

# Public Education in Buffalo and the Region

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THOSE OVER 25 YEARS OLD IN CITY, REGION AND NATION

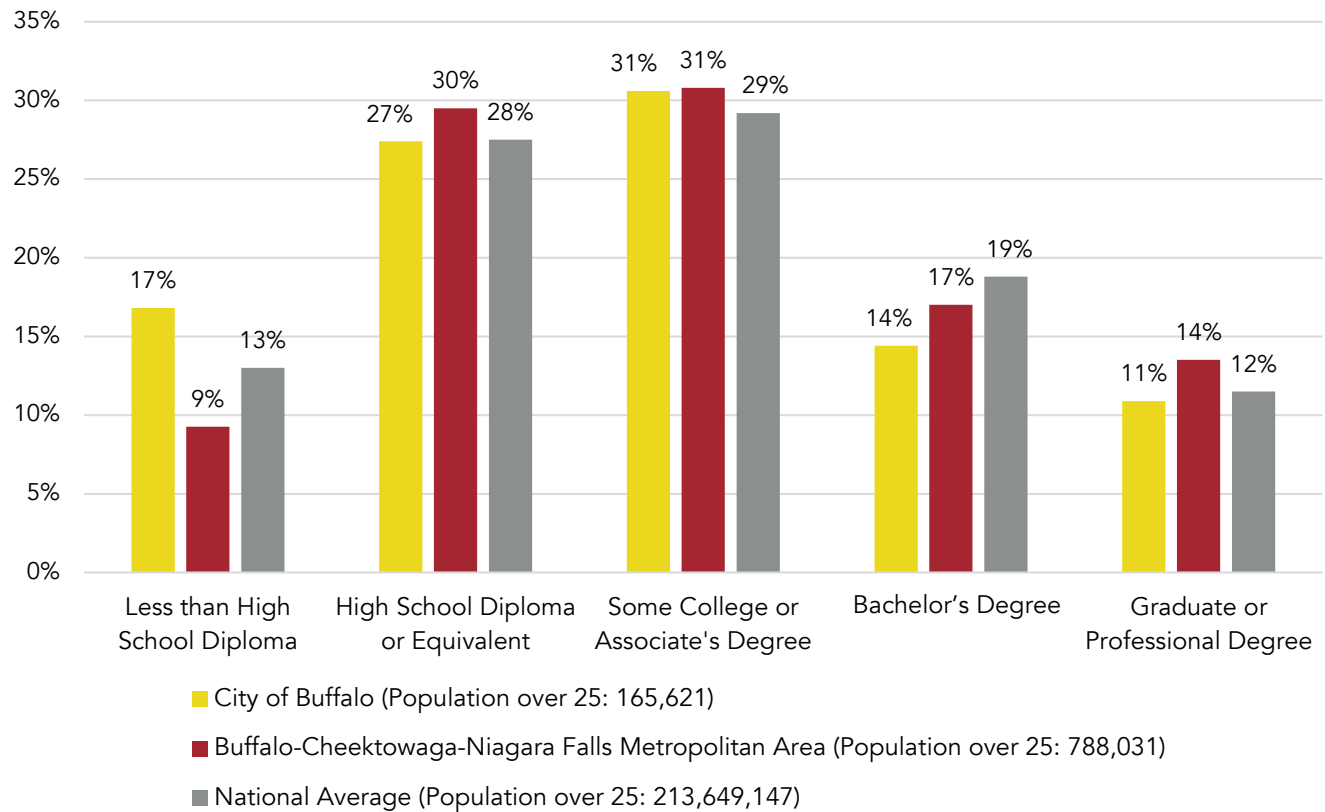


Figure 1. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2012-2016, 5-year estimates.

Residential segregation by race and income produces sharp disparities in educational outcomes in the Buffalo-Niagara Metro Region.

