



DESIGNING THE FUTURE: How Measuring and Mapping Student Opportunities in Nashville Can Improve Outcomes for Kids

At the Nashville Public Education Foundation (NPEF), we believe schools need to be led by highly effective principals, that classrooms must have inspiring teachers with high expectations, and that schools must be welcoming and supportive. Yet at the same time, improving school conditions alone will not eliminate the inequitable student outcomes we see in our city.

Research suggests that student and family access to low burden housing, living wage jobs, and neighborhoods rich with opportunities and services correlates to student achievement in school¹. For years, the nation has decried the relationship between zip code and student outcomes. Yet decades of education reforms, including standards-based instruction, testing and accountability, and charter schools and choice, have led to only modest or one-off results.

In 2021, [a poll](#) of 500 registered voters in Nashville revealed that two-thirds of respondents do not think Nashville prioritizes children and youth². It's time for Nashville to embrace the multitude of factors that lead to student success and prioritize a child-focused approach to policymaking in our city. **That begins with the creation of a Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index, a comprehensive analysis of the quality of resources and conditions present for children to develop in healthy ways in their neighborhood.**

At the same time we measure neighborhood opportunities for students, we also must assess opportunities and inequities in our schools. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) has developed an [Equity Roadmap](#) that includes suggested indicators

for identifying and reporting on inequities in schools. Reporting on these indicators regularly will allow the district to identify where disparities exist and provide the data needed to drive equity-driven decision making.

This brief explores why the Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index and MNPS Equity Indicators are critical for student success. By creating a shared understanding of the children and youth experience in Nashville, we can begin to design a system that truly meets the needs of our students.

OUR WORK TO ELIMINATE SYSTEMIC STUDENT BARRIERS IN NASHVILLE

In 2020, in the grips of the pandemic and as the nation wrestled with its history of racism, NPEF released [a brief](#) about the inequities in our schools and city, and named our collective responsibility for dismantling racist structures that inhibit student success. As a next step, in 2021 we released the documentary [By Design: The Shaping of Nashville's Public Schools](#) to illustrate the ways in which the growth and development of the city of Nashville and the evolution of Nashville's public schools are intrinsically linked. In Spring 2022, we released a brief, [By Design: How Nashville Created and Sustains Inequities in our Schools](#), that further described how city structures and systems prevent low-income students and students of color from thriving. The push for an Opportunity Index and Equity Metrics is the next step in our work to eliminate barriers for kids.

