

## Press Clippings 10/31/20 to 11/02/20

---Daily Herald--- 11/02/2020

### Few districts try to solve inequity

By: Tara García Mathewson



Elgin Area School District U-46 is among 53 large school districts nationwide that spend less state and local money on high-poverty schools than on lower-poverty schools.

Nationwide, few school districts have made changes to deal with the inequities laid bare by new data on per-school spending that a federal law required them to release this year. But Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland, is well on its way — and it's paying close attention to how spending is tied to student outcomes.

For many who advocated for this financial reporting requirement in the first place, making the connection between resources and results is the whole point of teasing out per-student spending by school.

A Hechinger Report analysis found 53 districts across the United States that spent a statistically significant amount less state and local money on high-poverty schools than on lower-poverty schools.

**Elgin Area School District U-46** and West Aurora School District 129 both fall into that category.

The analysis found another 263 districts where spending on each school had little to no connection to the number of students in poverty. Hechinger examined state and local spending by school in nearly 700 districts (those with 15 or more schools) from 40 states that made the data available.

“The end goal is taking this opportunity to leverage our dollars to get the greatest outcome for our students,” said Marguerite Roza, the economist at Georgetown University.

Montgomery County Public Schools hired an educational consulting firm to do a financial audit in advance of the federal reporting deadline. The firm found the district spends more on its higher-poverty schools, but it also identified inequities: Overall, Montgomery County's high-poverty schools perform worse, and Black and Latino students from low-income homes perform particularly poorly. In exploring what might contribute to these results, the district

found, among other things, that it concentrates its novice teachers and principals in higher-needs schools.

Diego Uriburu, executive director of Identity, a nonprofit in Montgomery County that serves Latino youths and families and that has teamed up with the NAACP of Montgomery County to lead the newly formed Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence, said the findings were not necessarily surprising, but that it was striking to see the data so clearly.

“We as Black and Brown folks have always felt it was hard for us to prove our points because we could only speak about our experience and anecdotes, but then suddenly there was the data that was clearly saying what we have been experiencing,” he said.

Jack Smith, the superintendent, came to the district with the explicit goal of improving educational equity. He knew Montgomery County had a long history of high performance for most students, but not all of them. The work he has overseen to root out inequities has caused some angst among families for whom the status quo was working well.

“There’s a belief somehow, always, that if someone gets something, I must be losing something,” Smith said.

He has worked to dispel that notion and win more support for the idea that improving performance for all students is in the best interests of the entire community.

Budgetary uncertainty thanks to the coronavirus pandemic will leave Montgomery County Public Schools with fewer resources to do things like create new incentives to get more experienced teachers into high-needs schools. But Smith said there’s no reason to “sit on our hands and do nothing.”

“We’re not in a position to do a major incentive program across all 135 elementary schools, but we can start,” he said.

In some districts that have tried to shift their spending, keeping up the momentum can be difficult. Rochester, New York, offers a lesson in how hard it can be not only to make major changes but to make them permanent. Jean-Claude Brizard took over as superintendent of the Rochester City Schools in 2008. (He is now a senior adviser and deputy director at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the many funders of The Hechinger Report.) Soon after he started, he hired a consulting firm to follow the dollars in his district and identify inequities, which, it turns out, were striking.

“We saw schools of similar size, similar demographics, but one school got 50 percent more per pupil,” Brizard said.

The budgeting system in Rochester until that point was one in which well-connected principals could advocate for more money for their schools. Brizard wanted to change that. He started out by sharing the data internally and then held community meetings where he aimed to spur enough demand for change that the district would be able to justify going

against the wishes of the small but vocal populations that had gotten more than their fair share of district spending.

Brizard orchestrated a three-year transition to a student-based funding formula that clearly laid out how much money schools would get for students with different needs. But when Brizard left the district in 2011, just after the new funding formula was fully in place, he said a group of affluent, mostly white parents succeeded in lobbying the school board to dismantle the new system.

“The board is often elected by a handful of people, and they will respond to that pressure,” Brizard said. His current work focuses on coalition-building across communities, which he says can help overcome pushback. “When you have a community that is galvanized around these equity issues, it brings the stakes beyond a single protagonist.”

In some cases, funding decisions have been taken out of the hands of school districts.

