

Equity, Access & Diversity

Persisting Students:

Exploring the Pathways and Outcomes of Students Who Don't Graduate in Four Years, But Remain Enrolled in NYC High Schools

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The Research Alliance for
New York City Schools

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About the *Equity, Access and Diversity* Series

Launched in recognition of the Research Alliance's 10th Anniversary, the Equity, Access and Diversity series is designed to illuminate important areas of progress as well as stubborn barriers to equity in NYC public schools. Focused on some of the City's most vulnerable students, the series aims to examine the mechanisms driving educational inequality and identify promising strategies to produce more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes.

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Persisting Students:

Overview of Key Findings

Over the past decade, New York City's graduation rates have risen dramatically. Still, roughly a quarter of each entering 9th grade class does not graduate on time. Some of these students permanently drop out within their first four years, but a much larger percentage actually remain enrolled (or reenroll after dropping out temporarily) and continue working toward a diploma in their fifth or sixth year of high school.

The Research Alliance recently undertook a study of these “persisting students.” They not only are a large group (about one in five—or more than 12,000 per entering class), they are also particularly vulnerable. Yet, the fact that these students maintain a connection to the education system offers meaningful opportunities to intervene and provide them with much-needed support.

Who Are Persisting Students?

- Persisting students look similar to students who permanently drop out, in terms of demographic and early academic characteristics. Reflecting system-wide inequalities, these students are disproportionately Black or Latino and male, and more likely to be living in poverty. In middle school, they struggle academically. More than a third were chronically absent in 8th grade.
- These findings show that it is possible—from as early as middle school—to identify students who are unlikely to graduate on time. However, our study also highlights some of the limitations of administrative records for identifying students who are most at risk. We found that persisting students face a host of challenges not captured in administrative data, including abuse, homelessness, gang involvement, early parenthood, and serious health issues.

How Do They Fall Behind?

- Most persisting students are already off-track after 9th grade, but they continue to fall further behind as they progress through high school. Persisting students miss school frequently (their rates of chronic absenteeism increased each year—to more than 60 percent in 11th and 12th grade). This makes it harder to form relationships with adults in the building and limits access to the kind of academic and social-emotional support that might help them get back on track.
- Persisting students are also concentrated in high-needs schools. We found that a quarter of persisting students were enrolled in the same 20 schools during their 9th grade year (of more than 400 high schools citywide). Based on the annual NYC School Survey, the high schools that persisting students attended were less likely to be perceived by students as orderly and safe, and adults in those schools were seen as less accessible, compared to the high schools that four-year graduates attended.

What Strategies Might Make a Difference for Persisting Students?

- **Identify at-risk students—and intervene early:** This study adds to a growing body of evidence highlighting the need for more scrutiny of students' middle school performance and experiences. Furthermore, our findings underscore the importance of sustained attention to students' personal and family lives, to help identify those most at risk. While persisting students are often chronically absent in early high school, they generally do not stop coming entirely. This means it is possible to work with them (e.g., by setting up regular meetings with a social worker or guidance counselor, and having frequent, explicit conversations about the consequences of missing school). Educators may need more flexibility and time in their schedules to implement such proactive measures.
- **Be more strategic about student placement:** At the system level, it is important to examine the uneven concentration of persisting students across schools. If we can understand why students who struggle to graduate tend to enroll in certain schools as 9th graders, we can better disrupt processes that continue to generate inequitable outcomes. A significant proportion of persisting students—almost a quarter—transfer into an alternative school during their first four years. Indeed, this is one of the primary systemic interventions for students who fall behind. However, interviews with students and educators suggest that decisions about when and where to move persisting students sometimes occur in an ad hoc fashion. Providing educators with more information and clearer guidelines about available options might improve the process for assessing students' needs and identifying appropriate interventions.
- **Tailor interventions to students' needs:** Persisting students enter their fifth year of high school with a wide range of academic needs. About a quarter are only *marginally behind*—they typically have enough credits to graduate, but haven't passed all the required Regents exams. About 44 percent are *moderately behind* (lacking both credits and Regents exams), and 30 percent are *drastically behind* (they still have to complete several years of coursework and have only passed one Regents exam, on average—these students are at particularly high risk for aging out of the system before they complete the necessary coursework). Given their varying needs, students in these three groups are likely to benefit from different types of intervention.

By the end of their sixth year, 44 percent of persisting students have earned a high school diploma; 19 percent are still enrolled, and 37 percent have dropped out or left the district. Helping more persisting students achieve the goal of earning a high school diploma would not only improve Citywide graduation rates—given the demographic profile of this group of students, it could promote more *equitable* outcomes as well.

Additional research is needed to inform these efforts and help educators and district leaders better capitalize on opportunities to support persisting students. This should include studies of traditional high schools, and how they identify and support vulnerable students; studies examining the distribution of struggling students across schools, and how systems for placing and transferring students might be improved; and studies examining which educational settings are most effective for different types of persisting students. Evidence from such studies could help district and state leaders fairly hold schools accountable and provide vital guidance to educators who are working to support this vulnerable yet resilient population.

Persisting Students:

Exploring the Pathways and Outcomes of Students Who Don't Graduate in Four Years, But Remain Enrolled in NYC High Schools¹

For years, in New York City and around the country, policymakers and educators have had a clear focus on decreasing dropout rates and increasing on-time high school graduation—and much progress has been made on both fronts. Over the past decade, the four-year high school graduation rate in New York City has [steadily increased](#) (from just over 60 percent of students who started high school in 2004, to nearly 75 percent of those who started in 2013). These changes have taken place in the context of a number of related, large-scale reforms, including the expansion of Citywide high school choice; the creation of new, smaller high schools; the phasing out of many large comprehensive high schools; and increased use of on-track indicators to identify students who are falling behind and provide them with timely additional support.¹

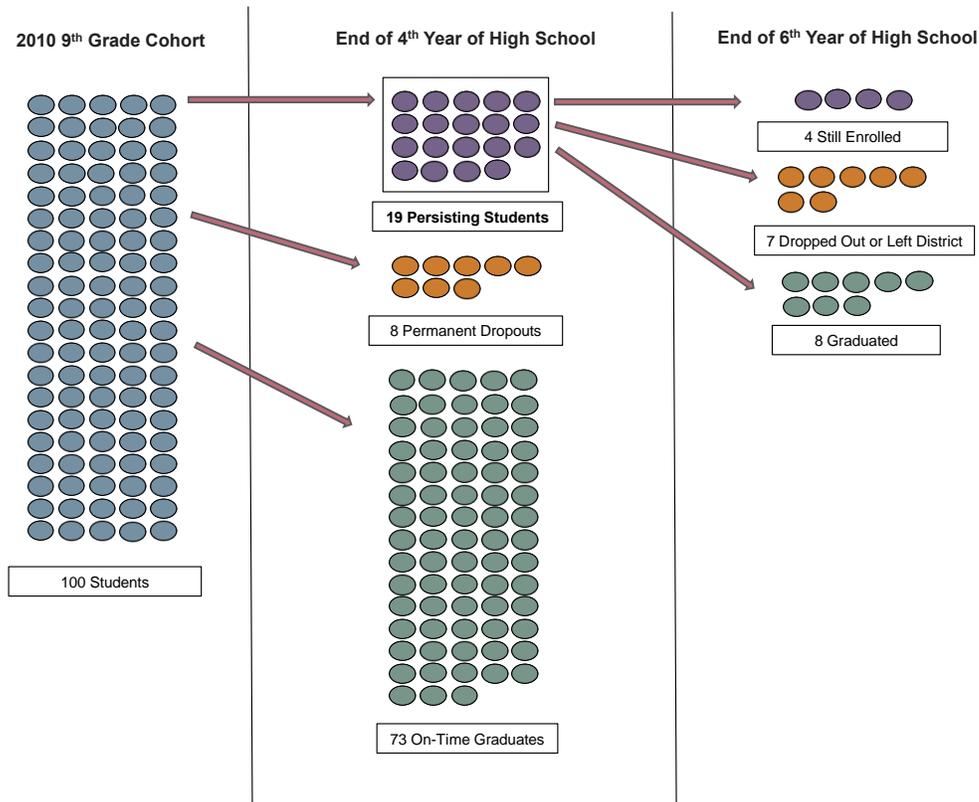
While there is much to celebrate in the City's rising four-year graduation rate, it is important to note that roughly a quarter of each entering class still does not earn a diploma in this timeframe. Figure 1 on the next page underscores this point, drawing on data for students who started high school in 2010.² For every 100 students who entered high school that year, 73 graduated on time, 8 permanently dropped out within their first four years, and the remaining 19 students persisted into their fifth and/or sixth year of high school. Notably, more than two thirds of the students who did not graduate on time continued to attend school in the hopes of eventually earning a high school credential.

