

A Close Look at the Dropout Crisis: Examining Black and Latino Males in New York City

METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR URBAN EDUCATION

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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A Close Look at the Dropout Crisis is written and edited by: Ben Meade, Frank Gaytan, Edward Fergus, and Pedro Noguera.

We are grateful for the expert advice and support of the **Black and Latino Male Advocacy Coalition**, which represents a group of more than 10 organizations and individuals that meet regularly to coordinate research with advocacy activities throughout New York City. The goal of the **Advocacy Coalition** is to monitor the impact of New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) educational reforms on the academic performance of Black and Latino male students. The coalition is comprised of researchers, community-based organizations, educators, and advocates dedicated to improving the social and academic outcomes of Black and Latino males in NYC.

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Executive Summary

A low proportion of Black and Latino males graduate high school. According to national estimates, only 59 percent of Black males and 49 percent of Latino males complete high school (Greene and Winters 2006). In New York City, the largest public school system in the nation, only about 44 percent of both Black and Latino males from the 2005 cohort graduate after six years of high school (NYCDOE 2008). What happens to the other nearly 50%? In New York City, many Black and Latino males are still enrolled after 4 years; however, a substantial percentage of them are dropping out. Given the various educational reforms in NYCDOE, will these changes reduce the rates of high school dropouts among Black and Latino males?

This report focuses on Black and Latino males from the 2006-2007 high school cohort who dropped out. We closely examine who drops out and when, and their achievement levels in middle and high school. Our assumption is that by knowing more about who is likely to drop out, and at what point in their education they are at greatest risk, we can more effectively determine appropriate interventions and better work to reverse this alarming problem.

Findings

1. Among this 2006-2007 cohort, **nearly 19% of Latino males and 14% of Black males dropped out.**
2. **Black and Latino male dropouts tend to be overage.** Among the dropout population, overage students (e.g., one year older than average of student population) comprise 16% of the population, in comparison to other groups where overage students are 3% or lower.
3. **A large portion of Black and Latino males who dropped out remained in high school for at least three years.** After three years of high school, more than 70% of the students who dropped out were still in school.
4. **The majority of Black and Latino males who dropped out repeated one or more grade levels.** About 67% of the students who dropped out repeated ninth grade after their first year of high school, while 39% repeated ninth grade a second time after their second year of high school. By the expected 11th grade year, only about 7% were on track (in the 11th grade).
5. **Black and Latino males who dropped out appear to have entered high school performing below their grade level in Math and English.** More than half of the Black and Latino male dropouts scored below proficiency on the 8th grade New York State math test and 28% scored below proficiency on the ELA test.
6. **The majority of Black and Latino male students who dropped out failed core subjects in their first year of high school.** In the first year of high school, about 67% of the dropouts failed math, 63% failed science, and 49% failed English.
7. **Black and Latino male students are not accumulating sufficient credits to graduate on time.** A total of 67% of dropouts received fewer than five credits in their first year of high school compared to 32% of those still enrolled after four years, 3% of Local Diploma earners, and less than 1% of Regents Diploma earners. Furthermore, 25% of dropouts completed no credits in their first year. Completing fewer

than five credits in the first year of high school is therefore a clear sign that a student is on the road to dropping out. By the fourth year, dropouts who were still earning credits had earned an average of

only 15 credits – far from the 44 credits needed for graduation. Those who did not graduate but remained enrolled after five years had earned an average of 29 credits – nearly double that of dropouts

Conclusion

Our analyses indicate the 9th grade to be a critical point of intervention. Patterns of high school performance appear to be largely established in the 9th grade. As others have noted, along with improving Black and Latino male students' skills before they reach high school, there appears to be a strong need to identify students likely to drop out during the first year of high school and target effective interventions to those students early (Allensworth and Easton 2007; NYCDOE 2006). Based on these findings, we propose the following policy initiatives:

Prevention Policy Implications: One clear policy implication of this analysis, and again one highlighted in previous research, is the utility of an early warning system to help to identify Black and Latino male students in need of additional support in order to prevent them from dropping out. There is a need to identify these students before high school, if possible, and help them in their transition to high school. By examining absences regularly during the first months of the term, school administrators could flag students in potential need of intervention more effectively. Coupled with these systems, there is need for training of school staff in interpreting the findings of risk data and assigning appropriate strategies of intervention and prevention. Additionally, the academic interventions needed for these struggling learners may need to go beyond typical remediation interventions focused on homework completion and content understanding—to include academic interventions focused on basic skills (e.g., reading comprehension and fluency, basic math computation skills).

Intervention Policy Implications: Identifying students *at risk* of dropping out is one thing – less clear is how to target effective interventions to students already off-track, especially given the difficulty in catching students up once they fall behind. There appears to be a clear need for stronger supports for Black and Latino males during their first year of high school, especially in the academic subjects of math and science. Our analysis suggests a need for policy initiatives focused on academic skill remediation and acceleration, credit recuperation, alternative school time options (e.g., night school), and post-high school planning.

