



2019–20 Annual Report

eskolta
We help schools learn.

2019–20 in Review

The 2019–20 school year was a transformative one for Eskolta School Research and Design. In the fall of 2019 we were thrilled to launch our flagship **Eskolta Network**, an improvement community designed to connect educators in the shared challenge of transforming learning for high school students who have been underserved by our school system. Funded by a five-year, \$15 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded in November of 2019, the goal of the Network is to increase graduation rates and meaningful postsecondary opportunities for previously under-served Black, Latinx, and low-income high school students and to better understand how to support these students and the educators who work with them.

Yet, of course, the defining aspects of the 2019–20 school year were the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected schools, the world, and our work in ways that we could never have imagined, and the Black Lives Matter uprisings, which spurred a societal-level reckoning with the systemic racism our institutions embody. As we responded to the immediate needs of districts, schools, and educators, these dual crises pushed us to interrogate our beliefs, our approach to support, and our actions with respect to racial equity. The lessons we learned through this process will indelibly inform our future work. This Annual Report shares three stories that illustrate how our work evolved during the early days of the pandemic:

- The **VOYAGES Prep Eskolta Network** team shifted their efforts to focus on student attendance and engagement once the pandemic hit.
- The **College and Career Planning Team (CCPT) Leadership Fellowship** offered support, consistency, and community during a time of crisis.
- **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)** developed in response to a sudden drop in internships for students and a deep desire to lift student voices.

We are excited about and proud of the ways our work is helping educators foster a culture of compassion, respect, and high expectations in public schools in the midst of both new and enduring challenges. We believe that through this work, Eskolta is contributing to a more equitable society—one in which all students can thrive, in high school and beyond.



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Our Mission:

Eskolta works with educators to create a more equitable society by fostering a culture of compassion, respect, and high expectations in public schools, so students who were once left behind can thrive.

Our Approach:



Understand

We conduct school-based research, analyze data, and provide current educational research to teachers.



Improve

We work with schools to create practices and tools, to test and modify them, and to measure their impact on student learning.



Spread

We write guides about successful tools developed by our school and district partners, expanding access to educational resources grounded in research and practice.

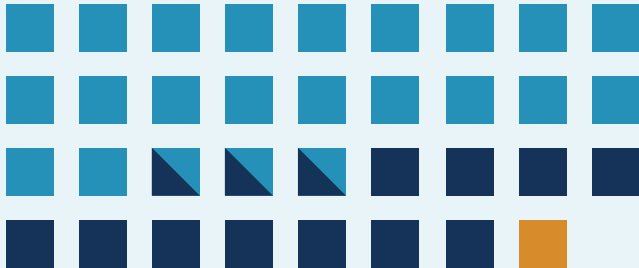


Sustain & Scale

Our professional development provides opportunities for educators to learn from one another and builds the capacity in teachers and administrators to lead school change projects.



Projects at a Glance



Networks

In 2019–20, four networks brought together educators from multiple schools who shared experiences, research, insights to help them develop new practices:

- Multiple Pathways Institute
- Eskolta Network – Boston
- Eskolta Network – NYC
- Eskolta Fellows

School Improvement Projects

Facilitated projects help school teams draw on the latest research to develop and test a practice for their school, department, or classroom.

Coaching Projects

Coaching and resources on school improvement strategies and methods are provided to educators and district staff leading professional development.

