And Still They Rise

Lessons from Students in New York City’s Alternative Transfer High Schools

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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, strug-
gle 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.

**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.”

**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.
but also highlight their interdependency on family, friends, educators, and community. They emphasize their schools’ focus on both personal and collective responsibility.

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.

**Summary of Recommendations**

“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

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.

**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.
What does it feel like to look at your community and worry every day that you or someone around you may fall ill or die? What does it feel like to have data points beyond your control, getting worse, with no end in sight? What does it feel like to be told that you must do certain specific things to improve, and even then, you get the feedback that you may fail?

While we were writing this report, the global health and economic crisis of COVID-19 became a sudden reality. Adults and children who were used to a work routine, accustomed to the freedom to go where they want, confident about what tomorrow would bring, suddenly lost this sense of security. Feelings of independence and safety replaced with the grief of the constant uptick of deaths, the terror of weary reports from loved ones on the front lines in overcrowded hospitals, clinics, and shelters, and concern about how this will affect elders’ health and funds for retirement. COVID-19 is not only a global crisis, but an existential one. It is changing how we look at the world; shaking our sense of stability and predictability and altering how we live now and how we envision possible futures.

We are living through a frightening if compelling experiment in inequity: while we all experience a fundamental existential and material threat, we know that some are more vulnerable to adverse consequences than others. We can point to sharply stratified consequences of COVID-19 by race, class, neighborhood, and age. We can’t help but wonder about who has access to health insurance, to tests, to consultation; who will get first dibs at ventilators in private hospitals; who will be bailed out by stimulus packages; and who will be required to put themselves at risk in meatpacking plants, on delivery routes, in healthcare facilities because they don’t have a financial safety net. We hear too little about those who remain hyper-vulnerable in shelters, prisons, detention centers, and on the streets even as we heard much about those on cruises. And so, this pandemic also brings with it an opportunity and an opening, to recognize and reckon with the savage inequalities that it puts into relief.

For many of us reading this report, our lives will be disrupted by COVID-19, but we will be able to work virtually, continue to feed our families, and access education for our children. Many of us have long-term relationships with healthcare professionals who can advise us, and connections to first rate medical institutions that will accept our insurance. In other words, the sense of precarity that COVID-19 brought with it is unfamiliar to many of us. Not so for the students at the center of this report. For many, this sense of precarity is familiar.

As we see mass demonstrations and protests ignite across the country in response to the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many other Black people
who have been the victims of police and state violence, we know that many students in New York City’s transfer schools, who are disproportionately Black and Brown, have been subject to police brutality and other forms of state violence. We know that as the COVID-19 crisis became a reality, many of the young people we write about in this report had already been profoundly impacted by the sustained public health crisis of police and state violence against Black and Brown and Indigenous communities. In this report, we write about young people growing up in a city of vast inequalities, many of whom experience daily a sense of economic, housing, and educational instability. All of whom have experienced fissures and failures of a racially segregated and unequal public education system that lacks a robust set of innovative alternative schooling options. As students, they have often been represented as sterilized data points who fall below the cut line, whether we consider grades, credit accumulation, attendance, or test scores. Through such metrics, they are classified by what they are not: not on grade level, not proficient, not sufficiently credited. Despite not fitting into traditional notions of academic progress, these young people embody and enact a deep thirst to be educated, to complete the high school journey that was interrupted, to walk across the secondary education finish line and overcome the obstacles in their path. These are the students who attend transfer schools in New York City: little known, grossly misrepresented, a resource in our midst. They are our highly motivated, creative, passionate, diverse future—if only we invest in them.

Transfer schools, as they are called in New York City, or alternative schools as they are referenced elsewhere, open arms to youth who seek to be educated, even as they carry the fallout of structural, familial, educational, and personal struggles. These schools, as you will read, deliver respect and relationships, academic content and emotional support. They graduate many, but not all; they are the home to which youth can return again and again after other doors have been shut. They have evolved an ethic of educational accountability—measured not by arbitrary cutoffs in graduation rates or test scores, but by keeping the light always on and the door always unlocked for their students.

This report is an invitation to meet these young people, and bear witness to the power of their schools; to rethink policies coded as “accountability” but enacted as a racialized and classed threat to educational possibility. Rooted in the stories and statistics of transfer school students in New York City, this report reveals lives of struggle and desire. We write to honor students and educators, to acknowledge the material and existential struggles they endure, and to address the deeply problematic policies that work to undermine their individual and collective efforts.

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In students’ words: “If you could sit down with the Chancellor of New York City schools and tell them about what gifts transfer school students have and why transfer schools are important, what would you say?”

“I would tell them how genuinely necessary it is to have transfer schools around the city. Transfer schools are important because they give people hope and structure to their life. These kids are able to get real life experiences, they’re treated like adults, respected. For me, I know I felt hopeless by my third time transferring, and much less so by the fifth time around. These schools are what gives kids like us, kids who can’t work with the same old school agenda, a place to thrive as our own.”

“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. In [my previous school] I felt like I was dumb because other students were understanding things faster than I was, but in my new transfer school they work with me and all the students are so accepting and loving because they know what it feels like.”

“That we are not lazy and work just as hard maybe 2x as hard as other students.”

“I’d say transfer schools are revolutionary. And have helped many students when they thought they would never ever be able to graduate and close that chapter of their life.”

In spring 2018, transfer schools in New York City were confronted with a policy paradox. The policy paradox was triggered by the requirements laid out in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the ways in which the New York State Department of Education decided to operationalize school “success” or, more aptly, failure.

The U.S. Department of Education’s adoption of ESSA established a new requirement that all schools meet a 67 percent graduation rate. This policy would ultimately set transfer schools up to fail. In this report, we refer to transfer schools, which is an official designation in New York City, but nationally these schools are more akin to “alternative schools”— public academic spaces where students seek out smaller and more individuated learning communities, often after their first (sometimes second or third) high school experience didn’t work out.”

