



# 2020–21 Annual Report

**eskolta**  
We help schools learn.

# A Note From Our Executive Director

To our community,

**Every student, every educator, every community has their own story.** Honoring these lived experiences, and how they impact teaching and learning—that is where shared meaning and understanding is created. At Eskolta, we listen in more than one way. We redefine how research is used, rooting it in understanding communities and their assets. By using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the stories, hopes, dreams of the students, educators, and districts, we can help co create more affirming, uplifting schools.



That approach is just one of the many reasons I was honored to join the Eskolta team this year. Having been part of the organization for the past few months, connected with the Eskolta community and our school partners, I feel more committed to why this work is so important to our alternative school youth. Not because we have a solution, but because we have a process for bringing the voices of our students, teachers, and leaders into creating meaningful change together. To those of you I haven't met yet, allow me to take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Dr. Nada Ahmed, and I'm Eskolta's new executive director.

I joined Eskolta during a challenging year—one that was especially hard for the students, educators, and schools we serve. This allowed me to clearly see our organization's and partners' strengths, many of which you can read about in this report.

In the past year, we made important shifts to our approach to working with schools, our theoretical grounding in culturally relevant sustaining education, as well as our own internal structures. These changes empower us to plan for the future. We know there is still important work to be done.

As we look at the upcoming three years, we're:

- › Integrating more diverse voices into the education process and **enhancing learning for all** by supporting schools and empowering them with research-based practices.
- › Working to more **intentionally give voice to educators and underserved BIPOC students** and families.
- › **Leveraging students' perspectives and experiences** in the design process in projects with the intent to build affirming school environments.
- › Exploring the possibility of an **Eskolta policy arm** that helps educators, youth, and the community influence school practices through ground-up policies created with communities.
- › Designing **new fellowship programs for youth and leaders**, with a focus on inclusive leadership.
- › Continuing to **expand Eskolta's national presence** through resources, policy briefs, and learning programs on the Eskolta Learning Center.

I'm excited about our future. This is just the beginning, and we can't do it alone. YOU, our supporters, partners and fellow advocates, empower us to make a difference. We're grateful for your continued support, advocacy, and trust in this work.

Together, we are creating a more equitable education system that allows every alternative school student to thrive. Together, we are removing the systemic barriers that unfairly hold our students back from learning. And together, we can transform our education system into a space of joy, growth, and liberation that is truly designed for, and with, our students.

Your partner,

**Dr. Nada Ahmed**  
Executive Director



# 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.

### 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.

# Inequality and Water Access: Project-Based Learning at Boston Collaborative



Imagine sitting at your desk and looking at Boston park pictures in a textbook, learning about global warming. Now imagine taking a walk through Boston with your class, noticing endless stretches of concrete in some areas and community gardens in others. During the walk, your teachers are helping you learn about the policies that created these and other discrepancies in infrastructure affecting the basic human rights of communities—from your own town to Flint, Michigan and Puerto Rico. Which lesson would you rather join?

Boston Collaborative High School, a small alternative school in South Boston, is betting on the second approach. The school serves

young parents, English Language Learners, and students who are working part- and full-time—students who in many cases have not had the opportunity to experience success in traditional school settings. Boston Collaborative focuses on social emotional learning and provides a range of support services such as mental health, housing, food, clothing, employment, health care, child care, and emergency support for students experiencing trauma.

“We wanted to figure out a way to help opportunity youth see themselves as learners—and to show that their struggles don’t define them,” Boston Collaborative Head of School Sherri Neasman shared. “The best thing we

could do is figure out our strengths, so those strengths could anchor us in the work. That's why we reached out to Eskolta."

As a first-year participant of the Eskolta Network, Director Jamel Adkins-Sharif and Facilitator Elana (E.M.) Eisen-Markowitz helped the Boston Collaborative team to harness those strengths. Together, Eskolta and Boston Collaborative worked to create a cross-departmental program to help students build excitement about school, with a focus on project-based learning.

