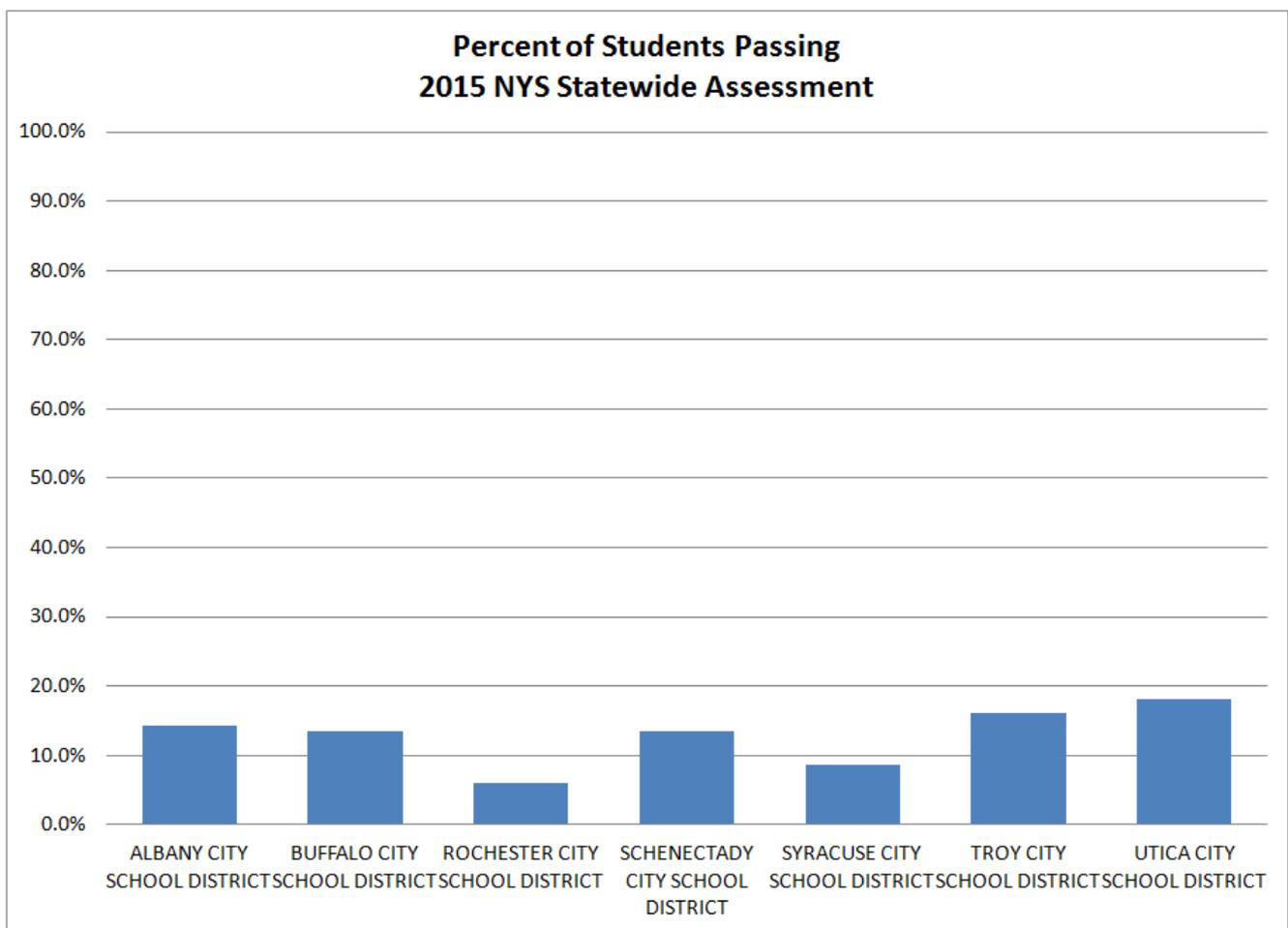


What Critics of Central City School Performance Ignore

Students attending central city schools perform very poorly on statewide tests. For example, in Upstate New York, less than 20% of city students received passing grades on the 2015 Grades 3-8 New York State Statewide Assessment. In Syracuse, only 8.7% of students passed, while in Rochester, only 6.1% passed. In Buffalo, 13.4% of students passed.



