

How They Thrive

**Lessons from New York City
Alternative School Alumni**

WRITTEN BY:

Anelfi Maria

Ali Holstein

Alicia Wolcott

Eskolta School Research and Design



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Contents

- Acknowledgments..... 2
- Author’s Note..... 3
- Executive Summary 4
- Introduction 6
- Background 9
- Finding 1: There are systemic barriers that students face prior to entering transfer schools;
some of these barriers persist after high school..... 10
- Finding 2: Transfer schools are humanizing..... 14
- Finding 3: Transfer school experiences connect to postsecondary interests and opportunities..... 17
- Finding 4: Pathways to success are not necessarily linear or traditional. 19
- Finding 5: Underserved students are making progress at transfer schools in ways not captured by
traditional accountability measures..... 22
- Discussion and Recommendations..... 25
- Discussion Questions..... 26
- Study Design 27
- Appendix..... 29
- Endnotes 30

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About Eskolta

Eskolta School Research and Design is a nonprofit consultancy that works with educators, community-based organizations, and districts to foster cultures of compassion, respect, and high expectations in schools. We partner with alternative and traditional high schools serving students who have previously been underserved by the traditional education system. Through professional learning opportunities, participant-driven research, and coaching in continuous improvement embedded in culturally sustaining practices, our work helps transform systems and structures at the classroom, school, and district levels. We envision learning spaces and systems grounded in connection, joy, self-reflection, integrity, collaboration, critical action, and trust that center the humanity and contributions of BIPOC and other marginalized communities.



Author's Note

From a young age, I wanted to do well in school. But in second grade, I felt what it meant not to fit the traditional standards. I was put in the front of the class to get more attention from my teacher. I got extra time on tests and got pulled out of the classroom for special workshops to help with my reading. Shortly after, I was evaluated and diagnosed with dyslexia. In elementary school, I was pulled out of class every day to work on my reading comprehension and speak to the school counselor. I'd lie to my classmates on why I wasn't in class each day. While at home, I didn't feel like a bad reader or that I had dyslexia. I read out my mom's legal documents and translated them to her. By the third grade, all the reading intervention wasn't helping me. I kept failing the state test till I got held back. The shame that came with being held back lingered on for me. All my peers moved on to the next grade while I was stuck.

My lunches were packed for me by my immigrant mother, who didn't speak English. She'd pack me soda crackers, cheese, and traditional Dominican food. I felt comfortable eating at home, but when I opened my lunch box at school, kids ran from me. I started emptying my lunch box in the mornings, ate the provided lunch at school like the kids in my class, and erased any part of me that didn't fit the mold.

After the third grade, the feeling that I had to catch up stayed with me. It became ingrained in me. As a teenager, I had to take on different

responsibilities in my household. I grew up faster than I should have, graduating high school became one of my last priorities at sixteen. I had to take care of my family first. I changed high schools more than three times before ending up in a transfer school. I kept changing schools, but no school could offer me the flexibility I needed. Going to a transfer school felt like my last chance after flunking out of traditional school.

The transfer school environment was what I needed. The staff made a plan to help each individual student reach their goals. Like the plants illustrated in this report, we all needed to be nurtured in different ways. Teachers and staff gave me the support I needed—I finally had a group of people who met me where I was at. I graduated high school, then moved on to go to community college and afterward to a four-year college. With help from the support system I had in high school, I was pushed to go after my dreams. I'm now in graduate school to obtain my master's in biostatistics from New York University. I've been able to finally just focus on myself living alone. I've been able to explore for myself who I want to be outside of the different roles society has imposed on me. As a participant in this study and a researcher, I want the readers of this report to feel what it's like to navigate through school as a student who doesn't fit into the one-size-fits-all traditional system. And I hope readers might help create schools that see students like me for what we are capable of.

Anelfi Maria | City-As-School alumna

Executive Summary

When we listen to young people describe their challenges and successes, we find a large gap between their stories and the limited ways they are defined by test scores, attendance, and other school data. We wanted to understand this gap, and in 2020, we reached out to New York City transfer school alumni to learn how existing policies and practices worked or did not work for them. They describe a system where traditional schools reliably failed to meet their needs. They describe a system designed to put them on timelines and trajectories that ignore the realities they face and devalue the ways in which they grow. As a result, in 2018–19 nearly 100,000 high school students were overage and under-credited (OA-UC¹), or two years behind in credit accumulation for their age. They were disproportionately Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners.

In this report, we use the term “underserved” rather than “overage and under-credited.” OA-UC is a DOE designation that remains useful in identifying students who are less likely to graduate from NYC schools. However, the term may be interpreted as a focus on academic deficits. Describing students as underserved places our focus on where the opportunities lie—in creating **a system that better serves all students**.

Our findings are rooted in the stories of alumni and echoed by citywide data:

1. There are systemic barriers that students face prior to entering transfer schools; some of these barriers persist after high school.

Students become invisible and unsafe in schools that are large, in buildings that are policed, and in classrooms that are rigid. High-stakes standardized tests create barriers to graduation and real-world learning. Transfer school students leave their prior schools that have, on average, more suspensions, fewer counselors, and higher enrollment. In college, students once again face inflexible policies and requirements.

2. Transfer schools are humanizing.

In all our interviews, alumni described supportive relationships with adults from their transfer school. Alumni said they felt seen, understood, and cared for in school and postsecondary transitions. In contrast to prior relationships with school staff, several alumni remarked that transfer school staff “actually cared.” The NYC School Survey shows how students at transfer schools have significantly better impressions of their relationships with teachers.

3. Transfer school experiences connect to postsecondary interests and opportunities.

Transfer schools at which a greater proportion of underserved students graduate within eight years offer significantly more internships

per student. Alumni said that internships, coursework, and other opportunities in high school connected them to what they are doing today. Work experiences in high school helped students qualify for further employment and also gave them opportunities to explore their interests and passions.

“[My transfer school] was, I’m going to say humanizing...being seen, like literally seen, and just appreciated, and understood, and valued, and all of these other amazing things.... You get to be a human. You get to be hungry, you get to be confused. You get to be upset, and not just judged based on the numbers you can prove on a test. And there’s a community there, too.”

4. Pathways to success are not necessarily linear or traditional.

Every alumni interviewed had a unique pathway and set of challenges and successes after high school. High school enrollment data similarly shows that student trajectories are not linear. When asked to define success and identify what they are proud of, we heard of accomplishments beyond enrollment and employment. Success is also showing up for their communities, taking care of loved ones, being financially independent, finding purpose, and persisting through challenges.

5. Underserved students are making progress at transfer schools in ways not captured by traditional accountability measures.

While existing accountability systems are quick to identify transfer schools as needing improvement, there is evidence of small learning communities that increase course pass rates and graduation, especially for underserved students. Among those who didn’t graduate within four years, students in transfer schools had **double the graduation rate** of students in traditional high schools (51% vs 25%).

Among those who didn’t graduate within four years, students in transfer schools had **double the graduation rate** of students in traditional schools.

Introduction

The findings in this report leave us with a sense of hope and one of frustration. It is frustrating to see that citywide data in many ways hasn't changed over time: Among more than 350,000 students enrolled in New York City's district high schools in 2018–19, **nearly a third, or 100,000, were two years behind in credit accumulation**, or overage and under-credited (OA-UC)² One in ten students begin high school already two years overage. This underserved population of high school students often do not follow the traditional four-year trajectory that so many accountability metrics are rooted in.³ Only 19 percent of students two years behind will graduate in four years, and 39 percent within eight years.⁴

While 28 percent of students in NYC were underserved, some groups were overrepresented: Black and Latinx students,

In 2018–19, of 355,744* students enrolled in NYC public high schools

98,848

were two or more years behind in credit accumulation.

