



# **NORTHWEST INDIANA COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT: FINDINGS**

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## Executive Summary

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Northwest Indiana (NWI) has undergone much transition in the last five decades. As the region re-establishes its local economy, a college and career ready workforce will be essential. In a region with high poverty and unemployment rates, meeting the social, emotional and educational needs of low-income families and children is especially critical to its resurgence and stability. Thus, for those seeking to become involved and contribute to solutions that respond to the region's educational and community needs, gathering accurate information representative of the needs of a community is an essential foundation to not only understand current situations, but also assess historical context and existing assets. Moreover, understanding how community residents experience school choice across the educational choice spectrum is vital to properly address educational needs given that the Indiana touts school choice through various programs and policies, including the largest state voucher program, a tax credit scholarship, and an open enrollment policy that allows for students to transfer to a public school of choice.

A comprehensive needs assessment is a first step in assessing the educational needs and opportunities in a community. For this reason, EduDream was commissioned to conduct a community needs assessment in the NWI region, defined by the following communities: East Chicago, Gary, Griffith, Hammond, Highland, Lake Station, Merrillville, Munster, and Whiting. Key findings emerged from data collection and analysis of publicly available datasets, interviews with community leaders and focus groups with parents and teachers. This report begins with an overview of the region's population and demographics, social and economic conditions, and health outcomes. Next, we present education quality and access across the spectrum of schools (i.e., public, charter and private), highlighting Catholic schools.

This report also provides an in-depth examination of community context and the most pressing educational needs and challenges of three NWI cities –East Chicago, Gary, and Hammond. While these three communities have overlapping assets and challenges, they also possess a distinct history, local economy and social fabric. This report will be a valuable resource to inform strategic planning and thoughtful programming geared toward ultimately improving access to and quality of educational opportunities for children and families in the region.

Below we present key takeaways regarding the social and economic conditions in the region based on analysis of publicly available data. We follow with a table summarizing community assets, educational needs, and community challenges in the three NWI cities profiled in case studies in the full report.

## *Northwest Indiana Overview: Key Takeaways*

- Since 2000, the total **population** of Northwest Indiana has declined by 3.8 percent. In 2016, Hammond and Gary were the most populated communities in the region, although they have experienced a nearly 5 percent drop since 2010. Only Merrillville saw small growth in its population between 2010 and 2016.
- Although the region is shifting to an **older age group**, East Chicago, Hammond, Lake Station and Merrillville have a **greater proportion of school-age** children than the region overall.
- NWI has become increasingly diverse; however, there is significant variation in racial and ethnic composition of residents across the nine communities.
- While the 113,900 households in NWI are majority family households (64.3%), there is variation across the nine communities: East Chicago and Gary have the highest percentage of **female-headed households** (nearly 30%) while Highland and Munster have the lowest (10.8% and 11.7%, respectively).
- There is also significant variation in **median household income** among NWI communities, ranging from a minimum of \$27,264 to a maximum of just above \$70,000.
- Six of the nine NWI communities have **poverty rates** higher than the state average of 15 percent. Seven of the nine NWI communities have unemployment rates higher than the state average of 6.9 percent.
- NWI trails the state in the **percent of residents with an Associate's degree or higher** (25% compared to 33%). East Chicago and Lake Station have the lowest percentage of adults in NWI with at least an Associate's degree (14%). In contrast, over 50% of the adult population in Munster hold a college degree.
- Lake Station, East Chicago and Hammond have the highest rates of **children without health insurance**, and Gary has the highest rate of **low-birth babies**.

## ***Northwest Indiana Educational Landscape: Key Takeaways***

- There were 106 schools in NWI enrolling over 56,000 students in Prek through 12<sup>th</sup> grade: 76 traditional public schools, 12 charter, 10 Catholic, and 8 private.
- Charter schools are significantly more likely to serve Black and low-income students.
- Catholic schools are more likely to serve Hispanic students. About half of students enrolled in Catholic schools are Hispanic.
- Based on school quality ratings, some communities such as East Chicago and Gary have very limited access to high quality schools. If families in these communities want their children to attend a higher quality school, they will have to travel to other communities, and that may not be an option for some.
- High school graduation rates in NWI ranged from a low of 39.6% to a high of 99.2% in 2017-18.
- Among high school graduates in the NWI communities, college enrollment rates range from a high of 90% to a low of 20%.
- Overall, 10 of the 23 high schools in the region had graduation rates below the state average. Yet, some of the highest performing schools are located in Gary and Hammond; in these schools, more than 90% of students graduated in four years.
- Among high school graduates in the NWI communities, college enrollment rates range from a high of 90% to a low of 20%.

## Overview of Case Studies

	City of East Chicago	City of Gary	City of Hammond
<b>Population and demographics</b>	28,418 38% Black, 54% Hispanic 32% Children under 18	76,424 81.5% Black, 5.6% Hispanic 28% Children under 18	77,134 22% Black, 36% Hispanic 30% Children under 18
<b>Educational Landscape</b>	Student Enrollment: 5,600  10 Schools 7 public, 2 charters, 1 catholic  14.3% increase in public school enrollment since 2014	Student Enrollment: 13,740  28 Schools 17 public, 8 charters, 3 private  11% decrease in public school enrollment since 2014	Student Enrollment: 14,000  23 Schools 3 catholic, 1 charter, 1 private  4% increase in public school enrollment since 2014
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	High school graduation rate: 59.6%  College enrollment rate: 53.0%	High school graduation rate: 89.6%  College enrollment rate: 47.0%	High school graduation rate: 76.9%  College enrollment rate: 54.0%
<b>Education Community Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foundation of East Chicago provides financial support and youth programming</li> <li>Boys and Girls Club provides afterschool care and out of school time programming</li> <li>Economic revitalization efforts to modernize the city and attract business and residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Food insecurity was described as prevalent and food banks are responding and providing meals for children and families</li> <li>Key nonprofits and foundations, including churches, are supporting community programming</li> <li>Residents feel a strong sense of community and ownership.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College access initiatives supported by local foundations and nonprofits</li> <li>Youth programming offered by nonprofits and traditional service organizations</li> <li>System of institutions of higher education and potential partnerships with the city's high schools</li> </ul>
<b>Educational Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social emotional learning (SEL), bullying, and suicide</li> <li>Increasing parental involvement and support for working families</li> <li>Concerns over student discipline policies and approaches (i.e. reliance on out-of-school suspension)</li> <li>Support for teachers to implement response to interventions for students</li> <li>Enhancing student enrichment and extra-curricular activities offered by schools</li> <li>Declining high school graduation rates (59.6%) and low educational attainment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mental health services, counseling, and serving high percentage of students with emotional disabilities</li> <li>Converting schools into community hubs for parents to access resources and adult educational programming to increase parent involvement.</li> <li>Exposing students to college readiness before high school, and ensuring a college readiness aligned curriculum across all school levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College access and success programs to better prepare high school graduates for college</li> <li>Increasing parental involvement and support for working families</li> <li>Resources to better serve catholic school students, including more enrichment, summer school programs, tutoring, peer mentors, and access to technology</li> </ul>
<b>Community Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited transportation options pose barriers for families seeking quality schools or the school voucher program</li> <li>Limited awareness of school programs and opportunities</li> <li>High levels of lead contamination have forced families to relocate and a local school to close</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited transportation options pose barrier to employment and use of the ICS program</li> <li>High poverty, including food deserts, food insecurity, child obesity, high crime rates, and transient families</li> <li>Limited economic development results in low tax revenue for the city and schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to no cross-collaboration or partnerships among local organizations</li> <li>School and city leadership has not evolved to meet the needs of a changing community demographic</li> <li>Perceived community isolation from the region and rest of the state has led to limited resources</li> </ul>



## Introduction

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Like other Rust Belt cities, such as Detroit and Cleveland, Northwest Indiana (NWI) is a region that has undergone much transition in the last five decades. Once densely populated with community members in good paying manufacturing and steel industry jobs, today NWI continues to feel the effects of mass business exodus, high unemployment rates, and demographic shifts. As the region works to re-establish its local economy, it will need a college and career ready workforce. Preparing residents for the changing local economy begins with access to high-quality educational experiences, and resources that support the social, emotional, and economical needs of children and families. In a region with high poverty and unemployment rates, meeting the needs of low-income families and children is especially critical to its resurgence and stability.

Given that Indiana has the nation's largest statewide school voucher program (known as the Indiana Choice Scholarship program or ICS, in addition to the Indiana School Scholarship Tax Credit and an open enrollment policy that permits students to transfer from one public school to another within or outside their district, accessibility to school choices *should* abound for NWI residents. For those seeking to become involved and contribute to solutions that respond to the region's educational and community needs, gathering accurate information representative of the needs of a community is an essential foundation to not only understand current situations, but also assess historical context and existing assets. Moreover, understanding how community residents experience school choice across the educational choice spectrum is vital. A comprehensive needs assessment is a first step in assessing the educational needs and opportunities in a community. For this reason, EduDream was commissioned to conduct a community needs assessment in the NWI region, defined by the following communities: East Chicago, Gary, Griffith, Hammond, Highland, Lake Station, Merrillville, Munster, and Whiting. While this needs assessment examines education across the spectrum of schools (i.e., public, charter and private), it highlights Catholic schools.

This report presents findings from the community needs assessment, beginning with a description of changes in the nine cities' population, social and economic indicators, and educational landscape. Additionally, we introduce recent policy changes and their implications on school performance. In sidebars throughout the report, we highlight findings specific to Catholic schools. This report also includes case studies of three NWI communities—East Chicago, Hammond and Gary. Each case study provides community context and a holistic view of the most pressing educational needs and challenges. The case study findings, which were gleaned from secondary data and community perspectives, show that the three communities have overlapping assets and challenges, but also ones that are distinct to their history, local economy and social fabric. This report will be a valuable resource to inform strategic planning and thoughtful programming geared toward ultimately improving access to and quality of educational opportunities for children and families in the region.

