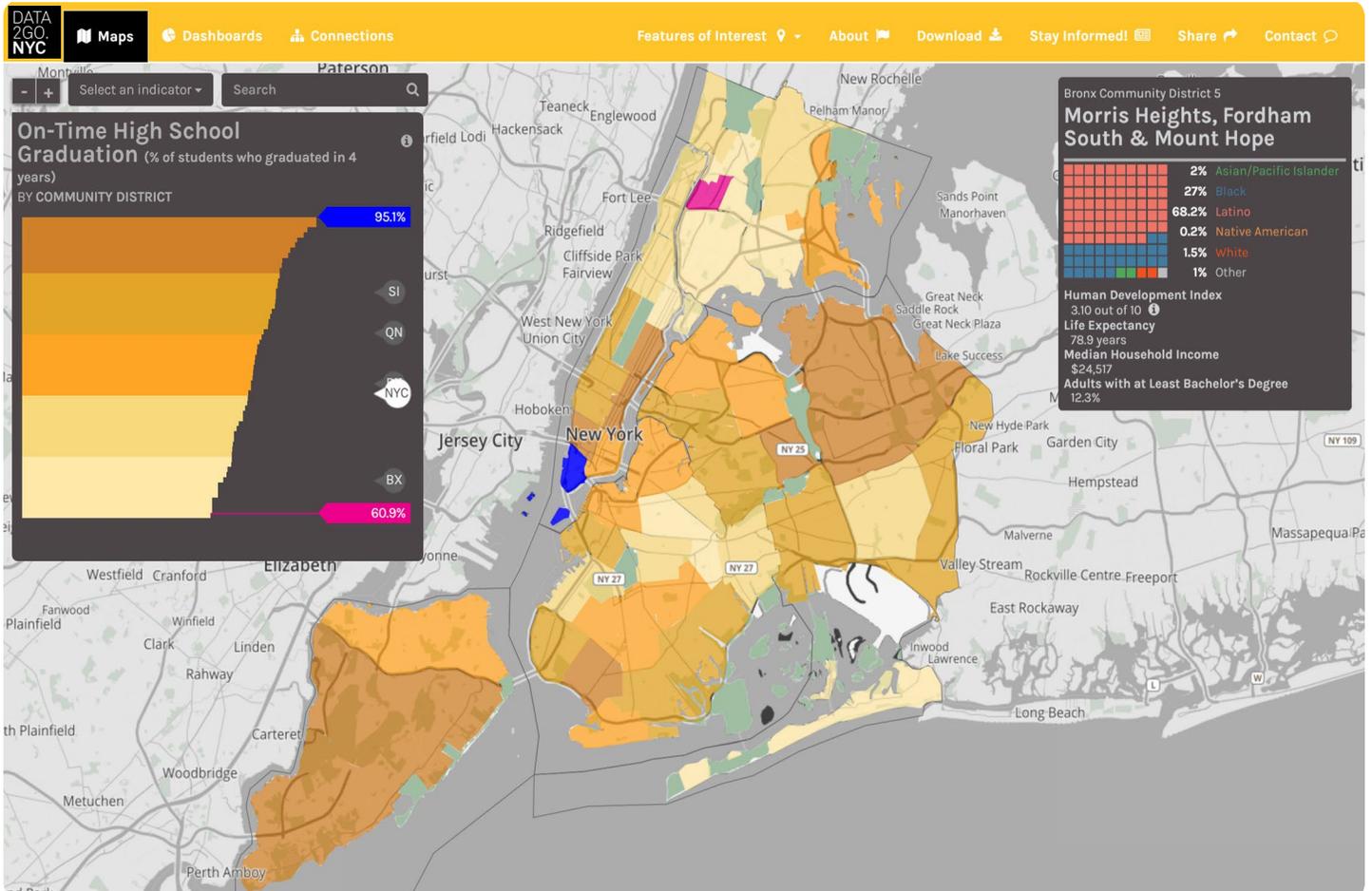


HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IN NEW YORK CITY IS NEIGHBORHOOD STILL DESTINY?



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calculation is likely a significant underestimate for families aiming at the most competitive schools; many of them will invest much more time than even the high-end 72-hour figure.

Adding together the hours spent by all the eighth-grade families in a given year gives us a range from a low of 2,000,000 hours to a high of 5,760,000 hours spent on school choice. That's between 57,142 and 164,571 work weeks' worth of time.¹⁴

Conclusion

Is the collective investment in time, stress, and financial resources required by the high school choice process, not to mention lengthier commutes for high school students, worth it? The evidence suggests not. **After more than a decade of universal school choice, a child's community district is still highly associated with his or her likelihood of graduating high school in four years.** It is time for New York City to reassess its approach.

Students from the city's affluent neighborhoods are doing well when it comes to graduating high school in four years. School choice allows these teens to select schools that not only provide an all-around high-quality education but also are particularly well-matched to their interests, abilities, and ambitions. The significant investment that they and their families make in the choice process tends to pay off, though many question the emotional, financial, and time costs. It is likely, though, that these students also had a fairly good set of options prior to the 2004 reforms. And then as now, the rich could always opt out of the public system altogether by sending their kids to private school.

We often hear about smart, motivated teens from poor pockets of the city who have benefited from leaving underperforming schools behind. But what about those who have not benefited? The data show that far too many young people from low-income black and Latino neighborhoods in the Bronx and central Brooklyn are winding up in high schools with low graduation rates, going to school mostly with other teens who share their socioeconomic disadvantages. For them, the link between neighborhood conditions and school quality remains as strong as ever, even if the school they now attend is farther from home.

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What can be done, not just in New York, but in districts nationwide? Large and growing inequalities in the United States, exacerbated by the role property taxes play in funding K–12 education, make educational equality a huge challenge for big cities across the country. For example, the on-time high school graduation rate in Los Angeles is similar to the rate in New York, and both are doing better than Chicago (66 percent) and Philadelphia (64 percent).¹⁵

Children living in poverty in the United States face tremendous challenges—from ill health and hunger to exposure to trauma and social exclusion—that hamper their ability to succeed in the classroom. Addressing these problems, which stem from inequality and segregation, is beyond the ken of the vast majority of schools. Expecting teachers, principals, and school administrators to right society’s most serious wrongs flies in the face of common sense; to blame them for failing to do so is unfair. Investing in better schools is surely necessary, and evidence-based reforms are critical. School choice may well prove to be a beneficial approach if carefully regulated to ensure good choices for all children. But making educational equality a reality requires investments in children, families, and communities far beyond the education sector. Residential segregation by race and income, poverty, the absence of meaningful work, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of voice and political power, and discrimination: addressing these larger issues is the fundamental educational reform that society has thus far been unwilling to make.

The City should set an ambitious, time-bound target for slashing the neighborhood graduation gap and make the changes needed to get there.

A yawning chasm separates the on-time graduation rates of young people living in the City’s affluent, largely white neighborhoods and those who call low-income, black and Latino communities home. Nearly four in ten students in parts of the City fail to earn what is, in today’s economy, a must-have educational credential—clear evidence that current approaches are falling short. The City should set an ambitious, time-bound target for slashing the neighborhood graduation gap and make the changes needed to get there.