

# Beyond the White Picket Fence: A Picture of Suburban Schools in California

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## Quick Facts

- Nearly 1/3 of school districts in California are located in suburban communities.
- Suburban school districts enroll over 1/3 of the state's K-12 students.
- Students in suburban school districts are racially and ethnically diverse.
  - 52% of students are Latinx, 24% are White, 10% are Asian American, 5% are Black, 4% are multi-racial, and 3% are Pacific Islander.
  - The diversity of suburban districts has increased somewhat in the last decade.
- Suburban school districts serve fewer students who are English Learners or eligible for free and reduced-price meals than urban areas or townships.
- The characteristics of the students differ dramatically across suburban districts.
  - The percent of Latinx students in each suburban district varies from <1% to 99%.
  - The percent of students who are White varies from <1% to 88%.
  - The proportion of Asian American students in each district ranges from <1% to 65%.
  - The proportion of Black students ranges from <1% to 19%.
  - Students who are eligible for free & reduced-price meals range from 1% to 95%.
  - The proportion of students who are English Learners varies from <1% to 62%.
- Students in suburban school districts perform better on standardized assessments of English Language Arts and Math than their peers in other locales, on average.
- Students in suburban school districts have similar high school course-taking patterns and graduation rates as students in urban districts.
- Two-thirds of students from suburban school districts enroll in college within 12 months of high school graduation, slightly higher than the statewide rate.
- There are great differences in students' performance on standardized assessments, high school course-taking patterns, and college enrollment across suburban districts.

## DATA and METHODS

This report consists simply of descriptive statistics calculated from the most recent school- and district-level data publicly available from the California Department of Education. District-level data was aggregated to locale-level (suburban, urban, rural, and town) using the locale codes assigned to each district by the National Center for Education Statistics. No findings in this report should be considered as causal or deterministic in nature. The opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the California Department of Education or the National Center for Education Statistics.

# Suburban School Districts

For decades, urban schools, and more recently rural schools, have been the focal point of education policy, research, funding, and reform. There is no arguing the immense needs of urban and rural schools, and the students they serve. Meanwhile suburban schools have been relegated to a place of relative disregard, mostly due to outdated perceptions of *suburban America*. *Suburban America* – a place where middle-class families live in homogenous neighborhoods with single family homes and tidy lawns surrounded by white picket fences. *Suburban America* – a place where eager children attend well-designed schools with creative and caring teachers and sufficient resources to meet every student’s unique learning needs. And yet, these outdated perceptions of *suburban America* mask the reality of suburban schools, the diversity of the students they serve, and the many individual and institutional challenges they must overcome to ensure the success of their students.

In recent decades, suburban communities have experienced dramatic shifts along numerous dimensions, including racial composition, linguistic diversity, and economic conditions, among others.<sup>i</sup> In many suburbs, racial minority subgroups are now the majority, with Latinx people representing the largest group in 25 suburban areas and Black families in nine highly diverse suburbs, and the large majority of Black, Latinx, and Asian American people living in suburbs.<sup>ii</sup> At first glance, these demographic shifts summon notions of integration and opportunity; yet, many suburban residents contend with racial inequality and economic strain, including fewer employment opportunities and declining incomes.<sup>iii</sup> These shifting demographics and economic circumstances are impacting schools. Migration and immigration are leading to the (re)segregation of suburban schools,<sup>iv</sup> and the number of students who are learning English is growing.<sup>v</sup> With economic challenges in communities, the number of students living in poverty is increasing.<sup>vi</sup> In fact, suburban school districts across the nation are experiencing more rapid growth of English Learners and students living in poverty than urban districts.<sup>vii</sup>

Suburban school districts in California, like those across the nation, serve a diverse student population. Yet, the challenges that suburban schools face in their quest to serve their students often go unrecognized and unheard. Their needs as educational providers are often misconceived, masked by the outdated perception of suburban America. Answering recent calls for additional scholarship about suburban school districts,<sup>viii</sup> this report aims to look beyond the white picket fence conception and provide a rich description of suburban schools in California as they are today.

# Suburban School Districts in California

**Suburban school districts serve a similar number of students in a similar number of schools as urban school districts.**

Nearly 1/3 of all public school districts (or LEAs) in California are suburban districts. In 2019-2020, these suburban districts operated 4,266 schools serving over 2.6 million students. There are twice as many suburban school districts as urban school districts in California, though suburban districts operate a similar number of schools and serve a similar number of students in total as the fewer and larger urban districts.

**Table 1.** California Public School Districts and Students by Locale, 2019-20

	Total Districts	Total Schools	Total Students
<b>CA Statewide</b>	942	11,064	6,025,229
<b>Suburban</b>	296	4,266	2,612,016
<b>Urban</b>	141	4,450	2,778,112
<b>Rural</b>	347	1,238	268,351
<b>Town</b>	158	1,110	366,750

Notes: Excludes 89 LEAs including County Offices of Education (COEs), Regional Occupational Programs (ROPs), Joint Power Authorities (JPAs), State Special Schools, and State Board of Education authorized charter schools. Student data calculated from the CALPADS Unduplicated Pupil Count Data publicly available from the California Department of Education.