## Research Design and Methodological Approach

### Exhibit 1. Community Needs Assessment Research Process



Using a research lens and systematic approach, the community needs assessments followed a five-phase process (See Exhibit 1). First, we gathered, cleaned and analyzed publicly available data (e.g. census, state education data files, etc.) to understand community demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including population trends, income and poverty, health and vital statistics, and education (e.g., quality of elementary and high schools, access to quality schools, college readiness, and postsecondary attainment). Data were synthesized and converted into visuals in regional and community level profiles (see Appendix C). Next, a structured prioritization process with explicitly defined criteria was used to identify three deep-divide communities.<sup>1</sup> We conducted an in-depth examination of the three focus communities—East Chicago, Gary and Hammond—through interviews and focus groups with community leaders, stakeholders and residents. Overall, the data collection and analysis were guided by a set of research questions (see Exhibit 2). For further details about the data sources, analytical approaches and research limitations, see Appendix A.

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<sup>1</sup> Criteria included the following: number of Catholic schools in the city, number of children under 14, poverty rate (%), and percent of schools with a D or F school quality rating.

## Exhibit 2. Research Questions Guiding Community Needs Assessment

### Research Questions

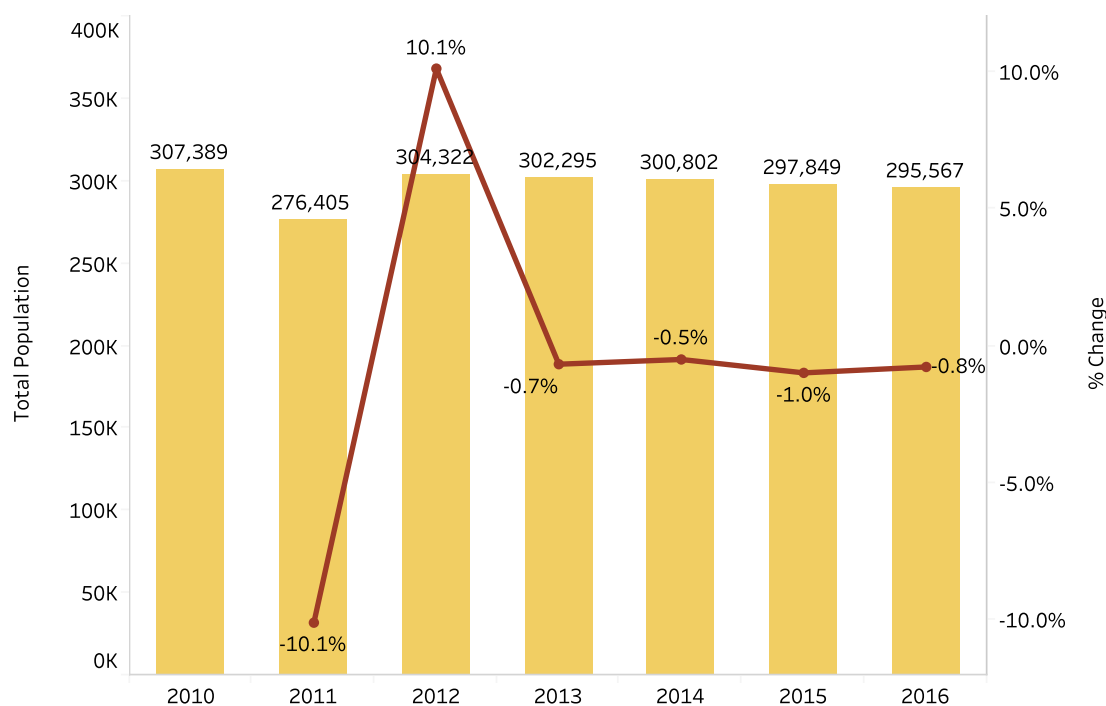
1. What are the current demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of target Northwest Indiana communities?
2. What are the educational needs of low-income children and families in Northwest Indiana, and what assets are available to meet needs?
  - a. In other words, how are children's educational needs currently being met? What educational institutions and organizations exist (i.e. public schools, charters, private Catholic, and private non-Catholic)? To what extent are low-income children able to access quality schools?
3. What current programs and practices exist to address the educational needs of low-income children in Northwest Indiana?
  - a. Are current practices demonstrating any progress or promising outcomes?
4. Who are the key NWI community leaders (e.g., university, business, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and foundations), and government agencies and liaisons working to address educational needs and access to quality education?
5. What are historical and emerging barriers to addressing the educational needs of low-income children in Northwest Indiana?
6. What strategies are community leaders and residents (i.e. stakeholders) currently implementing to address gaps in educational quality and access?

## Northwest Indiana Overview

To better understand Northwest Indiana, we began with an exploration of the region<sup>2</sup> by examining data and trends across three key topics — population and demographics, social and economic conditions, and health outcomes. We analyzed trends of corresponding metrics for these topics, and, for added context, compared the regional data to the state of Indiana and occasionally, the nation. Next, we examined publicly available education data (K-12 and postsecondary) to understand the educational landscape as well as educational options available for children in the region. Altogether, the findings presented in this section answer research question one and begin to lay the groundwork to address research question two.

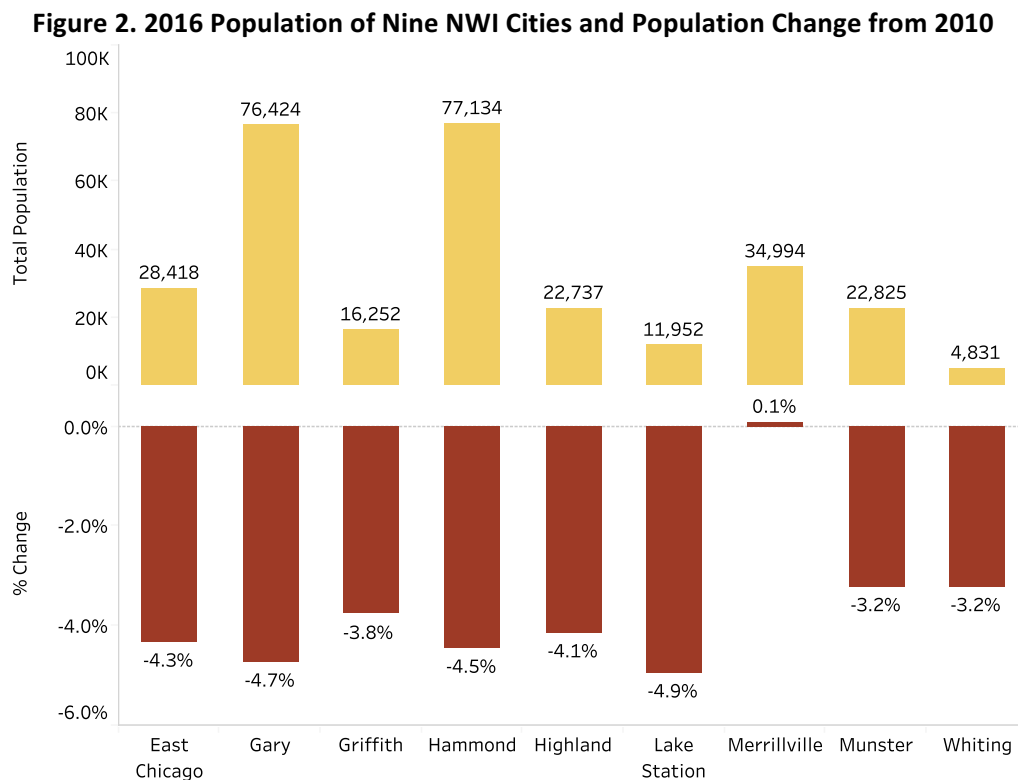
**Population.** Since 2000, the total population of Northwest Indiana has declined by 3.8 percent from 307,389 to 295,567 in 2016. However, a spike in population growth occurred between 2011 and 2012, with the population increasing by 27,917 people (or 10.1%), before stabilizing in 2013. Figure 1 below shows the population change between 2010 and 2016. The percent change in the population from the previous year is indicated by the line.

**Figure 1. NWI Change in Population, 2010-2016**



<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, unless specified otherwise, the NWI data reported encompasses the nine cities that are the focus of the community needs assessment.

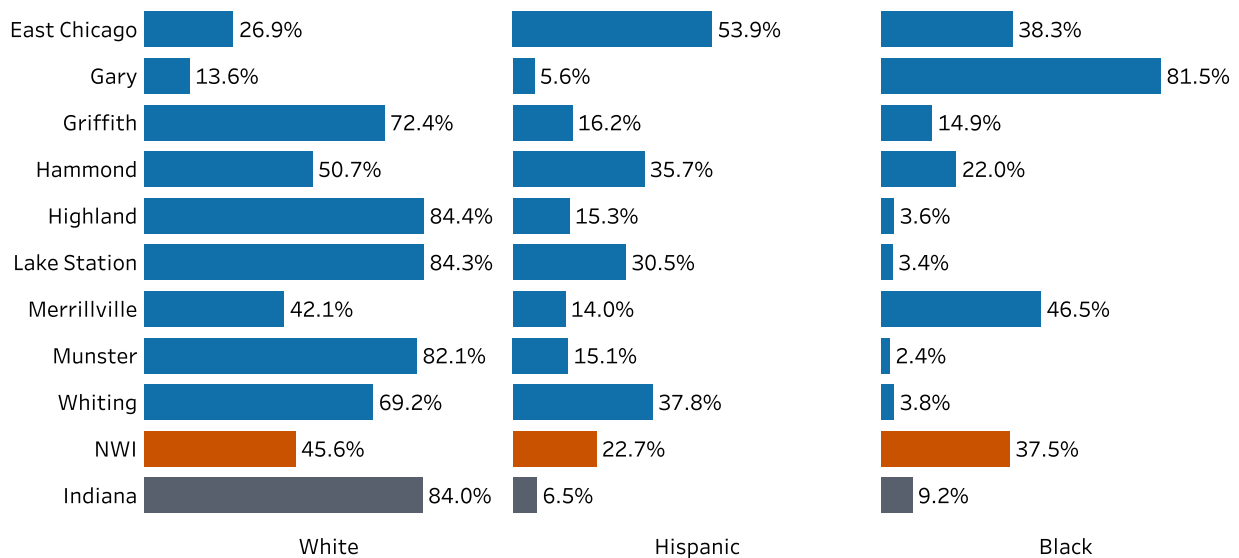
At the city level, only Merrillville saw small growth in its population between 2010 and 2016. Figure 2 below shows that, in 2016, Hammond and Gary were the most populated communities in the region, although they have experienced a nearly 5 percent drop since 2010. The smallest community is Whiting, with just under 5,000 residents.



