

[fastcompany.com](https://www.fastcompany.com)

Kids aren't failing school—school is failing kids

By *Ellie Anzilotti* 5 minute Read

7-9 minutes

Work hard in school, and you'll be successful. That is something every kid in America hears, and believes. This mandate, though, leaves out an important side of the equation: Is school working for kids?

For many students, the answer is no, but this can be hard to see—especially when the [American dream ideal](#) of self-determination exists to place the blame for why so many people struggle after finishing high school squarely on the shoulders of students themselves. If a person has a hard time in college, or can't hold down a job, this logic goes, they mustn't have tried hard enough.

A new study from [The New Teacher Project](#), a national nonprofit focused on teacher development and educational programming, aims to dispel this idea. Called [The Opportunity Myth](#), it delves into a phenomenon that's taken hold across the U.S.: As students finish high school and either enroll in college or head straight to the workforce, they're finding themselves poorly prepared for whatever path they choose. "They're

planning their futures on the belief that doing well in school creates opportunities—that showing up, doing the work, and meeting their teachers' expectations will prepare them for what's next," the study notes, but something, along the way, is not working.

According to TNTP, that something is [school itself](#). Across the U.S., 40% of students who enroll in college (including 66% of black students and 53% of Latinx students) end up having to take a remedial course, where they re-learn skills they were supposed to have mastered in high school. This places them behind in their degrees and adds costs onto already steep tuition; students who have to take a remedial course are 74% more likely to drop out than their peers. Employers are also reporting that new hires out of high school often lack basic skills on the job.

This is not because students are not trying hard enough in high school, says TNTP CEO Dan Weisberg. In the course of compiling the three-year study, which looked at five diverse school systems across the U.S., TNTP found that more than half of the students consistently brought home As and Bs—they were obviously satisfying the demands of their schools and their teachers.

The issue, Weisberg says, is that those demands don't match up with students' capabilities, or the level at which they need to be performing to stay on track for a successful college degree or career. "As we visited classrooms around the country, we found teachers working hard individually to help their students,

but we also saw pretty low-quality assignments kids were getting, and instruction that doesn't give them a chance to do deep thinking and the type of work they're going to need to do in order to succeed," Weisberg says.

Students only demonstrated grade-level mastery on their assignments 17% of the time. More often than not, their teachers are not assigning work that would bring them up to their grade level. "Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren't appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn't ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject," the report found. But classrooms filled with predominantly higher-income students spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments as classrooms with predominantly lower-income students.

What's particularly devastating, TNTTP found, was that out of the students surveyed, 94% wanted to attend college, and 70% had career goals that require at least a college degree. "Yet we found classroom after classroom filled with A and B students whose big goals for their lives were slipping further away each day, unbeknownst to them and their families—not because they couldn't learn what they needed to reach them, but because they were rarely given a real chance to try," the report notes. But when kids are given work that challenges them, they do well, Weisberg says.

There's no one cause for this gap, but one is low expectations on the part of teachers: Less than half surveyed by TNTTP

believe their students could work at grade level, so they assign them work that doesn't require them to stretch. But teachers themselves are not solely responsible for this problem: Teacher prep programs in the U.S., TNTP found, are often too focused on cookie-cutter curricula or standardized test scores, and doesn't prepare them to lead nuanced and engaging lessons or deal with students as individuals. And as the [teacher strikes](#) in states like West Virginia and Oklahoma made clear, teachers continue to be expected to take on more and more work with little compensation to show for it.

Weisberg believes that the solution starts with teachers and school administrators listening to students, much in same way that TNTP did in compiling the report. “Kids are very sophisticated consumers and they are really expert in the quality of education, so they distinguish, classroom to classroom, lesson to lesson, what type of work engages and challenges them, and when they're just sitting there copying down notes,” Weisberg says. “What we prioritize is operational efficiency—getting large volumes of kids through the system,” he adds, but The Opportunity Myth calls for an approach that not only gets kids through high school, but ensures that they succeed afterward.

So how can schools begin to create the kind of environments that ensure success? The good news, Weisberg says, is most of the changes do not require additional funding or massive overhaul (though teachers and people in educational systems, he says, should absolutely receive higher pay to reflect the difficult work that they do). “It doesn't cost one penny more to

have higher expectations for kids, to actually believe that kids—low-income kids, kids of color, English-language learners—can succeed,” he says. Weisberg wants to start seeing teachers and schools re-engage with students’ experience of the work—are they engaged throughout the whole time in a classroom? Are they asking questions, or zoning out during a lecture that requires no participation?—and ensure that their lessons are pulling kids forward, not letting them stay stuck.

TNTP does not yet have a full set of recommendations for what exactly this new approach might look like—the organization compiled *The Opportunity Myth* to understand why so many kids were struggling, despite finishing high school, and their next step will be to build a system that ensures that they succeed. So far, TNTP has gotten [over 40](#) education-system professionals and organizations, including Success Academy, IDEA Public Schools, Tennessee SCORE, and Greater MN Schools, to pledge to take action in response to the findings in *The Opportunity Myth*. TNTP will work in concert with this growing list of organizations to develop a set of recommendations over the next several years.

Even though the work to develop a better system is ongoing, Weisberg says, schools don’t need to wait to have a complete set of recommendations to begin changing things for their students. “We don’t need three years of planning or a billion more dollars to every school system to do this work—we can start right now,” he says.