* An official definition of transfer schools can be found on the New York State Education Department’s [website](http://www.nysed.gov).
schools are specifically designed with alternative models to traditional schools, often they are set up to welcome students who have fallen behind in credits, many of whom have “stopped out” in their high school trajectory. They offer students academically rigorous curriculum that is more individualized than in most traditional schools, as well as supportive services, opportunities to pursue internships, and college and career preparation programs. Many of these schools don’t admit students until they are sixteen or seventeen years old, and many of the students they enroll are well below the 44 required credits to graduate and without the necessary passing grades on New York State’s five Regent exams. For these schools, a 67 percent graduation rate is a nearly impossible goal. Under the existing interpretation of ESSA in New York, these schools are seriously threatened. Indeed, several are already in danger of coming under state receivership.

Moved by the power of these schools, the struggles and desires of the students, and concerned by this policy paradox, Eskolta, a nonprofit that works extensively with transfer schools in New York City (see Appendices A and B), sought to document the impact of these schools on their students, and then engage a participatory process with students, alumni, educators, counselors, principals, and policy makers to generate fair and equitable standards to assess these schools.

In collaboration with several schools and other nonprofits, Eskolta organized the Transfer School Student Discovery Project (The Discovery Project), a broad-based survey of students’ experiences in schools designated as transfers in New York City. The survey was designed to help transfer schools identify their success with students—especially successes that don’t show up in state accountability metrics—and the places where they could improve the educational resources they offer. Eskolta reached out to principals at all the schools that participated in the annual Transfer School Conference, inviting them to participate in an informal programmatic survey.

The design of the survey (elaborated in Appendix C) was participatory. Questions were drawn from the experiences and input of students, counselors, graduates, and educators. A small intergenerational team of educators, staff, and students curated the final survey. A sample of students was sought that could represent geographic and demographic diversity consistent throughout the participating schools. Eskolta staff organized the data and presented much of it back to educators and students to support their efforts to sustain their successful strategies and to think about where shifts might be needed.

In spring 2020, Eskolta invited the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York to curate a report about this work. The project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the Graduate Center and classified as “program evaluation” and therefore exempted from a full IRB review. Within the schools, principals approved distribution of the survey, responses were fully anonymized, and school level information is confidential.

As we write this report, we find ourselves in the midst of two grave public health crises: one is a new crisis, the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, and one is longstanding, state and police violence against Black people
and communities of color. 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 transfer schools. Amid these two public health emergencies, 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.

In this report we present the stories and the statistics across schools that participated in the 2018 survey, asking you to hear the silenced stories that lay behind the misnomer “at risk,” to appreciate the students’ desires to complete high school education, to understand the academic and socio-emotional commitments of educators and counselors in these essential institutions, and to consider how New York State might operationalize accountability in ways that recognize the complex process of converting academic struggle into success.
In the language of Maya Angelou:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise . . .

. . . Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.


In the language of transfer school students:

“I would say that transfer schools are very important because they give students like me another chance to succeed in life and make amends for the mistakes we made. It gives us a chance to turn our life around and really make a change.”

“Transfer schools are welcoming. Everyone walks into the building with one purpose. To get our credits and graduate. Transfer schools offer you what you need to graduate . . . [they are] a place where you can get a second chance to be somebody. Not just a high school dropout who didn’t make it.”

“I would say transfer schools are a gift to those students who made mistakes in the past. It was a big opportunity for students to succeed and fix their education life, and set their goals again.”
THERE ARE MANY REASONS that students leave their first high school. Some students fall behind in school; others get bored, “make mistakes,” get depressed, decide to work for a bit, are tired of being bullied, have to care for a sick relative, or decide to search for an environment that is a better fit for their learning style and academic interests. These are the young people who leave high school prior to graduation and are often homogenized, as if they were the same, and discussed in terms that highlight individual failings: they are talked about as “at risk,” categorized as “dropouts,” portrayed as “failures,” and seen as “struggling.” Indeed, we learn from students’ responses that the adversity many of them face begins far from and also within the schoolhouse doors, and often results in an interruption of their high school education. But there is only one reason they return to school: they want to be educated and graduate in an environment that cares for them emotionally and challenges them intellectually.

In responses to surveys in which students identified the obstacles that prevented their progress in New York City high schools and the

Caretaker Finding a Caring School Community

Katrina (pseudonym) has big dreams: “I want to go to college and become an emergency room physician.” What motivates her, she wrote, “is my past and how I’ve struggled.” Katrina is seventeen years old, Puerto Rican, and identifies as bisexual. She already felt disengaged and unsafe in her school when her mother got sick. As she became a primary caretaker for her mother, she explains, “I couldn’t really go to school because I would stay home and take care of her.” When Katrina tried to explain her absences to her teachers, “no one would believe me,” she wrote.

“I stopped going [to school] completely,” Katrina explains. With her sights on medical school, though, Katrina looked elsewhere to get an education. She found a transfer high school. If not for this new environment, Katrina reflects, she would not be at school. “The teachers believe I can succeed . . . and they teach more to my learning style.” Katrina says she trusts the adults at her transfer school; her teachers push her to do her best while also supporting her when things are difficult.

Katrina went from feeling no sense of purpose in her previous school to feeling a strong sense of purpose at her transfer school. Katrina credits her transfer school with helping her build a multitude of skills, ranging from research and writing to planning out her work and collaborating with others. Most important, she says, she has learned how to ask for help, something, she says, she was “always too scared” to do before.

Katrina’s strengths were missed as she stepped up to take care of her mother. Many families like Katrina’s can’t afford the help needed when a family member gets sick. Katrina’s grades suffered, but taking care of her mother was a priority. Don’t we all deserve learning communities that understand and help us with this kind of family priority in a context of increasing inaccessibility of health care?
opportunities they experienced in moving into transfer schools, many students reflect on their educational autobiographies, punctuated by moments of educational success and accomplishment. They generously offer stories about their breaking points, and how they sought out schools that could provide academic, social, emotional, and other supports that they weren’t getting during previous educational experiences.