A lawsuit brought by the ACLU of Southern California forced the Los Angeles Unified School District to revise its methods of allocating spending among schools. California distributes \$6.1 billion through its Local Control Funding Formula, a portion of which is set aside for foster youths, English learners and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The ACLU argued the money wasn’t being directed to the right students, and LAUSD settled, giving \$151 million to a group of schools that had been shortchanged and revising its spending patterns moving forward.

While the equity battles in Montgomery County, Rochester and Los Angeles have all played out differently, they share one common thread: clear data. In Montgomery County and Rochester, district leaders produced their own analyses and shared the data with the public. In California, outside researchers tracked the state dollars to the school level and gave advocacy groups a smoking gun.

U-46 instituted a flurry of equity-minded initiatives last school year, but according to the latest state data, released Friday, the district still spends fewer state and local dollars on its higher-poverty schools.

“With this second year of data in mind, we will work to be more deliberate about addressing school funding decisions as we develop our Fiscal Year 2022 budget,” Superintendent Tony Sanders said in a written statement.

In West Aurora District 129, the funding disparities have gone largely unremarked upon. Angie Smith, assistant superintendent for operations, said there are no plans to redistribute funds because district leaders believe the spending differences are justified. She pointed to some schools’ transportation costs, more expensive staffing in smaller schools and the costs of specialized programs as reasons for the district’s spending patterns.

But in Montgomery County, Uriburu believes this latest push for equity might truly result in long-term changes for the district and its students. District administrators are committed, as is the school board, and even the county government has embarked on an equity mission for

the broader community. And, of course, there is the coalition. Uriburu said this is the first time the Black and Latino communities have teamed up to advocate for better schools, and they are very clear about their right to make demands.

“By bringing the Black and Brown communities together, we make up 54 percent of the student body of Montgomery County Public Schools,” Uriburu said. “It’s a different ballgame.”

- This story about school funding disparities was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for Hechinger’s newsletter at [hechingerreport.org](http://hechingerreport.org).

### **---The Courier-News--- 11/01/2020**

## **Parents of U-46 special needs students say their kids are suffering not in school**

**By: Karie Angell Luc**



Jacob Teas, 8, an Elgin third-grader with severe ADHD, buries his head in the couch, not wanting to participate in a remote online learning session. His mother, Samantha, works with his teacher in the meantime on the laptop. (Karie Angell Luc/Elgin Courier News )

Remote learning is causing a lot of stress for those in School District U-46, including Superintendent Tony Sanders.

Sanders sent a Tweet earlier this month expressing how difficult it is to know people want him fired because they’re frustrated the district has returned to in-person classes.

“I deleted my Tweet,” said Sanders, who’s also received emails from angry employees and parents asking him also to resign.

“The point that I was trying to get across was missed,” Sanders said. “People saw that line and started replying based solely on that, kicking off this, ‘Oh, poor Tony.’ And that wasn’t the intent.

“It was intended to note that I’m so grateful to have built a network of colleagues from across the country who are facing similar issues,” said Sanders, who acknowledged he posted it after a “rough day.”



“This is hard on everybody,” Sanders said. “This isn’t just me.”

But the tweet infuriated Traci Wiberg, of Bartlett, the mother of 10-year-old Emric Wiberg-Treutler, a fourth-grader with autism, ADD/ADHD and a mood disorder. Remote learning has been extremely difficult for him, she said.

“(Sanders’ action) was totally irresponsible and makes me mad,” Wiberg said, who has attended in rallies calling for the district to implement a hybrid schedule in which students return to school part-time. “He should be ashamed of himself.”

Wiberg said a return to in-person learning may be too late because Emric, who is high-functioning but prone to outbursts, has required on-and-off hospitalization for the stress he’s been feeling.

“This is the second time in less than six months I’m putting my son in the hospital,” Wiberg said.

“It’s child abuse, hands down,” she said. “I think the superintendent needs to be fired. I think the school board needs to be fired.”

To make the situation worse, an Oct. 6 residential fire forced the family to move to a Schaumburg hotel. No one was seriously injured, Wiberg said, but the blaze did destroy Emric’s toys.

“It’s pretty much a total loss,” Wiberg said.

Because they can’t afford the specialized day care needed for her son’s disabilities, she had to leave her job as an office administrator. Her unemployment benefits ran out more than a month ago.