"We sat down to think through, what is it going to look like to create a project for students who are parenting, who may not be able to come to school every day, who have to work to support a family, students who are English language learners. We spent a lot of time with all of us, including our special education teacher, figuring out what that would look like," Neasman said.

With Jamel and E.M.'s guidance, the team of seven teachers, a social worker, a family liaison, a community field coordinator, and the principal began a year-long process to understand and address challenges they were facing. Beginning with empathy interviews with staff and students, the team continued to build their understanding through a root cause analysis, exploration of a framework for Cultural-Linguistic Sustaining Practice, a survey on teachers' beliefs and biases, and ongoing conversations about identity, race, and systems of oppression. The insights these tools and discussions unearthed helped the team land on the idea to launch their first project-based learning curriculum anchored in a thought-provoking question: how might water be used as a weapon of racism? The teachers then integrated subjects across disciplines, from math to current events to history to science, into lessons focused on this topic.

This multidisciplinary approach helped students connect the skills they were learning in different subjects with issues that mattered in their everyday lives and communities. Students learned about water systems through lessons,

research, and a presentation by the Boston Water and Sewer Commission, and used this to create policy proposals, plan strategies for informing their communities about ways to protect our access to clean water, and use what they were learning to make informed decisions in their own day-to-day lives.

"The Eskolta team served as real thought partners in designing and carrying out this work," said teacher Linda Ruiz Davenport. Support came from other places too—as a member of the Eskolta Network, the team was able to tap into the knowledge and experience of the larger community of educators at Network schools. E.M. connected Linda with a math teacher at City As School in New York City who had several years of experience with project-based learning so they could share resources and insights, particularly around strategies for how to more systematically provide students with feedback, track what students were learning, and identify how this learning aligned with standards.

As a result of the project-based learning model, students at Boston Collaborative are more engaged and excited about their learning experience. And the team is looking forward to the next steps—from taking their next class walk to designing their next project-based learning curriculum, focused on the differential impacts of climate change on neighborhoods in their city.

When teaching is connected to real issues impacting student lives and communities, meaningful learning happens—and that's what education, and Eskolta's mission, is all about.



# Snapshot: The Eskolta Network

**The Eskolta Network** is an improvement community designed to connect educators in the shared challenge of transforming learning for high school students who have been underserved by the school system. Drawing on current research, participating schools work together to explore problems, create practices and tools, test and modify them, and measure their impact. 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.

The 2020–21 school year presented a series of ongoing challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of which compounded disparities in education along racial/ethnic and income lines. Our network contended with changes in health and safety measures, shifts between remote and hybrid learning, and providing social-emotional supports as well as essential services to students whose families and communities had endured losses in life and economic stability. Eskolta coaches responded by shifting efforts to meet the emerging needs of our school teams and their students.

## The 2020–21 Network included:

**27**  
schools

**21** alternative /  
transfer schools

**6** traditional or  
charter schools

**164**  
educators and  
district staff

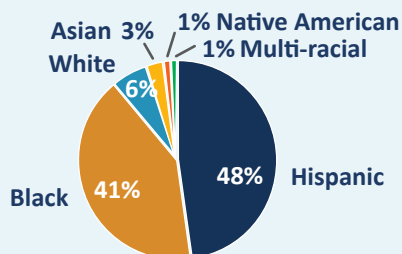
Of Network participants engaged in inquiry work who shared their feedback with us in 2021:

**85%** responded  
“I feel more capable of leading continuous improvement work in my school than I did before participating in the Eskolta Network”

**85%** responded  
“I have a deeper understanding of how and why to use a process of continuous improvement than I did before this year.”

**3,699**  
students

**Network schools supported students who were:**



**12%** ELL or LEP Designations

**29%** Students with Disabilities

**80%** Students in Poverty/  
Economically Disadvantaged



# What Do Educators Say About Our Work?

**Eskolta's work helps educators use a process of continuous improvement. Educators appreciated:**

"Opportunities to think creatively and analytically, to explore and unpack, to work with a team towards making our school better."

"Coaching calls, school consultancies, the curriculum, opportunities for work time and feedback, having opportunities to collaborate with our school team and other schools."