In response to an open-ended question—“How would your life be different if you had not found your transfer school?”—41 percent said they would have dropped out, and 26 percent said that their lives would be worse or more difficult. “Honestly,” wrote one student, “I would have dropped out of high school; I was at my breaking point of giving up.” Others predict a tragic future had they not found such an alternative. “My depression would have worsened. I would have shut down completely or made an attempt on my life,” says one student. “I would’ve been going through toxic situations,” writes another, “and I probably would’ve been somewhere dead or hurt.”

In students’ responses, we hear a variety of reasons for disengagement from school, from lack of interest or excitement with curriculum to struggles with depression, to family concerns and caretaking responsibilities, to structural challenges, such as housing precarity and financial instability. We hear echoes of what schooling is like in one of the most segregated and unequal cities and school systems in the nation, under conditions of structural and psychic precarity. Conditions only exacerbated by policies that incentivize schools to counsel out students when they fall behind (Borck, 2015; Fine, 1991), by school discipline strategies that disproportionately punish students of color and LGBTQ+ students (The New York Equity Coalition, 2018; Scott, Moses, Finnigan, Trujillo, and Jackson, 2017; Chmielewski, Belmonte, Stoudt, and Fine, 2016), by massive housing insecurity among students and their families (Pappas, 2016), and an immense lack of therapeutic care for students with mental health and substance use challenges. These circumstances are only made worse by the current global crisis and resulting budget cuts to public services and schools.

And, yet, as you will read in their narratives and the quantitative evidence, there is another story to be told about, and by, students in New York City’s alternative public high schools. Listening closely we hear stories of young people rising up in the face of obstacles, thirsting for and seeking out a meaningful education, dreaming big and daring to reach for their dreams, accepting responsibility for their shortcomings, and tenaciously staking a claim on their agency and choice in the matters of their education.

In the margins of their stories are nods of gratitude and full-throated thanks to the schools they call home and to the caring and committed educators, counselors, and administrators in them who meet these young people where they are and help them get where they want to go. We turn now to understand more about these schools to which students turn for educational support and meaning as they reach for a sense of academic completion.

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. The first alternative high schools in New York sprouted decades ago as street academies and storefront schools designed to meet the academic needs of students of color who were poorly served by traditional public high schools and to offer an alternate model for students who didn’t thrive under traditional school structures (Fruchter, Weinstein, and Jacobowitz, 2007). A total of 13,631 students currently attend the 55 schools in New York City designated as transfers, distributed across Brooklyn (19), Manhattan (18), Bronx (11), Queens (5), and Staten Island (2). Of these 55 schools, 7 are charter schools, while the other 48 are district schools. New York calls these schools “transfers” because they are designed to serve students who transfer into them after having left another high school, dropped out, or fallen behind on credits. Many of the students attending these schools are considered “over-aged and under-credited” (OAUC), but many are not. Some simply left their school for any one of a range of circumstances, including difficulties with health care, caretaking responsibilities, getting pregnant, family conflict, relocation, feeling unsafe in their school, or because they were dissatisfied with the curriculum and pedagogy at their school and went searching for an educational experience that was more engaging, exciting, and/or culturally responsive.

Our data confirm that many of these students are faced with barriers to their educational progress that crisscross personal, social, and structural conditions, resulting in an interruption in their education. Often, but not always, students who transfer have experienced chronic absenteeism, disciplinary issues, struggles with standardized tests, or have fallen behind on other linear academic benchmarks like credit accumulation and progress toward graduation.
According to data from the New York City Department of Education, 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 (see Table 1). 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 (Table 1). The educational path for these students is not always linear. In fact, one in four students who responded to the survey reported attending more than two high schools, indicating that they had transferred schools at least twice.

Transfer schools offer an alternative pathway to a meaningful education when other methods have not worked. These small, personalized learning environments can nimbly support students in overcoming institutional and personal roadblocks. Approximately 75 percent of transfer schools in New York City are connected in long-term and significant ways to community-based organizations. These partnerships support a variety of programs, including academic help and advisement, college readiness and counseling, vocational training, social and emotional support and development, family engagement, referrals for students and families, and internship design and management.

From these 55 schools, some will graduate but others will not. Some will earn a high school equivalency degree (in New York City referred to as TASC), others will leave prior to attaining any credential, attending to more pressing concerns and/or different visions for their futures that don’t include a high school diploma at the moment.

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. Next we turn to the policy dilemmas that these schools face, dilemmas that make it difficult for the schools to accomplish this important work.

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transfer School Demographics Compared to New York City High Schools</th>
<th>Transfer schools</th>
<th>NYC High Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Housing</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Need Index</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black &amp; Hispanic</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>Avg. Incoming 8th Grade Proficiency - ELA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avg. Incoming 8th Grade Proficiency - Math</td>
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<td>2.91</td>
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Data from School Quality Reports, NYCDOE 2018–19.

A Peculiar Spot in the Policy Context of Public Education

New York City’s alternative transfer schools represent educational possibility and a policy dilemma. These schools sit at a messy inter-
When Care and Recognition Metabolize into Motivation

Andrew’s (pseudonym) dream is “to be successful in life, and not just money-wise, but... happy with the people around me, and happy with myself.” “School,” he reflected, “should shape you to become a better person.” When reflecting on what led him to transfer, Andrew wrote: “I personally felt like my school wasn’t giving me what I needed to get to my goal. I was constantly being put down by staff and teachers... I wasn’t motivated to do anything at all... and it felt as if no one cared.” Andrew notes that at the time, he also struggled with depression.

When Andrew transferred, he wrote that he found a different environment, where teachers thought he could succeed, and he trusted the adults around him. “I haven’t encountered anyone who told me that I couldn’t... people here push you to do more,” Andrew wrote. “The classes are much smaller so there’s more teacher to student time; I can call for help when need be.” Andrew found he was learning digital and media skills that engaged him and honed his ability to manage his time better. Of the greatest value to his success, he says, was learning to make goals and follow through on them: “I was taught to know my next step and how to prepare for it.”

