

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Testimony by Scott Muri, Ed. D.

September 18, 2025

In the summer of 2019, the West Texas school district featured in the movie Friday Night Lights for its football prowess on the athletic field was on the verge of a state takeover because of its poor performance in the classroom. Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, TX had twenty of their forty-five schools ranked D or F by the Texas accountability system, with sixteen of them receiving an F. The district was in crisis and needed a significant transformation.

Today, ECISD has been recognized for making remarkable academic improvements and received its first “B” rating from the Texas Education Agency. In addition, researchers from Harvard and Stanford Universities highlighted the district’s progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 2019 to 2024 and published these findings in the Education Recovery Scorecard. ECISD was also awarded the 2024 District of the Year by K-12 Dive. A comprehensive strategic plan with an intentional focus on teachers and leaders guided the district to success.

Ector County ISD is located in West Texas and serves the city of Odessa, TX. Approximately 76% of the students are considered Economically Disadvantaged and 12% receive Special Education services. Student enrollment is approximately 34,000 with a demographic of 81% Hispanic, 13% White, 3% African American, and 3% other races. ECISD has 45 schools and 4,200 employees.

I began my tenure as Superintendent of Ector County ISD in July 2019 and worked with the leadership team to quickly diagnose the root cause of the system’s failure. Three areas arose as the primary contributors to the poor academic performance. First, the foundation was crumbling. The district struggled to provide the basics such as timely school meals, student access to modern technology and appropriate school facilities. Second, the human capital infrastructure was inadequate and ineffective. The district had an 18% teacher vacancy rate (350 teacher vacancies) on the first day of school in August 2019, along with multiple administrative vacancies, and there were no pipelines to fill these vacant positions. Finally, the classroom learning environments had not changed in decades. Students were being taught with a variety of poor quality curricular materials using teaching methods that were not based on current research. These findings led to the development of a strategic plan designed to address these deficiencies and transform the system.

Improving the System

Edwards Deming once said, “Your organization is perfectly designed to achieve the results it is achieving.” Ector County ISD was perfectly designed to achieve failure, and the design needed to change if improvement was going to happen. We developed a strategic plan based on three

system goals that were created by the Board of Trustees. However, in order for the plan to be implemented effectively, several system design elements were added:

- A Project Management Oversight Process was established to drive the projects defined within the strategic plan.
- The organization became ambidextrous; it learned to do today's work exceptionally well while also innovating for the future. A mechanism was put in place to help successful innovations become today's work.
- A change management strategy was a part of every project plan as effective projects create organizational change.
- A robust internal and external communication strategy was implemented.

Once the central pieces were operational, the strategic plan was effectively implemented. The plan focused on three distinct areas and contained a set of leading indicators that were regularly monitored to ensure the organization was making progress. Highlights of the plan include the following:

1) Learning Journey

- Expanded PreK to include a full-day program for 4-year-olds and a half-day program for 3-year-olds.
- Systematized a blended learning model to support more effective student learning.
- Incorporated high-impact virtual tutoring and leveraged Outcomes-Based Contracting with providers to drive effectiveness.
- Provided high-quality instructional materials PreK through 12th grade.
- Eliminated traditional summer school and replaced it with an experience-based summer learning program.

2) Foundational Excellence

- A modified zero-based budgeting process was implemented to align financial resources to strategic work.
- District technology standards and interoperability were established to provide more effective student access to technology resources and better access to data systems.
- Developed and implemented a long-range facilities master plan, resulting in the passage of a bond referendum to build new schools and maintain existing structures.