## Introduction

Public education in Buffalo and the surrounding region is a complicated story. The Buffalo-Niagara region is well educated, with higher than average rates of high school completion and graduate or professional degrees. But within the region, residential segregation by race and income produces sharp disparities in educational outcomes.

Comparing schools within the region, we find that student performance is highly correlated to poverty level, disability status, and English proficiency.



### Educational Outcomes in the City, Metropolitan Region, and Nation

Buffalo-Niagara is a well-educated metro area. In fact, educational attainment in the region tends to be higher than the national average. The region’s adults are more likely to have a high school diploma, have some college experience, or have a graduate degree. But within the region, disparities are unusually sharp. An adult in the City is nearly two times as likely as an adult in the metro area to lack a high school diploma (see Figure 1).

Educational outcomes mirror the disparity in household income between the City of Buffalo and the rest of the region (see Figure 2). At each level of education, the students in the City of Buffalo are roughly twice as likely to live in poverty than students in the metro region as a whole.

PERCENT STUDENTS BELOW POVERTY LINE IN THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS BY EDUCATION LEVEL

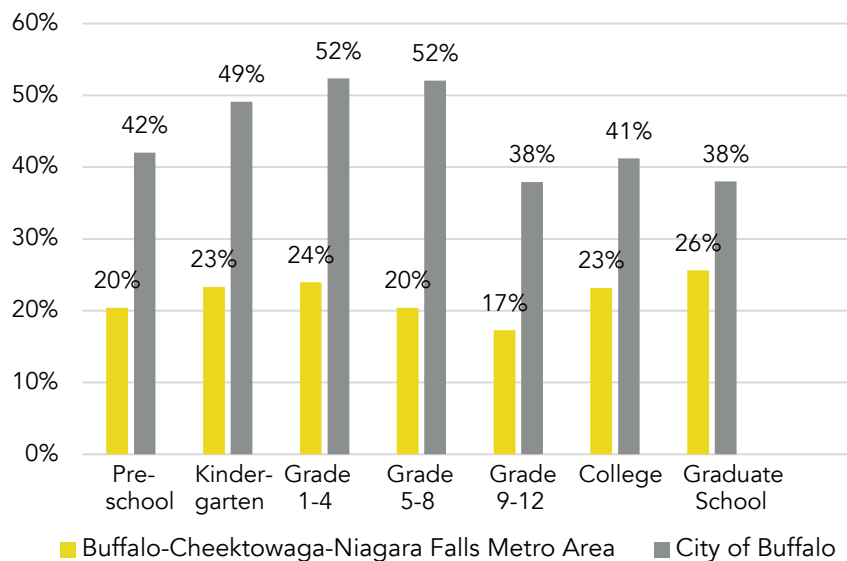


Figure 2. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2012-2016, 5-year estimates.

The same pattern appears when we look at graduation rates in the City of Buffalo compared to the first-ring suburbs. The Buffalo district has lower graduation rates than districts in the first-ring suburbs.

An adult in the City of Buffalo is almost **twice as likely** as an adult in the Metro area to be without a high school diploma.

City of Buffalo students are **twice as likely to live in poverty** than students in the Metro region.

Students in the Tonawanda school district and the Amherst school district are 40 to 60 percent more likely to graduate than students in Buffalo public schools (see Figure 3).

#### K-12 ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENT POPULATION AND SENIOR GRADUATION RATES IN BUFFALO AND FIRST-RING SUBURBS