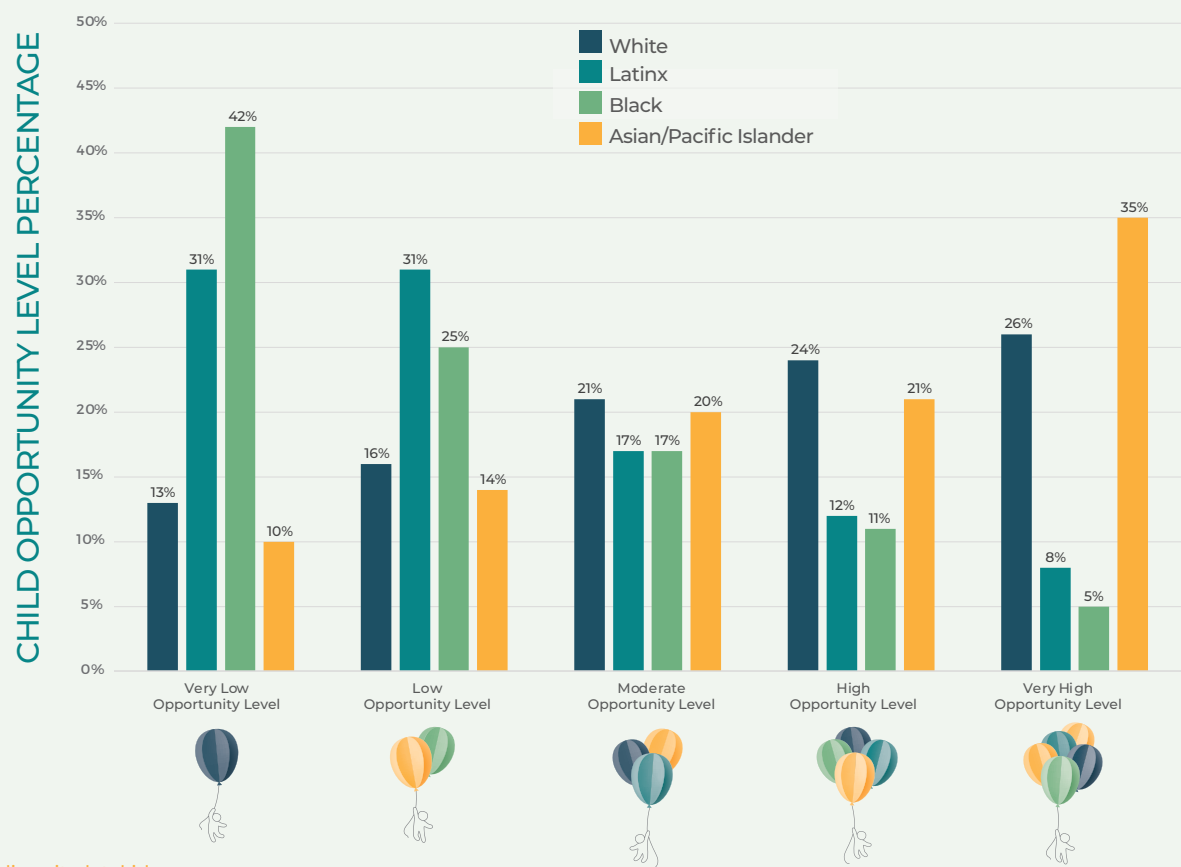


The Problem

With deeply rooted inequities across city structures, schools are tasked with hero's work. In addition to improving our schools, Nashville must address the social policies outside education that lead to many of the unacceptable results and opportunity gaps we see in our schools today. White children in Nashville are three times more likely to have access to higher quality resources, schools, and supports than Black children and two and a half times more likely than Latinx children.³

Education should not be solely responsible for overcoming inequities that exist outside the school building.

Distribution of Children in Each Opportunity Level by Race for the Metro Nashville Area



SOURCE: diversitydatakids.org

To be clear, we do not believe that students cannot succeed in school because of poverty or some other social factor. Numerous examples in our district prove the contrary. Yet the layers of barriers faced by many students in our district can be insurmountable even with the most comprehensive and effective school supports in place. We will not see widespread student success at scale in our schools without simultaneously addressing the adverse effects of non-education social structures. We must examine our assumptions about the resources and conditions students really need - both in and outside of school - to be successful in order to see transformational change for our students.

What is a Child Opportunity Index?

For more than two decades, organizations such as [Annie E. Casey Foundation, Opportunity Index](#), and the [Opportunity Atlas](#) have gathered and reported census data that measures the opportunities for and well-being of children and youth. Locally, these opportunity indices demonstrate that thousands of Nashville children live in neighborhoods with limited access to safe housing, healthy environments, good schools, and economic opportunities. Tennessee consistently ranks in the bottom 25 percent of states in these indices, and Davidson County ranks 90 out of 95 counties in Tennessee's own [Child Well-Being county profiles](#).

While each index is different, most include data in the following domains:

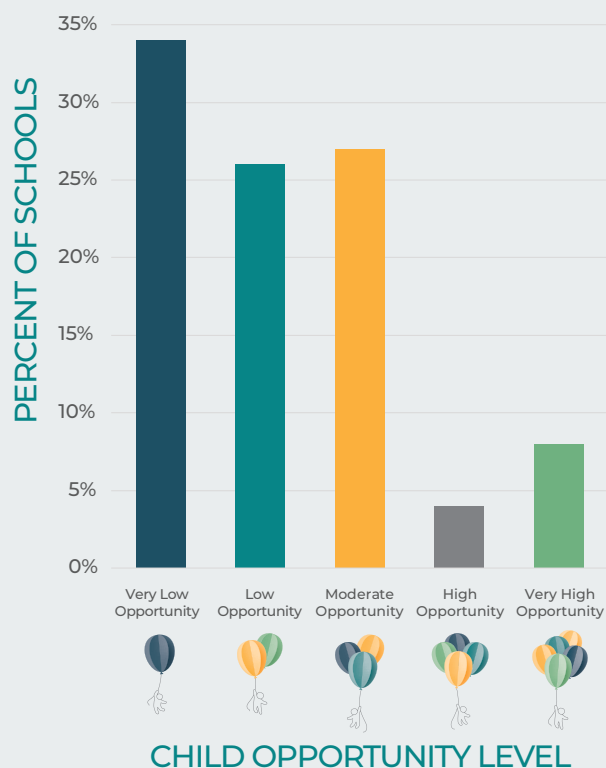
1. **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY** (e.g., household income or poverty rate);
2. **EDUCATION** (e.g., quality of schools or pre-K enrollment);
3. **HEALTH** (e.g., birth weight and insurance coverage);
4. **ENVIRONMENT** (e.g., exposure to toxic waste; access to parks and recreation)

A collaboration between the Center for Child, Youth, and Family Policy at Brandeis University and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University takes the data reporting a step further by assigning a rating to neighborhoods in their [Child Opportunity Index](#). This index rates neighborhoods from very low to very high based on the quality of resources and conditions present for children to develop in healthy ways, including education opportunities, healthy environments, and economic opportunities, to provide a summary measure of the child and youth experience in a given area.