**Demographics.** Northwest Indiana’s population has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. In 2016, about 46 percent of NWI residents identified as White; this represents a 5.8 percentage point decrease from 2010. Although the second largest racial group is Black/African-American (37.5%), the largest growth has been among the Hispanic population. Between 2010 and 2016, the Hispanic population increased 6 percentage points, and now represents almost a quarter of NWI residents. Comparing NWI to the state, the region is significantly more diverse, with four times as many Black residents and three times as many Hispanic residents.

There is significant variation in the racial and ethnic composition across the nine communities in NWI. As shown in Figure 3, four of the nine communities have minority populations at or above 50 percent. East Chicago is predominantly Hispanic (54%) while Gary is predominantly Black (81.5%). The minority population in Highland, Lake Station, and Munster is less than 15 percent.

**Figure 3. Race and Ethnicity of NWI Communities, 2016**

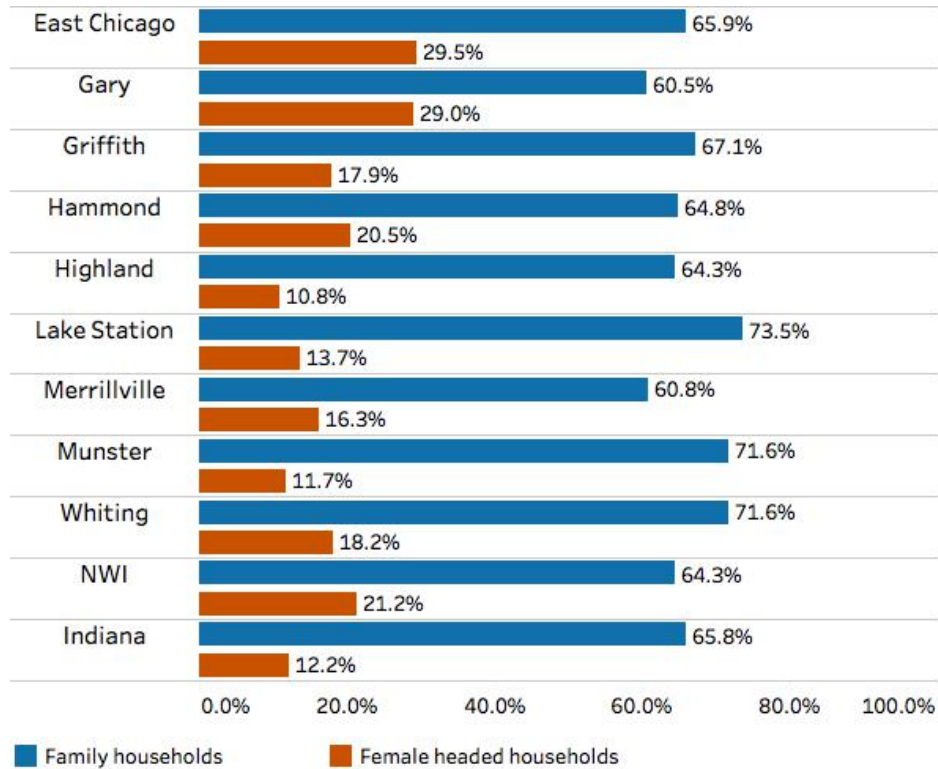


NWI is shifting to an older age group, similar to trends occurring in the state and nation. Seven of the nine communities have over half of residents ages 25 years or older. Munster and Highland have a slightly older population, with almost 20 percent of resident ages 65 and older. In 2016, roughly 21 percent of NWI's population was school-age (5-18 years). Four of the nine communities have a greater proportion of school-age children than the region as a whole: East Chicago, Hammond, Lake Station, and Merrillville. East Chicago, Griffith, and Whiting have a higher proportion of children under 5, at just above 8 percent.

**Social and Economic Conditions.** The families and communities in which children are born and raised heavily influence their future outcomes. Family composition is also strongly linked to a child's well-being<sup>3</sup>. For example, single mothers and fathers tend to face greater barriers to providing economic stability for their children. While the 113,900 households in NWI are majority family households (64.3%), there is variation across the nine communities, as shown in Figure 4. East Chicago and Gary have the highest percentage of female-headed households (nearly 30%) while Highland and Munster have the lowest (10.8% and 11.7%, respectively). Furthermore, many communities have households where grandparents are living with their grandchildren. Over 40 percent of households in six of the nine communities have grandparents directly responsible for the grandchild. Only Whiting and Griffith have under 20 percent. Although grandparents often are willing to care for the children in their families, they may face additional emotional and financial challenges in doing so.

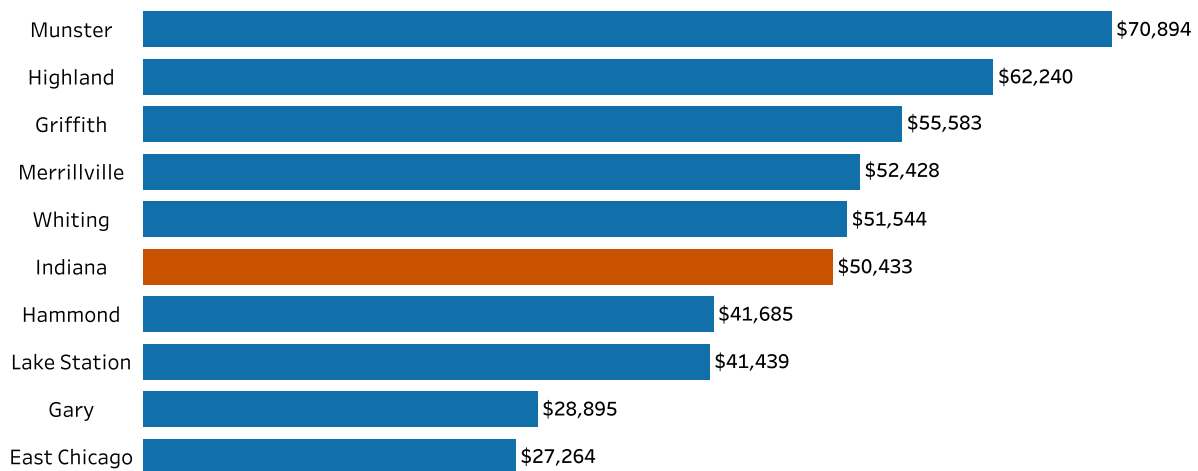
<sup>3</sup> Child Trends (2014). Family Structure. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=family-structure>

**Figure 4. Household and Family Composition in NWI Communities, 2016**



There is also significant variation in median household income among NWI communities, ranging from a minimum of \$27,264 to a maximum of just above \$70,000. Four of the nine communities have median household incomes less than the state average (see Figure 5). Indiana's median household income is nearly identical to that of Chicago (\$50,434). Gary and East Chicago have the lowest median household incomes, under \$30,000.

**Figure 5. Median Household Income in NWI Communities, 2016**



Unemployment and unaffordable housing are also closely associated with poverty and poor health. As with other metropolitan areas, rapid population shifts in NWI left poverty concentrated in the urban core. The poverty rate in the region is 22.5%, comparable to Chicago's poverty rate (21.7%). East Chicago and Gary have the highest poverty rates in NWI; over a third of the population had incomes below the poverty level. These communities also have the highest unemployment rates (see Table 1). Poverty rates range from a low of 7.6 percent in Highland to the highest of nearly 40 percent in Gary. Six of the nine NWI communities have poverty rates higher than the state average of 15 percent. Seven of the nine NWI communities have unemployment rates higher than the state average of 6.9 percent.

**Table 1. Poverty and Unemployment Rates in NWI Communities, 2016**

NWI Community	Poverty Rate (%) <sup>4</sup>	Unemployment Rate (%) <sup>5</sup>
East Chicago	35.3%	16.2%
Gary	35.9%	16.6%
Griffith	10.8%	8.4%
Hammond	23.4%	11.7%
Highland	7.6%	5.2%
Lake Station	24.2%	12.3%
Merrillville	15.3%	7.7%
Munster	8.3%	7.4%
Whiting	18.0%	6.2%
NWI	22.5%	11.4%
Indiana	15.0%	6.9%

Higher levels of parent educational attainment are associated with positive outcomes for children. Parent educational attainment is also related to a family's economic stability, as adults with higher levels of education are less likely to be unemployed and tend to earn more<sup>6</sup>. Educational attainment is measured according to the highest level of formal education earned for the population aged 25 years and older. NWI trails the state in the percent of residents with an Associate's degree or higher (25% compared to 33%). Compared to Chicago, educational attainment in NWI is significantly lower (42.3% compared to 25%). East Chicago and Lake Station have the lowest percentage of adults with at least an Associate's degree (14%). In contrast, over 50 percent of the adult population in Munster hold a college degree. Figure 6 provides a breakdown of educational attainment across the nine communities and NWI as a region.

