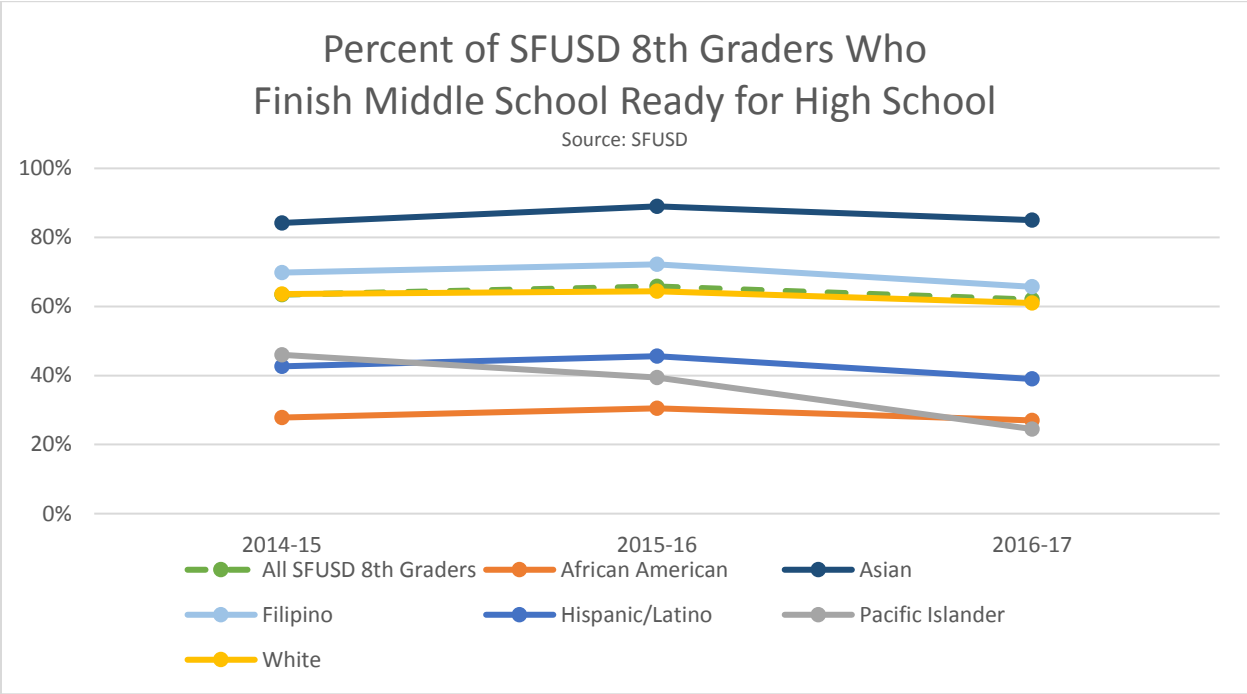


# Increase the Percent of SFUSD 8<sup>th</sup> Graders who finish Middle School Ready for High School



The above chart displays a three-year comparison of the percentage of students by race/ ethnicity who were considered ready for high school at the end of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.

## Data Definition & the San Francisco Trend line

High school readiness has been defined by the San Francisco Unified School District as a composite of four criteria that determine whether 8<sup>th</sup> graders are considered ready for high school:<sup>i</sup>

1. GPA at or above 2.5 (across all subjects)
2. No Ds or Fs in Spring Semester English or math
3. Daily attendance rate of 96% or above
4. No suspensions

Eighth grade students who fail to meet one or more of the criteria above are considered not ready for high school. In the 2014-15 school year, nearly half of SFUSD 8<sup>th</sup> graders (44.7%) failed to meet one of the four criteria. Nearly one third failed to meet two out of four criteria (32.3%). Far fewer youth failed to meet three or four of the criteria (17.7% and 5.3% respectively). This suggests that a large proportion of students struggled with just one or two of the criteria that kept them from leaving middle school ready for high school. High school readiness is one of several metrics SFUSD began measuring with the 2014-15 implementation of the School Quality Improvement Index, a new system of school accountability.<sup>ii</sup>

Among students who did not meet the high school readiness criteria in the 2014-15 school year, most struggled with grades, 59% had a GPA below 2.5, and 58% received a D or F in math and/or English during Spring Semester of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Attendance issues were almost as frequent, 57% of youth who were not high school ready had attendance rates of less than 96%. Suspensions only accounted for 10% of eighth graders who were not high school ready.

In 2016-17, Asian and Filipino youth had the highest rates of high school-readiness (85% and 66% respectively, each down slightly from the previous year. White youth were on par with the district average at 61%. In comparison, the percent of youth who were high school ready was lower among Latino youth (39%), English Learners (45%), Pacific Islander youth (25%), students in Special Education (39%) and African American youth (27%). Most groups saw a decrease between 2015-16 and 2016-17.

