

# Better Evidence for Better Schools

Lessons from the First Years of the  
Research Alliance for New York City Schools



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**The Research Alliance for NYC Schools** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center housed at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. Our mission is to conduct rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City's public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing evidence about the policies and practices that promote students' success. For more information, visit [www.ranycs.org](http://www.ranycs.org).

In New York City, and around the country, few issues garner as much heated debate as education. Many stakeholders hold out hope that concrete evidence about “what works” can cut through the political noise. But generating evidence that makes a real difference for education policy and practice is difficult. Historically, the work of researchers has been largely disconnected from that of school district officials and educators, and research findings have often done little to influence policy or improve day-to-day practices in schools.

In 2008, a diverse group of civic leaders—including representatives from the NYC Department of Education (DOE), the teachers’ union, and the philanthropic and business communities—came together to address these challenges in NYC. These individuals held wildly divergent views about key issues in education, but coalesced around the need for *better evidence* about problems facing the City’s schools and about the effectiveness of reforms aimed at solving these problems. They laid the groundwork for the creation of a new, independent research center housed at New York University: the Research Alliance for New York City Schools.

Today, the Research Alliance is an important and growing part of NYC’s civic infrastructure. Our mission is to conduct rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City’s public schools. We work closely with policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to identify pressing research questions and carry out relevant projects. We also maintain a rich archive of data on NYC schools and communities, to support ongoing research. To date, we have undertaken more than 20 major studies.

So, what have we learned from this work? What evidence have we amassed that can help City leaders better allocate resources, more meaningfully assess student progress and school performance, and ultimately serve students, families, and communities more effectively? And finally, what are the pressing issues in education policy and practice that we hope to tackle next? In this brief, we seek to answer these questions by compiling key findings and lessons from the Research Alliance’s first six years, and by highlighting new areas of inquiry that we view as essential for continuing to improve schools in NYC and across the country.

## Overview

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### 1. What Have We Learned About... *the NYC School System as a Whole?*

- The overall picture is one of solid progress, but with some sobering disparities.
- NYC high schools have shown steady improvement over the last decade—including large increases in graduation rates—following many years of poor performance.
- Yet, few students graduate “college ready,” and there are substantial gaps in outcomes based on race and gender.
- While educational disparities start early, there are leaks throughout the pipeline from kindergarten to college.

2

### 2. What Have We Learned About... *Keeping Students “On Track”?*

- It *is* possible to identify students who will need more support while there is still time to offer it.
- For example, we developed an indicator that predicts, with a high degree of accuracy, which 9<sup>th</sup> graders are on track to graduate and which are likely to need more help.
- Even earlier, students’ middle school attendance and test scores strongly predict their performance during high school.

### 3. What Have We Learned About... *Improving Schools?*

- Strong leaders can turn around struggling middle schools. We documented important school-wide conditions, as well as specific strategies that helped middle schools improve teaching and learning.
- At the high school level, educators in effective schools cite three factors as keys to success—robust personalized learning, high expectations for students and staff, and teachers who are willing to take on multiple roles.
- Targeted interventions, like the City’s Expanded Success Initiative for Black and Latino male students, can foster promising changes in schools.

### 4. What Have We Learned About... *Producing Information that is Useful for Educators?*

- Teachers and school administrators have an appetite for data, but aren’t satisfied with the current menu of data-driven tools.
- Educational measurement should be expanded to offer new, more meaningful information about students and schools.

## Looking Ahead

The Research Alliance has built one of the largest and most comprehensive education databases in the country, including administrative, human resources, and survey data from the NYC DOE, as well as a growing collection of survey and interview data compiled through Research Alliance projects. We recently launched a unique partnership with the City University of New York (CUNY) and the NYC DOE, which is allowing us to study factors associated with students’ enrollment, persistence, and success in colleges and universities. Moving forward, we will work with City and State agencies to integrate more data about K-12 and post-secondary education, early childhood programs, social services, and employment, making it possible to investigate how students’ learning and development are influenced by a broad range of factors.

Our data archive serves as the anchor for an array of ongoing and future studies. With partners here at NYU and other institutions, we are advancing projects examining, for instance:

- The roll-out, implementation, and impact of universal pre-kindergarten in NYC;
- Students’ transitions from NYC high schools into college and work;
- Resources and contexts that support effective teaching; and
- Inequality, particularly the distribution of schools and students across the system.

For more information about the studies cited in this brief, or other Research Alliance work, please visit our website, [www.ranycs.org](http://www.ranycs.org).