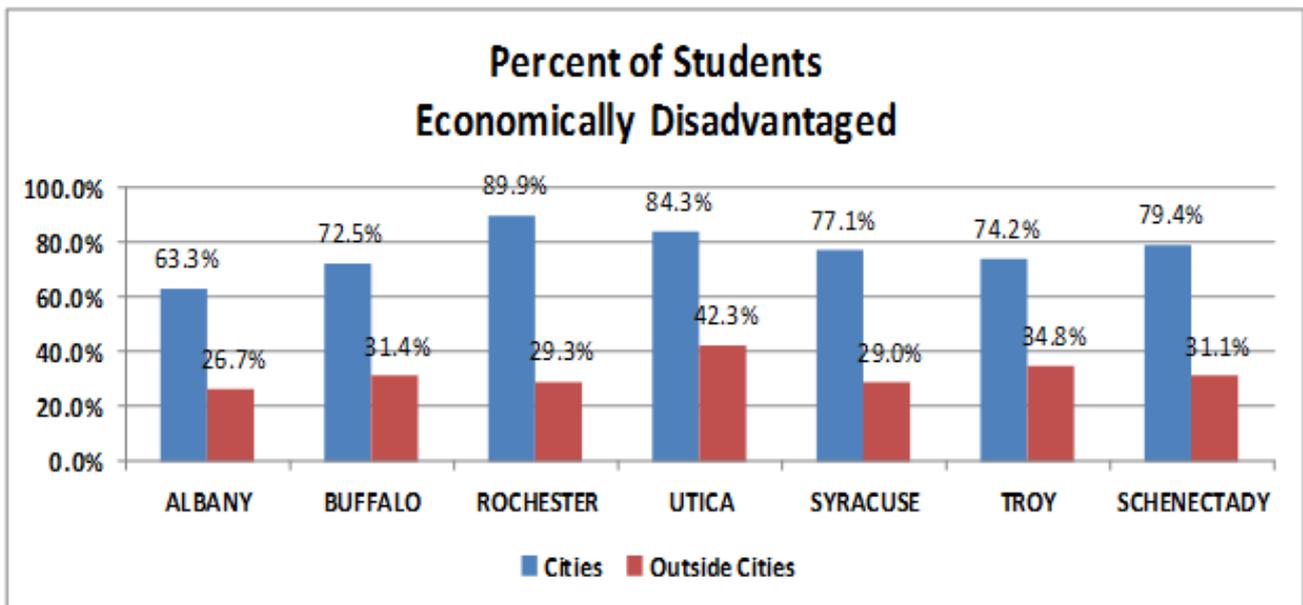
In contrast, students in suburbs like Pittsford, where 69% of students passed, and Fayetteville-Manlius, where 68%, did much better. Overall, in New York State, about 40% of students passed the exam.

Most discussions about city school performance have focused on perceived shortcomings of the schools themselves as the

primary cause of poor student performance. For example, Governor Cuomo has proposed restructuring and taking over many city schools whose students have performed poorly on statewide tests. Robert Wilmers, the Chairman of M&T Bank, writes an annual State of of Public Education in Buffalo letter. In this year's letter, Wilmers strongly criticized Buffalo schools, saying "By any yardstick our Public School system has been in decline for a long period of time and today it must be considered a dismal failure...There are many major systemic flaws which, if left unchecked, will continue to destroy any hope of improving academic performance and the outcomes of our students."