## Defining Locale

The National Center for Education Statistics, part of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education, classifies schools and districts into four major locale codes. Commonly used in education research, NCES locale codes are a measure of location relative to populous areas. Codes are derived from US Census Bureau data about the population and the distance from urban areas. The four major locale codes, which may be further divided into 3 subcategories based on population size, are defined as follows:

1. **City** – Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city (e.g., Los Angeles)
2. **Suburb** – Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area (e.g., Pomona)
3. **Town** – Territory inside an urban cluster but outside an urbanized area (e.g., McKinleyville)
4. **Rural** – Census-defined rural territory (e.g., Anderson Valley)

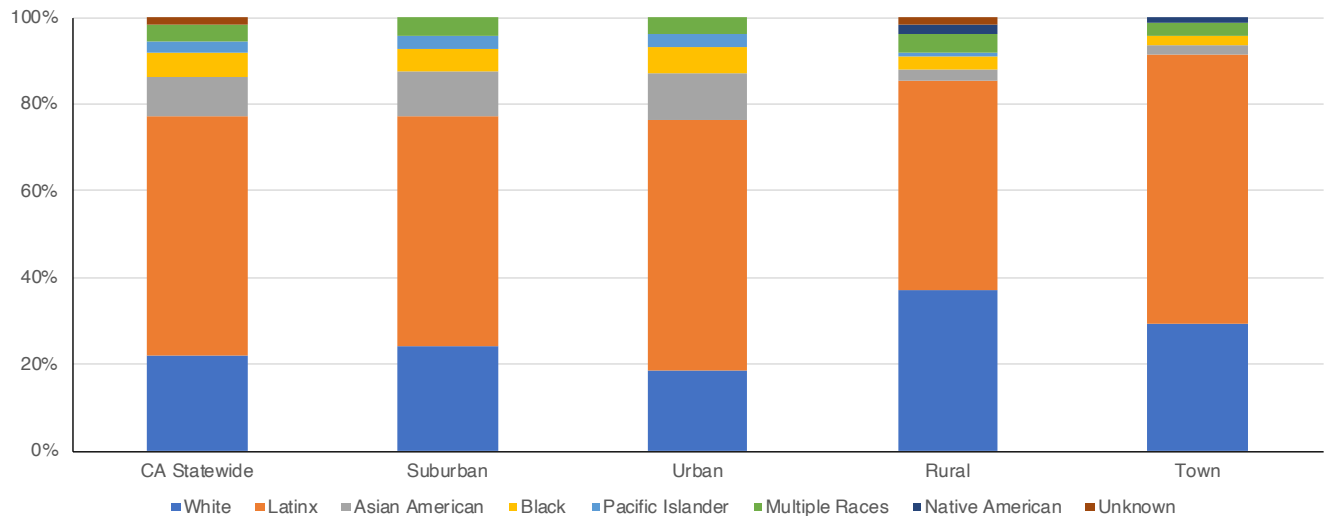
For more information see: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/CCDLocaleCode.asp>

# Students in Suburban School Districts

## Students in suburban school districts are racially and ethnically diverse.

Across all suburban school districts in California, 52% of students are Latinx, 24% are White, 10% are Asian American, 5% are Black or African American, 4% are multi-racial, and 3% are Pacific Islander or Filipino. The diversity of students by racial/ethnic background is similar in suburban and urban schools. Compared to urban school districts, suburban districts serve fewer Latinx students and more White students, an approximate five percentage point difference for each subgroup. A greater proportion of students in suburban districts are Asian American and Black than in rural areas and small towns.

**Figure 1.** Race/Ethnicity of California Public School District Students by Locale, 2019-20



## The diversity of suburban school districts has increased slightly over the last decade.

Since 2010, the diversity of suburban school districts across the state has changed somewhat. The most notable trend is a decrease, by 5.4 percentage points, in the proportion of students in suburban school districts who are White and an increase, by 3.6 percentage points, in the proportion of students who are Latinx. In addition, the proportion of students in suburban districts who are Black has decreased by 1.1 percentage points while the proportion of students that are Asian American increased by 1.3 percentage points.

# Students in Suburban School Districts

## Suburban school districts serve fewer students in unduplicated subgroups than school districts in all other locales.

Across the state, suburban school districts serve proportionately fewer students in unduplicated subgroups compared to public school districts in other locales. About 55% of students in suburban districts are eligible for free and reduced-price meals compared to 59% of students in rural areas, 62% in urban areas, and 70% in our state's towns. A smaller proportion of students in suburban school districts are English Learners (17%) compared to urban areas and small towns where 20% and 21% of students are English Learners, respectively. The proportion of students who are in foster care or homeless varies by less than one percentage point across locales, yet suburban districts have the highest rates of homeless youth at 3.4% of all students.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of California Public School District Students by Locale, 2019-20

	CA Statewide	Suburban	Urban	Rural	Town
Total Students	6,025,229	2,612,016	2,778,112	268,351	366,750
Unduplicated Students	62.40%	58.30%	65.30%	60.50%	71.60%
Free & Reduced-Price Meals	59.20%	55.10%	61.90%	58.50%	69.60%
English Learners	18.60%	17.30%	19.90%	15.10%	21.00%
Foster Youth	0.50%	0.50%	0.50%	0.60%	0.70%
Homeless	3.20%	3.40%	3.00%	2.70%	3.20%
Migrant	0.80%	0.40%	0.70%	1.90%	3.20%
Student Race/Ethnicity					
Asian American	9.30%	9.90%	10.60%	2.70%	2.10%
Black	5.30%	5.10%	6.00%	2.70%	2.10%
Latinx	54.90%	52.40%	57%	48.10%	60.80%
Native American	<1%	<1%	<1%	2.00%	1.40%
Pacific Islander/Filipino	2.80%	3.10%	3.00%	1.20%	<1%
White	22.40%	23.90%	18.60%	37.20%	29.20%
Multiple Races	3.90%	4.30%	3.70%	4.30%	2.90%
Unknown/Not Reported	1.70%	<1%	<1%	1.70%	<1%