These “persisting students”³ are the focus of this research brief, the first in our series on *Equity, Access and Diversity in NYC Schools*. Persisting students are not only a large group (over 12,000 students in the 2010 cohort), they are also a particularly vulnerable population, similar in many ways to those who dropout.⁴ By definition, persisting students have struggled academically, and—as we describe below—many face intense challenges in their life outside of school, including violence, homelessness, early parenthood and serious health issues.

Despite these obstacles, persisting students remain enrolled (or reenroll) in school, and make a good-faith effort to earn their diploma. As a counselor in a Young Adult Borough Center (YABC) told us,

“I really respect the fact that [persisting students are] here because they've had opportunities to drop out before. Whether they're on track or not, they came here with the right intention. I think most people see it that way. Therefore, we are willing to work with the kids and meet them where they are.”

Figure 1: NYC Students' Pathways through High School



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). See page 24 for other notes.

As this counselor emphasized, the fact that persisting students remain enrolled in school offers a meaningful opportunity for educators (and the larger system) to intervene and provide much-needed support. Getting more persisting students to earn their diploma could be a key to continuing to improve the City's overall graduation rate. However, for many of these students, the clock is ticking: NYC high school students have limited time to graduate before they become ineligible due to their age.⁵ This adds a layer of urgency to our effort to better understand persisting students' needs and experiences.

So, who are New York City's persisting students, and how do they fall behind? What supports do these students (and educators who work with them) see as most valuable? And what happens to students who persist into their fifth or sixth year of high school—how many of them eventually drop out, and how many manage to graduate?

This brief uses mixed methods, drawing on interviews as well as system-wide administrative data, to begin to answer these important questions. We conducted the interviews with students and educators in a small sample of alternative school settings (two transfer schools and two YABCs), which are specifically designed to serve students who struggle to graduate.⁶ (See the textbox on page 22 for more information about our methods.) We hope this brief paints a helpful portrait of persisting students and sparks conversation about how to identify them early and intervene to provide effective support that puts them on a path to success in high school and beyond.

A Vulnerable Group Confronted with Distinct Challenges

In many ways, **persisting students are similar to students who permanently drop out by the fourth year of high school** (see Table 1). For example, when compared to four-year graduates, persisting students and dropouts in the 2010 cohort were disproportionately Black and Latino, disproportionately male, and more likely to be living in poverty. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, these findings are in line with well-documented patterns of racial and socio-economic inequality in schools.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of On-Time Graduates, Permanent Dropouts, and Persisting Students

| | Full Cohort | On-Time Graduates | Permanent Dropouts | Persisting Students |
|---|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Gender (%) | | | | |
| Male | 49.9 | 47.6 | 56.9 | 56.1 |
| Female | 50.1 | 52.4 | 43.1 | 43.9 |
| Race/ethnicity (%) | | | | |
| Asian | 17.0 | 20.1 | 9.4 | 8.0 |
| Black | 29.5 | 28.2 | 28.9 | 34.8 |
| Latino | 39.0 | 35.5 | 51.3 | 47.4 |
| White | 13.6 | 15.5 | 8.8 | 8.0 |
| Poverty (Grade 9) (%) | | | | |
| Free or reduced price meals | 64.6 | 62.8 | 66.9 | 70.5 |
| Neighborhood poverty level ^a | 35.1 | 33.4 | 40.5 | 39.7 |
| Sample size | 66,811 | 48,860 | 5,183 | 12,768 |

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Table includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811).

^a Percentage of families in students' Census tract who report incomes below 150 percent of the poverty line.

Our findings also indicate that **most persisting students struggled academically even before they entered high school** (see Table 2). About 74 percent of persisting students had 8th grade ELA or math test scores in the bottom 20th percentile, compared with 39 percent of four-year graduates. Persisting students were also much more likely to be chronically absent during the 8th grade than four-year graduates, and to enter 9th grade older than they should be for their grade-level—suggesting that many of them started school late, were held back in middle or elementary school, or experienced an interruption in their formal education. Finally, persisting students were more likely than four-year graduates to be flagged during middle school as needing additional academic supports, including special education and English Language Learner services.

Table 2: Middle School Academic Characteristics of On-Time Graduates, Permanent Dropouts, and Persisting Students

| | Full Cohort | On-Time Graduates | Permanent Dropouts | Persisting Students |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| School services (%) | | | | |
| Special education | 12.6 | 9.7 | 24.4 | 18.9 |
| English language learning | 9.6 | 7.7 | 15.2 | 14.8 |
| Chronic absentee (%) | 21.0 | 12.6 | 65.2 | 37.5 |
| Data missing ^a | 11.1 | 10.1 | 19.2 | 11.5 |
| State test scores (%) | | | | |
| ELA or math in top 20% | 27.3 | 35.0 | 3.6 | 5.6 |
| ELA or math in bottom 20% | 48.0 | 38.8 | 78.1 | 73.6 |
| Data missing ^a | 12.2 | 10.6 | 25.8 | 12.8 |
| Overage (%) | 27.0 | 19.5 | 70.9 | 37.8 |
| Sample size | 66,811 | 48,860 | 5,183 | 12,768 |

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Table includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). All characteristics presented here were measured during 8th grade, with the exception of overage which was calculated at the end of middle school. ^a Students who were not enrolled in a NYC public middle school are included in the Missing Data rows.

Notably, across this spectrum of middle school academic characteristics, students who dropped out of high school in the first four years struggled even more than persisting students. This was particularly true for the likelihood of being overage and for chronic absenteeism—a full 65 percent of dropouts were chronically absent in 8th grade, compared with 38 percent of persisting students, and 13 percent of on-time graduates. These rates suggest that middle school attendance may be an important early indicator and quite possibly a lever to improve outcomes for students who are at-risk of not graduating high school on time.

This analysis, combined with findings from other research,⁷ underscores that it is possible—from early high school and even middle school—to identify students who will likely struggle to graduate. Yet our study also highlights some of the limitations of administrative data for identifying students who are most at risk. Our interviews suggest that **persisting students face a host of challenges that cannot fully be captured in their administrative record**. Students reported a range of obstacles, including abuse, homelessness, severe mental and physical health problems, teenage pregnancy, involvement in gangs, and the death of close family members. These personal challenges made it difficult for students to attend school and keep up academically. Moreover, the problems that the students faced as they struggled to stay on track were exacerbated by a lack of social support—in the form of a stable home environment, supervision by family members, or academically engaged peers. Any one of these supports might have helped prevent them from falling behind.