This is equivalent to

28%

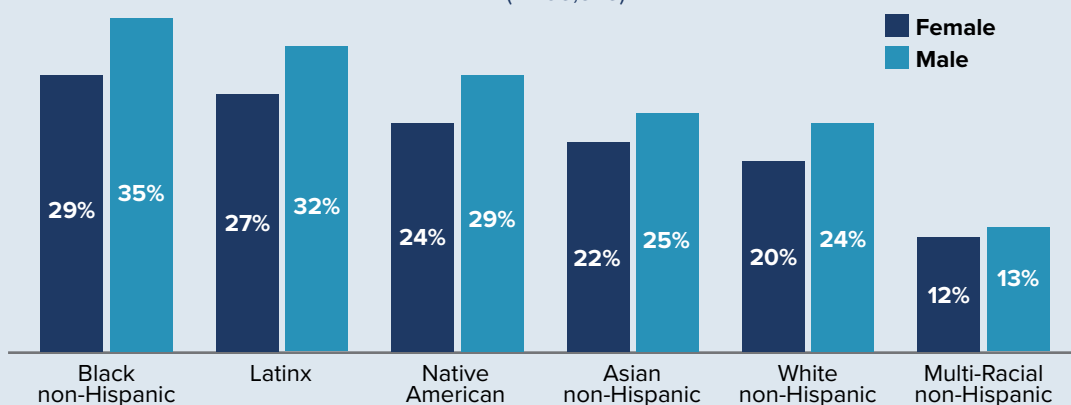
 of all NYC high school students

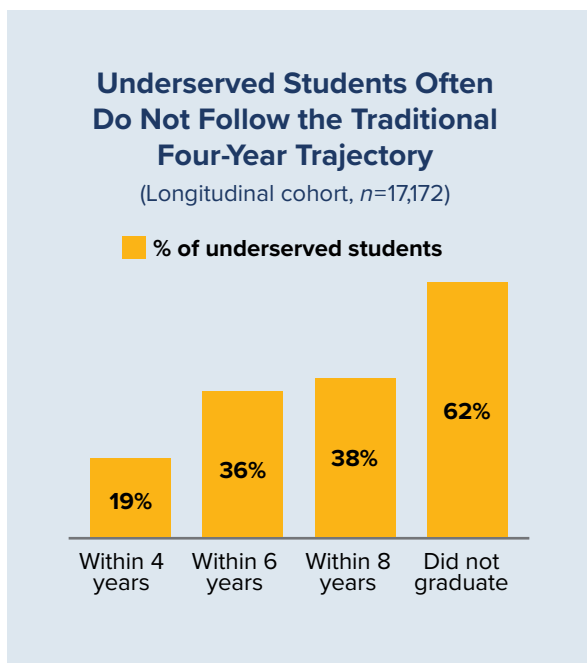
*For which data were available

students with disabilities (33%), males (30%), students students facing economic hardship (29%), and multilingual learners (35%).

Black, Latinx, and Male Underserved Students Are Disproportionately Underserved

(n= 98,848)





Our findings are rooted in the stories of alumni and echoed by citywide data:

1. **There are systemic barriers that students face prior to entering transfer schools; some of these barriers persist after high school.**
2. **Transfer schools are humanizing.**
3. **Transfer school experiences connect to postsecondary interests and opportunities.**
4. **Pathways to success are not necessarily linear or traditional.**
5. **Underserved students are making progress at transfer schools in ways not captured by traditional accountability measures.**

Transfer school alumni—students who left their traditional or specialized high schools for an alternative setting—tell us in interviews how it feels to navigate a system that has routinely failed students like them. They come from schools where they don't feel safe, understood,

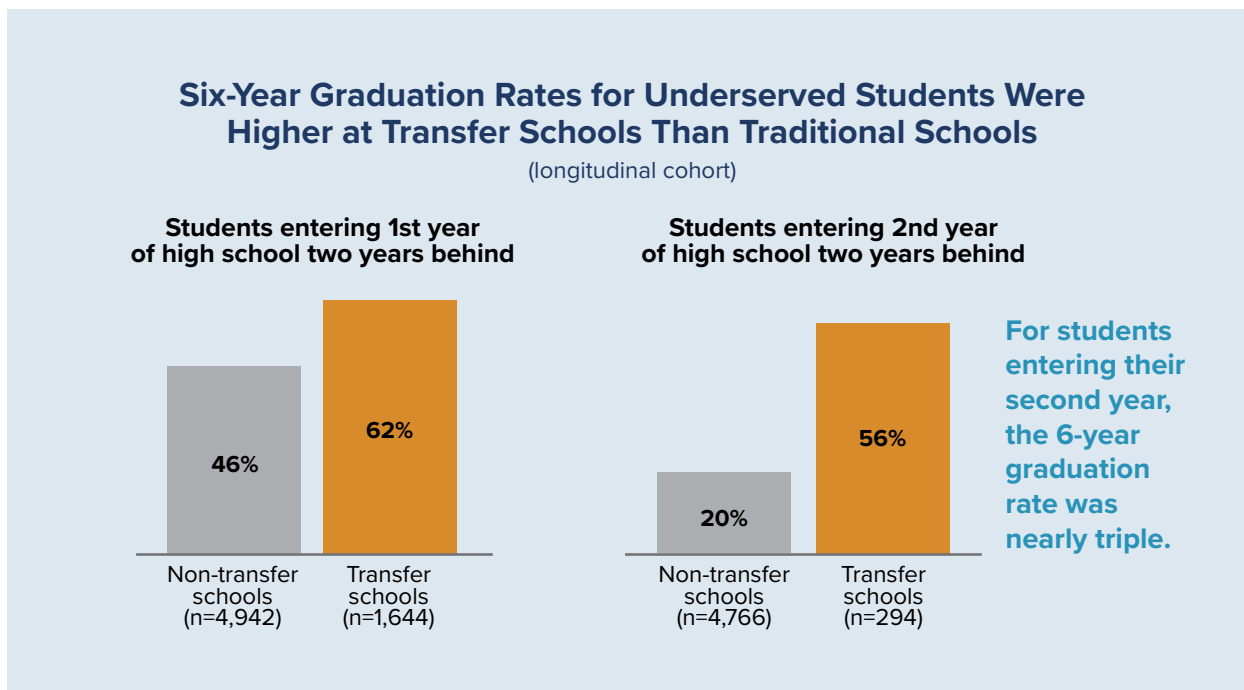
or supported in personal or academic obstacles. In some cases, young people take on these system failures as personal failures—impacting even their own beliefs of what they are capable of and what they deserve. However, per transfer school pioneer JoEllen Lynch, NYC transfer schools grew out of a realization that the problem is that the school does not fit the kids, rather than the kids not fitting the school. That problem still exists in NYC.⁵

We feel hopeful in hearing how transfer schools have remained a beacon for many young people—offering humanizing experiences, supportive relationships, culturally-responsive and sustaining curricula, and connections to opportunities and interests that persist beyond high school. These practices seem more relevant than ever as the COVID-19 pandemic shows us how school and work can adapt to help us meet health, mental health, and financial demands.