Notes: Excludes 89 LEAs including COEs, ROPs, and State Special Schools. Student subgroup data calculated from the CALPADS Unduplicated Pupil Count data files and the Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity data files, both publicly available from the California Department of Education.

# Suburban Districts: No 2 Alike

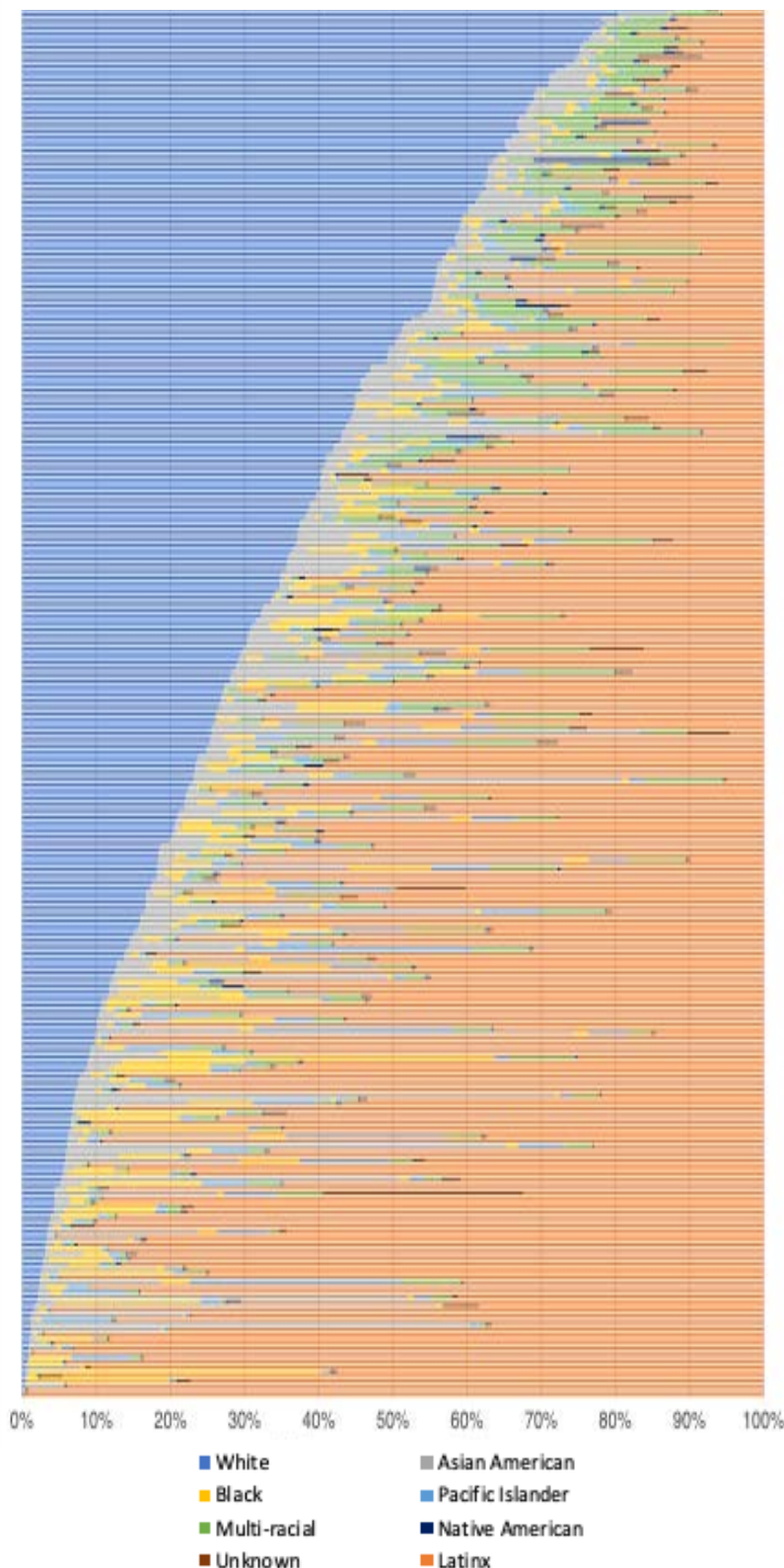
The rich diversity of students enrolled in suburban districts across California dismantles the notion of homogenous suburban schools. Moreover, the rates of student eligibility for free and reduced lunch and homelessness upend conceptions of affluence and privilege in suburban communities across our state. Yet, these statistics do not provide a full and vivid picture of suburban districts and the students they serve. In fact, the aggregate figures presented thus far mask important differences between districts.

