Born to Win, Schooled to Lose

Why Equally Talented Students Don't Get Equal Chances to Be All They Can Be

ANTHONY P. CARNEVALE
MEGAN L. FASULES
MICHAEL C. QUINN
KATHRYN PELTIER CAMPBELL

2019

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
Center *on* Education *and the* Workforce
McCourt School of Public Policy

Born to Win, Schooled to Lose

Why Equally Talented Students Don't Get Equal Chances to Be All They Can Be

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Anthony P. Carnevale
Megan L. Fasules
Michael C. Quinn
Kathryn Peltier Campbell

2019

All individuals, regardless of where they come from or who their parents are, should have the opportunity to reach their full potential. However, many poor children, particularly those who are Black or Latino, find the gates of opportunity barred—and not because they lack the talent to succeed.

Throughout their youth, relatively advantaged children enjoy protective and enriched environments that help ensure their success. Meanwhile, equally talented children from poor backgrounds are held back by material disadvantages. Stunningly, a child from the bottom quartile of socioeconomic status who has high test scores in kindergarten has only a 3 in 10 chance of having a college education and a good entry-level job as a young adult, compared to a 7 in 10 chance for a child in the top quartile of socioeconomic status who has low test scores.

Among children with similarly high academic potential, the test scores of economically disadvantaged students are most likely to decline and stay low as they move through the K–12 system. When students from affluent families stumble, they have a softer landing and assistance getting back on track, while those in adverse environments are more likely to land on rocky ground and never recover.

These advantages and disadvantages are compounded by systemic racial and ethnic inequities. As a result, Black and Latino children are less likely than their White and Asian peers with similar test scores to achieve educational and economic success.

Thus, the likelihood of success is too often determined not by a child's innate talent, but by his or her life circumstances—including factors that determine access to opportunity based on class, race, and ethnicity. In short, the system conspires against young people from poor families, especially those who are Black or Latino. Among these youth, even those who "make it" and earn a college degree are less likely than their more affluent peers to get a good entry-level job as a young adult.

There is still reason for hope: a child who struggles can beat the odds and become a high-achieving adult. The fact that children's test scores change over time shows that there is room for intervention. We need to use education to clear the pathway to opportunity for all, regardless of background. With adequate resources, schools can influence students' development of skills and abilities and, ultimately, their socioeconomic mobility.

For children from poor families who start out with high test scores, the chances of keeping those high scores are relatively slim.

Figure 1.