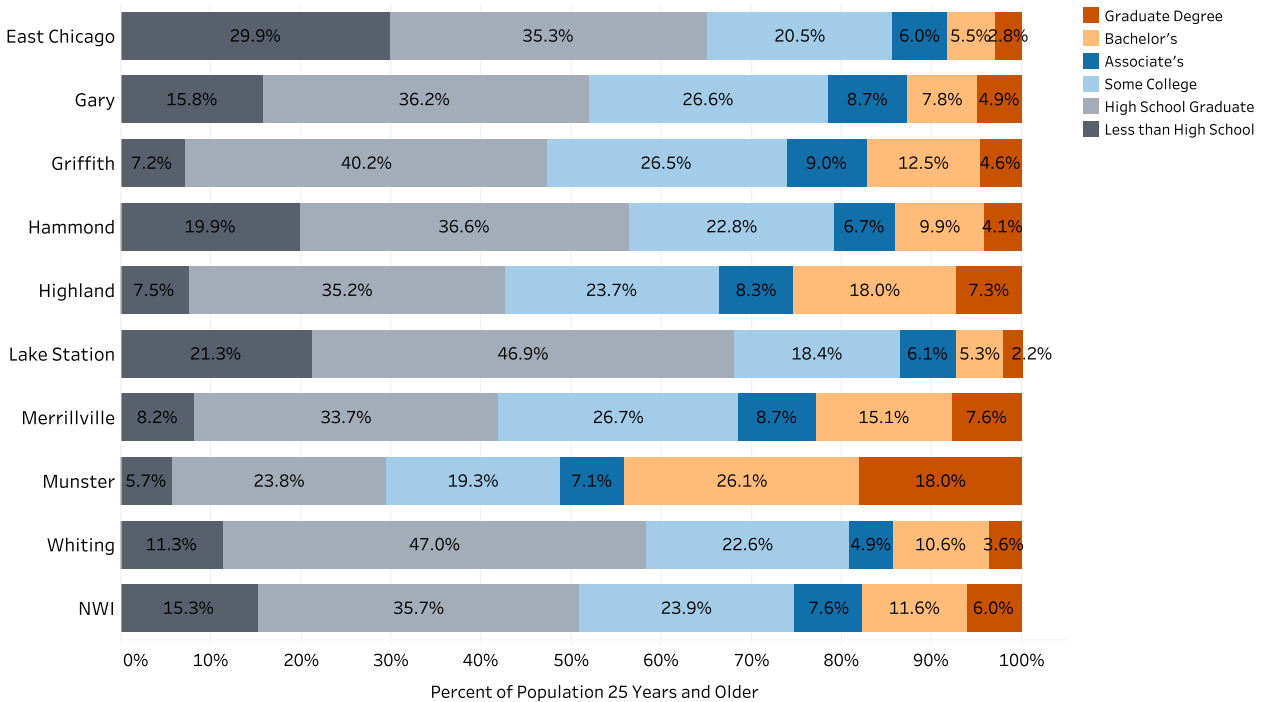
<sup>4</sup> Poverty status is determined by comparing annual income to a set of dollar values (called poverty thresholds) that vary by family size, number of children, and the age of the householder. If a family's before-tax money income is less than the dollar value of their threshold, then that family and every individual in it are considered to be in poverty. In 2016, the poverty threshold for a family with two adults and two children was \$24,339.

<sup>5</sup> Represents the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the civilian labor force 16 years and over.

<sup>6</sup> Child Trends (2014). Educational Attainment. Retrieved from [https:// www.childtrends.org/indicators/educational-attainment](https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/educational-attainment)



**Figure 6. Educational Attainment of NWI Communities, 2016**



**Health Outcomes.** A lack of quality health care can lead to negative health outcomes and more intensive treatments, such as avoidable hospitalizations. Furthermore, children with health insurance tend to be healthier than their uninsured peers. In Lake Station, almost one in five children has no health insurance. East Chicago and Hammond also have high rates of children without health insurance. Infants born at low birthweight (less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces) are at increased risk for mortality, and those who survive infancy may experience long-term disabilities and impaired development. Gary has the highest rates of low birth weight babies compared to East Chicago, Hammond, and Merrillville (see Table 2).

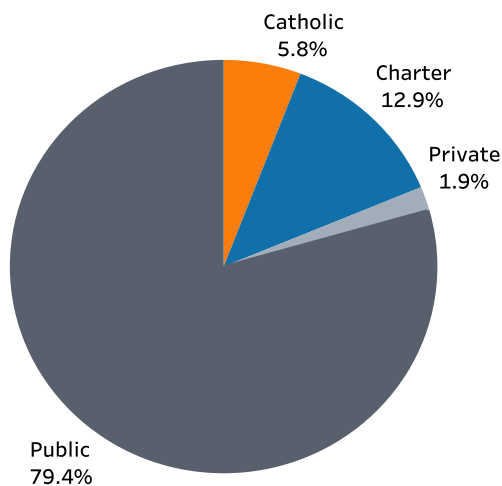
**Table 2. Select Health Indicators in NWI Communities, 2016<sup>7</sup>**

NWI Community	Low birthweight babies (%)	Preterm babies (%)	Mothers who received prenatal care (%)
East Chicago	8.7%	11.4%	57.0%
Gary	12.2%	12.2%	68.8%
Hammond	9.7%	11.2%	60.8%
Merrillville	7.8%	10.1%	69.0%
Indiana	7.6%	9.4%	71.2%

<sup>7</sup> Health data are only available for Indiana cities with populations of 25,000+ in 2010.

**Educational Landscape.** In Indiana, families have several options for their children’s schooling: traditional public schools, public charter schools, private schools, or homeschooling. In 2017-18, there were 106 schools in NWI enrolling over 56,000 students in Prek through 12<sup>th</sup> grade: 76 traditional public schools, 12 charter, 10 Catholic, and 8 private. As Figure 7 displays, the majority of children attend a traditional public school (79.4%), while 13 percent attend a public charter, and almost 6 percent of students (or 3,315) attend a Catholic school in one of the nine communities.

**Figure 7.**  
**Enrollment by School Type, 2017-18**



**Enrollment Trends by School Type.** While overall student enrollment in NWI has decreased slightly in the last four years, some communities have experienced a significant decline in student enrollment. For instance, traditional public schools in Gary experienced the largest decrease in student enrollment of the nine communities (-11.4%). This represents almost 1,000 students choosing to enroll in other schools (see Table 3). In contrast, traditional public schools in East Chicago saw the largest increase in student enrollment (+14.3%). During the same time period, charter school enrollment in the three communities with charter school options increased by 3 percent, largely driven by growth in East Chicago. It should also be noted that two-thirds of the charter schools (n=8) are located in Gary.

**School Voucher Program.** The **Indiana Choice Scholarship (ICS) Program** is the nation’s largest statewide school voucher program. To qualify for the program voucher, students must satisfy both the household income requirements and one of eight eligibility “pathways.” In addition to the ICS Program, students and families can also apply for the **Indiana School Scholarship Tax Credit**. The program provides students with scholarships to attend private schools and offers individuals and businesses to claim a 50 percent tax credit for contributions to approved scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs), which provide the private school scholarships. Finally, Indiana has an **open enrollment policy or transfer policy** that allows students to transfer from one public school to another, if their current school is underperforming. All three programs are further described in Exhibit 3.

### Exhibit 3. A Primer on School Choice in Indiana<sup>8</sup>

Established in 2011, **Indiana Choice Scholarship** (also referred to as the Choice Scholarship or voucher program) helps offset the cost of private school. As of 2017-18, with the participation cap lifted, 35,458 students and 318 schools participated in ICS. This means approximately 3 percent of all students in Indiana are using a voucher.

*Voucher Value.* The average voucher value is about \$4,342; however, voucher value varies since it must be the lesser of two amounts: the tuition and fees charged to the student at the eligible Choice school; or an amount based off the per-student state funding for the public-school corporation of residence. The funding amount for the latter can be anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of the per-student state funding formula, which is based on household income and percentage levels for free and reduced lunch.

*Eligibility.* To qualify for the ICS program, students must satisfy the household income criteria, as well as one of eight eligibility “pathways” in order to receive a voucher:

1. The student received a Choice Scholarship in the preceding school year.
2. The student received a Choice Scholarship in a previous school year, but not the preceding one.
3. The student received an SGO scholarship in the previous school year
4. The student has a disability that requires special education services
5. The student previously attended a public school that has been assigned an "F" grade.
6. The student was enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12 in a public school, including a charter school, in Indiana for at least two semesters immediately preceding the first semester for which the individual receives a Choice Scholarship
7. The student’s sibling received either a ICS or an SGO Scholarship the previous school year
8. The student received and used an Early Education Grant under IC 12-17.2-7.2 to attend Pre-K at an eligible

Launched in 2010, the **Indiana School Scholarship Tax Credit** provides student scholarships to attend private schools. Students are eligible if family income does not exceed 200 percent of the FRL rate (\$91,020 for a family of four in 2017–18) and the average scholarship in 2016–17 was \$1,978. The program allows individuals and businesses to claim a 50 percent tax credit for contributions to approved scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs), which provide the private school scholarships. There is no limit on the dollar amount that can be claimed, although the total amount of tax credits awarded statewide is limited to \$12.5 million in 2017–18. This program has grown from 386 scholarships in its first year to 8,501 scholarships granted in 2016-17.

Indiana’s **open enrollment policy** is supported by its legislation on educational legal settlement (I.C. 20-26-11-5), which permits a transfer of a student from the “Transferor School Corporation” to another public school corporation (the “Transferee School Corporation”). Parents must submit a transfer request application. However, a transfer request can be denied, if the transferee corporation does not have capacity, cannot provide a curriculum to better accommodate student’s needs, has not adopted a policy allowing out-of-district transfers or other grounds (e.g., high suspension rate). If a transferee accepts a students from another corporation, the per-pupil funding will follow that student to transferred school.

