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Changing How High Schools Serve Black and Latino Young Men:
A Report on New York City’s Expanded Success Initiative

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Executive Summary

Improving opportunities for young men of color has become a centerpiece of national conversation and policy. A growing number of initiatives around the country are attempting to tackle longstanding inequities, including higher rates of school dropout, incarceration, and unemployment among Black and Latino men. In 2014, for instance, President Obama unveiled My Brother’s Keeper, a national effort, involving philanthropists, business leaders, and government, to improve educational and employment opportunities for young men of color. Cities including Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York have developed their own initiatives designed to advance similar goals.

New York City’s Young Men’s Initiative (YMI) has been at the forefront of these efforts. Funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Open Society Foundations, and 22 City agencies, YMI was launched in 2011 to address disparities in education, employment, health, and criminal justice. The New York City Department of Education (DOE) developed YMI’s educational component, the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), to focus on the issue of low college readiness among Black and Latino young men—a problem that had persisted in NYC even as high school graduation rates were rising. ESI provided funding and professional development designed to help 40 NYC high schools boost college and career readiness among their Black and Latino male students. The hope was that the initiative would spur innovation in these schools and improve outcomes for the students they serve—while also generating larger lessons about preparing young men of color for success in college and beyond.

By design, the 40 schools selected to participate in ESI all had high percentages of Black and Latino males and low-income students. While ESI schools boasted stronger graduation rates for male students of color than schools Citywide (67 vs. 58 percent for students entering 9th grade in 2008), they had not made equivalent strides on college readiness. In fact, just 9.4 percent of Black and Latino males in ESI schools were graduating college ready in 2012—slightly better than the City average of 8.7 percent for Black and Latino young men, but still far below the 37 percent seen among the City’s White and Asian male students.

ESI is providing these 40 schools with considerable leeway to develop or expand programs that meet the needs of their Black and Latino male students. Schools are required to address three domains in their programming: strengthening academics,
supporting youth development, and creating a college- and career-focused school culture. They are also asked to undergird these programs with culturally relevant education (CRE)—a framework that recognizes the importance of students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning. Within these broad areas, ESI schools are free to develop specific programs and services that are a good fit for their school community. The initiative’s leaders hope that this flexibility, combined with support from the ESI central team, will enable schools to “move the needle” on their own college readiness rates and at the same time highlight effective practices that might be replicated in other high schools.

As part of the effort to learn from ESI schools’ experiences, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting an independent evaluation of the initiative’s implementation and impact over four years. The study will shed light on how ESI is being realized in schools and, ultimately, whether it is improving outcomes, including college and career readiness, for Black and Latino males. This summary highlights key findings from our report, Changing How Schools Serve Black and Latino Young Men, which focuses on Year 2 of ESI (the 2013-2014 school year). The report extends and deepens our ongoing examination of ESI’s implementation. It first looks at implementation “fidelity”—by assessing how well schools’ programming was aligned with the broad tenets of ESI—and “intensity”—by assessing the frequency and duration of programming as well as the number of programs offered. The report then describes specific elements of ESI that educators identified as particularly important for their Black and Latino male students. Finally,

**Other Reports Related to the Research Alliance Evaluation of the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI)**

This report focuses on Year 2 of ESI and follows three past reports related to the initiative:

- **Moving the Needle (2013)** examined the trajectory of Black and Latino males on their path to college, describing the key contextual factors that underlie their educational outcomes and highlighting opportunities to provide them with better support. [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/moving_the_needle](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/moving_the_needle)

- **Preparing Black and Latino Young Men for College and Careers (2013)**, described the key components of ESI, the 40 schools that were selected to participate in the initiative, and the strategies they planned to implement during the first year. [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_baseline](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_baseline)

- **Promising Opportunities for Black and Latino Young Men (2014)** looked at ESI’s first year of implementation, highlighting changes that ESI schools made in Year 1, particularly practices that held promise for reaching ESI’s goals. [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_year1](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_year1)
it outlines several more far-reaching changes to school culture or community that appear to be taking hold in ESI schools.