As children progress through primary school, they can improve on measures of achievement, but becoming and staying high-achieving is less likely for students from families in the lowest SES quartile.
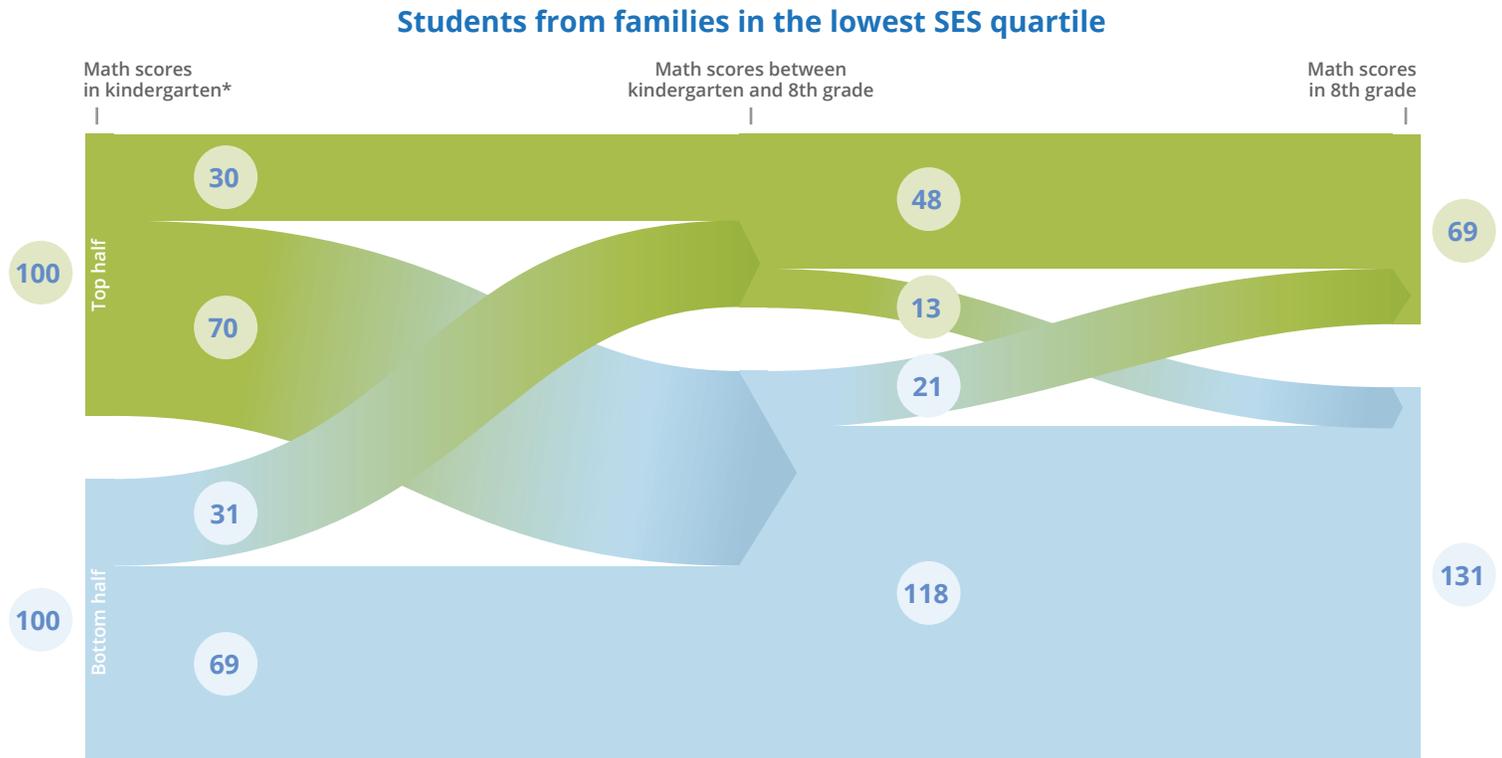
Students from families in the lowest SES quartile

Math scores in kindergarten*
Math scores between kindergarten and 8th grade
Math scores in 8th grade

Top half	100
Bottom half	100

30 · 70 · 31 · 69 · 48 · 13 · 21 · 118 · 69 · 131

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) (public use data), 2006.

Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. "Math scores between kindergarten and 8th grade" reflects any change in test scores that might have occurred between kindergarten and first grade, third grade, or fifth grade.
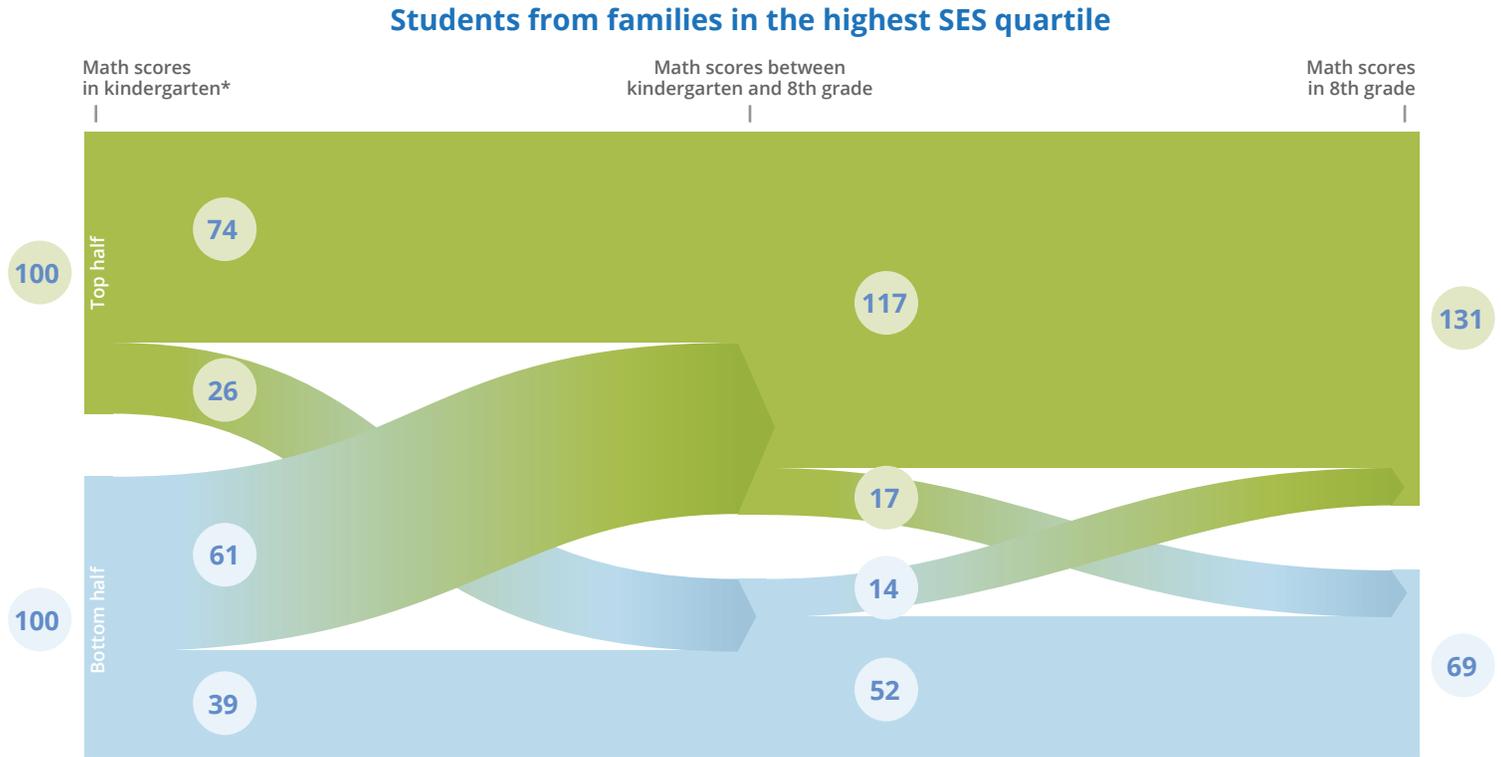
*Overall, 26 percent of students with families from the lowest SES quartile have top-half math scores in kindergarten.