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<sup>8</sup> Indiana Department of Education. 2017-2018 Choice Scholarship Program Report. August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/choice/2017-2018-choice-scholarship-program-report-august-update.pdf>

**Table 3. Change in Public and Charter School Enrollment from 2014-2017**

School Type	City	2014	2017	% Change
Charter	East Chicago	851	871	+2.3%
	Gary	5,686	5,750	+1.1%
	Hammond	567	549	-3.2%
	Subtotal	7,104	7,323	+3.0%
Public	East Chicago	3,954	4,520	<b>+14.3%</b>
	Gary	8,683	7,696	<b>-11.4%</b>
	Griffith	2,402	2,488	+3.6%
	Hammond	11,749	12,188	+3.7%
	Highland	3,240	3,179	-1.9%
	Lake Station	1,771	1,656	-6.5%
	Merrillville	6,756	6,512	-3.6%
	Munster	4,121	4,002	-2.9%
	Whiting	2,938	2,873	-2.2%
	Subtotal	45,614	45,111	-1.1%
Total School Enrollment		52,718	52,434	-0.5%

**Catholic Schools in NWI.** Across the nine communities in NWI, there are ten Catholic schools serving 3,315 students (or 7% of the school-age population) in 2017. Of the nine communities, Hammond has the most Catholic schools (1 high school and 2 elementary), while Whiting serves the most children as a percentage of the school-age population in the community (54%). The two high school options – Bishop Noll and Andrean High School – serve about 500 students each. Student demographics across the ten schools varies significantly. For example, St. Stanislaus in East Chicago and Saint Casimir in Hammond serve predominately Hispanic students (83.4% and 84.4% respectively). Additional details on Catholic schools in NWI can be found in Appendix B.

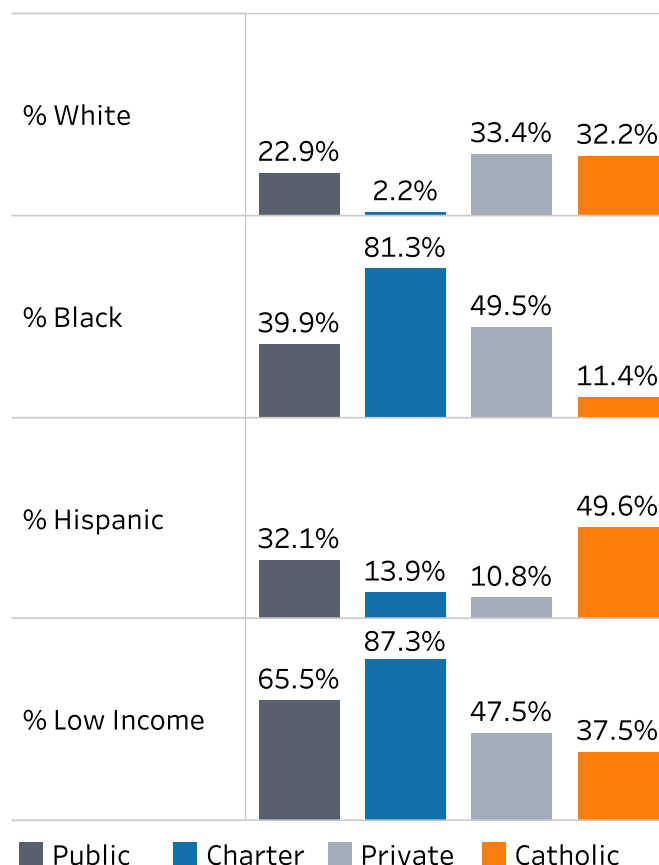
**Students Served by School Type.** Public, private, and charter schools in NWI serve vastly different student populations, as shown in Figure 8. Charter schools are significantly more likely to serve Black students. Further, nearly 90 percent of students enrolled in charters are low-income. Catholic schools, on the other hand, are more likely to serve Hispanic students; about half of students enrolled in Catholic schools are Hispanic.

Variation in student demographics also exists across the nine communities. For example, while charters in Gary and East Chicago serve over 90 percent low-income students, those in East Chicago serve similar percentages of Black and Hispanic students (42% and 54%, respectively). Further, traditional public schools in East Chicago, Gary, Hammond, and Whiting serve large percentages of low-income students (over 70%).

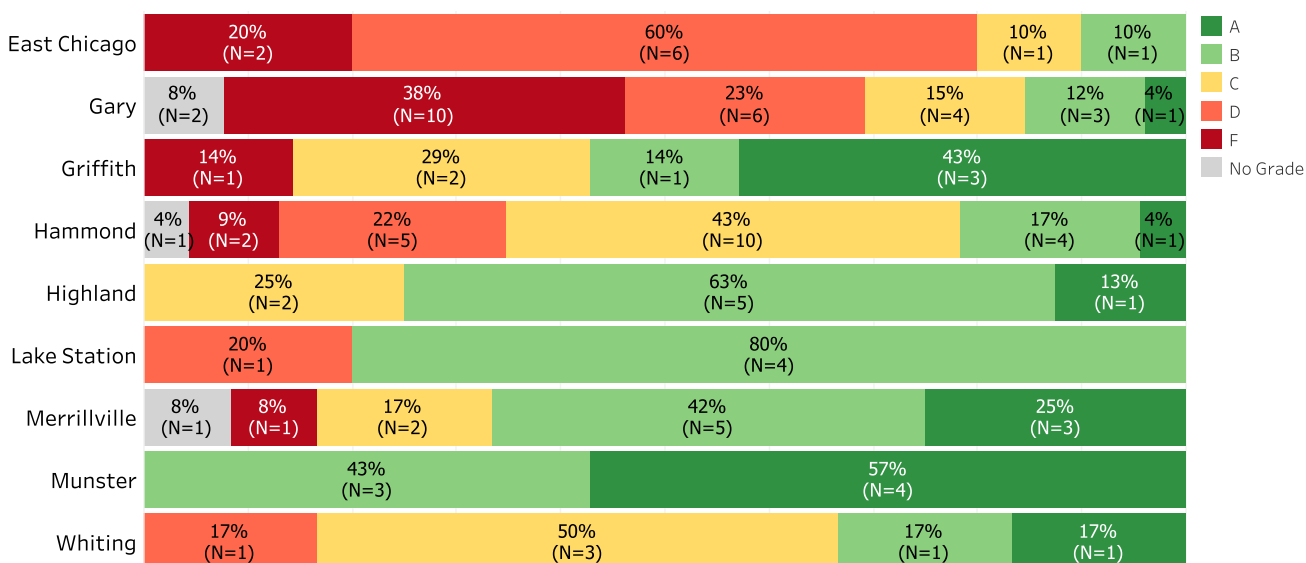
**School Quality Ratings.** Although students and families in Indiana have access to one of the most robust school choice programs in the nation, not all students have actual choice if the only options available are low-rated schools. To assess school quality in NWI schools, we used the state’s accountability grades as a proxy for quality. Each year, the Indiana State Board of Education gives all schools an A–F accountability grade<sup>1</sup> which provides a fairly uniform way to compare schools since all schools, including private and Catholic schools, receive a grade.

Our analysis found that certain communities in NWI have very limited options when it comes to high-quality schools (see Figure 9). For example, of the 29 schools in Gary, only four (or 16 percent) have a Grade of A or B. In fact, these four schools are the traditional public schools in the community, not the charter or private schools. Similarly, East Chicago families only have two high-quality schools in the community. If families in these communities want their children to attend a higher quality school, they will have to travel to other communities, and that may not be an option for some.

**Figure 8.**  
**Student Demographics by School Type, 2017-18**



**Figure 9. School Quality Ratings in NWI Schools, 2017-18**



**Educational Outcomes.** In addition to examining enrollment and demographic data across the schools and corporations in NWI, we also looked at various educational outcomes, including student performance on standardized assessments, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates. We found that achievement gaps are persistent across all school types, and specific subgroups continue to lag behind their peers in student achievement and educational attainment.

### Impact of Policy Changes on Educational Outcomes.

It is noticeable that all NWI schools were impacted by the 2015 changes to the A-F school rating system, as many schools' ratings dropped from A and B to D and F. While schools are struggling to demonstrate quality as defined by the current state school rating system, they will face greater challenges soon, if educational supports are not deployed and targeted to elevate teaching and learning to prepare college and career ready students. Moreover, the federal government's decision on eliminating waiver high school diplomas means that Indiana's A-F school rating system will need to be updated. In subsequent sections of this report, we take a closer look at academic performance in the three priority communities.

### Policy Snapshot College & Career Ready Standards

Mandated by the U.S. Department of Education to align state tests to more rigorous college and career ready standards, in 2015, Indiana adopted new college and career ready standards and rolled out a new ISTEP. The goal of the new standards is to ensure students "enter college and career without needing remediation." All Indiana students in grades 3-8 are tested in English/Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics using the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus exam (ISTEP+).

**High School Graduation Rates.** Research shows that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed, earn higher incomes, and tend to enjoy better health<sup>9</sup>. On-time high school graduation rates in the state have been steadily climbing, from 78 percent in 2007 to 87 percent in 2017, an increase of 8.8 percentage points. However, graduation rates of Black students are almost 10 percentage points lower (77.9%). At the school level, high school graduation rates in NWI ranged from a low of 39.6 percent to a high of 99.2 percent in 2017-18. Table 4 shows graduation rates for all high schools in the nine NWI communities by race/ethnicity. Overall, 10 of the 23 high schools in the region had graduation rates below the state average. Yet, some of the highest performing schools are located in Gary and Hammond; in these schools, more than 90 percent of students graduated in four years. However, Gary also has the two lowest performing high schools, one charter and one traditional public school. While high school graduation rates have been steady and on the rise in other parts of Indiana, for communities, such as East Chicago, the declining graduation rates are particularly worrisome, given the recent decision by the U.S. Department of Education to deny Indiana's request to continue counting waiver general education diplomas in its graduation rate calculation.<sup>10</sup> Indiana will begin using the federal graduation rate for the class of 2018.

**College Enrollment.** Over two-thirds of Indiana high school graduates enroll directly in college, and most enroll in four-year public colleges (about 50 percent). Among high school graduates in the NWI communities, college enrollment rates range from a high of 90 percent to a low of 20 percent. While two high schools in Gary graduate 98 percent of students, they differ significantly in how many of those graduates enroll in college. Just 47 percent of Gary Lighthouse Charter graduates enrolled in college, compared to 69 percent of Wirt-Emerson graduates.

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<sup>9</sup> Ma, Jennifer, Pender, M, and Welch, M. Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. The College Board. 2016. Accessed at: <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2016-full-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> In the reauthorization of the federal legislation, ESEA, currently known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), "regular high school diploma" was defined, and the waiver diplomas do not align with this definition.