In addition to a comprehensive description of implementation, the report also presents a preliminary look at ESI's impacts on the first group of students who had access to its programming—that is, students who were 9th graders the year ESI was launched in their high school and were (mostly) in 10th grade during ESI’s second year. While 10th grade is clearly too early to assess students’ college and career readiness (or ESI’s overall effectiveness), our analysis begins to look at possible antecedents to college readiness, including students’ credit accumulation, grade point average (GPA), aspirations for the future, and feelings about their school.

**How Was ESI Implemented in Year 2?**

Our implementation study draws on interviews with educators in all 40 ESI schools and a group of comparison schools, as well as an analysis of schools’ annual plans for implementing ESI-funded programming. Our data collection focused largely on the presence or absence of assorted programs and services, and did not include methods that would allow us to capture fine-grained variations in program quality across schools. We hope to gather more information about program quality in future years of the evaluation. Our key findings on ESI’s implementation in Year 2 are summarized below.

**Implementation was generally strong.**

We found that ESI schools are generally implementing ESI as intended, with robust programming being provided to students across ESI program areas. In addition, ESI schools differed from the comparison schools in ways that align with the goals of the initiative.

- **High fidelity and intensity**: Almost three quarters of ESI schools implemented ESI with high fidelity—meaning their programs aligned with the tenets of ESI, including 1) programming in academics, youth development, and school culture, 2) training in CRE, 3) early college supports in the 9th and 10th grades, 4) programming for males, and 5) attendance at DOE-led professional development meetings. Nearly all schools implemented ESI with high intensity—meaning they offered at least some programs weekly or more often to their 9th and 10th grade males throughout the school year.
• **Programming across the three domains and CRE:** ESI schools provided students with a variety of supports and services across all three domains—academics (e.g., summer bridge, tutoring), youth development (e.g., mentoring, alternative-to-suspension programs), and school culture (e.g., college trips, internships)—as well as culturally relevant education (e.g., CRE training for staff, culturally relevant curriculum for young men of color). Programming in the area of college preparation was particularly strong and widespread across the 40 schools. Programming in academics was less widespread.

• **More early college support and CRE in ESI schools than in comparison schools:** ESI schools were more likely to provide college supports in the 9th and 10th grades than the comparison schools we visited. In addition, educators in ESI schools were much more likely than those in comparison schools to participate in CRE or professional development related to Black and Latino males.

**ESI schools are making changes beyond programming.**

Beyond specific programs, we also found evidence that ESI has changed schools in deeper, more cross-cutting ways. These changes to school culture may bode well for schools’ ability to sustain ESI beyond the funding period.

• **Improved relationships:** Educators consistently asserted that ESI had improved relationships within their school, including relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves. They attributed this, in part, to increased opportunities for members of the school community to come together outside the classroom.

• **Greater emphasis on college:** Educators reported that they have expanded their understanding of their school’s core mission, moving from high school graduation as the primary goal to a clear focus on college readiness and enrollment. As a result, staff reported that students are showing awareness of college earlier on in their high school career.

• **More reflective practice:** Staff in many schools described how ESI has led them to critically examine their own practice and promoted continuous learning among staff in an effort to better serve Black and Latino male students. Teachers reported becoming more focused on making their classes
relevant to students. They also described rethinking approaches to discipline, including a conscious effort to reduce the use of suspensions.

**What Was ESI’s Impact on Students After 2 Years?**

We assessed ESI’s early impact on students by examining academic data before and after the introduction of ESI in schools, and comparing student performance in ESI schools to that of their counterparts in a set of similar schools. We also surveyed students to collect information about key skills, attitudes, and aspects of the school environment that are associated with college readiness. For the purposes of this report, we focus on ESI’s impact on 10th graders (see Appendix N for 9th grade impact results).