**Eskolta's work helps educators center race and design for equity.**

"[Our coach] engaged us in reflecting on cultural biases we often bring to the work without understanding their impact on student achievement."

"Our school team learned how to examine our practices through an equity lens which now allows for teachers and administrators to implement purposeful practices to support all students."

**Eskolta's support is responsive to each school's particular needs.**

"Our support has felt very specific to our school and our context, and that has really been the highlight. [Our coaches] met us where we were at and at no point did it feel like a one-size-fits-all approach even though we were rooted in the Eskolta theory of change."

"Our Eskolta Network coach... skillfully supported us as we grappled with the challenges to finding solutions to address low student engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic remote learning period. As result, we developed an effective support plan to increase student engagement."

# Where We Work

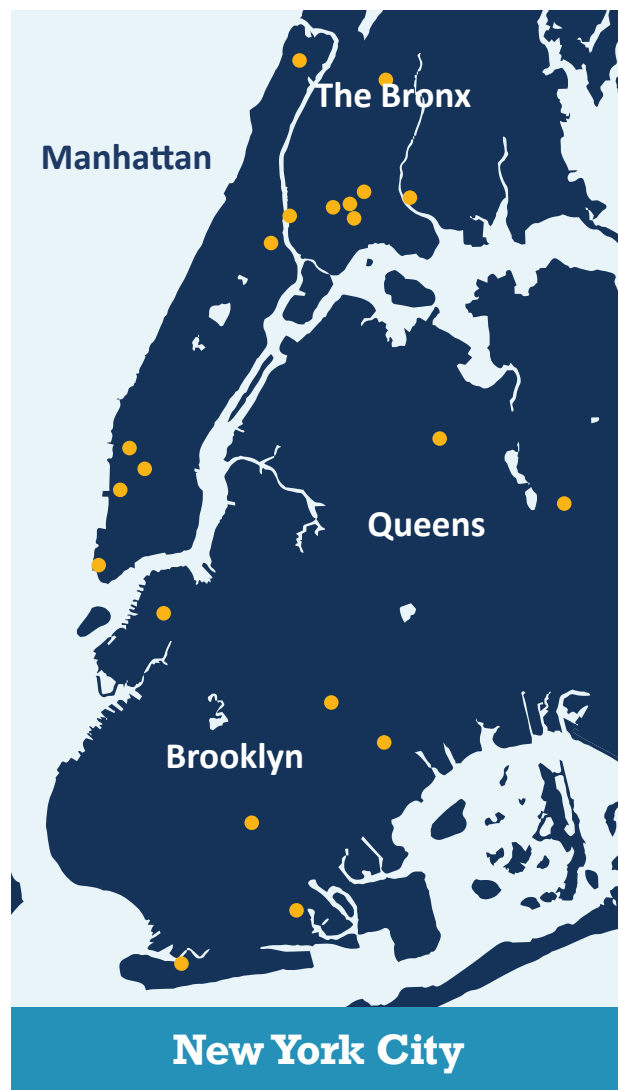


## Boston schools

- › ABCD University High School
- › Academy of the Pacific Rim
- › Boston Collaborative High School
- › Burke High School
- › EDCO Youth Alternatives
- › Excel High School
- › Roxbury Preparatory Charter School

