



Center for Public Education



# Urban Student Characteristics and Urban School Challenges: What High-Quality Education for Every Student Means (2023 Report)

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## Executive Summary

In 2021, about 39.1 million students, 80% of the U.S. student population, attended public schools in nonrural areas. They are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. They speak hundreds of different languages at home. Their parents have high expectations and hope that their children will attain an excellent education that will ensure that they are college and career ready and prepared to reach their full potential.

### How We Define “Urban”

The Census Bureau uses urban-rural classification to delineate geographic areas. Urban areas represent a densely developed territory and encompass residential, commercial, and other nonresidential urban land uses. Although the U.S. Department of Education classifies all territory in the U.S. into four types (i.e., Rural, Town, Suburban, and City), each type of locale is either urban or rural in its entirety. In other words, Town, Suburban, and City are technically urban. To have a better snapshot of urban students, we use this broader concept to define urban in this report, which includes all students attending schools in cities, suburban areas, and towns.

### Why This Report

Data still show that students in city schools are more likely to have characteristics or challenges such as poverty, difficulty speaking English, and numerous health and safety risks. These same challenges are increasingly seen in schools in suburbs, towns, and rural areas. To better understand the strengths and challenges commonly shared by students in public schools, the Center for Public Education (CPE) of the National School Boards Association compiled this first data-driven report on urban education. To inform urban school leaders, we will update this report annually.



## **Five Equity Issues That Challenge Urban School Districts**

Providing every student with a high-quality education requires schools to have adequate funding, high-level curricula, effective educators, a safe and supportive school culture, and parents' engagement and meaningful community support.

### **1. Funding**

The English language learner (EL) student population has been increasing in suburban schools as well as remote towns. In suburban districts, the number of students attending mid-high-poverty schools has been rapidly growing. In towns, the number of students attending high-poverty schools has increased. In the 2018-19 school year, public schools in both urban and rural areas only received 5% to 6% of the state-allocated money for special education. At the same time, students from disadvantaged backgrounds need bilingual education, gifted and talented programs, and vocational training, but state governments generally invested inadequately for schools to develop programs in advanced education.

### **2. High-Level Curriculum**

Evidence shows that schools with solid arts programs had higher graduation rates, and high-quality arts programs can improve student academic achievement. Public high schools located in cities had the lowest availability of arts coursework; on average, Black and Hispanic students in urban schools scored much lower in music and visual arts, compared with their White and Asian peers.

STEM courses often focus on hands-on learning with real-world applications and help students to develop a variety of skill sets, including creativity and 21st century skills. Like rural schools, for example, city schools and schools with high percentages of low-income students are less likely to offer computer science, and Black, Hispanic, and Native American/Alaskan students are less likely to attend a school that offers said course. Dual enrollment is often less accessible at schools that serve larger proportions of lower-income communities and communities of color.

### **3. Effective Educators**

In August 2022, about 95% of urban schools were looking for teacher candidates to fill their teacher vacancies for the 2022-23 school year. Urban schools encounter more challenges to fill teaching positions in general elementary education, special education, bilingual education, English, and math. More than 70% of urban schools experienced an increase in chronic teacher absenteeism during the 2021-22 school year, compared with a typical school year before the pandemic. In 2022, nearly half of city school students had teachers who felt frustrated in their profession.

#### **4. Safe and Supportive School Climate**

In 2022, nearly 70% of public school officials reported that more students had sought mental health services from the school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among suburban schools, 77% saw an increase (vs. 69% of schools in cities and towns, respectively). During the 2021-22 school year, 50% of city schools, 48% of schools in towns, and 42% of suburban schools reported that student chronic absenteeism increased substantially, compared with a typical year before the start of the pandemic.

In the 2019-20 school year, more schools in cities and towns reported taking at least one serious disciplinary action against students, compared with suburban schools. At the same time, schools with a high percentage of minority or non-White students were more likely to take serious disciplinary actions against students.

#### **5. Meaningful Community Engagement**

In 2022, nearly half of urban schools adopted community school models or wraparound programs. Among these schools, 93% of schools in towns, 88% of suburban schools, and 79% of city schools had community partners to provide mental health care to students. Most parents got involved in their children's schools through specific, one-time events, such as PTA meetings and prearranged parent-teacher conferences, but fewer parents volunteered, or served on school committees, or had ongoing meetings with a school counselor.