**ESI improved students’ access to programs and supports related to college culture and youth development, but not academics.**

Students in ESI schools were more likely to be aware of and report participating in programs and supports related to youth development and school culture, compared with their peers in non-ESI schools. This included college trips, college advising, mentoring, counseling, and young men’s/women’s groups. We did not find a similar difference for students’ participation in academic programs. These results corroborate findings from the implementation study; educators in ESI schools reported having a range of distinct youth development and school culture-related programs, while academic programs tended to involve Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses—which 10th grade students might be less inclined to take—or relatively diffuse efforts to provide culturally relevant education.

**By and large, ESI has not yet improved student outcomes.**

The survey we administered to students in ESI schools and comparison schools asked about numerous outcomes related to academics, youth development, and school culture. For most of these outcomes, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of students. The one exception was that ESI students were more likely than comparison students to report having conversations about future careers with adults at their school.

We also assessed ESI’s impact on a variety of academic outcomes, including grade point average (GPA), credit accumulation, and rates of passing Regents examinations. So far, ESI does not appear to have produced a systematic impact, positive or negative, on these outcomes. There are several possible explanations for
why this is the case. For example, ESI schools’ youth development and school culture programming—even when well implemented—may not have a direct effect on academic performance, at least as measured by things like GPA and Regents exam scores. It is even possible that these programs are taking instructional time away from academic subjects. On the other hand, ESI may simply need more time to produce academic gains. We have identified a number of changes in ESI schools—in terms of tone and culture—that could be laying a foundation for students to eventually improve their connection to and performance in school. Future analyses will provide a much clearer picture of ESI’s impact on academics.

Changes in school culture also point to other kinds of outcomes that are important to assess. For instance, as noted above, ESI educators described efforts to alter their approach to student discipline. Given well documented and large disparities in rates of suspension for young men of color in NYC and around the nation,xi this is a potentially important development, which we decided to investigate further.

**ESI schools appear to be handling student disciplinary matters differently than comparison schools.**

To assess the impact of ESI’s schools’ efforts to reduce the use of suspensions, we analyzed disciplinary data collected by the NYC DOE. We found that while suspension rates for behaviors categorized as “violent” and “aggressive” remained constant in both ESI and comparison schools, there is evidence that ESI schools are reducing the number of suspensions related to “disruptive” infractions, which include “minor altercations,” vandalism, and academic dishonesty. We observed a statistically significant decrease in the rate of this type of suspension for ESI 9th graders, relative to comparison schools (the decrease for 10th graders was not statistically significant).xii We will continue to examine ESI schools’ approach to discipline and assess the initiative’s impact in this area in the remaining years of our evaluation.

**Looking Ahead**

The fact that so many schools are implementing ESI as envisioned by its designers is an important finding, considering the heavy lift of developing and expanding a school-wide set of programs, working with new external partners, and focusing heavily on a subset of students, all while trying to meet district expectations related to the Common Core State Standardsxiii and new teacher evaluations.
Our first look at ESI’s impact also shows some hints of success, particularly students’ exposure to youth development opportunities and early college planning, as well as the reduction of certain kinds of suspensions in ESI schools. We do not yet see any impact on students’ academic outcomes as a result of ESI, which is not entirely surprising. Past research indicates that whole-school models and programs often do not result in significant increases in student achievement or, at the very least, require four or five years to have an impact.

Although we are now at ESI’s mid-way point, it is too soon to draw conclusions about the initiative’s overall effectiveness, especially since the most important measures of success—college readiness and enrollment—cannot be determined until students’ 12th grade year or later. This is an opportune time, however, to take stock of aspects of the initiative—and our evaluation—that might be improved.

- **Develop a more explicit focus on academics**: While ESI has boosted students’ participation in a multitude of youth development and college-related activities, their participation in academic activities appears similar to that of comparison students. Indeed, many ESI programs only indirectly affect academics. Yet schools and the district ultimately hope to see impacts in this area. ESI schools may want to consider introducing supports that more directly influence academic achievement (e.g., expanded learning time, more rigorous courses), especially those directly tied to college related skills (e.g., advanced math and science classes, research-based projects). Schools may also want to address competencies within specific subjects—writing longer reports, for instance, or strong number sense—to better prepare students for college-level academics.