A Close Look at the Dropout Crisis: Examining Black and Latino Males in New York City

Introduction

Black and Latino males have the lowest graduation rates of all students. According to national estimates, only 59 percent of Black males and 49 percent of Latino males complete high school (Greene and Winters 2006). In New York City, the largest public school system in the nation, only about 44 percent of both Black and Latino males from the 2005 cohort graduated after six years of high school (NYCDOE 2008). However, what happens to the other nearly 60 percent? In New York City, many Black and Latino males are still enrolled after 4 years; however, a substantial percentage of them are dropping out. Therefore we must ask the question, will the current educational reform changes in New York City reduce the rates of high school dropouts? Though much of our current education reform focuses on various school conditions for optimal learning, such as teacher quality, data systems, innovative school organizations, and college readiness, more attention is focused on how these conditions can increase numbers of graduates but not enough on what these conditions can do to prevent and intervene with dropouts. As we highlight in this report, dropouts have distinct patterns that necessitate school conditions to operate differently for them, as compared to students on track to graduate.

Implications of Dropping Out

In 2006, about 33 percent of dropouts nationwide who were expected to graduate in 2005 are unemployed (U.S. Department of Labor 2006). It is estimated that high school graduates are approximately 70 percent more likely to be employed than high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Labor 2003). Given the current economic downturn, those who do not have a high school diploma will certainly suffer even more extreme economic and social costs.

The ramifications of dropping out are particularly severe for young Black men. Low-skilled individuals within this group have the lowest rates of employment and highest incarceration rates (Western 2007; Austin 2008). In 2007, the employment gap between Black and White male dropouts was 15.4 percentage points (Austin 2008). The representation of Black male dropouts in the criminal justice system further reveals a cause for concern. In 2000, about a third of Black male dropouts aged 20 to 40 were in jail or prison, compared to only 7 percent of White males (Western 2007). Moreover, Black males between 1965 and 1969 who eventually drop out of school are estimated to have about a 59 percent chance of going to prison by the age of 35, compared to an estimated 11 percent for White male dropouts of the same age (Western 2007).

While the consequences of not completing secondary education are not as pronounced for Latino males as they are for Black males, there is still cause for concern. The employment rate for U.S.-born Latinos is slightly better than for Whites; however, Latinos tend to earn significantly less than their White counterparts (\$6,500 annually versus \$7,300, respectively) (Fry 2003). Complicating the dropout and employment situation for Latinos further are the large numbers of Latino immigrants who arrive to the U.S. without high school diplomas and enter directly into the labor force, often in low-skill, low-wage jobs (Fry 2003). Using Bureau of Justice statistics, researchers found that 17 percent of Latino males enter the criminal justice system in their lifetimes, compared to 5.9 percent of White males and 32 percent of Black males (Walker et al. 2004).

Given the adverse consequences of dropping out for the individual and society, this report is being released for the purpose of calling attention to Black and Latino males who have dropped

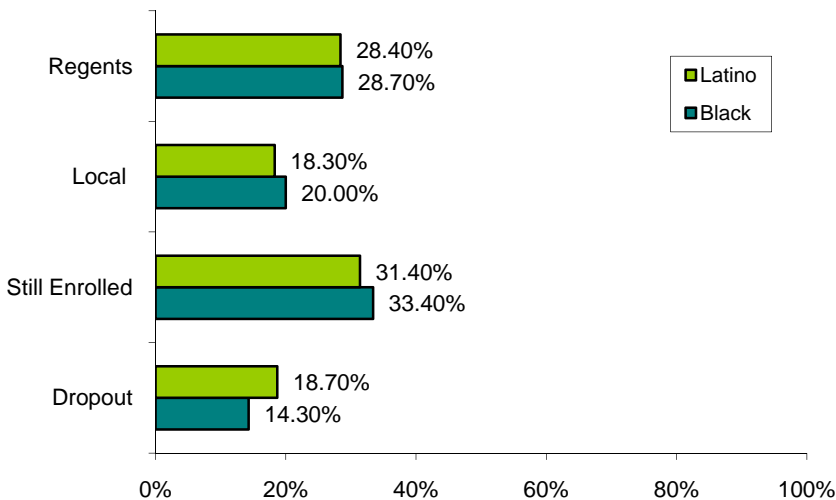
out during high school. By examining these characteristics, we seek to identify the factors that place Black and Latino males at risk for dropping out and illuminate how to target the most successful interventions.

Data

This report uses New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) administrative data for Black and Latino male students who are in the 2007 New York City graduating cohort (N=19,976). Students are assigned to the cohort when they first enter the 9th grade within New York City public schools or any other school system. Graduation and dropout status are determined up to August of 2007 – after summer school in the expected twelfth grade for students. Dropout status is determined using NYCDOE’s assigned designation (See Appendix A for more detail).