The story of one of the students we interviewed, a recent graduate who had attended a YABC and experienced homelessness while he was in high school, epitomizes the kinds of challenges that many persisting students face. After his mother dropped him off at a group home on his 18th birthday, this young man struggled for several months to find a place to sleep—staying in temporary shelters, or on the couches of friends. He told us:

“I lost a lot of school, and I was in shelter. It was very tough to get here, to get to school itself. I thought I would just quit. I thought I would just stop...I would go [to school], but I wouldn’t go every day. I would go two or three times a week. It was definitely tough.”

Both the distance and the student’s sense that he “looked like garbage” because of his unstable living conditions made it extremely challenging to attend school. However, the fact that he was able to get to school sometimes gave adults (at both his first high school and the YABC to which he ultimately transferred) opportunities to provide support, which eventually helped him earn his diploma.

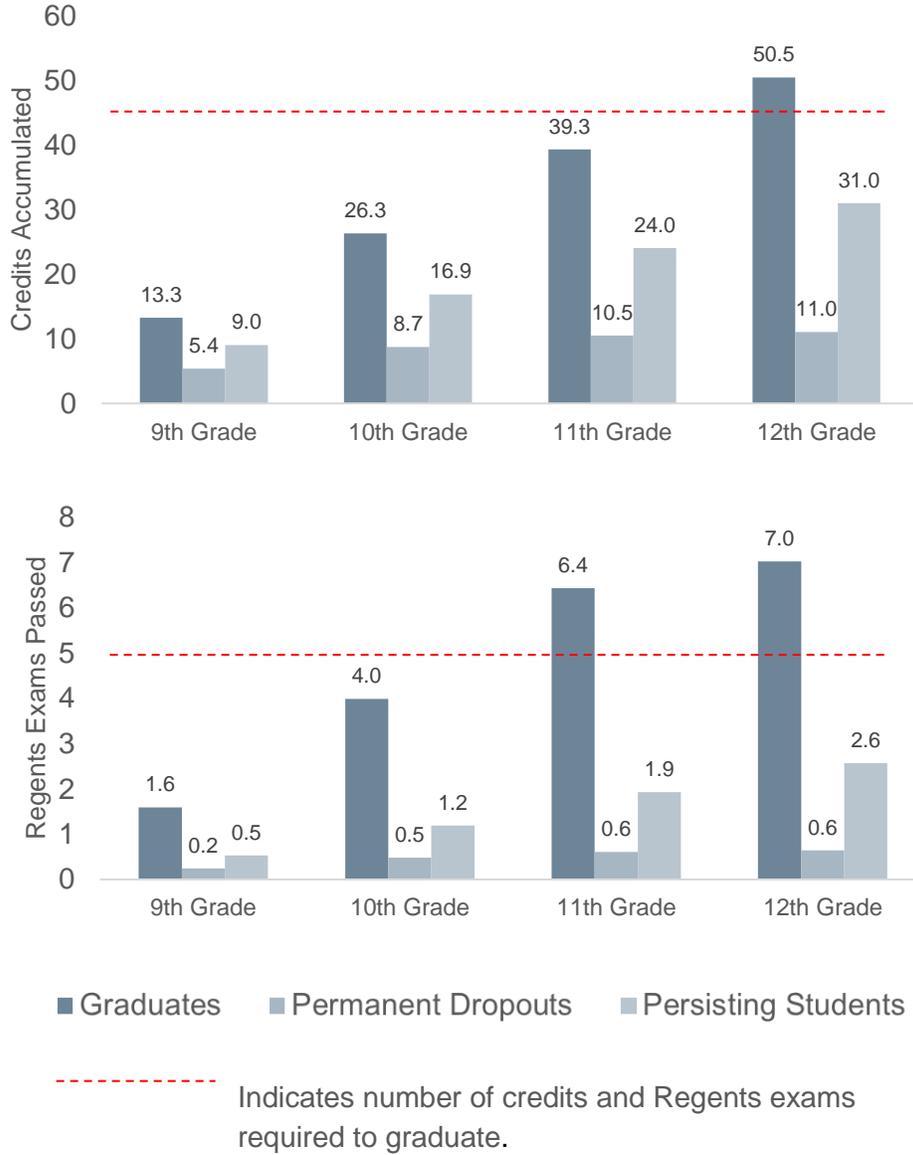
Missing School and Falling Behind

As noted, persisting students’ academic challenges often begin before high school, and most of these students are clearly off-track by the end of the critical 9th grade year.⁸ However, as shown in Figure 2 on the next page, **persisting students continue to fall further behind academically as they progress through high school.** New York City students must earn 44 credits to graduate from high school—approximately 11 credits each year for on-time graduation. Persisting students ended 9th grade, on average, with a deficiency of about two credits; three years later, they were 13 credits shy of the benchmark for graduation, meaning that they would need to complete more than a year of coursework to earn their diploma. Persisting students also struggle to pass Regents exams. They need to pass five to graduate, but by the end of 12th grade, on average, they had passed fewer than three.

Our interviews with persisting students suggest that a primary reason they fell behind academically was that they missed a substantial amount of school. Consistent with this, as shown in Figure 3 on page 9, we found that **rates of chronic absenteeism were high—and grew worse as persisting students got older.** A little over 40 percent of persisting students were chronically absent in 9th grade; this rose to 53 percent in 10th grade, and 62 percent in 11th and 12th grade. All told, persisting students missed over two days of instruction for every month of school. This is concerning because missing this much school has been strongly linked with the risk of dropping out.⁹

That being said, while persisting students struggled with chronic absenteeism, they were much more likely to stay continuously enrolled than students who permanently dropped out. Only a minority of persisting students—fewer than one in ten—were absent to the extent that they were categorized as having left school altogether within their first four years. The fact that persisting students are still attending school, albeit not as often as they should, underscores that there are opportunities to support and re-engage them.

