


MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable JB Pritzker, Governor
The Honorable Tony McCombie, House Minority Leader
The Honorable Don Harmon, Senate President
The Honorable John Curran, Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Speaker of the House

FROM: Dr. Tony Sanders 
State Superintendent of Education

DATE: February 23, 2024

SUBJECT: Evaluation of the Invest in Kids Act: Final Report

Pursuant to Section 45 of the Invest in Kids Act [35 ILCS 40] (“Act”), the Illinois State Board of Education submits the *Evaluation of the Invest in Kids Act: Final Report*, completed by WestEd.

Section 45(b) of the Act requires the State Board of Education to select an independent research organization to which participating qualified schools must report the scores of students who are receiving scholarships and who are assessed under the Act, and the independent research organization must submit an annual report to the State Board on its evaluation of the Act. The State Board of Education awarded WestEd a contract on September 29, 2022, to complete this work.

The Act requires scholarship recipients under the Act to be annually assessed beginning with the 2019-20 school year and requires the independent research organization to collect at least two years of assessment data in order to “report to the Board on the year-to-year learning gains of students receiving scholarships on a statewide basis” and to “include, to the extent possible, a comparison of these learning gains to the statewide learning gains of public school students with socioeconomic backgrounds similar to those of students receiving scholarships.” Assessments did not occur in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assessments occurred in 2021, but participation was very low and not representative of the student population, so the results are not comparable to other years. Therefore, the independent research organization conducted the statutorily required analysis using 2022 and 2023 assessment data.

Pursuant to Section 45(c) of the Act, the State Board of Education must annually submit the independent research organization’s written report, which includes an evaluation of the academic performance of students receiving scholarships and recommendations for improving student performance.

This report, prepared by the contracted independent research organization WestEd, is transmitted on behalf of the State Superintendent of Education. For additional copies of this report or for more specific

information, please contact Dana Stoerger, Executive Director, Legislative Affairs at (217) 782-6510 or dstoerge@isbe.net.

cc: Secretary of the Senate
Clerk of the House
Legislative Research Unit
State Government Report Center

Evaluation of the Invest in Kids Act: Final Report

RFP #20-586SBE-CHFED-B-11744

Daniel Bugler
Thomas Torre Gibney
Shelley Maberry
Ryan Miskell
Claudette D. Vaughn
Theodora Koumoutsakis
Bradley Quarles
Diana Roldan-Rueda
Tiffani Williams

January 2024

© 2024 WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Bugler, D., Torre Gibney, T., Maberry, S., Miskell, R., Vaughn, C.D., Koumoutsakis, T., Roldan-Rueda, D., Quarles, B., & Williams, T. (2024). *Evaluation of the Invest in Kids Act: Final Report*. WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that conducts and applies research, develops evidence-based solutions, and provides services and resources in education, human development, and related fields, aiming to improve outcomes and ensure equity for individuals from infancy through adulthood. For more information, visit [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org). For regular updates on research, free resources, solutions, and job postings from WestEd, subscribe to the E-Bulletin, our semimonthly e-newsletter, at [WestEd.org/subscribe](https://www.wested.org/subscribe).



Table of Contents

Introduction	1	
About the Invest in Kids Act Scholarships		1
Project Evaluation	5	
Evaluation Approach		5
Data Sources		5
Quantitative Analysis Plan		7
Qualitative Analysis Plan		11
Limitations of This Study		14
Quantitative Analysis	16	
Data and Sample		16
School Year 2020/21 Analysis		19
School Year 2021/22 Analysis		23
School Year 2022/23 Analysis		29
Two-Year Analysis		35
Comparison With Public School Students		37
SY 2022/23 SAT Analysis		39
Qualitative Analysis	41	
Private Elementary School Site Visit Selection		41
Private High School Site Visit Selection		42
Site Visit Details		42
Site Visit Findings		43
Survey Analysis		58
Key Findings	67	
Summary	70	
Appendices	71	

Introduction

WestEd is pleased to provide this report to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). This report summarizes our findings on the Invest in Kids Act (IIKA; Public Act 100-465)¹ and its impact on the academic outcomes of scholarship recipients. ISBE awarded WestEd a contract under RFP #20-586SBE-CHFED-B-11744 on September 29, 2022, to evaluate the IIKA. The contract ends on January 1, 2024. The contract stipulated two reports: a preliminary examination of findings, completed and delivered to ISBE on June 30, 2023, and this final report with our findings and recommendations.

WestEd was assisted in this work by our sub-contractor, Maberry Consulting and Evaluation Services, a Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprise in Swansea, Illinois. Throughout the 14-month project period, WestEd conducted a quantitative analysis of scholarship recipients' outcomes using IAR and SAT test score data. Both organizations worked together on site visits and qualitative analysis of interviews at schools that scholarship recipients attend. This two-pronged approach was designed to help the State of Illinois understand which outcomes are associated with scholarship receipt and how private schools support students.

About the Invest in Kids Act Scholarships

Illinois established the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Credit Program in 2017 through Public Act 100-465. The program provides income tax credits for taxpayers to make authorized contributions to a scholarship granting organization (SGO), which provides scholarships for eligible Illinois students to attend qualified nonpublic schools in Illinois.² SGOs are 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations the Illinois Department of Revenue has approved to accept contributions and to issue certificates of receipt (CORs) to contributors.³ These organizations must complete numerous certifications and submit extensive financial information to be considered for approval. Once approved, they are free to accept donations and applications for scholarships.

¹ <https://ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/100/PDF/100-0465.pdf>

² <https://tax.illinois.gov/programs/investinkids.html>

³ <https://tax.illinois.gov/programs/investinkids/sgo/sgo-requirements.html>

Taxpayers may receive a tax credit equal to 75 percent of the donation, up to a maximum credit of \$1 million per tax year.⁴ The program will expire on December 31, 2023, unless the state reauthorizes it.

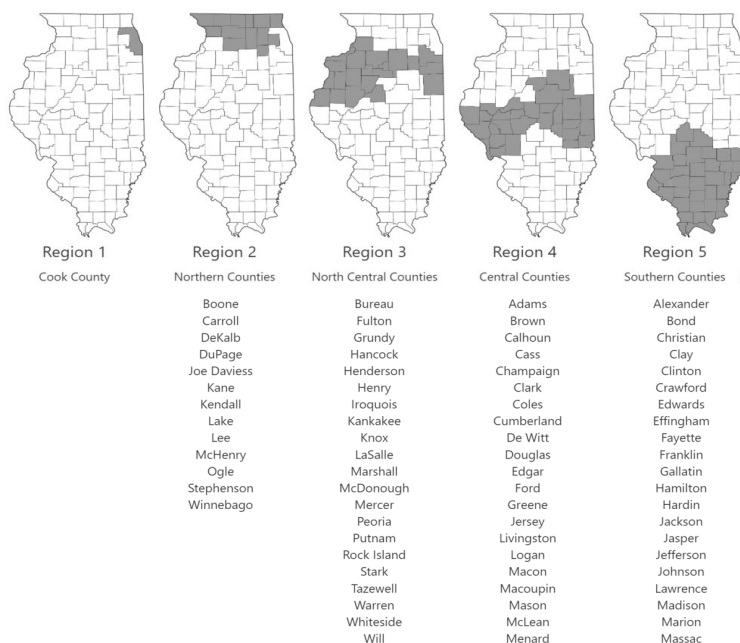
The SGOs accept applications from students, check for eligibility, and can then award scholarships, based on funding availability, to students who can attend private schools across Illinois. The IKA law awards tax credits to five regions in Illinois (see Table 1). The estimated proportionate share of tax credits by region for the 1st year of the program and the most recent data available are as follows:

Region	2018	2023
Region 1: Cook County	51.22%	52.45%
Region 2: Northern counties	23.09%	21.94%
Region 3: North Central counties	9.97%	9.38%
Region 4: Central counties	7.50%	7.98%
Region 5: Southern counties	8.22%	8.25%

Figure 1 shows the distribution of counties across the five regions. WestEd used these regional maps in the case selection process to ensure geographic representation across the schools for the site visits.

⁴ <https://www.icpas.org/information/copy-desk/insight/article/digital-exclusives-2022/understanding-the-tax-benefits-of-illinois-invest-in-kids-act>

Figure 1. Invest in Kids Illinois Regions



Schools receiving scholarship recipients must be

- nonpublic,
- located in Illinois, and
- recognized by ISBE according to Section 2-3.25o of the School Code.

Scholarship-receiving schools must provide for all students in compliance with federal nondiscrimination statutes. Schools register to be recognized by the ISBE according to Section 2-3.25o of the School Code before receiving the funds from IIKA.

Parents apply to SGOs via their websites for scholarships. In 2021/22, most parents and schools obtained scholarships from Empower Illinois, the state’s largest SGO (see Table 2). If awarded, the SGO sends funds for that student directly to the school the student will attend. Parents may apply to more than one SGO to cover their financial needs. The scholarships have been popular with parents. In 2022/23, 9,656 students were awarded scholarships.

Table 2. Illinois Invest in Kids School Scholarship Program 2022/23⁵

Scholarship granting organization (SGO)	Number of contributions	Dollars contributed	Scholarships awarded
Empower Illinois	4,041	\$51,304,667	7,018
Children's Tuition Fund of Illinois	155	\$2,216,976	294
Big Shoulders Fund	968	\$19,578,516	2,038
Institute for Community at HighPoint	7	\$85,450	7
Hightsight	8	\$99,632	8
Bright Promises Fund	114	\$2,682,382	291
TOTAL	5,293	75,967,622	9,656

⁵ Harris, D. (2022). *Invest in Kids Act annual report*. Illinois Department of Revenue. Retrieved June 20, 2023, from <https://files.illinoispolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Invest-in-Kids-Act-Annual-Report-2023.pdf>

Project Evaluation

In this section, WestEd elaborates on its evaluation approach, data sources, and evaluation questions. This section covers WestEd’s quantitative analysis plan, including the data sources and matching approach, the descriptive analysis, and analytic samples. Then WestEd describes the qualitative analysis plan, including the development of site visit protocols, the analytic plan, approval by the institutional review board, the data security plan, the positionality of WestEd’s evaluation team, changes to the evaluation plan, and limitations of this study.

Evaluation Approach

WestEd’s evaluation is a mixed-methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This two-pronged approach is intended to help the state understand how students with scholarships perform and how private schools are organized to support students’ success.

The evaluation questions and analysis approach guiding this work include the following:

- Q1: What is the academic performance of scholarship recipients?
- Q2: Do scholarship recipients achieve more learning gains when compared to the statewide learning gains of public school students?
- Q3: What are the programs, practices, cultural norms, and systems of support that students experience in outperforming private schools?

Data Sources

To answer the evaluation questions, WestEd obtained a variety of data. Below, WestEd lists key evaluation questions and data sources.

Data sources:

- a data set of the number of students receiving scholarships for each IIKA participating private school in the state for school years 2020/21 and 2021/22
- private school program eligibility information by school year from the ISBE website indicating IIKA eligibility and including school-level demographic characteristics, such as the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic compositions of the private schools
- the U.S. Department of Education’s Private School Universe Survey (PSS) from school year 2019/20 (the most recent year data were available), which includes data on eligible schools’ programmatic and geographic characteristics

Q1: What is the academic performance of scholarship recipients?

Data sources:

- Illinois Assessment for Readiness (IAR) English language arts (ELA) and math data for all IIKA scholarship recipients in 3rd through 8th grade tested in 2021, 2022, and 2023
- SAT scores for IIKA scholarship recipients in private high schools tested in 2023
- Illinois public school IAR averages for ELA and math tested in 2021, 2022, and 2023 and average gain scores in ELA and math by performance level for 2021/22 and 2022/23

Q2: Do scholarship recipients achieve more learning gains when compared to the statewide learning gains of public school students?

Data sources:

- gain scores by performance level on the IAR ELA and math data for all IIKA 3rd through 8th-grade scholarship recipients tested in 2021/22 and 2022/23
- Illinois public school IAR average gain scores in ELA and math by performance level for 2021/22 to 2022/23

Q3: What are the programs, practices, cultural norms, and systems of support that students experience in outperforming private schools?

Data sources:

- site visits to seven private elementary schools and three private high schools
- interviews with administrators, teachers, parents, and students obtained during site visits
- survey data from seven private elementary schools

When the contract was awarded, private schools posted scholarship recipients' test score data for the IAR and SAT to a central repository. WestEd obtained this report's student test score data from the repository, eliminating the need to collect it from individual schools. WestEd received the data in three separate electronic deliveries. In February 2023, WestEd received the IAR test score data for IIKA students for the 2021 and 2022 test administrations and the 2022 SAT data for IIKA students. In early June 2023, WestEd received IAR test score data for IIKA students for the 2023 assessment. Finally, WestEd received the 2023 SAT scores for IIKA students in early July 2023.

Upon receipt of the data in February 2023, WestEd reviewed data fields and ran data verification checks. Private schools are only required to test IIKA scholarship recipients. However, in the 2022 SAT data, some schools included non-scholarship recipients (who took the test as part of the college application process) with the IIKA scholarship recipients. The data lacked a variable indicating who was and was not a scholarship recipient. Therefore, WestEd decided not to use the 2022 SAT data in the analysis. WestEd received assurances that the 2023

test data would only have the required scores of IIKA scholarship recipients. Thus, the high school analysis has only one year of SAT data.

From the data sources used in this study, WestEd found that school-level demographic information is available for scholarship-receiving schools. However, the test files for IIKA students lack student-level demographic information. These files only show the grade level of the scholarship students who took the test and their test scores. This fact constrained the possible analysis and comparisons. Instead of conducting student-level analysis matching public and private school students by demographic characteristics, WestEd could only compare IIKA scholarship recipients' scores to average statewide scores for public school students.

Quantitative Analysis Plan

The quantitative analysis is designed to answer the first two evaluation questions:

- Q1: What is the academic performance of scholarship recipients?
- Q2: Do scholarship recipients achieve more learning gains when compared to the statewide learning gains of public school students?

WestEd's quantitative analysis plan had four stages: data verification, descriptive analysis, longitudinal analysis, and comparison of public school students and IIKA scholarship recipients' year-to-year gains.

Data Sources and Matching Approach

WestEd used four primary data sources to conduct quantitative analyses of academic performance. First, WestEd retrieved data on schools' IIKA eligibility status from the ISBE website based on the state's lists of registered and recognized nonpublic schools in 2021, 2022, and 2023.⁶ These data sets provided information about the schools' enrollments, locations, and demographic compositions. Second, WestEd received SGO-reported data about the schools that enrolled scholarship students in those years. These files contained school names, addresses, and counts of the number of scholarships received per school and grade.

Without a common unique identifier, these first two files were merged using the school names and the first three numbers of the school addresses. WestEd conducted further cleaning of school names to reconcile discrepancies related to punctuation and abbreviations (e.g., changing instances of "St." to "Saint" and vice versa to improve match rates across data sets). After matching the data in this manner, the merge resulted in 34 schools from the SGO data (8.4%) that could not be matched with the registered and recognized schools' data.

Third, WestEd retrieved publicly available data on all private schools in Illinois from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Private School Universe⁷ (PSS) Survey from school year

⁶ <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Nonpublic-Elementary-and-Secondary-School-Registration-and-Recognition.aspx>

⁷ Private School Universe Survey (PSU) ED.gov <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/>.

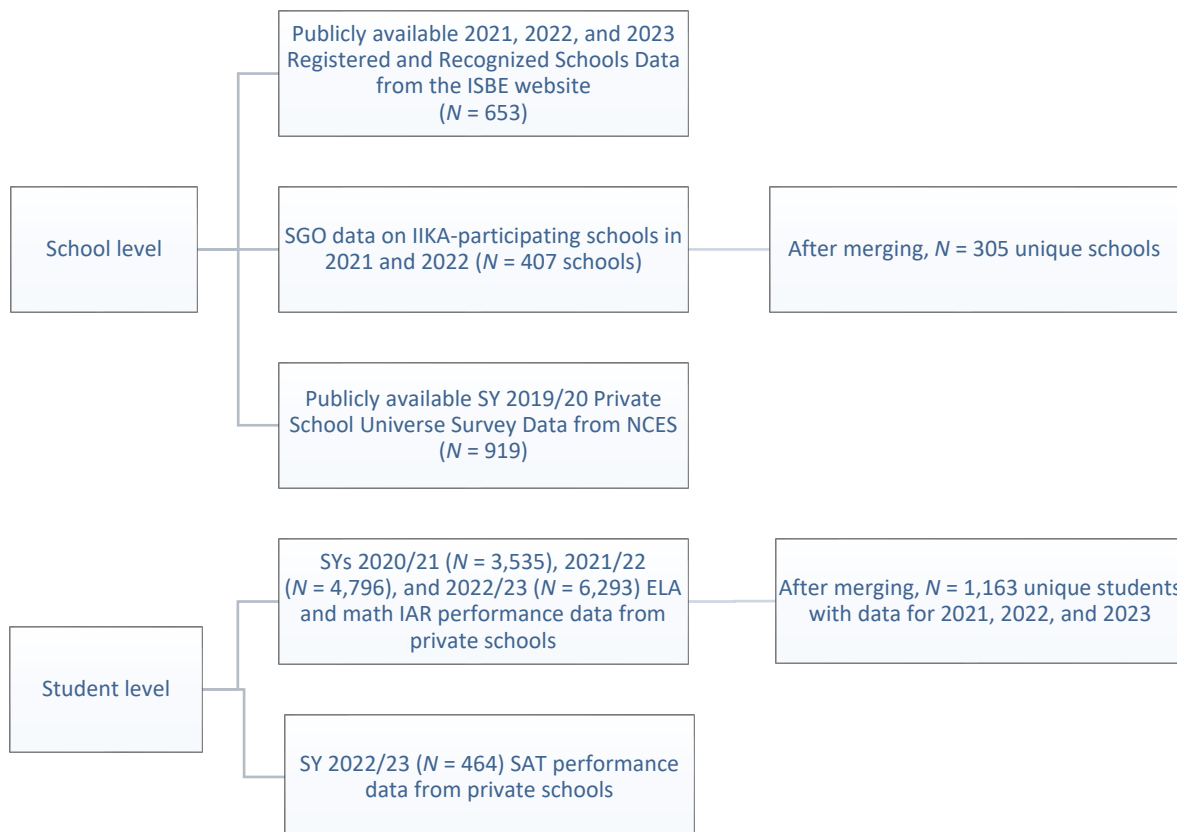
(SY) 2019/20, the most recent year for which data were available at the time of analyses. WestEd merged this file with the combined school-level data sets to obtain additional information on schools' locales (i.e., urbanicity classification) and religious affiliations. Like the previous step, the merge used a matching approach based on the names and addresses of the schools because the data did not contain a unique identifier that could be matched with the NCES-issued private school ID in the PSS data. The merge revealed significant numbers of IIKA schools absent in the PSS files, equivalent to 72 percent of the schools. The large volume of missing school data could have been due to several factors, including variations in the spellings of school names between the two sources, the misalignment of the data years, or incomplete coverage of the universe of private schools surveyed by NCES. Thus, WestEd did not use the PSS demographic data because of the number of IIKA-participating schools that were not in the PSS files, and the PSS data did not align with the school years represented in the analyses.

Fourth, WestEd received the student-level test data containing 3rd through 8th-grade scholarship recipients' math and ELA scale scores and corresponding performance levels on the IAR in SYs 2020/21, 2021/22, and 2022/23. The data also contained the names and state-assigned IDs of the schools in which the students enrolled. WestEd found some discrepancies in the data, including the same student ID being linked to multiple different student names and minor variations in the spelling of students' names, making it unclear whether some records were duplicates. After testing several alternative approaches to matching students across years, WestEd opted for a restrictive approach because it eliminated some discrepancies in the data, thereby giving WestEd greater confidence in the fidelity of the matches.