Research Projects

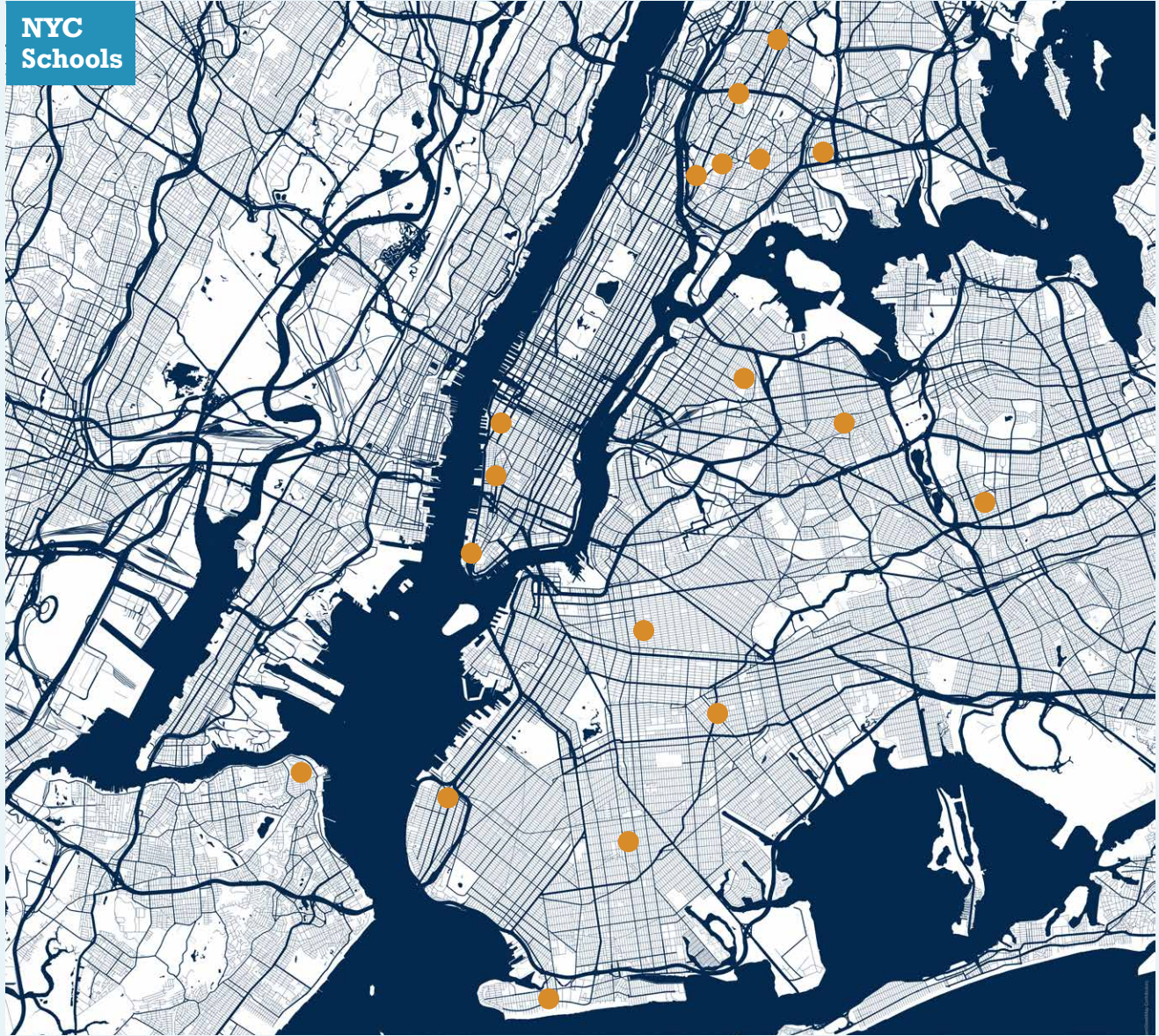
Quantitative and qualitative research enables policy makers and schools to understand the effects of their programs and to make changes based on data.

Who We Work With

Eskolta partnered with:

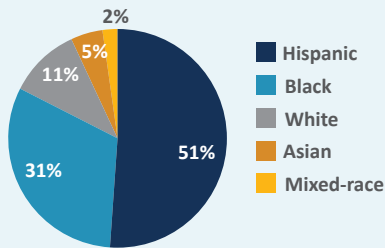
222 educators and district staff at
25 schools in NYC and Boston, of which...
16 were transfer schools,
8 were traditional high schools,
1 was a career and technical education school.