“If [I had not transferred],” Andrew wrote, “I’d be miserable. I’d have no motivation to do anything whatsoever.”

In the case of Andrew, his desire for a sense of belonging was misconstrued, as methods of evaluating his educational progress prevented teachers and counselors from noticing, appreciating, and relating with Andrew as a complex human with desires, strengths, and struggles. Unmotivated and depressed, Andrew nearly dropped out of school. Instead, he found an environment where he could engage with more nuanced accountability structures and receive the one-on-one attention he needed to stay motivated and pursue his intellectual interests.

section where responsive educational innovation runs up against universal accountability mandates. There are moments when these schools are appreciated as the educationally bold and generous institutions that they are. And yet, by design, they enroll many students with poor existing data on standardized metrics, which too often overshadows their important work, and in the policy world, the schools are deemed failures.

Current policy contexts destine these schools to be labeled failures, to live with the threat of closure, and to anticipate misdirected state intervention and burdening oversight. Specifically, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed under the Obama Administration in 2015 and put into force in 2017, requires that every high school in the United States post a 67 percent cohort graduation rate. According to the New York City Department of Education the “on-time” graduation rate for the entire district has been increasing over the past ten years. For the most recent four-year cohort data available
(2015), 73.9 percent (54,439) graduated by June, 16.9 percent (12,474) are still enrolled, and 7.8 percent (5,790) dropped out. Meanwhile, the six-year June cohort (2013) was 80.5 percent.*

Most students who enroll in one of these 55 schools have experienced academic struggles long before arriving in one of their transfer school classrooms. Many had experienced chronic absenteeism and poor grades as far back as middle school (Hill and Mirakhur, 2018). The majority of students in transfer schools are in their fourth, fifth, or sixth year of high school, working on earning a high school diploma after most of their high school cohorts have graduated, and many other peers have dropped out and stayed out (Jimenez, Rothman, Roth, and Sargrad, 2018). It is no surprise, then, that almost no transfer schools post four- and six-year cohort graduation rates that are on

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* New York State includes 4-, 5-, and 6- year graduation rates in accountability indicators.

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**Finding Peace and Purpose in an Alternative Pathway**

Roberta dreams of becoming an engineer. She lists a number of personal and systemic obstacles to her progress as a student: an ill family member, depression, violence in her community, getting suspended multiple times, and feeling like her learning needs were not being met. But her biggest obstacle, she says, was her anger.

In the large environment of her old high school, facing challenges inside and outside school, she became anxious and irritated, and found she could not control herself when she felt angry. Roberta got another chance to succeed when she transferred schools. She says at her transfer school she was helped to learn in a way that worked better for her: “They take time when teaching and will explain things. . . . The teachers are understanding, and they make me feel comfortable when I don’t understand something.” But academics were intertwined with other supports for Roberta. A counselor at her transfer school “helped me control my anger issues,” she wrote. “He helped me realize that there are going to be times when I’m upset, but I have to control that because reacting with anger makes things worse.”

Roberta found the courage to channel anger to action, showing the kind of grit and perseverance praised in cognitive science literature. Roberta, who identified herself as Jamaican and African American, elicited disciplinary actions from her school; the perception of her anger as unhealthy and violent was raced and gendered. She nearly dropped out of school and might have been one of many girls of color who are disproportionately pushed out of school because of disciplinary issues had she not found a transfer school where she felt heard and treated with dignity. (See Scott et al., 2017; Presley, 2019; and SolutionsNotSuspensionsNY.org for more information about the disproportionate disciplining and suspension of students of color.)
And Still They Rise: Writing Lives through Transfer Schools

par with the city. Indeed, on average the four-year graduation rate for the 55 transfer schools is 20 percent, the six-year graduation rate is 48 percent, surely an improvement, but still significantly lower than the city or the 67 percent cutoff. In the first year of ESSA accountability, only two transfer schools exceeded 67 percent for graduation in four years (2015 cohort) and only five schools exceeded 67 percent for six-year graduation (2013 cohort) (NYSED). For these schools, the ESSA requirement of a 67 percent graduation rate spells disaster.

Perhaps these graduation numbers generate a picture of failing schools in need of intervention. But, consider another way to assess the accountability and effectiveness of these schools. According to a study by Center for American Progress and Eskolta School Research and Design, when overage, under-credited transfer school students are compared to academically similar peers attending traditional schools, the transfer school cohort graduation rates are more than double that of traditional high schools for the six-year cohort, 29.9 percent versus 13.2 percent (Jimenez, Rothman, Roth, and Sarigrad, 2018). In other words, overage, under-credited students who attend transfer schools are twice as likely to graduate as their academically comparable peers who remain in traditional schools. While this is undoubtedly due to a combination of student self-selection and transfer school value added, the consequences are impressive and the punitive policy response is troubling.

While New York is among a handful of states (including Arizona, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Minnesota) that have tried to generate more creative ways of holding its alternative high schools accountable, modifications in accountability stay constrained within a very limited window of possibility and interpretation that hardly matches the depth of work that occurs in alternative high schools.

In the Recommendations for Policy and Practice section, we will return to a discussion of assessment systems that might more adequately fit alternative high schools. For the moment, however, we can see with this simple comparison that a single and universal metric of standardized graduation rates erases the struggles of these students, ignores structural inequities and obstacles many of them confront, and fails to capture the impressive evidence-based impact of these schools.

No one wants to avoid “accountability.” These schools seek and deserve an accountability system that more responsibly recognizes the differential conditions that weigh upon them, limiting their ability to meet a universal graduation rate and other one-size-fits-all benchmarks. They deserve an accountability structure that takes a holistic and individuated approach to these schools and students, careful to not overburden them with misdirected state intervention or to stifle the very successes they were designed to cultivate.

