



The Maryland Public Policy Institute

BALTIMORE CITY'S K-12  
EDUCATION CRISIS



The Maryland Public Policy Institute

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# BALTIMORE CITY'S K-12 EDUCATION CRISIS

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**BY DAN LIPS**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Baltimore City Public School district was among the lowest-performing in the nation. National and state test scores show that the vast majority of BCPS students do not achieve proficiency in reading or mathematics exams.

In 2021, the Census Bureau reported that the per-pupil expenditure for BCPS schools during fiscal year 2019 was \$15,888, or 11th-highest among the nation's 100-largest school districts.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, fewer than two in 10 BCPS 4th or 8th grade students scored "proficient" in reading or math exams on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Among low-income students, more than half of 4th and 8th grade students scored "below basic" on the NAEP reading and math exams. The 2018-19 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) revealed similar results.

Baltimore City public schools were closed for in-person learning for most students for at least 12 months beginning in March 2020. Initial evidence suggests that BCPS students' academic achievement has declined after these prolonged school closures. In May 2021, Baltimore City Public Schools reported that 63 percent of middle- and high-school students were failing at least one class during the 2020-21 school year.<sup>1</sup> The 2021 MCAP found that fewer than 10 percent of BCPS students in grades 3, 4, and 5 scored "proficient" on reading and English/language arts exams.

The ongoing crisis in Baltimore City's public schools, worsened by prolonged school closures during the pandemic, is limiting the life opportunities of a generation of children living in Charm City. These problems also pose significant challenges for the city as a whole and the state of Maryland.

## **BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS (BCPS) OVERVIEW**

In 2021, 77,856 students were enrolled in the Baltimore City Public School District (BCPS).<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 99.98 percent of the district's enrolled students were eligible for the federal free- and reduced-price school lunch program, which indicates that nearly every child attending school in the district is from a lower-income household.<sup>3</sup>

Maryland reports that, as of 2021, 75 percent of enrolled students were served by the federal Title I program.<sup>4</sup> Fifteen percent of the students had disabilities and, therefore, were eligible for an Individual Education Program under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>5</sup> In addition, 9.8 percent of students were “Limited English Proficient.”<sup>6</sup> In comparison, 11.6 percent of students have disabilities and 11.1 percent are English learners across the state of Maryland.<sup>7</sup> Less than a quarter of students statewide were served by Title I.<sup>8</sup>

BCPS predominantly serves minority children. As of 2019, 79 percent of BCPS students were African American, 11 percent were Hispanic, and 8 percent were white.<sup>9</sup>

During the 2018-2019 school year, BCPS operated 168 schools (including 34 public charter schools), employed more than 4,900 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, and had a teacher-to-pupil ratio of 16 to 1, according to NAEP.<sup>10</sup> That year, the per-pupil expenditure in BCPS was \$16,184.<sup>11</sup>

The BCPS 2021-22 school year budget is approximately \$1.2 billion.<sup>12</sup> This includes \$857 million from the state, \$295 million from the local government, and \$5.4 million from the federal government.<sup>13</sup> (However, funds provided by the state also includes federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education.) The Baltimore City Public School Superintendent indicated that the district would receive an estimated \$700 million in additional federal funding provided through emergency spending to address the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

### **BCPS PER-STUDENT SPENDING COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGE & OTHER DISTRICTS**

In 2021, the Census Bureau reported that the per-pupil expenditure for BCPS schools during fiscal year 2019 was \$15,888, or 11th highest among the nation’s 100 largest school districts.<sup>15</sup> (Two Maryland school districts, Howard County (\$16,084) and Montgomery County (\$16,490), spent slightly higher than BCPS on the Census Bureau’s list.) According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Maryland’s statewide

average per-pupil expenditure was \$15,155 during the 2017-18 school year.<sup>16</sup>

Within Maryland, BCPS receives one of the highest among the state’s school districts. According to the Department of Legislative Services, BCPS received \$17,493 in per-pupil funding in 2019, third-highest among Maryland’s 24 school districts.<sup>17</sup> To summarize, the Baltimore City Public School district is one of the highest-funded large school districts in the United States. Within Maryland, BCPS receives one of the largest shares of per-student funding among all school districts.

### **ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

But national and state data show that BCPS is one of the lowest-performing school districts in the nation. The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that students’ academic achievement in BCPS is below the majority of the other large school districts that participate in the NAEP examination. The below table breaks down Baltimore City Public School students’ academic achievement levels on the 2019 NAEP reading and math exam. The data show the percent of students scoring at each level.

Table 2 presents the average achievement levels of Maryland students statewide on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress. The statewide scores suggest that Baltimore City public school students’ average test scores are well below the Maryland average.