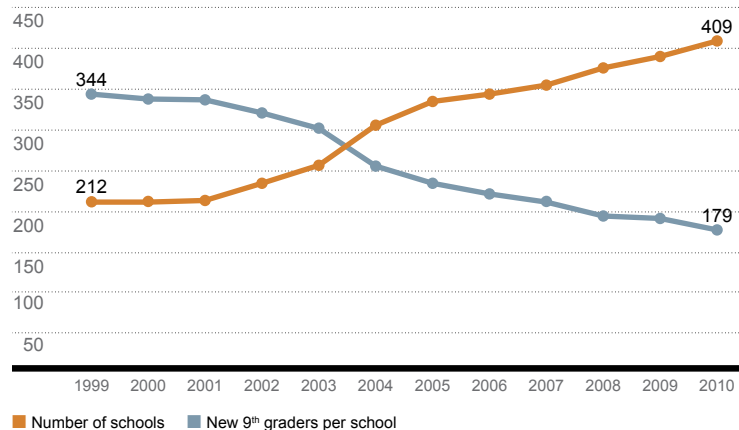
# What Have We Learned About *the NYC School System* *as a Whole?*

## NYC high schools have shown steady improvement over the last decade, following many years of poor performance.

Beginning in 2002, NYC embarked on a far-reaching high school reform effort. The DOE closed numerous low-performing high schools, replaced them with hundreds of smaller schools (see Figure 1), and created a high school choice system designed to match each of the City's 8<sup>th</sup> graders (some 80,000 per year) with a school of their choosing. The Research Alliance has produced substantial evidence about these reforms, including studies of small high schools and high school choice and an upcoming report on closures. In 2013, we conducted an in-depth, independent analysis of high school outcomes and trends during this time.<sup>1</sup> Most of the indicators we looked at pointed to steady improvement, including:

- *High school graduation rates*, which increased 14 percentage points, from 55 percent among students who started high school in 2001 and were scheduled to graduate in 2005, to 69 percent among those who started in 2007 and were scheduled to graduate in 2011 (see Figure 2).
- *Dropout rates and rates of transfer* to other school systems, which both declined during the period.
- Growth in various antecedents to graduation, such as *attendance*, *credit accumulation*, and the proportion of students *taking and passing Regents exams*.<sup>2</sup>
- Higher graduation rates and other outcomes among *historically marginalized groups*, including Black and Latino students, low-income students, and English language learners.

**Figure 1: Number of Schools and Average 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Size**  
Schools Serving First-Time 9<sup>th</sup> Graders, 1999-2010



The landscape of NYC high schools changed dramatically between 1999 and 2010. As shown in Figure 1, while the number of high schools nearly doubled, the average enrollment per school declined by almost half.

Source: Kemple (2013).

## Few students are graduating college ready.

As shown in Figure 2, rates of college readiness—based in this case on the NY State Aspirational Performance Measure—have lagged far behind rates of high school completion in NYC. Among students who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2007, for instance, only 21 percent met the state standard for being well prepared for college. Among Black and Latino males, the number was just 1 in 10.<sup>3</sup> While many students who aren't deemed "college ready" nevertheless enroll, their chances of obtaining a degree are slim (see *New York City Goes to College* below). Improving students' preparation for and transition to college is a critical challenge facing the NYC school system.

4

## There are substantial gaps in outcomes, linked to race and gender.

In the 2010-2011 school year, NYC's Black and Latino 1<sup>st</sup> graders were about twice likely as their White and Asian peers to be overage.<sup>4</sup> Past research has attributed this, at least in part, to differential access to preschools and pre-K programs.<sup>5</sup> Large gaps in performance on standardized tests can also be seen beginning in elementary school. Among 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in 2011, for example, proficiency rates on New York State's standardized English Language Arts (ELA) and math tests were at least 25 percentage points lower for Black and Latino students than their White and Asian peers. By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, less than half of all Black and Latino students were proficient in math, and less than a third were proficient in ELA.<sup>6</sup> Given these patterns, it is not surprising that Black and Latino students are much less likely to graduate from high school, and that those who do graduate are less likely to be academically prepared for college (see Figure 3). The problem is particularly acute for Black and Latino young men; young women in every racial subgroup consistently outperform their male counterparts.