3) Talent Development

- Created multiple talent pipelines in partnership with local colleges and universities.
- Created an Educator Preparation Program to educate and certify teachers.
- Created a paid full-year teacher residency model.
- Created a paid teacher apprenticeship model partially funded by the Department of Labor
- Redesigned compensation system to provide the most effective teachers with a salary of \$100k+. Key elements included:
 - incentive pay for teachers whose students demonstrated significant academic growth
 - stackable compensation for assumption of additional responsibilities
 - incentive pay for teachers/leaders accepting strategic placements

- alternative salary schedule for new teachers completing a full-year teacher residency
- Redesigned the traditional teacher role using the Opportunity Culture model developed by Public Impact. In this model, a master teacher spends 50% of their day teaching and 50% of their day coaching and developing other teachers. This model enables more students to access the most effective teachers, as explained in detail below.
- Incentivized effective teachers and administrators with a strategic staffing model that placed them in the most challenging schools.
- Aligned teacher professional learning with the gold standard, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.
- Developed a system of support for teachers pursuing their National Board Certification.
- Enacted the concept of strategy braiding to guide the development of all human capital strategies so they were interrelated.

Advancing the Teaching Profession

The single most important in-school factor that influences student achievement is the teacher. We often seek the “silver bullet” and fail to invest deeply in the most important element in the education equation. In Ector County ISD, we knew that if we were going to significantly improve academic outcomes for students, we needed to make strategic investments in our teachers.

Our human capital strategy had four main areas of investment: professional learning, compensation, pipeline development/recruiting, and redesign. The strategies were braided together so that each would complement the other. The strategy braiding also enabled the organization to more effectively organize around the work to ensure success. The following elements were a part of the overall strategy:

1) Professional Learning

- The district developed a system of support (fees paid and coaching provided) for teachers to gain certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.
- The district created a personalized professional learning system enabling teachers to gain access to professional learning opportunities that met their unique needs.
- The district fostered a collaborative environment of strong professional learning communities in which all teachers engaged.
- New ‘master teachers’ provide job-embedded coaching to teachers in high-need schools

2) Compensation

- The district annually increased base pay for teachers from \$54,100 in 2019 to \$61,000 in 2025.
- The district was one of the first to adopt the Texas Teacher Incentive Allotment, which awarded highly effective teachers with up to \$32,000 per year based upon student academic growth and teacher evaluation results.
- The district created a compensation plan for teachers completing a full-year residency program, which enabled them to reach the highest pay in 10 years rather than the traditional 30 years.
- The district provided additional compensation for those teachers accepting strategic staffing placements.

-The district developed a stackable compensation system in which teachers can now earn well over \$100,000 in annual compensation.

3) Pipeline Development/Recruiting

- The district created its own Educator Preparation Program to educate and certify new teachers.
- The district administered a Career and Technical Education Pathway in teaching.
- The district partnered with local universities to create a fully paid-full year teacher residency program for college seniors in the education program. The teacher residents were placed with master teachers participating in the Opportunity Culture model.
- The district partnered with the US Department of Labor to bring the Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program to the system. The Department of Labor provides funding for this program.
- The district created a program that identified highly effective paraprofessionals and guided them through college completion and teacher certification.
- The local college and university collaborated to create a Teach in 3 program in which the traditional four-year education degree was condensed to three years.

4) Redesign - The Opportunity Culture Model

- Ector County ISD redesigned the traditional teacher role using the Opportunity Culture model from Public Impact. In this new role, the teacher or Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) spends 50% of the day providing instruction to students and 50% of the day in a leadership role providing embedded coaching to a group of 2-5 other teachers. This teacher receives an additional \$17,000 per year for serving in the MCL role.
- Opportunity Culture roles are created by school teams, including teachers, using design principles and standards, and using materials that guide us based on data and research.
- School districts choose pay levels and implementation details—they and school leaders and teams run all implementation.
- Public Impact, the organization that developed the standard models we used to innovate, has stated publicly, and to me, that design and implementation details are correlated with results.
- The purpose of the Multi-Classroom Leader role is to ensure results, using materials and methods that each teacher-leader believes based on prior success will get higher growth student learning, including materials provided by the district or school.
- Multi-Classroom Leader positions in our district, and in others according to Public Impact, are selective and require prior high-growth student learning.
- These roles are paid through reallocations, vacancies and other school-level funding, so that they are financially sustainable and stable for our schools.
- Multi-Classroom Leader roles on average have earned supplements that total more than 20% of average teacher pay, consistently every year, and several other roles earn sustainably funded pay supplements, too, both nationally and in my district.
- These roles are accountable for using their best methods to achieve student learning growth by every teacher they lead, and as a team, which distinguishes them from many other roles nationally.