We turn now to our findings, looking at what students say in their survey responses to consider how transfer schools enable young people to convert mistakes into possibilities; avoid another bout of depression; come to believe in themselves; trust educators for the first time; and return to a site of struggle—to try again.
Findings: Value Added by the Transfer School Experience

Opportunities and Resources

Care and Compassion

Expectations and Supports

Personal and Collective Responsibility

IN SPRING 2018, 842 students responded to surveys as part of the Discovery Project (see Appendix B). Eskolta (see Appendix A) enlisted a large group of students, alumni, educators, and administrators to develop and implement a programmatic survey designed to help transfer school communities learn more about their students' academic and nonacademic lives to better serve their needs and desires. At the time of the survey, student respondents were enrolled in twenty-one of the schools designated as transfer high schools in New York City, which is a little under half the total number of schools with the transfer designation.

The students who participated in the Discovery Project were demographically representative of student populations across these schools. Of those who identified their race or ethnicity (n=614), 35 percent identified as Black, 48 percent identified as Latinx, 6 percent identified as Asian, 6 percent identified as multiracial, and 4 percent identified as white. Turning to age, of those respondents who provided their age, 36 percent were eighteen or older, 40 percent were seventeen, and 24 percent were sixteen or under. Additionally, the schools in the sample were representative of geographic diversity, with several schools from each borough, and charter diversity, with four charter transfers schools and seventeen district transfer schools.

Another important feature of the transfer school student population is educational mobility. These young people have moved around a lot. The survey asked students how many high schools they had attended. Of those who responded to this question, one third (34%) indicated that they had attended three or more schools, a reflection of both transience and a persistent pursuit of education and alternatives. Students in transfer schools are often pulled into other responsibilities outside of school. Notably, one of every five (19%) students who responded to our survey reported being the primary caretaker for a parent, sibling, or other family member. As is noted previously, we see greater economic need in the transfer schools:
Findings: Value Added by the Transfer School Experience

while the economic need index of traditional high schools across New York City is 76 percent, for transfer schools it is 85 percent. Given this discrepancy, it is not surprising that many transfer school students are navigating financial and caretaking responsibilities.

As we review the wealth of data generated from the survey, four core elements of the transfer school design deserve to be amplified:

- enhanced access to opportunities and resources for academic, economic, housing, legal, and mental health supports;
- cultures of care and compassion;
- high expectations scaffolded for individual development;
- and school cultures that encourage both personal and collective responsibility.

We turn now to examine how student responses to the survey illuminate and complicate these four themes.

Opportunities and Resources Aligned with Students’ Needs

A substantial and consistent body of research has shown that stubborn gaps in achievement in the United States are related to racialized and classed gaps in opportunities (DePaoli, Balfanz, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2018), leading to what some call the “racial achievement gap,” others the “economic need index,” and still others the “opportunity gap.” School achievement, persistence, and high school graduation are influenced by a combination of differential exposure to social problems and differential access to resources, overdetermined by racial and economic segregation, funding inequities in public schools, and an overreliance on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2018; Rothstein, 2015). We review here both the troubles that students named as obstacles prior to transfer school enrollment, and then the supports they were able to access through their transfer schools.

When asked about obstacles confronted prior to transfer school enrollment (see Table 2), young people identify issues that are educational, structural, familial, economic, and personal. When offered a list of thirty-one obstacles, 51 percent identify school features, but 29 percent note family responsibilities, 17 percent financial responsibilities, 17 percent violence, and 13 percent housing instability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of obstacles cited by over 10% of students (n=842)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obstacle Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caring for Family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing Instability</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The students’ responses force us to focus on mental health—a national crisis, animated in particular among teens and young adults. Close to half the survey respondents identify mental health struggles, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (48%). While these mental...
health obstacles affect people across racial and income lines, a growing research base makes it clear that the neurological consequences of repeated exposure to stressors (such as housing instability, financial precarity, and violence) exacerbate struggles with psychological health (Evans and Schambarg, 2009). Research also suggests that emotional wellbeing is strongly correlated with academic achievement, and that mental health can play a crucial role in mediating stressors associated with structural conditions such as poverty (Sznitman, Reisel, and Romer, 2011).

Within the transfer school population, these factors are worsened by their cumulative impact. Of the 842 students in the sample, nearly half (48%) report a combination of obstacles that cut across categories from school factors to family factors, to violence, to health, to housing, to the legal system. We hear from these young people, confirmed by neuroscience, that supportive environments (at home and at school) can mediate—not, of course eliminate—the impact of these stressors (McEwen, 2000).

When asked if their transfer school helped them overcome the obstacles they identified, over 80 percent of students indicated they did, either a lot (46%) or somewhat (36%) (see Chart 1). Young people who experience obstacles across academic, familial, community, and structural domains say that their transfer schools have helped them to address and overcome these obstacles.

Transfer schools within this study generate creative strategies—in concert with the district, local government, community-based organizations, and local funders—to support students. These resources include academic tutoring, mental health support, family planning services and health education, referrals for students and their families, career and college guidance, and vocational training and internship management.

What role does the availability of resources play in students’ experience of school? Many of the young people who answered the survey describe a downstream cycle—living in precarity, unable to resolve economic need or housing instability, and without resources to attend to mental health concerns, young people have a hard time focusing on learning. In a nation, state, and city with a fraying social safety net—particularly post COVID-19—transfer schools face the dual tasks of helping students mitigate a range of obstacles, while simultaneously helping them achieve their academic goals.

In the next finding we outline what we learned from students about the generous social, emotional, and material benefits that transfer schools provide.
Building School Cultures of Care and Compassion

When referencing their prior school(s), respondents said they felt like “I didn’t belong” and “no one cared.” In contrast, respondents report high levels of care and compassion within transfer schools. There is a vast literature documenting that care is a precious and stratified resource in schools, one that is distributed inequitably (e.g., Finesurrey, Lester, and Fine, 2020). The race and class composition of the student body too often overdetermines which schools offer care and compassion as core elements of school culture, and which schools focus on compliance, zero-tolerance, and punishment. The “color” of care stands in sharp relief when comparing schools that educate largely elite, white students and schools that educate low income students of color. Transfer schools break the mold—serving many low income students of color in cultures of care and compassion and offering alternative trajectories for students who the traditional system hasn’t worked for.