**Just as no two students are alike, neither are two suburban districts.**

There is dramatic variation in the composition of the student population across the 296 suburban districts in California. Some districts do in fact serve predominately White students, while others serve primarily Latinx students. Some districts serve a student body where virtually all students are living in poverty, while others serve a largely affluent student population. Some districts have high concentrations of English Learners and others do not.

**It is this variation which demands our attention, as the differences across suburban school districts are somewhat indicative of students' needs and influence funding, policy, and practice.**

**Figure 2.** Variation in the Racial Composition of Suburban School Districts, 2019-20



# Suburban Districts: No 2 Alike

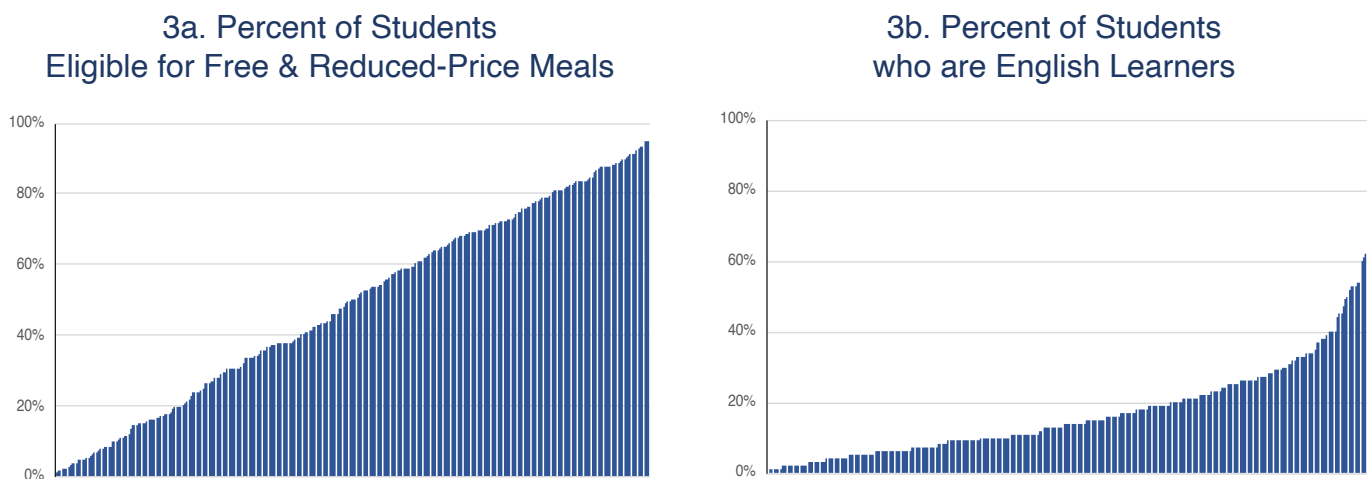
## The student population differs dramatically across suburban school districts by race/ethnicity and key student subgroups.

The differences in the student population across suburban districts are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, where each bar represents one of the 296 suburban school districts in California.

In Figure 2, each bar depicts the racial composition of the student body for one suburban district. The percent of White and Latinx students in each district varies the most, ranging from less than 1% to 88% for White students and less than 1% to 99% for Latinx students. The proportion of Asian American students in each district ranges from less than 1% to 65% and the proportion of Black students ranges from less than 1% to 19%.

In Figure 3, each bar represents the percent of the entire student population who is identified as belonging to a particular subgroup within a particular district. These subgroups, defined in the California Education Code, are used in both funding and accountability frameworks. The percent of students eligible for free and reduced meals in suburban districts ranges from 1% in a small elementary district in Marin County to 95% in a large unified district in Los Angeles County. The proportion of students who are English Learners in suburban districts ranges from less than 1% to 62%. While on average about 3.5% of students in suburban districts are homeless, one district in Los Angeles County serves a population where 36% of students are homeless.