Before presenting our findings, we begin by describing four-year outcomes for the Black and Latino males in the 2007 cohort. Although the focus of this report is to describe the patterns among dropouts as a relevant point for intervention, we also find high school outcomes for Black and Latino males to be alarming. Figure 1 displays the percentages of Black and Latino male students in the cohort that graduate with Regents or Local Diplomas, were still enrolled, and dropped out after four years. As can be observed, nearly nineteen percent of Latino males and fourteen percent of Black males dropped out. It is important to note that this does not represent the total proportion of students who dropped out or failed to graduate in the cohort, as final figures are generally calculated six years from when the cohort first entered high school. Also apparent in Figure 1 is that less than 50 percent of Black and Latino males attained a Regents or Local Diploma after four years. Finally, also startling is that nearly one third of Black and Latino male students were still enrolled after four years. In this brief, we focus on dropouts. Subsequent briefs will describe the still enrolled and graduate population.

Figure 1. Percentages of Black and Latino Male Dropouts, Still Enrolled Students, and Graduates in 2006-2007 Cohort After 4 Years of High School



1. What are the demographic characteristics of dropouts?

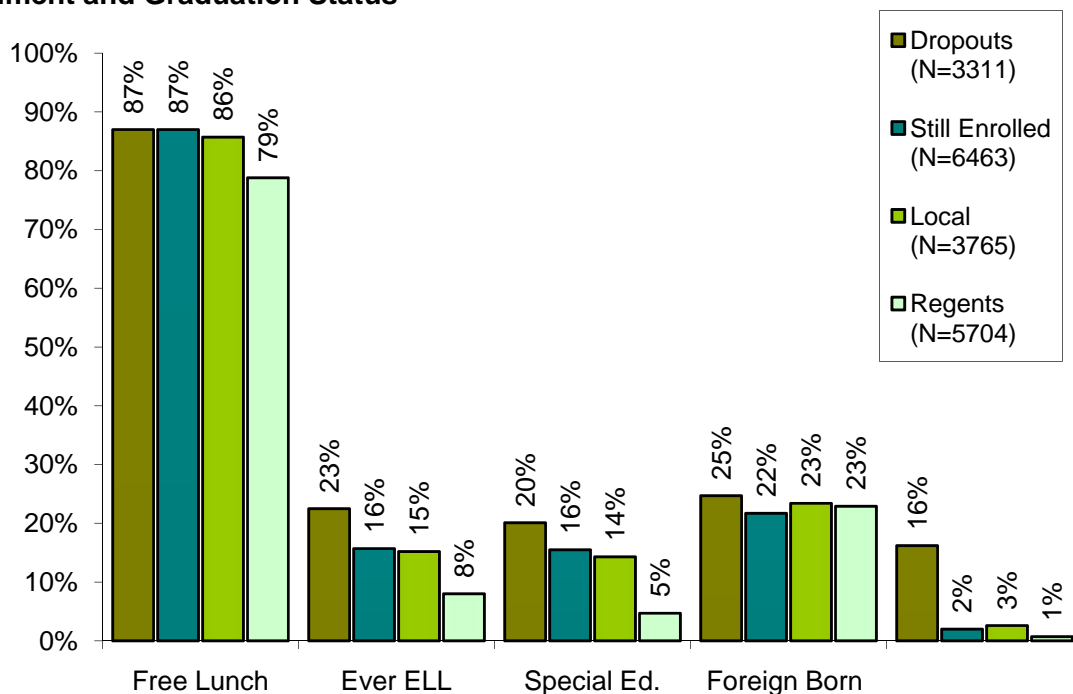
Sufficient research reveals dropouts comprising particular demographic characteristics, which are presumed to be associated with high school non-completion. However, within this cohort, Black and Latino male dropouts, graduates, and those still enrolled after four years do not look very different from each other in certain social characteristics. Figure 2 presents the demographic background characteristics of Black and Latino male students who dropped out to those that were still enrolled after four years or graduated with a Regents or Local Diploma.

As can be observed, a slightly higher proportion of Black and Latino male dropouts in the cohort were classified as English Language Learners than students in the other three groups. Also, the percentage of Black and Latino males that dropped out or were still enrolled and qualified for free lunch is about eight percentage points higher than those graduating with a Regents Diploma.

Similar percentages of foreign-born Black and Latino male immigrant students dropped out and graduated. However, the most apparent difference lies among the overage students; among dropouts they comprise 16 percent of the population, in comparison with other groups where overage students are 3 percent or lower. Though, based on our data, we cannot determine whether these students were retained or entered the NYCDOE system at an older age than their peers, the fact these students are overage is an important characteristic of dropouts that schools must know and understand as a possible risk marker of dropping out.

This social characteristic matters because older high school students are more likely to be at the age where they can be independent and work than other students of similar grade levels. Findings show that students who work are more likely to drop out of school, particularly students working in later grades (Stearns and Glennie 2006).