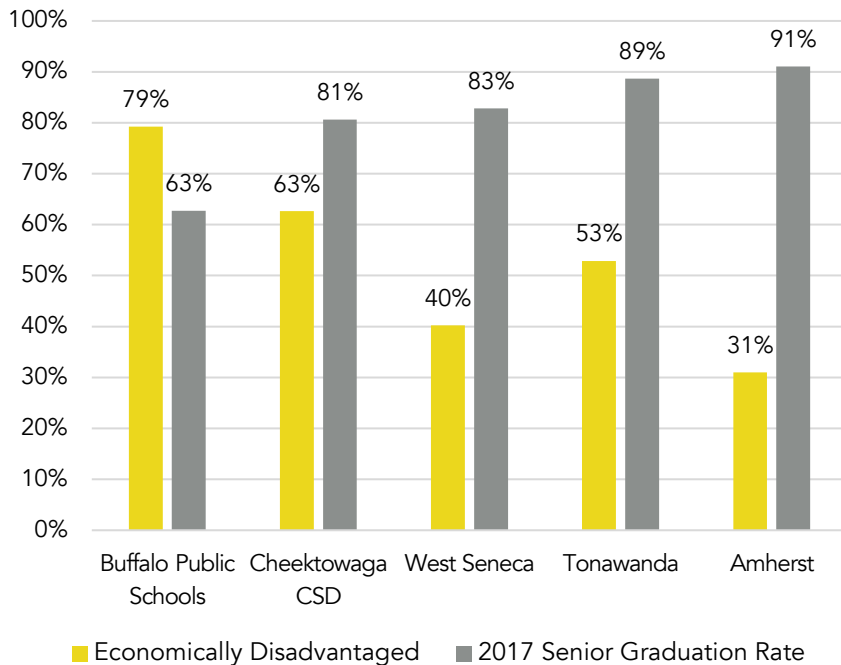


Figure 3. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

In Western New York, the most highly ranked public high schools except City Honors are all in affluent suburbs such as Williamsville, East Aurora, and Orchard Park. The twelve lowest ranked high schools are in Buffalo.<sup>1</sup> The main reason for this divide is the severe differences in poverty concentration in the districts.<sup>2</sup> National research has shown that income is the most powerful predictor of educational success for individual students, schools, and school districts.<sup>3</sup> A 2013 report by PPG found that three-fourths of the variation in test scores among local schools could be explained by their percentage of students with low incomes.<sup>4</sup>

Buffalo-Niagara's educational disparities between city and suburbs mirror those of the nation. In 2009, roughly 59% of students served by urban school districts located in the metropolitan areas of the 50 largest U.S. cities graduated, compared with 77% in nearby

Except City Honors, Western New York's most highly ranked public high schools are all in affluent suburbs.

suburban communities.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the Buffalo graduation rate (currently 63%) may be low, but it is also typical for large urban districts. In fact, given the extreme concentrated poverty in the district, Buffalo's graduation rate is perhaps higher than expected.

## Segregation

Buffalo-Niagara's poverty is unusually concentrated in its cities and among its people of color. In 2016, the poverty rate in the city of Buffalo was 31.2%—over twice the rate for the region as a whole (13.8%). Deep poverty is even more concentrated in the city. Of households with incomes below \$10,000, 48% live in the city of Buffalo. These geographic disparities are matched by racial disparities. The 2016 poverty rate for African-Americans and Hispanics was 32%. For American Indians it was 38%, and for Asians it was 31%, while for whites it was only 9%.<sup>6</sup> In 2014, the Buffalo-Niagara metro area was ranked seventh most segregated by income and the fifth most segregated by race.<sup>7</sup>

Buffalo public schools are just as segregated as they were in the 1970s, with a segregated school defined as at least 80% minority or 80% white. In 1972, 70% of the city's schools were segregated, prompting the issuance of the first of four federal desegregation orders in 1976. In a little over a decade, the segregation rate dropped to 40%, with 45 out of 74 schools considered integrated.<sup>8</sup> Buffalo public schools had become a national model of successful integration.<sup>9</sup> However, changing demographics, along with the termination of the court's desegregation order in 1996, triggered a reversal in the gains made and by 2012, 70% of Buffalo public schools were segregated once more.<sup>10</sup>

