

Executive Summary

IN 2018, 842 young people from New York City's transfer high schools responded to a participatory survey about their educational experiences. This report, *And Still They Rise: Lessons from Students in New York City's Alternative Transfer High Schools*, provides an analysis of these survey responses, shedding light on the gifts and educational dreams of transfer school students and the essential role New York City's transfer schools play. Specifically designed to serve students who have been underserved and failed by the system in the past, these schools are a critical educational resource for more than 13,000 students. Yet they are under continuous strain as state metrics fail to capture the profound impact they have on students. We believe this is both a policy oversight and an educational and racial injustice. These schools should be held accountable, of course, but with metrics and a palette of outcomes that recognize their distinct niche in New York City's educational landscape.

What Are Transfer Schools?

Transfer schools are New York City's version of what are referred to at the national level as alternative high schools. More than 13,000 students attend the 55 schools in New York City designated as transfers, so called because students transfer into them after having left another high school, stopped/dropped out, or fallen behind in credits. These small, personalized learning environments can nimbly support students in overcoming institutional and personal roadblocks. For those who will graduate from high school, and for those who won't, transfer schools

offer significant stops on the road, where many young people develop a meaningful relationship with schooling, a personal sense of educational purpose, skills necessary for college and careers, and a community of care, dignity, and acknowledgment. Transfer school students, on average, disproportionately experience high economic need, housing instability, and lower eighth-grade proficiency than their peers at other New York City high schools. They are also more likely than New York City high school students to be classified as Black or Hispanic, as English language learners, and in need of Special Education.

In transfer school students' words:

"I'd say transfer schools are revolutionary."

"I would say that transfer schools offer a safe haven for students that have given up on themselves because they're in a school environment that makes them feel not welcome."

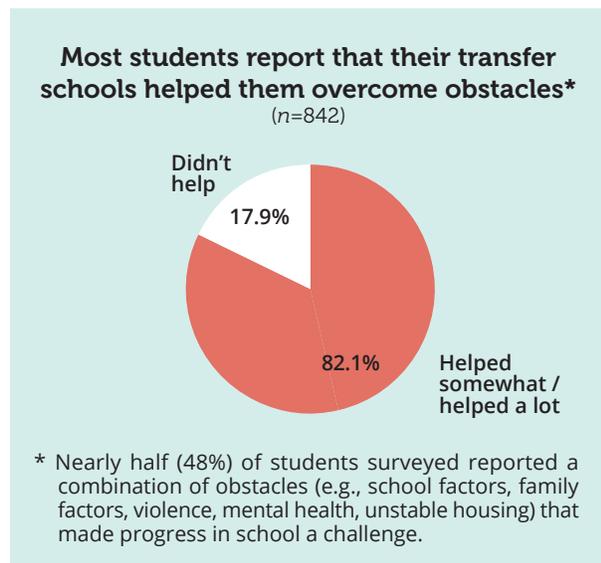
"My transfer school has taught me a lot, but most of all responsibility and self-respect."

Summary of Key Findings

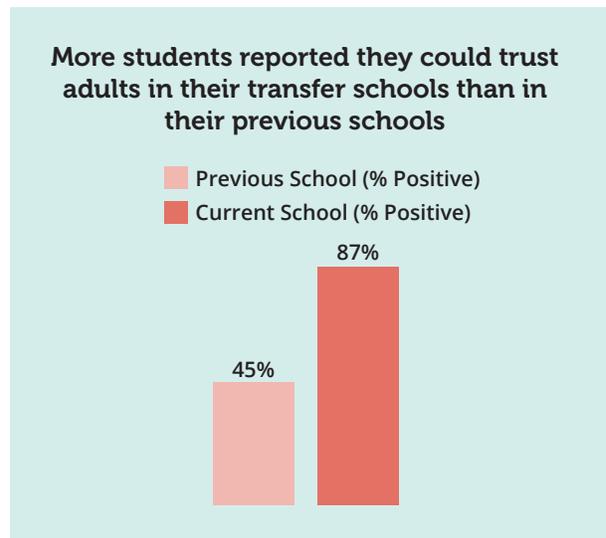
The report highlights the vibrant dedication, desire, educational struggles and hopes of New York City youth, particularly youth of color, immigrant youth, those who have experienced homelessness, identify as queer, struggle with mental health and those with creative minds that couldn't sit still in traditional high schools. In their narratives and even quantitative responses, we hear clearly how much these young people hope to succeed in high school and beyond, and how much they value rich relations with transfer school educators and counselors.

Student responses allow us to name **four non-negotiable elements** of transfer schools in New York City:

Opportunities and Resources Aligned with Students' Needs. Transfer schools within this study generate creative strategies—in concert with the district, local government, community-based organizations, and local funders—to support students.



Building School Cultures of Care and Compassion. At transfer schools, students find profound educational care, access to counseling, individually tailored and relevant curriculum, a safe environment, and a sense that they are met where they are academically and emotionally.