“There’s no money coming in,” she said. “When it rains, it pours.”

Therapist Kim Nygaard, an East Dundee licensed clinical professional counselor, conducted family therapy sessions with Emric.

“There has to be an alternative for special needs,” Nygaard said. “These kids are struggling.”

Sanders agrees. “Special education is our first focus for getting kids back into buildings,” he said.

The district has a plan to bring students back but it’s been postponed until November because of the surge in COVID-19 cases in Kane and Cook counties, which has led to a ban on indoor dining in both. Last week, one testing site in Elgin reported a positivity rate of 28%; the rate must be 6.5% or lower for restaurants and bars to reopen.

Elgin resident Samantha Teas, mother of an 8-year-old second-grader with special needs, said she received a letter earlier this month saying Jacob would start in-person classes two days a week Oct. 29. That return date is now pushed back to November.

Remote learning is too much for her son, who has severe ADHD with sensory and delay challenges, Teas said. There have been times when Jacob sprawls on the hard wood floor or hurls himself into the couch in an effort to avoid the laptop computer on the coffee table.

“He fights me the entire time,” Teas said. “Zoom sets him off. ... (He) tends to have meltdowns.”

During online learning, Jacob will abandon the computer to come into the kitchen and plead for chocolate Twinkie snacks or he’ll distract himself with the family’s German shepherd puppy or pet corn snake, she said. He also has two African clawed frogs.

“A lot of times when he’s doing his classes, he’s got the snake on him, the snake offers pressure, which he likes,” Teas said. Pets are “therapy. It just helps him, these are his school buddies.”

Teas saw Sanders’ tweet but said she doesn’t want him fired.

“I like that he shows his human side,” she said. “This is not a position I would want.”

Karie Angell Luc is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.

**---Daily Herald--- 11/01/2020**

## **Even within the same district, some wealthy schools get millions more than poor ones**

**By: Tara García Mathewson**



"Budgets speak to where priorities lie," said Traci Ellis, a former Elgin Area School District U-46 board member and now an administrator at the Illinois Math and Science Academy in Aurora. She is at Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin, which is named for her father and is allocated \$9,094 per student, compared to \$10,559 at Centennial Elementary School in Bartlett. Paul Valade | Staff

Photographer



"That's a problem. Who could argue that it's not?" Elgin Councilman Corey Dixon said of new data showing funding disparities among schools in Elgin Area School District U-46. Courtesy of Corey Dixon/2017



The Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin. Paul Valade | Staff Photographer



Elgin Area School District U-46 headquarters in Elgin. Paul Valade | Staff Photographer



"We are inequitable. And we are working on that," said Tony Sanders, superintendent of Elgin Area School District U-46. Brian Hill | Staff Photographer/2019

At Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin, none of the third graders could read and write at grade level, according to state tests in 2019. Nearly 90% of the students are considered low-income and nearly three-quarters are labeled English learners, meaning that the state language arts test assesses their reading and writing ability in a language they're still trying to learn.

Nine miles away sits Centennial Elementary School in Bartlett, where 73% of third graders met grade-level standards on that same test. A fifth of Centennial's student body is considered low-income, and 17% get extra support as they learn English.

The state has celebrated Centennial for "exemplary academic performance." It designates O'Neal as a school in need of targeted assistance.

But despite its low performance and its students' needs, O'Neal received \$9,094 per student in 2019 in state and local funding compared to Centennial's \$10,559. If O'Neal had received Centennial's per-pupil funding, it would have meant an extra \$789,905 in its budget: Money that could have covered more -- or more experienced -- teachers, social workers or home-school liaisons, or paid for new programs to address students' academic and nonacademic needs.

While wealthier school districts routinely spend significantly more money to run their public schools, the disparity between Centennial and O'Neal can't be attributed to the relative wealth in their communities. Both schools are part of a single district, Elgin Area School District U-46, Illinois' second largest.

## Interactive

**SPENDING DISPARITIES:** Look up a district to see how spending correlates with the percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged. A dotted line indicates a weak correlation, while a solid line indicates a moderate to strong correlation. No line means the correlation was too weak to be considered significant.