Meanwhile, children from affluent families who have top-half math scores tend to stay in the top half, and they have a safety net that keeps them from falling to the bottom if they stumble.

Figure 2.
Children from families in the highest SES quartile are more likely to earn and maintain top-half math scores.

Students from families in the highest SES quartile

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) (public use data), 2006.

Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. "Math scores between kindergarten and 8th grade" reflects any change in test scores that might have occurred between kindergarten and first grade, third grade, or fifth grade.
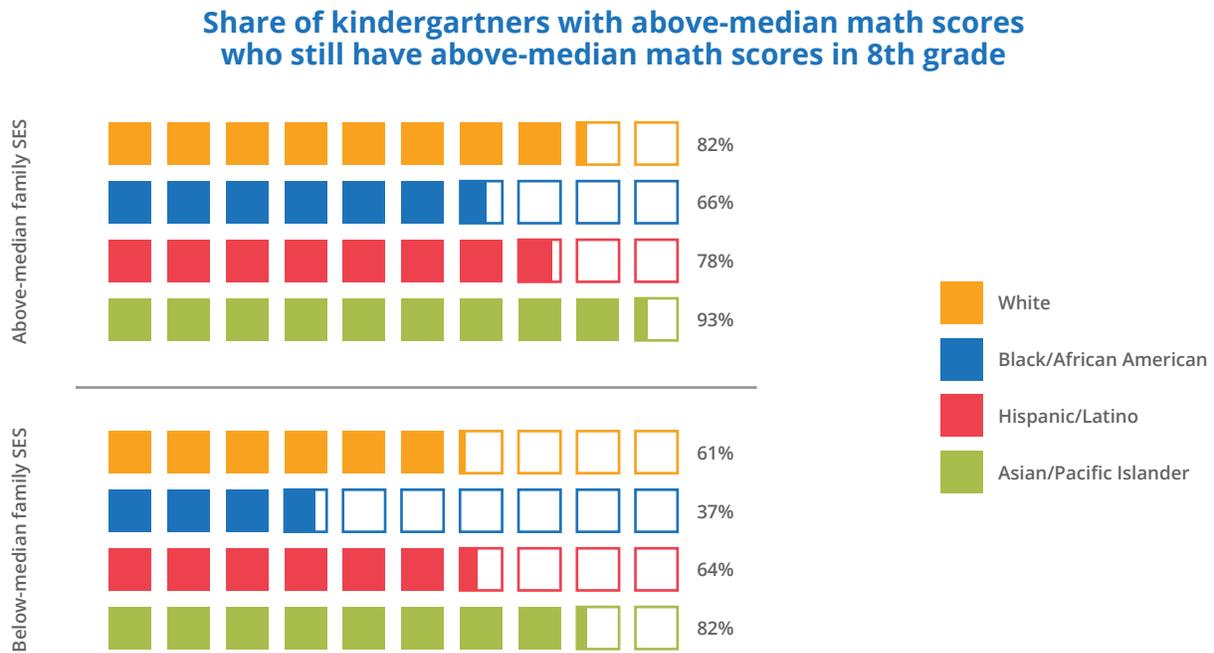
*Overall, 74 percent of students with families from the highest SES quartile have top-half math scores in kindergarten.