Many of the students who responded to the survey describe feeling previously uncared for in school, often receiving messages that they are on their own or that they won’t succeed, living out a tension between internalizing these messages and resisting them (Borck, 2015). We learned from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools that students who have transferred schools are more likely to report their previous schools as less orderly and safe than the schools they enrolled in subsequently, and are more likely to experience adults in their previous schools as less accessible or caring (Hill and Mirakhur, 2018).

“Before I transferred to this school, and before I got pregnant, I was in an abusive relationship where the person didn’t want me to go to school or do pretty much anything on my own. Then I got used to it, started hanging with the wrong crowd, getting into the wrong things, and the icing on the cake was when I found out I was pregnant. I still wasn’t progressing although I genuinely wanted to. Then, I transferred. . . . I went from failing every single class and not attending school to making high honor roll.”

“Transfer schools can help provide that cushion to help students in need . . . to help those students who see/saw no other options in their life regarding school. . . . In my [transfer school], it’s more hands on and going at your own pace. Plus the teachers make sure that you can understand the content by relating it to real life.”

“Transfer school is very beneficial at least for me . . . there is no judgments here, everyone gets treated equally, it’s a family environment, an environment that motivates you to want to grow, to want to accomplish your task.”
One student wrote that at their current school, “the staff cares and they want the best for you.” This student later connects this to their teachers’ pedagogy: “At my current school they move at a faster pace, but the teachers work with the students to make sure they are on track. . . . Everyone makes time for the students.”

Other students also expressed care showing up pedagogically. One student wrote about the importance of making curriculum relevant, “the teachers at [my transfer school] break things down . . . if I don’t know how to do something or I don’t understand a certain topic my teacher would make a real life connection so I can get a clearer image.” Across the survey, students talk about classes feeling “more comfortable” and “more related to real life”; students talk about teachers being “more involved” and “more excited.”

While many students cite the care and compassion of teachers, many also specifically named caring counselors and advocates as central to their academic success. One student wrote that she had a lot of trouble focusing in her previous school, and this made her “feel like giving up and losing hope.” She continued, “Seeing everyone at [my] old school graduate on time . . . I really became less motivated. . . . I started to believe I’m worthless and never going to be anything in life.” But with the support of a counselor who works with her in her transfer school, she was able to reconnect to a sense of self-efficacy and purpose: “I grew in subjects I really didn’t know,” she wrote. “[My counselor] showed me that she truly cared about me and saw that I wasn’t a failure.”

While such a caring environment is not enough to generate academic success, it is essential (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Cohen, Gordon, & Kendziora, 2019; Nieto, 2008). When asked, 87 percent of students reported that they could trust adults in their transfer schools while only 45 reported that they could in their prior schools. Usually smaller than typical high schools—the median enrollment of the schools in this study is a tight-knit 216 students—these schools provide a greater level of attention to each student. With more counselors and social workers and a smaller caseload for each, it is often these staff who appear in the stories of students.

**How are care and compassion conveyed in the school environment?** According to students, transfer schools are places of profound educational care, providing access to counseling, attendance outreach, individually tailored and relevant curriculum, a safe environment, and the time to meet students where they are academically and emotionally. As an interesting “outlier,” students have talked about transfer schools as places where care is institutionalized (Collins, 2016; Borck, 2015), where care and curriculum are culturally relevant and responsive (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2019), and where they are supported to care for themselves, for others, and for their futures (Collins, 2016). Confirming this larger literature on school care, trust, and a sense of belonging in their responses to our survey, students describe transfer schools as places where they reconnect to a sense of educational community. The sense of belonging and trust that students report feeling are reflections of mindsets that are central to academic outcomes (Walton and Cohen, 2007; Yeager and Dweck, 2012).
High Expectations Attuned to Students’ Needs and Supports

We wanted to understand the extent to which educators’ expression of care can facilitate high expectations. When compared to their prior schools, we see that students experience their current school as a context for developing a sense of purpose and experiencing teachers’ confidence in their abilities to succeed. Students were far more likely to report that their teachers at their current schools think they can succeed (92%) and that they experience more of a sense of purpose in their learning (87%) than at their prior schools (54% and 45% respectively) (see Chart 2).

Confidence boosts we anticipated, but we were delighted to hear students articulate a “sense of purpose in learning.” One student suggested that the most important thing about transfer schools is that they “give so many people a purpose who have never felt that way before.” Another student relayed a sense of being challenged in a caring way, writing, “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.” Another student wrote that with, “more hands-on interactive work . . . we have an opportunity to learn beyond what we can imagine.” And one student recognized that what they were offered in their transfer school was what they had not been offered in their previous school: “we are offered so many opportunities, just like the honor student in a [traditional public] school.”

This finding is an important counter to the typical accusation that equates care and compassion with coddling, diminished expectations, and a lowered sense of personal responsibility. Our data point in the opposite direction: students see that, when their schools offer care plus support, expectations rise and motivation increases and students take on responsibility for their own learning and for others’ well-being. We hear students say that transfer schools can help them challenge the sense that failure is inevitable and amplify the desire to keep trying.

Students explain that transferring often translates into a renewed sense of self-confidence, motivation, and an interest in pursuing new opportunities. According to the students, these schools do not lower expectations but rather help students and staff see opportunities and possibilities to build skills, including the ability to set goals (62%), finish what they start (54%), and manage their time (48%) (see Figure 1).

Students notice the care, and the scaffolding, as they appreciate the challenge of complex academic material. As one student reflected: “I needed flexible schedules and attentive teach-
ers and a small environment. When I am overwhelmed, I shut down. The curriculum [at my transfer school] is more complex [than at my previous school] but presented in an easier way. . . my mind is consistently challenged.”