## While these disparities start early, there are leaks *throughout* the pipeline from kindergarten to college.

It's easy to assume that differences in graduation and college readiness rates are rooted firmly in early achievement gaps. This is certainly part of the story, but there is evidence that some divergence in outcomes actually occurs in middle and high school. For example, when the Research Alliance looked at students who scored at the highest levels of the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade ELA test, we found that, even within this high-performing group, Black and Latino young men were much less likely than their White and Asian peers to go on to graduate from high school college ready. Similarly, among students who successfully completed high school and earned a Regents diploma<sup>7</sup> in 2010, Black and Latino young men had lower rates of college enrollment.<sup>8</sup> These patterns suggest that obstacles emerge for students at many points in time, but also—more encouragingly—that there are many opportunities to help students overcome those obstacles and stay on course to achieve their goals.

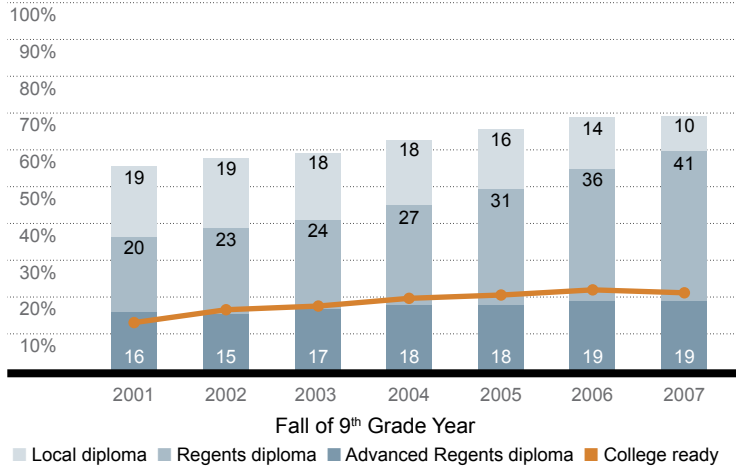
## New York City Goes to College

A new Research Alliance report extends our look at the NYC school system to include trends in college enrollment, persistence, and graduation. Our analysis shows growth in college enrollment rates between 2006 and 2012 (a period when high school graduation rates were also improving). But the number of students who obtained a post-secondary degree was quite low: Less than a quarter of 2006 high school graduates earned a degree of any kind by the spring of 2010.

Not surprisingly, students who had lower academic achievement in high school were less likely to attend and complete college. However, the type of college that students chose also seemed to influence their outcomes: Rates of persistence and degree attainment varied greatly based on a school's selectivity and whether it was a two- or four-year institution, even among students who were academically well prepared.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 2: High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates**

First-Time 9<sup>th</sup> Graders, 2001-2007



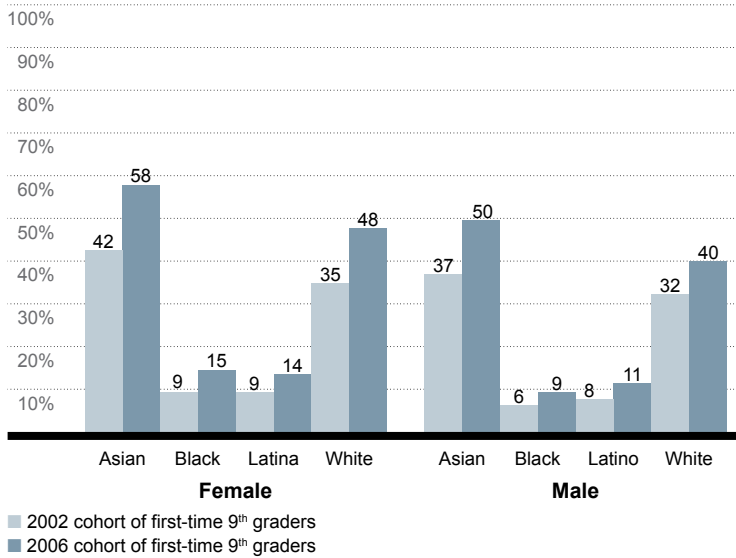
Source: Kemple (2013).

In recent years, NYC's graduation rates have risen steadily, with increasing proportions of students earning the more rigorous Regents diploma. This is welcome news against a historical backdrop of stubbornly low high school performance. Yet, 3 out of 10 NYC students still do not graduate within four years. Perhaps even more worrisome is the wide—and persistent—gap between the percentage of students who graduate and those who can be considered ready for college-level work. In this graph, “college ready” refers to students who met the NY State Aspirational Performance Measure (APM).

See notes on page 15.

**Figure 3: College Readiness Rates by Race and Gender**

First-Time 9<sup>th</sup> Graders, 2002 and 2006



Source: Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, and Guidry (2013).