When viewing Nashville data, the *Child Opportunity Index* illustrates a city that ineffectively prioritizes the needs of children and youth. Based on NPEF analysis, just 12 percent of Metro Nashville's public schools sit in high opportunity zip codes. Furthermore, low-performing schools are far more likely to be located in low opportunity areas than in high opportunity areas. School performance disparities result in part from the inequitable resources available in lower opportunity communities. Overlaying centuries-long segregation and the prioritization of economic growth in Nashville, low-income students and students of color are more likely to live in areas of Nashville that have historically seen less investment and have fewer quality resources, such as libraries, grocery stores, and access to culturally competent medical care, that are readily available in more affluent, often white communities.

In other words, a significant number of MNPS students are living in neighborhoods that do not have the resources to fully meet their basic needs.

Distribution of MNPS Schools in Opportunity Index



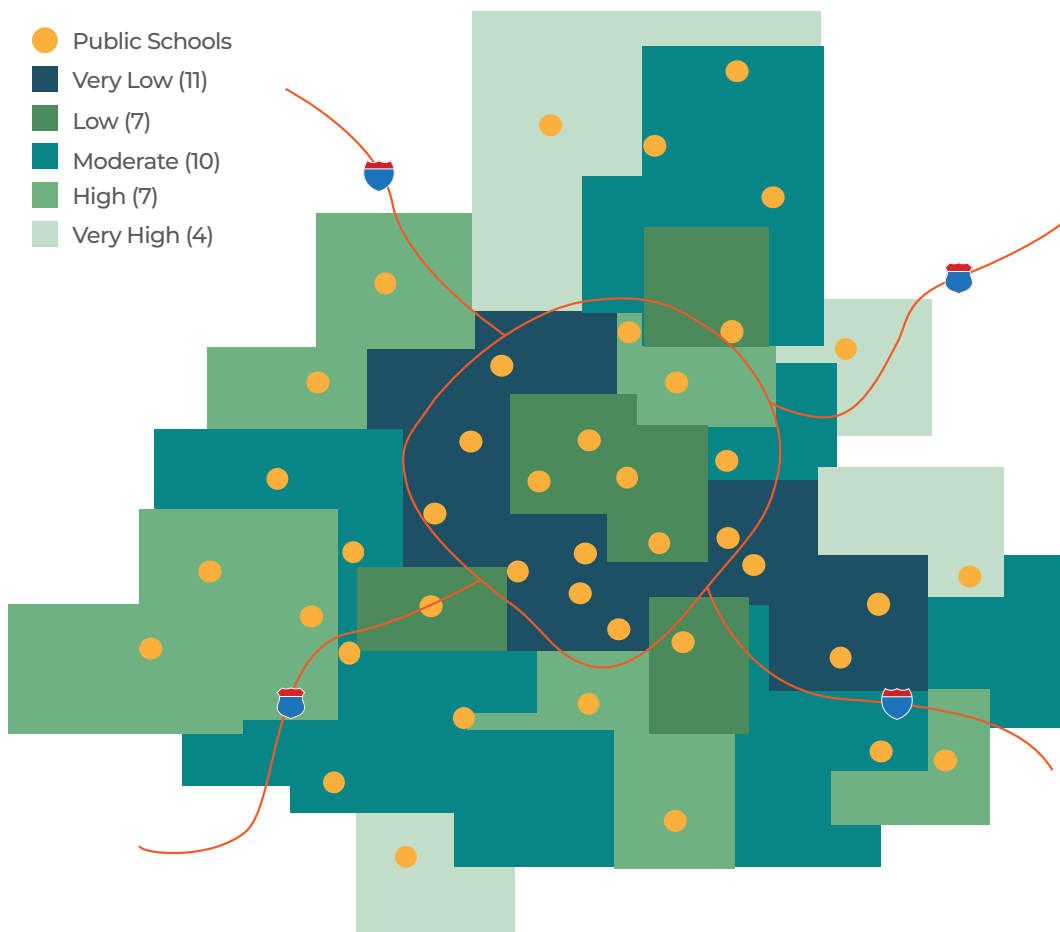
WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

NPEF Recommendation 1: A Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index

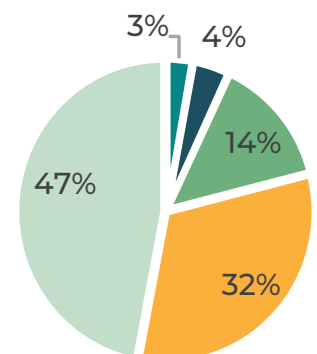
While the *Child Opportunity Index* is a valuable tool for Nashville, the data points used in this index may or may not be aligned to the needs of Nashville. That's why NPEF is advocating for a Nashville-specific opportunity index that uses metrics identified by stakeholders across Nashville and aligned to the needs of our children and youth.