Finally, this student-level data set was merged with the cleaned school-level data sets to obtain the combined data upon which WestEd based all subsequent analyses for grades 3–8 scholarship recipients. Because student-level data on the demographic characteristics of scholarship recipients were unavailable, the analyses focused on average performance trends by grade, subject, and year and selected school-level characteristics, such as the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic composition of the student body. See Figure 2 for a graphic illustration of the data sources used to construct the merged student–school IAR performance data set.

To assess high school performance, WestEd used the student-level SAT scores for all 11th-grade scholarship recipients who took the SAT in the 2022/23 SY. This data was examined separately from the IAR data.

Figure 2. Flowchart Illustrating the Construction of the Student–School Data Sets



Descriptive Analysis

WestEd conducted descriptive analyses for grades 3 through 8 data to summarize the results of each year of testing, to summarize learning gains made by students from one testing year to the next, and to compare the performance of scholarship recipients with the public school state averages. WestEd also conducted descriptive analysis of high school scholarship recipients' average SAT scores and percentile rankings for 11th grade students who took the exam during the 2022/23 school year. See the Quantitative Analysis section later in this report for more details on the analysis.

Analytic Samples

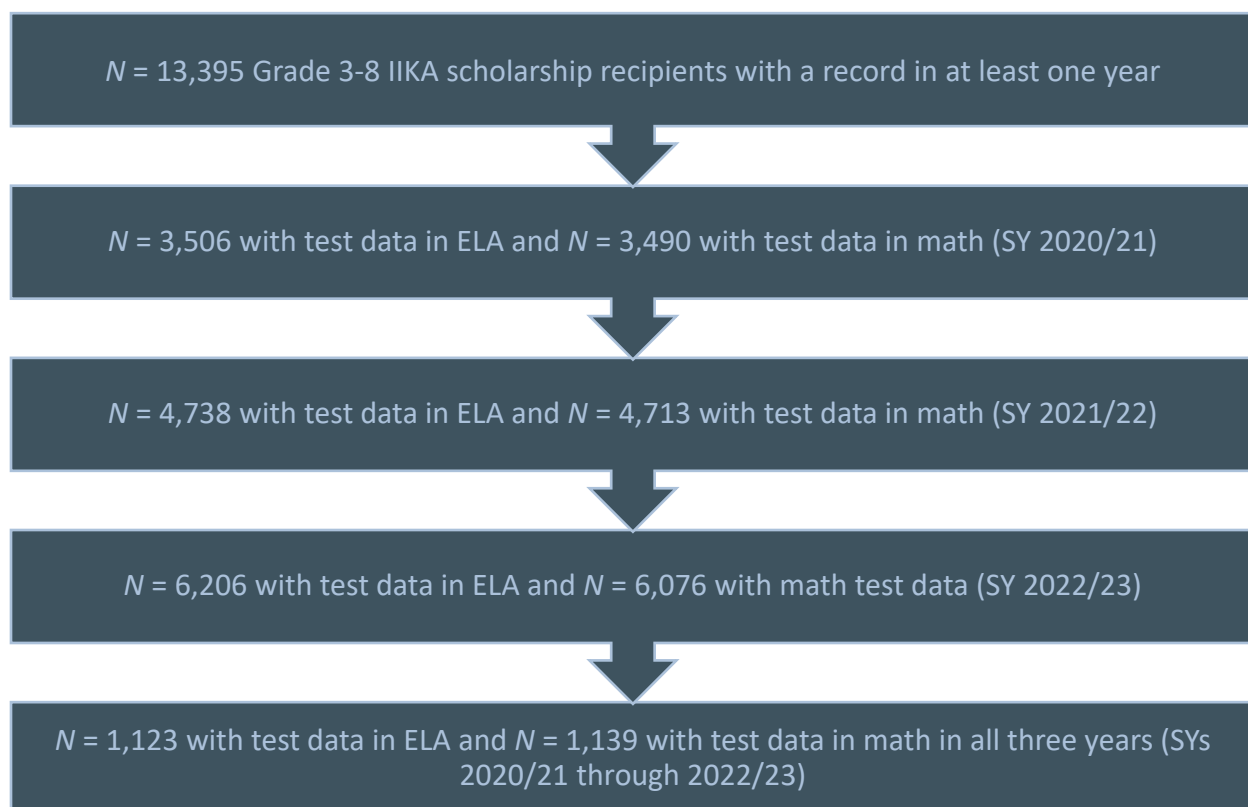
For the IAR analyses pertaining to IKA scholarship recipients in grades 3 through 8, WestEd sought to maximize the data available for analysis by examining year-specific trends in performance outcomes and by examining ELA and math outcomes separately rather than excluding observations for having incomplete test data across years or subjects. As a result, four distinct analytic samples were identified for the analyses of IAR student performance.

- The first sample included IKA scholarship recipients with a test data record in at least one of the two subjects in SY 2020/21. This total amounted to 3,535 students, including 3,506 (99.2%) with an ELA score that year and 3,409 (96.4%) with a math score.
- The second sample included IKA scholarship recipients with a test data record in at least one of the two subjects in SY 2021/22. This total amounted to 4,796 students, 4,738 (98.8%) of whom had an ELA score that year and 4,713 (98.3%) of whom had a math score.
- The third sample included IKA scholarship recipients with a test data record in at least one of the two subjects in SY 2022/23. This total amounted to 6,293 students, 6,206 (98.6%) of whom had an ELA score that year and 6,076 (96.6%) of whom had a math score.
- The fourth sample was the longitudinal sample of IKA scholarship recipients with a record of test data in at least one of the two subjects for all three school years examined. This total amounted to 1,169 unique student records representing 170 schools. Of this total, 1,123 students (96.1%) had an ELA score in all three years, and 1,139 students (97.4%) had a math score for all three years.⁸

Taken together, a total of 13,395 unique student records were included in the IAR analyses across the three years. See Figure 3 below for a graphic illustration of the analytic samples used in the IAR analyses.

For the SAT analyses pertaining to students in grade 11, WestEd's analyses focused on the 2022/23 SY. The analytic sample for the SAT analyses included 464 students with complete data on the exam's evidence-based reading and writing (EBRW) and math sections. The students' essay scores with complete EBRW and math data were also examined. Together, these students enrolled in 77 unique high schools. The average high school enrolled 12 scholarship recipients; the range included a minimum of one student to a maximum of 33. While demographic data on students' race and ethnicity was included in the SAT files, this self-reported measure contained high levels of missing data due to non-response (69.8% of students chose not to report their race/ethnicity). Thus, WestEd did not disaggregate results by race/ethnicity.

⁸ For the longitudinal analyses, this report focuses on the 1-year gain in student scores from the 2021/22 SY to the 2022/23 SY. The sample of students for this analysis is identical to the sample with three years of data (i.e., the same 1,169 students with data in SYs 2021/22 and 2022/23 also had data in SY 2020/21).

Figure 3. Sample Sizes for the Analyses of Grades 3–8 Performance

Qualitative Analysis Plan

WestEd designed the school site visits to answer evaluation question 3:

- Q3: What are the programs, practices, cultural norms, and systems of support that students experience in outperforming private schools?

To answer that question, WestEd designed a series of interviews and survey protocols to capture the perspectives of administrators, teachers, parents, and students about their schools. The qualitative analysis plan includes the development of site visit protocols, the analytic plan, completing the Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements and the data security plan, and consideration for WestEd’s evaluation team members’ positionality.

Development of Site Visit Protocols

The school site visits allowed WestEd to identify and investigate the contextual factors associated with the selected schools. WestEd sought to understand how schools are organized

and led, how they support instruction and student learning, and how parents are involved. In reviewing resources ISBE uses to help parents understand public schools, WestEd found reports on the 5Essentials® surveys for public schools. The 5Essentials® uses a framework to examine effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction. Since these cover the main aspects of school operations that WestEd sought to understand, WestEd decided to draw on this framework with some variations to organize and structure the interview and survey protocols (see Appendix C for protocols used in this study).⁹ In designing protocols, WestEd sought public domain questions aligned with this framework, but WestEd did not seek to replicate the University of Chicago’s surveys.¹⁰

WestEd developed questions for surveys and interviews to understand schools in the following five areas.

Leadership

How do principals lead their schools? Do they share leadership responsibilities with teachers or other staff? What is their vision and mission for the school? How do they organize people and resources to support that vision for sustained improvement? How do they support high-quality instruction? How do they support professional growth for faculty and staff?

Teaching

Do teachers work alone or in teams? How is the school organized to support collaboration among teachers and staff? How are teachers involved in decisions about instruction and school improvement? How do leadership and the school community support teachers? What professional growth options are provided by the school?

Engaged Families

How are parents involved in the daily life of the school? How do parents describe their relationship with teachers and administrators? How does the school communicate with parents, especially about students learning?

Culture

How do parents, students, teachers, and leaders describe their school culture? Do they think the school is safe and supportive? How is the school responding to students’ emotional and academic needs? How does the school support strong academic achievement?

Instruction

How do parents and students describe their classes and schoolwork? Do they think teachers are challenging students? Do they think students are prepared for their next grade or school? How do teachers and administrators rate the quality of instruction in the school?

⁹ <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/5Essentials-Survey.aspx>

¹⁰ UChicago Impact. (n.d.). *The 5Essentials Framework*.

https://www.uchicagoimpact.org/sites/default/files/5eframework_outreach%26marketing%20%281%29.pdf

Analytic Plan

WestEd conducted a thematic qualitative data analysis for the interviews and focus groups. The analysis began with an initial coding scheme organized around the evaluation questions to identify common themes and patterns. WestEd developed new codes to record relevant details that did not correspond to the initial codes, expanding the codebook as necessary.

WestEd conducted a descriptive analysis of survey results, developing means and standard deviations for responses. Due to varying levels of survey response from the schools, WestEd opted to report these findings in the aggregate rather than school-by-school.

Institutional Review Board

WestEd developed a data security plan and received IRB approval for this study before obtaining student-level data. For the IRB approval, WestEd developed (a) data collection protocols, (b) informed consent documents, (c) a data security plan, (d) a plan to establish a secure computing environment, and (e) additional documentation of all evaluation procedures.

After the contract signing, from October through January, WestEd developed all the materials needed for the IRB (see Appendix C for surveys and interview protocols) and received IRB approval on February 21, 2023. WestEd collected IKA assessment data in late February and early March 2023.

Data Security Plan

WestEd created a secure computing environment (SCE) to store and use the data for this project. The SCE has access restricted to trained users who have installed the appropriate VPN software on their computers. All data files were transferred using a secure FTP protocol directly into WestEd's SCE. WestEd also completed and received approval for a data security plan that outlines what data is held, where and for how long, who has access to that data, and what happens to the data at the end of the project. All student-level data will be destroyed at the end of the contract.

Positionality of WestEd's Evaluation Team

Before the study, WestEd reflected on how staff assumptions, biases, and experiences related to race, ethnicity, and religion could influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. IKA is designed to help students with low family income participate in schools they choose based on the needs of the students. In this program, students may choose independent or religiously affiliated schools. WestEd staff in this study share some cultural and demographic characteristics with the students in this study but have unique and different lived experiences. The WestEd staff are employed in relatively well-paid positions with good access to social capital. The WestEd team is mixed-race and mixed-gendered and attended various

independent, religious, and public schools. WestEd sought to acknowledge these differences between students and researchers to minimize potential bias in the conduct of this study.

Limitations of This Study

There are several limitations WestEd identified during this study:

- WestEd needed to complete school site visits in early May to avoid the testing window and finish the site visits before the last two weeks of school. When WestEd received the IIKA data in early March 2023, it did not allow enough time to conduct descriptive, longitudinal, and comparative analyses, select and recruit elementary and middle schools, and conduct the school site visits. Instead, WestEd used the descriptive and longitudinal analyses in the selection process but could not identify the schools that outperformed their public school peers at the time of the site visits.
- Because WestEd did not use the 2022 SAT data (due to the inclusion of non-IIKA scholarship students), the high school site visits were postponed to September 2023. This allowed WestEd to use the 2023 SAT data in the site visit selection process.
- For the IAR data, 2021 assessments were conducted during COVID-19. ISBE issued special guidance for public schools to make accommodations for the many changes that schools implemented during COVID-19 lockdowns.¹¹ Illinois assessments were required for public schools in 2021, but participation was extremely low and not representative of the student population, so the results are not comparable to other years. For this reason, WestEd is cautious about comparing the 2021 data to other assessment years where the assessment had more typical testing instructions.
- Scale scores are based only on grade-level content, meaning that the scale scores are not on the same scale across grades. This means that changes in scale scores between grades from one year to the next (for example, 3rd grade this year to 4th grade next year) are not meaningful in themselves.
- WestEd does not know if all eligible IIKA scholarship recipients were tested, so the data may not reflect the population of IIKA students.
- Consistent with reporting on the Illinois Report Card and to protect students' privacy, WestEd does not report data for groups of fewer than ten students. For the school visit selection process, WestEd only included potential schools with at least ten scholarship students tested in years 2021 and 2022, with scores in both ELA and math. Many private schools do not have more than ten scholarship students that they are required to test. Consequently, many schools were not included in the site visit selection process. For the

¹¹ <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/State-Plan-Accountability-2020-2021-FAQ.pdf#search=covid%2D19%20and%20Assessment%20%202020%2D2021>

analysis of the IAR, out of 472 schools with scholarship recipients, only 42 had at least ten tested scholarship students tested.

- WestEd conducted site visits to 10 schools. Although WestEd tried to select schools with a range of school-level characteristics such as test score performance, geographic location, religious affiliation, the ethnic makeup of the school, and the percentage of students from low-income families, they may not be representative of the 472 schools educating scholarship recipients.
- Because of these limitations, WestEd urges caution in interpreting these results. These results do not support causal inferences; these are descriptive trends based solely on available data.

Quantitative Analysis

This portion of the report addresses the first two research questions of the IKA evaluation:

- Q1: What is the academic performance of scholarship recipients?
- Q2: Do scholarship recipients achieve more learning gains when compared to the statewide learning gains of public school students?

To answer question 1, WestEd conducted descriptive analyses of the average performance levels of grades 3–8 scholarship recipients on the IAR in SYs 2020/21, 2021/22, and 2022/23, disaggregated by grade, tested subject, and select school characteristics. WestEd analyzed growth trends in performance from the prior year. For the 2021/22 school year, WestEd also compared the performance of scholarship recipients with the public school state averages. In addition, to assess the academic performance of high school scholarship recipients, WestEd analyzed the average SAT scores and percentile rankings of grade 11 students who took the exam during the 2022/23 school year.

To answer question 2, WestEd obtained data from ISBE on the average year-to-year differences in public school students'¹² scores on the IAR from SY 2021/22 to SY 2022/23 and compared these differences with those of scholarship recipients during the same period. These data were aggregated to the grade-subject level by public school students' baseline performance level (i.e., 1 through 5) in SY 2021/22. For example, for each subject, among public school students who enrolled in grade 3 in SY 2021/22 and who scored in the lowest performance level ("Did not yet meet expectations"), their average scale score change from that year to SY 2022/23 was calculated by ISBE and shared with WestEd for comparison with the average change among scholarship recipients in the same grade. The following sections describe the results of these analyses.

Data and Sample

The following analyses are based on a student-level sample of grades 3–8 IKA scholarship recipients enrolled in an IKA-participating private school in at least one of the school years 2020/21 or 2021/22. WestEd conducted the analyses separately by school year, based on the unique number of student records present in each year of data. WestEd retained students in the analytic samples so long as they had a test score for at least one of the mathematics or ELA

¹² ISBE provided these aggregated data for all public school students. WestEd's analyses focus on comparisons with this group, consistent with the aims of research question 2.

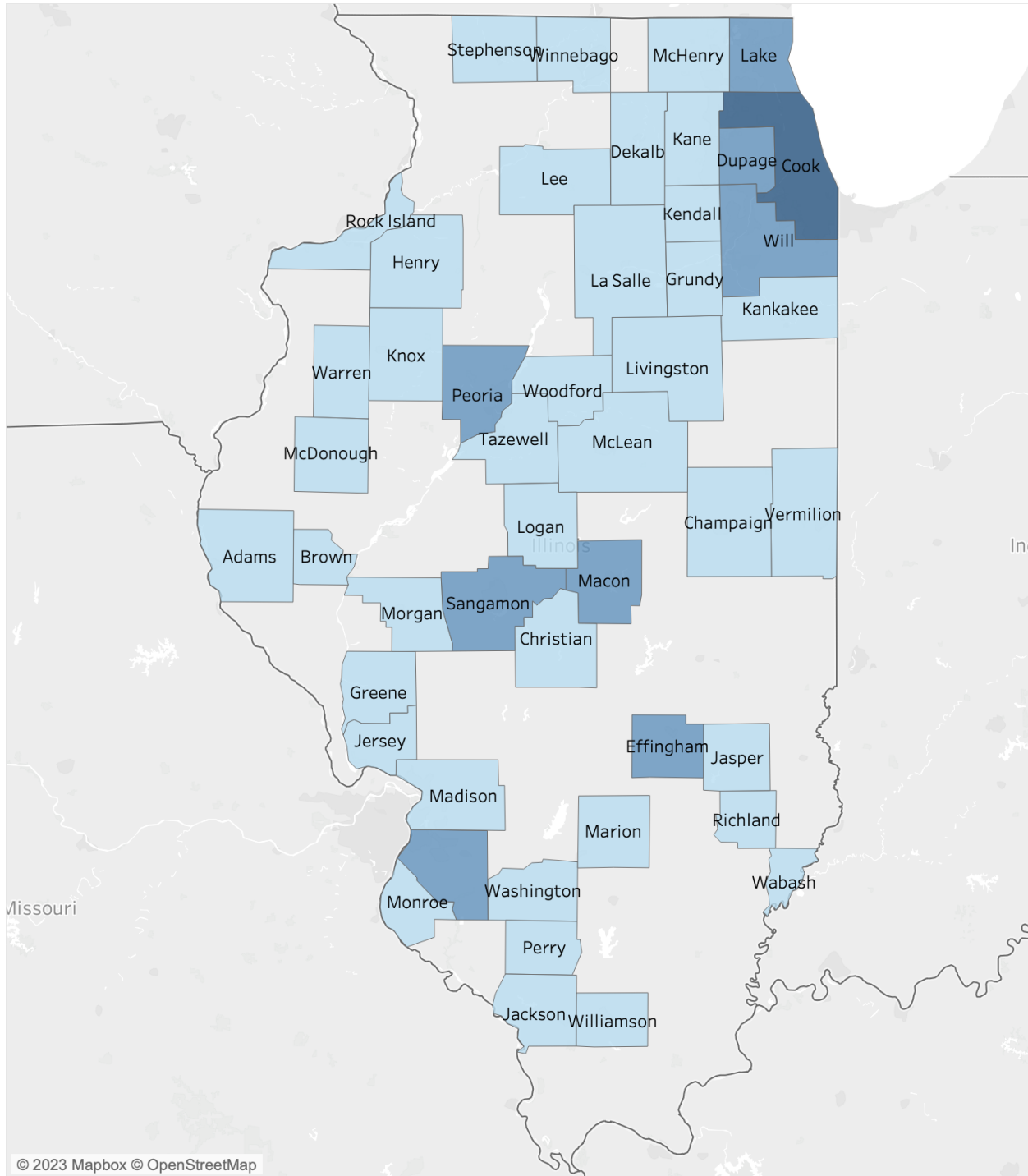
assessments (i.e., students did not need to have complete test data in both subjects to be included in analyses).

Over the three school years examined as part of WestEd’s evaluation (SY 2020/21 through SY 2022/23), a total of 13,395 scholarships have been awarded in grades 3–8.¹³ This number represents the count of unique students for whom test data was available over the three years.

Figure 4 shows a map of the Illinois counties with at least one IKA-participating private school with available student test data in any of the three years. The color gradients indicate the relative proportion of all 13,395 grade 3-8 students in the data set who enrolled in IKA private schools located in each county. Darker gradients represent higher proportions of students, while lighter gradients represent smaller proportions of students. Two-thirds (67.9 percent) of the scholarships have been awarded to students in Cook County.