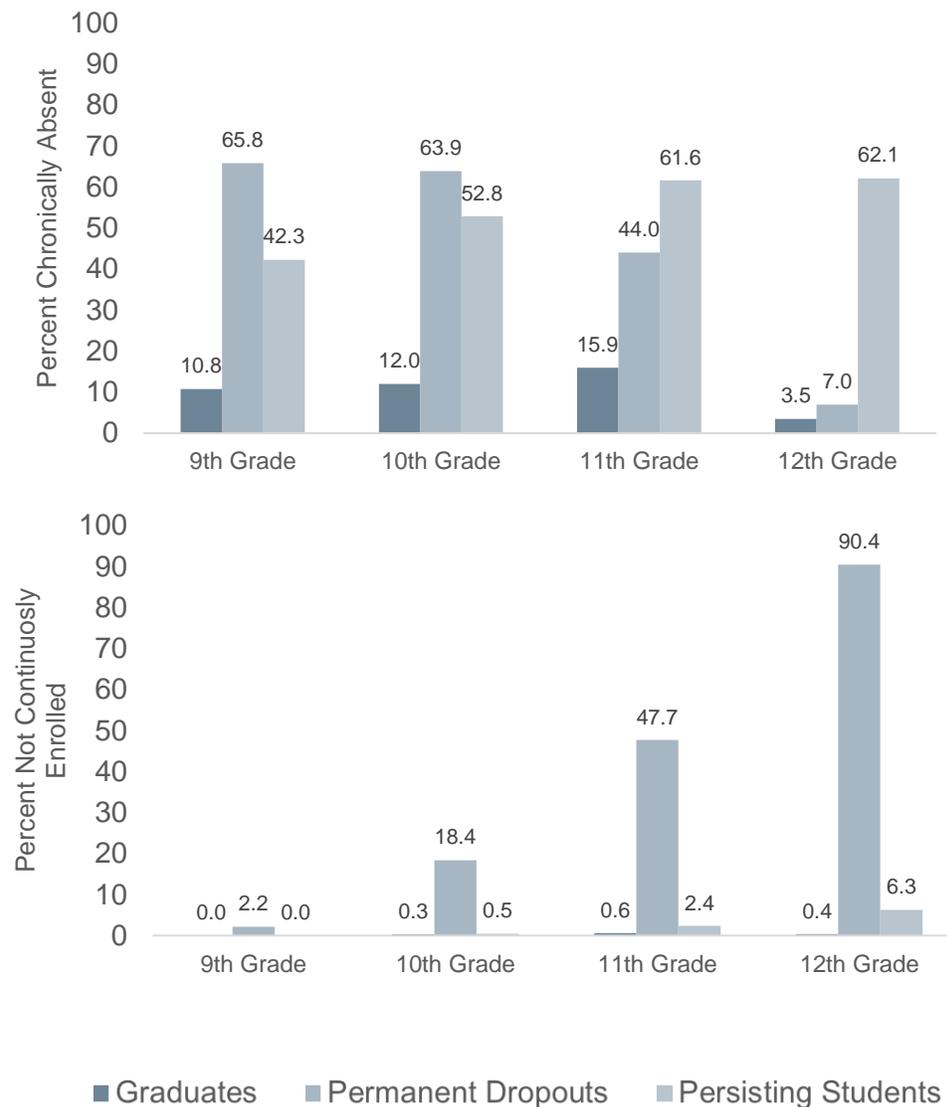
Figure 2: Persisting Students Fall Further Behind As They Progress Through High School



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Notes: Figures include all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). See page 24 for additional notes.

Figure 3: Persisting Students Are Frequently Absent But Generally Remain Enrolled



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Notes: Figures include all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). See page 24 for additional notes.

Barriers to Building Supportive Relationships with School Staff

Our findings highlight how challenging it is for many persisting students to build supportive relationships with adults at school, which limits access to the kind of academic and social-emotional support that might get them back on track. **Many of the students we interviewed told us that they did not have any close relationships with adults in their first high school** and found it difficult to get help with their personal and academic problems. In particular, students found it challenging to meet with their guidance counselors, and many reported that they did not even know who their guidance counselor

was. If they were able to meet with a guidance counselor, they often found them to be dismissive and too busy to help. (It is important to note here that our sample only included students who had moved to a transfer school or YABC, and did not include students who stayed enrolled in their original 9th grade school—these students may have been much more likely to report feeling supported by the educators in that first school.)

One of the young women who we interviewed, who had missed a significant amount of school due to mental health issues and the sudden death of her sister, approached her guidance counselor at the beginning of the 11th grade. She asked him about ways that she could make up the coursework she missed. It was the first time she ever met with him. She told us,

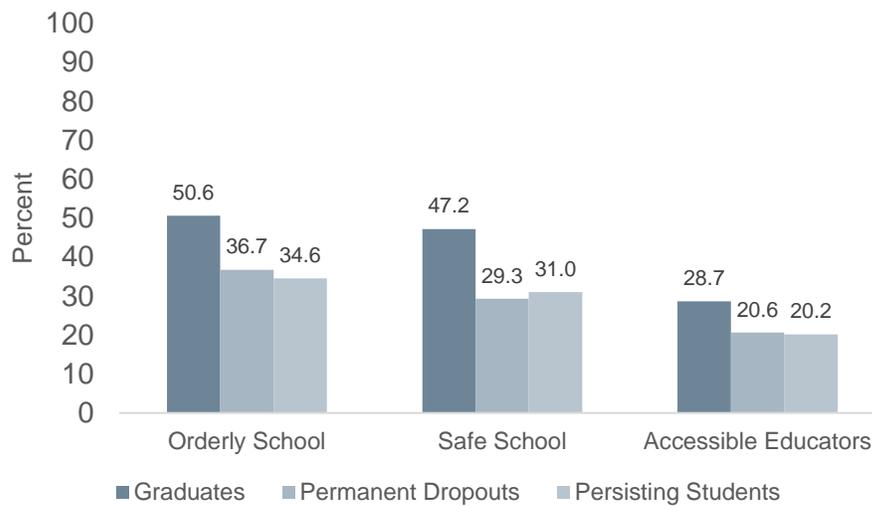
“I went to my guidance counselor. I didn't know him. He didn't know me. I went to him for help. I asked him if he could give me extra classes, so I can graduate with my senior class, and, he was like, ‘Who are you? I've never seen you.’”

This student was eventually able to meet with her school dean, who she found to be more supportive. Given how far behind the student was academically, the dean let her and her parents know about alternative educational options, and referred them to a YABC, where she enrolled the following semester. This story highlights how important it is for persisting students to connect with supportive adults, who can help them explore options for getting back on track to graduate.

Poor attendance is one major obstacle to the development of supportive relationships. As noted above, persisting students miss a great deal of school, which makes it harder to get to know school staff. In addition, it may be challenging for persisting students to build close relationships with adults at school because there are often many other struggling students vying for help. Our findings show that persisting students were highly concentrated in a small number of schools. In fact, **a quarter of persisting students were enrolled in the same 20 schools during their 9th grade year (out of over 400 schools citywide)**. Being asked to serve so many needy students places a heavy burden on schools and educators—who might not have sufficient capacity to support them all.¹⁰

In keeping with this, our analysis of New York City School Survey data showed that persisting students were less likely than four-year graduates to attend schools that students saw as orderly and safe (see Figure 4 on the next page). Persisting students were also less likely than four-year graduates to attend schools where students reported that educators were accessible—on average, only about a fifth of the students in persisting students' schools believed that they could approach adults with their problems and felt comfortable doing so. While the School Survey shows that many New York City high school students do not see educators in their school as accessible, the consequences of this situation are likely more severe for students who are already struggling.

Figure 4: Persisting Students Attend Schools Where Students Feel Less Safe and Supported



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Notes: Figure includes all students (N = 66,811) who enrolled in NYC public schools (N = 450) as first-time 9th graders in 2010. See page 24 for additional notes.

Changing Schools

As highlighted above, one of the main strategies in place for students who have fallen behind is to counsel them into an alternative high school option, most notably transfer schools and YABCs. Indeed, we found that nearly a third of persisting students moved to a new school at some point in their first four years—meaning, on average, they were more likely to change schools than other students in their cohort. Transfers into alternative educational settings account for most of this mobility. In fact, **almost a quarter of persisting students attended an alternative school during their first four years of high school**, while only 2 percent of four-year graduates did.¹¹

These types of transfers have consequences for individual students, and for the distribution of struggling students across the system. Yet **our interviews with educators and students suggest that decision-making and communication with students and families about educational options often happens in an ad hoc fashion**. The educators we spoke to, who all work with students who struggle to graduate, perceived that schools sometimes face competing incentives as they consider how to support students who fall off track. For instance, according to a YABC administrator who was reflecting on which schools tended to send students to his program, small high schools often cannot afford to lose students (and the funding associated with their enrollment), whereas larger comprehensive schools have more leeway to counsel out struggling students. Indeed, several of the educators that we spoke with believed that schools have incentives to counsel out students who are unlikely to graduate, so that they will not negatively impact the school's graduation rate.