**Figure 3.** Variation in Key Student Subgroups across Suburban School Districts, 2019-20



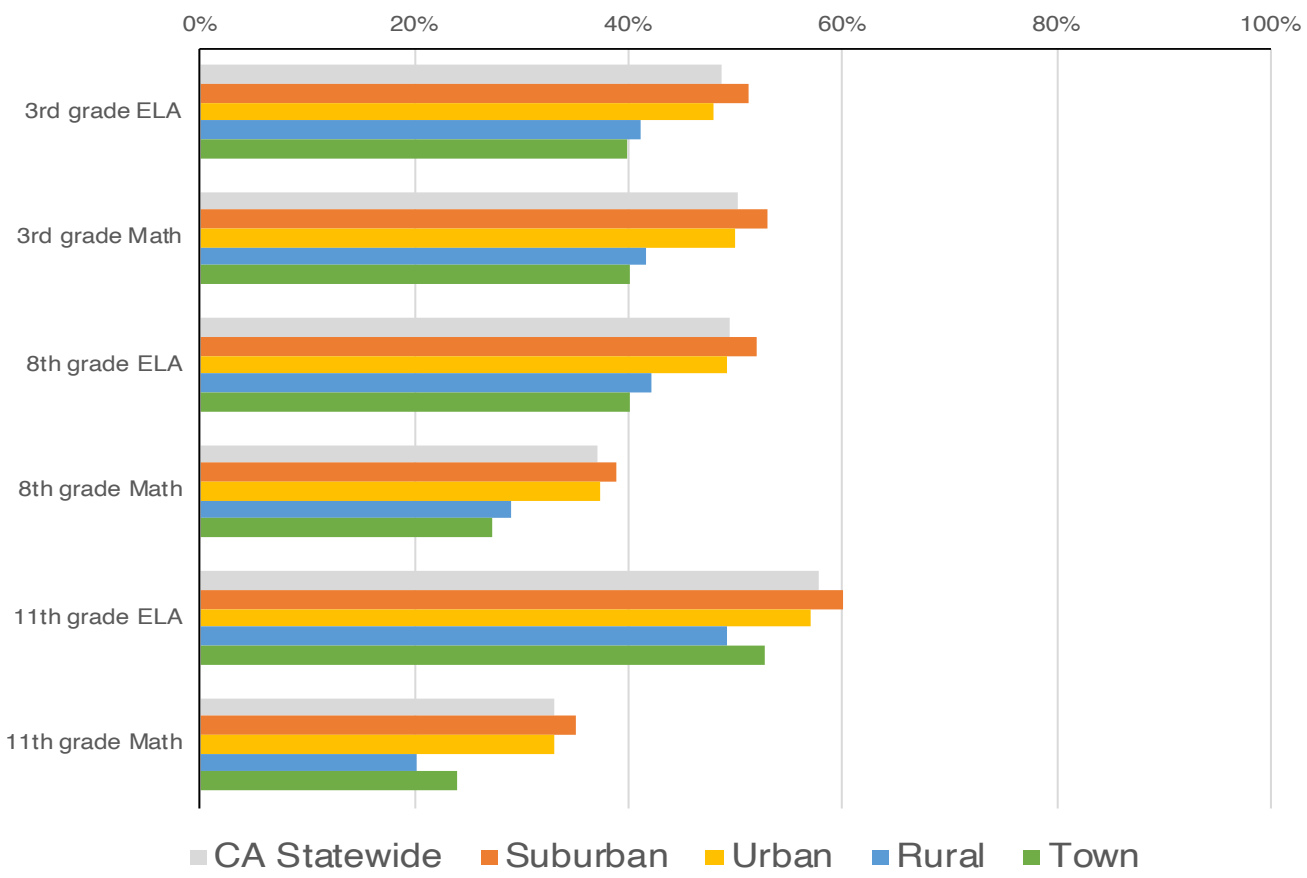


# Academic Performance

**A greater proportion of students in suburban school districts meet or exceed the standards of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) than other locales in the state.**

Students in suburban school districts demonstrate better performance on the state standardized assessments than students in other locales. The gap between the percent of students in suburban and urban districts who meet or exceed standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math is quite small; however, the difference of nearly 10 percentage points between students in suburban districts and those in rural areas or townships is noteworthy. In elementary grades, just over half of students in suburban districts meet or exceed standards in ELA and Math. Unfortunately, student performance in Math appears to decline as students get older. Only about 1/3 of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students statewide meet or exceed Math standards.

**Figure 4.** Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards on CAASPP in 2019, by Locale



# High School Graduation & College Readiness

## Students in suburban school districts have similar high school course-taking patterns and graduation rates as students in urban districts.

Across various measures of college readiness, suburban school districts demonstrate better performance than statewide averages and districts in rural areas and townships, and similar performance to urban school districts. About 87% of students graduate from high school in all locales, except rural areas where the 4-year cohort graduation rate is 20 percentage points lower. Just under half of graduates in suburban and urban districts alike complete the coursework (A-G course eligibility) necessary for admission to the state’s public 4-year universities; these rates are markedly higher than the rates of a-g eligibility in rural areas (19%) and townships (31%). Moreover, students from suburban and urban districts participate in AP test-taking at similar rates, 27% and 29% respectively, and students earn a score of three or higher on around 60% of AP tests.