When and how are youth afforded opportunities to meet meaningful and high expectations? When schools are organized to recognize students’ needs and gifts and to scaffold their development toward academic success with flexibility and support. Many of the schools in our sample toss aside some traditional practices to create a flexible, attuned, and challenging coursework for their students. This includes uniquely designed schedules and academic trajectories with courses selected to intellectually challenge them while meeting their needs; anticipating when they might “shut down” or bolt; and offering options to avoid exit and encourage persistence.

Students are simultaneously nurtured and challenged. Behind this we find not only the resources and compassion discussed in the previous sections but also the structures that get students into classes that will engage them and develop the skills that have eluded them in previous schools; where their gifts and the way they have grown will be recognized, as well as their challenges and areas for improvement. As we imagine the collectivity of this dynamic of care and high expectations, we turn to questions of personal and academic responsibility.

Building an Ecology of Personal and Collective Responsibility

As explored in the previous three sections, nationally and even throughout New York City, racial and class disparities exist in resources, privileging some and disadvantaging others; in varying levels of compassion that nurture some students and marginalize or punish others; in varying expectations that recognize some students as filled with potential and others as less valued; in disparate access to innovative and creative options for different kinds of schooling. Yet, even though much has been said and studied of these gaps for years, the myth of meritocracy pervades the American school system. We assume that success lies in the merit of the rugged individual without considering the gaps and the expensive academic “water wings” that elite students enjoy (Burns, 2004). Personal responsibility alone is necessary, but hardly sufficient, to succeed in American schools and society. Indeed, as we have learned during COVID-19, a healthy democracy requires a sense of collective responsibility (Boyte, 2018).
The students who participated in the Discovery Project are not immune from the narrow myth of meritocracy and reproduce it themselves when asked to explain their often jagged academic histories. According to our qualitative analysis, when students were asked to identify the single obstacle that most hindered their progress in school, they were most likely to volunteer obstacles that placed responsibility squarely on their own shoulders: 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%) (see Table 3). When students discuss their successes, they cite their growing capacity to take responsibility; to advocate for themselves in new ways; and to keep track of goals that once escaped them. They also credit adults in transfer schools who saw them, helped them, and acted in ways that showed they felt responsible for their learning, success, and well-being. They are proud and reflective about their agency to carve their pathways and work toward their dreams, but also highlight their interdependency on family, friends, and community for motivation and support, and, sometimes, as sources of distraction, difficulty, and pain. Responsibility is posited, not only in the merit of the individual or in the community surrounding them, but importantly in both.
One student reflected on his educational journey: “My goal is to become a man that is an example for my future children and hopefully other men. . . . Before I transferred to this school, I was a bad student. I would skip class, didn’t do any homework, slept a lot in class . . . . it was time to change and things couldn’t keep being the way it was . . . I was not just harming myself but also my mom and girlfriend. After I transferred . . . I immediately changed and started to get high scores in my classes . . . who supported me throughout all this was my girlfriend and my mom, my girlfriend still wakes me up every morning at 6 a.m. to get to school early.”

Students also express responsibility for other people in their lives as an educational motivator. “My goals are to continue to go to school and learn as much as I can,” one student writes. “My motivation is my daughter, I do everything for her.” Another student writes, “my goal is to work hard and try to buy a house for my mom . . . the thing that motivates me are the classes I take.”

Many students invoke the support of counselors when they reflect on responsibility. For example, one student writes that when he fell behind in school he regretted “letting my emotions influence my actions . . . I learned to decide my actions by setting a goal and not going solely off my emotions . . . my counselor helped support my growth and I wouldn’t have been grounded without them.” Counselors are often made available through rich relationships cultivated with community-based organizations. Indeed, of the twenty-one schools included in the analysis, sixteen are connected to community-based organizations. These connections are one way that transfer schools model a commitment to collective responsibility, to create networks of care, expectation, and futures for young people.

### TABLE 3
How Students Define Their Most Significant Obstacle (qualitative sample, $n=188$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization and work habits</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not passing the Regents</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of family</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble focusing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalled on academic progress</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental/emotional health</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School climate and relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning needs not met</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving to a new school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupted housing / homeless</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-concept</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and collaboration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How is responsibility understood by the adults and youth in a school? The stories told in the words of the students in the Discovery Project show the important truth that the responsibility for schooling lies with all of us. Personal responsibility and community responsibility are two sides of the same coin, most constructive when taken together. By its nature, community responsibility cannot be adequately recognized through measures that accrue to the individual.

“My transfer school has taught me a lot, but most of all responsibility and self-respect.”
Reflections on the Findings

This research was designed to be preliminary—to sketch lives, understand obstacles, reveal the range of school cultures and pedagogies in transfer schools, and think about how one might authentically assess their effectiveness. We learned so much more.

We learned that many of these young people sit at the brutal downstream intersections of socio-economic inequities, structural racism, gentrification, police violence, and battles with mental health. That many have been enrolled in and have left a range of schools—disproportionately schools with too few resources, too many students in need, high teacher turnover, chaotic and over-policed school environments, and a diminished sense of “care.” They have been raised in high stakes testing-cultures where they have failed, over and over again; where they haven’t seen themselves or their interests reflected in the curriculum. And yet they seek, and find, alternative educational settings where their needs are recognized, their gifts are admired, and expectations are high.

From these young people we learned of their struggles that map onto a city with swelling inequities. As impressive, however, we hear their desire to be educated and to complete at least their secondary education journey. We wish we learned more about the particularities of how they got to their current schools, but we certainly learned what they found when they got there. Additionally, though the Discovery Project began with a participatory foundation, including students and educators in the development and implementation of the survey, we observed considerable shrinkage of participation from young people and educators as the project continued. The analysis of the data, for example, was not done in a participatory way. While we see this as a profound limitation of the work, and perhaps even a betrayal of its initial intentions, we also recognize it as an opportunity to call for more participatory research with transfer school students, alumni, and educators, and an opportunity to shed light on why this work is desperately needed.