**DATA:** State and local per-pupil expenditures taken from all states' reports, with the exception of Maine, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio and Oregon, which made only combined federal, state and local data available. States use different definitions for economically disadvantaged students, so take care when comparing districts across states. Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Wyoming provide data on the percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch by school. Exact eligibility percentages are suppressed for schools above 90% eligible in Minnesota. Data are from the 2018-19 academic year for all states except Nevada, for which 2017-18 data were the most recent available at the time of publication.

Kids who need more support to overcome barriers to academic achievement are routinely shortchanged. U-46 was one of 53 districts across the United States that spent a statistically significant amount less state and local money on high-poverty schools than on lower-poverty schools, according to a new Hechinger Report analysis of how districts disburse funding. In

another 263 districts, the level of spending on each school had little or no connection to the number of students in poverty, despite the higher needs often present in low-income schools. It's the first time this kind of data has been compiled and analyzed nationally, and some of the spending gaps are extreme.

Until this year, funding disparities between schools in the same district were hard to identify. Most districts didn't budget in a way that allowed comparisons of school-level spending. They reported only districtwide averages, making disparities across districts the primary fodder for conversations about educational inequities. Now, a federal financial reporting requirement has taken effect, demanding that states report per-student spending by school -- just as they report student performance by school -- and forcing transparency about disparate spending inside district lines.

Hechinger's analysis of state and local spending by school included nearly 700 districts (those with 15 or more schools) from 40 states that made the data available. The data was from the 2018-19 academic year, with the exception of Nevada, which has released only the data from 2017-18. Additionally, five states -- Maine, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio and Oregon -- reported combined federal, state and local spending. The analysis focused on state and local spending because federal dollars are explicitly intended to supplement district budgets, rather than provide an alternative revenue stream. Districts that use the federal dollars to equalize their spending violate federal policy.

Hechinger's analysis found multimillion-dollar funding disparities between schools in the same communities. A lot of factors affect school-level spending, but a handful of district practices routinely drive these disparities. Schools with the wealthiest students tend to draw the most experienced teachers, who cost more. And because small schools cost more to operate without economies of scale, districts that happen to have more of these schools in higher-income areas might end up spending more on wealthier kids. Magnet programs that often serve wealthier student populations drive up spending, both because they are generally small schools and because they frequently get extra funding to support specialized programming.

Marguerite Roza, an economist at Georgetown University and the director of its Edunomics Lab, has studied how spending choices play out in district budgets.

"Those are very much district choices, but districts would say, 'What? We never made an intentional decision to give more money to the wealthier schools,'" Roza said.

The enrollment and staffing patterns that district leaders allow can have a major impact on children's outcomes. Magnet schools tend to skim districts' highest-performing kids and most engaged families, pulling them from elsewhere in a district where they might contribute to building stronger schools. Teachers with more than five years of experience tend to be more effective and more likely to stay in the field for the long term, boosting student performance in schools where they dominate the teaching force. And small schools tend to offer more attention to individual students, giving their populations a better school experience, overall.



Centennial Elementary School in Bartlett was allocated \$10,559 per student in state and local funding last year, compared to \$9,094 per student at Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin, even though both are in Elgin Area School District U-46. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

In Elgin, where Ronald D. O'Neal is located, the median household value is nearly \$100,000 less than in Bartlett, where Centennial is. The poverty rate is three times higher. Elgin City Councilman Corey Dixon was born in Elgin and graduated from U-46. He had no idea an elementary school his constituents attend was getting so much less in per-pupil funding than a school in a wealthier portion of the same district. But he's not surprised.

He has long taken issue with the "broken" way our country finances its schools: primarily with local property taxes that unfairly benefit students from wealthy communities, which are often also majority white because of the U.S.'s long history of segregation and racist policies. Sixty-five percent of Centennial's students are white. Five percent of O'Neal's are -- the vast majority, 85%, are Latino. Dixon has three daughters in the district. He is Black and has always known that students who look like his own children are on the losing end of glaring achievement gaps nationwide. Now he sees they're the victims of school funding disparities within individual districts, too.



"That's a problem. Who could argue that it's not?" Elgin Councilman Corey Dixon said of new data showing funding disparities among schools in Elgin Area School District U-46. - Courtesy of Corey Dixon

"That's broken," Dixon said. "That's a problem. Who could argue that it's not?"