Figure 2. Demographic Characteristics of Black and Latino Male Students by Dropout, Enrollment and Graduation Status

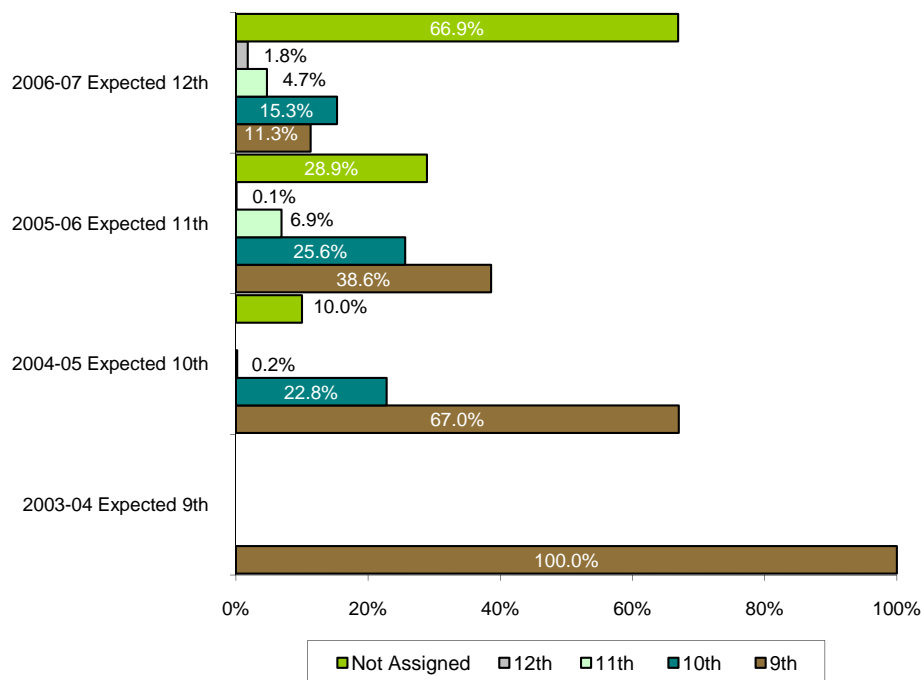


2. When are Black and Latino male dropouts leaving the NYC school system?

Contrary to what might be expected, most Black and Latino males in the cohort remained in high school for at least three years. Figure 3 shows Black and Latino males in the cohort who dropped out and the percentage at each grade level during the course of an expected four years. Apparent is the extremely high proportion of dropouts who hang in there but do not advance as expected through high school.

In the 2003-04, 100 percent of the Black and Latino males included in this analysis, (N=3,311) were in the 9th grade. By 2004-05, 67 percent of expected 10th grade students were still in the 9th grade and only 23 percent were on track towards graduating in 4 years, while about 10 percent were not assigned to a grade. By the expected 11th grade year, about 39 percent of the dropouts were still in 9th grade and about 7 percent advanced to the 11th grade. In the expected twelfth grade this pattern continued, with about 30 percent of the dropouts still enrolled in school and assigned a grade, and less than 2 percent on track. Furthermore, about 11 percent of Black and Latino male dropouts were still in the 9th grade after four years of high school. Based on these findings, it is apparent the decision to drop out of school appears to have been a gradual one and occurred after a consistent pattern of failure and falling behind over several years. However, this persistence suggests there is time to target interventions for the majority of Black and Latino male dropouts to help address their pattern of academic decline.¹

Figure 3. Expected Grade Level and Actual Grade Level Among Students Who Dropped Out and Were Still Enrolled When They Entered Their Fourth Year of High School

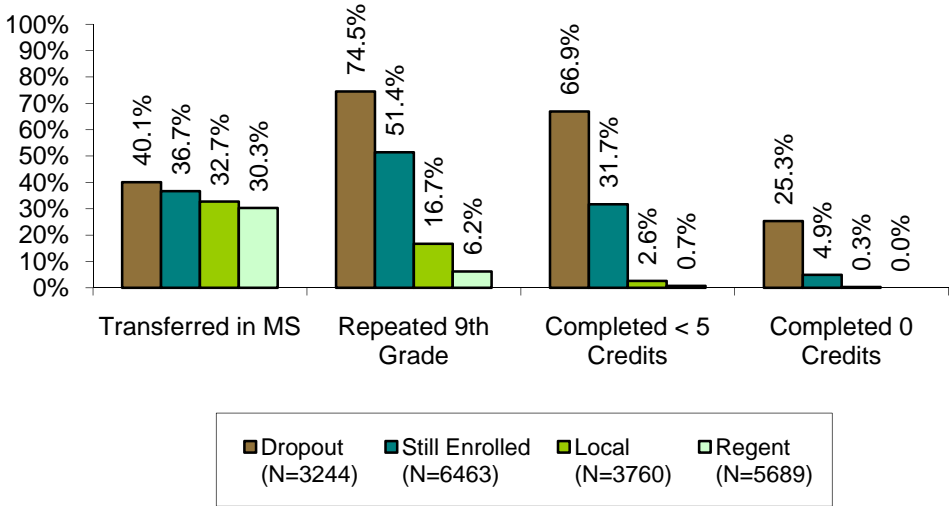


¹ It is also important to point out that by 2006-07 more than 44 percent of dropouts did not attempt credits. These are likely students who matriculated but did not register for courses and were likely only nominally of the system.