-Public Impact also has data that district and school communications about the roles and program are correlated with student learning results, as well.

-In addition to the district-wide increases in student learning growth that the Harvard-Stanford Education Recovery Scorecard found, the Texas Tech researchers looked at effects on learning in Opportunity Culture teams and schools and found they were above and beyond learning growth that our other schools and teams without these models experienced.

Impact on Student Learning

I asked researchers at Texas Tech University to rigorously evaluate the Opportunity Culture initiative, and they found a strong positive impact on student learning in both math and reading over a four-year period.

- A study will soon be released by Texas Tech researchers covering the period from 2020-21 to 2023-24 in ECISD.
 - Citation: Kirksey, J., Wiseman, A. W., Gottlieb, J. J., Reed, B. M., &
 - Lansford, T. (2025). Evaluating Opportunity Culture Improving Student Achievement through Strategic Staffing in West Texas. Working Paper, Center for Innovative Research in Change, Leadership, and Education at Texas Tech University. Available: <https://hdl.handle.net/2346/103578>
- The study finds positive student learning growth effects in math and reading, both when Opportunity Culture Multi-Classroom Leaders directly taught students and when teachers led by MCL roles taught students over 2020-21 through 2023-24.
- The study finds that students gained an additional 3.8 months of reading growth above the average annual gain of other students in the district when taught by Opportunity Culture Multi-Classroom Leader roles and their team teachers, and 3.5 months of extra math growth above the rest of the district per year.
- Students achieved this extra growth, on average, every year they were in an Opportunity Culture classroom in each subject.
- On average, students who were in Opportunity Culture classrooms in ECISD for four years in a row in a subject achieved well over an extra year of learning growth in total, in both reading and math.
- The Texas Tech study also found a positive impact on a major challenge districts nationwide are facing: chronic absenteeism. Students with the highest absence rates were 10–20% less likely to be chronically absent when taught by an MCL role or team teacher they led.
- A second third-party study from Brookings and AIR found similar results in an analysis of three other districts in 2 other states, before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- When Opportunity Culture Title I schools nationally reach all students with these models, they are 61% more likely to make schoolwide high growth according to Public Impact analysis, using publicly available growth data. Schools reaching all students in their 4th or later year of implementation, they are 83% more likely to make schoolwide high growth, according to the same analysis of 2023-24 data, the most recently available.
 - 93% of OC schools nationally are Title I
 - 96% of OC schools in Ector are Title I

- The Texas Tech study also explores whether Opportunity Culture teams appear to have had a positive effect beyond their own teams' classrooms, and found that yes, student learning growth increased outside of the classrooms directly led by Multi-Classroom Leader roles, indicating what prior researchers called a "spillover effect."
- In layman's terms, this spillover might include: Effects outside of treatment classrooms if Multi-Classroom Leader roles shared materials and methods, outside their teachers led directly, within their schools in a variety of ways.
- The earlier study by AIR and Brookings (CALDER) did not look at this potential spillover, or spread of benefit, within or across schools, but they noted that if spillover exists, then the extra learning effect sizes found in their study of three districts would be higher than what they reported.

Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

- Educators also love working in these models.
- 97-99% of teacher-leaders want the models to continue, according to a national anonymous survey administered by Public Impact over 9 years.
- 86-90% of all staff involved have wanted the models to continue in recent years, according to that same survey.
- In Ector County, we saw an enormous impact of this and companion reforms on vacancies, which dropped from "over 350 substitute teachers filling in for full time teachers (18% of classrooms) to 29 in the 2024-2025 school year."
- Another district that analyzed its data found a 54% drop in teacher turnover after 2 years of implementing these models.
- Another district reported receiving over 800 applications for 35 open Opportunity Culture positions and filling other positions in the district with excess applicants.

