing race.¹¹

That same year, the district and plaintiffs signed a settlement ending the consent decree.¹² As part of the settlement, the district agreed to take a number of actions to continue work addressing racial inequity, including establishing an Education Equity Excellence Committee and revising the district's special education policy.¹³

After the expiration of the consent decree, the district decided to continue their choice-based equitable enrollment system as part of a new voluntary integration plan.¹⁴ In 2011, the district won a \$5 million grant from the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program to support new programming designed to diversify enrollment and improve student achievement in three of the district's elementary schools.¹⁵

The Current Plan

Enrollment in Champaign's elementary schools continues to operate through "controlled choice." Families rank their school choices and fill out an application indicating whether or not their child is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The student assignment system ensures that each school ends up with a relatively even balance of low-income students—such that each school falls within 15 percentage points of the district average for enrollment of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—while also giving a preference to siblings and students that live within a 1.5-mile radius of the school.¹⁶ The district's Family Information Center conducts extensive outreach to families to explain the process and walk them through their school options, holding community forums and open houses throughout the year, and scheduling both daytime and evening opportunities for families to visit schools.¹⁷ Typically, close to 90 percent of incoming kindergarten families receive their first choice school.¹⁸

District leaders also meet with local real estate agents once a year to explain the enrollment process and ensure that agents are equipped to represent the process accurately to prospective homebuyers.¹⁹ Champaign provides transportation for any student who does not live walking distance from their school, which in a choice-based enrollment system can mean operating a number of

different buses and routes. One of the ways that Champaign has helped to control transportation costs is by having half of its elementary schools operate on an early schedule and half on a late schedule. These staggered start and end times allow one fleet of busses to run two routes each morning and afternoon.²⁰

At the middle school level, Champaign maintains integrated schools by developing a feeder pattern of clusters of elementary schools that flow into middle schools, with the diversity established through elementary school admissions creating a foundation for diverse middle schools. The district's two high schools use geographic attendance zones that are redrawn periodically to ensure socioeconomic and racial diversity.²¹

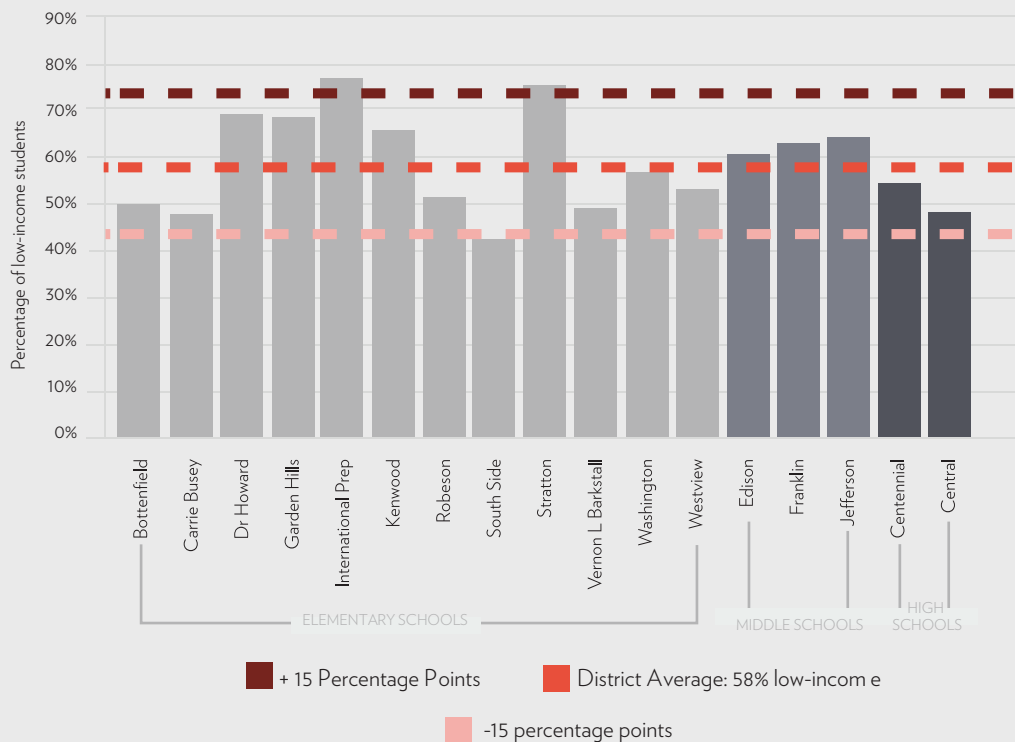
Impact on Integration and Student Outcomes

Champaign's efforts to continue work on school integration even after the end of their consent decree have resulted in relatively integrated schools across the district. However, Champaign has struggled to increase integration within schools by boosting diversity in high-level programs and coursework, and achievement gaps in the district remain high.