3. What academic risk factors are most prevalent among dropouts?

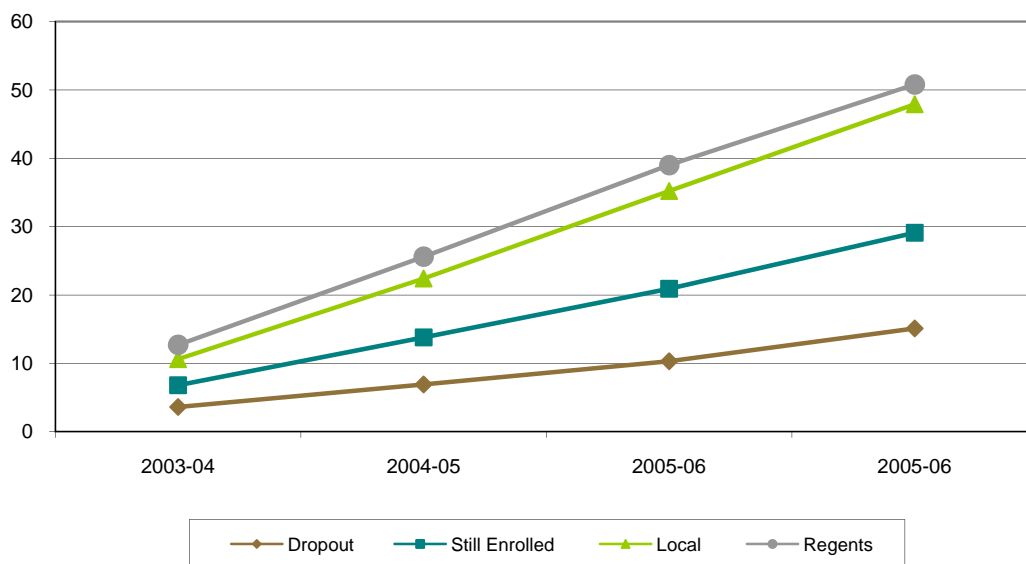
There are striking differences in the academic risk related factors between Black and Latino male students who dropped out compared to those who were more successful over the four year period (See Figure 4). First, there was a 10 percentage point difference between Black and Latino male dropouts and Regents earners who transferred in middle school. Also, nearly 75 percent of Black and Latino male dropouts repeated ninth grade compared to a little more than half of those still enrolled after four years and about 35 percent of all Black and Latino males in the cohort. Moreover, 67 percent of dropouts received fewer than 5 credits in their first year of high school, compared to 32 percent of those still enrolled after four years, 3 percent of Local Diploma earners, and less than 1 percent of Regents Diploma earners. Further, 25 percent of dropouts completed no credits in their first year. The additive nature of transferring schools, grade repetition, and credit completion is a recipe for dropping out; however, it is not necessarily predictive as made apparent by the percentage of local and Regent diploma earners who also experienced these factors.

Figure 4. Student Transfer, Grade Repetition, and Credit Completion



Examining the mean annual credit completion longitudinally reveals the depth of the lag between that Black and Latino male dropouts and diploma earners over time (See Figure 5), and the extent to which eventual dropouts fall deeper and deeper behind. By the fourth year, the students in the dropout group who were still earning credits (N=686 or 21 percent of all Black and Latino male dropouts) had earned an average of only 15 credits – far from the 44 credits needed for graduation. Those who did not graduate but remained enrolled after five years had earned an average of 29 credits – nearly double that of dropouts, but still far from the 44 credits they need to graduate. Also notable is that students enrolled after four years earned more credits on average in the fourth year of high school than in any other year – moving in the opposite direction than those who dropped out.

Figure 5. Cumulative Credit Completion



4. What academic content areas are dropouts most likely to fail?

The achievement patterns among Black and Latino males are as complex as their gradual exiting. As far as achievement on the eighth grade NYS Math and English Language Arts (ELA) tests, higher percentages of dropouts scored at the lowest level (Level 1) with a little bit more than half (53.6 percent) not meeting the state standard in math and 28 percent not meeting the ELA standard (See Figure 6 and 7). On the other hand, a low percentage of Black and Latino males scored at the proficient level or higher (Levels 3 and 4), even among those who received a Regents Diploma. Only about half (55.6 percent) of Regents earners met or exceeded the standard on the ELA test and 44 percent met or exceeded the standard in math. Also, nearly 27 percent of the Black and Latino males who earned a Local Diploma after four years scored at the lowest level on the math exam. Clearly a fairly high percentage of students who might be predicted to experience challenges in high school given their middle school test scores still managed to graduate in four years while a meaningful number of students who met the test standards dropped out. If 8th grade exams are in fact indicators of being academically on track, this begs the question, what happens in high school? Also, how well aligned are the 8th grade exams to high school performance?