High-Dosage Tutoring

ECISD spent \$12 million of our \$93 million in federal pandemic-response funds on high-dosage tutoring, spread out over three years. Our staff conducted a virtual tutoring pilot in the fall of 2019 that resulted in significant learning gains for our students, so we placed a big bet on expanding virtual tutoring in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over 6,000 students across 23 of Ector County's 45 schools received high-dosage tutoring, which we continue to do today. The program has done more than help struggling students. It has also led participating schools to redesign their school days, creating schoolwide or grade-wide "intervention" blocks that deliver extra instruction to all students regardless of reading level. Advanced students get faster paced or enriched instruction, while others work in small groups with a classroom educator or paraprofessional.

ECISD used Outcomes Based Contracting to ensure that federal investments improved student outcomes. This meant the district only had to pay if the students showed improvement, creating accountability for the students, the district, and the tutoring company. The payout for the tutoring company was tied to the academic growth of students, with higher student growth leading to higher payouts.

Results

Today, due to our strategic investments and system reform, our **student academic achievement has improved and continues to grow:**

- The percentage of high school seniors considered prepared for postsecondary success jumped from 56% to 93% between 2019 and 2025.
- Kindergarten readiness increased from 36% in 2019 to 57% in 2024.
- ECISD's graduation rate improved to 87.8%, the highest level in 23 years.
- Researchers from Harvard and Stanford Universities highlighted the district's progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 2019 to 2024 as stated in the Education Recovery Scorecard.
- Ector County ISD was awarded the [2024 District of the Year](#) by K-12 Dive.

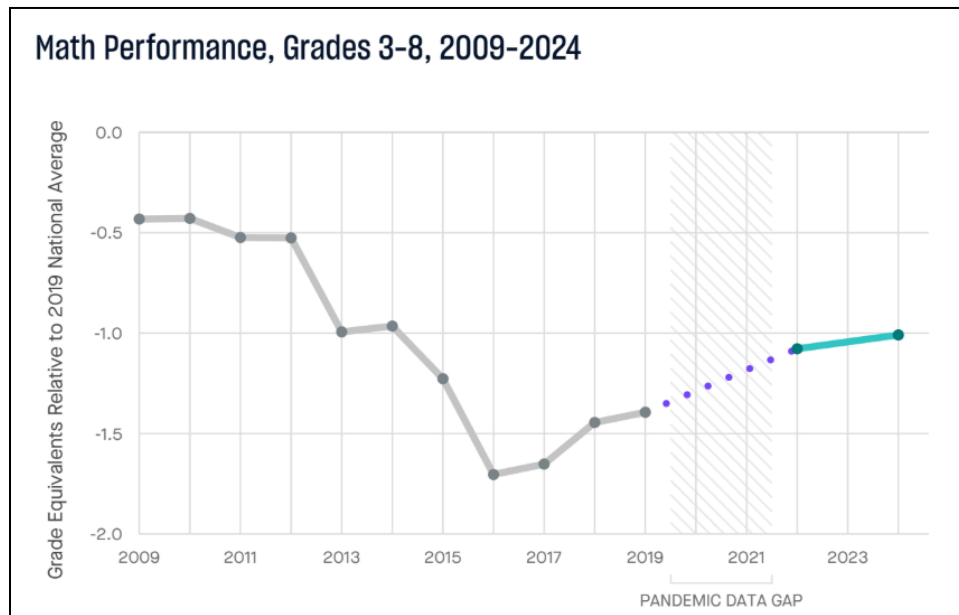
Recommendations

In order to improve public education in our country, I would recommend:

- Edifying the teaching profession and honor the people who mold and shape the future of this great nation, our children.
- Investing deeply in the two factors that have the greatest impact upon students and their academic achievement, teachers and principals.
- Providing the necessary funds to improve teacher compensation and incentivizing strategic compensation. The *Pay Teachers Act* is a healthy step in this direction.
- Supporting continued research in the areas of strategic staffing and compensation as this body of work continues to evolve.
- Supporting research that informs the transformation that must occur in public schools as we embrace the impact of Artificial Intelligence.

EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD

Ector County Independent School District
Odessa, Texas



Student Demographics (provided by Superintendent Dr. Muri):

Total student population: 33,662

Hispanic/Latino: 81%

White: 12%

Black/African-American: 3%

Students receiving FRPL: 75%

ELL students: 29%

Dr. Scott Muri, Superintendent Emeritus (through January 31, 2025)

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- “Boosting student achievement starts with equipping and supporting teachers. Incentivizing the best teachers to work in our lowest-performing schools allowed us to put the most qualified teachers in front of the students in most need of support.”

Background:

In 2019, Ector County Independent School District was on the verge of a state takeover, half of its schools received a D or F on the state report card, and was short 350 teachers. The district has transformed student learning through an intentional strategy that braided together tactics such as heavy investments in the teacher workforce, apprenticeship programs for aspiring teachers and principals, and a results-based tutoring program.

Strategies for Success:

Outcomes-based tutoring:

- Superintendent Muri used Covid relief funds to provide 1:1 tutoring for 6,000 students

identified based on their state assessment data and teacher input. Dr. Muri contracted with multiple companies to provide outcomes-based tutoring, which meant the district only had to pay if the students showed improvement, creating accountability for the students, the district, and the tutoring company. The payout for the tutoring company was tied to the academic growth of students, with higher student growth leading to higher payouts.

- The tutoring was done virtually, which helped reduce barriers like transportation, and was conducted during school hours to ensure students who needed the tutoring were receiving those services.
- Dr. Muri directed schools to communicate with the parents of students who qualified for tutoring, ensuring that parents were aware that their child qualified for the service to get their buy-in for the program.
- ECISD was also responsive to the needs and desires of the students receiving tutoring services. For example, it was important to elementary students that they see the tutor, while secondary students preferred being able to text or “chat” with their tutor.

Investing in the teacher workforce:

- Superintendent Muri leveraged the Texas Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) to garner what is approaching \$7 million additional dollars in performance pay to reward outstanding teachers for becoming “master teachers” and showing improvements in student learning.
- ECISD partnered with [Public Impact](#), a North Carolina-based organization, to implement [Opportunity Culture](#), a staffing model that incentivizes and supports teachers to become teacher leaders and work in high-need schools in what Dr. Muri calls “stackable compensation opportunities.”
- New roles were created for teachers who were identified as “master teachers”: these teachers teach for half the day, and mentor new teachers for the rest of the school day. Master teachers were offered additional pay incentives as part of their new role.
- As part of this model, Dr. Muri practiced putting highly qualified teachers in the lowest performing schools and compensated those teachers for the increased responsibility.
- Dr. Muri created partnerships with local colleges and universities to create pipelines for teacher prep programs, offering a fully paid one-year teacher residency program, a principal apprenticeship program for current teachers, and ongoing professional development and mentoring opportunities.
- In 2019, the district was facing a massive teacher shortage, with over 350 substitute teachers filling in for full time teachers (18% of classrooms). In the 2024-2025 school year, that number is down to 29.