School Diversity

Most of Champaign's schools meet the district's goal of falling within 15 percentage points of the district average

FIGURE 1. ENROLLMENT BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS



Note: Low-income students are defined as those who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, who live in substitute care, or whose families receive public aid.

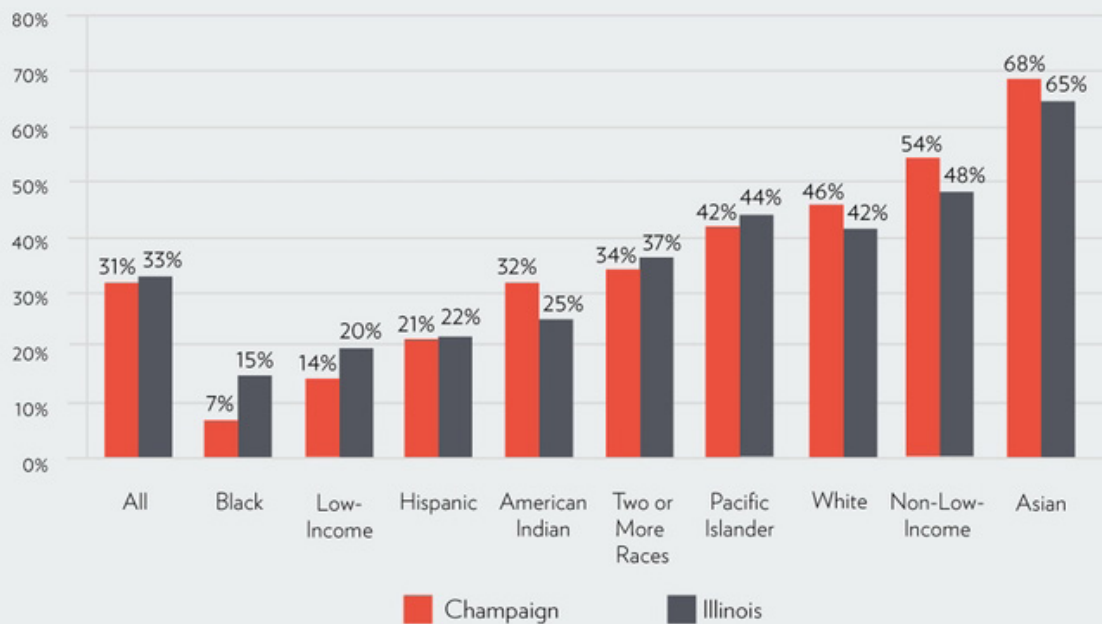
Source: Illinois Report Card, 2014-2015 data, <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>.

for enrollment of low-income students (see Figure 1). According to Susan Zola, Assistant Superintendent for Achievement, Curriculum and Instruction, the biggest challenge to maintaining socioeconomic balance among elementary schools is continually working to improve schools that fewer families rank as a top choice. The district's federal magnet funding has helped to create new programming, boost student achievement, and increase the number of families choosing some of these schools, but imbalances remain. In some of the under-chosen schools, families may leave mid-year if they are offered a seat at another school, while students who move into the district after the initial registration period end up enrolling in the under-chosen schools because they have seats available. Because the families leaving when they get off a waitlist tend to be middle-class, and families moving into the district after

registration tend to be low-income, this can push some of the schools outside the 15 percentage-point window above or below the district average.²² Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts addresses this issue by reserving seats in some of the district's most popular schools specifically for low-income students who enter the district mid-year, but Champaign does not currently have a similar policy.²³

Within Champaign's schools, however, there are sharp divides in the demographics of students participating in different academic level programs. At the elementary school level, only 3 percent of black students, 3 percent of Hispanic students, and 2 percent of low-income students are enrolled in gifted programs, compared to 8 percent of white students and 37 percent of Asian students.²⁴ Across the district's middle schools, only 39 percent of black students, 52 percent