Figure 6. Eighth Grade Math Exam Performance

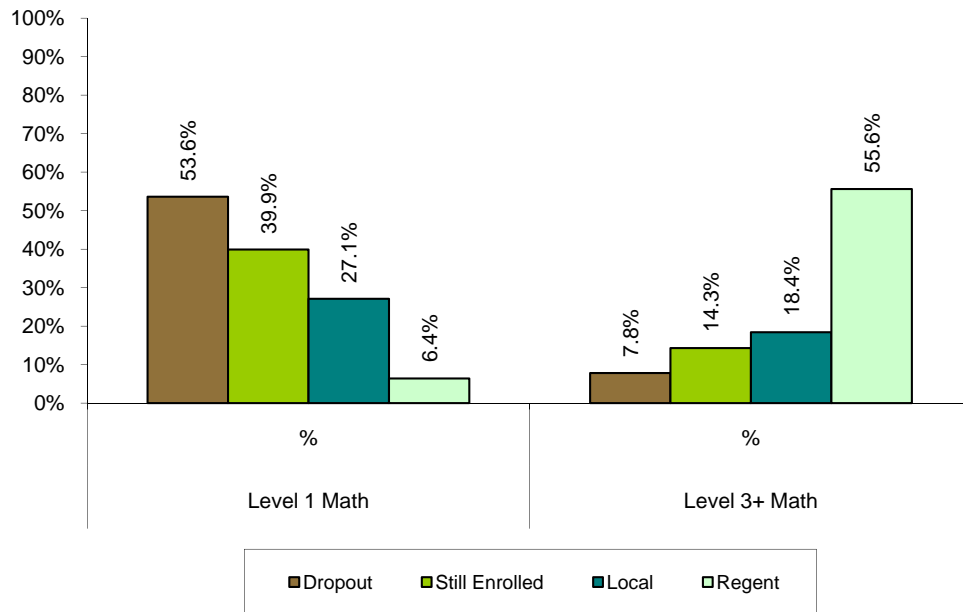
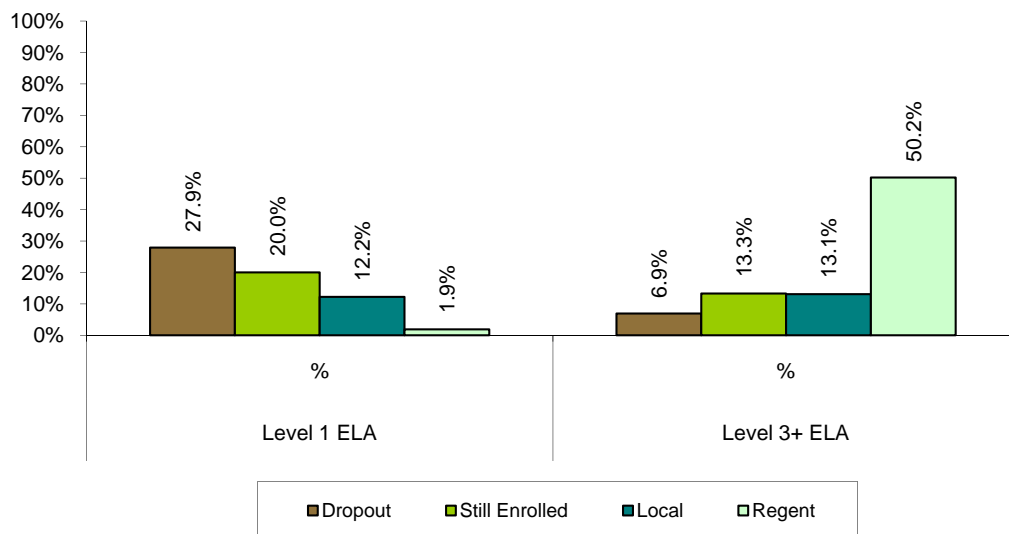


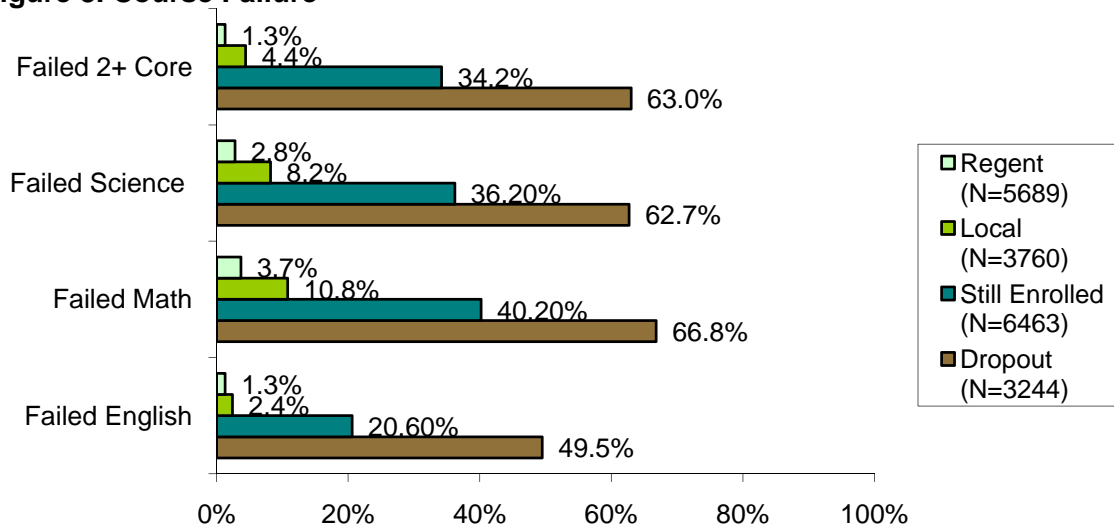
Figure 7. Eighth Grade ELA Exam Performance