Given the value of a college degree for students' future earnings and stability, the low rates of college readiness seen here are troubling. Recent years have seen a moderate increase in the proportion of students who are ready for college, but there are still wide gaps based on gender and, especially, race. White and Asian students are about four times more likely to be college ready than their Black and Latino peers (based on the NY State APM).

See notes on page 16.

# What Have We Learned About *Keeping Students On Track?*

6

## **Our 9<sup>th</sup>-grade indicator predicts, with a high degree of accuracy, which students are on track to graduate, and which may need extra help.**

Building on work in other cities that has established a clear link between 9<sup>th</sup> grade progress and high school graduation, the Research Alliance constructed a 9<sup>th</sup> grade indicator based on an extensive analysis of NYC data. We found that students who earned at least 10 course credits and passed at least one Regents exam in 9<sup>th</sup> grade were significantly more likely to graduate than classmates who did not. Over time, this on-track indicator remained a stable predictor of students' graduation rates (we looked at seven cohorts of entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders). Furthermore, we found that regardless of background characteristics—such as gender, race or ethnicity, poverty, English language learner status, and ELA and math proficiency in middle school—this on-track indicator provided strong signals about students' chances of graduating.<sup>9</sup>

## **Students' attendance and test scores in middle school predict the likelihood of being on track in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.**

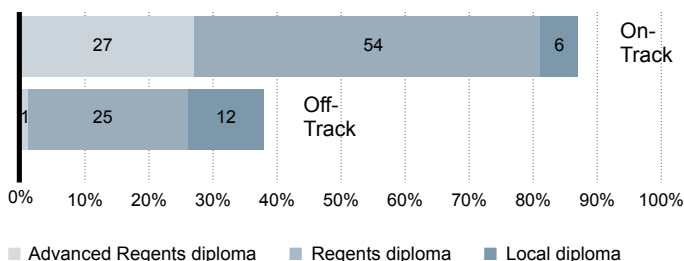
Just as students' performance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade foreshadows their odds of graduating, their performance in middle school sets up that critical 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. Research Alliance analyses showed that students' attendance and test scores in grades 4-8 strongly predicted their likelihood of being on track at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Even students who were performing reasonably well at the beginning of middle school sometimes fell off track during grades 7 or 8, with serious consequences for their progress toward graduation. Declines in attendance and math scores emerged as particularly worrisome. These findings add to a growing body of evidence from around the country that emphasizes the need to better support students who fall behind during the middle grades.<sup>10</sup>

More broadly, the strength of these on-track indicators suggests that it is possible to identify students who will struggle to graduate and to offer them academic help and other supports (e.g., connecting them to counseling). By doing so, schools may be able to keep more young people on track to succeed. The Research Alliance is now working to develop similarly robust measures that can be used to determine if high school students will be adequately prepared for college.



**Figure 4a: High School Graduation Rates for Students Who Were On- and Off-Track at the End of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade**

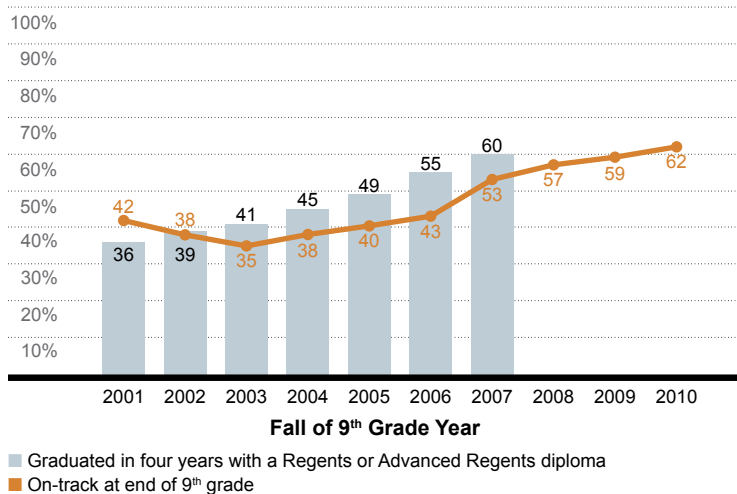
First-Time 9<sup>th</sup> Graders, 2007



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data provided by the NYC DOE.

**Figure 4b: High School Graduation and On-Track Rates Over Time**

First-Time 9<sup>th</sup> Graders, 2001-2010



Source: Adapted from Kemple (2013).