Looking closer at the academic achievement level of low-income BCPS students, NAEP data show that more than half of the low-income students in BCPS scored below basic in 4th and 8th grade reading tests. Statewide data, shown in Table 4, indicate that low-income students across the state were more likely to achieve basic or proficient levels in these subjects that disadvantaged children attending BCPS schools.

**TABLE 1: 2019 ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS FOR BCPS STUDENTS BY GRADE, READING AND MATH, IN PERCENTAGES<sup>18</sup>**

	BELOW BASIC	BASIC	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
Grade 4 Reading	64	23	11	2
Grade 4 Math	47	38	14	2
Grade 8 Reading	50	35	13	1
Grade 8 Math	61	29	8	2

**TABLE 2: 2019 ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS FOR MARYLAND STUDENTS BY GRADE, READING AND MATH, BY PERCENTAGE<sup>19</sup>**

	BELOW BASIC	BASIC	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
Grade 4 Reading	36	29	24	11
Grade 4 Math	24	37	28	11
Grade 8 Reading	27	37	31	5
Grade 8 Math	35	32	21	12

**TABLE 3: 2019 ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS FOR LOW-INCOME BCPS STUDENTS, BY PERCENTAGES<sup>20</sup>**

	BELOW BASIC	PERCENT AT OR ABOVE BASIC	PERCENT AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
Grade 4 Reading	73	27	7	#
Grade 4 Math	56	44	8	#
Grade 8 Reading	58	42	8	#
Grade 8 Math	71	29	4	#

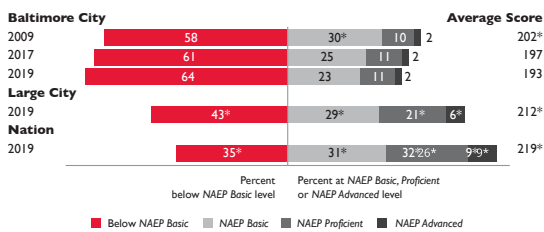
**TABLE 4: 2019 ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS FOR LOW-INCOME MARYLAND STUDENTS, BY PERCENTAGES<sup>21</sup>**

	BELOW BASIC	PERCENT AT OR ABOVE BASIC	PERCENT AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
Grade 4 Reading	50	50	19	4
Grade 4 Math	37	63	21	3
Grade 8 Reading	42	58	18	1
Grade 8 Math	54	46	14	2

The following figures, which were published by the U.S. Department of Education, show how Baltimore City's students compared with students in other large school districts and the national average in Grade 4 and Grade 8 reading and mathematics assessments. In each subject and at both grade levels, BCPS students' average achievement scores were below the average in other large city school districts and the national average. In fact, Baltimore City's 4th and 8th grade students' achievement levels were below those of students in 19 other large school districts.<sup>22</sup> BCPS students' average score was only higher than those of students in Detroit on each of these four assessments.

### GRADE 4 READING<sup>23</sup>

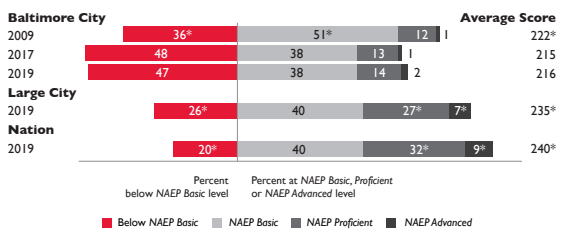
**NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



\*Significantly different (p < .05) from district's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers. NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

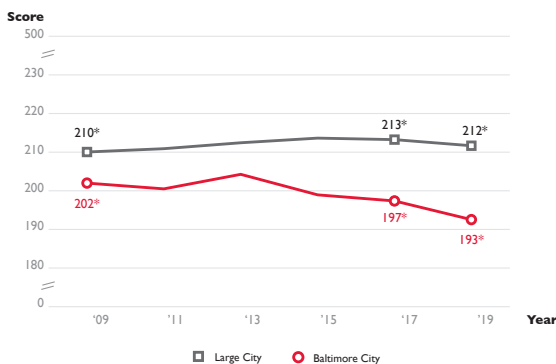
### GRADE 4 MATH<sup>24</sup>

**NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



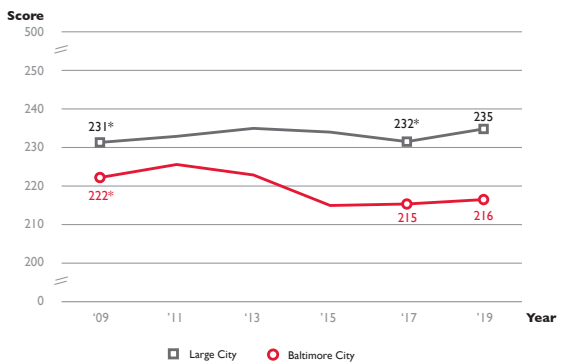
\*Significantly different (p < .05) from district's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers. NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