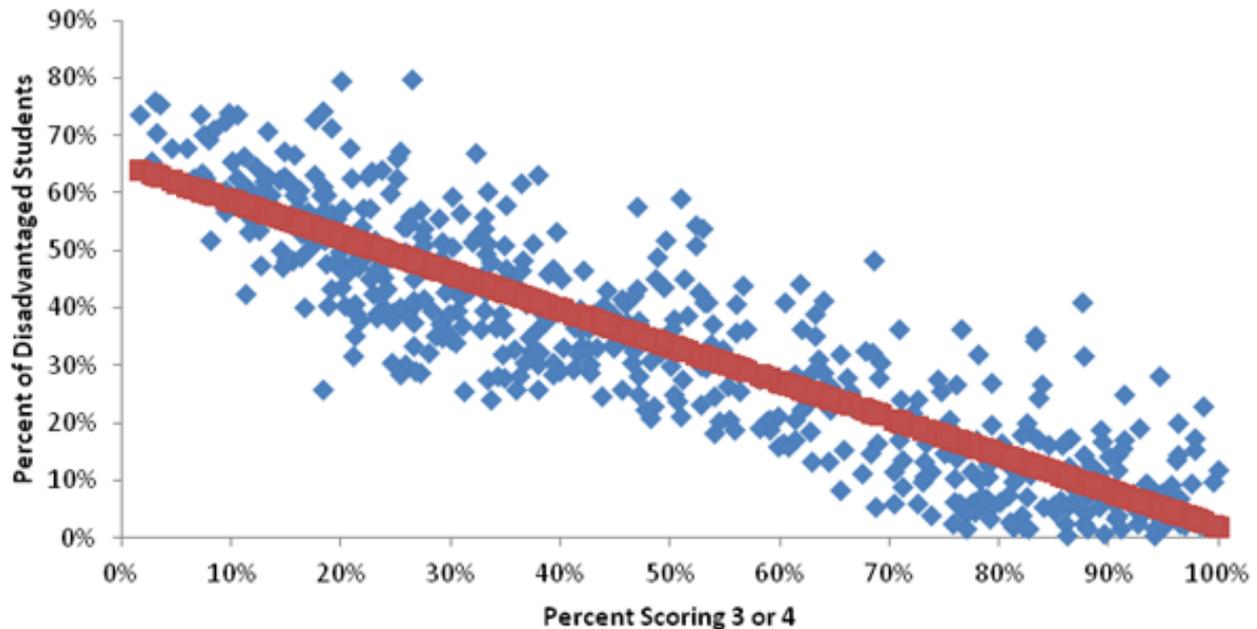
Is the performance of city students primarily the result of organizational flaws in public school teaching and administration? Although critics of city school performance acknowledge that city school students face significant challenges because of high levels of poverty, they do not consider the impact of concentrated poverty on school performance. In this post, and several succeeding posts, I examine the association between poverty and student performance.

First, to understand why the concentration of poverty in schools in city schools is so important, we must recognize the very high percentage of disadvantaged students who attend city schools in Upstate New York. Disadvantaged students, by this definition, are those who receive a form of government assistance – such as food stamps, foster care, the earned income tax credit, and others. The percentage of students defined as economically disadvantaged students in city schools is as high as 90% in Rochester, 84% in Utica, and 77% in Syracuse. In contrast, suburban schools outside upstate central cities had percentages of disadvantaged students of between 26% and 40%, with most suburban areas having less than 30% economically disadvantaged students.



To understand how the difference in the concentration of poverty between different schools affects the performance of students, I examined the relationship between the concentration of economically disadvantaged students at the schools and the performance of students on the statewide assessment. To do so, I applied a technique called regression analysis, which finds the trend line that best fits the data points.

Concentration of Disadvantaged Students vs. % of Students Scoring 3 or 4 School Buildings Statewide Assessment - 2014-2015



As the figure shows, as the percentage of disadvantaged students in a school **increased**, the percentage of students passing the statewide assessment **decreased**. In fact, for a 10% increase in the percentage of disadvantaged students in a school, the percentage of students passing the exam decreased by 6.3%.

Using statistical analysis, it is also possible to determine what percentage of the variation in student performance between the schools is accounted for by the percentage of disadvantaged students in them. In this case, the analysis shows that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in schools predicted 79% of the variation.

Another way of viewing this finding is that only 21% of the differences in performance between the schools in the counties containing the upstate cities was not associated with the concentration of disadvantaged students. The implication of

this analysis is that factors associated with the organizational performance of schools, like teaching effectiveness and administration, were associated with a relatively small percentage of the difference in performance. By blaming central city schools for the level of student performance at them, the critics are holding them responsible for what is largely outside their control.

Those who focus on reforming the schools by weeding out bad teachers and restructuring administration as the solution to the problems of central city education are unlikely to significantly improve student performance, because they ignore the impact of the concentration of poverty. Nor is the problem a lack of adequate funding. Upstate city schools spending per student is very high. For example, the Rochester City School District spends more than \$27,000 per pupil, well above the state average.

To remedy the poor performance of students at city schools with high concentrations of poverty, we must address the root causes of poverty in our cities – the factors that prevent poor people in inner cities from getting good jobs. We must address the needs of single parent families, provide additional training to those with low levels of education, and ensure that discrimination against members of minority groups does not hinder their access to jobs.