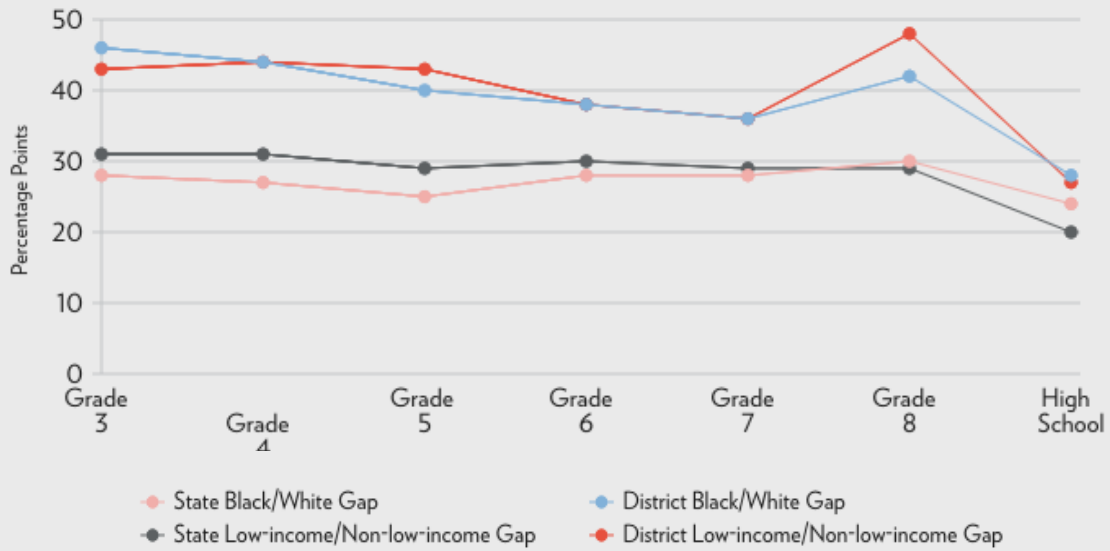
FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING THE 2015 PARCC ASSESSMENT, CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS VS. ILLINOIS



Note: Passing is defined as scoring in level 4 ("met expectations") or above. Results combine passing rates for reading and math tests.

Source: 2015 PARCC assessment data, Illinois Report Card 2014-2015, <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>.

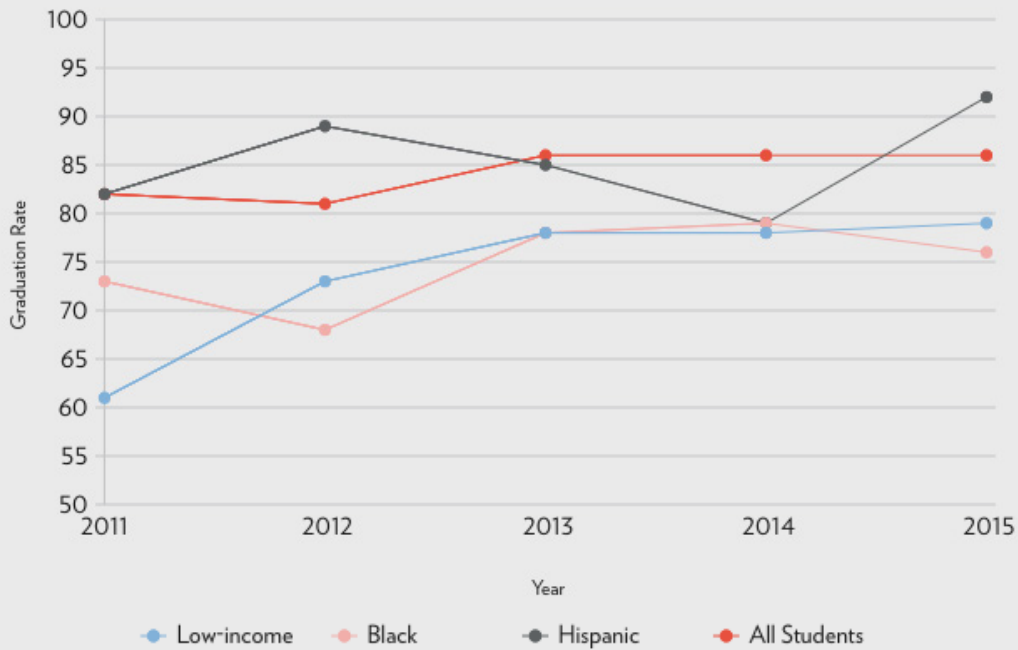
FIGURE 3. ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN STATE TEST SCORES, CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS VS. ILLINOIS



Note: Achievement gap is calculated as the difference in the percentage of students in the two demographic subgroups with scores in level 4 (“met expectations”) or above on the PARCC assessment, combining results for reading and math tests.