**Table 4. High School Graduation Rates and College Enrollment in NWI**

Community	School	HS Grad Rate Overall	HS Grad Rate Black Students	HS Grad Rate Hispanic Students	HS Grad Rate White Students	College Enrollment Rate
East Chicago	East Chicago Central High	59.6	57.4	61.2	70.0	53.0
Gary	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Charter*	89.1	88.6	-	-	67.0
	Calumet New Tech	93.4	93.1	89.6	96.4	43.0
	Gary Lighthouse Charter*	98.3	97.9	100.0	-	47.0
	Gary Middle College	39.6	38.2	-	-	20.0
	New Tech Innovative	84.8	83.6	-	-	-
	Thea Bowman Leadership*	89.4	90.0	-	-	74.0
	Theodore Roosevelt*	45.5	46.9	-	-	56.0
	West Side Leadership	86.2	86.1	-	-	41.0
	Wirt-Emerson Visual Performing Arts	98.8	98.7	-	-	69.0
Griffith	Griffith Senior HS	95.2	94.1	98.3	93.6	59.0
Hammond	Bishop Noll Institute^	99.2	95.5	100.0	100.0	90.0
	Donald E Gavit Middle/High	79.8	85.5	79.5	72.7	54.0
	Hammond Academy of Science and Tech*	98.5	100.0	100.0	93.8	78.0
	Hammond HS	83.2	82.3	84.1	-	37.0
	Morton Senior HS	73.7	73.1	74.3	72.7	61.0
Highland	Highland HS	93.9	100.0	93.3	93.2	70.0
Lake Station	Thomas A Edison Jr-Sr HS	87.2	-	83.3	91.1	51.0
Merrillville	Andrean High School^	92.1	94.1	94.1	91.7	90.0
	Merrillville HS	89.1	90.0	88.4	86.4	59.0
Munster	Munster HS	92.7	81.0	90.5	95.1	86.0
Whiting	George Rogers Clark Middle/HS	74.1	55.6	77.9	68.6	53.0
	Whiting HS	80.8	-	80.7	87.1	78.0
Statewide		87.2	77.9	83.3	89.4	64.0

\*Indicates charter school

^Indicates catholic school



## Case Study: City of East Chicago

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Located in the northwestern tip of the state of Indiana, the City of East Chicago is 30 minutes from downtown Chicago, Illinois and two and a half hours from Indianapolis, the state capitol. The city became one of the region's first industrial cities, created to meet the needs of its workers and for most of its history, steel dominated East Chicago's economy<sup>11</sup>. In 1903, Inland Steel Corporation transformed East Chicago into an industrial powerhouse and attracted other steel companies that would command the city's economy through the 1990s. But when the steel crisis occurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it caused high rates of layoffs and unemployment, and negatively impacted residents' social and economic conditions.

### Population Declines and Demographic Shifts

While not as large as the bordering cities of Gary and Hammond, East Chicago's population is the fifth largest of the nine focus NWI communities, with a population of 28,418 in 2016. Previously home to people who represented over 70 nationalities, today East Chicago remains a highly diverse and majority minority community. East Chicago is home to the largest proportion of Hispanics (53.9%) in the region, and more than one-third (38.3%) of its population is African-American, the third largest proportion in the region, next to Gary and Merrillville.

Like other cities in the region, East Chicago has experienced a decline in population. The declining populations are attributed to the steel crisis of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, when steel prices dropped significantly due to an oversupply of steel. East Chicago's population declined from about 47,000 in 1970 to 34,000 in 1990 and eventually to 29,000 in 2010, a decrease of 38 percent in three decades. However, the population does appear to be stabilizing, with only a 4.3 percent population decline from 2010 to 2016. While not reflected in the secondary data, community members reported an influx of families moving into East Chicago from Chicago's west and south side communities. We later discuss the perceived impact of this in-migration on the educational needs of the city.

### Income and Poverty

Distressed by the economic downturn of the steel industry, middle and high-income residents moved out of East Chicago. Unfortunately, the city has yet to fully recover these residents in substantial numbers. Today, East Chicago has the lowest median household income (\$27,264) and per capita income (\$14,363) of the region. To put this into perspective, East Chicago's median household income is close to half of what is reported for Lake County (\$50,905) and the state (\$50,433). Similarly, the city's poverty rate (35.3%) is twice as much as those reported for

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.eastchicago.com/>

the county and state, and one of the highest in the region. Of the 10,000+ households in the city, almost one-third are headed by females, and almost one in five households with children are headed by females. More sobering is the percentage of children living in households below poverty (57.5%). Poverty is closely associated with unemployment, affordable housing and educational attainment. In East Chicago, almost one in five adults 16 and older are unemployed in the city (16.2%). In interviews, community members remarked on the high poverty rates in East Chicago. As one community leader shared:

The biggest challenge I see now with more urban or smaller metropolitan cities—that were once hustling and bustling with development and industry, and then suddenly disappeared—is the lack of foresight to think what is the next big industry or corporation that will employ citizens, how do we tap into that, and how do we prepare students [for the next generation of jobs].

Establishing and sustaining a middle class is critical to the vitality, prosperity and longevity of the city. However, to pull its residents out of poverty will require collaborative and equity-minded community and government leaders who can attract businesses and improve educational access and quality for all students, especially the city's poorest children.

## Economic Development and the Demand for Postsecondary Skills

Although there has been minimal—if any—job growth in East Chicago, the city continues to be home to manufacturing, steel and refinery companies. Based on 2016 census data, almost a quarter of residents (23.1%) were employed in production occupations, and close to a third (29.9%) held occupations in the service industry. These numbers suggest continual reliance on manufacturing, and an expanding service industry, which tends to offer low wages. Local economists, Micah Pollak and Bala Arshanapalli, created the Northwest Indiana Coincident (Economic) Index<sup>12</sup>, and in 2017, they recommended that *“policymakers examine how to attract higher-salary services i.e. “knowledge-based” jobs in addition to manufacturing.”*<sup>13</sup>

Recently, regional organizations such as the Northwest Indiana Forum and One Region established cross-regional partnerships to attract new businesses, create jobs, improve the region's infrastructure and foster population growth. For example, last year the NWI Forum attracted 17 companies that pledged to create 1,493 jobs and invest \$661 million in the region.<sup>14</sup> Business leaders are heavily marketing and pushing for diversification of the region's

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<sup>12</sup> The index “measures the current pulse of the economy in Northwest Indiana and forecasts future growth for the region.”

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-iun-commission-economic-development-st-1025-20171024-story.html>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.nwitimes.com/business/local/northwest-indiana-s-outlook-is-positive-as-businesses-change-the/article\\_59c35e8a-a8ae-5527-b36b-70cc8594ade9.html](https://www.nwitimes.com/business/local/northwest-indiana-s-outlook-is-positive-as-businesses-change-the/article_59c35e8a-a8ae-5527-b36b-70cc8594ade9.html)

economy and support of entrepreneurship. Government agencies are also posting their commitment to grow and stabilize local economies by attracting businesses and supporting small businesses.<sup>15</sup> This fall, the state’s department of commerce “has worked with 11 relocating or expanding businesses that have pledged \$1.09 billion and 1,238 jobs to the Region.”<sup>16</sup>

While the anticipated economic development brings hope to the region, it also presents a challenge: ensuring current and future residents are workforce ready. Community leaders supporting postsecondary education and workforce training and readiness (e.g., NWI Partners for Workforce Readiness) note that the region is, *“in a ‘cultural transition’ from its deep manufacturing roots where a middle-class lifestyle could be achieved without post-secondary education to the new imperative for acquiring post-secondary credentials to achieve that lifestyle.”* In other words, the higher quality and higher paying jobs emerging in Northwest Indiana require specific credentials beyond high school.

Given the changing economy, and demand for postsecondary education and training, in subsequent sections of this case study, we report on the quality of the schools educating children in East Chicago. We also examine the extent to which residents use school choice to access school options and high-quality schools. Finally, we present the pressing educational needs and community assets and challenges that emerged in interviews and focus groups with community members.

## Educational Landscape

In this section, we present secondary data analysis of student enrollment patterns across public, charter and Catholic schools located in East Chicago. We also examine and explain changes in school quality ratings and academic performance for these schools. To inform the educational needs, assets and community challenges in East Chicago, we conducted focus groups with parents and teachers from public schools. Therefore, the findings in those sections reflect their experiences and perspectives. For more information on data methods, see Appendix A.

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<sup>15</sup> See City of East Chicago’s Planning & Economic Development Department.

<sup>16</sup> The Times of Northwest Indiana. “Businesses have pledged more than \$1 billion in investment to Region this year” Accessed at: [https://www.nwitimes.com/business/lake-newsletter/businesses-have-pledged-more-than-billion-in-investment-to-region/article\\_96e92f3e-dead-5c18-ba96-921cfe8e932d.html](https://www.nwitimes.com/business/lake-newsletter/businesses-have-pledged-more-than-billion-in-investment-to-region/article_96e92f3e-dead-5c18-ba96-921cfe8e932d.html)

**Student Enrollment.** In East Chicago, there are 10 schools—including 2 charters and 1 Catholic school—educating over 5,600 students. Public schools are comprised of equal parts African-American and Hispanic students. Similarly, charters attract large percentages of African-American (41.7%) and Hispanic students (54.1%); though, they account for less than a fifth of students in the city. Although the Catholic school enrolls only 1 out of 25 students in the city, the majority are Hispanic. Overall, the schools in East Chicago are serving mainly students of color. Moreover, these schools are educating about 70 percent of all children living in East Chicago. Of the remaining 30 percent of children attending a school outside of East Chicago, about a quarter (n=1200) attend a public or charter school outside the School City of East Chicago Corporation boundaries. Of these children, 6 out of 10 (n=988) choose a charter school. Nonetheless, traditional public schools in East Chicago have experienced the largest increase in student enrollment (+14.3 percent) in the region. Community members also reported increasing student enrollment in the School City of East Chicago Corporation. They attribute this increase to the influx of Chicago residents moving into the community.