Once in high school, this 2006-2007 dropout cohort demonstrated distinct patterns of academic struggle. Achievement among dropouts was particularly limited in math and science (See Figure 8). About 67 percent of dropouts failed math in their first high school year and about 63 percent failed science. Students who dropped out tended to fail more than one course. Approximately 63 percent of Black and Latino male dropouts failed two or more core course in the first year of high school. A fairly high percentage of those still enrolled, 34 percent, also failed two or more core courses. On the other hand, very few Regents and local diploma earners failed 2 or more courses. This pattern of academic content failure suggests areas for

intervention, particularly given the influence of these subjects as predictive of post-high school outcomes and college matriculation.

Figure 8. Course Failure



Discussion of Findings and Current Policy Efforts

Overall, our descriptive analyses demonstrate a dynamic pattern of downward spiral among Black and Latino male students who drop out – most do so after one or two years of low high school performance that begins in the ninth grade but becomes more pronounced over time. By the third year, while two-thirds of dropouts were still in school, the average dropout who was still enrolled had earned only one-third of the credits required for graduation and accordingly most had not even taken any of the required Regents Exams. This is consistent with other research that shows that dropping out is a response to academic problems that reaches the tipping point or “critical threshold” (Croninger and Lee 2001, p. 551). When there appears to be little hope of meeting graduating requirements and school is associated with stress and failure, many students decide to leave school behind. It is important to question how much personal agency is involved in this decision and how much might be attributable to other sources such as a lack of support, institutional failures, or family pressures. As others have noted, along with improving skills of Black and Latino male students before they reach high school, there appears to be a critical need to identify students likely to drop out during the first year of high school and target effective interventions addressing this pattern (Allensworth and Easton 2007; NYCDOE 2006).

In addition, the over-representation of ELLs and special education students, as well as those who are 16 or older in 9th grade, raises questions as to the kinds of educational experiences that are systemic for these populations. Especially given the consistency of these findings with previous research that students who complete fewer credits in high school and are overage have the highest likelihood of dropping out in large urban school districts (Allensworth and Easton 2007; Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg 2008). Again, in line with previous findings, our analysis highlights the importance of the ninth grade as a critical transition year for Black and Latino male students (Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg 2008). Patterns of high school performance appear to be largely established in that year.

Another alarming finding that emerges from our analysis is the high rate of 9th grade course failure among Black and Latino males in key academic subjects like science and math. The high rate of course failure, especially in the core academic courses among dropouts, but also among Black and Latino male students overall, is most likely a function of both inadequate preparation before high school and a failure of schools to adequately address the challenges these students face in learning the material.

Current NYCDOE Policy and Program Efforts

Current efforts to address the dropout issue in New York City include the Community Achievement Project in the Schools (CAPS), and the programs offering alternative means to schooling and high school completion managed by the DOE's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. The New York City CAPS program is managed by United Way of New York City and administered by 60 community based organizations located around the city. For 2008, the CAPS program operated in 184 schools, of which 54 served high school students. Further examination is necessary to understand whether these programs are sufficient to intervene and whether they are intervening with truly at-risk students.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Although current program efforts are critical for intervening in the dropout process, there is still need for systemic policy initiatives that establish a baseline of prevention and intervention among all middle and high schools. Given the graduation policy changes taking effect in 2009-2010, the need for such policy initiatives is pressing. The raising of graduation requirements will likely increase the number of students failing Regents Exams and might have a negative impact on dropout rates, both directly as more students are unable to meet the higher standards, and indirectly due to the negative psychology of failing the tests (Catterall 1989; Reardon and Galindo 2002; Carnoy 2005). What might have happened if the new requirements had been in place for the Black and Latino males in the 2007 cohort? While some of the may have ultimately met the new requirements, many more might not. Based on our preliminary descriptive analysis, our coalition proposes the following:

- A. Ensure that an early warning system for identifying students at risk of dropping out is operating in all New York City public high schools and middle schools:*** One clear policy implication of this descriptive analysis and again one highlighted in previous research is the utility of an early warning system to help identify Black and Latino male students in need of additional support and prevent them from dropping out. There is a clear need to identify these students early, before high school if possible, and help them in their transition to high school. In order to identify students in possible need of early intervention before the end of the first year, others have recommended regular attendance monitoring. Allensworth and Easton (2007), for example, recommend targeting students who miss more than 10 percent of instructional time. By examining absences regularly during the first months of the term, school administrators could flag students in potential need of intervention within the first few months of school. Coupled with these systems there is need for training of school staff in interpreting the findings of risk data and assigning appropriate strategies of intervention and prevention.