Source: 2015 PARCC assessment data, Illinois Report Card 2014-2015, <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>.

FIGURE 4. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR BLACK, HISPANIC, AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS IN CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS



Source: Education, Equity, Excellence Committee, “Data Presentation,” Champaign Unit School District #4, August 25, 2016, emailed to Halley Potter by Susan Zola, August 29, 2016, p. 29.

of Hispanic students, and 43 percent of low-income students are enrolled in honors classes, compared to 74 percent of their white peers and 89 percent of their Asian peers.²⁵ And in high schools, while 27 percent of white students and 40 percent of Asian students take AP courses, only 5 percent of black students, 9 percent of Hispanic students, and 7 percent of low-income students do.²⁶

Academic Achievement

White, Asian, and non-low-income students in Champaign all perform above the state average on standardized tests; however, low-income students and black students in Champaign perform significantly below the state average, while Hispanic and Pacific Islander students also perform slightly below state average (see Figure 2). As a result, Champaign has large achievement gaps based on race and socioeconomic status. In 2015, across all tested grades, the achievement gaps between low-income students and non-low-income students, as well as between white and black students, were greater than the state average. However, these gaps do generally narrow somewhat and become closer to the state average in later grades (see Figure 3). While these achievement gaps remain a great concern, the district has made some progress in recent years with graduation rates. Since 2011, Champaign has seen increased graduation rates for low-income, black, and Hispanic students (see Figure 4).

Next Steps

Reducing academic achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color are central concerns for Champaign, and the district has instituted some new strategies to address this persistent problem. The district recently decided to build specific goals for academic growth of black students and special education students into principal evaluations. They are also working with outside experts to develop staff training around culturally responsive work and developing a positive growth mindset. “When you look at the needs of African-American students, you have to look at the adults who are working with them, and make sure they have a mindset that these students can be successful,

that they have the skills within their professional craft,” Zola explained.²⁷

The district has also begun work incorporating elements of trauma-informed care in their schools, working with administrators, teachers, social workers, and psychologists to target the needs of students who have suffered various forms of trauma.²⁸ Ryan Cowell, principal of Booker T. Washington STEM Academy, one of the elementary schools that received grant funding in recent years, described this as a central challenge and goal moving forward: “We... have a lot of students with incredible needs, including many who have experienced various forms of trauma that impact them tremendously. We are working hard to build our expertise in creating a therapeutic environment to best support all of our students.”²⁹

District administrators are also taking a hard look at suspension data for the district. While only 35 percent of Champaign’s students are black, 76 percent of suspensions are assigned to black students.³⁰ Champaign has instituted new programs to provide additional supports for students with repeat suspensions, including the Lead4Life Identity Project, which guides middle and high school students through projects tied to personal growth, and Operation Hope, Jr., an alternative summer school program for middle school students that includes helping students find “an advocate” in the district—a teacher or administrator who can stand up for them.³¹

One of the areas which the district has not yet addressed is teacher and staff diversity. Although concern about the lack of black teachers was raised by the black community in Champaign already in the 1990s, the district has made little progress in the past decade in diversifying its teaching staff.³² From 2006 to 2015, the percentage of white teachers in the district has stayed constant at 84 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of black teachers has fallen from 11 percent to 8 percent. (The percentage of Hispanic and Asian teachers grew slightly.)³³ Increasing the diversity of the teaching force in Champaign—and working with teachers of all races to address implicit bias—could help more students of color

in the district find teachers who provide them with strong academic and social support.

Another cause for concern is that the black and white communities in Champaign also report quite different perceptions of school climate. School climate surveys conducted in 2000 and 2009 indicate that black educators, students, and parents consistently had more negative perceptions of school climate than their white peers, and that their perceptions of school climate did not change much over that period of time.³⁴

While Champaign's commitment to continuing school integration has created relatively diverse schools in the district, chronic differences in the opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students of different backgrounds have not been addressed. In addition to the work that it is already pursuing related to school discipline, growth mindset, and trauma-informed care, Champaign will likely need to focus on these issues of staff diversity and school climate in order to provide more equitable outcomes for students of color and low-income students in the district.

Halley Potter is a fellow at The Century Foundation, where she researches public policy solutions for addressing educational inequality.

Notes

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