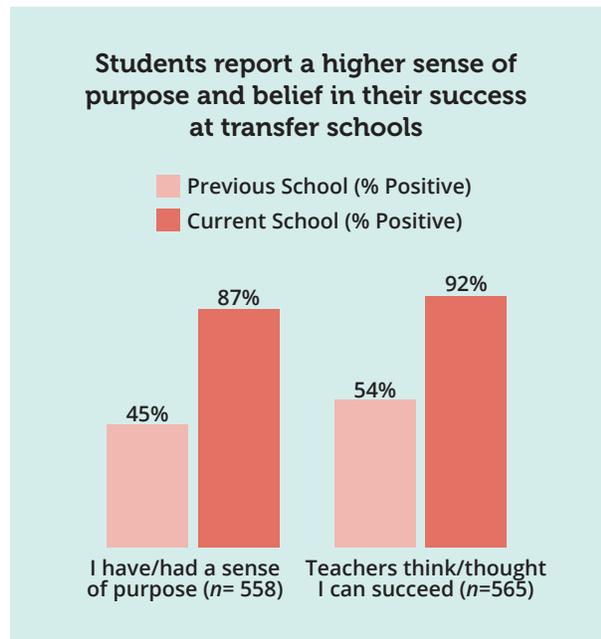


High Expectations Attuned to Students' Needs and Supports. Alternative schools are sometimes accused of coddling students or of holding them to lowered expectation, but our data show that transfer schools create flexible, attuned, and challenging coursework for their students that translate into the development of concrete skills.

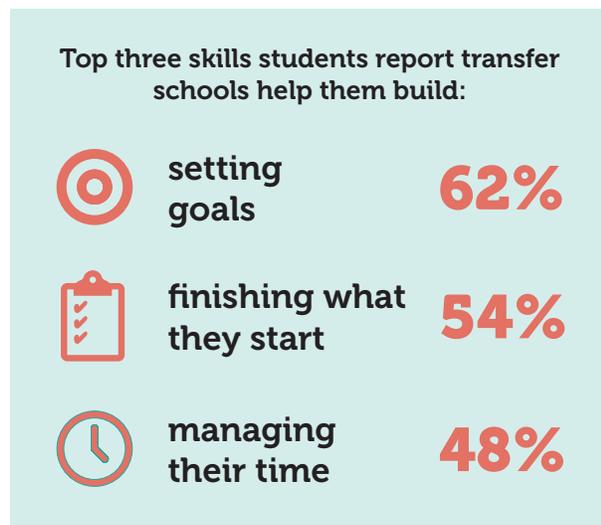
In transfer school students' words:

"We are offered so many opportunities, just like the honor student in a [traditional public] school."

"Each teacher works with you on what you don't understand. . . . They don't make you feel less of yourself if you fail, they just make us work harder."



When identifying the obstacle that most hindered their progress in school, students were most likely to take personal responsibility: one in five cited their own lack of organization and work habits (15%) or focus (6%), while a similar one in five cited their own inability to show up at school (7%), make academic progress (5%), or pass standardized exams (7%). However, when students discuss their successes they cite their growing capacity to take responsibility, advocate for themselves, and to keep track of their goals, while also crediting counselors, educators, and peers in transfer schools who treated them with dignity, respect, and care, and who cultivate a culture of both personal and collective responsibility.



Building an Ecology of Personal and Collective Responsibility. Students are proud and reflective about their agency to carve their pathways and work toward their dreams, but also highlight their interdependency on family, friends, educators, and community. They emphasize their schools' focus on both personal and collective responsibility.

Summary of Recommendations

This report concludes with a series of recommendations devised through a participatory collective process with educators, students, alumni, and community partners. As we release this report, in October 2020, it is abundantly clear that the young people most affected by the concurrent crises of COVID-19 and state and police violence are Black and Brown, immigrant, queer, indigenous, low income, living in poverty, precariously housed, and impacted by the criminal justice system. These young people in New York City are disproportionately represented in alternative transfer schools. It is imperative that we support transfer schools and listen to transfer school students, that we fight the constant threat of budget cuts to these schools and their partner community based organizations, and that we establish a more equitable system for evaluating these schools and the essential work they do with young people in New York City.

“Transfer schools provide a safe haven for students who were left behind by traditional schools, meaning we fell through the cracks because we didn’t fit the traditional template. We are, like many students, unique and transfer schools nourish our uniqueness to make us set and excel our expectations.”

—**Cristal Cruz**, Human Rights Activist and Alum of Brooklyn Frontiers High School

Recommendation 1

Decouple standardized testing from graduation and expand the portfolio of pathways to attain graduation.

Transfer school students show us that not all students follow the typical path to graduation. New York City students need access to a range of innovative, alternative school settings that meet their diverse needs.

Recommendation 2

Establish a blue ribbon commission to develop a robust, transparent, and ethical framework for alternative high school accountability that includes various pathways to graduation, drawing upon multiple indicators and outcomes.

We recommend New York State discard consideration of a 67 percent graduation rate when identifying transfer schools in need of improvement in the 2021 round of ESSA-required identification, declare a moratorium on transfer school closures, and form a blue ribbon commission led by those most directly involved in transfer schools, including students and alumni, to develop an ethical accountability framework.

Recommendation 3

Shift resources from policing to nurturing students through funding to transfer schools and their partner community-based organizations (CBOs).

Investing in social supports, internships, culturally responsive teaching, and mental health partnerships, particularly in peer-led models, is crucial and funding for these initiatives must be prioritized.