For Black kindergartners with math scores in the top half, staying at the top is especially difficult.

Figure 3.

Black kindergartners who have above-median math scores are much more likely than children of other races and ethnicities to fall behind by eighth grade.

Share of kindergartners with above-median math scores who still have above-median math scores in 8th grade

Above-median family SES
- White: 82%
- Black/African American: 66%
- Hispanic/Latino: 78%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 93%

Below-median family SES
- White: 61%
- Black/African American: 37%
- Hispanic/Latino: 64%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 82%

Legend:
- White
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian/Pacific Islander

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) (public use data), 2006.

Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige.

By high school, achievement patterns begin to hold for all students. Very few tenth graders with top-quartile test scores see their scores fall by twelfth grade. Similarly, tenth graders with bottom-quartile scores have difficulty improving their scores.

Figure 4.

Most tenth graders who score in the top or bottom quartiles remain in the same quartile in twelfth grade, regardless of SES.

Share of 10th graders whose math scores remain the same in 12th grade

Top-quartile math scores

Highest SES quartile — 85%

Lowest SES quartile — 61%

Bottom-quartile math scores

Highest SES quartile — 75%

Lowest SES quartile — 73%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.
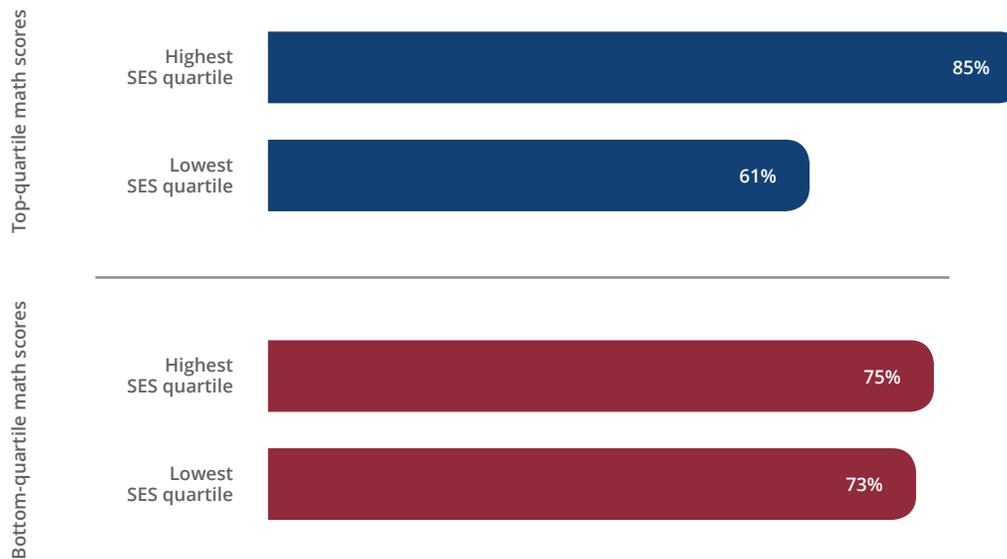
Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. Students who dropped out of high school before the twelfth-grade assessment are included as tenth graders whose math scores do not remain the same in twelfth grade. This represents 18 percent of lowest-SES-quartile tenth graders and 7 percent of highest-SES-quartile tenth graders.

Regardless of academic ability, poor tenth graders are less likely than their affluent peers to enroll in college, to attend four-year institutions, and to complete college degrees.

Figure 5.

Students from families in the lowest SES quartile are far less likely than their highest-SES peers to earn a college degree by their mid-20s—even when their test scores suggest that they are equally prepared.