**Table 3.** College Readiness & Enrollment of High School Graduates, by Locale

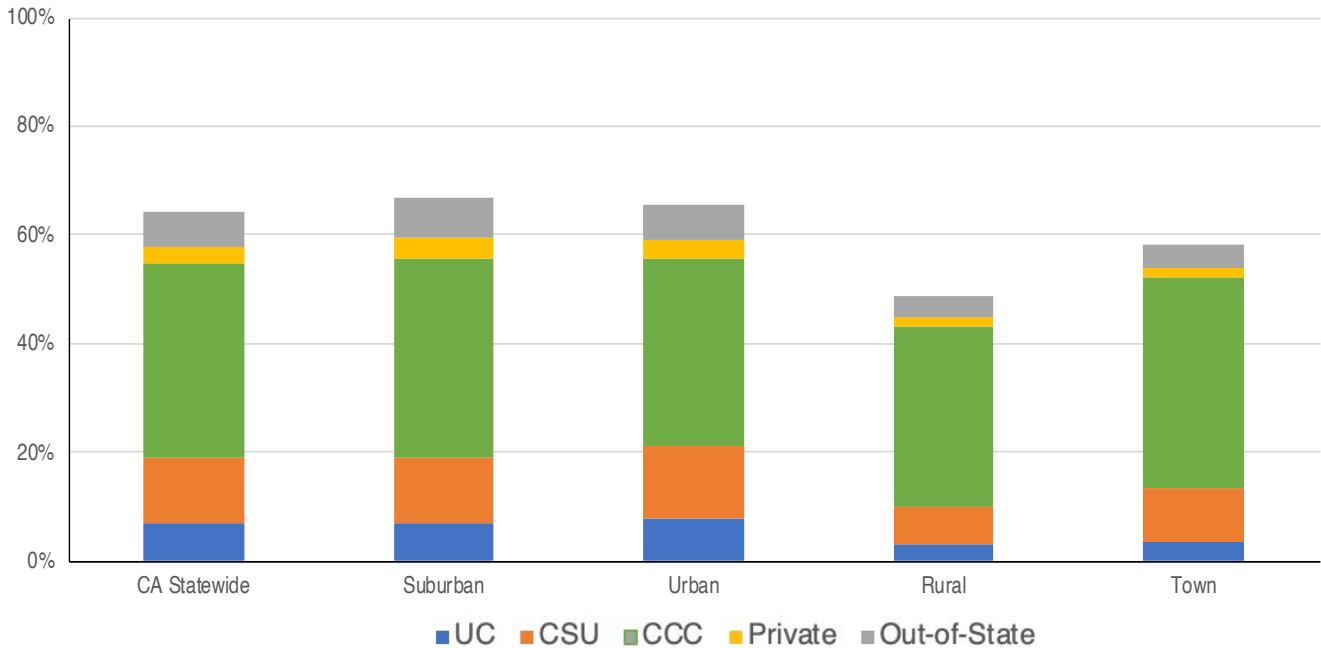
	CA Statewide	Suburban	Urban	Rural	Town
<b>AP Test-Taking, 2018-19</b>					
10th - 12th graders taking AP Tests	26.72%	27.38%	28.70%	10.94%	16.90%
Tests with Scores 3, 4, 5	58.75%	61.22%	57.86%	39.47%	45.47%
<b>A-G Course Completion, 2019 Graduates</b>					
A-G Course Completion	43.00%	45.20%	46.80%	19.20%	31.20%
<b>High School Graduation, 2019 Graduates</b>					
4-year Cohort Graduation Rate	84.50%	87.00%	86.50%	66.70%	86.30%
<b>College Enrollment within 12 months of High School Completion, 2018 Graduates</b>					
Any college enrollment	64.40%	66.80%	65.60%	48.80%	58.30%
Enrollment in UC	7.07%	7.05%	8.07%	3.16%	3.60%
Enrollment in CSU	12.07%	11.91%	13.33%	7.09%	9.90%
Enrollment in CCC	35.48%	36.93%	34.51%	32.85%	38.80%
Enrollment in Private Institution	3.17%	3.55%	3.16%	1.76%	1.56%
Out-of-State Enrollment	6.60%	7.31%	6.56%	3.91%	4.47%

Notes: High school graduation and a-g course completion rates calculated from 4-year Cohort Graduation data files publicly available from the California Department of Education; data reflects the 178 suburban school districts with 2019 high school graduates. College enrollment rates calculated from College-Going data files publicly available from the California Department of Education and include 182 suburban school districts for which data was available for the graduating class of 2018.

## Two-thirds of students from suburban school districts enroll in college within 12 months of high school graduation.

High school graduates from suburban and urban school districts enroll in college at similar rates (67% and 66%, respectively); these rates are notably higher than the rates of college enrollment for graduates of school districts located in towns (58%) or rural areas (49%). More than half of the high school graduates from suburban and urban districts who go to college enroll in community colleges. Seven percent of suburban graduates enroll in a UC and 12% enroll at a campus of the CSU system. Compared to graduates of urban school districts, suburban graduates are slightly less likely to attend one of the state's public 4-year universities and slightly more likely to attend a private or out-of-state institution.

**Figure 5.** College Enrollment of 2018 High School Graduates, by Locale



# Different Students, Different Outcomes

Similar to the notions of homogeneity and affluence, conceptions of suburban school districts often allude to academically successful students. Yet, just as the students in suburban districts vary across the state, so does the academic success, college readiness, and college enrollment.

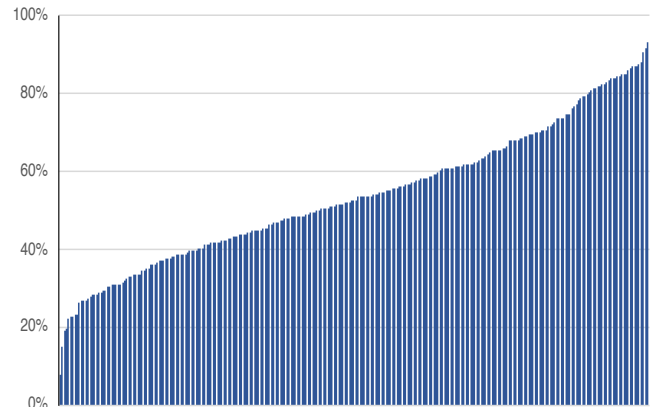
**Though students in suburban school districts tend to perform better on standardized assessments of ELA and Math than their peers in other locales, there are great differences in students' performance between distinct suburban districts.**

The percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders meeting or exceeding standards ranges from 8% for ELA and 12% for Math in a small Central Valley School District to 93% for ELA and 96% for Math in a small district in Santa Barbara County. For 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the percent of students meeting or exceeding standards ranges from 19% to 95% in ELA and from 5% to 87% in Math. The evidence is clear. Students from some suburban districts are performing quite well, while students in other districts are not.