¹³ Additionally, WestEd examined a subset of high school scholarship recipients for the single school year of 2022/23. These 464 students took the SAT as 11th graders in that year. When combined with the unique count of grades 3–8 student records, the grand *N* of all IKA Scholarship Recipients included in the evaluation was 13,859 across all years, data sources, and grade levels.

Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of Scholarship Recipients Enrolled in Private Illinois Elementary and Middle Schools, SYs 2020/21 through 2022/23



Note. Map based on total unique count of grade 3-8 IKA Scholarship recipients ($N = 13,395$) included in the analyses from SYs 2020/21 through 2022/23. Color gradients indicate the proportion of this total represented in each county. Counties color-coded with the lightest shading contained less than 1 percent of all students in the data set; counties with the next-darkest shading contained between 1 percent and 10 percent of all students; the darkest-shaded county, Cook, contained 67.9 percent.

School Year 2020/21 Analysis

School Year 2020/21 Sample

The 2020/21 sample contained 3,535 unique student records representing IKA scholarship recipients in 258 private schools. Among students for whom school-level enrollment data was available, the average student attended a private school with a total enrollment of 334 students and a student body that was 33 percent low-income, 49 percent female, 2 percent American Indian, 5 percent Asian, 15 percent Black/African American, 30 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Pacific Islander, 7 percent two or more races, and 64 percent White (Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of IKA Scholarship Recipients and the Schools They Attend Included in the 2020/21 Sample

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value	Number in the analysis
IAR Scores for IKA Scholarship Recipients (Student-level Data)					
English language arts scale score	728.1	30.3	650	850	3,506
Math scale score	723.4	29.4	650	840	3,490
Characteristics of Schools Attended by IKA Scholarship Recipients (School-level data)					
Total enrollment	333.8	216.0	23.0	2,107.0	3,043
% low-income	32.5	34.6	0.0	100.0	3,043
% female	49.1	9.4	0.0	60.8	3,043
% male	50.9	9.4	39.2	100.0	3,043
% American Indian	1.6	1.8	0.1	7.7	353
% Asian	5.3	9.5	0.2	80.4	1,600
% Black/African American	15.4	29.2	0.2	100.0	1,958
% Hispanic	29.0	33.4	0.2	100.0	2,083
% Pacific Islander	1.0	3.6	0.1	27.5	1,007
% Two or more races	6.5	5.7	0.3	35.0	2,444
% White	63.7	35.8	0.5	100.0	2,950

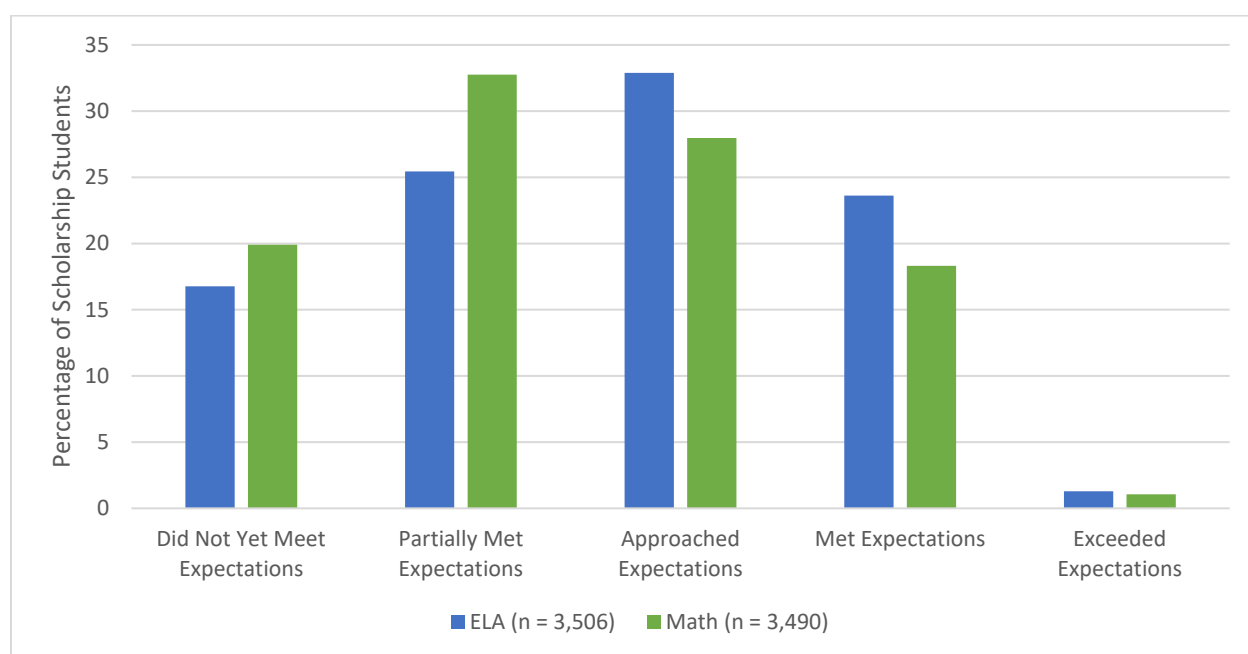
Note. The data has a Grand total of $N = 3,535$ IKA Scholarship Recipients. “Number in the analysis” refers to the number of students for whom information on a given characteristic is available. Values for all rows related to “Characteristics of Schools Attended” are private school characteristics obtained from publicly available data on the ISBE website. N counts vary widely for school characteristics due to large amounts of missing or suppressed data (where counts of students are less than 10).

School Year 2020/21 Results

About one-quarter of scholarship recipients were proficient in English language arts in 2021, while about one-fifth were proficient in math.

Among all IKA Scholarship Recipients in private schools who took the IAR in grades 3–8, 873 (24.7%) met or exceeded ELA expectations. For mathematics, 676 students (19.1%) met or exceeded expectations (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percentage Distribution of Scholarship Recipient Performance Levels in IAR ELA and Math, SY 2020/21

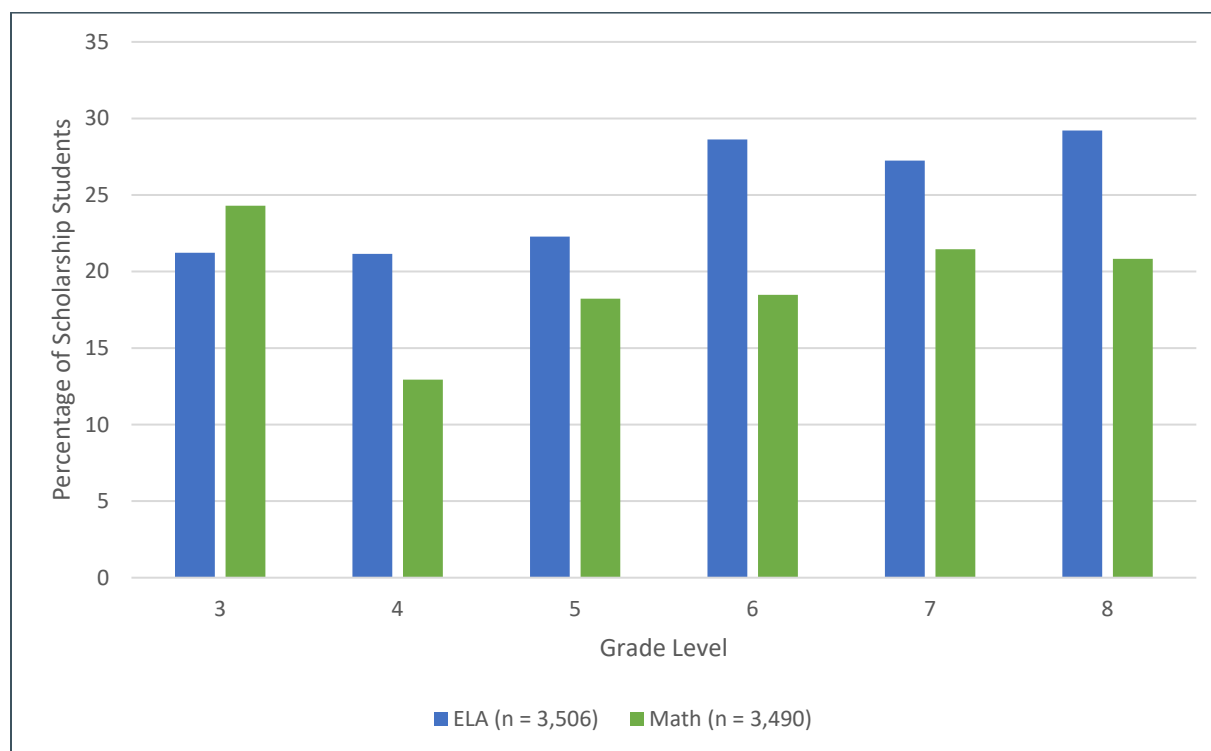


Note. Figure includes all IKA scholarship recipients with a record of ELA or math performance at their private school in SY 2020/21.

Proficiency rates were highest in the upper grades in English language arts. In contrast, proficiency rates in mathematics varied more widely by grade.

A smaller share of students met proficiency benchmarks in ELA in the lower grades compared to the upper grades (Figure 6). Specifically, 21.2 percent of students scored *proficient* or *advanced* in grade 3, compared to 29.2 percent in grade 8. The data for mathematics revealed that 24.3 percent of students scored *proficient* or *advanced* in grade 3, compared to 20.8 percent in grade 8; 4th graders had the lowest proficiency rates of all grade levels, with only 12.9 percent of 4th graders scoring *proficient* or *advanced*.

Figure 6. Percentage of IKA Scholarship Recipients Who Met Illinois Proficiency Benchmarks in IAR ELA and Math by Grade Level, SY 2020/21

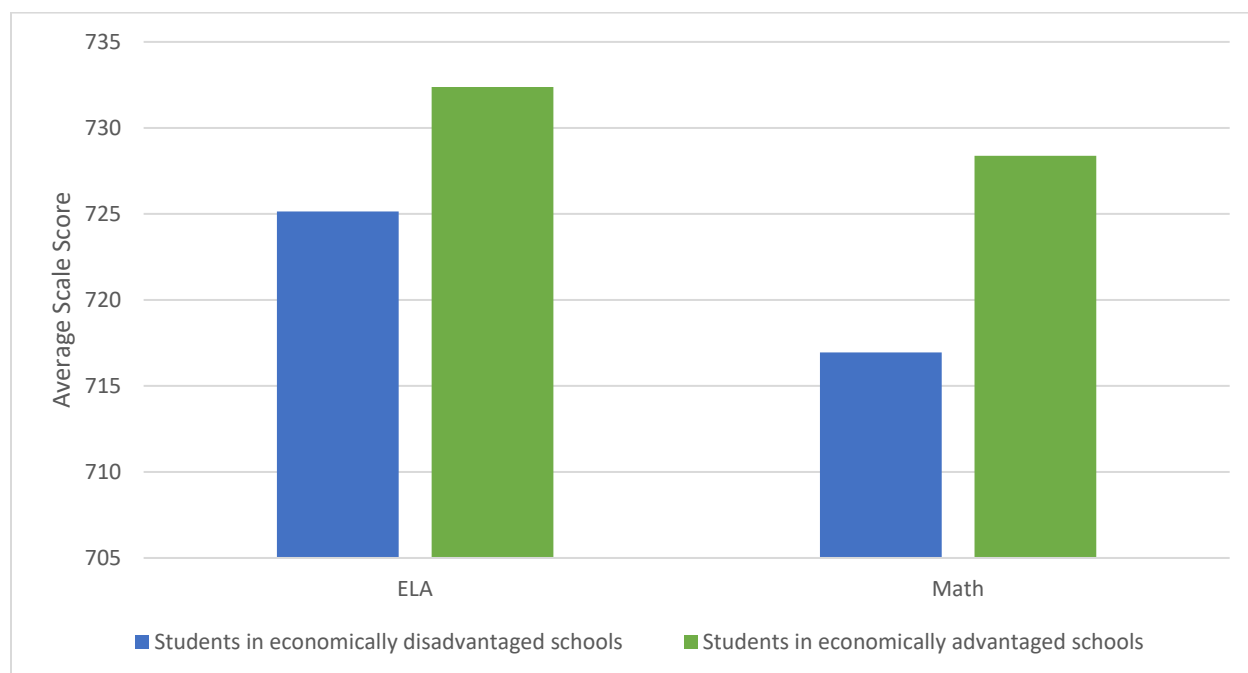


Note. Figure includes all IKA scholarship recipients with a record of ELA or math performance in SY 2020/21.

On average, students enrolled in private schools with higher percentages of low-income students had a lower scale score than those enrolled in private schools with lower percentages of low-income students.

In SY 2020/21, 812 scholarship recipients, or 23.0 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where low-income students comprised 90 percent or more of the student body (hereafter, “economically disadvantaged schools”). An additional 1,295 students, or 36.6 percent, enrolled in a private school where low-income students comprised less than 10 percent of the student body (hereafter, “economically advantaged schools”). On average, students enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools performed 7.2 scale points lower in ELA compared to those in economically advantaged private schools. In math, the difference was 11.4 scale points lower, on average (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Average Scholarship Recipient IAR ELA and Math Scores in Economically Advantaged Schools Compared to Economically Disadvantaged Schools, SY 2020/21



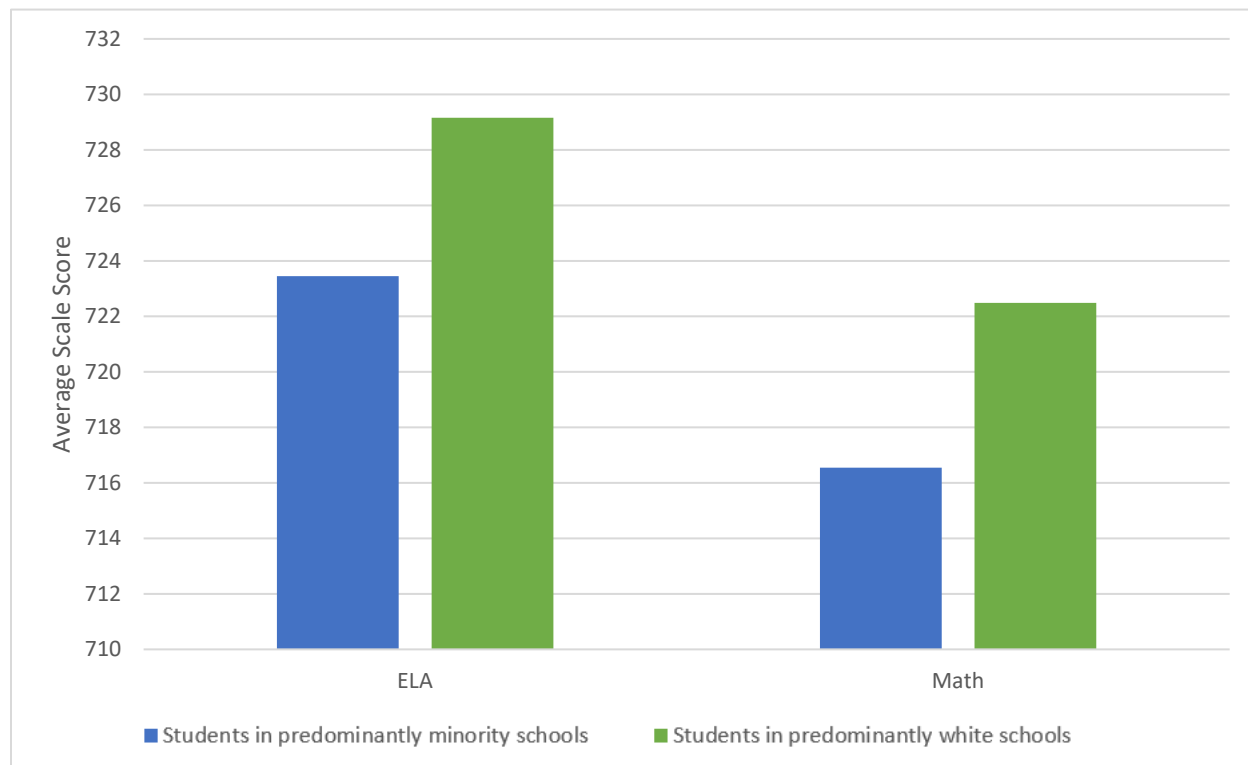
Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 799 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 794 students with test data in math who enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools, and the subsamples of 1,286 students with available test data in ELA and 1,281 students with test data in math who enrolled in economically advantaged private schools.

Students enrolled in predominantly minority private schools had lower scale scores, on average than students in predominantly white private schools.

In SY 2020/21, 1,072 scholarship recipients, or 30.3 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as non-White (hereafter, “predominantly minority schools”). An additional 1,585 scholarship recipients, or 44.8 percent, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as White (hereafter, “predominantly white schools”). In both subjects, students in predominantly white schools tended to outperform students in predominantly minority schools. Specifically, students in predominantly white schools performed 5.7 scale points higher on average than students in predominantly minority schools in ELA. In math, the difference was 5.9 scale points (Figure 8). This finding is consistent with other research studies that have shown test proficiency is positively correlated with income and parents’ education level and income is also correlated with race/ethnicity.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sirin, S. R. (2005). Socioeconomic status and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 417–453. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543075003417>

Figure 8. Average Scholarship Recipient IAR ELA and Math Scores in Predominantly Minority Schools Compared to Predominantly White Schools, SY 2020/21



Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 1,059 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 1,053 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in predominantly minority schools, and the subsamples of 1,567 students with available test data in ELA and 1,553 students with test data in math who enrolled in predominantly white schools.

School Year 2021/22 Analysis

School Year 2021/22 Sample

The 2021/22 sample contained 4,794 unique IKA Scholarship Recipient records representing 272 private schools. Among students for whom school-level enrollment data was available, the average student attended a private school with a total enrollment of 330 students and a student body that was 40 percent low-income, 47 percent female, 1 percent American Indian, 4 percent Asian, 23 percent Black/African American, 24 percent Hispanic, less than 1 percent Pacific Islander, 6 percent two or more races, and 64 percent White (Table 4).

Table 4. Characteristics of IKA Scholarship Recipients Included in the 2021/22 Sample

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value	Number in the analysis
IAR Scores for IKA Scholarship Recipients (Student-level Data)					
English language arts scale score	724.6	31.7	650.0	840.0	4,738
Math scale score	721.9	30.1	650.0	850.0	4,713
Characteristics of Schools Attended by IKA Scholarship Recipients (School-level data)					
Total enrollment	330.1	203.7	27.0	2198.0	4,084
% low-income	39.7	34.5	0.0	100.0	3,987
% female	47.1	14.7	0.0	100.0	4,084
% male	53.0	14.7	0.0	100.0	4,080
% American Indian	0.6	6.3	0.0	76.8	3,423
% Asian	3.7	9.2	0.0	81.7	2,785
% Black/African American	22.5	35.6	0.0	100.0	2,632
% Hispanic	24.0	32.6	0.0	100.0	3,334
% Pacific Islander	<1.0	0.3	0.0	6.9	3,148
% Two or more races	5.6	6.2	0.0	26.1	2,974
% White	64.2	35.5	0.0	100.0	3,566

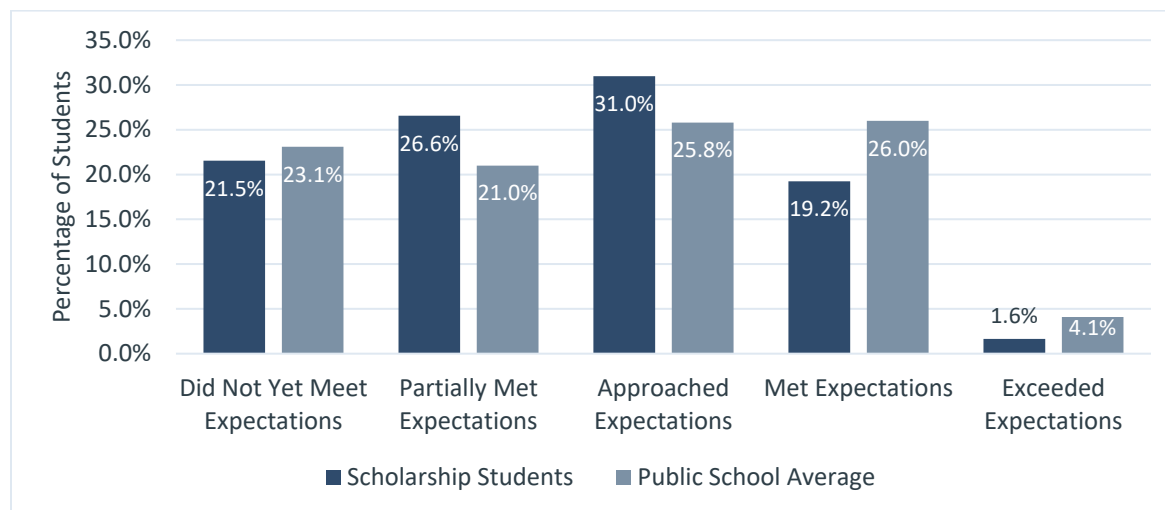
Note. The data has a Grand total of $N = 4,794$ IKA Scholarship Recipients. “Number in the analysis” refers to the number of students for whom information on a given characteristic was available. Values for all rows related to “Characteristics of Schools Attended” are private school characteristics obtained from publicly available data on the ISBE website. N counts vary widely for school characteristics due to large amounts of missing or suppressed data (where counts of students are less than 10).