Highest-SES-quartile 10th graders with above-median math scores

Highest-SES-quartile 10th graders with below-median math scores

Lowest-SES-quartile 10th graders with above-median math scores

Lowest-SES-quartile 10th graders with below-median math scores

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.
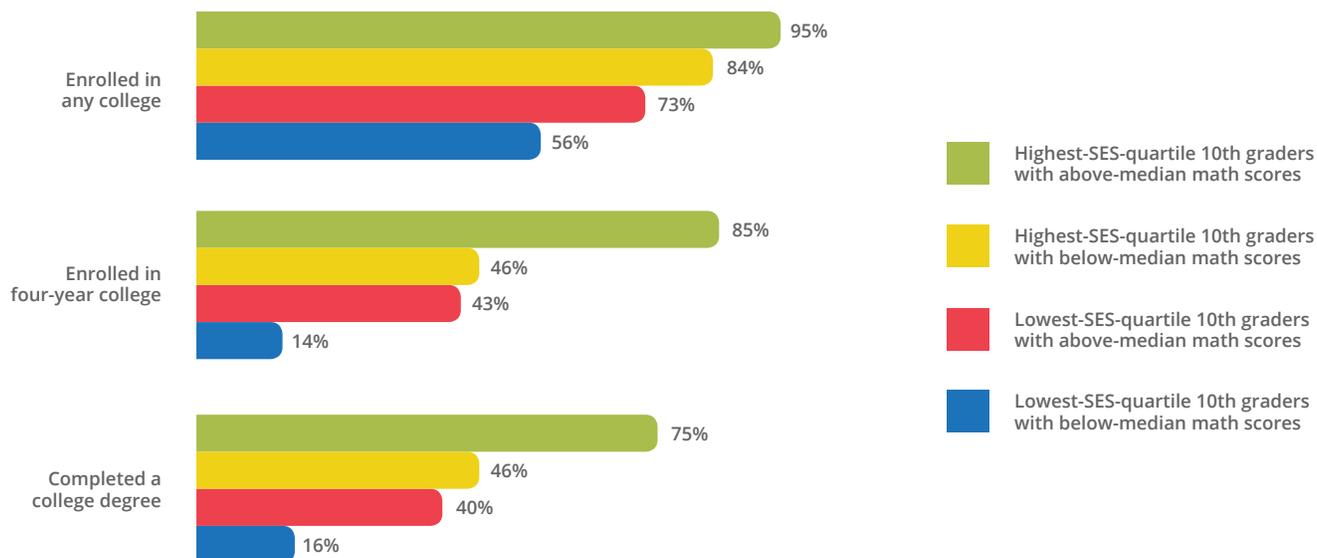
Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. College degree includes associate's degrees and higher.

Students' chances of attaining a postsecondary degree also vary by race and ethnicity.

Figure 6.
White and Asian tenth graders are more likely than their Black or Latino peers to complete a college degree within 10 years, no matter their math scores.

Share of 10th graders who completed a college degree within 10 years

Above-median math scores:
- White: 62%
- Black/African American: 51%
- Hispanic/Latino: 46%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 69%

Below-median math scores:
- White: 29%
- Black/African American: 23%
- Hispanic/Latino: 22%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 39%

Legend:
- White
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian/Pacific Islander