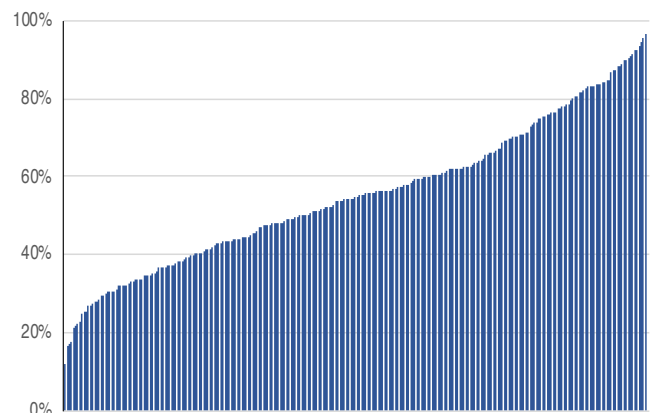
**These vast differences are likely the result of individual needs and institutional factors, such as instructional resources.**

**Figure 6.** Variation in Student Performance on CAASPP, 2018-19

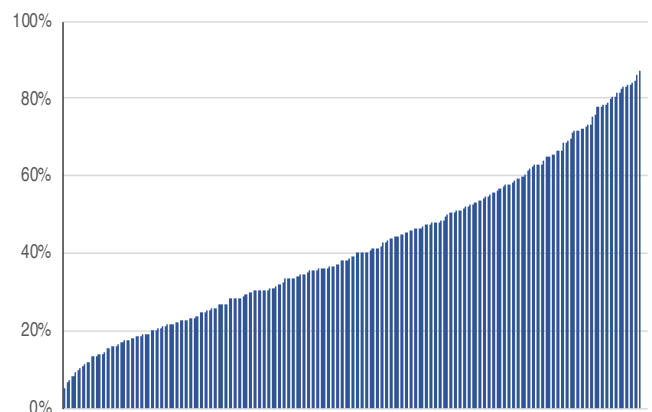
**6a.** Percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in ELA