School Year 2021/22 Results

About two in ten grade 3-8 scholarship recipients achieved proficiency in English language arts in 2022, compared to 3 in 10 public school students.

Starting with the 2021/22 analysis, WestEd compared scholarship recipients' IAR scores to public school student scores. Among all scholarship recipients who took the IAR in grades 3–8, 990 (20.8 percent) met or exceeded ELA expectations. Among public school students, 30.1 percent met or exceeded expectations (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Percentage of Scholarship and Public School Students Achieving Performance Levels in IAR ELA for SY 2021/22



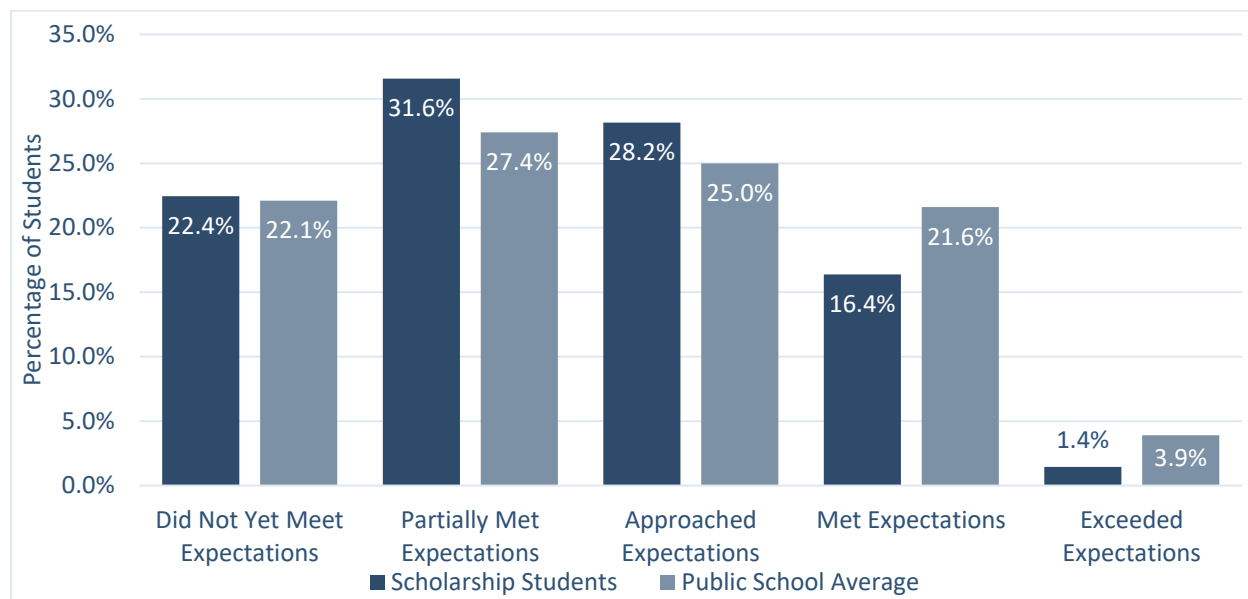
Note. Figure includes data on IKA Scholarship Students in Grades 3-8 who took the ELA portion of the IAR (N=4738) in SY 2021/22. Figure also includes the statewide average performance levels for Illinois Public school students (data source Illinois Report Card¹⁵).

Among grade 3-8 scholarship recipients, less than one-fifth achieved proficiency in Math in 2022, compared to about 1 in 4 public school students.

Among all scholarship recipients who took the IAR in grades 3–8, 840 (17.8 percent) either met or exceeded expectations in Math. Among public school students, 25.5 percent met or exceeded expectations in Math (Figure 10).

¹⁵ Illinois State Board of Education. (2023). *Illinois Report Card*. Illinois State Board of Education. Accessed 12/20/2023. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/State.aspx?source=trends&source2=iar&Stateid=IL>

Figure 10. Percentage of Scholarship and Public School Students Achieving Performance Levels in IAR Math for SY 2021/22



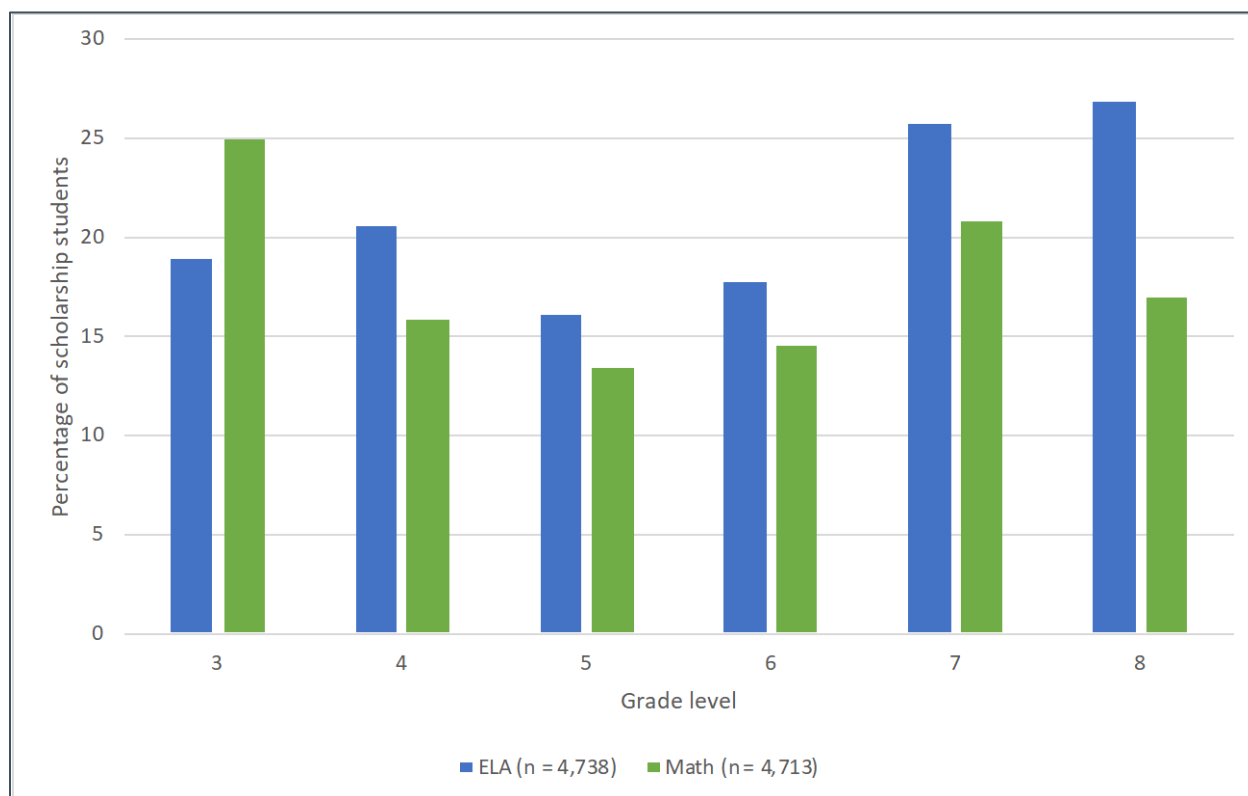
Note. Figure includes data on IKA Scholarship Students in Grades 3-8 who took the Math portion of the IAR (N=4713) in SY 2021/22. Figure also includes the statewide average performance levels for Illinois Public school students (data source Illinois Report Card¹⁶).

Similar to the trends in 2021, proficiency rates were highest in the upper grades in English language arts, while proficiency rates in mathematics varied more widely by grade.

For the second year running, a smaller percentage of IKA Scholarship Recipients met proficiency benchmarks in ELA in the lower grades compared to the upper grades. Specifically, 18.9 percent of students scored *proficient* or *advanced* in grade 3, compared to 26.9 percent in grade 8. In mathematics, proficiency rates ranged from a low of 13.4 percent of students in grade 5 to a high of 25 percent in grade 3 (Figure 11).

¹⁶ Illinois State Board of Education. (2023). *Illinois Report Card*. Illinois State Board of Education. Accessed 12/20/2023. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/State.aspx?source=trends&source2=iar&Stateid=IL>

Figure 11. Percentage of IKA Scholarship Recipients Who Met Proficiency Benchmarks in IAR ELA and Math by Grade Level, SY 2021/22

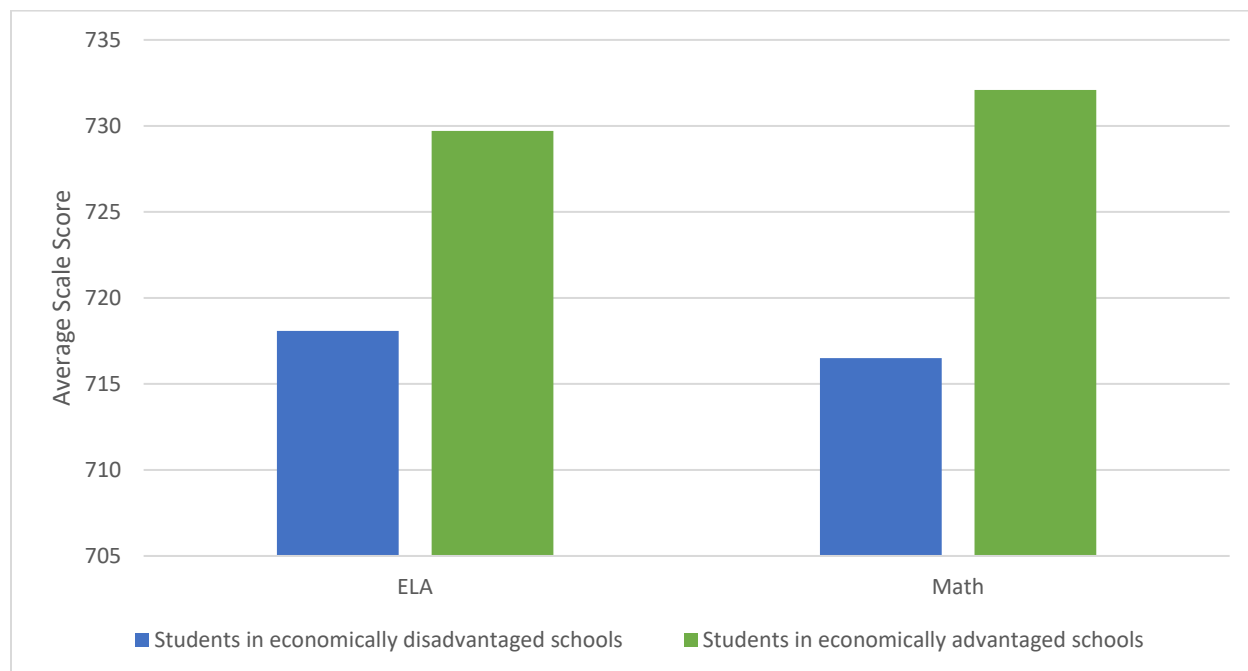


Note. Figure includes all IKA Scholarship Recipients with a record of ELA or math performance in SY 2021/22.

Consistent with results from the 2020/21 school year, students enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools had lower scale scores, on average, than students enrolled in economically advantaged private schools.

In SY 2021/22, 1,239 scholarship recipients, or 25.8 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where low-income students comprised 90 percent or more of the student body. An additional 934 students, or 19.5 percent, enrolled in a private school where low-income students comprised less than 10 percent of the student body. On average, students enrolled in economically disadvantaged schools performed 11.6 scale points lower in ELA compared to those in economically advantaged schools. In math, the difference was 15.6 scale points lower on average (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Average Scholarship Recipient IAR ELA and Math Scores in Economically Advantaged Schools Compared to Economically Disadvantaged Schools, SY 2021/22

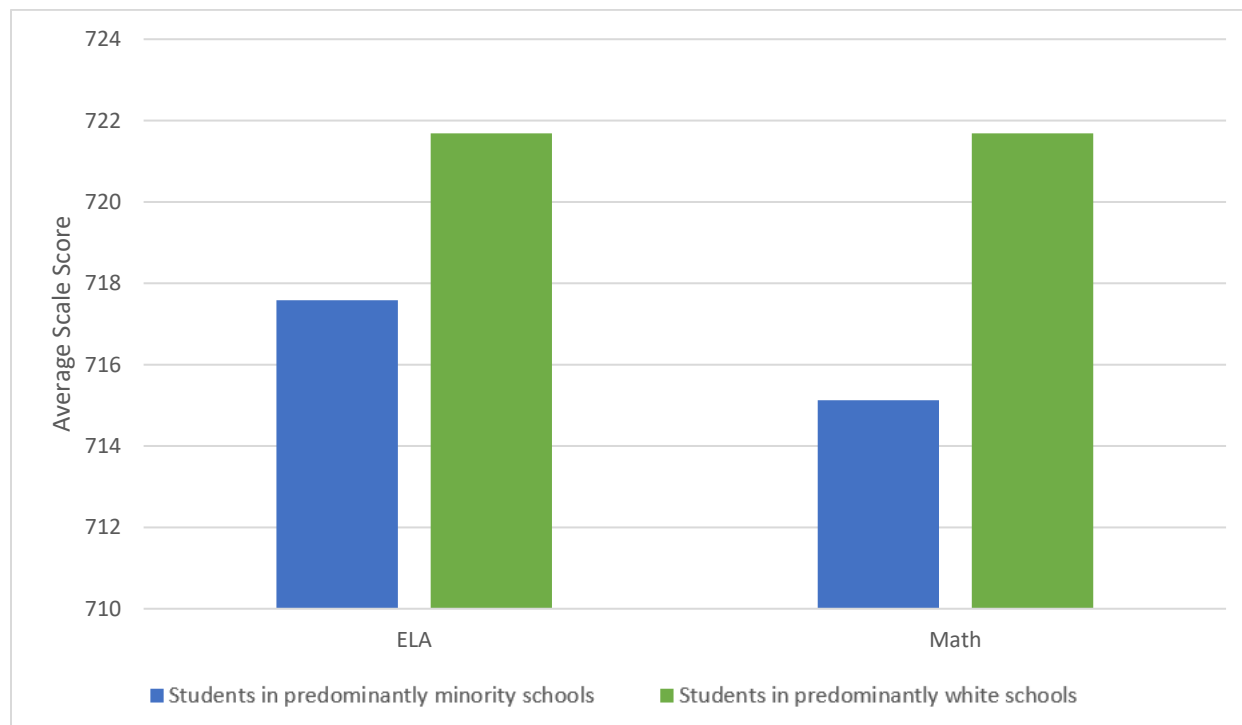


Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 1,233 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 1,230 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools, and the subsamples of 928 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 929 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in economically advantaged private schools.

Consistent with results from the 2020/21 school year, IKA Scholarship Recipients enrolled in predominantly white private schools had higher scale scores, on average, than students in predominantly minority private schools.

In SY 2021/22, 1,852 scholarship recipients, or 38.6 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as non-White. An additional 2,443 scholarship recipients, or 51.0 percent, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as White. In both subjects, students in predominantly white private schools tended to outperform students in predominantly minority private schools. Specifically, students in predominantly white private schools performed 5.7 scale points higher on average than students in predominantly minority private schools in ELA. In math, the difference was 5.9 scale points (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Average Scholarship Recipient IAR ELA and Math Scores in Predominantly Minority Private Schools Compared to Predominantly White Private Schools, SY 2021/22



Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 1,845 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 1,841 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who were enrolled in predominantly minority private schools, and the subsamples of 2,392 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 2,371 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in predominantly white private schools.

School Year 2022/23 Analysis

School Year 2022/23 Sample

The 2022/23 sample contained 6,293 unique IKA Scholarship Recipients records representing 341 private schools. This represents a growth of 31 percent in students served, and 25 percent in schools served since the 2021/22 school year. Among the private schools for which demographic data was available, the average student enrollment was 363. The average proportion of low-income students was 42 percent, which is slightly higher than the average low-income population among schools with data in the 2021/22 school year. The average student body in the 2022/23 sample was 48 percent female, 66 percent White, 23 percent Black, 23 percent Hispanic, 6.9 percent two or more races, 2.9 percent Asian, and less than 1 percent American Indian or Pacific Islander (Table 5).

Table 5. Characteristics of IKA Scholarship Recipients Included in the 2022/23 Sample

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value	Number in the analysis
IAR Scores for IKA Scholarship Recipients (Student-level Data)					
English language arts scale score	725.4	30.7	650.0	850.0	6,206
Math scale score	720.1	30.0	650.0	831.0	6,076
Characteristics of Schools Attended by IKA Scholarship Recipients (School-level data)					
Total enrollment	362.6	247.1	37.0	2204.0	6,235
% low-income	41.9	32.9	0.0	100.0	6,076
% female	48.2	21.9	0.0	100.0	6,235
% male	51.8	21.6	0.0	100.0	6,235
% American Indian	<1.0	0.7	0.0	8.2	5,477
% Asian	2.9	8.5	0.0	85.5	4,572
% Black/African American	23.1	35.8	0.0	100.0	4,197
% Hispanic	22.6	31.9	0.0	100.0	4,649
% Pacific Islander	<1.0	1.1	0.0	16.2	5,623
% Two or more races	6.9	11.7	0.0	96.3	4,472
% White	66.0	36.8	0.0	100.0	5,450

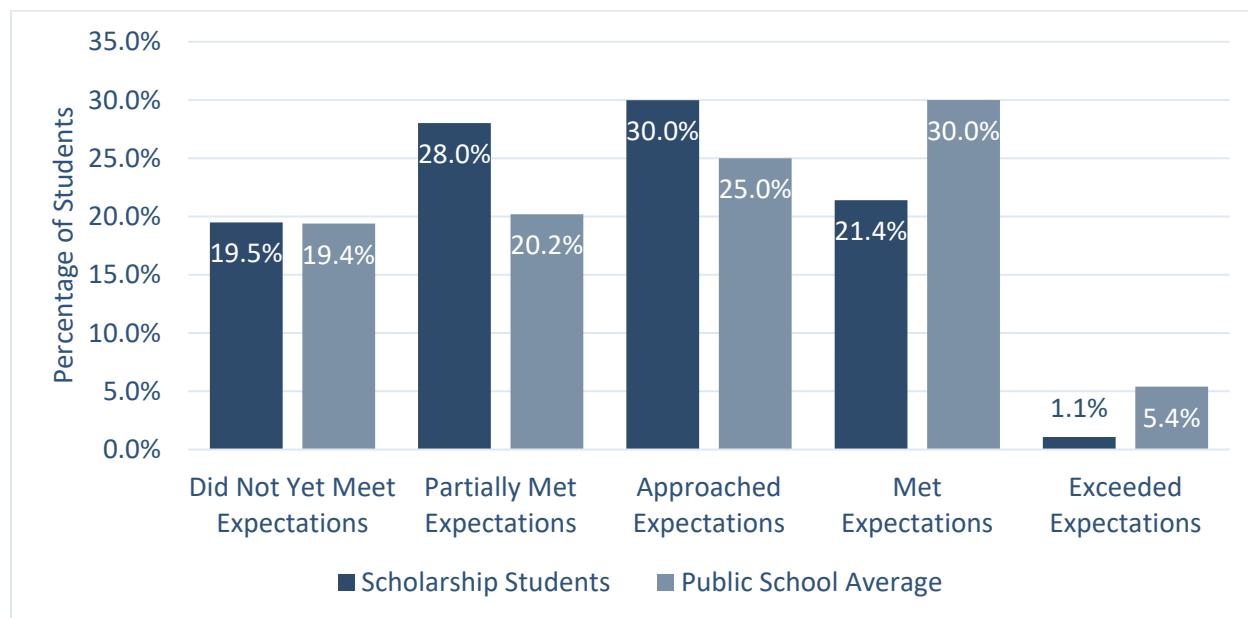
Note. The data has a Grand total of $N = 6,293$ IKA Scholarship Recipients. “Number in the analysis” refers to the number of students for whom information on a given characteristic is available. Values for all rows related to “Characteristics of Schools Attended” are private school characteristics obtained from publicly available data on the ISBE website. N counts vary widely for private school characteristics due to large amounts of missing or suppressed data (where counts of students are less than 10).