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.
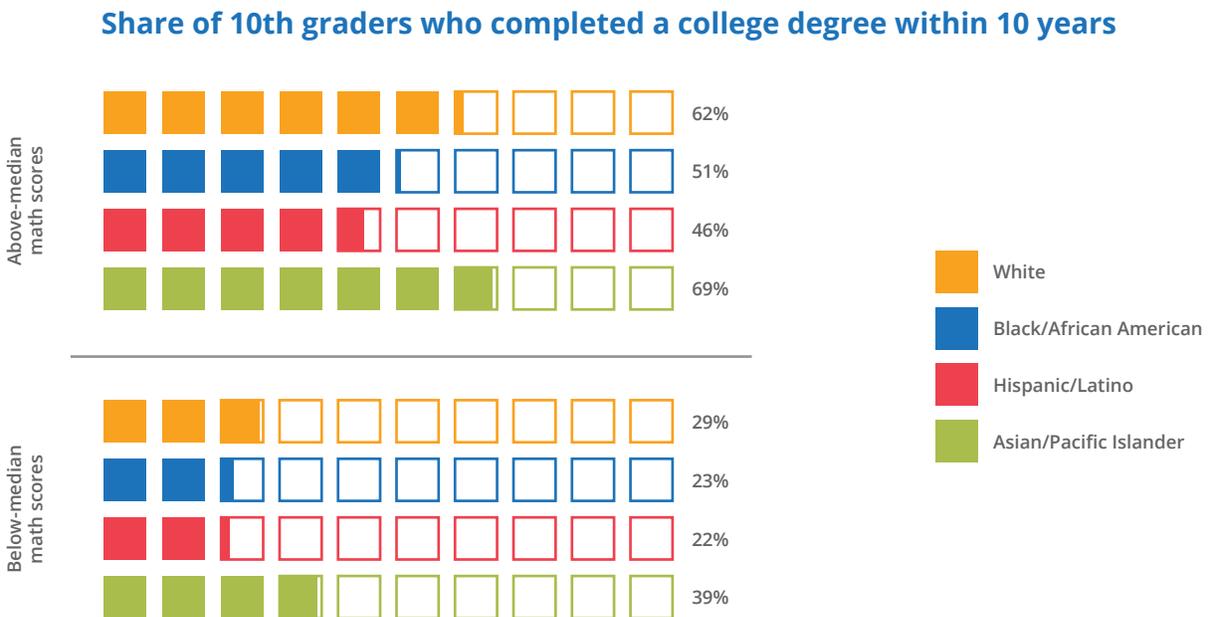
Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. College degree includes associate's degrees and higher.

Coming from a poor background does not necessarily determine a child's economic destiny. Students from poor backgrounds who show academic promise have higher odds of success, particularly if they maintain high math scores in high school.

Figure 7.

Tenth graders from families in the lowest SES quartile are twice as likely to have early educational and career success if they score in the top half on math assessments in high school.

Share of 10th graders with lowest-quartile family SES who have above-median SES 10 years later
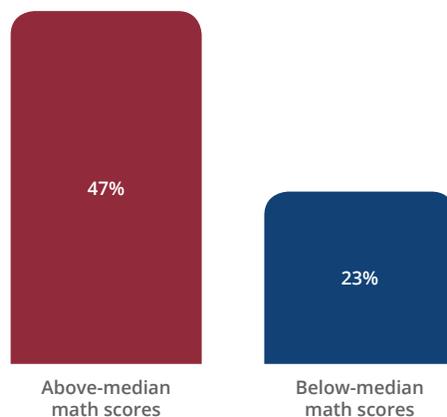
47%   Above-median math scores

23%   Below-median math scores

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.
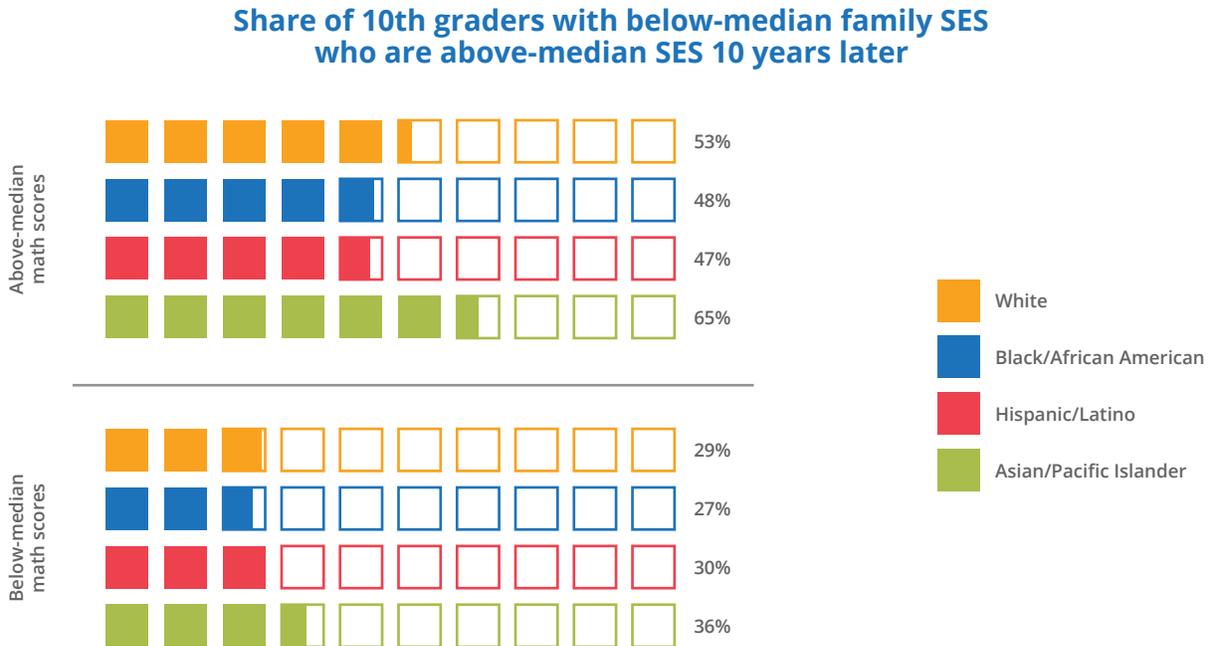
Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. Young adult SES is defined according to individual status compared to the cohort group 10 years after tenth grade.