Our interviews also highlighted how communication with students about transfer options can be inconsistent and—from the perspective of students—somewhat jarring. Many

persisting students reported that when they were told (usually by a guidance counselor or a dean in their 10th or 11th grade year) that they would not be able to graduate on time, they were taken aback. For most of the students, this news came with an encouragement to transfer to an alternative educational setting. As one student described:

“That’s when I found out that I wouldn’t graduate on time. My guidance counselor, she told me, like, ‘Oh, you might as well just start looking into transfer schools,’ cause that’s always the first thing they say. They never tell you, ‘Oh, you just gotta pick up the slack.’ They just hand you the paper and tell you, ‘Oh, these are a list of transfer schools.’”

Like this student, others we interviewed said they were aware they were not performing well in school and could benefit from more support, but that the conversation about transferring made them feel they would not be given a chance to turn things around. It is probable that because these students had missed a lot of school—and in fact the student quoted above described going to school only about twice a week during the 9th and 10th grade—it was difficult for educators to communicate with them about their academic progress.

Finally, the educators we interviewed described how recommendations to students and families about where they should transfer seemed to be informed largely by individual social networks. One guidance counselor, who works with students at risk of not graduating in a traditional high school, described how he worked to build relationships with transfer high school principals, to give him reassurance that he was referring students to supportive environments. He told us:

“It helps me to basically make informed referrals so that I can talk with families and send them to places where I have contacts, where I’ve been. I’ve met the staff there. I’ve met students there. That really helps. It’s a stressful situation for families with change a lot of the time. Sometimes it isn’t the first time they’ve changed high schools, and we want to just let them know we’re not bouncing them from place to place. We offer them a destination where they can hope to graduate.”

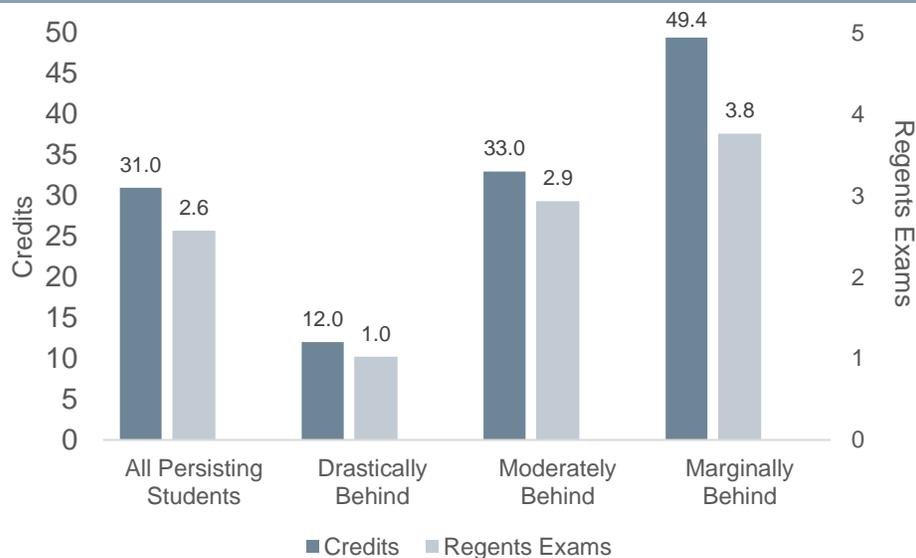
This quote highlights how much thought and care many educators put into their recommendations, but also suggests that educators may benefit from additional information and guidance about the options available to students. As we describe below, there is in fact a good deal of diversity among students who fall behind and are unable to graduate on time. It is likely that different kinds of support and intervention will make sense for different students, depending on how far behind they are academically, as well as their personal circumstances. More research on the efficacy of different options for the full range of persisting students can inform the advice and support that educators provide.

Academic Standing at the Beginning of the Fifth Year

Persisting students begin their fifth year of high school still seeking a diploma. However, within this group, **there is dramatic variation in how far they have to go to graduate.** Our analysis of credit accumulation and Regents data yielded three distinct groups of persisting students (see Figure 5 on the next page).¹² We found that:

- 30 percent of persisting students (or 3,803 students in the 2010 cohort) were **drastically behind**. These students still had to complete two or three years' worth of coursework to graduate from high school. They had earned, on average, just 12 credits of the 44 needed to graduate and had passed just one Regents exam. These students generally would need to be in school full-time and take a full load of courses for credit to have any chance of graduating before they age out of the system.
- 44 percent of persisting students (5,656 students) were **moderately behind**. These students had about a year of coursework left to complete. Students in this category had earned just under 33 credits, on average, and passed three Regents exams. Depending on how old these students are, some choose to be enrolled in school full-time, while others are able to work and attend school, a flexibility afforded them by the structure of YABCs and some transfer high schools.
- The remaining 26 percent of persisting students (3,309 students) were **marginally behind**. On average, they had earned over 44 credits but were still approximately one Regents exam short of graduating. These students might just need a course or two, perhaps geared toward preparing them for a particular Regents exam, to earn their high school diploma. It is notable that for these students—about a quarter of all those who persist into their fifth or sixth year of high school—not passing Regents exams (or in many cases, a single Regents exam) is the primary obstacle to graduation.

Figure 5: There Is Dramatic Variation Among Persisting Students in What They Need to Graduate



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure includes all students who were categorized as persisters at the end of their fourth year (N = 12,768) from the 9th grade 2010 cohort. New York City high school students need 44 credits and 5 Regents to earn a high school diploma.

The demographic characteristics of the three groups of persisting students once again underscore troublesome inequities in educational experiences and outcomes. Most notably, **drastically behind persisting students were more likely to be male, Black and from high-poverty neighborhoods**, compared to other persisting students (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Background Characteristics of Different Types of Persisting Students

| | All Persisting Students | Drastically Behind Persisting Students | Moderately Behind Persisting Students | Marginally Behind Persisting Students |
|---|-------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Gender (%) | | | | |
| Male | 56.1 | 60.4 | 56.2 | 50.9 |
| Female | 43.9 | 39.6 | 43.8 | 49.1 |
| Race/ethnicity (%) | | | | |
| Asian | 8.0 | 5.1 | 8.1 | 11.5 |
| Black | 34.8 | 38.5 | 34.5 | 31.3 |
| Latino | 47.4 | 47.0 | 47.6 | 47.7 |
| White | 8.0 | 6.9 | 8.6 | 8.3 |
| Poverty (Grade 9) (%) | | | | |
| Free or reduced price meals | 70.5 | 70.6 | 71.3 | 68.9 |
| Neighborhood poverty level ^a | 39.7 | 41.0 | 39.4 | 38.9 |
| Sample size | 12,768 | 3,803 | 5,656 | 3,309 |

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Table includes all students who were categorized as persisters at the end of their fourth year (N = 12,768) from the 9th grade 2010 cohort. ^a Proportion of families in students' Census tract who report incomes below 150 percent of the poverty line.

There were also differences across these groups in terms of school-based services (see Table 4 on the next page). First, students who were drastically behind had disproportionately high rates of having received special education services during their high school years—over a quarter of students who were drastically behind were classified as in need of special education. Significant learning difficulties or a lack of access to appropriate services earlier in their high school careers may explain why some of these students are so far behind.

Second, over a third of the students who were marginally behind received support for English language learning (ELL). Our analyses indicate that, **for these ELL students, the Regents exam appears to be a significant barrier in attaining a high school diploma.** Moving forward, the recent decision to allow New York City students to use the Spanish-language exam toward a Regents diploma might increase the four-year graduation rate for this group.¹³

Table 4: Services Received by Different Types of Persisting Students

| | All Persisting Students | Drastically Behind Persisting Students | Moderately Behind Persisting Students | Marginally Behind Persisting Students |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Special education (%) | 21.0 | 27.2 | 21.5 | 13.1 |
| English language learning (%) | 20.9 | 12.9 | 18.1 | 34.8 |
| Sample size | 12,768 | 3,803 | 5,656 | 3,309 |

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Table includes all students who were categorized as persisters at the end of their fourth year (N = 12,768) out of the 9th grade 2010 cohort. See page 24 for additional notes.