Additionally, combining national census data (as in the *Child Opportunity Index*) with local data will create the most accurate and informative picture of opportunity for Nashville's children and youth. Publishing disaggregated data about the conditions of children and youth in Nashville is a powerful first step in raising awareness of institutional problems and identifying equitable policy solutions. A Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index can help inform decisions by illuminating disparities that affect children and youth across our city.

CONCEPTUAL INDEX Degree of Opportunity for Children and Youth By Neighborhood in Anywhere, USA



Conceptual City Demographics



- Other
- Asian
- Latinx
- Black/African American
- White

NPEF Recommendation 1 Continued: A Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index

Metrics presented in a Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index should be analyzed using an intersectional lens that includes factors such as immigration status, primary language, class, culture, and gender to provide the most accurate picture of child and youth experience. Many students encounter disadvantages caused by multiple inequities in our city. The most equitable policy solutions will stem from a deep understanding of students' actual lived experiences.

IDENTIFY

As a community, identify conditions and resources that affect student success in Nashville (e.g., quality of school, family access to economic opportunities, etc.)

COLLECT & MAP

Collect and map data for those conditions and resources to develop the Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index

INFORM & PRIORITIZE

Use the Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index to inform city decisions that prioritize the needs of children and youth

Considerations for Launching a Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index

FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD OPPORTUNITIES



- » Homeownership rate
- » Housing burden
- » Adult education attainment
- » Affordable housing
- » Housing vacancy rate
- » Internet access
- » Crime rate
- » Arrests
- » Homelessness

HEALTH AND WELLNESS OPPORTUNITIES



- » Food/supermarket access
- » Healthcare/hospital access
- » Insurance coverage rate
- » Birthweight
- » Suicide rate
- » Mental health visits
- » Parks
- » Toxic exposures
- » Walkability

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



- » Employment rate
- » Poverty rate
- » Median household income
- » Banking access
- » Commute duration
- » Public assistance rate
- » High skill employment
- » Transit access

EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES



- » Preschool enrollment
- » Early childhood centers
- » Access to high-quality schools
- » Graduation rate
- » Postsecondary Education Completion
- » 3rd grade reading proficiency
- » 8th grade math proficiency



NPEF Recommendation 2: A Baseline Report of Equity for Student Success in MNPS

While Nashville works to become a city that prioritizes children and youth, MNPS should advance its [Equity Roadmap](#), released in spring 2022, by publishing disaggregated data by race, income, disability status, and language proficiency for the following indicators:⁴

» Access to effective teaching
» Access to rigorous coursework
» Curricular breadth
» Access to high-quality academic supports
» Students' exposure to racial, ethnic, and economic segregation
» School climate
» Non-exclusionary discipline practices
» Non-academic supports for student success
» Engagement in schooling
» Performance in coursework
» Performance on assessments
» On-time graduation
» Postsecondary readiness



MNPS can use these data to support and reinforce systems, policies, and practices driving equitable outcomes for students while also helping the district define improvement targets for areas of inequity.



CONCLUSION

Establishing a Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index and MNPS Equity Metrics will help drive different conversations about the systems, structures, and policies that need to be in place to best support our children and youth. Data that contextualizes the story of a student's life in our city will help inform better decisions. At the same time we work to assess equity of opportunity in our schools, we must also have accurate data about the systemic barriers in our community that get in the way of student success. The Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index and MNPS Equity Metrics are critical steps to creating a more equitable Nashville for all our children and youth.

If you are interested in participating in discussions around a Nashville Children and Youth Opportunity Index, please contact us at info@nashvillepef.org.

The Nashville Public Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization that works to remove barriers for students by promoting excellence, serving as a strategic thought partner to Metro Nashville Public Schools, convening stakeholders, and advocating for change so all students can thrive in school. More information is available at nashvillepef.org.

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5748572/>; <https://www.nber.org/digest/sep06/improved-neighborhoods-dont-raise-academic-achievement>

²https://nashvillepef.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NEWS_NPEF_Announces_2021_Citywide_Survey_Of_Education_October_14_2021.pdf

³<https://www.diversitydatakids.org/research-library/data-visualization/racialethnic-patterns-child-opportunity>

⁴Building Educational Equity Indicator Systems: A Guidebook for States and School Districts | The National Academies Press (nap.edu)