### Average Scores for District and Large Cities



\*Significantly different (p < .05) from 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

### Average Scores for District and Large Cities

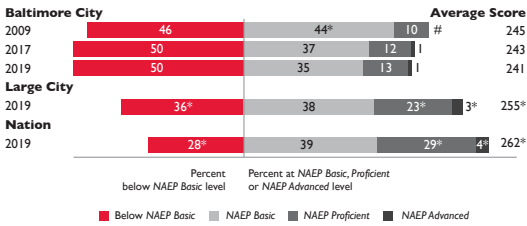


\*Significantly different (p < .05) from 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

**GRADE 8 READING<sup>25</sup>**

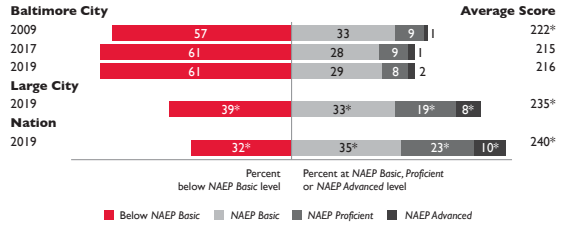
**GRADE 8 MATH<sup>26</sup>**

**NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



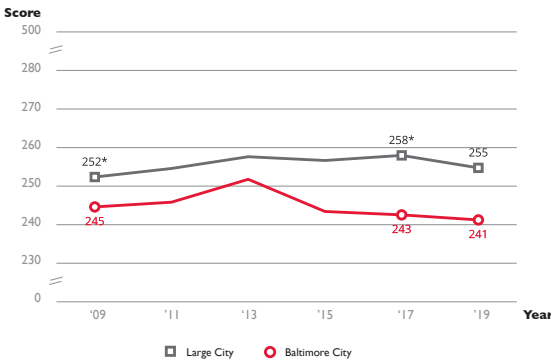
# Rounds to zero. \*Significantly different (p < .05) from district's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers. NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

**NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



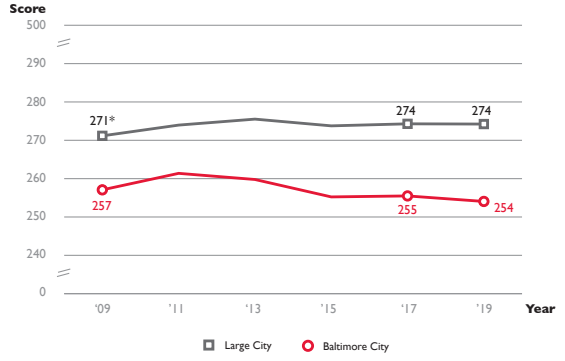
\*Significantly different (p < .05) from district's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers. NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

**Average Scores for District and Large Cities**



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**Average Scores for District and Large Cities**



\*Significantly different (p < .05) from 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

The Maryland State Report Card similarly shows that few BCPS students achieve proficiency in key subjects. According to the 2018-19 school report card on average, fewer than 1 in 3 BCPS students scored proficient in either math or English language arts at the elementary, middle, and high school levels on the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP). See Table 3.

**TABLE 3: PERCENT OF BCPS STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT ON THE MCAP, 2018-19<sup>27</sup>**

	MATH			ENGLISH / LANGUAGE ARTS		
	ELEM.	MIDDLE	HIGH	ELEM.	MIDDLE	HIGH
All Students	17.9	13.5	21.8	18.6	22.7	32.9
Economically Disadvantaged	11	7	13.3	18.6	22.7	32.9
English Learner	11.7	4.7	3.4	9.8	8	7.5
Students with Disabilities	6.5	6	12.1	5.2	5.8	10.7

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Education waiver, Maryland changed its traditional testing practices through the MCAP during the pandemic. During the fall of the 2021-22 school year, the state conducted a condensed assessment. Due to schooling changes during the pandemic, the state department of education reports, the most recent MCAP data is presented in a different way. The following table shows the percentage of BCPS students scoring proficient on MCAP mathematics and English Language Arts exams by grade that was tested. (For the mathematics exam, the test scores for several grades were marked as “<=5.0”, rather than providing a specific percentage.) See Table 4. These results show that less than 10 percent of BCPS students are scoring proficient in mathematics or English/language arts in several elementary and middle school grades suggests that the schooling disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in significant learning losses.

**TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF ALL BCPS STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT BY GRADE AND MCAP SUBJECT<sup>28</sup>**

GRADE	MATH	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
3		8.9
4	5.8	8.4
5	7.5	9.8
6	8.1	28.9
7		15.4
8		8.5
10		38.9

That BCPS proficiency rates are lower than the 2018-2019 school year is not a surprise. BCPS public schools operated remotely for most students from the spring of 2020 through the spring of 2021.

In July 2021, McKinsey issued a report analyzing the impact of “unfinished learning” during the pandemic and project that student affected by pandemic school closures were “five months behind in math and four months behind in

reading,” compared to prior year achievement levels and growth rates during a typical school year.<sup>29</sup> McKinsey also found that “unfinished learning” has had a disproportionate effect on low-income and minority students:

*Students of color and low-income students suffered most. Students in majority-Black schools ended the school year six months behind in both math and reading, while students in majority-white schools ended up just four months behind in math and three months behind in reading.<sup>8</sup> Students in predominantly low-income schools and in urban locations also lost more learning during the pandemic than their peers in high-income rural and suburban schools.<sup>30</sup>*

A similar review of national student test score data by NWEA reached a similar conclusion that low-income and minority students were more negatively affected by schooling disruptions.<sup>31</sup>

In May 2021, Baltimore City Public Schools reported that 63 percent of middle- and high-school students were failing at least one class during the 2020-21 school year.<sup>32</sup>

**GRADUATION, DROPOUT & COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATES**

According to the Maryland State Report Card, the graduation rate in BCPS schools was 69 percent in 2021, which was essentially level with a 5-year trend.<sup>33</sup> The 2021 dropout rate of 12.5 percent was likewise consistent with the 5-year trend, but lower than peak dropout rates of nearly 16 percent in 2017 and 2019.<sup>34</sup> College enrollment data shows that about half of BCPS students enroll in college and remain for at least 24 months, according to state data.<sup>35</sup>

**THE COSTS OF LOW ACHIEVEMENT & DROPOUT RATE**

Lower academic achievement and attainment results in significant costs for individual students and society. For example, U.S. Social Security Administration data show that higher educational attainment is linked with larger lifetime earnings.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. Department of Education provided a useful summary of these



costs in the introduction to a report on trends in high school dropout and completion rates:

*Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes. According to data from the Census Bureau's 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS), the median earnings of adults ages 25 through 34 who worked full time, year round and who had not completed high school were lower than the earnings of those with higher levels of educational attainment. For example, median earnings for full-time workers ages 25 through 34 who had not completed high school (\$26,000) were lower than those of workers whose highest education level was high school completion (\$32,000), an associate's degree (\$39,000), or a bachelor's or higher degree (\$55,000). Among 25- to 34-year-olds in the labor force, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts (13 percent) was higher than the unemployment rate of those whose highest level of educational attainment was a high school credential (7 percent).<sup>2</sup> In addition, dropouts age 25 and older were reported being in worse health than adults who were not dropouts, regardless of income (Pleis, Ward, and Lucas 2010). Dropouts also make up disproportionately higher percentages of the nation's institutionalized population than of the nation's noninstitutionalized population. Relative to individuals who complete high school, the average high school dropout costs the economy approximately \$272,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on welfare (Levin and Belfield 2007).<sup>37</sup>*

For the students attending Baltimore City Public Schools, and in the state of Maryland, low academic achievement and higher dropout rates impose significant personal and societal costs. A 2008 study of Maryland's statewide dropout rate found that the state of Maryland loses nearly \$200 million in annual tax revenue due to its high school dropouts.<sup>38</sup> A RAND Corporation analysis of neighboring Pennsylvania projected that “[c] losing race-ethnic academic achievement gaps going forward would increase the lifetime earnings of each yearly group of Pennsylvania

students by \$1 billion to \$3 billion (in present-value dollars).”<sup>39</sup> Improving educational opportunities for Baltimore City Public School students and increasing the BCPS high school graduation rate would likely yield similar benefits for Baltimore students and the state of Maryland.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite spending nearly \$16,000 per-student, the Baltimore City Public School has been one of the lowest performing urban public school districts in the country. According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress, more than 50 percent of BCPS low-income students scored “below basic” in 4th and 8th grade reading exams. Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program data also show that a small percentage of BCPS students are proficient in mathematics or English/Language Arts. The Covid-19 pandemic and prolonged school closures have exacerbated the crisis in Baltimore City Public Schools.

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**DAN LIPS** is a Senior Fellow, Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity.

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