Besides basic ideas about fairness, spending inequities are a problem because having more money matters when it's used well. Although researchers -- and elected officials -- have debated the value of increased educational funding, new evidence suggests that when schools serving low-income students do spend additional money in key ways, they greatly boost student success.



Rucker Johnson, an economist at the University of California, Berkeley, and his team have drawn a line from per-student spending to better standardized test scores and graduation rates, findings they think bolster the argument that more money makes a difference. "At every stage, higher spending led to significant increases in student outcomes and narrowing of achievement gaps by race and poverty status," Johnson said his forthcoming paper will show.

In Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300, Superintendent Frederick Heid has prioritized school-level spending as a route to educational equity since he took over the position six years ago. Beyond the needs of kids from low-income homes, Heid said the district allocates extra money to schools serving large populations of students with disabilities and students who are still learning English. The district also provides more funding to schools with preschool programs and to a pilot program for students with four or more "adverse childhood experiences," including exposure to abuse, neglect and household dysfunction.

"It does result in different funding amounts going to different schools, but we believe that is the best way to get to equity for our students," Heid said.

Still, even in a district with such explicit spending priorities, inequities between individual schools remain. Golfview Elementary School in Carpentersville, for example, serves about 550 students, 86% of whom are considered low-income, 69% of whom are English learners and about 13% of whom get special education services. Algonquin Lakes Elementary School in Algonquin serves about 425 students, with less than half its students in poverty, less than one-fifth English learners and about the same proportion in special education. Yet, Algonquin Lakes gets more than \$2,000 more per-pupil than Golfview.

Susan Harkin, District 300's chief operating officer, said this can largely be attributed to Golfview Elementary School's early career teaching force and Algonquin Lakes' shrinking special education population.

District leaders around the country have had a reckoning over the last year as they prepared and reported their per-school spending data to the state for the first time because of the new federal requirement. The transparency mandate was tucked into the 2015 update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act but didn't require states to report that data until June 30 of this year.



"We are inequitable. And we are working on that," said Tony Sanders, superintendent of Elgin Area School District U-46. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer/2019



Some districts have defended spending less on higher-poverty schools. Certain special education programs can drive up costs, for example. In U-46, Superintendent Tony Sanders also pointed to costs associated with special education services as a reason that some schools in higher-income communities end up becoming the most expensive.

But he doesn't let his district off the hook entirely.

"We are inequitable," Sanders said. "And we are working on that."

This past year, with extra money from the state thanks to a revised funding formula, U-46 placed more assistant principals in its high-poverty schools. It also reduced class sizes in the early elementary grades in some of those buildings and bought more mobile devices for schools that didn't yet have enough for every student. And Sanders said administrators are brainstorming ways to spread out access to the district's best teachers, perhaps virtually, so that students get more opportunities than the ones available to them in their assigned neighborhood schools.

In U-46, the financial data has been tucked into the online state report cards -- in a tab labeled District Environment -- since last October, but conversations about it have mainly been among school officials.

Traci Ellis is a former U-46 school board member, Elgin native, and chief human resources and equity officer and chief legal officer at the Illinois Math and Science Academy in Aurora. The Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School is named for her father, a longtime educator in U-46. While she no longer lives in Elgin, she has made educational equity her life's work, and she was disappointed to learn of U-46's spending trend. The district's slogan is "academic success for all," and a frequent tagline is "all means all."

"Budgets speak to where priorities lie, and if the district is going to have equity as a priority, and it says that it does, then we should be able to see that borne out in how it spends money," Ellis said.

Disheartening as U-46's first-year data is, along with the knowledge that similar spending trends exist all over the country, Ellis sees a silver lining: "So many of the problems in school districts with respect to resolving equity issues require some outside third-party intervention," she said. "This is not one of them. ... It does not require laws changing and getting legislators to understand that schools need more money."

Districts already have the power to reshape their own budgets. They just have to muster the will to do so.

After a flurry of equity-minded initiatives last school year, Sanders had hoped the district's spending trend would be different in the 2020 update to the state report cards. The changes weren't enough, and according to the latest state data, released Friday, U-46 still spends fewer state and local dollars on its higher-poverty schools, overall. Sanders said in a written statement that the district is disappointed its investments last year didn't change its spending trend.