It is also important to recognize differences across school sites. Eighth graders' readiness for high school was measured across 20 school sites. While in 2016-17, 62% of all 8<sup>th</sup> graders were high school ready, 4 schools reported that less than 50% of eighth graders were high school ready and 14 schools saw a decrease in the percentage of eighth graders ready for high school between 2015-16 and 2016-17.

## Story Behind the Curve

### Policy and Practice Shifts in San Francisco

While the current measure of high school readiness is relatively new, several key initiatives and programs in San Francisco are in place to ensure that middle school students are on track to succeed in and graduate from high school.

**The Mayor's Middle School Leadership Initiative.** In 2013 former San Francisco Mayor Lee launched A Force for the Future—also known as the Mayor's Middle School Leadership Initiative—in partnership with SFUSD and with the support of the Salesforce Foundation. The goal of this investment is for every student to graduate from middle school equipped with the skills, capacities and dispositions necessary for success in high school and beyond by focusing on family engagement and supporting the difficult work of principals.<sup>iii</sup>

During the second year of the initiative, SFUSD rolled out a new sequence of math courses better aligned with the Common Core State Standards adopted in 2010 that define what students should know in each subject in each grade. As a result of these efforts, eighth grade students in San Francisco performed better in math than their peers in other school districts. Teachers surveyed as part of the study reported that students increased their collaboration and engagement in the classroom through the new Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) activities associated with the Common CORE.<sup>iv,v</sup>

**SFUSD Practice & Policy.** Beyond this targeted initiative, SFUSD has implemented a series of policy changes to address inequities in student outcomes and improve school disciplinary practices.

SFUSD began implementing the Response to Intervention (RTI) model in 2012 to address inequities in youth outcomes. RTI is a comprehensive early detection and prevention strategy that identifies struggling students and assists them before they fall behind in various subjects such as English Language Arts (ELA), math, and science. Starting from Pre-K, schools must take appropriate steps to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills to implement RTI programs and that the programs are implemented with fidelity to the RTI model. For students at the highest tier of need within this model,

interventions tailored to the students' needs are provided by a highly trained, knowledgeable, and skilled educator such as a Reading Recovery teacher, Academic RTI Facilitator, or Literacy Specialist.<sup>vi</sup>

In 2013, San Francisco and five other CORE districts in California were granted a waiver from the federal accountability system, No Child Left Behind. In its place, the six districts installed the School Quality Improvement System (SQIS), which lasted until the passage of the Every Child Succeeds Act at the end of 2015. The SQIS tracked multiple measures of student success across academic, social-emotional, and school culture and climate domains. Indicators included student progress on Common Core-aligned assessments and factors such as the elimination of disproportionality in school discipline, chronic absenteeism, and non-cognitive factors such as grit or resilience. School culture and climate were also measured. Districts participating in the School Quality Improvement System collected and shared data on these indicators far beyond what is necessary for federal accountability purposes so that they could learn from each other about what works and how to correct course when students or schools are falling behind.<sup>vii</sup> The CORE districts have since launched a "Data Collaborative", inviting other California districts to participate in continued statewide benchmarking and shared learning around data-driven system improvement.<sup>viii</sup>

Following a series of efforts to reduce a reliance on suspensions and implement Restorative Justice Practices, in 2014 the San Francisco Board of Education adopted the Safe and Supportive Schools Resolution to deepen and extend behavioral interventions and alternatives to suspension, increase instructional time, and reduce racial disparities. The policy mandated full implementation of Restorative Practices and School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports at all Schools. It is interesting to note that while rates of suspension steadily declined from 2012 to 2014, there was a slight uptick in 2015 and 2016.<sup>ix</sup> For additional information on SFUSD suspension and absenteeism rates, see the corresponding scorecards.

Finally, SFUSD has endeavored to improve the achievement of English Learners and African American students. The Lau Action Plan ensures that English learners acquire high levels of English and primary language proficiency (whenever available), academic achievement and skills for college and career success. The African American Achievement and Leadership Initiative (AALI) was established by the Board of Education in 2015 and mandates a heightened level of attention to African American student achievement, as well as a regular and comprehensive internal and external review of programs and services supporting African American students in SFUSD. More information on the Lau Action Plan and AALI is available in the district's strategic plan for 2016-19.<sup>x</sup> In November 2017, SFUSD's Superintendent, Dr. Vincent Matthews, unveiled an approach to raise African American student achievement at 20 school sites across the city. This approach, called "PITCH," refers to five key supports schools must have to create a high-quality academic environment: Professional Capacity, Instructional Guidance, Transforming Mindsets, Collaborative Culture, and High-Quality Staff. PITCH represents a multi-year commitment by SFUSD's Central Office to coordinate and resource high-impact, sustainable strategies that help to realize these conditions.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Key Factors that Impact High School Readiness**

**Loss of Instructional Time.** Research has demonstrated that learning outcomes such as grades are highly correlated with the amount of time students spend engaged in learning tasks. When students are out of class due to absences, suspensions, or other disciplinary actions, the loss of instructional time directly affects their ability to learn the required material.