The re-segregation of Buffalo public schools is closely linked to the decline in the number of white students in the district as a whole. In 1972, white students accounted for 54% of the district. In 2017, they make up only 20%.<sup>11</sup> Today, white students are heavily concentrated in eleven schools where they make up the disproportionate majority (including two schools with test-based admission policies – City Honors and Olmsted 64).<sup>12</sup>

BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

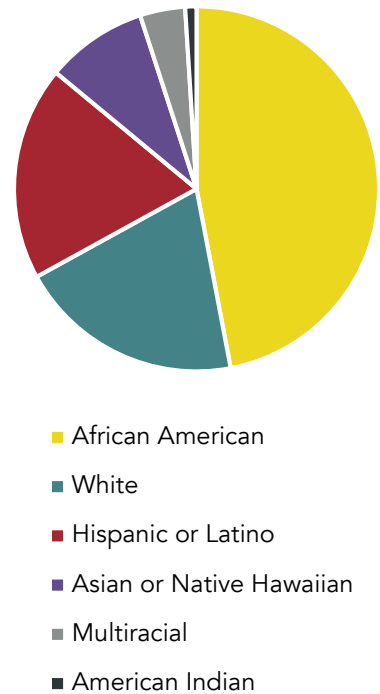


Figure 4. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

**Buffalo Public Schools are just as segregated now as they were in 1972, before federal desegregation orders.**

Buffalo's suburban districts are also highly segregated, although they are experiencing some change. Compared to other suburbs around the nation, Buffalo's suburbs are unusually white. As of 2015, the suburbs were 90.4% white, and only 3.5% black and 2.2% Hispanic.<sup>13</sup> The suburban districts are becoming somewhat more diverse, however. Over the past decade, the percentage of minority students grew in every school district but one in Erie and Niagara counties. In half of the districts, minority enrollment grew by at least 5%, and it grew by at least 10% in seven districts: Cheektowaga, Cleveland Hill, Sweet Home, Cheektowaga-Maryvale, Williamsville, Lockport, and Amherst.<sup>14</sup>

A relatively large part of the increase in diversity can be attributed to increased Asian enrollment, which in some cases accounts for more than all other minority groups combined. Half of the schools in Williamsville have an Asian enrollment that accounted for at least 10% of the student body. However, the most dramatic growth in minority population was in Cheektowaga, where black students now account for 32% of the enrollment.<sup>15</sup>

### Graduation Rates

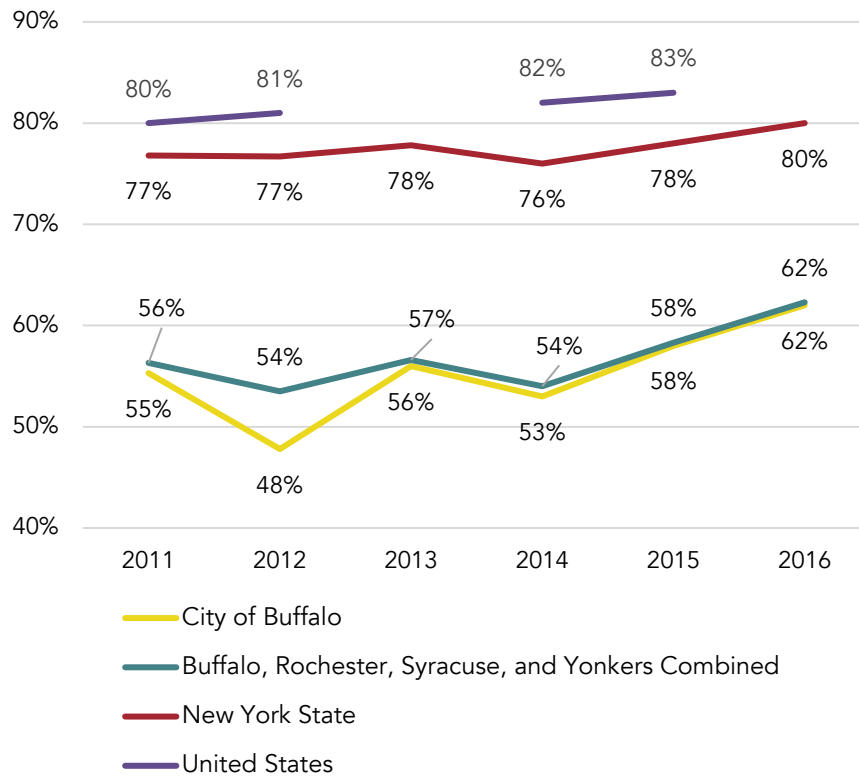
Graduation rates for public high schools in the City of Buffalo have risen in recent years and are very similar to those of Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers (see Figure 5). These rates, however, are much lower than New York State graduation rates or national rates – reflecting the concentrated poverty in the cities of upstate New York.