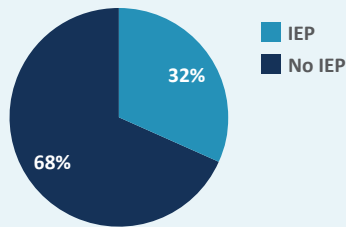


Student schoolwide averages at the schools we worked with:

Race and Ethnicity



Individualized Education Program (IEP)





The Eskolta Network

Connecting Educators. Transforming Learning.

The Eskolta Network is transforming a system designed to fail students and burn out teachers by providing educators with the space and support to reflect, strengthen their practices, and build better classrooms and schools. Together, we aim to confront the educational inequities driven by systems of racism and oppression in our nation and improve academic outcomes for students so they can thrive in high school and beyond.

Schools participating in the Eskolta Network draw on current research and work together to explore problems, create practices and tools, test and modify them, and measure their impact. Eskolta facilitators coach teams of educators through cycles of continuous improvement, and teams attend Network convenings to

share learnings across sites. Nineteen schools participated in the inaugural year: five in Boston and fourteen in New York City. Over the next five years, this community of educators will grow to nearly 50 schools across three school districts in New York City, Boston, and Washington, D.C.

Through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Eskolta joins 29 other organizations that are part of the Networks for School Improvement Community of Practice, working to find unique solutions to the problems facing students in education. We are leading the Network with key partners Boston Compact, reDesign, and Motivate Lab, and through vital collaboration with the New York City Department of Education and Boston Public Schools.

The Eskolta Network: Exploring the Student Experience

At VOYAGES Preparatory High School, a transfer school in Queens, participation in the Network injected a brand-new approach to improving student learning: inviting students to participate as collaborators. The Network team was initially curious to learn about the needs of one group of Voyages students in particular: those who were attending school, but not earning credits.

During the initial phase of the project, the team conducted empathy interviews with students to better understand their challenges. Based on what it learned, the team decided to develop an “onboarding” course for new students that would help build more of a sense of belonging at school and some of the skills and mindsets the team hypothesized would smooth the transition into the school’s mastery-based learning system. Rather than developing a class the usual way, the team decided to bring students in as co-designers. “We told the kids what our inquiry was, and about the class design, and then left a lot of it unformed because they were essentially like co-founders,” noted Principal Nicholas Merchant-Bleiberg. Students conducted classroom observations to tune into different elements of teaching and learning, reflected on what worked for them as learners, and provided the group with feedback about what the team might change.

This process provided the group with some profound insights on their approach to teaching: “I think that what the kids aired out for us is ... we were not giving them enough scenarios to work independently. In that restorative justice box we were doing it for not with.” Merchant-Bleiberg explained, “A teacher needs to be a



Nicholas Merchant-Bleiberg, principal, VOYAGES Preparatory High School



Fuschia Ray, Project Associate, Eskolta

facilitator rather than just sort of a planner.”