Among those who didn't graduate within four years, students in transfer schools had **double the graduation rate** of students in traditional high schools (51% vs 25%). **Transfer schools had nearly triple the graduation rate** for students who were overage and under-credited entering their second year of high school. *See Appendix for more details on who graduates.*

Transfer schools, while not perfect, may serve as a road map for how schools can be designed around the hopes and needs of young people.

Since our analysis, it is likely the pandemic has shifted where and how students are underserved in the system. Enrollment has declined citywide and particularly for transfer schools. It's possible these shifts are due to new academic policies rather than systemic improvement. Therefore, credits may have become a weaker indicator of who is truly underserved in the system. In 2021, it was



estimated that the number of youth who are disconnected from school and work could double.⁶ It is critical to continue monitoring underserved students and sharing practices that work for them.

“I think it’s worth it to think about these things and be flexible with other people’s learning experiences. I definitely think high school and public education just needs to improve in general. Going to [my transfer school], it means we all have this common thread of something about traditional schooling not working for us for whatever reason. ...When you don’t think that you’re good at school, it messes you up. I

think [my transfer school] did a good job of trying to—giving me a clean slate and I wish more schools would be more understanding of people’s experiences and needs.”

Background

In 2005, New York City began to quickly expand the portfolio of schools and programs serving “overage and under-credited students” (OA-UC)⁷ as data revealed that this population of 138,000 who became two years behind in earning credits based on their age was almost identical to the population who left high school without a diploma. At the time, the 70,000 OA-UC students enrolled would have been the second largest high school district in the United States.⁸

Now serving over 13,000 students in over 50 schools in New York City, transfer schools remain a system that stems from the harm of other systems: traditional schools as well as systems outside the school like housing, childcare, transportation, and healthcare. In New York City, transfer schools are not a monolith. For example, some serve newcomers, others overage eighth graders, and some serve high numbers of adjudicated youth. Typically, transfer schools offer small, personalized settings; they partner with community organizations to offer paid internships, student support services, college and career exploration and preparation activities. They are referred to as “transfer” high schools because most of them enroll students who have already completed ninth grade and are transferring to a new high school.

Transfer schools are designed to serve students who have not met traditional milestones of success in previous high schools. By “traditional,” we refer to the expectation that students will learn and master concepts at the same pace, graduating in four years despite any obstacles they may encounter. There is no single narrative to explain why students find themselves in transfer schools. In 2018, the

Public Science Project at the CUNY Graduate Center analyzed data from an Eskolta survey of over 800 transfer school students across over twenty schools. In the report, [*And Still They Rise*](#), students describe some of the obstacles to school success including school features—disengaging curriculum, lack of support passing Regents exams, and lack of support for learning needs. Nearly half reported mental health challenges and 29 percent had responsibilities caring for family members. Many faced financial responsibilities, violence, and housing instability. Notably, the vast majority reported that their transfer school helped address their obstacles to school success in ways detailed in the report.⁹

The research herein builds on the learnings from *And Still They Rise* to include stories from transfer school alumni who can offer an expanded view of how their high school experiences connect to life after high school. Months and years after leaving high school, they remember what mattered in their lives. Additionally, using their stories as our guide, our analysis of citywide quantitative data reveals how the stories of nineteen alumni echo disproportionalities in New York City schools. More details are provided in the *Study Design* section.

Finding 1: There are systemic barriers that students face prior to entering transfer schools; some of these barriers persist after high school.



Speaking with transfer school alumni, it does not take long to discover a pattern of recurring systemic barriers that impede success in traditional schools:

Lack of support and flexibility in prior high schools as well as college. Students with adult responsibilities or health obstacles that take them out of school are not offered opportunities to make up for missed class time. The City University of New York's rigid attendance policy

led one parenting student to leave school, despite earning all her credits in the prior year.

- › On average, there are fewer district guidance counselors and social workers staffed in students' prior schools¹⁰ than in transfer schools (0.7 vs. 2.6 per 100 students). Transfer schools include partnerships with community-based organizations who employ additional counselors and coaches.

Lack of attendance and academic interventions to address challenges. Students often felt a lack of care and support when they fell behind in class—often nobody noticed or reached out to solve the problem.

“I was absent all the time. No one had contacted my family about me failing.”

After high school, some students reported failing remedial math multiple times, despite having access to college tutors. One student returned to her transfer school for help from her former teachers.

High-stakes testing was often a barrier to high school graduation. One alumna mentioned how upsetting it was to fail the NY State Regents exams, inhibiting them from earning a diploma. They came to a transfer school with all the credits needed to graduate, but they needed support to pass the exams. Research shows how the Regents exam can be a significant barrier to graduation for English Language Learners.¹¹

Large schools and classes created a sense of invisibility and inhibited caring relationships.

- › On average, the schools that students attended prior to transfer schools had larger median enrollment (429 vs 237) and larger class sizes (14.2 vs 12.8).¹²
- › On the NYC School Survey, students’ prior schools scored lower in trust than their transfer schools (3.38 vs 3.86 element score rating for Trust on the NYC School Quality Report).

Lack of safety as the impetus for transferring. Alumni experienced racism and homophobia at prior schools. Alumni felt that conflicts were often left unresolved. Rather, schools relied on policing or suspensions.

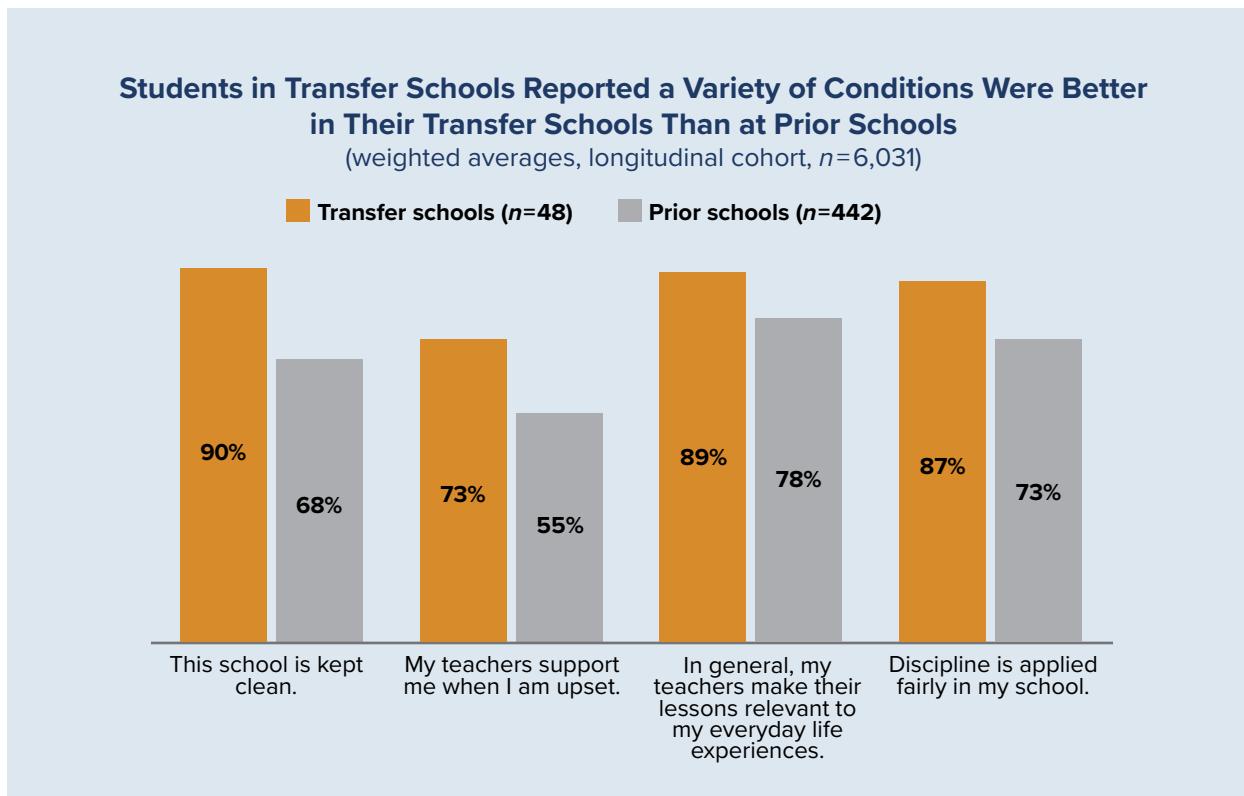
“[My principal] gave me a safety transfer out of the school because she’d just rather push me out of the school than solve conflicts for some reason.”