We also found differences in the types of alternative schools that these different categories of persisting students were most likely to attend during their fifth and sixth years of high school. Persisting students who were drastically and moderately behind were more than twice as likely to attend transfer schools, relative to their marginally behind classmates.¹⁴ Meanwhile, marginally behind persisting students were more likely to attend YABCs—in fact, almost a third of them did so, relative to less than 1 percent of drastically behind students. This is likely a function of the requirements to enter these two settings. Students need to be older, have completed more coursework, and have passed more Regents exams to enter YABCs. This may also relate to the perceived incentive to move or keep different kinds of students who fall behind: The educators we spoke with pointed out that while students who attend YABCs remain on the roster of their original high school and count toward that school’s graduation rate, students who move to a transfer high school do not.

Supports Toward Earning a Diploma

While many persisting students do not attend an alternative school, and while there is a fair amount of variation even within these alternative settings, we found some intriguing common perspectives in the transfer schools and YABCs where we conducted interviews about strategies to help persisting students succeed. Students and educators in these schools highlighted the value of tailoring academic programs to meet individual students’ needs, providing social-emotional support, and helping students connect current coursework to their future employment. A principal of a YABC summed up these strategies when he described the overarching goals of his program, saying that it involved three pieces—helping students work toward their high school diploma, providing social-emotional supports for the challenges that got them off track academically, and helping them devise a clear and attainable plan for the future.

As this principal described, the first part of the mission of alternative schools is to help students earn a high school diploma. Given the dramatic variation in what students need to meet that goal, we were not surprised to learn that educators in these schools devoted much of their time toward **tailoring academic schedules to student needs**. Educators

worked carefully to create customized academic programs, so each student could earn the credits that they still needed. While students we interviewed were often under the misconception that they could earn credits more easily in an alternative school, the educators we spoke with were careful to point out that this is not the case. The schools did, however, use creative scheduling strategies to maximize students' credit accumulation, such as offering classes before and after regular school hours, operating on a trimester system, and allowing students to take credit-bearing courses online. The students we spoke with were very aware of how many credits they needed, and how long it would take them to finish. They appreciated the effort that went into helping them efficiently make up the courses that they had not yet passed. One transfer school student, who receives special education services, talked about the benefits of her school's trimester system:

“Well, you can accumulate your credits fast. You definitely don't feel that... pressure of having to wait a long four or five months... In three months, that's already a semester, and you're already getting a credit for that. I feel academically-wise, this school has helped me a lot...They really focus on their students, and they make sure everybody's doing what they're supposed to do.”

In addition to personalized academic attention, educators and students emphasized the importance of **social-emotional support to address the many out-of-school challenges that persisting students face**. Persisting students spoke about the strong relationships they had with adults at their alternative schools, and how adults seemed to really know them and care about their emotional well-being, which contrasted with the experiences many had in their first schools. All of the schools where we conducted our interviews had counseling support staff, who would frequently check in with students about both their academic progress and other issues the students may be dealing with. Staff worked to engage and connect with students' families. They also kept very close track of student attendance, as missing school was often a red flag. Each school had attendance-taking procedures that allowed them to take action right away if students were absent or late. One YABC student, who had difficulties connecting with adults at his first high school, started to miss school because of a serious personal issue—one that he was not comfortable talking about—after he started at his new alternative school. He remembered how one of the school support staff noticed his lagging attendance and reached out to him.

“She really supported me. She was like, ‘I'm gonna keep checking on you—see what's going on.’ She did. I think the week after, she gave me all these pamphlets. She was like.... ‘You went through a horrible experience. You need these. I want you to go through them and see if you can get help if you really need it.’ I was like, ‘Thank you so much.’ Yeah. It was really nice. For her to go out of her way and do that, I was like, that's so kind.”

This close attention to students is labor intensive. Educators in all four alternative schools relied heavily on support staff and programming provided through other school-support organizations. Two of the schools where we interviewed students and educators were part of the NYCDOE's Learning to Work program, which enables schools to formally partner with a community-based organization (CBO). In these partnerships, both NYCDOE and CBO staff manage the day-to-day operations of the school and are present on school sites

everyday providing support to students. A CBO program director at a YABC spoke to us about how this partnership creates enough staff capacity to get to know each student very well and to offer a nurturing school environment. She said:

“Having a great partnership just makes everything easier. The DOE and the CBO staff are always on the same page. We’re always communicating [about] how can we do things better in our program... I think that’s what the kids feel when they come in here. It’s kind of like a homey feeling... Within two weeks, all our new students, we know them by their first name. They’re not really just person A, person B, or 1, 2, and 3. They’re actually someone here.”

Like this program director, others we spoke with underscored the importance of school-CBO partnerships and strong communication and collaboration between staff, as a way to provide a coordinated set of academic and social-emotional supports to students.

Partnerships between schools and CBOs also facilitated another strategy that those we interviewed described as important—**helping persisting students create a plan for the future, with a focus on employment**. The two schools that were part of Learning to Work (which supports workforce development programming) offered resume help, job interview practice, and lessons in how to dress professionally. Educators and students discussed these programs—along with internship opportunities—as a promising way to get persisting students re-engaged in earning a high school diploma. While most of the students we interviewed did still plan to enroll in college after they graduated, the explicit connection between their current education and skills they would need when they got a job helped motivate them to finish. One YABC student we spoke with described his program’s emphasis on the link between education and future employment:

“I think because of the way it’s set up that it allows me to improve, definitely... ‘Cause they tell me, ‘Hey, guy, this could help you get a job. This could help you with everything.’ I was like, ‘They didn’t even tell me about this in [my original] high school. They just told me, ‘All right, just do your class work.’”

Educators also pointed out that the habits—such as punctuality and responsiveness—that made for success in students’ internships would help them both in making academic progress and in preparing for life after graduation. As an internship coordinator at a transfer school told us:

“If you’re going to get meaningful work to do, well, you have to be a meaningful worker also. That’s part of what the [internship program] is. This is the ongoing effort of monitoring and making sure that, ‘Hey, I heard you came in late the other day. Did you call them?’ ‘I heard you were absent two days. Did you let them know ahead of time?’ All these little things that go into becoming a viable worker.... That’s what the bottom line pretty much is... we’re gonna have them for a short amount of time, and by the time they leave, they should be able to survive in this world as workers, as people going to a training school, people going to college, people going to the military, people going to work.”