**School Climate.** According to the National School Climate Center, school climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. School climate directly affects the degree to which youth feel safe and welcome in school, which in turn affects their attendance, academic performance, and behavior.

**Adverse Childhood Experiences and Competing Priorities.** Local research suggests that trauma is a major contributor to absenteeism. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that students exposed to trauma may show a change in their school performance, attendance and behavior. Additionally, youth may be out of school to provide support to parents and caregivers with health issues, and/or to care for younger siblings while parents and caregivers work.

**Developmental and Structural Changes.** Middle school represents a time of significant physical, cognitive, and emotional change for many youth as they go through puberty. As youth begin to feel different internally, adults may perceive them differently. While it is developmentally appropriate for early adolescents to begin to question authority, youth may be labeled as “trouble-makers” for doing so. There is growing documentation and acknowledgement of the criminalization of normal adolescent behavior in school systems, particularly for youth of color. Further, compared to elementary school, the structure of middle schools can feel overwhelming and impersonal. In general, levels of student engagement decrease as youth move from elementary school, to middle school and on to high school. Youth who find middle school transition stressful may disengage (resulting in absenteeism and/or poor grades) or act out (potentially resulting in suspensions).

**Access to Individualized Academic Support.** For many eighth graders who are struggling academically, it is likely that these difficulties began long before eighth grade (and possibly even middle school) and have continued unaddressed. Overcrowded classrooms and overburdened teachers are two factors that make it difficult for students to get the individualized attention they may need. When students are unable to understand the material, they may disengage, potentially resulting in absenteeism and/or behavioral issues, in addition to poor grades. Schools vary in their capacity to meet the needs of students in Special Education as well as English Learner (EL) students. In SFUSD both EL and Special Education students were significantly below average in high school readiness.

## What Works: A Selection of Best Practices to Increase the percent of 8<sup>th</sup> Graders who are ready for High School

Because the High School Readiness indicator is a combination of academic outcomes, attendance, and suspensions, the practices to address the indicator overlap greatly with those in the High School Graduation, Chronic Absenteeism, and Suspension scorecards. The following are a selection of practices that are most likely to have a positive impact on the percent of students who are ready for high school.

**Foster Supportive Relationships to Ease Transitions.** The transition from middle to high school can lead even high achieving students to struggle. A dramatic drop in grades, attendance and academic behavior is a common warning sign of this strain. In high school, it is easier to skip class and harder to figure out how to get help with coursework. Teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors and friends can make a concerted effort to reach out to students when they show signs of falling behind or disengaging, find out why they are struggling, and get them the academic or emotional support they need.<sup>xii</sup>

**School Connectedness and Supported Academic Engagement.** Research has demonstrated that students who feel connected to school have both positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Increased student connectedness promotes classroom engagement and school attendance, which increases students' academic achievement and competency to overcome challenges. Connected students are focused, achieve higher grades and invest in relationships at school. Increasing students' engagement in learning means setting high academic and behavioral standards, implementing flexible teaching methods and making students feel that learning is relevant. Helping students to reach a high academic and behavioral standard requires learning support for all students.<sup>xiii</sup>

**School-based Health and Family Services.** For elementary school students in particular, the causes of chronic absenteeism often have more to do with family circumstances, such as poor health and financial insecurity, than individual factors. As such, efforts to support elementary school attendance need to support families in meeting their basic needs.<sup>xiv</sup> The Center for American Progress highlights school-based access to services as a critical strategy to reduce student poverty.<sup>xv</sup>

**After-School/ Out-of-School Opportunities.** A 2002 report on California's afterschool programs by the California Department of Education found many positive impacts that resulted from the programs. Students who participated in afterschool programs demonstrated increased achievement, regular attendance, good behavior, and were less likely to be held back a grade. At-risk students in the lowest quartile on standardized test scores and English Learners showed the greatest improvement. Students also showed improved social skills and behavior that resulted in fewer disciplinary incidents at school and fewer suspensions. The cost savings to the state as a result of the decrease in student retention is substantial.<sup>xvi</sup>

Research suggests that when youth have an opportunity to develop caring relationships with adults and peers outside the school day, this can reinforce important social emotional learning that supports them in developing positive relationships at school, which in turn increases attendance.<sup>xvii</sup>

**Addressing Trauma.** It is critical that the trauma-informed interventions implemented reflect the complexity of youth who have been repeatedly exposed to trauma over the course of many years. Effective approaches to addressing trauma may also vary by community, taking cultural norms into account.<sup>xviii</sup> Considering the high rates of chronic absenteeism, particularly among African American and Pacific Islander youth, trauma-informed interventions should be culturally responsive and effective for these communities.

## **Please see the following selected references for more information on the 'Story Behind the Curve' and highlighted 'Best Practices'**

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<sup>iii</sup> City and County of San Francisco Office of the Mayor. Mayor's Middle School Leadership Initiative. <http://sfmayor.org/mayors-middle-school-leadership-initiative>

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