- › On average, there were more suspensions in prior schools than in transfer schools (8.7 vs 6.5 per 100 students).

“In my old school there were like 3,000 students, probably more. If I miss out any day, I will miss a lot of work. It was probably difficult for the teachers to, you know, give each student like the stuff that they missed. Compared to the [transfer] school where the teachers *actually care* for each individual student because there were less students and easier for the teachers to help the students out.”

NYC School Survey results echo the stories of alumni. Compared to transfer schools, students scored their prior schools lower on

- › School cleanliness
- › Support through challenges
- › Relevance of lessons to students’ lives
- › Fair discipline



“I would have to go through metal detectors every day...it felt very uncomfortable having to stand by police officers every day, and fights would break out and the tension would be there because the police that were in the building they’re not hired by the department of education, they’re actually with the police, I think. So, there’s no de-escalation. So, there would be fights constantly and then there’s a likely chance of you getting arrested, even if it’s just that you have your phone, there’s just fear of being arrested.”

By zooming out on citywide data, we see that the barriers faced by transfer school students may have started even before high school. For example, 29 percent of transfer school students had low attendance (<85% on average) in middle school, compared to 12 percent of students in traditional high schools. Prior to transferring, 31 percent of transfer school students had been suspended.

Typically, reports about underserved students highlight early warning indicators and predictors of dropping out. For example, 36 percent of transfer school students failed a course in ninth grade compared to 14 percent of all students in traditional schools.

While “early indicators” may be useful at the school level for offering targeted and individualized support, these data are often presented as student deficits rather than

Finding 1: There are systemic barriers students face prior to entering transfer schools.

what they are—systemic biases and structural inequities that disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, and indigenous students. Teachers gave Black and Latinx students a failing grade in 9th grade at twice the rate (18–21%) as White non-Hispanic (9%) and Asian students (8%). School administrators suspended Black non-Hispanic students (29%) at four times the rate as Asian students (7%). These disparities persisted in transfer schools.

Even though alumni often take personal responsibility for academic failures and shoulder the stigma of falling behind, we hear their stories again and again—a sign that the system remains perfectly designed to get the results that it gets.

Finding 2: Transfer schools are humanizing.



“[My transfer school] was, I’m going to say humanizing... being seen, like, literally seen, and just appreciated, and understood, and valued, and all of these other amazing things.... You get to be a human. You get to be hungry, you get to be confused. You get to be upset, and not just judged based on the numbers you can prove

on a test. And there’s a community there, too.”

Alumni describe transfer schools as humanizing.

In all our interviews, alumni described supportive relationships with adults from their transfer school. Alumni felt seen, understood, and cared for in school and postsecondary transitions. In contrast to prior relationships with school staff, several alumni remarked that transfer school staff “*actually cared.*”

After high school, alumni kept in touch with adults from their transfer schools, mostly informally, for a range of support including college navigation, parenting advice, emotional support, tutoring, and motivation. Especially for students who lacked family support, transfer school staff were often their most prominent supporters in postsecondary transitions. Notably, alumni did not mention college or other agency staff as key supporters in these transitions. It's also clear that the role many transfer school staff play with alumni is beyond their job descriptions—attending funerals, sending origami kits during the pandemic, or tutoring students attending college. One student did not graduate from her transfer school but subsequently earned her high school equivalency diploma and enrolled in college; she made sure to reach out to her guidance counselor and advisor from her transfer school who were happy to hear about her college enrollment.

“At my transfer school, I passed all my classes... And that was a first for me because I had a lot of issues in school and outside of school, and I didn't have any support at all. So, of course, my grades were bad, because I wasn't coming. And when I would go, I didn't feel like they wanted me there so that I wouldn't come. But when I went to my transfer school, I had a support system, and it was weird at first, but it helped me graduate. I had my team; that's what it felt like.”

Supportive adults within the school setting provided students emotional support and advice when confronting personal issues. They provided valuable resources—helping students with basic needs. They may have provided individualized academic support and/or helped students plan for the future. The support was not limited to school—it was holistic. Supportive adults provided students with constant check-ins. Students felt that there was mutual respect, and one way they described that was when they

could address adults by their first name or give feedback that was heard.

In some cases, students described staff as “another mom” or “family.” Without being prompted, at least five alumni described being fed by the teachers or the school. One went into detail:

Supportive Adults

Transfer school alumni described supportive adults through the following traits and behaviors:

