

# CONCLUSION

The future prosperity of our nation rests not only on our ability to improve the performance of our lowest-achieving students, but also on our ability to support and advance the performance of our highest-achieving students. As this study shows, many students—about two in five—who were high-achieving in early grades had lost that status just four years later. While the vast majority of these Descenders were never *low* performers—on average, they declined from above the 90th percentile to just below the 80th percentile—their decline is likely to have a substantive impact on their long-term education outcomes. Students performing at or above the 90th percentile are more likely to have access to gifted programs in elementary school and honors or advanced placement courses in high school. If they maintain their achievement and grades, their performance is likely to qualify them for selective colleges and universities and for higher tiers of merit aid than other students. These Descenders should be of great concern for educators. Once a student’s capacity for high achievement is established, the school’s objective should be to ensure that that student maintains an upward trajectory. After all, these are bright, highly capable individuals. Every casualty among this group is a loss in potential human capital, and schools need to find and implement strategies that effectively stem performance losses among students who show promise in the early grades.

It is important to note, however, that this out-migration from the top decile is surpassed by in-migration; in other words, a larger number of students achieve high-flyer status over time than lose it. Like those students who lost their high-achieving status, these Late Bloomers never performed far below the 90th percentile—the majority consistently ranked in the top 30 percent of students or above. They demonstrate that growth into high-achiever status is not just possible, but common for above-average students. The progress of these students begs the question: How can we improve the achievement of *other* students performing in the 70th and 80th percentiles?

Perhaps the least expected finding of this study is that, while one finds fewer high achievers in high-poverty schools, school poverty rates have little relation to the academic growth of high-achieving students. This challenges the widespread belief that schools in wealthy suburbs will produce the greatest gains in student achievement, at least among the highest achievers. Our study shows instead that while wealthy, suburban schools do tend to house more high-performing students, their students don’t show substantively greater gains than high achievers in high-poverty schools. These findings, albeit preliminary, suggest that placing a high-performing student in a high-growth school is largely a lottery. The schools within the sample varied greatly in the growth they produced for high-performing students, rendering the odds that a low-poverty school would produce high growth at only slightly over 50 percent.

If we are truly serious about providing excellence in education for all students, then we should consider changing accountability systems to place emphasis on the growth of low-, middle-, and high-achieving students alike. Our results suggest that this type of accountability would subject some wealthy, underperforming suburban schools to fair and welcome scrutiny.

Many of America’s future leaders in business, in politics, and in service to humanity will almost certainly be the high achievers in our schools today. While these children are not in short supply, this study suggests that we are not doing everything we could to nurture and sustain their promise, to increase their numbers, and to assure that high-achieving minority students and students in high-poverty schools have every opportunity to reach their goals. The primary reasons these promises remain unfulfilled are unrelated to the resources available to schools. Were that the case, low-poverty schools would produce substantively better gains than others. Instead, the problem seems to be one of consistency in both policy and practice. Educational policy in recent years has focused more on low-performing students than high achievers, and the curricula and instructional practices adapted toward these students produce inconsistent and idiosyncratic results. We can and must do better if we want to secure a future for our children that reflects the opportunities that past generations have enjoyed.