School Year 2022/23 Results

Among grade 3-8 scholarship recipients in 2022/23, just over 1 in 5 were proficient in ELA. In contrast, over one-third of grade 3-8 public school students were proficient in ELA.

Again, in the 2022/23 analysis, WestEd compared scholarship recipients' IAR scores to public school student scores. Among all the IKA Scholarship Recipients who took the IAR in grades 3–8, 1,366 (22.5 percent) met or exceeded expectations in English Language Arts. For Illinois public school students, 35.4 percent met or exceeded expectations (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Percentage of Scholarship and Public School Students Achieving Performance Levels in IAR ELA for SY 2022/23

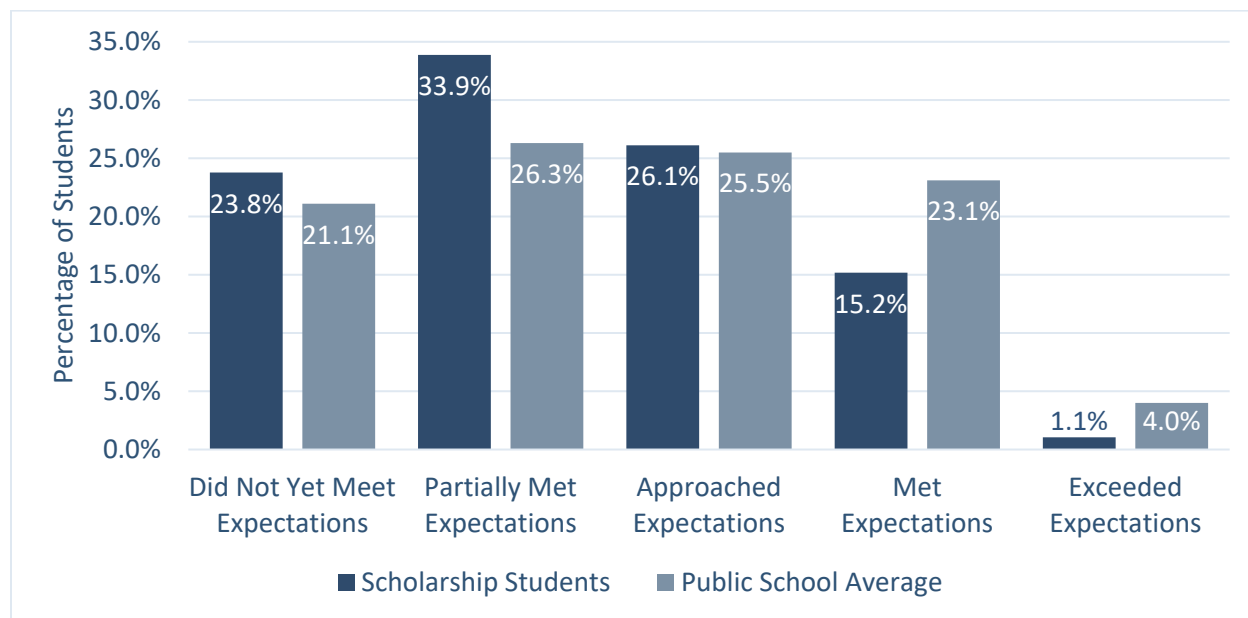


Note. Figure includes data on IKA Scholarship Students in Grades 3-8 who took the ELA portion of the IAR (N=6076) in SY 2022/23. Figure also includes the statewide average performance levels for Illinois Public school students (data source Illinois Report Card).

Among grade 3-8 scholarship recipients in 2022/23, less than 1 in 5 were proficient in Math. In contrast, over one-quarter of grade 3-8 public school students were proficient in Math.

Among all the IKA Scholarship Recipients who took the IAR in grades 3–8, 1,007 (16.3 percent) met or exceeded expectations in Math. For Illinois public school students, 27.1 percent met or exceeded expectations (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Percentage of Scholarship and Public School Students Achieving Performance Levels in IAR Math for SY 2022/23

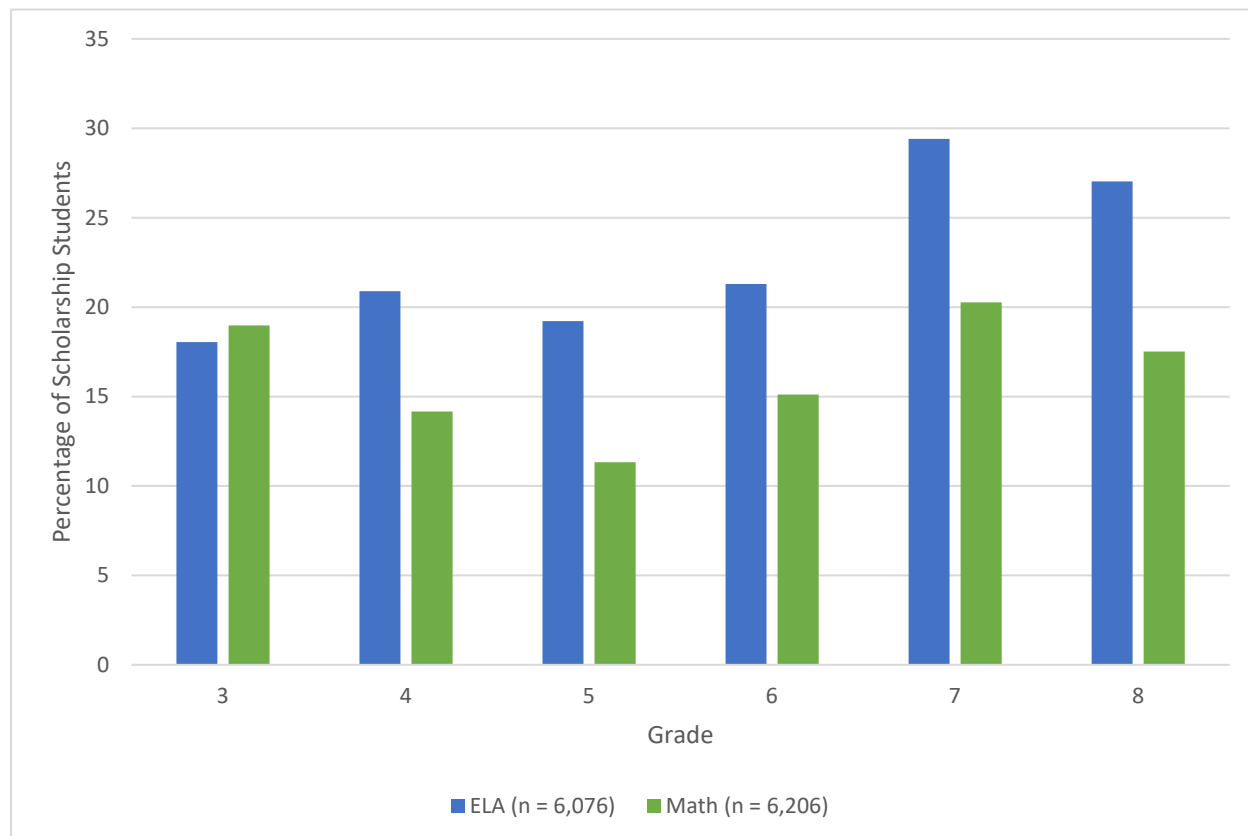


Note. Figure includes data on IKA Scholarship Students in Grades 3-8 who took the Math portion of the IAR (N=6206) in SY 2022/23. Figure also includes the statewide average performance levels for Illinois Public school students (data source Illinois Report Card).

Similar to the two previous years, ELA proficiency rates were higher for every grade except 3rd grade, and rates were about the same as in previous years. By contrast, math proficiency rates were generally lower than SY 2021/22. Fifth grade had the lowest overall proficiency attainment rates, while 7th grade had the highest overall rates.

For ELA, proficiency rates for IKA Scholarship Recipients varied from 19.2 percent in 5th grade to 29.4 percent in 7th grade (Figure 16). For math, the proficiency rates range from 11.3 in 5th grade to 20.3 percent in 7th grade. Similar to previous years, 3rd grade performed higher in math compared to ELA, although the difference was smaller compared to prior years (about one percentage point). Specifically, the proportion of 3rd graders achieving proficiency in math decreased by about five percentage points from the 2021/22 school year.

Figure 16. Percentage of IKA Scholarship Recipients Who Met Proficiency Benchmarks in IAR ELA and Math by Grade Level, SY 2022/23

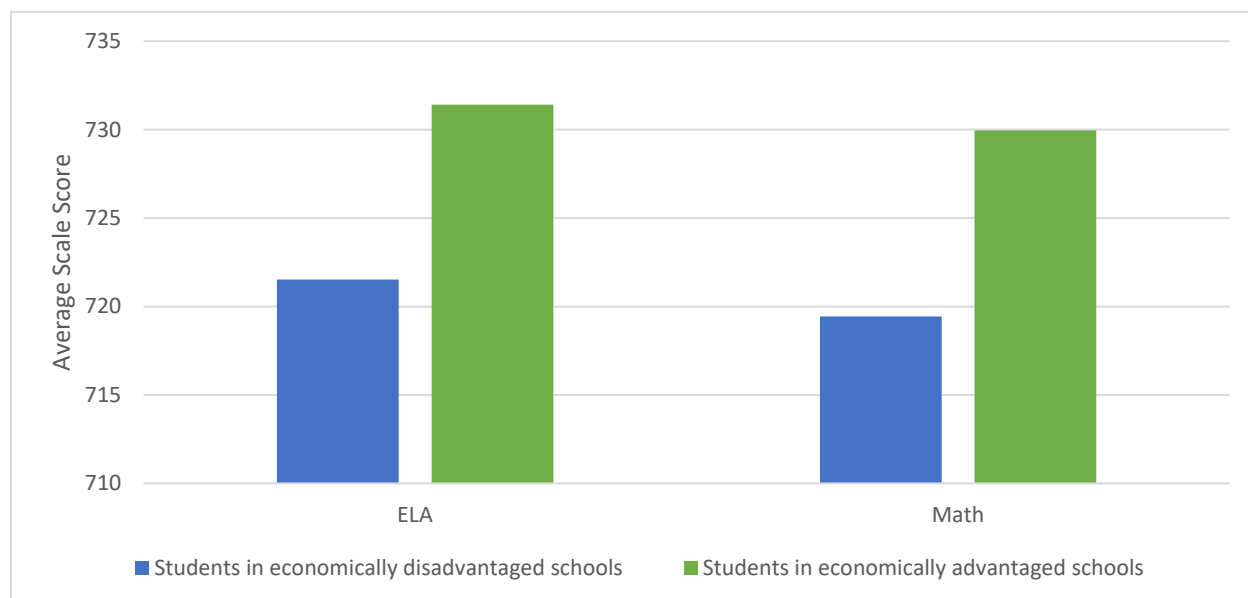


Note. Figure includes all students with a record of ELA or math performance in SY 2022/23.

Consistent with the two previous years, students enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools had lower scale scores, on average, than students enrolled in economically advantaged private schools.

In SY 2022/23, 1,076 scholarship recipients, or 17 percent of the sample, enrolled in an economically disadvantaged school. Compared to the two previous years, the percentage of students in economically disadvantaged private schools decreased by eight percentage points. Still, the number of students in these schools was about the same (Figure 17). An additional 1,230 students, or 20 percent, enrolled in an economically advantaged private school. Compared to the two previous years, there were slightly more scholarship recipients in economically advantaged private schools. Still, the percentage of students in this type of school was about the same as in previous years. On average, students enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools performed ten scale points lower in ELA and 11 scale points lower in math compared to those in economically advantaged private schools.

Figure 17. Average IKA Scholarship Recipients' IAR ELA and Math Scores in Economically Advantaged Schools Compared to Economically Disadvantaged Schools, SY 2022/23

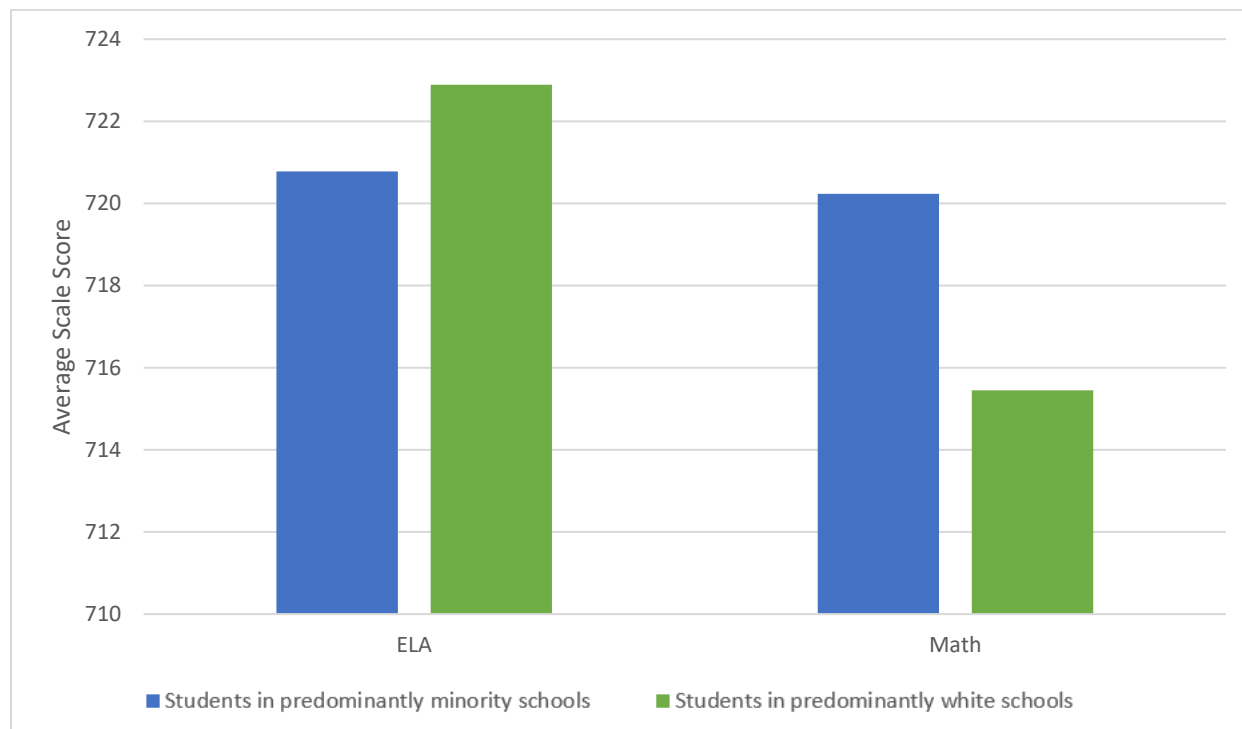


Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 1,031 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 1,073 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in economically disadvantaged private schools, and the subsamples of 1,196 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 1,219 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in economically advantaged private schools.

Consistent with the two previous years, students enrolled in predominantly minority private schools had lower scale scores in ELA, on average, than students enrolled in predominantly white private schools. The opposite was true for math, with students in predominantly minority private schools having higher scale scores, on average, than those in predominantly white private schools.

In SY 2022/23, 895 scholarship recipients, or 14 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as non-White. This is substantially lower than the percentage of students in the same type of school in 2021/22 (38.6%). In addition, 3,089 scholarship recipients, or 49 percent of the sample, enrolled in a private school where 90 percent or more of the student body identified as White. This was about the same percentage of students as the 2021/22 school year. In terms of performance, students in predominantly minority private schools had lower scale scores in ELA, on average, than students in predominantly white private schools. The opposite was true for math (Figure 18). Specifically, students in predominantly minority private schools scored two scale points lower than those in predominantly white private schools in ELA and 4.8 scale points higher than those in predominantly white private schools in math.

Figure 18. Average Scholarship Recipient IAR ELA and Math Scores in Predominantly Minority Private Schools Compared to Predominantly White Private Schools, SY 2022/23



Note. Figure based on the subsamples of 870 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 859 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who were enrolled in predominantly minority private schools, and the subsamples of 3,009 IKA Scholarship Recipients with available test data in ELA and 3,065 IKA Scholarship Recipients with test data in math who enrolled in predominantly white schools.

Two-Year Analysis

Two-Year Sample

The two-year sample contained 1,169 unique IKA Scholarship Recipient records representing 170 private schools. These students had data available for two school years (from 2021/22 to 2022/23). Students included in the sample had a test score for at least one of the mathematics or ELA assessments for both 2022 and 2023. Among students for whom school-level enrollment was available, the average private school had a mean enrollment of 404 students in 2023, 36.5 percent of whom were low-income, and 78 percent identified as White. On average, compared with the private schools in the complete sample of scholarship recipients from SY 2022/23, the schools represented in the longitudinal sample were larger, had lower percentages of low-income students, and had higher percentages of White students (Table 6).

Table 6. Characteristics of IIKA Scholarship Recipients Included in the Two-Year Sample

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value	Number in the analysis
IAR Scores for IIKA Scholarship Recipients (Student-level Data)					
1-year English language arts scale score change	3.0	24.4	-86	97	1,123
1-year math scale score change	-1.2	22.7	-80	81	1,139
Characteristics of Schools Attended by IIKA Scholarship Recipients (School-level data)					
Total enrollment	404.2	252.4	37	2204	1,157
% low-income	36.5	31.5	0	100	1,137
% female	46.4	19.5	0	100	1,157
% male	53.8	19.53	0	100	1,157
% American Indian	<1	0.8	0	8.2	1,016
% Asian	2.9	9.2	0	85.5	871
% Black/African American	12.1	26.8	0	100	660
% Hispanic	20.0	29.5	0	100	737
% Pacific Islander	<1	0.7	0	16.1	1,041
% Two or more races	6.2	11.1	0	96.3	854
% White	77.8	29.0	0	100	1,056

Note. The data has a Grand total of $N = 1,169$ IIKA Scholarship Recipients. “Number in the analysis” refers to the number of IIKA scholarship recipients for whom information on a given characteristic was available. Values for all rows related to “Characteristics of Schools Attended” are private school characteristics obtained from publicly available data on the ISBE website. N counts vary widely for private school characteristics due to large amounts of missing or suppressed data (where counts of students are less than 10).