Graduation rates vary greatly across Buffalo public schools (see Figure 6). Districtwide, in 2016, Buffalo's 4-year graduation rate was 62%. Between schools, however, graduation rates ranged anywhere from 0% to 98%.

As shown in Figure 7, the schools with the highest graduation rates tend to have the fewest economically disadvantaged students. City Honors, for example, has less than half the rate of economically disadvantaged students that Riverside has (35% versus 79%).

Riverside has more than twice as many economically disadvantaged students than City Honors.

PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE BY GEOGRAPHICAL AREA



Low graduation rates in the City of Buffalo reflect the concentrated poverty in the cities of upstate NY.

Figure 5. New York State Education Department (NYSED), <https://data.nysed.gov>, and National Center for Educational Statistics, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_coi.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp).

BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE (2016)

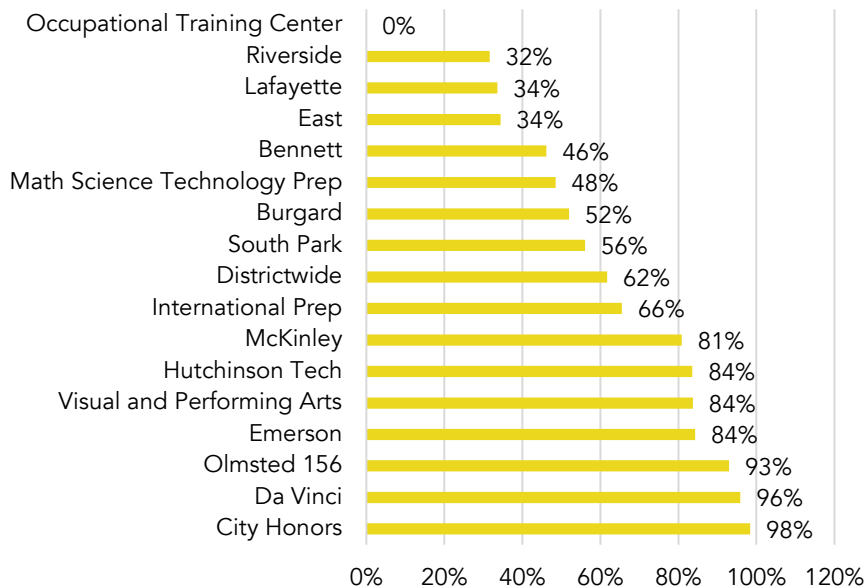


Figure 6. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

Graduation rates also correlate closely to the percentage of students with disabilities (see Figure 8). Several of the schools with the lowest graduation rates have a student disability rate of nearly 30%, while several of the schools with the highest graduation rates have student disability rates of 10% or less. Not all Buffalo schools report the number of students with limited English proficiency. In those that do, we see a similar correlation between low graduation rates and students with limited English (see Figure 9).

Within the Buffalo Public School District, lower graduation rates closely match higher levels of economic disadvantage, disability, and limited English proficiency.

BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AND PERCENTAGE OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS (2016)

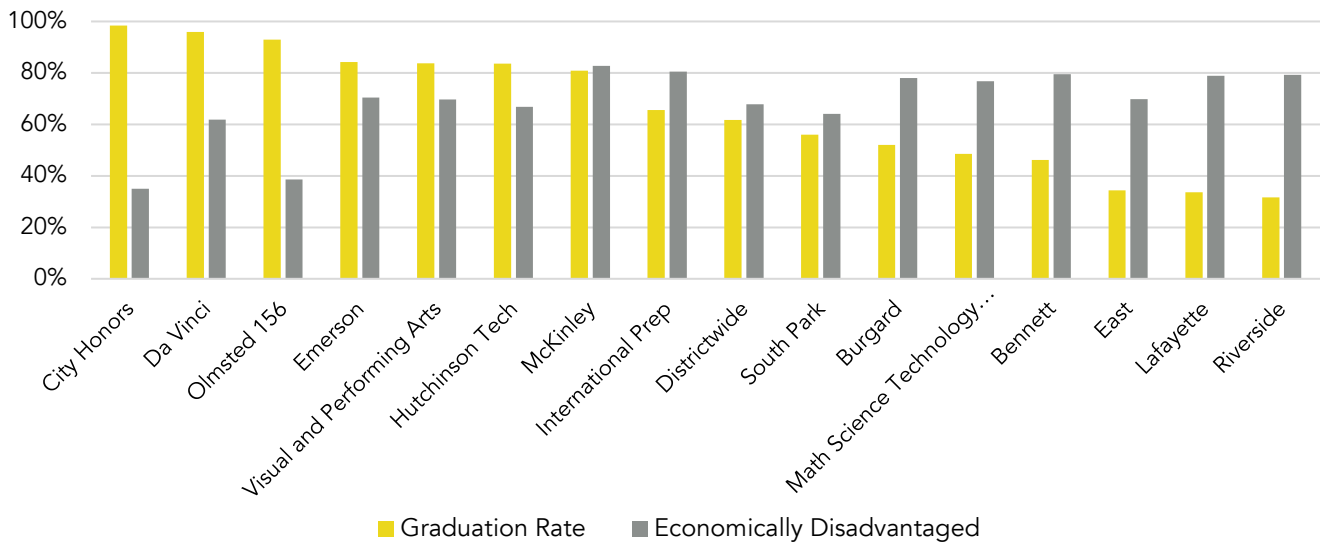


Figure 7. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AND PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY (2016)