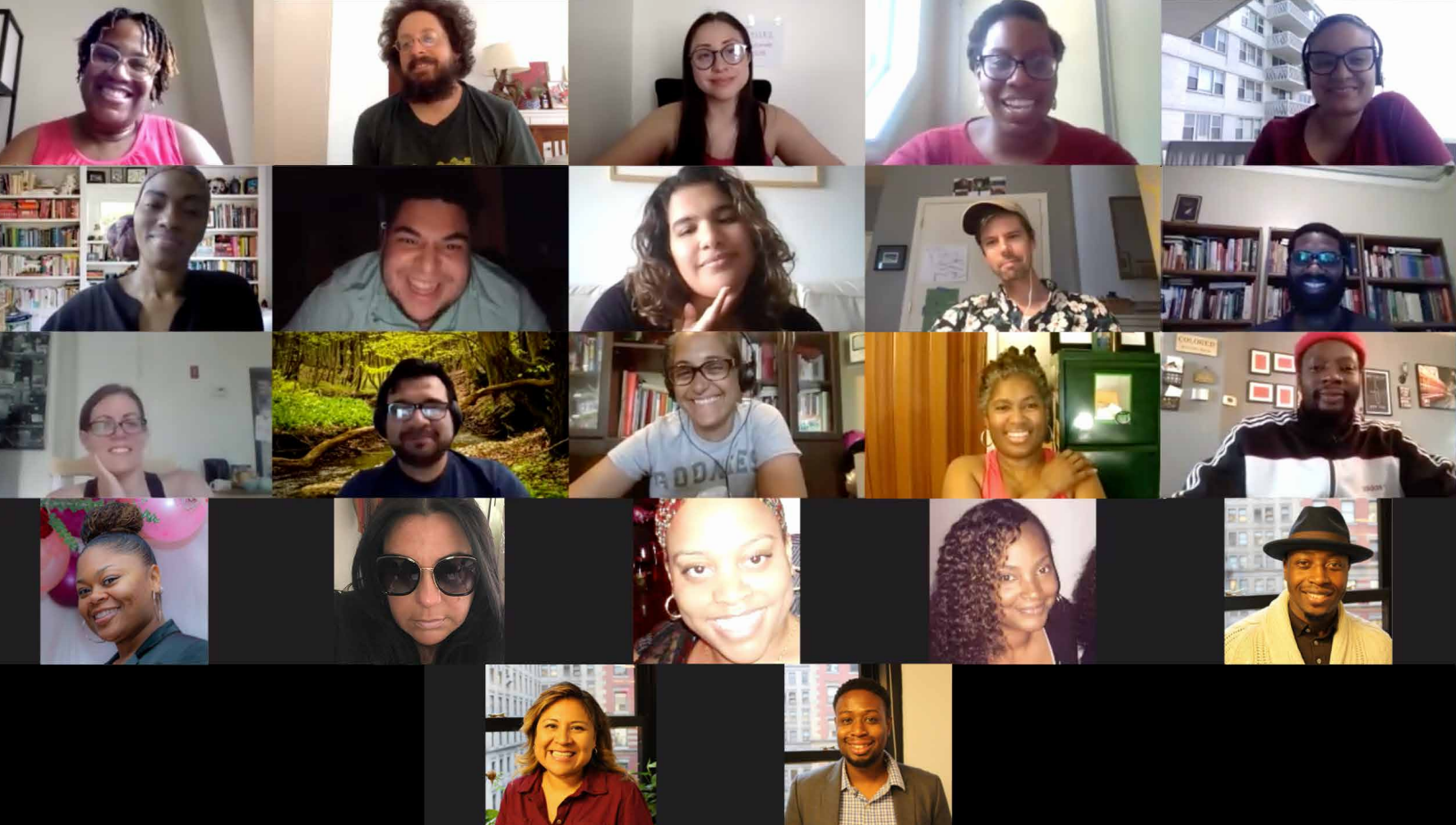
The team designed and taught the course with 27 students, but the outbreak of COVID-19 in March of 2020 precluded a second iteration. Following the school shutdown, the team turned their focus to more immediate needs: transitioning to remote learning, understanding the challenges students were facing, and finding ways to respond. Focusing on the same group of students, they began collecting engagement data such as log-ins to Google Classroom and assignment completion. Eskolta coaches Fuschia Ray and Zoe Roben helped the team develop a protocol for a weekly team meeting to determine which students were less engaged, think about what might explain these variations, and decide how to reach out to them to find out about their remote learning experience and needs and potential steps to take.

During this second phase of the project the team unearthed challenges and insights about effective collaboration within the school. Representing a variety of roles—program chair, guidance counselor, attendance coordinator, science teacher, principal, and assistant principal—the Network team had access to multiple perspectives on student needs. But initially, meetings on student attendance and engagement took place in fractured groups across the school, making it difficult to maintain consistent involvement and awareness about the project's progress. The team found they needed to restructure cross-departmental collaboration to include all members' voices and expertise.