Two Year Results

Among IIKA scholarship recipients with two years of data, the average student scored higher in ELA and slightly lower in math compared to the previous year, with roughly a quarter (26%) of students were proficient in ELA in 2022/23 and one-fifth were proficient in math.

Examining one-year changes in proficiency revealed that 9.6 percent of students who were not proficient in ELA in 2022 were proficient in 2023 (Table 7). On the other hand, about 7.3 percent of students who were proficient in ELA in 2022 were not proficient in 2023. Similarly, 6.8 percent of students who were not proficient in math in 2022 were proficient in 2023, and 5.3 percent of students who were proficient in math in 2022 were not proficient in 2023.

Table 7. Proportion of IKA Scholarship Recipients Who Changed IAR Proficiency Status from SY 2021/22 to SY 2022/23

	Not proficient to proficient (%)	Proficient to not proficient (%)	No change (%)
ELA (n = 1,123)	9.6	7.3	83.1
Math (n = 1,139)	6.8	5.3	88.0

Note. Table 7 based on IKA Scholarship Recipients with two years of test score data in ELA or math in SYs 2021/22 to 2022/23. The “No change (%)” category contains students who scored *not proficient* in both years as well as students who scored *proficient* in both years.

Comparison With Public School Students

Scholarship recipients and their public school peers had similar trends in their average ELA and math score changes over time.

To answer question 2, Do scholarship recipients achieve more learning gains when compared to the statewide learning gains of public school students? WestEd examined scholarship students and public school students who scored in the same scale score range (performance level) on the 2021-2022 IAR to see whether the changes in scale scores on the IAR in 2022-2023 are relatively higher, lower or the same for the two groups. It is the relative difference that is of interest. The hypothesis is that there should be no difference in scale score changes from 2021/22 to 2022/23 between students receiving scholarships and public school students within a performance level. Due to data limitations, this is not a definitive analysis.

Overall, the difference in the mean scale score changes between IKA Scholarship Recipients in private schools and students enrolled in public schools was not statistically significant (Figure 19). Both groups exhibited the same general trend, regardless of subject: students who scored in the lower performance levels in SY 2021/22 tended to have higher scale scores in SY 2022/23, while students who scored in the higher performance levels tended to record lower scale scores the following year.

Two statistically significant differences exist between IKA scholarship recipients in private schools and students enrolled in public schools in the average change in scale scores from 2021-22 to 2022-23.

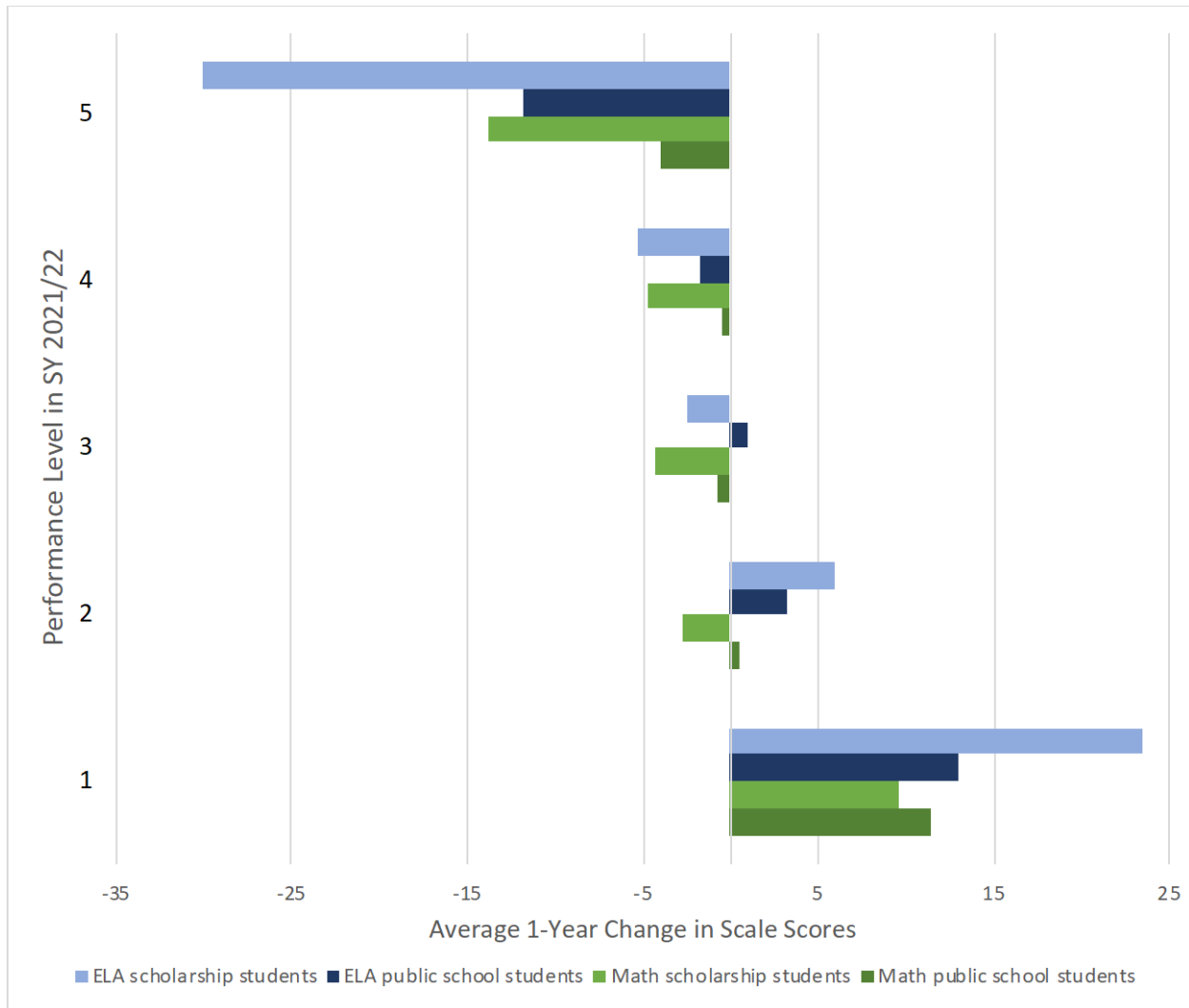
- When examining the scale score changes for students who achieved performance level 1 (“Did not yet meet expectations”) in ELA on the SY 2021/22 tests, scholarship recipients recorded a significantly larger average increase in scale scores one year later compared to the average public school student (10.5 scale points; $p = 0.02$). In other words, performance level 1 students in 2021-22 who attended private schools had significantly larger increases in their 2022-23 scale scores in ELA compared to the

average public school student who was at performance level 1 in 2021-22.¹⁷

- When examining the scale score changes for students who achieved performance level 5 (“Exceeded expectations”) in ELA on the SY 2021/22, scholarship recipients recorded a significantly larger average decrease in scale scores one year later compared to the average public school student with prior performance at level 5 (-18.4 scale points; $p = 0.04$). In other words, performance level 5 students in 2021-22 who attended private schools had significantly larger declines in their 2022-23 scale scores in ELA compared to the average public school student who was at performance level 5 in 2021-22.

¹⁷ A p-value measures the probability of obtaining the observed results. The lower the p-value, the greater the statistical significance of the observed difference. A p-value of 0.05 or lower is considered statistically significant.

Figure 19. Average 1-Year Change in IAR ELA and Math Scale Scores from SY 2021/22 to SY 2022/23, by Scholarship Status and Beginning Performance Level in SY 2021/22



Note. Figure based on IKA Scholarship Recipients with two years of test score data in ELA ($n = 1,123$) or math ($n = 1,138$) in SYs 2021/22 to 2022/23 and all students enrolled in Illinois public schools with two years of test score data in ELA ($n = 622,123$) or math ($n = 619,845$) during the same period.

SY 2022/23 SAT Analysis

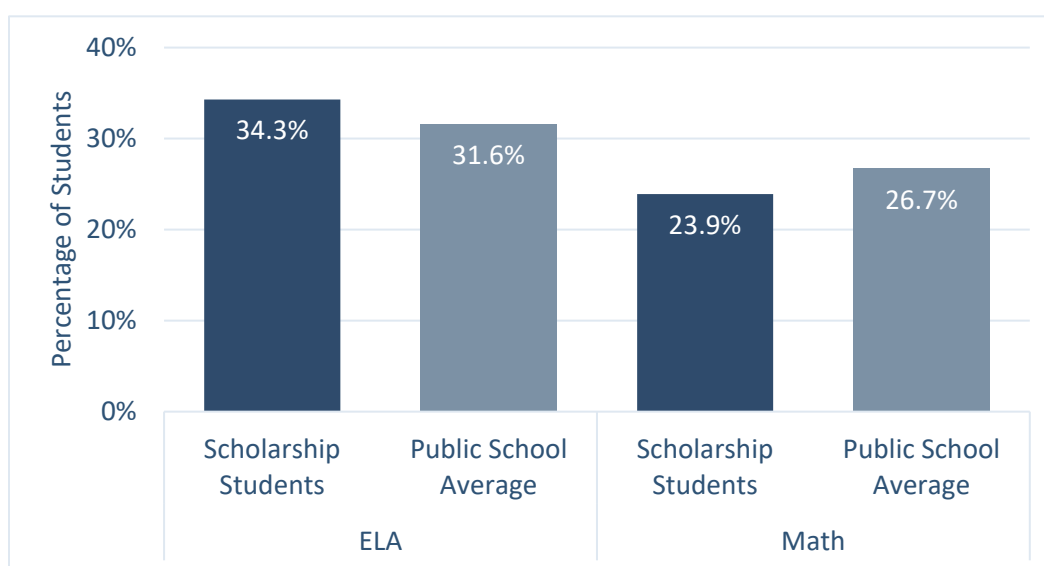
In this section, WestEd provides SAT scores for both scholarship recipients and public school students to provide a reference point. However, with only one year of SAT data, WestEd can only answer question 1:

- Q1: What is the academic performance of scholarship recipients?

About one-third of scholarship recipients were proficient in ELA, while about one-quarter were proficient in math. Among Illinois public school students, less than one-third were proficient in ELA, while more than one-quarter were proficient in math.

Among 11th-grade scholarship recipients who took the SAT during the 2022/23 SY, the proportion of students who met or exceeded state-determined proficiency benchmarks¹⁸ (a score of 540 or above per subject) in ELA and math were 34.3 and 23.9 percent, respectively (Figure 20). Illinois public school students had lower proficiency levels in ELA, with 31.6 percent who met or exceeded state-determined proficiency benchmarks. In Math, Illinois public school students had higher proficiency levels, with 26.7 percent achieving proficiency benchmarks or better.

Figure 20. Percentage of IKA Scholarship Recipients and Public School Students Who Met State Proficiency Benchmarks in ELA and Math on the SAT, SY 2022/23



Note. Figure based on IKA Scholarship Recipients who took the SAT in 11th grade during the 2022/23 SY ($n = 464$). Figure also includes the statewide SAT performance for Illinois Public school students (data source Illinois Report Card).

The average total score among all 11th-grade scholarship recipients was 958 on the SAT's 400–1600 scale. The average scores for each section were 495 on the EBRW section and 464 on the math section. In the essay section, scholarship recipients recorded an average score of 4.0 in reading, 2.8 in analysis, and 4.3 in writing (each out of a possible score of 8).

¹⁸ The state-specific proficiency benchmarks are determined by Illinois educators and are aligned with Illinois state standards in ELA and math

Qualitative Analysis

Private Elementary School Site Visit Selection

WestEd used the merged performance data to inform the selection of private elementary school sites. To select schools, WestEd identified students who had two years of test scores in both ELA and math. This requirement resulted in 42 elementary schools with at least ten students with two years of test scores in both subjects.

Using data for 2022, these 42 schools have a minimum enrollment of 77 students and a maximum enrollment of 728, with an average of 238 students. Fifteen of these schools are economically disadvantaged. Three have majority African American student populations, 9 have majority Hispanic student populations, and 22 have majority White student populations.

Schools receiving IKA scholarship recipients are not evenly spread across the state. Twenty-three are in Region 1 (Chicago), with six schools each in Regions 2 and 3, three in Region 4, and two in Region 5 (refer to Figure 1). Not all private schools are religiously affiliated, but the schools with ten or more tested students included in this selection were religiously affiliated. Eight schools are Jewish, 31 are Catholic, and three are non-Catholic Christian.

Several criteria then guided the selection process. First, WestEd sought to identify schools with evidence of high average academic performance among scholarship recipients relative to other schools in the study sample. Second, WestEd sought a diverse geographic mix of schools. Third, WestEd sought a mix of schools that represented the diverse religious affiliations of IKA-participating schools. Fourth, WestEd considered the demographic compositions of the schools concerning the proportions of low-income students enrolled and the proportions of enrollments from various races/ethnicities.

WestEd began the selection process by aggregating the student performance data to the school level to calculate average performance levels for each school. Then, WestEd calculated average growth figures for students and schools with two years of data. WestEd then ranked schools on these criteria. Our initial selections focused on schools that ranked in the top half of growth in both ELA and math and did not have large proportions of scholarship recipients with missing test data. One region did not have an overperforming school. WestEd selected the highest-performing school in this region.

After identifying schools with higher achievement levels and reflecting on the diversity of schools eligible for site visits, WestEd invited schools to participate. Schools that were unable or unwilling to participate in the site visits were replaced by the next school on the list that shared similar characteristics with the replaced site.

Seven schools were selected for site visits and agreed to participate. For a variety of reasons, four schools declined to participate. Of the seven schools selected, four are identified as majority White, one as majority African American, one as majority Hispanic, and one represented a balance of racial/ethnic identities. Five of these schools are Catholic, one is Jewish, and one is non-Catholic Christian. One of the schools served a student body that is majority low-income. The average enrollment of these schools is 190 during the 2021/22 school year, and they serve an average of 37 IKA students.

Private High School Site Visit Selection

WestEd used school-level demographic, descriptive, and geographic data to select high school sites. High schools receiving IKA scholarship recipients are not evenly spread across the state. Fifty-four are in Region 1 (34 in Chicago), with 26 schools in Region 2, nine in Region 3, five in Region 4, and eight in Region 5. Most schools are religiously affiliated. Twelve schools are Jewish, 53 are Catholic, 16 are non-Catholic Christian, and 21 have other or unknown affiliations.

WestEd budgeted for site visits to three high schools. To select schools, WestEd identified schools with at least 35 IKA scholarship recipients. This resulted in only 9 of 102 high schools with at least that many students. WestEd selected one school each from Chicago, Region 2, and Regions 3, 4, and 5 combined. WestEd included a Catholic school, a non-Catholic Christian school, and a Jewish school. Two schools have over 90 percent White student population. One school has over 95 percent African American and Hispanic students, and over 80 percent of students experiencing poverty.

Site Visit Details

After identifying schools for site visits, WestEd invited schools to participate in the study. Once the school administrator agreed to participate, WestEd held a virtual preparation meeting to discuss the visit schedule and finalize the logistics of the study.

At that preparation meeting, WestEd explained the informed consent process and the requirement that all participation in the study is voluntary. Schools received informed consent documents for participants (one for staff, one for parents, and one for students). WestEd also discussed what the school needed to do to inform its community. In the meeting, WestEd identified times for interviews (administrator, teacher group, parent group, and student group), finalized the schedule for the day of the site visit, determined whether any surveys needed to be translated (WestEd contracted with WorldWide Translations to translate documents), assessed the availability of archival documents, and established a plan for distributing surveys to the appropriate groups. These steps ensured a smooth and efficient site visit that provided meaningful information to assess further distinguishing elements of participating schools.

WestEd visited the seven elementary schools between April 24 and May 11, 2023. Two staff members attended all schools but one; one school had only one member present. WestEd conducted three site visits to high schools on September 6 and 7, 2023.

Across the seven elementary schools, WestEd met with 17 administrators, 46 teachers, 38 parents, and 53 students (see Table 8). WestEd also collected surveys from 9 administrators, 77 teachers, 240 parents, and 583 students. Parents were invited to opt their students out of the study, and 30 parents elected to do so. Parent survey respondents had students in grades PreK–2 (46%), grades 3–5 (29%), grades 6–8 (20%), and grades 9–12 (5%).

In the three high schools, WestEd met with six administrators, 20 teachers, 11 parents, and 22 students (see Table 8). WestEd did not conduct surveys at the high schools.

Table 8. Counts of Respondents and Participants Across 10 Site Visits

	Elementary school surveys	Elementary school focus groups	High school focus groups
Schools	6	7	3
Administrators	9	17	6
Teachers	77	46	20
Parents	240	38	11
Parent opt-out	30	N/A	N/A
Students	583	53	22

WestEd gave the schools extra time to conduct the surveys, allowing parents to opt out of their children from the study.

Site Visit Findings

The following discussion highlights the findings from the interviews and surveys. WestEd began the site visits looking for evidence of how the schools organize themselves around leadership, teaching, engaged families, culture, and instruction. As WestEd reviewed our evidence, other themes emerged around faith, the importance of the IKA scholarships, and the challenges these schools face.

One notable observation from the site visits was the small size of many elementary schools. The schools WestEd visited schools have enrollments that range from 77 to 728 students, with an average of 238 students. Several site-visit schools have only one teacher per grade. Some participants noted that the resources are tight. One principal said, “That is certainly a challenge

in a small school like this. We run on a tight budget, so I don't have the resources that other schools may." Small size has implications for some of the challenges private schools face.

"Names are important in this community. Saying the names right, spelling the names right . . . I take all the kids' names and almost make yearbook pages. . . . I give volunteers . . . if you come in and you know all my kids' names . . . those people keep coming back . . . Now they're connected, right? Now I know your name. Now I'm coming back because we know each other."

—Principal

But small size has a significant benefit: relationship building. The school staff get to know the students in their school. One principal makes all her volunteers memorize the students' names. One parent expressed a similar thought about knowing the school staff: "We're not a very large school, so . . . it's very easy to know every teacher's name, every staff person, everyone."

Leadership

Participants from all schools shared feedback that emphasized the critical role of leadership in schools. Principals spoke to creating and sustaining positive and caring school cultures focused on religious and academic pursuits. Teachers described collaborative school cultures that distributed leadership and decision-making. Students described the many ways in which principals established and sustained relationships with students and families. Parents described school communities led by committed and selfless school staff.

During school leader interviews, principals explained that effective leaders lead by example, build relationships, and work together as a team. They also emphasized the need for open communication, collaboration, organization, and the motivation and inspiration of others. Principals explained how they demonstrated distributed leadership through purposeful efforts that engaged staff in schoolwide issues, solicited teacher input and feedback, and empowered teachers to make decisions. As one principal explained, "Teachers are leaders and fill many roles in the school." Another principal shared, "We make collective decisions. This team meets every Wednesday, and we talk about what's happening at school, what do we need to work on, whether that's community-based events or when it's enrollment time or budget stuff."

“I say this out of a place of love because our mission is for the kids. And so, we’re always going to do what’s best for the kids. And that has to be reflected in our practice. We got to be here on time. We’ve got to be all in. I mean, that’s just what it is. . . We love on our people well, and we just care for each other.”

—Principal

High schools have bigger staffs and rely on teams for leadership in many areas. An administrator explained, “We work as teams. So, I have an administrative team. I have a senior staff team. I have an academic services support team, which also includes social-emotional support, and we create collaboration across the areas. So, people are not working in silos.”

Staff from larger schools described various opportunities to collaborate with staff in different schools. One teacher shared that her school can collaborate with “[many similar faith-based] schools in Chicago. And that really helps teachers collaborate with other schools. So, fourth-grade teachers can meet with fourth-grade teachers of another school. . . . There are tons of opportunities.” Another teacher described the various opportunities available during the school year: “They bring in different speakers, sometimes at a teacher’s meeting, sometimes at the in-service before school starts, a couple times during the year. President’s Day . . . we have a whole professional development day. And to be honest, the administration does ask for feedback. ‘What would you like to work on?’ So, you don’t have a class on classroom management every single time.”