Supports Provided

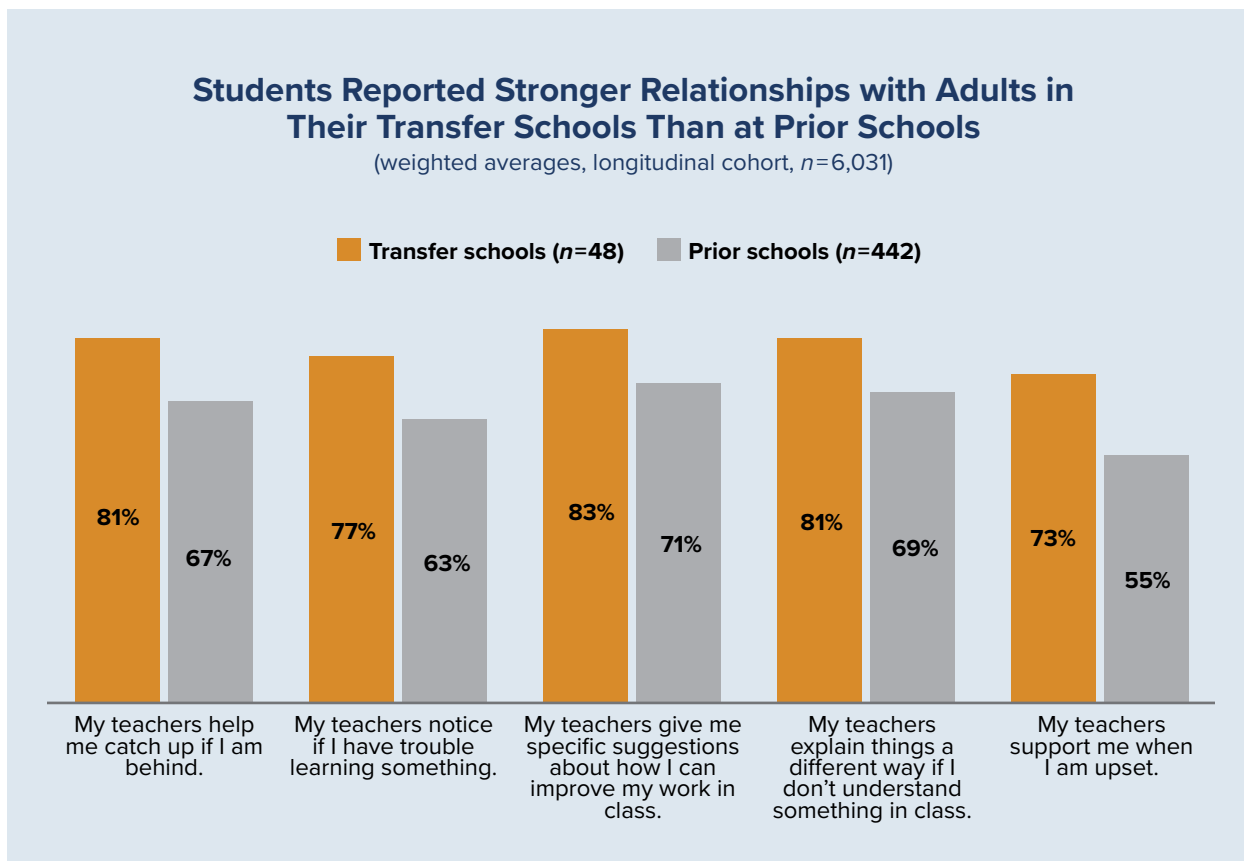
- › Emotional support and advice when confronting personal issues
- › Valuable resources
- › Help with basic needs, including food
- › Holistic support; a willingness to help with anything
- › Individual academic support
- › Support in planning for the future

Behaviors

- › Check in; they are always “on you”
- › Go above and beyond
- › Have open doors
- › Listen to feedback
- › Show mutual respect, using first names

Characteristics

- › Kind
- › Genuine and authentic
- › Welcoming and accepting of all
- › Believe that students can succeed in the future



“They made sure hot food was fed... No pizza that’d be in a circle with some chocolate milk and two fries now ...some good old chicken, some steak with some rice and potato salad. And some students’ only meal is when they’re in school. So when you’re at [my old traditional school], they’re like ‘don’t eat in class, it’s disrupting class.’ But you don’t know when the last time that person ate. And what if they’re really hungry? And when you’re hungry, you can’t really focus. At least not me. I can’t

focus at work if I’m hungry. So [my transfer school] will allow you to do that. They’ll let you eat.”

Finding 3: Transfer school experiences connect to postsecondary interests and opportunities.

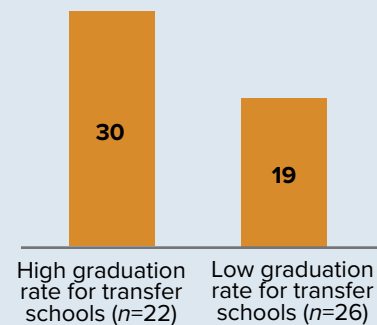
Six-month postsecondary enrollment rates for transfer school students fall below city averages (28% vs 64% in traditional high schools), but that doesn't mean transfer school students have not found meaningful or self-sustaining work. Transfer school alumni revealed how internships, coursework, and other opportunities in high school connected them to what they are doing today.

Some students reported that coursework or school activities (ie. Restorative Justice mediator) influenced their college majors. College-goers pointed to longer classes, flexible scheduling, research papers, spreadsheets as structures and tasks that mimicked college and helped them prepare. Students spoke about classes that were interesting and engaging—where students and teachers interacted—rather than “textbooky” classes at prior schools. They recalled specific classes that shifted their perspectives. Perhaps coincidentally, or perhaps due to the teachers they credit, many alumni work and study in helping professions including teaching, community organizing, and nursing.

“I did an internship for local government and I was like, ‘Oh, this isn't really for me.’ But then I did an internship with a nonprofit and I was like, ‘Oh, this is for me.’”

Transfer Schools With Higher Graduation Rates for Students After Four Years Offered Significantly More Internships per Student

Internships per 100 students



Work-based learning matters

- Transfer schools at which a greater proportion of underserved students graduate within 8 years offer significantly more internships per student.¹³
- When asked what contributed to their success after high school, alumni pointed to internships that sparked postsecondary interests.
- Six of the alumni, in our sample of 19, who had participated in work-based learning

in high school were connected directly to work after high school through extending internships, connections via LTW internship coordinators, or jobs they had access to due to their internship experience.

“Leaving [high school] was really scary. I was like, “Oh my God, what am I going to do now? Do I have to go to college?” I wrote into schools. I tried it. I realized it really wasn’t for me at the time, because unfortunately I do have to work full time to support myself. So it was kind of hard to try to work full time hours, and then go to school part-time. So, I had to take a break from school to work full-time, but because my resume had so many things on it, from all of the internships that I did at my transfer school, it was easy for me to find a job that paid well and that I had experience in. So after high school, I started working for a nonprofit in the Bronx for black, queer youth.”

We asked alumni, as they reflected upon successes, if there was anything the teachers or administrators in their transfer schools did that was really important or helpful in preparing them for life after high school. While nothing was mentioned more than supportive and motivating relationships with adults, students also pointed to financial education, planning and goal-setting activities, internships, and high expectations.



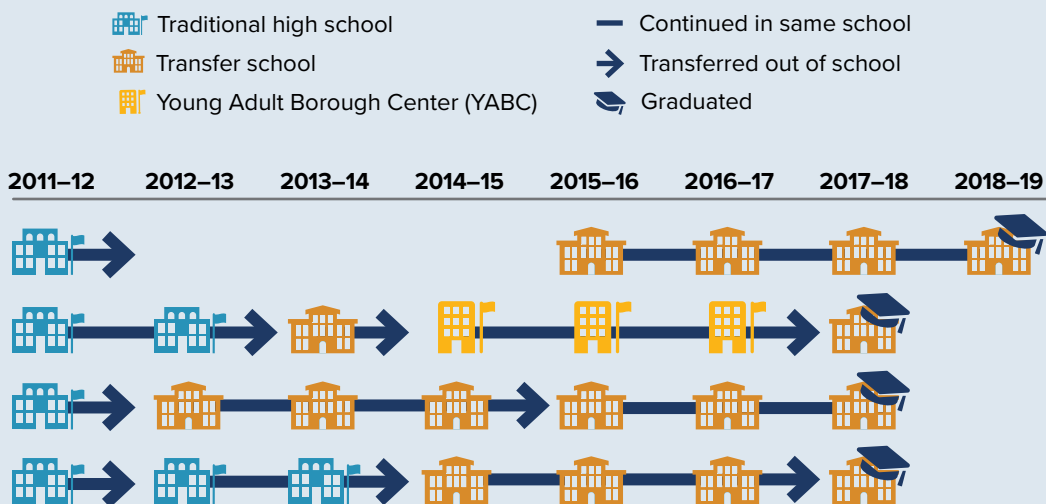
Finding 4: Pathways to success are not necessarily linear or traditional.