Across racial and ethnic groups, top-half math scores in high school increase the odds that a student from an economically disadvantaged family will earn a good entry-level job as a young adult.

Figure 8.

Tenth graders with top-half math scores who are from families with below-median SES are more likely to have above-median SES 10 years later than their peers with bottom-half scores, regardless of race or ethnicity.

**Share of 10th graders with below-median family SES
who are above-median SES 10 years later**

Above-median math scores

53%
48%
47%
65%

Below-median math scores

29%
27%
30%
36%

- ■ White
- ■ Black/African American
- ■ Hispanic/Latino
- ■ Asian/Pacific Islander

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.

Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. Young adult SES is defined according to individual status compared to the cohort group 10 years after tenth grade.
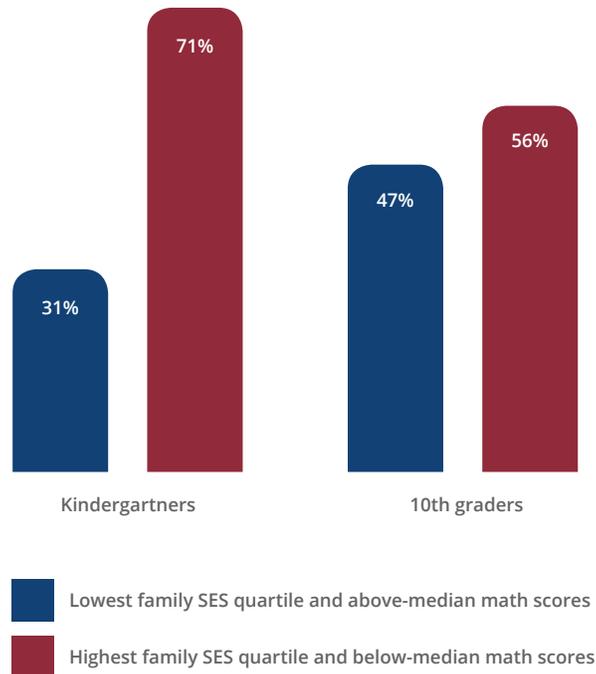
However, strong math scores alone are not enough to overcome the influence of family socioeconomic status on economic mobility.

Figure 9.

A student from a lowest-SES family who has top-half math scores has a lower chance of early career and educational success than a student from a highest-SES family who has bottom-half scores, even if the student from the lowest SES quartile continues to have top-half math scores in tenth grade.

Share of students who are above-median SES as young adults

Kindergartners: 31% (Lowest family SES quartile and above-median math scores), 71% (Highest family SES quartile and below-median math scores)

10th graders: 47% (Lowest family SES quartile and above-median math scores), 56% (Highest family SES quartile and below-median math scores)

■ Lowest family SES quartile and above-median math scores

■ Highest family SES quartile and below-median math scores

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) (public use data), 2006, and Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (public use data), 2012.

Note: Socioeconomic status (SES) is used to define class. Family SES depends on three factors: household income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational prestige. Young adult SES is defined according to individual status compared to the cohort group 10 years after tenth grade. To connect test scores in kindergarten to SES as young adults using different data sets, we assume the likelihood of changing scores between eighth and tenth grade is equivalent to the likelihood of changing scores between tenth and twelfth grade.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Education can mitigate the effects of adverse environments. To help make this a reality, policymakers must consider several options:

Expand academic interventions that start before kindergarten.

Continue academic interventions throughout K–12.

Improve and expand high school counseling so that more students have the information and social supports they need to transition from high school to postsecondary education and training.

Integrate career exploration and preparation into the advising process at the high school and college levels.

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Center
on Education
and the Workforce

1789

McCourt School of Public Policy