Teachers stressed the importance of leadership skills such as open communication, critical thinking, collaboration, initiative, organization, and the motivation and inspiration of others. Teachers reflected on their roles as leaders in their classrooms, emphasizing the importance of creating collaborative environments where students can work together and support one another. Teachers commented on how principals helped to create the environments that enable them to lead in the classroom. One teacher explained, “Giving autonomy to the teachers allows them to make their own decisions. But anytime support is needed, [the principal] is there and always supportive of those teachers and their decisions, especially when there are difficulties.” Another teacher shared, “I think there’s a lot of transparency from the administration to the staff about things that we need to work on and are going on. I think keeping everybody in the loop with that really helps the teachers perform better. And then the admin knows what our needs are.”

For one school, good leadership is finally having stable leadership. Its current administrator explained, “In the first 14 years of [the school], there were 15 different principals. The last five years, we had one.” For another school, leadership is needed to deal with teacher turnover. As one administrator explained, “We know we're a school that we're not going to be able to compete with Chicago public schools in salaries. We're not. So, we're going to be a place where teachers sometimes cycle through.”

In reflecting on available professional development opportunities, teachers expressed a desire for autonomy to pick what they need for professional development. Teachers also expressed their desire for opportunities that foster collaboration among educators, regardless of their grade level, enabling them to exchange resources and expertise.

Most visited schools struggled to provide robust site-level professional development opportunities for teachers. Schools that were part of larger networks were more able to leverage the size and resources of their network to provide meaningful professional development opportunities. One small school limited its professional development opportunities to staff involved with implementing and reviewing a new curriculum. One high school teacher who had experience working in traditional public schools noted that public schools can do a better job offering targeted professional development that is responsive to teacher needs.

One high school had a different experience with professional development. An administrator explained, “We consider professional development as a core value of our staff... We actually provide bonuses for teachers who have participated in at least the minimum of the six hours per year, outside of the professional development that we provide as a natural piece within the school itself.”

For students, effective leaders focus on relationships, creating community, organizing events, and providing support to struggling students. One student shared, “I think [my principal] does well in building relationships with the actual students . . . greeting them in the morning or just talking to them a lot.”

Many students indicated they knew their principal and felt comfortable talking to them. One student said, “[Our principal] makes us feel comfortable if we need to tell him about anything. He makes it [clear] that his office is always open, and we can always go there if you need to.”

Students said school leaders encourage students to do their best in their classes and succeed. Students described school leaders as patient, giving students multiple chances, and being willing to work proactively with parents and religious leaders before taking more severe disciplinary action.

Parents reported that school leaders are invested in the student’s social, emotional, and physical well-being. They praised school leaders and teachers for providing support and resources to the staff, students, parents, and the broader school community. One parent

shared, “I would say that the principal has done a great job. I mean, she’s empathetic and always very responsible. She provides feedback right away if there’s a parent question or a parent need. And with the kids, I’ve noticed that she’s very warm with them.”

“There are no benefits. I mean, they’re all heart benefits. They are kingdom benefits. They’re not earthly [benefits] at all because it’s a hard job.”

—Principal

Teaching

Strong collaborative relationships among teachers were evident across all visited schools. Principals described the importance of enabling teachers to work together. Teachers shared opportunities to debrief, plan, problem-solve, train, and enjoy one another’s company. Students described relationships with teachers built on trust and common goals. Parents shared the many ways teachers collaborate with families and keep families informed.

Across schools, principals spoke to the importance of enabling teachers by utilizing teachers’ expertise in curriculum development and involving them in creating school rules and standards. As one principal explained, “All of our teachers are leaders.”

A high school administrator explained how their staff creates positive working conditions: “When teachers feel empowered, when staff feel empowered and their opinion matters, they’re more passionate. They’re happier, they produce more. They’re friendlier to the students.”

At another high school, an administrator explained how they try to keep teachers engaged in the school. They said, “We’re constantly creating opportunities for teachers to get feedback, whether that’s a grade level meeting, a department meeting. We have a staff-wide praise meeting on Thursday afternoons.”

Across all visited schools, teachers collaborated in different ways. Small interpersonal working environments enabled close relationships among teachers. Teachers discussed informal opportunities they take to communicate and collaborate through text messages, email, or conversations in the school hallway or during lunch. One teacher explained, “I think within the middle school team, we share pretty much everything that’s going on with the student. We have lunch together, so we’re able to talk during our lunchtime about what’s going on with a

student. . . We do email each other and correspond a lot just to know what’s going on with somebody, a student, or a family. Bring in our principal when needed.”

“We help out wherever we can. One of us may have greater strengths than the other, and we support each other in that.”

—Teacher

Teachers and principals across all visited schools also discussed the working environments teachers enjoy. For some schools, small staff sizes contribute to interpersonal relationships. One teacher explained, “We all treat each other like family, and we’re all close.” For other schools, co-teaching models or teacher mentors contributed to interpersonal relationships. One teacher shared, “We do a little mentor program with newer teachers. Our principal pairs us with a veteran teacher so we aren’t lost through the process.”

One high school has a building designed to encourage positive interactions: several large communal spaces encourage collaboration and relationship building, staff who provide student services have offices next to classrooms so students use these services, and teachers share a large office space where they can plan and work together.

Students reported that their teachers are effective leaders who focus on building relationships with the students and creating a sense of community. Students describe ways in which teachers organized classroom and schoolwide events. In all schools, teachers provide various types of support to students. In some schools, teachers offer tutoring to students. Students spoke favorably of classrooms that acknowledged efforts and accomplishments.

Parents reported that teachers create environments where students can work together and support each other. Classroom teachers allow students to work with partners for activities. Parents praised teachers for providing support and resources to the staff, students, and parents and for creating a culture of open communication. The parents also mentioned that the staff is welcoming and approachable and values parent feedback. One parent explained, “The school is always open to hearing what the parents have to say. If there is a kid who’s having concerns or issues, it’s really met with a response.”

Engaged Families

Visited schools served different communities with different histories and different needs. Across all schools, participants spoke of school staff who build meaningful relationships with

students and families. Parents generally shared that schools keep them informed, plan activities and events, and, in some schools, provide parent leadership opportunities.

There are differences across schools in the capacity for families and communities to be involved and support school activities. Some schools serve families and communities that experience severe economic and social challenges. Other schools serve families and communities that can raise tens of thousands of dollars during the school year to support school initiatives and improvements.

Across the visited schools, principals emphasize the importance of parental involvement in their children's education. Some schools organize specific family engagement opportunities. One principal described the various offerings available to students and families: "There are some touchstone events where the entire community shows up, and Around the World is one. Back-to-School Barbecue is another one. Christmas concert is another one. Honestly, depending on a parent's level of wanting to be engaged in the community, there's a place for everybody." Families must attend three to five parenting nights in one school, which include parenting strategies and tips, and the school encourages families to sign a statement of faith. School leaders provide information and resources to help parents become more involved in their children's education, including online classes and support groups. Several principals ensured their schools had active parent-teacher organizations that met regularly.

"I feel like the teachers have made it very open. Since we all have a very personable relationship with the teachers, I feel like, as parents, we know that we could just voice our opinion to them whenever. I feel like they would, right then and there, take what we say into account."

—Parent

At a high school, the administrator explained that they want parents to buy into the school community. "For the application process to get in, there's two teacher recommendations, an online application, a family interview, your grades or transcripts, and then a standardized test score. All of the students who come here have to demonstrate a willingness to complete that process. And then once they finish the interview, they'll either be given an acceptance or waitlist letter or a rejection letter."

Administrators stressed the importance of families aligning with the school's mission and values. They explained that if a parent does not buy into the school's core mission, "spending [money] on tuition would seem illogical."

A high school teacher commented on the level of involvement exhibited by families: "They show up, and they're eager to hear what's going on. They want to know what's being taught; they want to know how their child is doing. We do our best to create action plans if they need it. And . . . tell them how much they're loved and respected in the classroom and how they feel like they're heard."

Across most schools, teachers noted that parents often offer their time, chaperone, and bring in professionals to speak. Schools and classrooms also send out surveys to collect parent input. Schools hold parent-teacher conferences. One teacher shared, "We are all required to send a weekly email saying what's going on in the classroom, what's coming up so that parents are involved." One teacher reflected on the different challenges families might face, explaining, "It can be difficult to get parents to the school to do something to support the school due to socio-economic situations, language barriers, and the fact that many of them have two jobs."

Across schools, students reflected on how their families are involved with school events and activities, including accomplishing service hours, helping with fundraisers, volunteering, and donating to the school. One student shared, "I think they find ways to show us that school is fun and we're safe here, and it's a second home."

High school students discussed the numerous opportunities families had to be involved at their school, including serving on the parent board, participating in evening events at the school, publishing the school's literary magazine, and taking part in the Parent Teacher Association and its activities. And grandparents also have an annual day of celebration at the school.

Parents appreciated the schools' efforts to collect and act on parent input and to solicit participation. Parents expressed a belief that family involvement is essential. Schools encourage parents to be involved and provide ways for them to do so. Parents raised schools for their open communication. School staff keep families informed and welcome questions and feedback. One parent explained, "I would say communication is strong. I mean, you're always aware of what's going on every week. If there's any special anything of importance that gets communicated almost immediately and then also addressed."

Culture

Participants across all visited schools described school cultures centered on trusting relationships. Interview participants described safe environments dedicated to academic and religious teachings. Students described how teachers support students and provide the help that students need along the way. Faith was identified as a critical element of each school's

supportive environment. Some schools spoke to constraints with resources, which limited school operations and programming.

“A lot of our kids that receive this are lower-income kids. . . . We show that they can excel . . . in an environment that has strong academics, has a caring and loving environment.”

—Teacher

Principals emphasize the importance of involving parents and the community. Schools provided resources for families to get involved, such as parent-teacher meetings, workshops, and soliciting feedback from parents through emails, walk-ins, newsletters, and organizations. One principal reflected on his efforts to build relationships: “In building those relations, I think relationships are the key. I think we show that at the very beginning of the day when those students walk through the doors. You were there, of having people greeting every student that walks into this school and make them feel welcome, that they’re going to be loved here.”

Teachers generally expressed that families are heavily involved in their children’s education and the school’s programs and operations. Teachers spoke to explicit efforts to focus on developing “the whole child” rather than only focusing on academic goals. One teacher explained, “Our goal here is really educate the whole person. . . . We’re not just trying to teach them content. We’re certainly trying to do that. We’ve got those standards we’re trying to meet. But in addition to that, we focus a lot on the whole person.” A principal explained in a survey comment, “We educate the whole student. We seek to give an outstanding academic and religious education to our students.”

“You got to experience a lovely community. You got to go to chapel. Maybe you found a relationship with Jesus. Maybe you found a relationship with a mentor, someone who's going to believe in you and be that champion for you.”

—High School Principal

One high school administrator explained, “We ask them what they're interested in again and again. We ask them what they want to do after high school again and again. So, we build an idea of who they are as a person, not just a learner. We ask for their input on the classes they want to take, too. And we have implemented quite a few electives,” like archeology and zoology. At another high school, the administrator explained that staff want to “show students love, and discipline is meant to build students up, not tear them down.”

Across all schools, students described the support they receive from their teachers. One student explained, “A couple of teachers here offered to tutor after school. So, if you’re really struggling, they’ll be like, ‘Hey, come over. Come after school this day, and I can help you out.’” Students described how school community members can engage with one another during and outside school hours. One student explained a favorite thing about her school: “Oh, definitely the community—the community outside of school. And on the weekends, you’ll still see your classmates and friends. And we’ve developed a lot of budding relationships.”

Parents express appreciation for their schools’ efforts to collect and act on parent input. Schools encouraged families to get involved with classrooms and school events. Many parents commented on how dedicated school staff are to serving students. One parent explained, “I would just say the bright spot is how involved the teachers are and how dedicated they are to the kids. Like they call them their kids. So, they’re just very involved.”

School leaders who spoke to intentional school policies and procedures around discipline (i.e., tardiness, suspension, referrals, in-school suspensions, and expulsions) used language that reflected themes of equity, safety, and support for a positive school climate. One school leader emphasized the importance of “treating kids with dignity and establishing a supportive relationship with them” to create a positive and supportive environment. Another principal’s philosophy around discipline centered on the idea that students misbehave because they lack social, emotional, or academic skills. This school takes the approach of addressing misbehavior through intentional wraparound services that help support students academically.

At one high school, administrators identified challenges with specific student behavior. An administrator explained, “A sense of discipline is essential. And lots of kids facilitate distractions here. When they first get here. Because that was commonplace in the schools they're coming from.”

Instruction

Across schools, participants’ feedback spoke to instructional environments that were challenging and engaging. Participants in most schools shared that their schools’ instructional programs prepare students to excel in high school and college. Variations in school size correspond to concerns regarding the resources available to support instruction, planning, and the acquisition of resources; participants from smaller population schools raised concerns about school budgets and the ability to acquire new resources, but participants from larger

population schools or schools within a larger school network spoke to the unique learning experiences they can provide students.

“It’s a high expectation . . . it’s an expectation that everybody does this homework. Math homework comes home every night. Every night.”

—Parent

Some principals spoke about purposeful planning and action that align lessons and curricula to learning goals. One principal explained, “That’s what the PLCs [professional learning communities] are all about. It’s one of the pieces there. Being able to collaborate with each other, try to find strong programs, curriculum programs that are going to assist teachers.” A different principal described teachers’ purposeful reflection: “It’s not enough to get through the lesson because, ‘Now, I’m done. It’s okay.’ Really, assess what works, what doesn’t work, and then try something different or try challenging students, or try this differentiation.”

Other principals focused on teachers building relationships with students that help meet academic needs. One principal explained in a survey comment, “We do not have a specific content area academic focus (for example, STEM or fine arts). Instead, our focus is on academic inclusion. We work hard to ensure that all of our students can access the curriculum that we teach. We do this by providing differentiated curriculum within the classroom and a variety of levels of supports outside of the classroom, including social work, behavior therapy, academic intervention, and counseling.”

One high school has a strong mentoring program designed to help teachers become better instructors. Teachers new to the school were assigned trained mentors who observed instruction and provided coaching. In addition to mentors, an administrator explained that classroom observation is a shared practice amongst the staff, “department chairs, and administration of all visit classrooms. Last year we completed over 600 classroom visits.” Classroom observers use an observation software platform that allows teachers to receive feedback from administrators on a regular basis.

Teachers spoke to the strengths of their instructional models and the success that students experience in high school and college. One teacher explained, “We have a tremendous success rate in some of the most competitive high schools in the Chicago area because of our academics.” The positive relationships that teachers have with students support the students’ academic progress.

At a high school, teachers described the instructional approach as challenging and interactive, with a strong emphasis on real-world applications. Student participants expressed the sense of being academically challenged in their classes and appreciated the teachers' willingness to assist in learning new content and provide additional learning resources.

At another high school, teachers shared the need to assess students to understand their unique strengths and challenges and to “find ways to serve the students in the best way possible.” During classroom learning, teachers encouraged participation by engaging students in discussions with their peers, fostering the exchange of ideas and perspectives. In interviews, students appreciated opportunities to collaborate with partners on writing assignments to gain different approaches to the material, and parents expressed admiration for the school's strong instructional practices.

Students reported that teachers provide challenging instruction, pushing them to do better work while engaging students in learning to make it fun. Students commented on teachers' abilities to focus on individual student needs during class. Students also shared feelings that their schools prepare them for high school, college, and beyond. One student shared, “A lot of my friends are in public school. Every time I have a question about homework or anything, I ask them, they're like, ‘I haven't even gotten to that yet.’”

Parents described different ways schools provide challenging instruction that helped prepare students for high school and beyond. One parent explained, “These guys are going to go to college, and they'll already have it figured out. They're not going to college to fail.” Parents shared praise for how schools provide structures and resources to help parents support student learning.

A high school parent said, “My perception was that...[this school] was a higher academic standard than public school. That it was pushing them harder. It was driving them to become just so much more academically successful.”

While most people interviewed shared positive thoughts about the caliber of instruction at the schools, some shared concerns about the level of instruction. Parents at one school voiced concerns about the newly hired teachers not providing rigorous instruction like previous teachers. One parent at a different school commented, “If someone needs more ambitious instruction, they may not find it at the school.”

Faith

The schools WestEd visited are religious. In these schools, faith is considered an essential element. The presence of faith at each visited school was a critical organizing element in school culture, curricula, and interpersonal relationships. In a survey comment, one principal shared, “We are committed to a Catholic education founded on Gospel-centered values that guide our students to a full, spiritual, academic, and physical learning.”

“We have some kids that have never been to church, have no reference point for religion or Christianity. And then you have some who are literally leaders in their own church. And so, the community has been created where we can engage together, led by teachers.”

—High School Principal

Faith formed the bedrock of school norms and practices in most visited schools. Expressions of faith served as opportunities to build relationships among students. One student shared, “We have this thing where we have prayer pals, and we all go to mass, and . . . the older kids teach the little kids how to participate.” Strong school culture and routines were grounded in faith and lived expressions of faith. One teacher explained, “We’re trying to instill in them [students] the values of our faith, which are priceless and something that will guide them and carry them in high school, college, and beyond college. The way they treat their fellow man and the way they look at life and work through life.”

Some participants described their calls to be educators as directly connected to their desire to serve their faith. They said they are committed to serving communities in need through educational and religious service. One principal explained, “We all feel we’re missionaries, and our performance is only to honor God. It’s not to show off. It’s not to outperform. The vision, dream, and prayer of this school is that somehow, through us, God will use us to plant seeds in kids who will come to know Him, who will change this community for the Kingdom.”

Expressions of faith are woven into behavioral expectations. At one school, a teacher stopped her instruction and sit on the floor with a misbehaving child so they could pray together.

“She just needs somebody to meet with her and pray and be like, I’m so glad you’re here and safe, and know that we’re praying for you.”

—Teacher

In some schools, teachers see prayer as a way to connect with students and to reflect on behaviors and growth. Faith is central to these schools' culture and efforts to create a supportive student environment.

Impact of Scholarship on Schools

Participants across all schools praised the impact of the scholarships on their schools. Several participants shared that the scholarship relieves some families of an insurmountable financial burden. One principal explained that “the feeling that these parents get when they get that phone call that they’ve received this scholarship . . . and that financial burden is lifted . . . is just indescribable.” Some participants commented that the IKA scholarship enables schools to sustain or increase student populations. One principal shared, “It helps to keep more kids here.” Some participants added that the scholarship helps to diversify student populations.

“It’s a blessing for both the families that get it [the scholarship] and the families that don’t because it adds a whole new aspect of kids and personalities and families to the school that would not have been here. . . . [I]t’s kind of enriching the school.”

—Parent

Participants from several schools described purposeful efforts that schools, parishes, and other school-affiliated personnel undertake to make families aware of the scholarship opportunity and to increase their likelihood of applying for this and other financial support. One principal explained, “When we have a family that wants to come for a tour, we give them a packet with more information, and it talks about how to enroll for Empower Illinois.”

Some schools have organized school communities to promote the IKA scholarship. One principal explained, “The whole diocese partnered up with Empower Illinois. . . There’s also some political advocacy . . . to make sure this program continues. So, my families are also very involved in that because I need them to be.” A high school administrator stated, “We ask all of our students and families to apply for the scholarship simply because we anticipate nearly all of them winning it or being awarded that scholarship based on their income levels.”

At a high school, staff created opportunities for students to be involved in the lobbying process with legislators. An administrator noted, “Our conversations about Invest in Kids have opened doors to talk to the students about Illinois politics. We’ve gone to Springfield a few times with the students.”

At another high school, the scholarship has encouraged the school to implement standardized testing as well as to incorporate knowledge of the political process of the scholarship into classroom discussions. An administrator explained, “I so much have appreciated the standardized testing that comes with Invest in Kids. This year, we implemented the standardized test for science, and that was a great experience for our kids and for our teachers.”