The Research Alliance develops and tests “early warning indicators” to help schools recognize and support struggling students. The strength of our 9<sup>th</sup>-grade on-track indicator (Figure 4a) is good news for educators, since it suggests that a student’s chances of graduating can be improved in school, in spite of external factors that may be beyond a school’s reach. As seen in Figure 4b, the on-track rate for NYC 9<sup>th</sup> graders has risen substantially in recent years—forecasting continued growth in high school graduation rates. Note that Figure 4b focuses on students who graduated with a Regents or Advanced Regents diploma and does not include students who graduated with a local diploma.

See notes on page 16.

# What Have We Learned About *Improving Schools?*

8

## **Strong leaders can turn around struggling middle schools.**

The turnaround strategies that predominate in federal policy include closing schools, converting them to charter schools, dismissing the principal and a substantial proportion of teachers, and reassigning students to other schools. In contrast, the Research Alliance set out to examine NYC middle schools that had substantially improved student performance without such aggressive measures. These schools instead made improvements by drawing on existing resources and building internal capacity to educate students effectively.

To gain insight about how they did it, we compared the experiences of educators in two sets of schools: a group of “turnaround” schools, and a group that saw minimal growth in student outcomes over the same period. We found that the turnaround schools shared three conditions, driven largely by their principal, that enabled them to raise student achievement: well aligned and clearly articulated needs and goals, a positive work environment for teachers, and a strong, relationship-centered approach to student discipline and school safety. These conditions set the stage for specific strategies to improve teaching and learning, such as providing professional development for teachers, creating small learning communities, and using data to inform instruction.<sup>11</sup>

## **Effective high schools are characterized by robust personalized learning environments, high expectations for students and staff, and teachers who are willing to take on multiple roles.**

There is unusually rigorous evidence that the City’s new small schools<sup>12</sup> have improved outcomes for students. An ongoing impact study by MDRC has shown that these schools have large and sustained positive effects on students’ high school graduation rates and other outcomes, and that these effects accrue to a wide range of student subgroups.<sup>13</sup>

To learn more about how schools achieved these results, the Research Alliance conducted interviews and focus groups with more than 100 teachers and principals in 25 of the most effective small schools.<sup>14</sup> This work revealed three factors that educators across schools viewed as central to their success:

- *Personalization*, which was widely seen as the most important success factor. This included structures that foster strong relationships with students and their families, systems for monitoring student progress—beyond just grades and test scores—and efforts to address students’ social and emotional needs, as well as academic ones.
- *High expectations*—for students and staff—and instructional programs aligned with these ambitious goals.
- *Dedicated and versatile teachers* who were willing to take on multiple roles, sometimes outside their areas of expertise.

The educators we spoke with also described challenges to the creation and ongoing operation of small schools. Among the issues they cited were teacher burn out and problems continuing to offer a “personalized” environment as schools grew. Policymakers and school leaders will need to grapple with these issues, if they hope to sustain—and perhaps expand on—the success of the new small high schools.

### Targeted interventions can foster promising changes in schools.

The Research Alliance is evaluating the City’s Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), which aims to boost college and career readiness among Black and Latino male students in 40 NYC high schools. The NYC DOE has provided these schools with an array of resources, including funding, workshops and professional development sessions, planning meetings, and information about potential external partners, to help them develop and expand programs for their Black and Latino male students. These resources appear to be helping schools make significant changes in how they do business. During the first year of implementation, educators reported raising academic standards and creating more opportunities for students to take rigorous coursework, improving relationships with and among students, and expanding college-focused supports earlier in students’ high school careers. Many also described changing school-wide practices (particularly around discipline), as well as teacher mindsets and beliefs about their students, as a result of their exposure to “culturally relevant education.”<sup>15</sup>

While all of these changes are directly aligned with the ESI theory of action, it is too soon to tell whether they will lead to measurably better results. The Research Alliance will continue to examine ESI’s implementation, as well as its impact on a range of academic and non-academic outcomes, through 2016. We believe this work will provide valuable lessons for other schools and districts that are attempting to expand opportunities for young men of color.