## **Seven Characteristics of Urban Students**

It is difficult to describe the whole population of urban students. Every student is unique if we look at factors such as student demographics, family backgrounds, school enrollment size, personal interests, attitudes, and expectations, among other characteristics. Because of their geographic location, urban students often have the opportunity to access a variety of unique and valuable resources and learning opportunities. In general, urban students share the following seven characteristics:

### **1. Urban Students Are Demographically and Culturally Diverse**

In 2021, nearly 3 in 4 students in city schools, more than half of the student population in suburban schools, and 2 in 5 students in towns are non-White. Hispanic students are the largest racial/ethnic minority group, followed by Black students.

### **2. The Number of Urban Students From Immigrant Households Is Growing Substantially**

Nearly 1 in 4 public school students in the U.S. live in a household headed by an immigrant, also referred to as a foreign-born person. Most of these students attend urban schools. In 2020, English learner (EL) students constituted an average of 14% of the total public school enrollment in cities, 10% in suburban areas, and 7% in towns.

### **3. Increasing Numbers of Urban Students Are Living in Poverty**

In the fall of 2021, more than one-third of students who attended city schools (36%) were in high-poverty schools, according to the report, “Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program.” Nationwide, large cities, distant towns, and remote towns have higher family poverty rates than other urban subtypes. At least 1 in 5 children live in poverty in those urban areas.

### **4. Urban Students Are Supported by Parents With High Expectations**

Data show urban parents are committed to spending time doing education-related activities with their children. In 2019, nearly two-thirds of students’ parents said they always check on their children to see whether they complete their homework. In 2022, most public schools (85% of city schools, 84% of suburban schools, and 67% of town schools) reported that parents expressed concerns about their students meeting academic standards.

### **5. Urban Students Have a Wide Variety of In-School and After-School Programs**

In the 2017-18 school year, more than half of urban schools provided instruction beyond a normal school day for students in need (vs. 37% of private schools). About 40% of urban public schools provided instruction beyond the normal school day for students who sought academic advancement and enrichment (vs. 30% of private schools). More than 80% of public schools in urban areas offered school-related extracurricular activities (vs. 66% of private schools).

To mitigate the learning loss caused by the pandemic, most urban schools offered tailored, accelerated instruction (i.e., teacher-led individualized learning, using new, grade-level content to teach prior-grade concepts or skills), remedial instruction (i.e., using content from prior years to teach concepts or skills), tutoring services, summer schools, and after-school learning programs.

## 6. Urban Students Have More Chances to Learn from Educators With High Credentials

In the 2020-21 school year, more than half the teachers in city public schools (52%) and suburban public schools (55%) held master's degrees. More than 1 in 10 teachers in city and suburban public schools had educational attainment higher than a master's degree. More than 40% of urban K-12 public school teachers had taken undergraduate or graduate courses about how to teach EL students.

## 7. Urban Students Have More Access to Learning in the Digital Age

Compared with rural communities, including remote towns, urban communities have fewer challenges with broadband availability. In general, students in cities and suburban areas are more likely to use the internet to do homework and learn math and science, compared with their peers in towns and rural areas.

## High-Quality Education for Every Student: Best Practices by Some School Districts

High-quality education for every student means a positive learning environment where all students can graduate with sound foundational academic skills and successfully transition to postsecondary education and careers. Encouragingly, many school districts are making great efforts to provide high-quality education for every student. The following examples can be found in our report:

1. Dual Language Across All Grades in Topeka Public Schools (Kansas)
2. Oklahoma Aviation Academy in Norman Public Schools (Oklahoma)
3. Advocating Equitable Funding for Indianapolis Public Schools (Indiana)
4. Virtual Advanced Preparation Program in South Huntington School District (New York)
5. Breaking the Status Quo in Urban School Districts with High Percentages of Racial Minority Students (e.g., Pontiac City School District, Michigan; Lancaster Independent School District, Texas; Madison CUSD 12, Illinois).



## About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

## About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a non-profit organization representing state associations of school boards and the Board of Education of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Through its member state associations that represent locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

For more information, visit [nsba.org](https://www.nsb.org).