**6b.** Percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Math

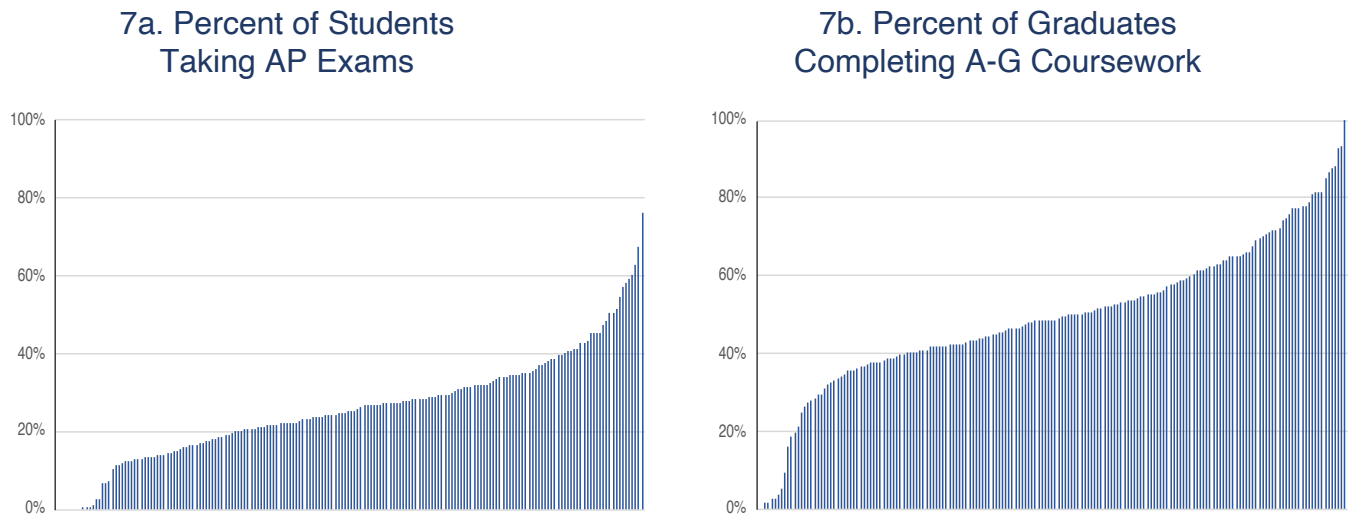


**6c.** Percent of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards in Math



# Different Students, Different Outcomes

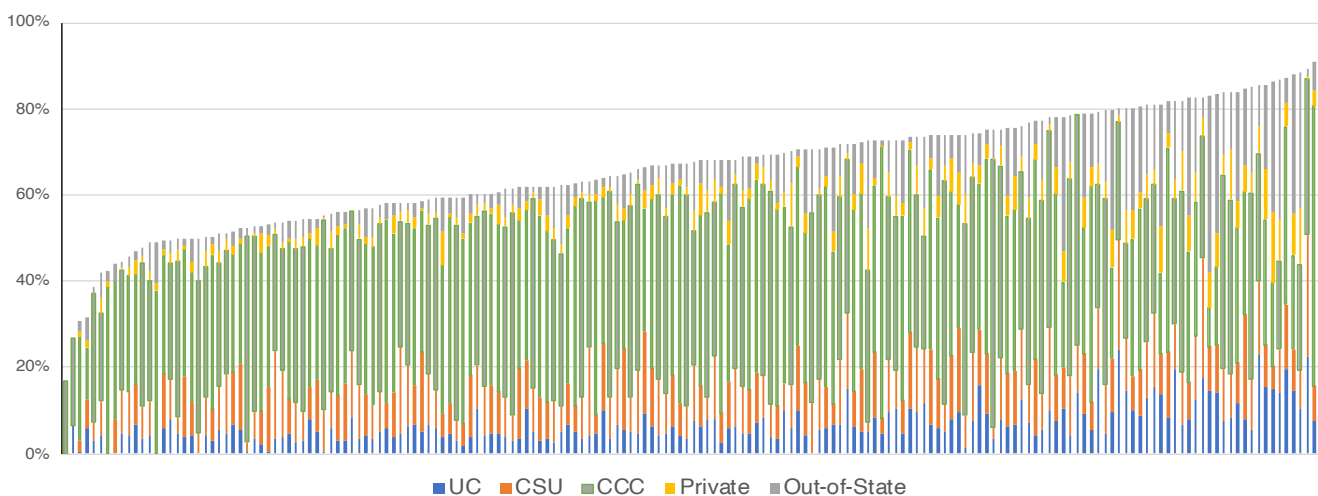
**Figure 7.** Variation in College Readiness of 2019 Graduates across Suburban School Districts



**High school course-taking in preparation for college, as well as college enrollment, varies greatly across suburban school districts.**

In some districts, no high school students take AP tests, whereas in other districts as many as 76% of students engage in this form of academic preparation.<sup>x</sup> Likewise, completion of A-G coursework varies from 0 to 100% of graduates.<sup>x</sup> Importantly, the rates of college enrollment differ dramatically between suburban districts, ranging from just 17% to more than 90%. When comparing districts with similar rates of overall college enrollment, marked differences in enrollment in 2-year or 4-year and out-of-state institutions are observed.

**Figure 8.** Variation in College Enrollment of 2018 Graduates across Suburban School Districts



California is widely considered the most diverse state in our nation along multiple dimensions, including racial and ethnic backgrounds, family structure, household income, political affiliation, and religious beliefs, among others.<sup>xi</sup> This diversity extends to the nearly 1,000 public school districts serving over 6 million K-12 students in diverse communities and varied geographical regions across the state, including our suburbs.

Almost half of suburban districts serve a student body where more than 55% of students are included in at least one of the state's *unduplicated student subgroups* (English Learners, students eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program, and foster youth) resulting in additional state funding to support student needs.<sup>xii</sup> But, the needs of students and thus the funding needs of districts, even in suburban districts, are often greater. In one-quarter of suburban districts, nearly 75% of all students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and in 15% of suburban districts the rates of student homelessness are more than double than the statewide rate, indicating financial hardship which may negatively impact student learning. Moreover, in about 10% of suburban districts, more than one-third of students are English Learners who may require extensive instructional resources.

The diversity of students in suburban districts is not limited to characteristics and needs, however, it is also reflected in the varied academic performance and educational outcomes measures. For elementary and middle school students, there are remarkable differences in the percent of students who meet or exceed standards on the CAASPP. For high school students, participation in college-preparatory courses also differs across suburban districts. Fewer than 20% of high school graduates in some suburban districts complete the course requirements necessary for admission to CSU or UC or participate in AP test-taking. Due in part to the varied levels of academic preparedness, the college enrollment patterns of high school graduates also differ dramatically across suburban districts from a mere 17% to over 90% of graduates.

If we intend to improve educational outcomes in our state, then we must attend to the needs and outcomes of all students. For years, attention has been directed to the students, schools, and communities with the most perceived need. Yet, our perceptions of where need resides may well be poorly conceived. In fact, our outdated perceptions of suburban America may result in unintentional neglect of the over 2.6 million students living in suburban areas. This report unmasks the diversity of California's suburban school districts and upends prior notions of homogeneity and affluence held by some. As we strive to improve, we must lay aside our preconceived ideas and carefully examine the diversity in all of our school districts – urban, rural and suburban alike.

## ENDNOTES and REFERENCES

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- <sup>vi</sup> Gill, Posamentier & Hill, 2016
- <sup>vii</sup> Gill, Posamentier & Hill, 2016
- <sup>viii</sup> Diamond, Posey-Maddox & Velázquez, 2020
- Mitchell, C. (2021, January 26). Suburban schools have changed drastically. Our understanding of them has not. *Education Week*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/suburban-schools-have-changed-drastically-our-understanding-of-them-has-not/2021/01>
- <sup>ix</sup> Eight suburban districts reported enrollment ranging from 37 to 620 students in grades 10 through 12, but none of these students took AP tests in 2019. Five of these districts were elementary school districts and three were unified school districts. In some cases, elementary school districts run small secondary school programs or authorize charter schools that serve secondary grade levels.
- <sup>x</sup> Nine suburban districts reported between 31 and 1529 high school graduates in 2019, but less than 1% of graduates were A-G eligible upon graduation. Four of these districts were elementary school districts and four were unified school districts.
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/most-diverse-states>  
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-09-10/california-is-the-most-diverse-state-in-the-us>
- <sup>xii</sup> For more information on California's Local Control Funding Formula see: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp>