Promising Opportunities for Black and Latino Young Men
Findings from the Early Implementation of the Expanded Success Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011, the New York City Mayor’s Office, the Open Society Foundations, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and over 20 local agencies launched the Young Men’s Initiative (YMI), a citywide effort to improve outcomes for Black and Latino young men in the areas of education, health, employment, and criminal justice. YMI is one of the single largest initiatives focused on Black and Latino males in the country, and it is at the forefront of a growing national movement to address the challenges these young men face in a more concerted way. This was exemplified by President Obama’s recent launch of My Brother’s Keeper, an initiative backed by government, businesses, and more than a dozen foundations that have committed $350 million toward identifying and expanding effective programs for young boys and men of color. Like others in this new generation of initiatives, YMI is attempting to tackle problems that have commonly been perceived as too large to fix.

The core education component of YMI—the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI)—is designed to meet two related goals: 1) to increase college and career readiness among Black and Latino male students in participating high schools, and 2) to identify and disseminate effective strategies that might be replicated in other NYC schools and possibly other districts. In this way, ESI is a “research and development” initiative, encouraging schools to experiment with new approaches and documenting lessons from their experience, with the intention of eventually effecting change throughout the city by scaling up practices that prove successful.

Supported by a multi-year, $24 million commitment by the Open Society Foundations, ESI has invested funding and other resources in 40 NYC public high schools, to help them create and expand programs in the areas of academics, youth development, and school culture. These programs begin with the schools’ 9th graders and will follow them through their scheduled 12th grade year. As part of the initiative, each ESI school receives $250,000 as well as regular opportunities for professional development, particularly in the areas of college readiness and culturally relevant education.

ESI has been lauded both for the attention it brings to the challenges confronting young men of color and the substantial investment it makes in students and schools (Associated Press 2011; Peltz 2012; Zelon 2013). But understanding how these
resources are actually being used, how they change participating schools, and
whether they make a difference for students is also a critical part of the initiative. To
answer these questions, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is
conducting an independent multi-year evaluation—funded by the Open Society
Foundations—to assess ESI’s implementation and impact. This executive summary
presents highlights from our report, Promising Opportunities for Black and Latino Young
Men: Findings from the Early Implementation of the Expanded Success Initiative. While it is
too soon to know if ESI is having an impact on student outcomes, the report
provides a rich description of the first year of implementation (i.e., the 2012-2013
school year) at 38 of the 40 ESI schools. It focuses on elements that are integral to
ESI’s theory of action and were reported by school staff as having been the most
promising for improving student outcomes and school culture. This information is
intended to help ESI schools and the NYC Department of Education (DOE) as they
refine programming and district-level support through the remainder of the
initiative. More broadly, these findings and recommendations can inform efforts in
other schools and districts working to better engage young men of color.

Findings on ESI’s Early Implementation

Data collection on ESI implementation began in the summer before the 2012-2013
school year, but primarily entailed visits to 38 ESI schools in the spring of 2013.
During each visit, we conducted interviews with the principal and ESI design team
members, as well as a focus group with three to five 9th-grade teachers. We also
used a structured questionnaire for principals or design team members about the
details of ESI programming in their school. Our analyses of the data we gathered
yielded a number of notable insights about ESI’s rollout and early implementation:

- **The DOE provided a wide array of resources to ESI schools.** Given the size
  and scope of the initiative, district-level funding, workshops, planning meetings,
  partner information, and other resources were generally made available quickly and
efficiently. While a majority of schools spoke positively about the support they had
received from the ESI central team, some schools raised concerns about delays in
funding, which largely stemmed from having to revise and resubmit their
workplans. Others expressed dissatisfaction over not being able to work with
existing external partners who were not on ESI’s approved vendor list. Among the
supports provided by the ESI Central team were an online community for
participating schools and partners, various professional development (PD)
opportunities, and meetings with schools through the year to provide individualized support. Attendance at PD events and workshops ranged widely from school to school and seemed to depend on the topic.

- **The majority of participating schools received high ratings for implementation fidelity and service or program intensity.** We developed quantitative measures of **fidelity**, to assess how well schools’ implementation in Year 1 matched their workplans, and **intensity**, to capture the robustness of programming (e.g., the number of students served and the frequency and duration of their participation). We found that a majority of schools implemented their plans with high fidelity and intensity in Year 1, receiving ratings of 13 or 14 out of a possible 16. Some schools found it challenging to implement all of the specific programs they had proposed in their workplans, to implement these programs as often as they originally envisioned, or to implement programming evenly across ESI’s three domains—academics, youth development and school culture.

- **Schools enhanced programming in the three domains specified in the ESI design and theory of action.**

  **Academics.** Educators reported both raising academic standards or benchmarks and increasing opportunities for students to take more rigorous coursework. Overall, these changes are aligned with ESI’s theory of action, which proposes that raising expectations and increasing rigor will better prepare students not only to apply to college but also to succeed at college-level work.

  **Youth Development.** Staff at more than half of ESI schools reported improvements in relationships between students and their peers as well as between students and teachers. A substantial body of social science research has demonstrated that positive relationships can help boost academic achievement and promote better behavior and college enrollment (Wells et al. 2011; Riegle-Crumb 2010; Haynie and Osgood 2005). Thus, enhancing these kinds of relationships may represent a key lever for improving outcomes for young men of color.

  **College and Career Culture.** ESI’s third domain, school culture, refers to school-wide efforts to prepare students for college and careers. The educators we spoke to reported a substantial expansion of college supports, not only in
terms of adding programs, but also in terms of shifting the school culture to be more explicitly college focused, beginning in the 9th grade. Past research suggests a link between explicit college support and students' levels of college knowledge and college readiness (Conley 2007; Scramm 2008).

- **Culturally relevant education (CRE) emerged as a central focus and organizing principle for ESI schools and for the initiative as a whole.** Staff in more than half of ESI schools reported that exposure to CRE had changed school-wide practices (particularly around discipline), as well as teacher mindsets and beliefs about their instruction and their students—important elements in being able to effectively support young men of color (Cummins 1986; Ladson-Billings 1994).

- **The level of programmatic cohesion varied among ESI schools.** School administrators and teachers identified cohesion across program elements—and with the school as a whole—as essential for successfully implementing ESI. The level of cohesion among ESI schools was more varied than fidelity or intensity; while some schools largely operated as if ESI were an add-on program, others made great efforts to weave ESI into existing school norms, programs, and structures. Educators described various barriers to achieving cohesive implementation, as well as strategies they used (or should have used) to overcome these barriers.

**Recommendations for Schools and Districts**

These early implementation findings point to strategies that may be used to strengthen ESI as it continues to evolve. They also provide preliminary hints about factors that are likely to influence long-term sustainability and efforts to scale up ESI. To this end, we offer the following reflections on our findings.

**Focus on Programmatic Cohesion**

**Recommendations for schools:** Schools with the strongest overall ESI programming were those that put a good deal of energy into ensuring that ESI was well integrated into the school’s culture and everyday school practice. Evidence from these schools suggests that to increase cohesion, multiple staff members should be involved in ESI meetings and professional development, ESI-related activities should be built into in the school day, and there should be opportunities to inform
teachers and administrators about the rationale behind ESI and how its programming is connected to the school mission.

**Recommendations for centralized support systems:** In Year 2 (the 2013-2014 school year), the ESI central team created an important structure for increasing programmatic cohesion by having every school designate an ESI point person and organizing regular meetings for these point people (in addition to regular ESI principal meetings). These meetings are designed to share important ESI information and training, which point people can then disseminate to their staff. Some schools suggested that the ESI team should also provide explicit training around programmatic cohesion. It might be useful to highlight the work of schools that are excelling in this area. Increasing programmatic cohesion is likely to be especially important as schools begin to think about how to sustain ESI in the face of less funding, staff turnover, and other district-wide changes, such as the implementation of the Common Core.

**Expand Career Supports**

**Recommendations for schools:** While a majority of schools reported an expansion of college supports, very few reported changes in their career-focused programming. Given that career readiness is one central goal for ESI, school staff should begin thinking about how career supports both overlap with and are distinct from college readiness (Symonds et al. 2011). It should be noted that career programming is not merely about helping students gain employment, but about developing the skills and competencies they will need to succeed in the world of work (including full-time employment or work-study opportunities in college).