B. *Intensive Academic Intervention Services:* It is important to have supplementary high school programs and other interventions that target high school youth for remediation and social supports when they start getting off track. One option for identifying appropriate interventions is the development of a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework at the high school level. The research on RtI is least robust at the high school level and on the rising bubble of struggling students in high school, particularly Black and Latino males; however, NYCDOE needs to identify available valid and robust intensive intervention services (see Cunha et al. 2005, and for evidence supporting early interventions www.rti4success.org).

C. *Identifying Strategies for Students Already Off Track:* Identifying students *at risk* of dropping out is one thing – less clear is how to target effective interventions to students already off-track, especially given the difficulty in catching up once a student falls behind. Given our findings that the 2007 cohort of dropouts held on into the 11th grade, there should also have been a menu of intervention opportunities. Our analysis suggests a need for policy initiatives focused on academic skill remediation and acceleration (specifically, language arts, math and science), credit recuperation, alternative school time options (e.g., night school), and post-high school planning.

Overall, the question remains how to best support the thousands of Black and Latino males at high risk of dropping out upon arriving in the critical first year of high school. Our Coalition will continue to provide substantive analyses that can bring attention to how educational policy impacts the educational outcomes of a highly vulnerable population.

Finally, there also appears to be a need for research around what is working well and what effective schools are doing to support their especially vulnerable students. Our future reports will consider how the current system is working to support the most vulnerable Black and Latino male students and make recommendations for how those supports could be improved.

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APPENDIX A: Data Source

As stated earlier, the purpose of this report is to describe the achievement and demographic characteristics of Black and Latino male dropouts. More specifically, our analytic approach in this report is to identify Black and Latino males that dropped out and examine their achievement characteristics (includes 8th grade mean scores, credit completion patterns, Regents scores) and demographic characteristics (includes language status, overage, mobility, free/reduced lunch status, special education). This study uses New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) administrative data for Black and Latino students who were in the 2007 New York City graduating cohort (N=19,976). Students were assigned to the cohort when they first entered fourth grade, either within New York City public schools or any other school system. Graduation and dropout status are determined up to August of 2007 – after summer school in the expected twelfth grade for students.

The sample for the analysis includes only male students that are identified in the data as being Black or Latino. The sample also excludes students that were in self-contained special education programs in the 9th grade (District 75 schools) and students without data on annual grade levels and course completion. The dataset includes 84 percent of all the students identified as Black or Latino males. Table 1 compares outcomes of students in the sample and in the complete dataset. As can be observed, our sample includes a slightly lower proportion of dropouts and higher proportion of graduates, as students with disabilities are excluded from the analysis.

Graduating students are divided into two groups – Local Diploma and Regents Diploma earners. Both groups are required to pass New York State graduation tests, or Regents Exams, in English, mathematics, global history and geography, United States history and government, and in one of the sciences. In order to earn a Regents Diploma, students in this cohort are required to score 65 or above. A Local Diploma requires that students score 65 or above on one of the exams and above 55 on the other four exams. A Local Diploma is held in lower regard than a Regents Diploma by many colleges and many four-year colleges encourage applicants to attain a four-year diploma (Dao 1996). The percentage of Black and Latino male students in the sample graduating with either diploma is similar to that of the total population.

Table 1: Comparison of Graduation Outcomes among Black and Latino Males in the Sample and all Black and Latino Males in the 2007 Cohort

Status	Sample		All Black and Latino Males in Cohort	
Dropout	3,311	16.6%	4,333	18.2%
Regents	5,704	28.6%	6,418	26.9%
Local	3,765	18.9%	4,461	18.7%
Other	7,196	36.0%	8,608	36.1%
Total	19,976	100.0%	23,820	100.0%

Source: This and all subsequent calculations by the author using data from the New York City Department of Education, 2008, unless otherwise noted.

Note: 'Other' includes students who were still enrolled after four years, were discharged to another education setting, reached 21 without graduating, received their GED, or received a Special Education Diploma.

Defining Dropout

A student's dropout status is determined by the NYCDOE. Students are considered dropouts if they are no longer enrolled in the NYCDOE system and have not enrolled in another education program that leads to a high school diploma or prepares them for a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Among Black and Latino male students identified as having dropped out in four years, 90 percent (N=2,994) were labeled as having "voluntarily withdrawn" from the system. Among the remaining 10 percent, five percent had unknown addresses, two percent were enrolled in non-DOE GED programs, and the others were in the military, vocational high schools, or other non-diploma granting institutions. As our data only spans four years of high school, 2003-04 to 2006-07, we are only able to identify students that dropped out within that time frame.