



# Struggling High Schools Are Just the Tip of the Iceberg

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If Missouri has a workforce development problem—that is, if students are leaving high school [without the skills they need](#) to enter the workforce, a knee-jerk reaction might be to blame the high schools. But there is reason to believe that the problem starts much earlier.

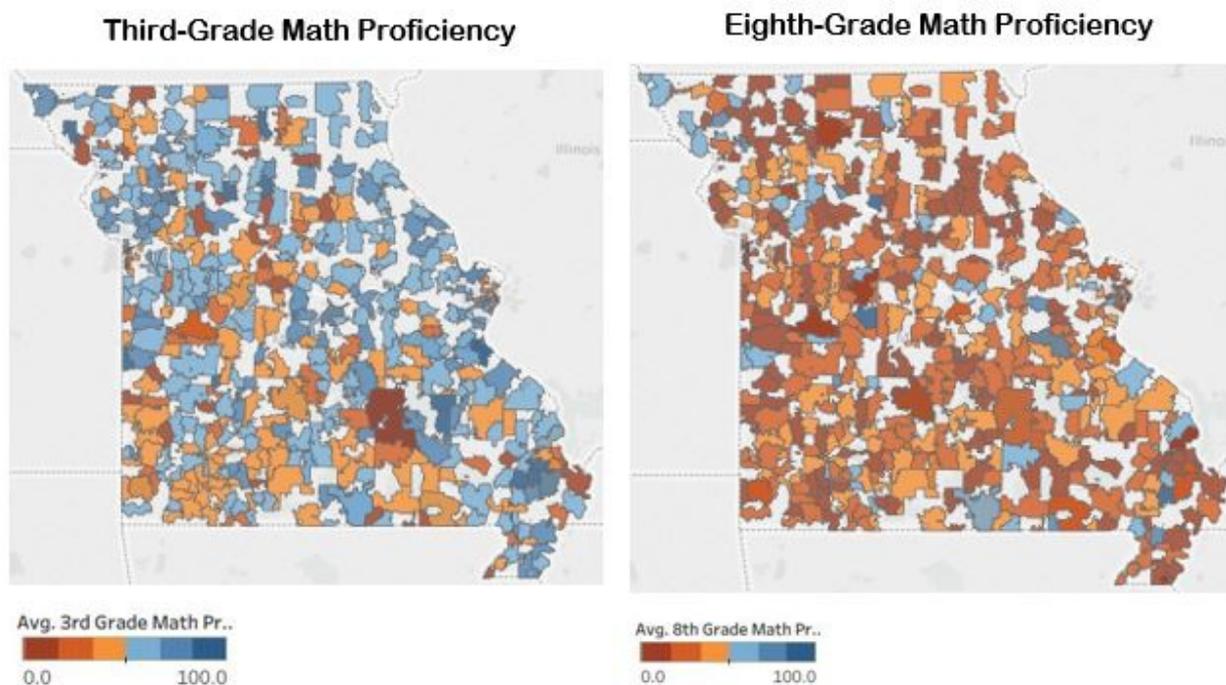
The Missouri Department of Education and Secondary Education (DESE) publishes [district-level data on standardized test results](#) that we can use to track whether students are gaining or losing ground as they progress through the primary school grades. Student scores are tiered in four categories: below basic proficiency, basic proficiency, proficiency, and advanced proficiency.

Let's look at math scores as an example. In 2017, 61 percent of Missouri districts had at least half of their third-graders achieving proficiency or above. (These districts show up as blue in the maps below.) There is plenty of room for improvement in these scores, but also plenty of time—third-graders have nine years of K-12 schooling ahead of them.

Unfortunately, the eighth-grade scores show that many students have fallen even further behind. Only 12 percent of districts had at least half of their eighth-grade students achieving proficiency in 2017. The eighth-grade map shows far fewer blue (above 50 percent proficiency) districts and many more orange and red (below 50 percent proficiency) districts than the third-grade map. It should hardly surprise us when these students struggle in high school—by the time they get there, they have been on a downward trajectory for several years. (Note: White

areas on the map encompass districts that had so few students that they could not provide data due to concerns about student privacy.)

Show-Me Institute writers will be diving deeper in future blogs and publications to better understand how our state can get high-schoolers ready for the workforce (and for college) by the time they graduate. Workforce development depends on effective preparation of our students, which in turn (certainly in Missouri's case) depends on a detailed and accurate view of school performance.



*(Data for maps from Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2017 Content Area Assessment Data)*

## About the Author



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## Links

- [1] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/accountability/struggling-high-schools-are-just-tip-iceberg>
- [2] <http://mochamber.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Workforce2030.pdf>
- [3] <https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/home.aspx>

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