**Recommendations for centralized support systems:** The DOE may be able to help schools develop programming that is explicitly geared toward career readiness. To support the work of schools in this area, the DOE could provide more information about the benefits of this type of programming, as well as examples of specific career-related strategies that have garnered some evidence of effectiveness. The team could also ensure that the approved ample external partners list includes ample options who can assist with this type of programming.
Bolster Culturally Relevant Education Across Domains

Recommendations for schools. While educators in many schools reported a shift in mindsets, culture, or practice as a response to their work with CRE, others were still wondering how to translate CRE principles into specific instructional practices. In schools where CRE has been embraced, we heard about the profound differences it is making in how teachers think about their work and the ways in which they relate to their students. Schools should continue to take advantage of the unique opportunity to receive (or increase their presence in) the CRE training provided by the ESI central team and should strategically send staff who will be able to successfully share this training with other members of the school community.

Recommendations for centralized support systems. The work around CRE is related to issues of cohesion and sustainability, because of CRE’s potential to affect teacher mindsets, school practice, and school culture at deeper levels that cut across individual programs. We encourage the team to continue developing schools’ expertise in CRE, particularly helping them identify more practical ways to incorporate a culturally relevant perspective into school policies and everyday school practice. This might be another area in which the ESI central team can structure time for principals to learn best practices from other schools.

Managing External Partnerships

Recommendations for schools: Partners were central to the creation and expansion of programming in ESI schools. The most successful partnerships were those in which the vendor added a unique expertise not present or fully developed in the building, while also fitting in well with the culture of the school. In schools that were particularly focused on sustainability beyond the ESI funding period, staff reported actively learning from an outside partner during this first year (e.g., about how to run a successful advisory or peer mentoring program), so that the school would be in a position to provide that program or service on its own in subsequent years.

Recommendations for centralized support systems. Half of the ESI schools reported problems or challenges related to external partnerships. The DOE’s ESI team might consider either making special allowances for vendors with whom schools have worked successfully in the past or amending the application process for these vendors so it is not overly cumbersome. To ensure that these partnerships are
fruitful, it might also be useful to provide some kind of anonymous survey or rating system on external vendors, which would allow educators to give feedback and possibly help other schools make more informed decisions about which partners to select.

Launching and rolling out a complex new initiative in 40 NYC high schools is a massive undertaking. Our findings suggest that, for the most part, ESI’s first year of implementation has been successful. While participating schools and the DOE’s ESI team both encountered challenges, our fieldwork showed many encouraging signs. It is clear that schools have made a number of important changes that hold promise for improving college readiness among Black and Latino young men. We hope that by providing a broad picture of how ESI is being implemented on the ground, this report is useful to ESI schools and the NYC DOE, as well as other stakeholders around the country who are working to improve outcomes for young men of color.

Executive Summary Notes

1 This includes $150 million in current investments and at least $200 million in new funding over the next five years. See White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2014.

2 There are many questions about how to measure “college readiness.” One commonly used benchmark for NYC schools is the New York State Education Department’s Aspirational Performance Measure: earning a Regents diploma or an Advanced Regents diploma within four years, passing at least one Math Regents with a score of 80 or higher, and passing the English Regents with a score of 75 or higher. The Research Alliance is currently engaged in work to help create better measures of college readiness.

3 A competitive “Design Challenge” was used to select schools to participate in ESI. The initiative targets schools that have relatively high graduation rates, but are only on par with other schools in terms of college readiness, in an effort to leverage the capacities and best practices of these schools to close the gap between high school graduation and college readiness.

4 The $24 million also funds other components of ESI, including efforts to scale up college advising training citywide and the ESI School Design Fellowship, which is dedicated to designing and launching eight new high schools focused on preparing Black and Latino students for college and careers. Fellows will become school leaders in these eight new schools, slated to open in September 2014. These other components of ESI are not a part of the Research Alliance evaluation.

5 Culturally relevant education is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” See Ladson-Billings 1994.

6 Two of the 40 ESI schools were not included in our Year 1 analysis because they were relocated or closed for a length of time due to Hurricane Sandy.

7 Design team members are individuals who were responsible for crafting each school’s ESI application and workplan and for helping implement ESI programming throughout the year.

8 Before receiving funding, each ESI school was required to develop a workplan that described the programs they would be expanding or developing with ESI funding.
References


The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the city’s public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing non-partisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.