Traditional ways of defining success are linear, encompassing a singular narrative that implies all students are to finish high school in a four-year trajectory, then follow along with postsecondary enrollment and continuous careers. This particular narrative is harmful to students in traditional schools as it fails to empathize with the individual students' needs or desires. School systems typically measure their long-term success through short-term postsecondary college enrollment numbers. While this expanded view of success beyond graduation is important, it remains linear and narrow.

After high school, the alumni we interviewed followed various postsecondary journeys

including two-year college, four-year college, delayed enrollment, dropping out of college, part-time and full-time work, parenting, and military enlistment. In our interviews and discussions with alumni, some students felt like they were forced to make impossible choices between parenting or working and attending college. One student felt like they were learning more before college, so they left college for a new job and a new city. Students switched majors or schools as they learned more about themselves and their interests. Some students got stuck in remedial math—passing after several attempts. The unique pathways alumni experience reflect the data we see at this high school level as well:

More than one pathway to graduation: The trajectories of four transfer school graduates illustrate different ways students move in and out of schools.



Traditional measures place value on some postsecondary outcomes more than others. It's important to ask alumni what success means to them. One alumnus recalled not having a place to sleep when he was in high school. As a young parent, he didn't see college as an option for him. He started working two jobs right after graduating high school and now finds joy in taking care of his family and excelling in his career. He credited his transfer school with helping him develop the confidence and mindset to confront challenges today. However, his trajectory is often not recognized as a success by traditional postsecondary measures.

One important step that is too easy for youth-serving organizations to skip is defining success with, not for, young people. Alumni described feeling successful in their lives when they accomplished school at their own pace. Alumni described feeling successful when they could show up for their community and contribute back. They felt successful as they started to establish their independence emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Alumni described finally finding meaning in what they love to do. While employment and enrollment are still important components of success, there is more.

“Before, success was making it through high school. Graduating middle school was a success because at the moment that was what you were meant to do.... Now, going onto almost twenty-seven years old, success is different.... But every success is a success.”

What does success look like?

Transfer school alumni defined success as

- › Doing what you set out to do
- › Independence
- › Financial stability
- › Taking care of the people you love; giving kids more than you had growing up; those you love feeling proud of you (“that’s my pops”)
- › Earning a degree
- › Persisting through something difficult
- › Getting a job
- › Freedom (emotionally, financially, spiritually); peace (“breathing easy”)
- › Being happy and content
- › Doing what you love; finding purpose
- › Positive community; being with people you love
- › Contributing/Giving back; success of community
- › NOT just money

Schools should consider how to design instruction, experiences, and supports toward these versions of success. We also must consider how alumni have described challenges after high school:

Challenges transfer school alumni face after high school

- › Finding employment. It was especially difficult during the pandemic. Some students found fewer employment options without a postsecondary degree.
- › For students who were employed or had other responsibilities, it was difficult to save money or plan for their futures.

- › Setting new goals was challenging.

“The only struggles I have been having were trying to figure out how am I supposed to take care of myself by working all the time, and then build toward my future by going to school. But there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and I work twelve of those, and I need to sleep for eight of those. So I was like, where do I find the time to build towards my future?”

- › Adjusting to “adulting,” including managing time, organizing finances, and taking responsibility for new independence.
- › Staying motivated; for some, this was harder in a pandemic.
- › Lack of an engaging curriculum in college.

“Honestly, it just felt like high school. I hated that it felt like high school. I hated that I was paying for high school....It reminded me of the reasons why I left [the specialized high school before my transfer school], because it was just like: lecture, read this. It wasn’t that experiential learning that I need.”



Finding 5: Underserved students are making progress at transfer schools in ways not captured by traditional accountability measures.



State accountability places the blame for poor academic outcomes on the efforts of transfer schools rather than expanding their view to the broader system that reliably fails to meet the needs of transfer school students. New York City is home to one of the most segregated education systems in the country. In New York State, we find some of the largest gaps in the country in graduation rates by race, and some of the lowest graduation rates for students with

disabilities or limited English proficiency.¹⁴ These disparities are magnified in transfer schools where students are more likely to be classified as Black or Latinx and as English Language Learners. Transfer school students are more likely to experience high economic need, housing instability, lower eighth-grade proficiency, or be classified as Students with Disabilities than their peers at other NYC high schools.

Finding 5: Underserved students are making progress at transfer schools in ways not captured.

By relying on traditional measures that do not align with the trajectories of overage students, the state disproportionately identifies transfer schools as needing improvement. However, citywide data analyzed in alternative ways highlights how transfer schools are helping students make progress.

- › **Higher course pass rates.** On average, for students enrolled in 2018–19, transfer schools supported students in improving course pass rate over their prior school (+5.1% pts), particularly for students in their first year after transfer (+11.2% pts) or designated with an IEP (+6.7 % pts).
- › **Learning communities.** On the NYC School Survey, transfer high schools outperform traditional high schools on nearly all survey items including questions related to relationships and high expectations. (2018–19 NYC School Survey)

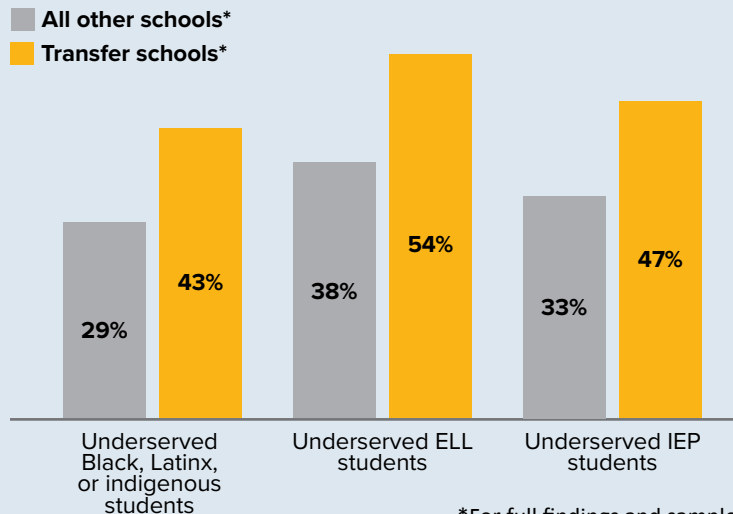
› **Graduation.** Among students who are still enrolled after four years, transfer schools graduate 51 percent of them while traditional schools graduate 25 percent. Sixty-four percent of all students who earn a diploma in their sixth, seventh, or eighth year do so from a transfer school vs fourteen percent from traditional schools. For OA-UC students identified with an IEP, English Language Learners, and Black, Latinx, or Indigenous students, their six-year graduation rates were much higher at transfer schools.

Of those who did not graduate within four years, greater proportions of those who went on to transfer schools (51%) and YABCs (83%) ultimately graduated within eight years.