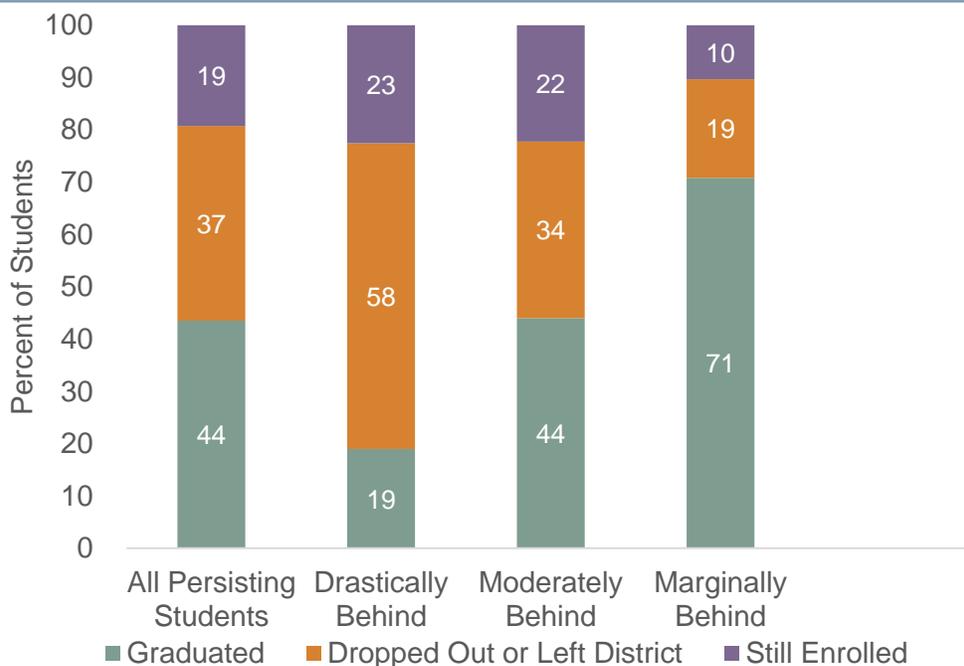
Like this internship coordinator, many other educators spoke about the connection between skills gained through internships or workforce development opportunities and students’

future success. Educators saw this preparation for the world of work as an essential part of the support that they provided to persisting students.

Graduation Outcomes and Aspirations for College and Work

The system-wide graduation statistics for persisting students are somewhat sobering. As Figure 6 illustrates, by the end of their sixth year of high school, fewer than half of all persisting students had earned a Regents or local diploma; about 19 percent were still enrolled, and 37 percent had dropped out or left the district.¹⁵

Figure 6: Six-Year Graduation Rates Vary Widely for Different Types of Persisting Students



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure includes all students who were categorized as persisters at the end of their fourth year (N = 12,768) from the 9th grade 2010 cohort. Please note that this figure has been updated; see page 24.

As one would expect, there were substantial differences in outcomes between the different types of persisting students. **While almost three quarters of persisting students who were marginally behind were able to graduate in six years, only about one in five students who were drastically behind did so.** While the differences in outcomes are not surprising, these findings do raise important questions. For example, among marginally behind students—who, on average lacked just a single Regents exam to graduate—it is notable that a quarter of them didn't achieve this goal. What strategies might help more of these students get over the finish line? And for drastically behind students, who start their fifth year of high school with two or more years of coursework left to complete, what factors keep them engaged and working toward a high school credential? The fact that a fifth of these students managed to catch up and graduate, while another fifth remained enrolled, is notable, given how far behind they were after their first four years of high school.

A handful of the students we spoke with were drastically behind at some point in their high school careers. One student had fallen behind because he had dropped out of school to support his family. When we interviewed him in the winter semester, he was 19 years old, and had earned 30 credits and passed three Regents exams. He was inspired to return to school because of his parents' experience and told us about talking to a family member who lived in Mexico:

“He started telling me about how my father, he knew what it is to be poor, walk around the sand dunes in dirt, go to work and stuff...so I started thinking, I don't want to be like them, without an education.”

To meet his goal of earning a high school diploma before he aged out of the system, this student was taking additional classes before and after regular school hours. This meant that he was in school from 7:30am until 5:30pm every weekday.

Such individual efforts make a meaningful difference to the City's overall graduation rate. If we revisit Figure 1 on page 4, we see that at the end of six years, persisting students have added 8 percentage points to the overall high school graduation rate for the 2010 cohort (from a 73-percent four-year rate to an 81-percent six-year rate).

Beyond earning a high school diploma, the students we spoke with also told us about plans to attend college—usually to earn a two-year associates degree at a local community college. Many of them mentioned educators who had supported them in completing applications for CUNY schools, and placed them in programs to prepare for the CUNY Assessment Test, which would determine how many remedial college classes they would need to take.

A few of the students, even if they aspired to ultimately go to college, felt that it was more practical for them to gain skills at a vocational school and begin working. One student at a YABC, who fell behind because the sudden death of his father required him support his family financially, was interested in going to automotive trade school. He said:

“I could go to college any time I want to. Right now for me...I researched a lot about it, like the tuition, the financial aid and all of that, honestly financially where I'm at, I feel like [automotive trade school is] the best for me, and it's a two-year program instead of like four years of college. Their rate of getting a job after graduating is really high. I like that.”

For the educators we interviewed, students deciding to forgo a four-year college is not seen as problematic or cause for concern. While they want to ensure that students have viable postsecondary plans, they focus on preparing students for adult life more broadly, rather than defining success strictly through the lens of a postsecondary degree.

Summary of Findings and Implications for Policy, Practice and Future Research

Our findings point to school- and system-level opportunities to identify students who are at risk of not graduating from high school on time and to intervene—before students fall off-track, when possible, but also after they have persisted into a fifth or sixth year. Helping

more of these persisting students earn their degree could make a difference for the City's overall graduation rate. Furthermore, given their demographic profile—disproportionately Black and Latino, male and very low-income—focusing on persisting students holds promise as a strategy to promote more *equitable* outcomes as well.

Identifying Students Who Are At Risk

Our data suggest that we can identify students who may not graduate from high school on time as early as 8th grade. Given this finding, we join the chorus of researchers and practitioners who have called for increased attention and scrutiny to students' middle school performance and experiences—in particular, students' levels of chronic absenteeism, their standardized test scores, and their history of retention in school. In addition to these quantitative measures, our conversations with students and educators highlighted the fact that increased and sustained attention to students' personal and family lives can help us better identify students who most likely will struggle to graduate from high school.

Intervening to Put More Students on the Path to Graduation

Identifying at-risk students enables school staff to intervene early, before students have fallen too far off track. We found that although persisting students are often chronically absent during their first few years of high school, they generally do not stop coming to school entirely. This means that it is possible to work with them, perhaps by setting up regular one-on-one or small group meetings with a caring adult, like a social worker or guidance counselor. In fact, our interview findings suggest that younger students may benefit from earlier and more explicit communication about the consequences of missing school, before they fall significantly behind. School staff may need more flexibility and time in their schedules to implement such proactive measures.

At the system level, it is necessary to consider the uneven concentration of persisting students across schools and districts in NYC. If we can understand why students who struggle to graduate are more (or less) likely to enroll in certain schools, we can better disrupt processes that continue to generate inequitable experiences and outcomes.

Once students have already fallen off-track—and have persisted into their fifth or sixth year of high school—personalized school experiences appear to be particularly important. Academic programs that are tailored to helping students earn the course credits they are missing or pass the Regents exams they have failed previously may keep students motivated and make the best use of their often limited time. Findings from our interviews also suggest that targeted social and emotional supports can enable students to better focus on their academic responsibilities. It is time- and labor-intensive to stay updated on students' evolving academic and personal needs and challenges. Educators we spoke with noted that school-based staff who do not also have instructional responsibilities can play a vital role in this process.