**School Quality.** Public and charters schools in East Chicago received mainly grades of D and F as measured by the state's 2017 A-F school rating system. In contrast, St. Stanislaus Catholic School received a grade of B. Yet far less East Chicago families are using the choice scholarship and enrolling their children in non-public schools. As one community leader remarked, *"Schools in East Chicago are struggling. It's an uphill struggle."* However, when examining Indiana's school grades, one must consider ratings before and after 2016. It is noticeable that all the schools' ratings were impacted by the 2015 changes to the A-F school rating system, as many schools' ratings dropped from A and B to D and F. While schools are struggling to demonstrate quality as defined by the current state school rating system, they will face greater challenges soon, if educational supports are not deployed and targeted to elevate teaching and learning to prepare college and career ready students. For example, the federal government's decision on eliminating waiver high school diplomas means that Indiana's A-F school rating system will need to be updated.<sup>17</sup> Recent attempts to revise the school rating system have been unsuccessful (e.g., creating two accountability systems and relying more on standardized test score), but efforts will likely resume in 2019.

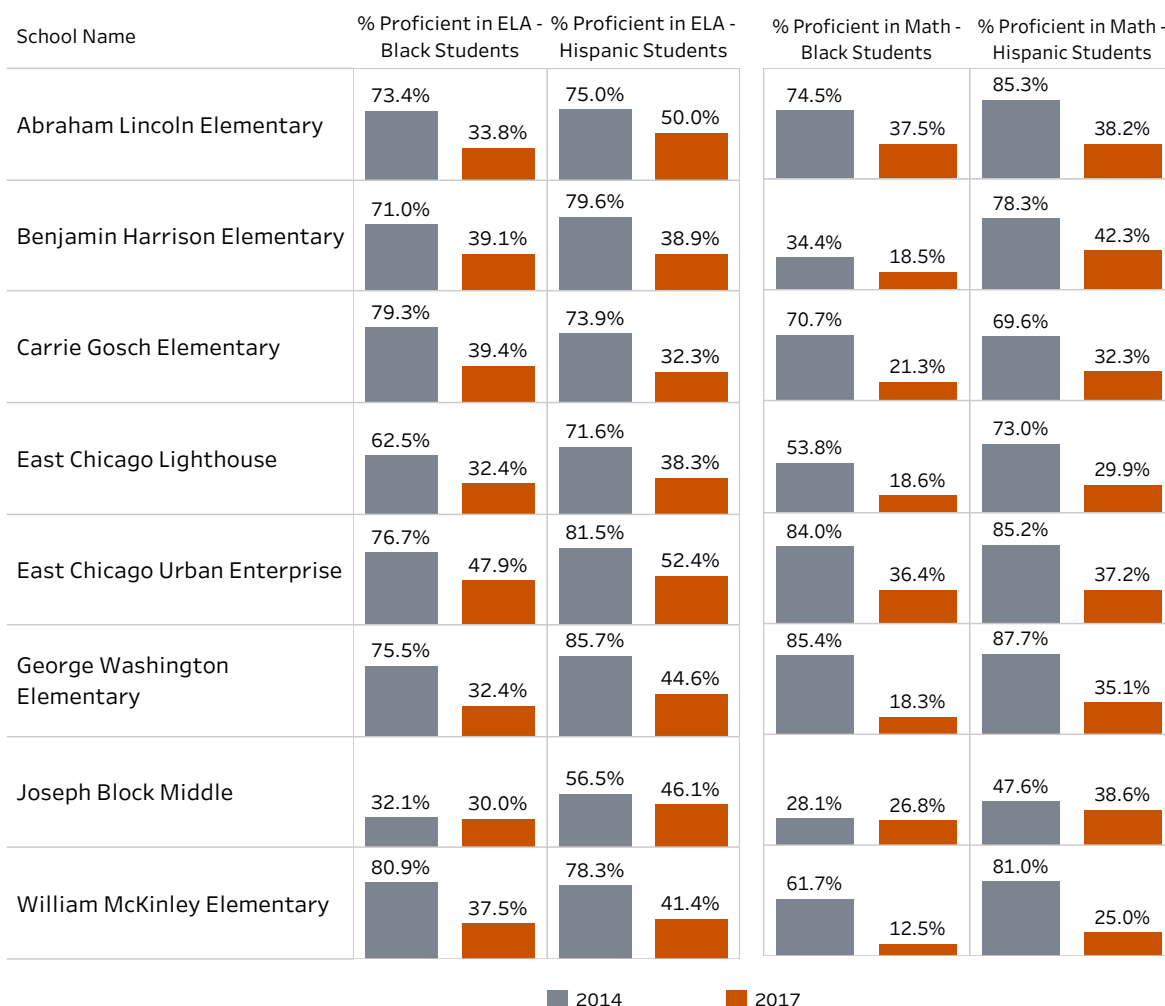
**Academic Performance.** Schools were also impacted by changes made to the state's standardized assessment, ISTEP+. As Figure 10 shows, compared to 2014, student performance on ISTEP+ significantly decreased in 2017, with much greater declines in the performance of African-American students on the Mathematics assessment. The ELA and Mathematics ISTEP+ results suggest that one or more of the following situations may exist: 1) teaching is not yet aligned to the standards; 2) the curriculum is not as rigorous as it should to be; 3) in schools

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<sup>17</sup> See section X for more information.

where teaching is robust and the curriculum is aligned to the standards, students are struggling to grasp the material; and/or 4) teachers are expending more time and energy reteaching and bringing students up to grade level than teaching at grade level. One community member commented on the importance of building a strong foundation in English, math, and science in the elementary grades. The community leader stated, “if you are able to get math, science and language, early on in the learning, you are so much further ahead when you get to middle school.”

**Figure 10. I-STEP+ Student Achievement in East Chicago Schools, 2014 and 2017**



**Defining Good Schools.** While the state’s school ratings, inclusive of students’ academic performance, can be used to identify high-performing and low-performing schools, and in turn gauge quality, we wondered what information community members used to gauge school quality. For this reason, we asked community leaders: “how do parents define good schools”, and then asked parents a series of questions that contextualized what they liked about their children’s schools, and how they learned about “good schools.” Although there was little, if any, mention of school ratings, for parents from East Chicago, a good school is staffed with highly

qualified teachers, provides students with a safe and secure environment, and teaches a diverse student population. Parents said they were aware of flaws in their school system, yet, they appreciated that the schools maintained a curriculum. Community leaders also believed parents took into consideration public perceptions of a school and school safety. As one community leader put it, *“parents are not evaluating a school based on state ratings or test scores; it becomes personal”* such as will my child be bullied, can any adult pick up my child from school without screening or verification?

**Accessing School Choice.** We examined enrollment of East Chicago students at participating choice schools<sup>18</sup>. In 2017-18, 370 children received the voucher, and as of fall 2018, 323 were enrolled in a private school (see Table 5). We asked community members why they believed more East Chicago parents were not accessing school choice, considering the financial supports available for them to enroll their child in another public or nonpublic school. Some community members believe that the traditional public schools’ approach to grade promotion was an incentive for parents and students to stay in the corporation. They shared concerns with this approach, which began under previous corporation leadership. Specifically, they noted that the academic struggles only intensify when students reach middle and high school; “When students get to high school, then they are not earning credits because they are failing class. It’s [grade promotion] really hurting [students in the long-run].” There are other community members who perceive choice as a privilege when one considers school location and costs even after the voucher. As one community member described, “If you have a school choice, you make it by moving there...either you move somewhere or take your kid to another school. This is a slim part of population.”

Furthermore, there was some disagreement among community members about whether parents are choosing to keep their children in the designated traditional public school because it is meeting their expectations, or if parents do not know what other options existed and therefore prefer to stay in a school they know and trust. The latter is supported by a recent cross-sector survey of parents’ views on school choice conducted by an Indiana non-profit. The survey finds that traditional public school parents in low-income households (51%) were more likely than those in middle-income (34%) or high-income households (26%) to say they were unaware of Indiana’s school choice programs.<sup>19</sup> However, the first argument aligns with decades of studies in which parents report satisfaction with their local public schools, yet, signal concerns about the quality of public schools at the national level.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Indiana Department of Education. 2017-2018 Choice Scholarship Program Report. August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/choice/2017-2018-choice-scholarship-program-report-august-update.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Catt and Rhinesmith, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Paul E. Peterson, Michael B. Henderson, Martin R. West, and Samuel Barrows (2017), Ten Year Trends in Public Opinion from the EdNext Poll, Education Next, 17(1), p. 11, [https://educationnext.org/files/ednext\\_XVII\\_1\\_2016poll\\_unabridged.pdf](https://educationnext.org/files/ednext_XVII_1_2016poll_unabridged.pdf)

**Table 5. Choice School Enrollment of School of City of East Chicago Students, 2017-18**

Participating Choice School	Enrollment Number
Saint Stanislaus School	141
Bishop Noll Institute	100
Saint Casimir School	30
Saint Mary School	22
Saint John The Baptist School	16
Our Lady Of Grace School	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>323</b>

*Parents' Experiences with School Choice.* In focus groups, we asked parents if they had ever heard of the ICS program or the tax credit scholarship, and if they had, to share their experiences. One set of parents shared that they transferred their child from the School City of East Chicago Corporation to a school in a neighboring NWI corporation, and they reported a negative experience which resulted in the decision to transfer the child back to East Chicago. The parents said that because the child was not from the receiving community, he was bullied. However, what cemented the parents' decision to transfer the child was safety concerns beyond bullying. The parents reported *"They [school administrators] allowed someone [who was not authorized] to pull child out of school without my knowledge."*

Another parent shared that she transferred her child from the School City of East Chicago Corporation to a Catholic school. The parent shared that her child was excelling at the public school, but for safety issues, they transferred the child to a Catholic school. The parent recalled that when her child was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, another student pulled out a knife. Amidst safety and security concerns, the child was transferred to a Catholic school. The child is now 19 years old; therefore, the parents made financial sacrifices for 2-3 years. Once the ICS program went into effect, the parent met the eligibility criteria and used the voucher for high school. Although the child graduated from Bishop Noll Catholic High School in Hammond with a strong academic record, the parent noted that her child was initially behind academically. The change from public school expectations to Catholic school expectations was challenging for both the child and parents. Catholic schools expect parent involvement and participation. Looking back, the parent notes that *"it makes a difference [in students' academic success] when parents are involved."*

## **At-a-Glance: Catholic Schools in East Chicago**

- Of the 10 schools in East Chicago, 1 is Catholic (Saint Stanislaus School).
- Saint Stanislaus School enrolls 1 out of 25 students in East Chicago, and the majority are Hispanic.
- Saint Stanislaus School received a grade B quality rating.
- Very few East Chicago families are using the Choice Scholarship and enrolling their children in non-public schools. In 2017-18, 370 children received the voucher, and as of fall 2018, 323 were enrolled in a private school.
- Most East Chicago students who use the voucher attend St. Stanislaus Elementary School or Bishop Noll High School.
- Some community members perceive choice as a privilege given the costs, even after the voucher, and required transportation to drive students to Catholic schools in neighboring cities.
- There is some disagreement among community members about whether parents are choosing to keep their children in designated traditional public schools because it is meeting their expectations, or if parents do not know what other options exist.
- In the focus group, one parent shared that she transferred her child from the School City of East Chicago Corporation to a Catholic school for safety reasons.