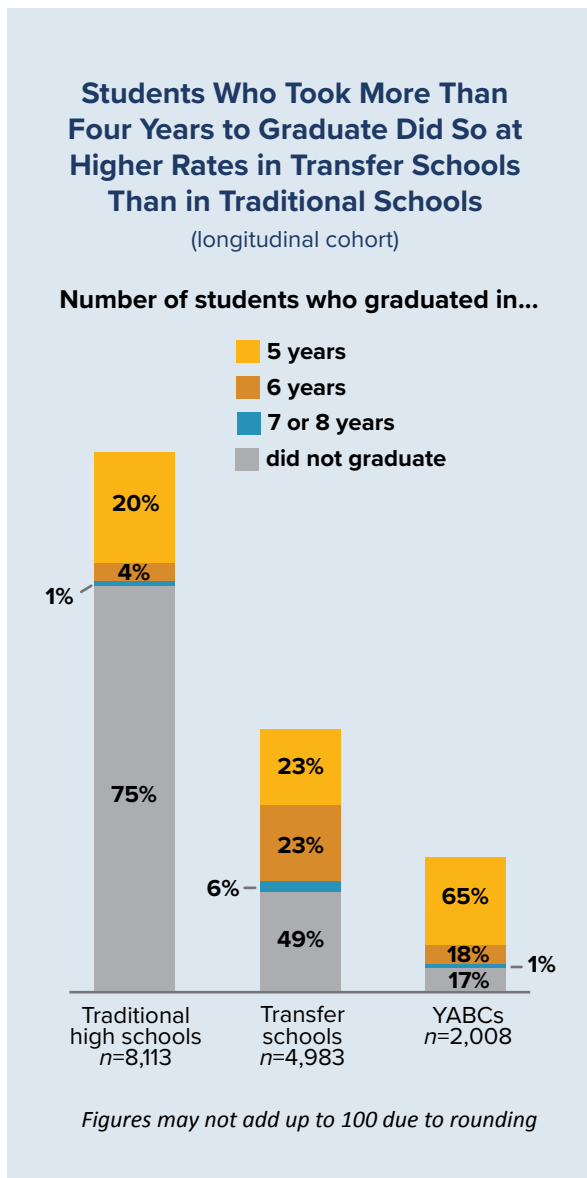
With the goal of helping young people thrive, it's important to recognize that not everything that matters is measured. Alumni are proud of their academic milestones and employment,

Transfer Schools Have Better 6-year Graduation Rates For Underserved Students Than Other Schools, Especially for Those with Traditionally Marginalized Identities

(longitudinal cohort)



*For full findings and sample sizes see Appendix



“I think I’m just proud of being here and making it through it all. I don’t really have a precise moment. I think the past year I really learned what it means when people say it’s about the journey. I didn’t think I would be here alive, you know? I’m just grateful for that every day...another thing I’ve been proud of [this] past year, I’ve been a retail manager the past year and a half... I’ve been having to basically manage a whole store... and that’s a thing I’ve been proud of, not having a store burn down, you know? I’ve been able to handle situations.”

Transfer school educators point to additional areas of unmeasured growth: social-emotional skills, self-advocacy, accessing services, addressing mental health needs, engaging parents and community advocates, and belonging in an academic community. Transfer school educators point to incremental growth in attendance and course grades as key measures of re-engagement and progress that should be celebrated. However, data was inconsistently available for these metrics and is therefore not reported here.

In partnership with educators, families, and alumni, Eskolta has written an [Ethical Framework for Alternative Accountability](#) that urges policy makers to consider multiple measures of success that are fair and transparent.

but when asked what they are most proud of, they also mention: work-related skills and personal hobbies, determination to pursue long-term goals and do hard things, and living independently. They are proud of their personal growth and maturity, their ability to handle difficult situations, speak up, be honest, create joy, and take care of themselves and others. Some are proud that they survived.

Discussion and Recommendations

Alumni describe a system where they do not fit—where the challenges they face are not met with systemic solutions but with stigma they carry with them beyond high school. Out of their stories, we find recommendations emerging for both policy makers and educators.

Caring and Affirming Schools: Alumni were surprised to be met with care and support at transfer schools. We need to promote school structures and cultures that make caring relationships possible: trauma-informed classrooms, small class sizes where students can receive individualized support, empathetic leaders who have routines for *listening* to students and families. District leaders should work with transfer schools to further codify these practices for replication in all high school settings.

Safety: Expand restorative justice practices in traditional schools so students feel understood and not policed. Restorative justice is not only a response to conflict but a way to foster positive communication and build trust and understanding. Invest in adult learning focused on race and gender and sexual identity so educators are well prepared to welcome and be affirming of students of all identities.

Postsecondary Transition Supports: After high school, alumni kept in touch with adults from their transfer schools, mostly informally, for a range of reasons including college navigation, parenting advice, emotional support, tutoring, and motivation. Other than family members, transfer school staff were their biggest support in postsecondary transitions. High schools could strengthen this support by formalizing and

expanding the role staff and alumni networks play in students' lives after high school.

Accountability: Incorporate the perspectives of students and families when assessing the value of a school and the success of its students. Look beyond raw test scores, and consider multiple ways of assessing growth and readiness for life after high school. Improve data systems to capture non-linear pathways and accomplishments. See Eskolta's [Ethical Framework for Alternative Accountability](#) for more.

Flexibility: Alumni stories highlight traditional high schools and colleges that do not have strong strategies to address the needs of students who have adult responsibilities, health issues that require time out of school, or other common barriers to school success. Schools should adopt practices from transfer schools that reflect care for students facing these circumstances. They may allow flexibility in scheduling, offer remote learning, and choose assessments that place performance above attendance.

Meet Financial Needs: New York City has not yet systematically addressed the pressure older students face to both attend high school or college while meeting their financial responsibilities. Alumni of transfer schools, including young parents, feel unable to prioritize postsecondary education. Food and other assistance is harder to access after high school. Not only has our data pointed to the relationship between internships and graduation, we believe internships could also offer financial support that lets students

simultaneously learn and meet their basic needs. Financial support beyond internships should also be considered. We heard from one alumna how important it was that her community college program, CUNY ASAP, covered the cost of transportation.

Further research could expand on and quantify the postsecondary outcomes of students—connecting positive outcomes to school policies and practices.

Discussion Questions

For educators

- › If success was defined by our students and families, how might our school be different? How might our students experience school differently?
- › This study highlighted the importance of relationships with supportive adults. What are the intentional ways we build relationships with students and families?
- › Has this report challenged our assumptions about students who “fall off track?” How?
- › As an educator what are practices and resources we can provide to ensure students’ individual success?

For policy makers

- › Based on this report, what impact does transferring to an alternative school have on young people? Are our measures of success aligned with that impact?
- › What are some school practices and policies mentioned in this report that should exist in all schools?

Study Design

In early 2020, in conjunction with a review of the literature, we engaged in a series of focus group discussions with transfer school educators to identify core research questions and solidify our study design.

Guiding Research Questions

What can we learn about the experiences of transfer school students and the pathways their learning has taken before, during, and after their time in transfer schools? How has this differed for students experiencing the impacts of systemic racism?

What do we know about the school practices and policies that contribute to academic progress and postsecondary success, and how is that defined by students themselves?

Data Sources

Transfer School Alumni interviews (nineteen, graduates and non-graduates) and subsequent feedback groups with alumni

2018–19 de-identified academic and administrative data for all students enrolled in NYCDOE high schools

2018–19 publicly available school quality data for all NYCDOE high schools

Longitudinal de-identified data following the 2014–15 Graduation Cohort (Cohort Q), or students identified by the NYCDOE for expected on-track 4-year graduation in 2014–15.

Alumni were recruited to participate by transfer school staff and through snowball sampling. We

were also fortunate to discover an emerging researcher in our group of alumni who joined the research team and was key to interpreting and communicating our early findings. Nineteen alumni from five different transfer schools and over fifteen traditional high schools participated in interviews. Alumni include both high school graduates and non-graduates. After high school, this group followed various postsecondary journeys including two-year college, four-year college, delayed enrollment, dropping out of college, part-time and full-time work, parenting, and military.