Though the fall of 2020 brought a very different teaching and learning environment as schools restructured to provide hybrid or fully remote learning, the VOYAGES team found elements from the year's project they wanted to incorporate into other areas of teaching.



Zoe Roben, Research and Design Facilitator, Eskolta



Adapting: Consistency, Challenge, and Care

A Base of Leadership

Jointly facilitated by Eskolta and the NYC Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Readiness College and Career Planning Team (CCPT), the CCPT Leadership Fellows program is a highly selective professional development opportunity for expert educators looking to develop leadership skills and strengthen the postsecondary culture at their schools. Throughout a yearlong curriculum, each Fellow builds out a new practice designed to increase postsecondary success of their students. Fellows receive multiple supports as they do this—from monthly group sessions to one-on-one leadership coaching—aimed at growing their skills and confidence, as well as

“You come into Fellows and you’re like, ‘This is what I was missing.’ This space is so different from any other. It is a place for us to just talk, and be, and learn. I didn’t know how much I needed that. Feeling accepted... it’s beautiful.”

—TUNISIA RILEY

practical training leading large CA4A events and mentoring others. At each step, the process is anchored in equity, pushing Fellows to consider the complex ways race and intersectional identity impact the post-secondary process, while helping them build authentic collaboration with community stakeholders and lead a team through cycles of inquiry.

As Fellows develop their practices within their individual buildings, they also share with one another the success and challenges that accompany their new leadership positions. And it is here the deepest intention of the program emerges: the creation of a loving and supportive community. The CCPT Fellows program offers participants a space to feel, to connect, to disagree, to be seen, heard, and accepted, and to challenge the common misconception that every postsecondary practitioner works alone. This culture of challenge and care bonds Fellows together and holds them as they grow. “From day one, I was always like, ‘I don’t know how I ended up here. There must have been a mistake. I don’t belong here.’ But this has really given me the opportunity to find my voice and really know that I have something to offer,” Fellow Marsha Ormejuste noted.

“This challenged me to build on an uneasy relationship with my school leaders, to go in there and really think about how I wanted to contribute. Although feeling a little bit reluctant, a little bit worried about the feathers that I might ruffle, it really challenged me to go above and beyond.”

—HAKEEB LANLOKUN

2019-20 CCPT Leadership Fellows

Kristina Allocco, Music Teacher, Urban Assembly Music and Art

Kevin Brooks, Guidance Counselor, Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters

Jordan Canela, Guidance Counselor, Robert F. Wagner Middle School

Martin Castro, Teacher, International Community High School

Curtis Cox, Career Coach, NYC Department of Education

Sharlene Daley, School Counselor, Brooklyn High School for Law and Technology

Brenda Glasse, School Counselor/College Advisor, High School for Construction Trades, Engineering & Architecture

Elizabeth Hamilton, College Counselor, Urban Assembly Academy of Government & Law

Tunisia K. Riley, Post Secondary Counselor, Urban Assembly School of Design and Construction

Hakeeb Lanlokun, School Counselor, High School for Health Professions

Teresa Marino, Teacher, The Bronx High School for the VisualArts

Monique Maylor, Director of Community Affairs, Victory Collegiate High School

Xaviera Nichols, School Counselor/Guidance Counselor, George Westinghouse CTE High School

Marsha Ormejuste, School Counselor, Queens Collegiate

Jacqueline Pena, College and Career Counselor/Social Worker, English Language Learners and International Support

Shanika Sweeney, Math Teacher, Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters

Imelda Tellez, School Counselor, Information Technology High School

Ervin Thomas, Guidance Counselor/College Advisor, EPIC High School South

Catherina Villafuerte, College Counselor, El Puente Academy

Responding to a New Set of Challenges

As school closures began in March, Fellowship co-facilitators Kimberly Hall (from OPSR) and Brian Zimbler (from Eskolta) had a decision to make: back away from the Fellowship in deference to the many new responsibilities and stresses Fellows had or double down on the Fellows community as a vital and continuing source of support for its members. Kimberly and Brian decided to ask the Fellows what they needed, and the response was unanimous. Fellowship sessions were increased from once a month to weekly, and any planned curriculum was set aside in favor of meeting the Fellows—and, by extension, their students—right where they were. At first, this meant bearing witness to each other's fear. "It became a support group," Brian noted. Fellow Ervin Thomas agreed: "the Fellows was that first group that I heard from [after the shut down]. They heard us and said, 'No matter what's going on, we're going to have this space for you every week.'"

As the weeks progressed, the focus of sessions shifted from emotional triage to practical work: responsively developing best practices for remote schooling, holding consultancies on student engagement strategies, and fostering critical conversations about the ways Fellows' roles in their schools were both changing and staying the same. When the protests surrounding George Floyd's murder pushed a long delayed reckoning with white supremacy to center stage, the Fellows used their community to process rage and heartbreak into possibility and action steps. At each step, Kimberly and Brian provided individual coaching calls and site visits over Zoom. And when the budgeted per session funding eventually maxed out, Fellows individually decided to continue attending, their weekly sessions organically lengthening from one hour to two and a half.

In this way, the Fellows became a family:

channeling the love and support they received from the program into their work in their schools. Monique Maylor hosted a #yourlifematters town hall for students and staff to process the Black Lives Matter protests. Kevin Brooks supported his students in using their own tech savvy to create "I COMMITTED [to college]" videos. Multiple Fellows led town halls centered on student voice and needs, instituted office hours to support students' academic and emotional needs, and developed more personalized outreach plans with a premium on connecting to every student. Jordan Canela, a Fellow who started a discussion forum for ninth graders noted, "Last Friday I had 80 people. It was an open discussion, kids talking about their experience if they were protesting, asking questions. That's something that I would have never imagined doing, but this group really helped me grow."

For every member, the Fellows program offered a consistent, responsive, and affirming space for professional growth and connection as human beings. "This gathering of people has been amazing to me," noted Fellow Xaviera Nichols. "It's great to be somewhere where you can actually be yourself. People feel comfortable enough to share, to be authentic, to say what they need to say." Or as Facilitator Brian Zimbler noted: "This is why we build community in the first place... So we can hold onto each other, have each other's backs, in times like this."

"It's shocking to me that this is not a required experience....

To figure out how we develop ourselves, how we unpack our own experiences, so that we can be the best advocates for our students and for ourselves."

—ELIZABETH HAMILTON

Student-Led Action Research

By Paola Vasquez, 2020 Program Intern

When City-As-School student Nicholas Cannon was first searching for a summer internship in 2020, he wanted an experience that was “more interactive,” and that “would really affect me and my experiences at school and other students’ experiences.” Fellow student Adreanna Cox, too, wanted to make a difference in her school’s culture after noticing that “a lot of kids don’t help each other ... they just let each other fall behind.”

Both students seemed a perfect fit for a new internship Eskolta Senior School Design Partner Katie Gleason had begun to pilot. Many transfer school students hold internships that help them explore career paths, build skills, and—critically—earn money. When COVID-19 hit, in-person internships were paused and schools and community-based organizations were left scrambling to find virtual, meaningful internships for their students. As a result of the pandemic, New York City also canceled the Summer Youth Employment Program. Against this backdrop, Katie had begun to design a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project: a paid, student-led internship where students are trained to conduct research on a critical issue they see in their community and then use their findings to advocate for change. Students from three transfer schools—Liberation Diploma Plus, City-As-School, and Urban Dove Team Charter School—were encouraged to apply and thirteen were selected. Among those participants were Nicholas and Adreanna.

Both Nicholas and Adreanna focused on research questions aimed at improving the sense of community, interdependence, and collective support for peers at their school. Nicholas saw a need to “support student-staff connections and grow confidence in the student and with



Adreanna Cox, student, City-As-School



Nicholas Cannon, student, City-As-School

2: Data Collection—What are the different ways to do this?