For all the importance given to the IKA scholarships, from the surveys, 60 percent of teachers at these schools do not know who the scholarship recipients are. Ninety-four percent of teachers also indicated that scholarship recipients are not treated differently than other students in their school. In the focus groups, teachers said they did not know who the scholarship recipients were until the required testing. The IKA scholarships are essential for getting students in the door. However, they do not affect teachers’ perceptions of student ability once the students are there.

Challenges

Many interview participants said positive things about their school across various topics. However, a few challenges emerged in their answers and survey results. WestEd summarized these challenges below.

Turnover/Hiring

For some schools, staff turnover is a concern. For one school, the issue is leadership retention. The current principal said, “We have had three principals here in the past three years. This is my first year.” The rapid successive turnover has a significant impact on school operations. The prior principal started a strategic planning process, and the current principal was reluctant to cast it aside because so many in the school community had contributed to it. However, they are not comfortable pushing it forward. They opted to table the work on the plan for this year. There is a similar issue with teacher professional development. The principal wanted to assess what teachers need and restart professional development for teachers next year.

After the abrupt resignation of their longtime principal in 2020, one school turned to a veteran teacher to fill that role. This teacher does not hold an administrative credential but is still the principal. The school plans to promote another teacher to be the principal once they finish their administrative credential.

Another school’s teacher turnover generated much concern among parents. One parent spoke of lost “tribal knowledge” when a longtime teacher leaves. Another parent added, “We lost her, and then we lost these teachers . . . parents have tried to pick up these pieces.”

“This year, we had three different teachers. We started with one, and then he left, and then we had a fill-in teacher. Now we’re back to [a third one].”

—Parent

Other schools had similar issues. One principal commented on the increase in hiring for classroom teachers, “Actually, last year, and this never happened in my 15 years, we hired 18 teachers.” A teacher from a different school shared, “I feel in the past years we’ve been losing teachers and getting new ones.”

Special Education

A few interview participants shared concerns about students with behavioral issues. One parent spoke about a student: “No one had anything against this girl, but this girl did not belong. She had extreme behavioral issues. . . Like it’s not that we don’t want that child or it’s not like we’re un-Christian, but it’s like we don’t have the resources for it. . . We don’t have a special ed program or a behavioral program.” A parent at another school shared a similar view: “We don’t really have space or resources for a special education program and that kind of thing. That would be nice. And some kids who have special needs function here. But some kids, with their needs—I don’t know.”

The size of the school plays a role. Smaller schools lack the resources to add services and programs they might need, like special education and counseling, and many programs they want to add, such as after-school programs.

Survey Analysis

In the following survey analyses, WestEd describes the respondents to the teacher, parent, and student surveys (the administrator survey, with only six respondents, has too few participants for confidentiality, so WestEd chose not to report their answers). This is followed by survey results by topic, including leadership, teaching, instruction, engaged families, culture, and access and opportunity. For the complete survey results, see Appendix B: Survey Results.

Teacher Survey Respondents

Across six site-visit schools, two hundred and thirty-eight elementary teachers completed the online survey. These teachers were evenly distributed across the grades (see Table 9).

Table 9: Grade Level Participants:

Grade 9	0.4% (1)
Grade 8	11% (25)
Grade 7	11% (25)
Grade 6	11% (26)
Grade 5	11% (26)
Grade 4	10% (24)
Grade 3	10% (23)
Grade 2	9% (21)
Grade 1	9% (22)
K	10% (24)
PreK	9% (21)

Over one-half of teacher respondents have ten or more years of teaching experience. About twenty percent of teacher respondents are in their first four years of teaching (Table 10).

Table 10: Number Of Years In The Teaching Profession

This is my first year	9% (7)
1 to 4 years	11% (9)
5 to 10 years	31% (25)
More than ten years	50% (41)

Parent Survey Respondents

Two hundred and thirty-nine parents completed the parent survey. Thirty-one percent of parent respondents received a scholarship for their child(ren), and about half of parents did not receive a scholarship. Almost twenty percent of parents are not sure if their child has an IIKA scholarship (Table 11).

Table 11: Number Of Students That Received A Scholarship:

Yes	31% (75)
No	49% (118)
Not Sure	19% (46)

WestEd asked teachers if they knew which of their students received a scholarship. Only thirty-nine percent of teachers indicated they knew which of their students had a scholarship. Ninety-five percent of teachers did not think scholarship recipients are treated differently at their school.

Student Survey Respondents

For students, 546 completed the surveys across the six site-visit schools. There is a higher concentration of students from grades 3 and 5 (21% and 25% of all respondents, respectively). Other grades have similar numbers of student respondents (Table 12).

Table 12: Grade-Level Participants

Grade 8	11% (58)
Grade 7	12% (67)
Grade 6	16% (85)
Grade 5	21% (117)
Grade 4	15% (81)
Grade 3	25% (138)

Most students are not sure if they received an IKA scholarship. Almost two-thirds of students do not know if they have the IKA scholarship. Only thirteen percent of student respondents indicated they received the IKA scholarship. Nearly one in five indicated they did not receive the scholarship (Table 13).

Table 13: Number Of Students That Received A Scholarship:

Yes	13% (70)
No	23% (119)
Not Sure	64% (335)

Survey Results by Topic

In the following tables, WestEd displays the level of agreement that survey respondents have regarding survey items that are grouped by topic: leadership, teaching, instruction, engaged families, culture, and access and opportunity. Where possible, WestEd reports responses by topic for teachers, then parents, and followed by students.

Table 14 shows responses for Leadership. A quick scan shows high levels of agreement among teachers, parents, and students, with most items associated with the concept of leadership. Teachers' lowest level of agreement is with discipline. Roughly fifteen to twenty percent of teachers do not think there is a clear process for disciplinary approaches, that disciplinary approaches result in the desired outcome, and disciplinary approaches are fair. Student responses to discipline indicate similar levels of agreement with the teachers. Parents did not respond with concerns about discipline.

Table 14: Leadership

Teachers	
Thinking about your school administrators, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Teacher evaluations are fair.	100%
I can get help from administrators if needed.	96%
Administrators provide the tools and materials I need to support all learners in my classroom.	96%
Staff allocations are adequate.	93%
Administrators have high expectations for student behavior.	91%
Disciplinary approaches are fair.	86%
Disciplinary approaches result in the desired outcome(s).	81%
Administrators have defined a clear process for disciplinary approaches.	79%

Parents	
Thinking about your school leaders, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Overall, this school has high expectations for student behavior.	97%
Overall, this school has high expectations for student academic performance.	97%
Our principal is effective.	96%
There is a clear, fair process for discipline.	95%

Students	
Thinking about your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
I feel safe at school.	95%
My teachers care about me.	94%
I can get help from teachers if needed.	94%
This school has high expectations for how students behave.	90%
Overall, people are respectful at my school.	88%
There is a clear, fair process for discipline.	86%
I feel like an important part of my school.	78%
It is hard to communicate with people in the school (ex: my teachers, and the principal).	16%

Teachers feel they have the training needed to be effective, they have positive relationships with colleagues and students, and they have access to the professional development they need. With respect to teachers, parents indicate that their children get the help they need, the teachers care about their children, and they have good relationships with teachers (Table 15).

Table 15: Teaching

Teachers	
Thinking about teacher collaboration at your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
I have had the training I need to be an effective educator.	100%
I have positive relationships with my students.	100%
I have positive relationships with my colleagues.	100%
Professional development is strategic according to my needs as an educator.	88%

Parents	
Thinking about teacher collaboration at your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
My child(ren) can get help from teachers if needed.	98%
Our teachers care about my child(ren).	98%
I have positive relationships with my child(ren)'s teacher.	97%
Teachers keep me informed of what my child(ren) is/are learning in school.	95%

In other questions, however, when teachers were asked about opportunities to collaborate, forty percent of teachers responded that they did not have opportunities to collaborate with other educators in their subject area. In addition, thirty-six percent of teachers indicated that they did not have opportunities to collaborate with other educators in their grade band, and about thirty percent indicated that they did not collaborate with other educators in their building. Three-fourths of teachers indicate they have access to teacher professional development, leaving a quarter who indicated they do not have that access.

Both teachers and parents have high levels of agreement with statements indicating the school has good instruction (Table 16). They agree that their school expects students to work hard, that students are engaged in learning, that instructional methods meet students' needs, that the school supports struggling students, and that all students can learn.

Yet, 28% of teachers indicated that they are not confident in their ability to support ELL students. Nearly one-fifth of students indicate they do not have to work hard to do well, do not have to write to explain their work, and are not required to explain their answers on schoolwork. Further, nearly thirty percent of students say they do not discuss their work with other students. Finally, about thirty percent of students disagree that most kids in their classes think doing schoolwork is important.

This echoed the teachers' response; 22% disagreed that most kids in their classes think doing schoolwork is important.

Table 16: Instruction

Teachers	
Thinking about instruction, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
I understand the needs of my students.	100%
I have high expectations for student academic performance.	100%
Students are engaged in learning.	100%
My instructional methods are meeting the needs of my students.	100%
My assessment methods are appropriate for students.	100%
All students are capable of success.	100%
I know how to help struggling learners.	99%
I know how to support diverse needs among my students.	97%
The curricula I use is effective.	96%
My school has effective support in place to help my students.	93%
Most students in my classes think doing homework is important.	78%
I am confident in my ability to work with ELL students.	72%

Parents	
Thinking about instruction at your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
My child(ren) is/are engaged in learning.	98%
Students of all backgrounds have equitable access and opportunity to high-quality general academic programs.	97%
I have positive relationships with my child(ren)'s teacher.	96%
Our teachers ask my child(ren) to work hard to do well in school.	95%
My child(ren) are asked to share and discuss their work with other students.	93%
My child(ren) frequently is/(are) asked to write in order to explain a concept, problem, or a solution.	91%

Students	
Think about your classes and schoolwork, please select your level of agreement for the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
This school has high expectations for the work we do in class.	90%
Most kids in my class try hard to get good grades.	88%
I have to work hard to do well in school.	82%
My teachers ask us to use evidence to support our ideas	81%
In my classes, we have to write to explain a concept, or a problem, or a solution	78%
My teachers make me explain my answers.	78%
My teachers discuss how our classes connect to life outside school.	76%
In my classes, I share and discuss my work with other students	72%
Most kids in my classes think doing schoolwork is important.	71%

Both teachers and parents have high levels of agreement that families are an important part of the school community. Communication between home and school is a challenge for 30% of teachers and 13% of parents. All parents indicated that attending school is important, but 28% of teachers indicated that truancy is a problem at their school (Table 17).

Table 17: Engaged Families

Teachers	
Thinking about families, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Parents/families are an important part of our school community.	97%
It is challenging to connect with parents.	29%
Truancy is an issue at my school.	28%

INVOLVED FAMILIES	
Parents	
Thinking about family involvement at your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Attending school is important.	100%
I take an active role in the education of my child(ren).	99%
This school has effective support to help parents.	92%
I feel like an important part of my school community.	92%
It is challenging to communicate with people in the school (ex: teachers, principal).	13%
Transportation to school is difficult for my family.	12%

Teachers indicated that they feel valued, safe, and supported (Table 18). They think the school climate is positive, with students who care about good grades and who can get help. About 15 percent of teachers, however, think their school does not have a system in place to support struggling students.

Parents indicated that their school is safe, has a positive environment, and offers quality education. They indicated that the school offers equitable access to academic programs, support, and extracurriculars. Finally, parents indicated that their children are receiving effective support.

Most students indicated that attending school is important, that they do their best, and know what it takes to succeed. However, about one-fifth of students indicated that they do not like learning at school.

Table 18: Culture

Teachers	
Thinking about your school environment, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
I feel like a valuable member of my school community.	97%
Our school environment is safe.	97%
Students can get help if needed.	97%
Overall, the school climate is positive.	96%
My school has effective supports in place to help me.	95%
Most students in my class try hard to get good grades.	94%
I have enough time to teach all of the required subject matter.	92%
My school has a system to support struggling learners.	85%

Parents	
Thinking about your school environment, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Overall, the school climate is positive.	98%
The school environment is safe.	98%
My child(ren) is/are getting a quality education.	98%
Students of all backgrounds have equitable access and opportunity to receive academic support (e.g., remediation, tutoring).	96%
Students of all backgrounds have equitable access and opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities.	95%
This school has effective support to help my child(ren).	94%
Students of all backgrounds have equitable access and opportunity to participate in advanced academic programs (e.g., AP classes, gifted programs).	91%

Students	
Thinking about your school, please select your level of agreement with the following statements.	Agree or Strongly Agree
I know what it takes to succeed.	94%
Attending school is important.	92%
I do my best each day.	92%
I like learning at school.	81%
It is difficult for me to get to school.	12%

About one-half of teachers indicated that their students do not have access to after-school and enrichment programs or tutoring for extra academic help (Table 19). About forty percent of teachers responded that students do not have access to counseling. Most students indicated

that they have equal access and opportunity for advanced work, tutoring, and after-school activities.

Table 19: Access And Opportunity

Teachers	
Think about the presence or absence of each component listed below. Please circle the number that corresponds with your thinking on the extent to which each component is present in your school.	Highly or Mostly Present
Student Learning	99%
Clear communications	86%
Instructional technology	85%
Family involvement	82%
Teacher professional development	75%
Counseling for students	62%
Tutoring/extra academic help	57%
Afterschool/enrichment programs	54%

Students	
Thinking about your school, please tell us if you agree or not with each statement.	Agree or Strongly Agree
Students of all backgrounds have equal opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities.	95%
Students of all backgrounds have equal opportunity to receive academic extra help or tutoring.	94%
Students of all backgrounds have equal opportunity to participate in advanced academic programs (e.g., AP classes, gifted programs).	90%

Key Findings

Finding 1: IKA Scholarship Recipients Proficiency Rates on the IAR

Scholarship recipients attained relatively low levels of proficiency in the IAR. About one-quarter of scholarship recipients were proficient in English language arts in 2021-23, while about one-fifth were proficient in math in 2021 and 2022. Still, only 16 percent were proficient in math in 2023. In the 2023 IAR results, ELA proficiency rates were higher for every grade except 3rd grade, and rates were about the same as in previous years. By contrast, math proficiency rates were generally lower than SY 2021/22. Fifth grade had the lowest overall proficiency rates, while 7th grade had the overall highest rates.

On average, students in economically disadvantaged schools had lower scale scores in IAR than those in economically advantaged schools. Students enrolled in predominantly minority schools had average lower scale scores than students in predominantly white schools. *The exception was in math in 2023.* Students in predominantly minority schools had higher scale scores on average than those in predominantly white schools

Among scholarship recipients with two years of data, the average student had higher scale scores in ELA and slightly lower scale scores in math compared to the previous year, with roughly a quarter (26%) of students achieving proficiency in ELA in 2022/23 and one fifth achieving proficiency in math. The students most likely to have lower scores in math enrolled in 5th and 8th grade in 2023.

Finding 2: Comparing IAR Performance of IKA Scholarship Recipients with Public School Students

In both 2022 and 2023, Illinois public schools had a higher percentage of grades 3–8 students meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA compared to IKA scholarship recipients (in 2022, 30.1 percent to 20.8 percent, and in 2023, 35.4 percent to 22.5 percent respectively). The same was true in Math for both 2022 and 2023. Illinois public schools had a higher percentage of grades 3–8 students meeting or exceeding expectations than IKA scholarship recipients (in 2022, 25.5 percent to 17.8 percent, and in 2023, 27.1 percent to 16.3 percent, respectively).

WestEd examined year-to-year gains by performance level, using 2022 as the baseline performance level and 2023 to calculate the gain or loss in scale score. Overall, the difference in the mean growth between IKA Scholarship Recipients in private schools and students enrolled in public schools was not statistically significant, with two exceptions. Comparing students who achieved performance level 1 (“Did not yet meet expectations”) in ELA on the SY 2021/22 tests,

scholarship recipients recorded a significantly larger **increase** in their 2022-23 scale score in ELA than the average public school student. But comparing students who achieved performance level 5 (“Exceeded expectations”) in ELA on the SY 2021/22 scholarship recipients recorded a significantly larger average **decrease** in their 2022-23 scale score in ELA compared to the average public school student.

Finding 3: SAT Performance

Among students who took the SAT during SY 2022/23, Illinois public school students performed slightly lower in ELA, with 31.6 percent who met or exceeded state-determined proficiency benchmarks compared to 34.3 percent among scholarship recipients. In Math, Illinois public school students performed higher, with 26.7 percent who met or exceeded state-determined proficiency benchmarks compared to 23.9 percent among scholarship recipients.

About one-third of high school scholarship recipients were proficient on the SAT in ELA, while about one-quarter were proficient in math. The average total score among all 11th grade scholarship recipients was 958 on the SAT’s 400–1600 scale. The average scores for each section were 495 on the EBRW section and 464 on the math section.

Finding 4: What Teachers, Parents, and Students Think of Their Schools

In the school communities where WestEd interviewed, participants at all levels mostly praised the school leadership, the teachers and teaching, the school environment, parent support, and the instruction. Many emphasized the strong relationships fostered in the school, beginning with leaders open to input, teachers who know their students, and parents who positively engage with the schools. Students feel safe in the schools. Participants say these schools have high expectations for behavior and academic performance. Parents think their children are getting a good education, and many point to success in high school from prior graduates. WestEd found that participants in the visited schools liked their school.

At many of these schools, teachers, parents, and students cite the importance of faith as the essential element of a complete education. The presence of faith at each visited school was a critical organizing element in school cultures, curricula, and interpersonal relationships. Many staff feel called to serve in faith-based schools. Many feel their duty is to educate students in faith and academics.

Finding 5: Schools’ Use of IKA Scholarships

Participants across all schools praised the impact of the scholarships on their schools. They help families overcome financial burdens, enable schools to sustain or increase student populations, and help schools use funds that formerly went to scholarships to fund other unmet priorities. One leader characterized the potential loss of IKA scholarships as a “potentially existential threat” to some of the struggling schools in their affiliation. Some schools in our study are well-

funded, and the scholarship recipients are a small part of their student participation. In other schools, the IKA scholarships provide a significant source of funds that they would need to raise by other means. In the schools WestEd visited, schools work to make families from their school and religious community aware of the scholarship opportunity.

Finding 6: Some Core Challenges for Private Schools

Some of the schools WestEd visited shared concerns about their ability to deal with students with behavioral issues or who need additional special education services. They lacked the resources needed to provide the support that some students need. As noted earlier, the size of the school plays a role. Smaller schools lack the resources to add services and programs they might need, like special education and counseling, and many programs they want to add, such as after-school programs. Beyond the anecdotes shared with WestEd, WestEd does not have systematic data to know how many schools share similar concerns.

Summary

This report includes analyses of IKA scholarship recipients' test scores, with comparisons to average public school student test scores and descriptions of how private schools support student learning. It is a beginning effort to understand the impacts of the IKA scholarships. Given the limited number of testing years and the data limitations outlined in the report, WestEd urges the findings to be interpreted with caution.

If the IKA scholarship program continues, additional information about scholarship recipients would allow the state to conduct a more rigorous analysis of the effectiveness of the program and the equity of impacts on students with different backgrounds and needs. The state may want to consider asking scholarship-receiving schools to include student demographic information, including special education and English language learning status, in all IKA scholarship recipients' student assessment data.

Participants at schools WestEd visited expressed concern about their ability to support students needing additional help with language, behavior, and physical or mental challenges. WestEd does not know how much this is an issue at other schools. If the IKA program continues and the scholarships are meant to help students regardless of their additional needs, the state may want to assess the need for additional support for scholarship recipients with language, behavior, physical, or mental challenges.

Finally, in considering who applies for and receives a scholarship, WestEd did not find publicly available data sources about how low-income families learn about the IKA program. If the IKA scholarship program continues, the state may want to ask SGOs to report on marketing efforts to inform low-income families across the state about the scholarships.

Appendices

(see separate document)