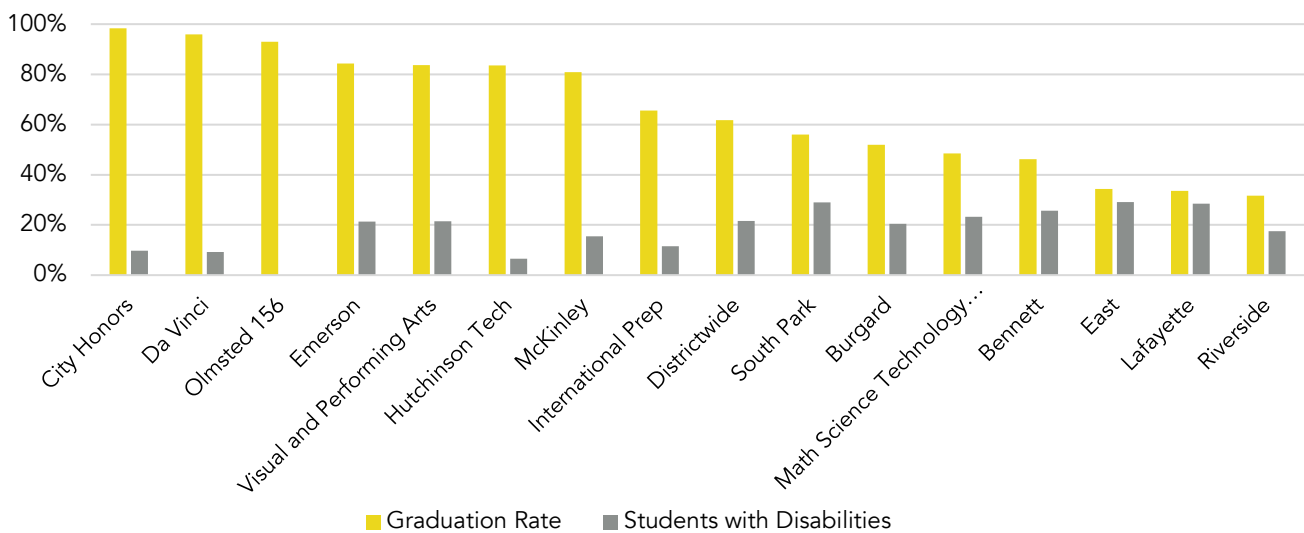


Figure 8. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

## BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AND PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (2016)

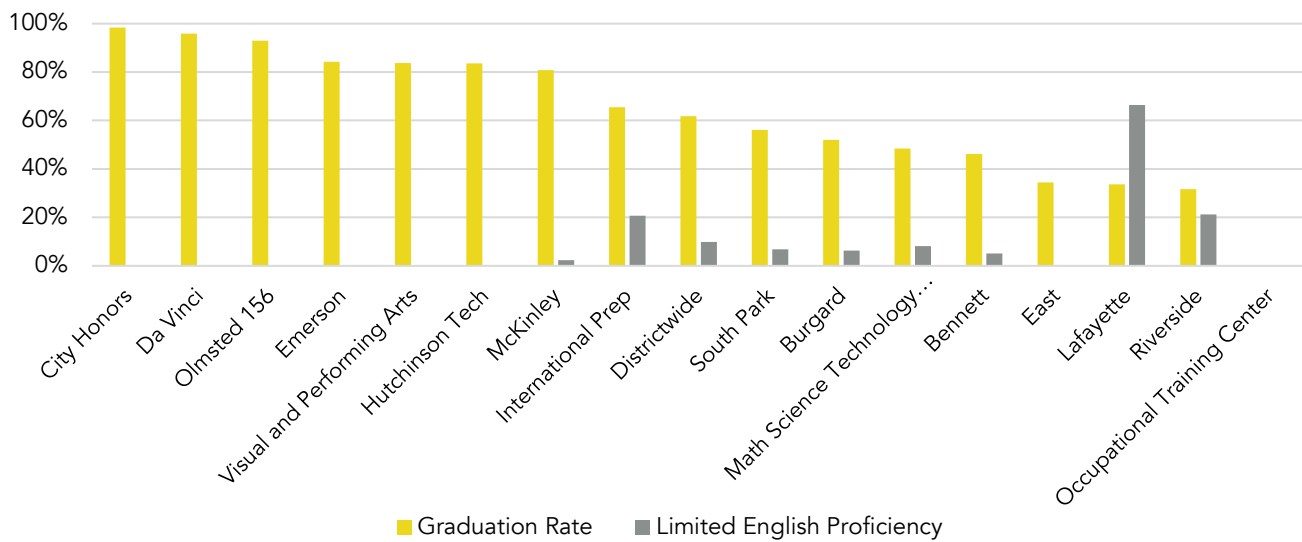


Figure 9. New York State Education Department (NYSED), available at <https://data.nysed.gov>.

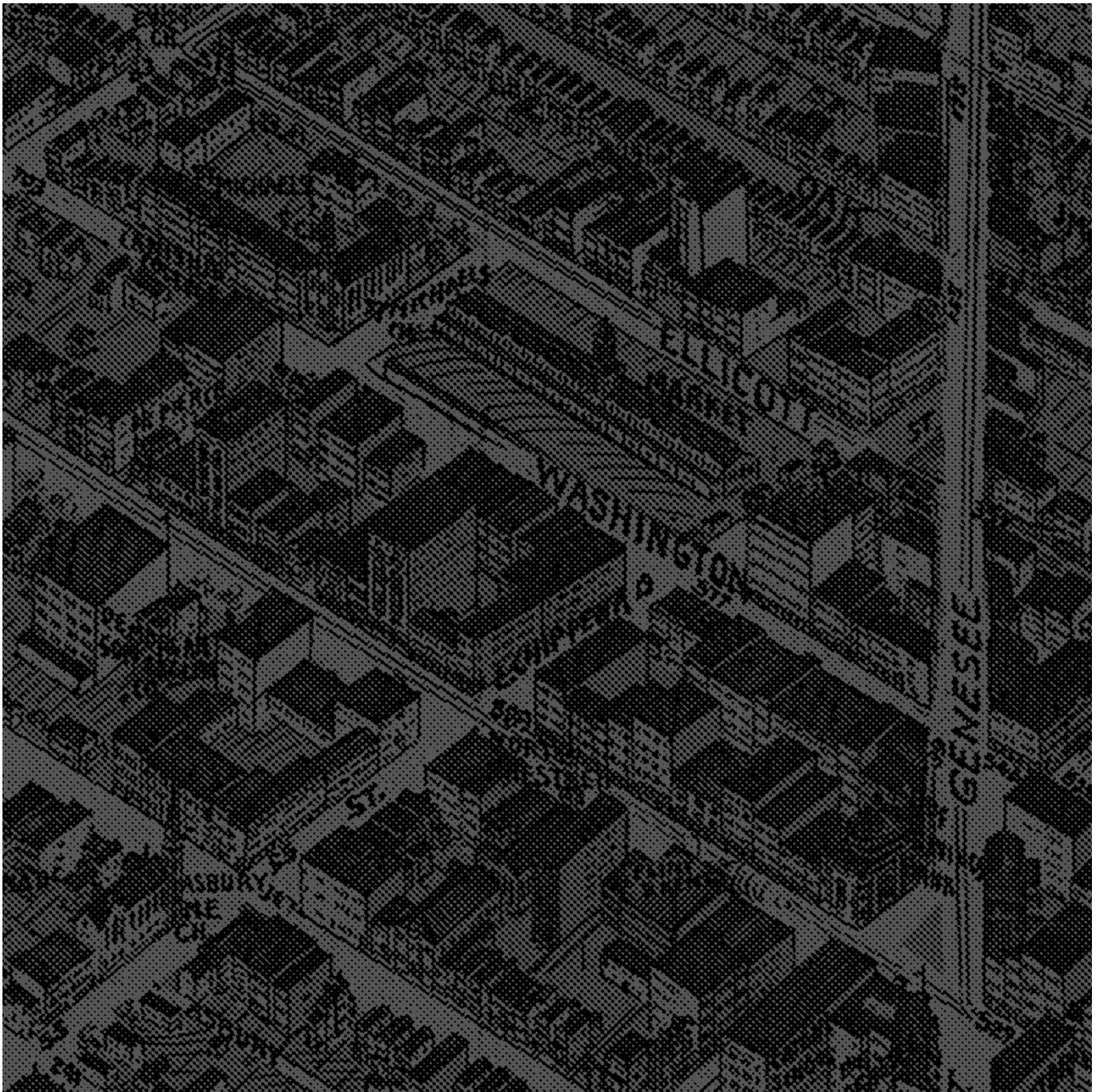
## Conclusion

In education as in many sectors, Buffalo-Niagara performs relatively well as a region but is marred by extreme inequities, with urban and minority populations faring much worse than suburban and white populations. The disadvantages that lower income students face in getting good educations are magnified when those students are concentrated together in schools, especially when those schools also contain high concentrations of students with disabilities and English language learners. Hence, the most powerful tool to improve educational outcomes is to reduce poverty, especially concentrated, racialized poverty of the kind prevalent in Buffalo-Niagara.



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