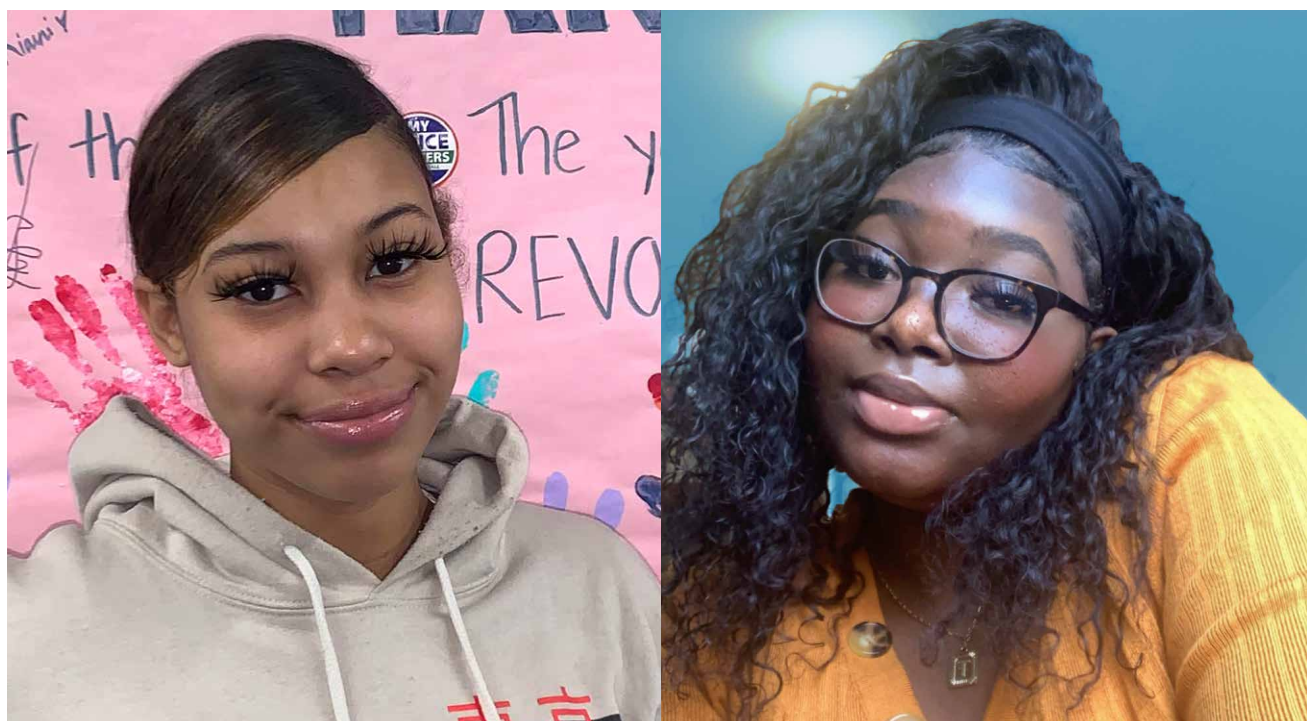
## NYC schools

- › Arturo A. Schomburg Satellite Academy
- › Bronx Arena High School
- › Brooklyn Frontiers High School
- › City-As-School
- › East Brooklyn Community High School
- › Harlem Renaissance High School
- › Harvest Collegiate High School
- › Health Opportunities High School
- › High School for Excellence and Innovation
- › Jill Chaifetz Transfer High School



- › John V. Lindsay Wildcat Academy Charter School
- › Knowledge & Power Preparatory Academy
- › International High School (KAPPA)
- › Landmark High School
- › Liberation Diploma Plus High School
- › North Queens Community High School
- › Professional Pathways High School
- › University Heights High School
- › Urban Dove Team Charter School
- › Urban Dove Team II Charter School
- › Olympus Academy
- › Voyages Preparatory High School

# A New Approach to Inquiry: Students As Co-researchers



Landmark High School alum Titilayo Aluko hopes to one day work for the American Civil Liberties Union and is considering a career in law. Student Dynasti Rios is interested in nursing, anesthesiology, and art. Chris Holguin is figuring out what he's most passionate about—but he already knows that he wants students to learn more real-world skills in the classroom that they can then apply to promising careers.

Landmark scholars have big dreams, but they also know students face challenges in our school system, from graduation disparities to implicit biases. When a group of teachers formed Landmark's Equity and Curriculum team, five students including Titilayo, Dynasti, and Chris joined the team as partners in building a school that better supports students.

In 2020, the team decided to focus their Eskolta Network work on understanding some troubling data they had gathered showing disparities around graduation rates. For the initial phase of the project—what Eskolta calls the *Familiarize* phase—the team wanted to hear directly from students about their lived experiences in school that might be contributing to this issue.