We reviewed citywide de-identified data to determine where there were opportunities to provide quantifiable evidence and anchor statistics alongside our qualitative findings from conversations with alumni. Specifically, we included administrative and academic data for two cohorts of students: all those enrolled in 2018–19 in NYCDOE high schools for a snapshot analysis; and all those with expected four-year on-track graduation in 2014–15 (Cohort Q) for a longitudinal analysis. All findings related to graduation rates draw on the latter.

We made comparisons on measures of school quality and other school factors between transfer schools and the schools transfer school students attended prior to transfer, weighted such that prior schools from which greater numbers of students transferred to transfer schools are proportionately over-represented in reported averages.

We made comparisons on measures of school quality and other school factors among transfer schools only, between schools with above

average rates of graduation for non-four-year graduates and those with below-average rates of graduation for non-four-year graduates.

All quantitative findings reported here are descriptive unless otherwise noted.

Limitations

Just like transfer schools, transfer school alumni are a dynamic group that cannot be summarized in the stories of a few. While our qualitative analysis lifts up themes that often portray transfer schools in a positive light, not every student thrived in a transfer school. Broader surveys of transfer school alumni might help us better understand the frequency of trajectories and experiences. We also recognize that the participants may have shared different responses with the interviewers—both white women who did not grow up in New York City—than they would have with interviewers with whom they could identify. Finally, some of the postsecondary challenges transfer school alumni faced were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students faced interrupted postsecondary enrollment or difficult economic hardships that might be atypical.

NYCDOE data offices provided a deep set of de-identified quantitative data for our research. However, DOE systems are not perfectly set up to capture the non-linear nature of the transfer school student experience. Attendance and course data, for example, included a significant and non-random portion of missing values for transfer school students, and postsecondary enrollment datasets were only available for four-year graduates and six-year transfer school graduates.¹⁵ The NYCDOE also follows the lead of the federal government on how race and ethnicity variables are reported: those students identifying as “Hispanic” are categorized as such regardless of whether they also identify as Black

or another race, limiting our ability to speak to intersectionalities within the Latinx experience in the quantitative analysis.

Appendix

Among NYCDOE students with expected four-year graduation in 2014–15 (Cohort Q), excluding students who transferred out of the system:

TABLE 1

	% of the longitudinal Cohort (Q)			% graduating within 4 years			% graduating within 6 years			% graduating within 8 years		
	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools ¹⁶	Transfer schools
OA-UC at any point	23% (17,172 of 75,127)	19% (12,976 of 68,783)	66% (4,196 of 6,344)	19%	20%	15%	35%	32%	46%	38%	34%	51%
OA-UC at entry (SY12)	10% (6,586 of 69,019)	8% (4,942 of 63,297)	29% (1,644 of 5,722)	30%	31%	25%	50%	46%	62%	51%	47%	62%
OA-UC in 2nd year of HS (SY13)	10% (6,860 of 71,193)	7% (4,766 of 65,365)	36% (2,094 of 5,828)	16%	14%	20%	31%	20%	56%	33%	22%	57%
OA-UC in 4th year of HS (SY15)	11% (7,727 of 69,545)	8% (5,371 of 64,243)	44% (2,356 of 5,302)	16%	18%	10%	33%	30%	40%	37%	34%	44%
OA-UC in 5th year of HS (SY16)	30% (3,922 of 12,933)	24% (2,279 of 9,459)	47% (1,643 of 3,474)	N/A	N/A	N/A	30%	25%	38%	37%	30%	47%

TABLE 2

	% of the longitudinal Cohort (Q)			% graduating within 4 years			% graduating within 6 years			% graduating within 8 years		
	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools	Transfer schools	Citywide	All non-transfer schools ¹⁴	Transfer schools
Identified with an IEP & OA-UC at any point	7% (or 5,395 students)	8% (4,613)	12% (782)	15%	15%	13%	35%	33%	47%	39%	36%	52%
ELL distinction & OA-UC at any point	6% (4,253)	5% (3,316)	15% (937)	25%	25%	22%	42%	38%	54%	43%	40%	55%
Black/Latinx/Indig & OA-UC at any point	19% (14,206)	16% (10,703)	55% (3,503)	16%	18%	13%	32%	29%	43%	36%	32%	48%
Male Black/Latinx/Indig & OA-UC at any point	11% (8,469)	10% (6,553)	30% (1,916)	15%	16%	11%	31%	28%	43%	34%	30%	49%

Endnotes

1. The overage and under-credited (OA-UC) distinction was calculated annually to include students age 16 upon entering grade 9, age 16 with less than 11 credits earned, age 17 with less than 22 credits earned, age 18 with less than 33 credits earned, and age 19 or older with less than 44 credits earned. This aligns to the NYCDOE definition but a) does not include Regents passage and b) was calculated annually rather than only upon entry.
2. In 2018–19, nearly 100,000 high school students were two years behind. Others may have fallen behind in past years and caught up. Others may not be behind in 2018–19 but will fall behind in future years.
3. Quantitative findings reported here follow two cohorts of citywide NYCDOE data: 1) All those enrolled in NYCDOE non-charter high schools in 2018–19. 2) all those in Graduation Cohort Q, i.e., identified by the NYCDOE as those with an expected four-year graduation in 2014–15. The latter is used in all graduation figures reported here.
4. In this report, we consider anyone who earned a commencement credential or high school equivalency diploma to be a graduate. This may not align with other publicly reported data.
5. <https://www.aypf.org/event/how-new-york-city-is-meeting-the-varied-needs-of-out-of-school-youth-through-multiple-pathways-to-graduation/>
6. 2020 Disconnected Youth Taskforce Report: Connecting Our Future <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/youthemployment/downloads/pdf/dytf-connecting-our-future-report.pdf>
7. Age 16 and 0 credits earned, Age 17 and <11 credits earned, Age 18 and <22 credits earned, Age 19 and <33 credits earned, Age 20 and <44 credits earned.
8. Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, NYC Department of Education (2006).
9. Baum-Tuccillo, M., Arora, V., Holstein, A., & Fine, M. (2020). And still they rise: Lessons from students in New York City’s alternative transfer high schools. New York: The Public Science Project, publicscienceproject.org/still-they-rise/
10. In comparisons here and throughout between transfer schools and the schools transfer school students attended prior to transfer (“prior schools”), we use weighted averages, such that schools that enrolled a higher number of transfer school students—and by extension those prior schools from whom a higher number of transfer school students transferred - are proportionately overrepresented in averages.
11. Hill, Kathryn, & Mirakhur, Zitsi. (2018). Persisting students: Exploring the pathways and outcomes of students who don’t graduate in four years, but remain enrolled in NYC high schools. New York, NY: Research Alliance for New York City Schools.
12. Trust score is an indexed score calculated by the DOE: “This section looks at whether relationships between administrators, educators, students, and families are based on trust and respect. This section draws upon data from the NYC School Survey.” Full list of items is on page 27 of this document (also details methodology).
13. NYC DOE Office of Postsecondary Readiness 2018–19.
14. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_219.46.asp
15. At time of printing, we were still in discussions with NYCDOE’s data office to understand gaps in postsecondary datasets.
16. “Non-transfer schools” include other alternative options like D79 programs and YABCs. Students are counted in the school in which they exited from.