While providing valuable insights about persisting students, this study has also raised many important questions that still need to be answered. We see the following three key questions as particularly relevant for improving the policies and practices that affect persisting students:

- **What intervention strategies—already in place in traditional public high schools—are most effective?** Our work highlighted practices that students and educators in alternative schools see as most promising to help persisting students make progress toward a high school credential. However, many persisting students remain in traditional high schools. It is important to learn more about how traditional high schools are identifying students who are at risk of not graduating on time and what interventions they are using to get students back on track. Uncovering practices used by schools that are particularly successful at identifying vulnerable students and intervening to help them recover could provide useful guidance to educators across a broad range of school settings. Further research, including in-depth qualitative case studies and system-wide surveys, could help us to understand the specific routines, resources, or practices that are associated with better outcomes for vulnerable high school students.
- **How are persisting students distributed throughout the NYC system, and what are the consequences of this distribution?** Our work suggests that students who struggle to graduate are highly concentrated in particular schools. About a quarter of the persisting students in the 2010 cohort started high school in one of just 20 schools (of more than 400 citywide). A substantial portion of these persisting students ended up transferring into alternative settings; however many of the students and educators we interviewed felt the communication and decision-making around these transfer often occurs in an ad hoc fashion. These findings raise questions about the consequences of having so many struggling students in particular schools, and how systems for placing and transferring students might be improved. Further research, examining the concentrations of needy students across schools, patterns of persisting student mobility, and why and how educators, families and students make decisions to change schools, could offer valuable lessons about how to enhance school choice and referral processes.
- **Which educational settings are effective for various types of persisting students?** A substantial portion of persisting students attend a transfer school or YABC during their high school years. Our findings highlight the many challenges these students face, and suggest that the students who are furthest behind may be more likely to attend transfer schools. New accountability requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandate a more rigorous standard for four-year high school graduation rates than in previous legislation (67% as opposed to 60%, for schools to avoid identification as being “in need of intervention”). Few of the New York City schools serving large numbers of persisting students would be able to meet this standard. While other states have adopted differentiated metrics for alternative high schools, New York State has yet to do so. Further research that carefully accounts for variation in the student composition of different kinds of schools could provide more robust evidence to inform the dialogue about how to fairly hold schools accountable.

We hope our findings about New York City’s persisting students highlight opportunities to identify them early, serve them more effectively, and perhaps produce more equitable graduation outcomes over time. We also hope this work spurs new research that will help answer the many important questions that remain about this vulnerable and resilient group of high school students.

Sample and Methods

This brief draws on two sources of data to understand who persisting students are, the pathways they take through high school, and their six-year outcomes. Our quantitative analyses rely on the Research Alliance's student-level administrative records, as well as data collected through the annual NYC School Survey.

To supplement our quantitative analyses, we conducted interviews with 20 students in alternative educational settings: two transfer schools and two Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs). We also spoke with seven educators in those four school sites and one day-school counselor who worked in a comprehensive high school where one of our YABC sites was housed. All of these educators work closely with students who are at risk of not graduating.

We purposefully recruited school sites that had seen some success in graduating academically struggling students, by using our administrative data to generate a list of schools that 1) served higher proportions of these students and 2) graduated higher numbers of them than other similar schools. In these schools, we recruited persisting students who were close to graduation, so they could describe both their pathways through high school and the support that, in their view, had been important to getting back on track academically.

We chose to focus on transfer schools and YABCs because they were specially designed to serve students who struggle to graduate high school. Indeed, our analyses show that persisting students were more likely than either four-year graduates or students who permanently dropped out within four years to attend alternative schools. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the perspectives of the educators and persisting students whom we interviewed may be particular to these alternative settings and not necessarily representative of other educators and persisting students throughout the system.

To learn more about our sample and methods, please see the technical appendix.

Endnotes

- 1 See Kemple, J. (2015), Kemple, J., Segeritz, M. & Stephenson, N. (2013), and Siskin, L. (2011).
- 2 We focus here on the 2010 freshman cohort, because they are the most recent cohort for which we have a full six years of administrative data following their entrance into a NYC high school.
- 3 We call this group “persisting students” because, by our definition, they have not earned a Regents or local diploma by October of their fifth year of high school but remain actively enrolled in high school for at least one subsequent semester.
- 4 There is a good deal of overlap between persisting students and students identified as overaged/under-credited (OA/UC). The NYCDOE defines students as OA/UC if they are, generally speaking, older than expected for their grade level and are behind on accumulating the credits they need to graduate from high school. We focus on persisting students in this brief because we seek to capture and trace the pathways of the broader group of students who do not graduate on time. Students can move in and out of OA/UC status each year, and some students who are identified as OA/UC at some point during their first four years of high school do end up graduating on time. By looking specifically at students who do not graduate in four years, but remain enrolled, we can examine the characteristics, experiences and outcomes of a single, defined group of students who struggle academically, but also maintain a connection to the public school system.
- 5 In New York, students are only eligible to earn a high school diploma until the year in which they turn 22. After that, they are still eligible for a GED.
- 6 Some persisting students are counseled into alternative settings—most notably transfer schools and YABCs—where they are supported in smaller, more personalized academic settings with other students who have fallen off track academically in their original high schools. These alternative settings were a focus of the (now-closed) Office of Multiple Pathways, which was established within the NYCDOE in 2005 to provide a “differentiated portfolio of educational models” for students at increased risk for dropping out. The office expanded transfer schools and created new YABCs. For more information, see this [NYCDOE memo](#).
- 7 See Balfanz, R. (2009).
- 8 See Kemple, J.J., Segeritz, M.D. & Stephenson, N (2013) and Roderick, Melissa, Kelley-Kemple, Thomas, Johnson, David W., & Beechum, Nicole O. (2014).
- 9 See Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012).
- 10 In acknowledgment of this problem, the NYCDOE launched the Single Shepherd initiative in 2015, to increase the number of guidance counselors for 6th through 12th graders, in two of New York City’s neediest Community School Districts with the lowest graduation rates—District 23 in East Brooklyn and District 7 in the Bronx. For more information, see media coverage [here](#) and the DOE website [here](#).
- 11 For more information on persisting students’ mobility and enrollment in alternative schools during their first four years of high school, please see Table A-1 in the technical appendix.
- 12 Please refer to the Table A-3 in accompanying appendix to see the distribution of persisting students’ Regents scores and course credits at the start of their fifth year of high school.
- 13 See media coverage [here](#) for more on the recent decision to allow the Spanish Language Regents exam to count toward graduation and how it may help English Language Learning students.
- 14 For more information on student mobility and which alternative schools different types of persisting attended in Year 5 and 6 of high school, please see Table A-2 in our technical appendix.
- 15 Please note that a previous version of this research brief presented a different graph in Figure 6. We have updated the graph and accompanying text by combining the “dropped out,” “left the district,” and “missing data” categories, which is simpler, easier to follow, and more consistent with other figures in the brief.

Additional Figure and Table Notes:

Key Definitions:

“Persisting students” are students who have not graduated by the end of their 4th year of high school, and are enrolled for at least one semester during their 5th and 6th years.

“Permanent Dropouts” are students who are not enrolled for *all* semesters during what should be their fifth and sixth years of high school. They do not have a high school credential; nor are they formally discharged to another school district.

“On-Time Graduates” are students who have earned a Regents or local diploma by the end of their 4th year of high school (including the subsequent summer).

Figure 1: Figure includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). This population of students does not include those who enrolled in NYC public high schools after their 9th grade year or students who were repeating 9th graders. The percentages of students in each group were rounded in this figure; we included students with missing data in the dropped out or left district category.

Figure 2 and 3: The grade levels on the x axis reflect the students’ expected grade levels based on the year they entered high school.

Figure 4: The three constructs presented here were created based on the results of a factor analysis of student data from the 2011 NYC School Survey. This graph reflects the percent of students at each student’s school who agreed that their school was orderly, safe, and had accessible educators. For further information about our methods, please consult the appendix.

Table 4: Students are classified as receiving special education or English Language services if they were ever eligible for either at any point between 9th and 12th grade.

Figure 6: Please note that we have updated this graph from a previous version of this brief, by combining the “dropped out,” “left the district,” and “missing data” categories.

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