### Are Efforts to Improve Middle Schools Being Complicated by High Teacher Turnover?

While some amount of teacher turnover is generally thought to be constructive (as it brings new ideas, energy, and skills to schools), too much turnover may have a host of instructional, financial, and organizational costs. Our analyses of NYC DOE human resource records revealed that rates of turnover are higher in the City’s middle schools than in elementary and high schools. Among middle school teachers who entered their school between 2002 and 2009, more than half left that school within three years. This situation poses a serious challenge for middle school leaders. A constant churning of teachers saps already scarce resources and makes it difficult to establish a consistent, constructive school culture. A separate policy initiative may be warranted to support and incentivize teachers who specialize in working with early adolescents and commit to doing so for the long haul.<sup>21</sup>



# What Have We Learned About *Producing Information that is Useful for Educators?*

10

## **Educators have an appetite for data, but aren't satisfied with the current menu of data-driven tools.**

Our work strongly suggests that educators want more information about their students. Across multiple Research Alliance studies, teachers and school administrators have reported that they actively collect and analyze data to help identify and address student needs. Yet system-wide attempts to improve access to such data have fallen short. The Research Alliance carried out the only independent, systematic analysis of the City's \$80 million Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS), which was designed to put student information at educators' fingertips. We found that while ARIS had been relatively useful as a tool for school-wide planning, it was much less valuable as a direct aid to classroom instruction.

Developing new education technology tools in closer consultation with administrators and teachers might improve the fit between the tools' features and educators' needs. For instance, teachers have told us they would like access to more regular, real-time assessment data, as well as non-academic information, such as updates on student behavior and details about special services students receive. Many would also like the ability to *input* data about their students, rather than simply view information gathered elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Our findings suggest that, if tools are meant to inform day-to-day classroom instruction, it is important to involve teachers from the very earliest stages of development, and to provide ongoing training and support to help them get the most out of the products that are available.

## **Can Education Technology Tools Be Developed in Ways that Better Meet Educators' Needs?**

The InnovateNYC Ecosystem is an attempt to improve the NYC DOE's technology procurement process by bringing educators and developers together to identify real-world learning challenges and create solutions that successfully meet those needs. With support from a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation grant, the Research Alliance is evaluating the rollout and development of the Ecosystem, as well as its impact on a variety of student and teacher outcomes. The study is designed to provide ongoing feedback that helps the Ecosystem meet its goals; we also hope to surface larger lessons that will be useful for other districts working to develop innovative and effective education technology tools.

# Educational measurement should be expanded to capture new, more meaningful information about students and schools.

Education research has traditionally assessed student achievement and progress by focusing on academic outcomes, particularly test scores. Yet there is growing evidence that a variety of “non-academic” outcomes are also critical for students’ long-term success. The Research Alliance has begun to investigate factors that influence these kinds of outcomes. For example, our evaluations of ESI and the iMentor College Ready program are both measuring—and assessing impacts on—students’ perseverance, academic self-confidence, and aspirations for the future (see Figure 5). While this work is still in its early stages, it is already providing a useful new lens on students’ development and achievement, helping to augment and contextualize traditional academic measures.

Expanding our thinking about the types of outcomes that matter is one piece of the puzzle; our work also suggests the need to collect new kinds of information about schools. NYC’s annual School Survey, administered to students in grades 6 through 12 and all district parents and teachers, provides a vital opportunity to gather insight about the learning environment at each of the City’s 1,800 schools. Since 2010, the Research Alliance has been collaborating with the DOE with the goal of ensuring that the Survey captures valid, reliable data. This work has led to a number of improvements and has illuminated additional, larger changes that would unleash the Survey’s potential. We are currently working with the DOE to incorporate new measures of important aspects of schools’ capacity, such as instructional leadership and collaboration.

**Figure 5: Examples of Key “Non-Academic” Student Outcomes**

Outcome	Sample items
<b>Academic Self-Confidence</b>	“I am confident in my academic abilities.” “I do well in school.”
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	“I can easily express my thoughts on a problem.” “I usually have more than one source of information before making a decision.”
<b>Grit</b>	“I am a hard worker.” “I finish whatever I begin.”
<b>Meaningful School Participation</b>	“In my school, I help decide things like class activities or rules.” “In my school, I do things that make a difference.”
<b>Educational Aspirations</b>	“The level of education I want to get...” “The level of education I think I will need...”
<b>Adult Support for College and Career Planning</b>	“How many non-relative adults could you ask about what it’s like to be in college?” “How many non-relative adults could you ask about a career you are interested in?”

Research Alliance studies are examining important non-academic outcomes, like critical thinking and grit. Items like those listed above can be used on surveys to measure these outcomes. These measures allow us to move beyond traditional assessments of student achievement, to develop a richer picture of students’ progress.

# Looking Ahead

12

Our work to date has produced important insights, but, of course, much remains to be learned about the policies and practices that promote students' success. Over the past six years, the Research Alliance has built an impressive database that includes administrative, human resources, and School Survey data from the DOE, as well as data collected through our own research projects. This growing archive provides an extraordinary platform for investigating a range of important questions about the City's schools. Among other topics, we are currently developing studies examining:

Some schools are “beating the odds” to produce better results for students who are typically at high risk for school failure. What are these schools doing differently?