- **Build on early success offering college supports**: Our study suggests that ESI is providing a very different experience to 9th and 10th graders in terms of their exposure to early college programming and supports. As ESI students become juniors and seniors, there will be more opportunities for schools to build knowledge about post-secondary options and encourage college going (e.g., completing applications, seeking financial aid). Schools should also consider expanding supports around career skills (e.g., time management, public speaking, computer skills) through work-based learning opportunities, which is not currently a prominent feature of ESI programming. Past research suggests these skills can be important for students’ success in postsecondary settings.
• **Broaden the Research Alliance evaluation:** Based on Year 2 findings, we plan to examine additional outcomes in future years, in an attempt to better capture the impacts of ESI. For example, according to school staff, one of the biggest changes related to ESI has been improved relationships, especially between teachers and students, as well as a stronger sense of school community. In order to measure these outcomes, we added questions to the ESI survey about students’ sense of belonging in school, and we will assess impacts related to relationships using questions from the annual NYC School Survey administered by the NYC DOE. In addition, we hope to deepen our implementation evaluation by obtaining more information about program quality and cohesion across schools.

Across the country, policymakers, funders, and community leaders are looking for ways to improve opportunities and outcomes for young men of color. While our evaluation is only in its second year, we hope that this report and our ongoing research on ESI may be able contribute to this larger conversation by documenting innovative strategies and providing empirical evidence about their impact.
Each school received $250,000 over three years. In the context of the schools we studied, this amount represented between 3 and 10 percent of their annual budget. In the fourth year of the initiative, schools will not receive any funding, but are still expected to implement programs initiated under ESI.

ESI schools were required to meet three criteria: (1) student enrollment of at least 35 percent Black and Latino males, with at least 60 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, (2) a four-year graduation rate above 65 percent, and (3) an “A” or “B” on the 2010-2011 high school Progress Report. See our report Preparing Black and Latino Young Men for College and Careers (2013) for details on the application and school selection process for ESI.

Unless otherwise noted, the college readiness measure used in the report is based on the New York State Education Department’s Aspirational Performance Measure, which is defined as earning a New York State Regents diploma and receiving a score of 80 or higher on a math Regents examination and a score of 75 or higher on the English Regents examination. The Research Alliance is engaged in ongoing work to develop better indicators of college readiness.

Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education. Note that these calculations do not include students in NYC’s specialized high schools; the rate for Black and Latino males also excludes schools without significant numbers of Black and Latino students.


Schools are required to submit annual plans that clearly describe how ESI resources are being used to increase college and career readiness for young men of color. They are encouraged to use strategies with some evidence of effectiveness, but also to take informed risks, try new things, and refine their programs over time.

For the implementation study, we rely on interviews in 12 comparison schools. For the impact study, we rely on survey data from 22 comparison schools and academic data from 80 comparison schools. See Appendix A for more information on the matching process.

Note that we did not systematically compare ESI schools with comparison schools across all ESI program areas. Rather, we specifically investigated college supports and CRE training.

We estimated the effects of ESI using Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS) analysis. A CITS design uses data from multiple years before a change occurs or a program is implemented (in this case, ESI) to create a stable baseline. See Appendix N for more detail.

The six survey outcomes included critical thinking, academic self-concept, conversations with adults about college, conversations with adults about career, sense of fair treatment, and gender and culture climate. See Table 1 in the full report for definitions of these outcomes.


Some of the difference in suspension rates may be explained by district changes in discipline policy. A more detailed discussion of suspension data and these results are in Appendix O.

2013-2014 was the first year that New York State fully implemented the Common Core State Standards, a set of college- and career-ready K-12 standards that has now been adopted by 44 states. The development of the Common Core was led by the National Governors Association for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (http://www.corestandards.org)


Kemple, 2008.
References


Find this report online at http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_year2
The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the city’s public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.