“Our goal, quantitatively, is changing the data that started our work. We want to lower those alarming numbers—ones like boys of color ‘not doing well in school’ based on the measurements we have in place,” teacher Houdda Balouch said. They were curious how the curriculum might be centering whiteness and what they could do to change that.



Eskolta School Research and Design Partner Zoe Roben served as Landmark’s partner as the team pursued these questions. Zoe met with Houdda, the team lead, once a month to plan meeting agendas, bringing elements of design thinking to guide the team’s inquiry.

“Zoe gave us a number of easy ways to collect qualitative data and had a lot of great ideas for us,” teacher Shannon Guglielmo shared. “We needed more information about strategies, and Eskolta was there to help.”

With Zoe’s support, the team launched a series of six student-led focus groups corresponding to different racial identities in order to offer a safe space for students to share their thoughts and experiences. Landmark teachers participated in their own focus groups as well. Titilayo, Dynasti, Chris, and other students helped conduct research, from writing interview questions, to facilitating the focus groups, to reviewing and analyzing the data.

“Our education system is not perfect. It’s a work in progress, and I appreciate Eskolta for acknowledging that and our schools for

acknowledging that and making it better, and taking the time, because this work is not easy,” Titilayo shared.

Through the focus groups, the team learned that students were hesitant to ask for help because it made them feel vulnerable and they felt a perfectionist pressure in the learning culture. “It’s important for students to trust that teachers are going to help them,” noted Chris. Now, these findings are directly informing professional development at Landmark; the team is using its second year in the Eskolta Network to design new feedback practices to move towards a culture that celebrates support and revision in service of deeper, more meaningful learning.

Dynasti expressed her hopes for the work Landmark’s student-teacher team is doing—including its potential to inspire change for others outside of her immediate school community: “I hope that it leads to less racial bias... I hope that more schools become more aware of what issues are going on—and if those issues are present in the classroom, then how could we resolve it?”



# Our Journey Towards Becoming an Anti-Racist Organization



It is a simple but devastating truth that our education system was designed to fail Black and brown students. Systemic racism and the trauma it causes holds our students back—and it's past time for meaningful change. At Eskolta, we recognize that the work of dismantling white supremacy in our education system must begin with ourselves and our organization.

That's why during the 2020-21 year, Eskolta engaged in a number of initiatives to deepen our capacity and internal alignment around Race, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI). Our goal in 2020 was to first uncover and honestly address issues related to race and equity impacting our organization internally. This process was difficult and not without missteps, but ultimately provided a path to build new systems that will ensure meaningful change for our staff, as well as the schools and districts we partner with. This work is ongoing, and we remain

deeply committed to continuing to grow and incorporate our REDI values as an organization.

Our REDI work has included both internal and external initiatives.

## Internal

- We know how important the right leadership is. In the past year we began an organizational restructuring, hiring a new executive director in July 2021. Dr. Nada Ahmed brings more than 21 years of experience in equity, anti-racist, and community building work to Eskolta.
- With the support of NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, we developed a new set of organizational values, grounding our approach in antiracism and Culturally Relevant Sustaining Education (CRSE). This statement has become a critical guiding

## Values Statement

At Eskolta, we believe that high-quality culturally responsive sustaining education is a fundamental human right and a mechanism for liberation and justice. We are committed to interrupting racist, culturally destructive systems by sharing power in schools and our own organizational practices, and challenging deficit-based mindsets that have created disproportionality. 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.

text we revisit to ground our planning for both internal and external work.

- › We focused deeply on creating an equitable organizational culture. We addressed inequities in staff salary and compensation, established more transparent hiring and promotion processes and developed uniform onboarding processes.
- › Our team made REDI-focused professional development a priority. Eskolta staff engaged in trainings on CRSE, using youth participatory action research methodologies, Restorative Justice/ Transformative Justice, and more. We are continually building a more nuanced understanding of race and culture with a goal of improving educational outcomes for every student.

- › The Eskolta DEI Council engaged in a range of important activities, including conducting surveys and interviews with current and past employees to better understand the diversity and inclusion climate at Eskolta.
- › Our data team began a series of professional development sessions targeted at building their capacity to apply a racial equity lens to research design, data collection, and data analysis.

Our internal work has—and will continue to—help us better serve our students, educators, schools and districts. In 2020-21, we were excited to redesign the Eskolta Network professional development curriculum to embed CRSE and CSLP theoretical models into our work. These updates help partners reflect on their role in education and as anti-racist advocates, at the self, interpersonal, and systemic levels so they can then connect those reflections to beliefs and teaching practices. Our aim with this shift is to help educators create practices and classroom environments that affirm the racial, linguistic, and cultural identities of students and to bring students into the process of redesigning education as co-creators and co-researchers.

As part of our continuous learning, we also administered NYU's Perspectives on Race & Culture Survey to all Eskolta Network participants. We shared team- and Network-wide results. These steps are helping our team discover what focus areas are most important within our network—guiding us in our future exploration, learning and reflection.

Finally, this fall, we began recruiting for Eskolta's first Youth Advisory Board, recruiting a group of current and former alternative school students who will give voice to the student experience and shape how Eskolta works with educators and schools to support young people in culturally responsive and sustaining ways. The board will offer a combination of a traditional advisory board experience with a facilitated youth

## COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. Listen with respect
2. Struggle together
3. Participate and remain engaged
4. Push your growing edge
5. Consider what's in it for me
6. Expect to experience discomfort
7. Speak your truth and keep it real
8. Try not to take it personally
9. Confidentiality

participatory action research (YPAR) program focused on interrogating and building skills around youth leadership.

Through critical self-reflection, challenging conversations, community building, and the continual re-alignment of our work to our values, we are redefining Eskolta's future and impact on education. The journey of becoming an antiracist organization is one that has no finish line, but we are committed to walking it together.

# Financials

## Statement of Financial Position

Current Assets	FY20	FY21
Cash	\$ 3,078,836	\$ 3,069,961
Accounts Receivable	\$ 45,445	\$ 289,937
In-Kind Receivable	\$ 0	\$ 0
Prepaid Expenses and Other Current Assets	\$ 14,356	\$ 8,351
<b>Total Current Assets</b>	<b>\$ 3,138,638</b>	<b>\$ 3,368,250</b>
Fixed Assets	\$ 20,215	\$ 20,215
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$ 3,158,853</b>	<b>\$ 3,388,465</b>
<b>Liabilities and Net Assets</b>		
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	<b>\$ 380,916</b>	<b>\$ 438,272</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>		
Unrestricted	\$ 2,757,936	\$ 2,930,193
Temporarily Restricted	\$ 20,000	\$ 20,000
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 2,777,936</b>	<b>\$ 2,950,193</b>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 3,158,853</b>	<b>\$ 3,388,465</b>

## Statement of Activities

Revenue and Support	FY19	FY20
Program Service Revenue	\$ 945,873	\$ 424,200
Unrestricted Contributions and Grants	\$ 3,318,750	\$ 3,261,940
Interest Income	\$ 600	\$ 256
<b>Total Revenue and Contributions</b>	<b>\$ 4,265,223</b>	<b>\$ 3,686,396</b>
<b>Expenses</b>		
Program Expenses	\$ 1,358,379	\$ 1,983,225
Management and General	\$ 1,255,944	\$ 1,485,012
Fund-Raising	\$ 76,727	\$ 45,902
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 2,691,051</b>	<b>\$ 3,514,139</b>
<b>Change in Unrestricted Net Assets</b>	<b>\$1,579,172.74</b>	<b>\$172,256.80</b>
<b>Change in Temporarily Restricted Net Assets</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>
<b>Net Assets—Beginning of Year</b>	<b>\$1,198,763.60</b>	<b>\$2,777,936.34</b>
<b>Net assets—End of Year</b>	<b>\$2,777,936.34</b>	<b>\$2,950,193.14</b>

As of July 31, 2020. Figures may not add up to totals due to rounding.

## 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!