## Inequality

The Research Alliance will continue to analyze outcomes and trends for the City as a whole and for different subgroups of students, schools, and communities. In future work, we will do more to examine the diversity that exists within these subgroups. Monolithic categories like “Black,” “White,” “Asian,” and “Latino” mask a great deal of variation. We want to know more about how factors like immigration and English language learner (ELL) status, country of origin, special education classification, income level, or neighborhood interact with overarching demographic categories to shape students' educational experiences and outcomes.

The largest educational disparities, in NYC and elsewhere, are related to race, poverty, and special needs, including special education and ELL status. System-wide, students' odds of success are highly correlated with these characteristics and classifications. But some schools are “beating the odds” to produce better results for students who are typically at high risk for school failure. It is crucial that we learn from these schools. What are they doing differently? Could other schools adopt similar strategies?

We will also look more closely at the distribution of students across schools. The Research Alliance's earlier work on the City's high school choice system revealed that low-achieving 8<sup>th</sup> graders were matched to high schools that were, on average, less selective, lower-performing, and more disadvantaged than the schools attended by their peers.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, these differences were largely due to students' choices—not varying rates of placement in their preferred schools. We found that *most* students requested schools that were close to home, but low-achieving students were concentrated in disadvantaged communities, which tend to have a lower supply of high-quality schools. In fact, nearly a quarter of NYC's low-achieving students hails from just 10 high-poverty zip codes in Brooklyn and the Bronx. These findings raise important questions about the school choice process and the distribution of schools throughout the City. What is the supply of higher-performing schools, particularly in and around communities where many low-achieving students live? Are there effective strategies to help students access high-performing schools outside their neighborhood? Are certain subgroups of students (e.g., in terms of race, income, or academic performance) being isolated in certain kinds of schools, and, if so, what can be done to address this issue?

## School Improvement

In spite of substantial progress over the last decade, NYC continues to confront the challenges of persistently low-performing schools. More than a third of the City's elementary schools and more than half of its middle schools fail to ensure that a majority of their students achieve proficiency in math and English. Nearly 20 percent of the City's high schools fail to graduate even half of their students.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, school improvement efforts have focused largely on high-stakes, outcome-based accountability. This approach appears to have yielded some benefits for the system, but it offers little specific guidance to struggling schools about how they might improve their work.

Research has begun to identify strong links between various school-level conditions or capacities and the performance of students and teachers. These include, for example, strong instructional leadership, stimulating professional development, a safe and orderly environment, and opportunities for staff to collaborate.<sup>19</sup> This new line of research acknowledges that while the practices and “added value” of individual teachers may be important, good teaching is also a collective and organizational enterprise that depends heavily on resources, conditions, and decisions outside individual classrooms.

The Research Alliance has done extensive work focusing on the school as an organization and investigating elements of school capacity that can help drive improvement; we will be extending this research in coming months. We are continuing our partnership with the DOE to enhance the School Survey—with an eye toward gathering information about aspects of schools' organizational capacity that are most likely to influence teaching and learning. More broadly, we are building an evidence base to inform critical decisions about accountability and school support systems, here in New York and nationally.

Can providing schools with information about key aspects of their organizational capacity help them improve performance?

## Universal Pre-K

An established and growing body of evidence points to early childhood education as key for preventing school failure and lasting achievement gaps. But scaling up high-quality programs has proved challenging. Universal pre-K is being rolled out for the first time in NYC in the 2014-2015 school year, providing a unique opportunity to learn about the benefits of—and obstacles to—making early childhood education available to all families in the nation's largest school district.

The Research Alliance is collaborating with others at NYU to study universal pre-K's implementation and impact in City. This work will be designed to offer feedback as new pre-K programs continue to be developed and to assess whether programs are making a difference for students. Importantly, it will also inform future initiatives across the country that aim to expand high-quality early education to more children.

## Transitions to College and Work

We are also interested in the other end of the education pipeline. With support from the U.S. Department of Education, the Research Alliance has developed a unique partnership with CUNY and the NYC DOE, to study factors associated with students' enrollment, persistence, and success in colleges and universities. Ultimately, we hope this work will tackle a constellation of important questions: How can we improve access to college, particularly for those who seem to be relatively well prepared? How can high schools do a better job of imparting the knowledge, skills, and behaviors students need for college? And what can institutions of higher learning do to produce better results for traditionally disadvantaged populations?