Pivoting from Pandemic Recovery to Long-Term Reform: A District-Level Analysis

Daniel C. Dewey, Erin Fahle, Thomas J. Kane, Sean F. Reardon, Douglas O. Staiger (Dartmouth)

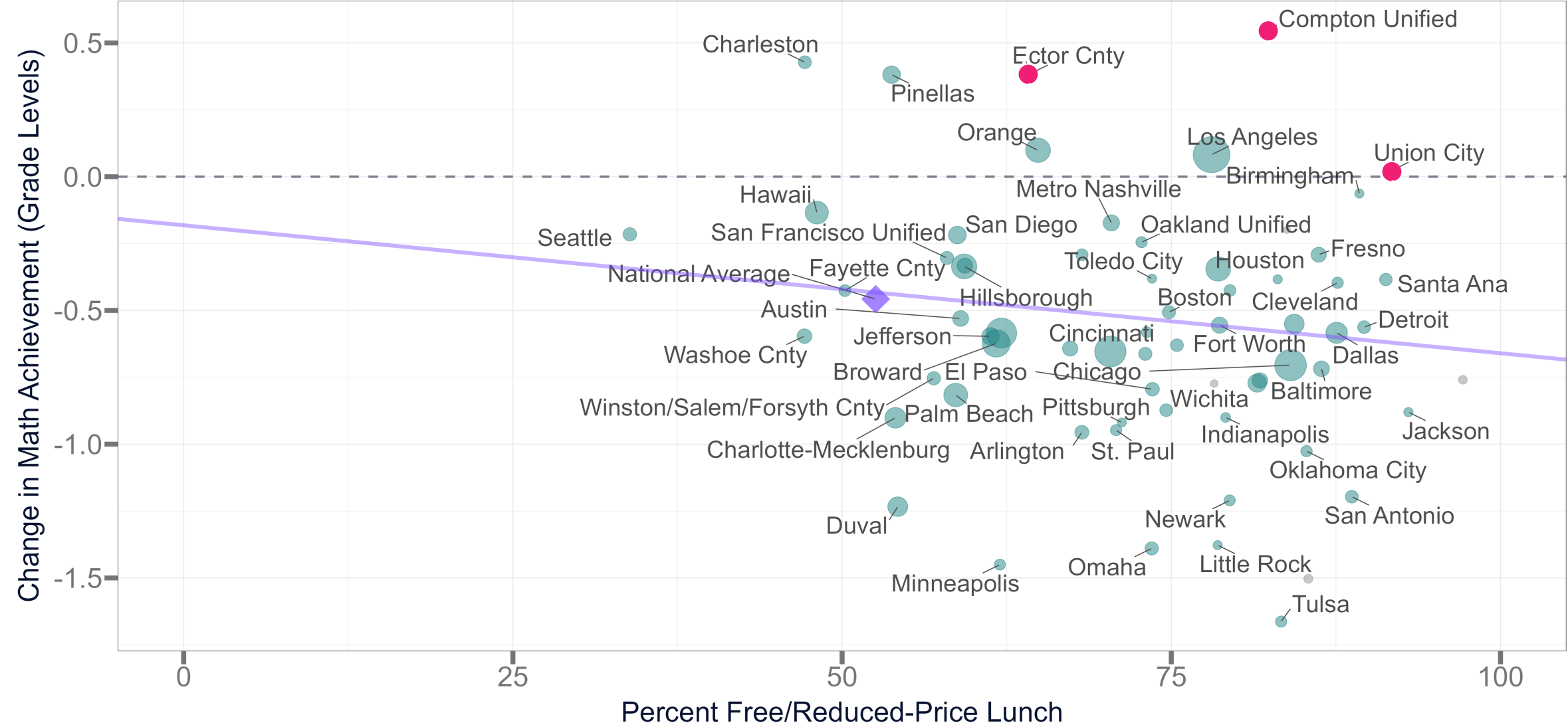


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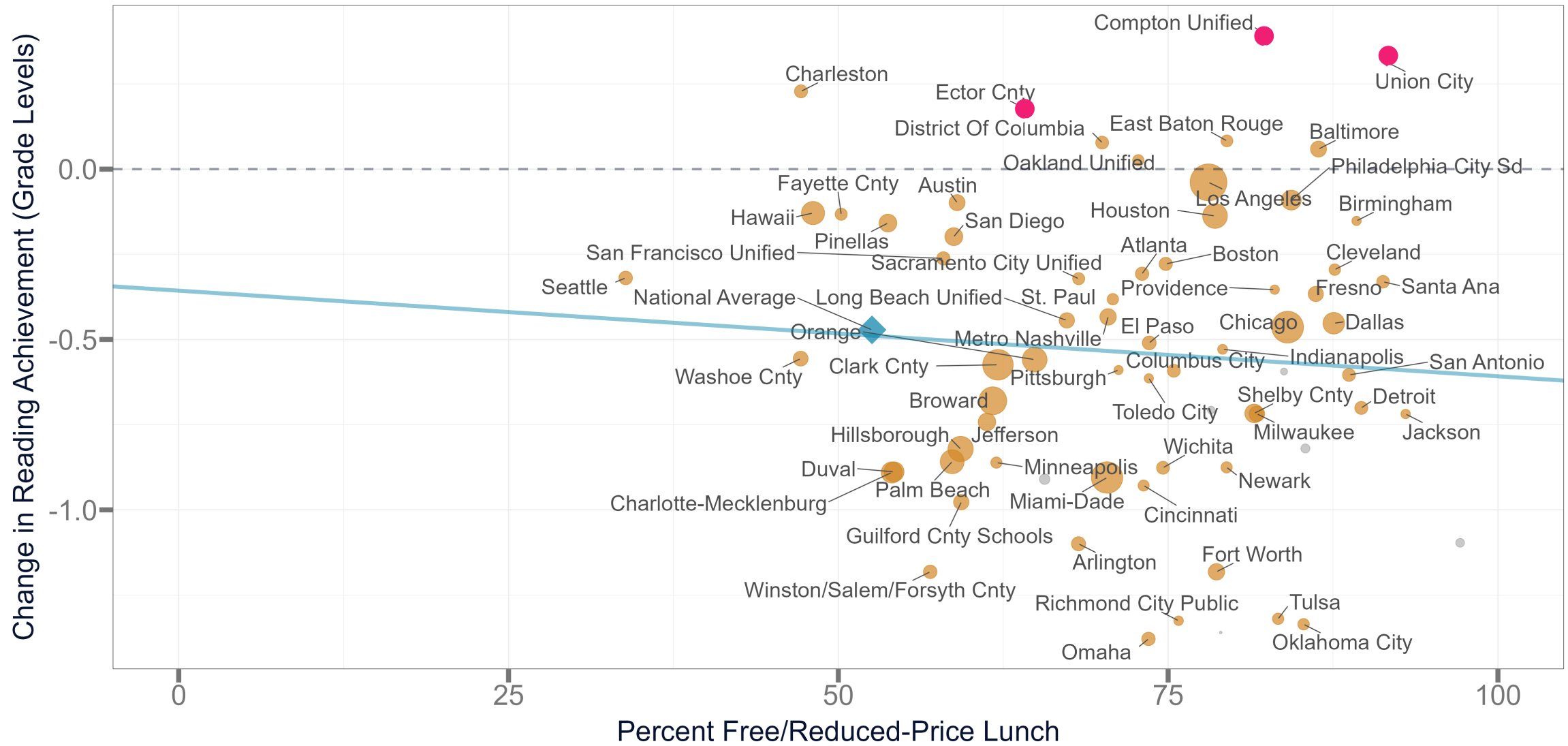
The Educational Opportunity Project
at Stanford University

Math Achievement Losses in Selected Districts: 2019 to 2024



Source: Education Recovery Scorecard, by Harvard Center for Education Policy Research and Stanford Educational Opportunity Project.
For details on the methodology see <https://edopportunity.org/recovery/methods>.

Reading Achievement Losses in Selected Districts: 2019 to 2024



Source: Education Recovery Scorecard, by Harvard Center for Education Policy Research and Stanford Educational Opportunity Project.
For details on the methodology see <https://edopportunity.org/recovery/methods>.