## Educational Needs

***Social Emotional Learning (SEL).*** SEL emerged as an educational need in interviews with community leaders and continued to be a recurring theme in focus groups with educators and parents. Community leaders shared that East Chicago is dealing with issues of bullying and suicide. One community leader felt that, despite funding from local foundations for anti-bullying initiatives, the issue was not being fully addressed. Community residents and stakeholders also shared that children are being raised in single parent families, by grandparents, or raising younger siblings. As one community leader shared, *“the children have to make a choice: go to school or take care of siblings. They have to make some really tough decisions, if adults in life are working and young siblings are at home.”*

***Parent Involvement and Support.*** The most prominent educational need across all community stakeholders is increasing parent involvement and support. Parents in the focus group remarked that *“it makes a difference when parents are involved.”* Parents perceived the greatest challenge to be engaging young parents, stating *“if we can make the younger generation focus, come out...but someone needs to reach that target audience, those parents are not coming to school events.”* For other parents, the barrier is work and when volunteer and events are scheduled. One teacher shared, *“I have a mom who works nights and volunteers, but she barely sleeps. That’s [being involved] so important to her”* For teachers, parent involvement means building relationship, exchanging information, communicating expectations and supporting one another. As one teacher stated, *“parent involvement is essential in making sure district is approachable.”* A second teacher shared:

The parent is one of the bigger stakeholders in child’s education. We need to address parent involvement or lack thereof. I have learned to build relationships with parents, to be on same page and reach student. I know the environment that children come from. For example, my dad yelled, and when that is all you hear at home, I (as the teacher) don’t want to be more yelling.

Teachers reported contacting parents, whether to report good or bad news about their children. However, most teachers agreed that the greatest challenge was consistent parent connection. Teachers and parents shared that until two years ago, all the schools had a parent liaison who was charged with parent communication and engagement. However, due to budget cuts, the parent liaison positions were eliminated.

***Student Discipline Policy and Approaches.*** Parents shared concerns about the student discipline policy; specifically, that the first and only line of action to address discipline appears to be out of school suspension. One parent reported that her son was suspended, but the behavior was never addressed. She went on to state, *“I want the behavior corrected, addressed and something put in place in order to change behavior. Not just this is what you did wrong, so you are out of school for 5 days.”* Another parent added that the *“the disciplinary action (policy) is what would be hindering kids from succeeding.”* Parents also shared that because students know the consequences of misbehavior; some students use it to their advantage. In other words, a student knows that if s/he misbehaves, they will be sent home. One parent suggested that some students “work the system” and purposely misbehave because *“they know what they are going to get. It’s 9am and only been there for one hour.”* Parents recognized that teachers are encountering various student behavioral issues, and that teachers are also teachers with daily life stresses. As a result, teachers can become easily frustrated and short with students; at times even triggering misbehavior. Parents noted that there are teachers who *“take out their frustration on the kids. A lot of times they [the teachers] don’t realize the kid probably didn’t have breakfast, he is wearing shoes that are too big, and has to do this all for himself.”* Parents suggested in-school detention or some form of guidance. Parents noted that students want some form of connection, and if teachers could better connect with students, that would make their day easier and smoother.

***Supports for Response to Interventions.*** Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed implementing new programs and having minimal support and structures in place to provide interventions for their struggling students. The teachers shared the need for more paraprofessionals and support to implement response to interventions. Teachers from one school reported that special education students are in a self-contained classroom. We asked why this practice was in place, the teacher shared that *“If you move them [special education] into that general education population, then teachers spend a double block re-directing because there are so many behavior issues.”*

***Student Enrichment and Extra-Curricular Activities.*** Community stakeholder agreed that schools need to be more inviting, and reincorporate art, music, and recess into the daily schedule. One teacher posited, *“School has become a job for students. It’s not a place where they truly look forward to. If you want it to be an exciting place, then you have activities here... give them art, PE, we used to have recess. Where do you learn to play? Playing is big for collaboration.”* Parents also want to see more afterschool activities and extra curriculars such as student newspaper, yearbook. As one teacher reflected, *“schools used to be a community center. Then they started locking the school doors at 3pm. We have to change our approach because we’ve been closed off to the community for so long.”*

**Educational Attainment.** Like many states and cities across the nation, NWI has put forth the goal to increase the percentage of adults with a college or career credential to 60% by 2025. As of 2016, a little over one-third of East Chicago residents (35.3%) had attained at least a high school education. This is equivalent to the state and region's reported percentage of high school graduates. According to a 2011 needs assessment report from the Indiana Community Action Association, high graduation rates have been on the rise across the state. However, our analysis shows that high school graduation rates have been decreasing over time for all East Chicago students, from 2013 through 2017 (see Figure X). Our analysis included all graduating students, regardless of diploma type (i.e., waiver, General Education and nonwaiver or CORE 40). The most recently available data shows that the state's aggregate high school graduation rate was 87.2%; whereas for East Chicago, it was 59.6%.<sup>21</sup> Disaggregating by subgroups, the high graduation rates are not very different for African-American (57.4%) and Hispanic (61.2%) students in East Chicago. For East Chicago, the declining graduation rates are particularly worrisome given that the state will begin using the federal graduation rate definition and calculation for the class of 2018. Based on the aggregate and non-waiver, the high school graduation rate for East Chicago in 2017 is 49.7 percent. Thus, the city should be prepared to respond to rates below 50 percent following the policy change this year.

Of those who graduate from high school, half will go on to enroll in college. Looking at the raw numbers, this means that of a class of 332 seniors, about 198 will graduate high school; of which about 105 will enroll in college. Of the nine NWI cities, East Chicago has one of the lowest percentage of adults with at least an Associate's degree (14%), and Bachelor's degree or higher (8.2%). In contrast, twice as many residents in the region and three times as many residents in the state hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. These sobering statistics have mobilized organizations and business throughout NWI to develop a regional network of school and community partnership to develop an action plan designed to improve student college and career success.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This reflects East Chicago Central High School graduation rate, as this is the only high school in the city. It does not reflect graduation rates for all residents of East Chicago, as some families may choose to enroll their children in public or private high schools in a neighboring city.

<sup>22</sup> [www.readynwi.com](http://www.readynwi.com)

## Educational and Community Assets

***Foundation of East Chicago.*** The Foundation of East Chicago provides financial support to local schools, churches, municipal agencies and nonprofit organizations that work to improve the quality of life in East Chicago. The foundation funds programs for students in East Chicago such as after-school, reading, writing, science, and prekindergarten. In addition, the foundation provides scholarships to college-bound high school students who are residents of East Chicago and have a minimum 2.50 cumulative GPA. The foundation also provides scholarships for students with a GED or general high school diploma seeking to pursue a post-secondary education or trade certification.

***Boys and Girls Club.*** The Boys and Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana is perceived as a valuable partner that provides an indispensable service for working families: afterschool care and out of school time programming. For leaders from organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, they view their organization as part of the solution to supporting youth and children. As one leader commented, “Most people want to look at school districts [i.e., place the responsibility only on school districts]. It’s incumbent on organizations like ours with social services to fill the gap between school and home. It will take individuals, organizations, and municipalities working together, collaboratively.”

***Lakefront and Economic Revitalization.*** Community leaders reported that East Chicago government officials are working to reclaim the waterfront, create housing along the lakefront, and burgeon community pride. Much of the revitalization focuses on modernizing the city’s parks and recreation facilities and lakefront amenities. Additionally, East Chicago has expanded its high-speed fiber optic broadband network. Altogether, these efforts will help East Chicago attract more business, and people who want to work and live there.

## Community Challenges

***Transportation.*** Interview and focus group data revealed that access to transportation (public or private, i.e., car, carpool, etc.) was limited for residents of East Chicago. Community leaders reported the lack of transportation as a barrier for families, specifically, children, to access programs and use the school voucher option. As one community leader described, “*unless the school or program is walking distance, parents won’t send children. They don’t have transportation to get where they need to go. If families can’t get to Griffith or Whiting, they won’t take advantage of that program.*” Transporting children to and from school to programs, even afterschool programs, is a real challenge, given the budgetary constraints of districts such as East Chicago. As a result, school buses that once transported students from school to programs have been eliminated, and now organizations must take on that cost and risk.

*Information Dissemination and Awareness.* Community leaders remarked that few community residents were aware of scholarship opportunities and/or the school voucher program because information about these programs is not disseminated in traditional ways using television and radio. East Chicago residents are watching Chicago television and radio stations, which have little to no incentive to promote programs like the 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars. One community leader noted that programs rely on social media to disseminate information; however, he cautioned that residents may not have the ability to access the internet (i.e., digital divide).

*Lead Contamination.* East Chicago was negatively affected by the discovery of high levels of lead contamination, which forced 300 families, living in public housing, to relocate. A school near the contamination site was also closed. Community leaders noted the devastating effects of the lead contamination, and ongoing efforts to provide health services to families in that area such as free eye exams and blood tests.