We also note that while there has been a great deal of attention paid to preparing students for “college and careers” in funding and policy circles, most of the resulting work has focused almost exclusively on post-secondary education. Little attention has been paid to the specific experiences and skills that prepare young people to enter the labor force before, during, or after attending college. We hope to fill this gap by developing studies of NYC students' preparation for and pathways into the labor market.

## Closing Thoughts

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Just as important as findings from individual studies, the Research Alliance is advancing a new model for productive collaboration between researchers, policymakers and educators. Many partners make our work possible, including the NYC DOE; teachers, principals, students, and their families; community groups; and funders. Thanks to their support and active involvement, the Research Alliance (along with the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, which pioneered this approach) has been cited as a leading example of what research-practice partnerships can achieve. We regularly meet with representatives from burgeoning partnerships in other cities, to provide guidance based on our experience and to share lessons emerging in different contexts.

Looking ahead, we will build on these efforts, expanding our portfolio of studies and our network of partners. We will work more closely with educators, to ensure that research addresses their needs and more routinely informs the decisions they make. We will continue to move beyond test scores toward more meaningful, more actionable measures of student progress and school performance. And we will dig into the causes and consequences of inequality across the system.

We are excited about the work that lies ahead—and confident it will yield evidence that makes a positive, lasting difference for the City's students and schools.



## Endnotes

1. Kemple (2013).
2. Regents exams are standardized New York State tests in core high school subjects; students must pass at least five Regents exams to graduate. See note 7 for more information.
3. Kemple (2013).
4. Villavicencio et al. (2013). See Table 4.
5. Villavicencio et al. (2013); Sadowski (2006).
6. Villavicencio et al. (2013). See Table 4.
7. As of 2012, to earn a New York State Regents diploma, a student had to earn at least 44 course credits and score 65 or higher on the five required Regents exams: English, math, science, global history, and U.S. history. To earn an Advanced Regents diploma, students had to meet these requirements and score 65 or higher on an additional science exam, two additional math exams, and an exam on a language other than English. The Local diploma was phased out for students entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade in September 2008.
8. Villavicencio et al. (2013). See Table 3.
9. Kemple et al. (2013).
10. Kieffer & Marinell (2012).
11. Villavicencio & Grayman (2012).
12. Between 1999 and 2010, the NYC DOE opened more than 250 new high schools. Most of these were small (serving 110 or fewer new 9<sup>th</sup> graders per year), academically nonselective, and open to students residing anywhere in the city.
13. Bloom & Unterman (2013).
14. Villavicencio & Marinell (2014).
15. Villavicencio et al. (2014). Our report defines culturally relevant education broadly, as any practice intended to strengthen a connection between students' home culture and their experience in schools.
16. Gold et al. (2012).
17. Nathanson, Corcoran, & Baker-Smith (2013).
18. Based on Research Alliance calculations from data provided by the NYC DOE.
19. Bryk et al. (2010); Johnson et al. (2012); Ladd (2009).
20. Coca (2014).
21. Marinell & Coca (2013).

## Figure Notes

### Figure 2:

Please note that the rates shown here for each diploma type are rounded to the nearest whole number. A total graduation rate for the 2007 cohort, created from unrounded numbers, is reported as 69 percent elsewhere in this brief (e.g., page 3). Graduates include those who earned diplomas over the summer following scheduled graduation (NYC DOE and NYSED rates also include these students). For example, graduation rates for students who began high school in September 2005 reflect the percentage of these students who earned a diploma as of October 2009. Students who receive a GED or IEP certificate are considered non-graduates.

1. The Local diploma does not require passing scores on Regents examinations. Beginning in 2012, students must earn a Regents diploma to graduate from high school in New York State.
2. As of 2012, the New York State Regents diploma requires that students earn a minimum of 44 course credits (one for each semester-long class that a student passes) and pass a minimum of five end-of-course Regents examinations with a score of 65 or higher.
3. An Advanced Regents diploma requires a score of 65 or higher for all five end-of-course Regents examinations included in the Regents diploma, plus four other Regents exams (see endnote 7 above).
4. For the purposes of this analysis, a student is classified as college ready if they met the New York State Education Department's Aspirational Performance Measure: earning a Regents diploma or an Advanced Regents diploma within four years, passing at least one math Regents with a score of 80 or higher, and passing the English Regents with a score of 75 or higher. The Research Alliance is currently engaged in work to help create better measures of college readiness.

**Figure 3:**

See notes to Figure 2 above for definition of college readiness.

**Figure 4a:**

Graduation rate includes Local, Regents, and Advanced Regents diploma (see definitions in notes to Figure 2 above).

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