"With this second year of data in mind, we will work to be more deliberate about addressing school funding decisions as we develop our Fiscal Year 2022 budget," he said. Ellis and Dixon, the city councilman, will be among those watching.

- This story about school funding disparities was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for Hechinger's newsletter at [hechingerreport.org](https://hechingerreport.org).

**---Daily Herald--- 10/31/2020**

## **State school report cards different this year, too**

**By: Madhu Krishnamurthy**



Lisle resident Sara Sadat oversees her children's e-learning work last spring at their home during COVID-19 school shutdown. Due to pandemic disruptions, the 2020 Illinois School Report Cards released Friday does not include reliable data for the 2019-2020 school year.



Due to pandemic disruptions last school year, the 2020 Illinois School Report Card released Friday does not include reliable accountability data, so schools get largely the same ratings.

The protracted coronavirus pandemic not only has disrupted schools and students in an unprecedented manner, but it's also made it difficult for educators to measure student growth from the previous school year.

The 2020 Illinois Report Card released Friday for the first time does not include comprehensive or reliable data on assessments, student/teacher attendance or graduation rates. Nor does it have designations for schools to indicate overall performance or percentages of low-income students, among other accountability metrics for the 2019-20 school year.

A statewide school shutdown last spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic made most student data from the 2019-20 school year either unavailable or incomplete, limiting year-to-year comparisons.

Illinois received a federal waiver and did not administer otherwise mandated state assessments in math, English language arts and science last spring. The state amended graduation requirements for students who matriculated last spring, and schools were urged to amend grading policies for ninth-graders on track. Illinois schools also weren't required to administer the annual culture and climate survey last school year.

The federal waiver allowed the state to not issue new summative designations, which indicate schools' level of performance. Each school received the same summative designation in 2020 as in 2019 with a name change. The "lowest-performing" designation now is labeled "comprehensive" and "underperforming" is now "targeted" to show the level of support each school will receive through the state's IL-EMPOWER program.

That essentially preserves the status quo for schools so they won't be penalized for a decline in student performance or participation caused by adjusting to a new remote learning environment.

"Everybody kind of got frozen where they were," said Fred Heid, superintendent of Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300. "It's hard enough to improve math and reading proficiency in a normal year. Now, when you are trying to do it remotely ... for all schools, it's important that they froze things to the extent that they could. Really we will get a better indicator (of student growth) at the end of this year depending on what will happen with testing."

The 2020 report card includes the second year of per-pupil spending broken down by school compared to the previous year, and for the first time, data from the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey results measuring students' developmental readiness in the first 40 days of kindergarten is included.

Advanced coursework is among the few areas on the 2020 report card not affected by the pandemic. The data show growth and higher-than-ever participation among high schoolers in college and career preparation courses.

More than 8,000 additional high school students took career and technical education, dual credit, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses in the 2019-20 school year compared to the year before. Students last year took more than 14,500 more AP exams in high school than in the previous school year and earned a 70% pass rate — two percentage points higher than the Class of 2019.

High school students also took about 70,000 dual-credit courses last school year — an increase of about 6,000 courses from the year before — and about 1,500 more students took career and technical education courses.

“These advanced courses offer opportunities for students to earn college credits in high school, making earning a degree more affordable or allowing students to take more advanced or elective courses in college,” State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said.

Ayala said state budgets for the 2020 and 2021 fiscal years included funding for fee waivers to reduce the cost of AP exams for low-income students. The state board of education’s state plan for career and technical education also will help increase access to college and career preparation courses for historically underrepresented students.

At **Elgin Area School District U-46**, the state’s second-largest school system, 2,995 students took AP classes last school year across all five district high schools. Officials said the district saw an increase in students taking AP exams, even remotely, and partly attributed that to the dual language program offering an AP Spanish language test.

Officials also noted growth in the number of students taking CTE courses, specifically automotive and welding, which are accredited courses that come with industry certification.

“We are extremely proud of the work that our students have, especially in these times of uncertainty and a lot of challenges,” said Josh Carpenter, U-46 assistant superintendent for teaching and learning.

“We’re excited about the results that we’ve seen. It is extremely hard to be able to quantify the growth that our students have made over the past eight months. I would probably have an easier time trying to qualify it. ... Our students and our staff have really grown exponentially in ways that we probably can’t sum up in a number.