Interviews: One person interviews another with the goal of understanding the experience of the other person.

Surveys: Collect data from many people in a community and report on the frequency of responses.

Photovoice: Use photography to capture community conditions.

Focus Groups: A group of people are asked about their opinions, attitudes and beliefs on a specific topic.

Observations: Looking closely at events as they happen (such as a lesson in the classroom) or looking at artifacts (such as assignments or written feedback from teachers).

Above: A slide from the YPAR curriculum outlining different forms of data collection for students to explore.

each other.” After conducting interviews with faculty and students, he created a plan to introduce longer-lasting student clubs to foster these relationships. Meanwhile, Adreanna investigated best practices to encourage student collaboration through focus groups. “There was a time in Spanish class [another student] didn’t understand what the teacher was saying so she asked me to explain it to her,” she says. “I want to see people interact more with each other ... to open up to other people that are their same age.” Over the course of the project, Adreanna, Nick, and the eleven other participating students learned the fundamentals of action research: choosing a research question, creating a research plan, collecting data, analyzing findings, and reporting out.

It was not just research skills that students gained through the YPAR project—for Adreanna, she noted this project “helped me with my growing, my team-leadership skills.” Nicholas echoed these sentiments, adding that the project had helped build his sense of personal agency in shaping his educational experience:

“It has definitely opened me up with feeling confident about making changes at my school.”

Finally, this summer internship project provided lessons for Eskolta as well. Looking ahead, program staff are planning ways to incorporate YPAR and other forms of student voice and participation into projects within the Eskolta Network so that the changes educators are designing are informed by, and co-created with, the students themselves.

“[This project] helped me with my growing, my team-leadership skills. It has definitely opened me up with feeling confident about making changes at my school.”

— NICK CANNON

Financials

Statement of Financial Position

Current Assets	FY19	FY20
Cash	\$ 1,150,604	\$ 2,764,783
Accounts Receivable	\$ 86,289	\$ 233,953
In-Kind Receivable	\$ 0	\$ 0
Prepaid Expenses and Other Current Assets	\$ 15,657	\$ 14,356
Total Current Assets	\$ 1,252,550	\$ 3,013,092
Fixed Assets	\$ 38,212	\$ 38,212
Total Assets	\$ 1,290,762	\$ 3,051,304
Liabilities and Net Assets		
Total Liabilities	\$ 91,998	\$ 51,899
Net Assets		
Unrestricted	\$ 1,178,764	\$ 2,979,405
Temporarily Restricted	\$ 20,000	\$ 20,000
Total Net Assets	\$ 1,198,764	\$ 2,999,405
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 1,290,762	\$ 3,051,304

Statement of Activities

Revenue and Support	FY19	FY20
Program Service Revenue	\$ 2,007,880	\$ 1,152,131
Unrestricted Contributions and Grants	\$ 431,786	\$ 3,318,750
Interest Income	\$ 1,049	\$ 342
Total Revenue and Contributions	\$ 2,440,715	\$ 4,471,223
Expenses		
Program Expenses	\$ 1,462,267	\$ 1,358,379
Management and General	\$ 1,002,371	\$ 1,241,899
Fund-Raising	\$ 90,756	\$ 70,302
Total Expenses	\$ 2,555,395	\$ 2,670,581
Change in Unrestricted Net Assets	-\$ 26,504	\$ 1,800,642
Change in Temporarily Restricted Net Assets	-\$ 80,000	\$ 0
Net Assets—Beginning of Year	\$ 1,305,268	\$ 1,198,764
Net assets—End of Year	\$ 1,198,764	\$ 2,999,405

Supporters

We are grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the State Street Foundation, the Tiger Foundation, New York Community Trust, and the Fordham Street Foundation for their financial support during the 2019–20 year.

Thank you!