The students’ responses allow us to name four non-negotiable elements of transfer schools in New York City: enhanced access to opportunities and resources for academic, economic, housing, legal, and mental health supports; cultures of care and compassion; high expectations scaffolded for individual development; and school cultures that encourage both personal and collective responsibility. It seems to us that these four nonnegotiable elements at work in transfer schools are deeply foundational to what Django Paris (2012) describes as culturally sustaining schooling and pedagogy.

Our analysis was not sufficiently fine-tuned, nor did we set out, to examine which schools successfully incorporate these four elements, nor, perhaps more significantly, did we focus on what students say their schools are missing. We know that all schools are uneven and can always be improved, including alternative ones. Yet, this report sheds light on the urgency of these 55 schools as an essential educational
safety net for more than 13,000 students that is under continuous strain as state metrics predetermine that these schools will fail. 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 the educational landscape of New York City.

We end this report with a series of recommendations for how the state and city can support and strengthen transfer school students and transfer schools; how state accountability systems can be operationalized in ways that are transparent and also appropriate to the needs of students and schools. We devised a participatory process for collective reflection through which educators, students, alumni, and community partners reviewed the report, offered thoughts, edits, critique, and provocations that went into generating the recommendations to follow.
Conclusions and Recommendations

We begin this section with reflections from two alternative transfer school alumni who are familiar with this study and helped formulate the recommendations included. Here, they reflect, with the wisdom of hindsight, on the value of growing up in New York City’s transfer schools, reminding us that many young people most appreciate their experience in transfer schools from the rearview mirror of young adulthood.

“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

“I often tell my story starting at Liberation, but the school system had already failed me before I got to Liberation. I was kicked out of two different high schools and labeled a gang leader, which I was not. The perception of what the system thought I was and was going to become was already made. I dropped out of Liberation more than four times and Ms. Leong [the principal] took me back every time. It’s important that when we collect data, we reflect how opportunities like these do not exist in traditional high school. I finished Liberation with a 60 overall GPA. . . . Ms. Leong’s alma mater is now my alma mater. I finished Baruch College with honors and a 3.7 GPA. . . . Transfer schools have helped me a lot. I am employed at the same high school I graduated from. This is the data that needs to reflect transfer school success as well. I am a living testimony to the effects of what transfer school can produce in the long term. . . . So when we collect data, we must not only gather from current students but alumnus as well. While focusing on long-term success as well as short-term success. If we do not, we do a disservice to our community because we do not show how transfer school affects students in all aspects.”

—Evin Orfila, Educator and Alum of Liberation Diploma Plus High School
Conclusions and Recommendations

This report offers a window into schools that open their arms to students: schools filled with educators and counselors who are constantly innovating to create nourishing learning communities that engage and excite students for whom traditional educational pathways didn’t work; schools doing the daily tireless work of repaying the education debt owed to Black and Brown students that Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) identified more than a decade ago. And yet, a policy paradox threatens to shutter these schools and undermine the perseverance of the young people who turn to them for academic support, intellectual excitement, emotional care, and material resources.

Alternative transfer schools are a vital element of our educational ecology. They deserve to be supported, sustained, and integrated; studied for their successes rather than misrepresented as failures; and expanded rather than threatened by punitive policies and continual disinvestment. Policy makers and the city and state departments of education need to take immediate and sustained action to guarantee the full funding and survival of these schools, to make it easier for students to find and choose these alternatives, and to remove disincentives that deter schools from helping students find these alternatives.

Amidst the ongoing and concurrent public health crises of COVID-19 and police and state violence against Black people and other people of color, we know that transfer school teachers, counselors, principals, and community partners are creatively reaching out to offer support to their students, to help young people choose the track they want to be on and stay with it, to say, Someone is here, we have your back, you’re not alone. We know that students are reaching out to their peers to offer a shoulder to lean on and to share encouraging words and inspiration. But these educators, counselors, administrators, community partners, and students were doing this long before the pandemic hit; they have spent years working and living alongside young people who at some point disengaged from school, many of whom navigate significant economic and social precarity, and many of whom have felt pushed out or policed out of the school system. These are the experts of student engagement, the endless wells of care and compassion, the pedagogical innovators to whom we must turn to envision a way forward.

We offer here a set of recommendations that have been collaboratively defined by transfer school students, alumni, educators, administrators, and community partners, drawing from our data while speaking to broader discussions of education policy. We believe that acting on these recommendations will strengthen and sustain the vitally important work that alternative transfer schools do.

**Recommendation 1**
Decouple standardized testing from graduation and expand the portfolio of pathways to attain graduation.

This report makes evident the reality that not all students follow the typical path to graduation. The New York City Department of Education and New York State Education Department should facilitate access to a range of innovative, alternative schools by

- Providing a variety of educational options for all students, and specifically developing and
supporting models that address the needs and potential of youths, ages 15 to 25, in the system who have experienced trauma and are statistically most likely to drop out;
- Providing more information about transfer schools and other options through counselors, educators, and community-based organizations and removing disincentives that deter some schools from helping students find alternatives;
- Eliminating the requirement of standardized testing to graduate from high school, thus joining the 39 other states in the country that do not require a high-stakes exam to graduate.

**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.**

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) established a 67 percent graduation rate, but a history of federal regulation also makes clear that alternative high school campuses are to be treated differently in accountability systems. For these schools, the 67 percent graduation rate is an irrelevant cutoff that does not align with the goals and mission of alternative transfer schools, which include keeping their doors open to all students, especially those who have fallen behind on narrow and linear academic benchmarks. Transfer schools and their students have been burdened by punitive oversight and threats of closure based on metrics that do little to capture their success and accomplishments.

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 and declare a moratorium on transfer school closures, recognizing the important role of these schools and the need to expand, not reduce, pathways to postsecondary success, particularly in this moment of crisis.

Schools should be held accountable with a range of measures that highlight their strengths and address their challenges. To accomplish this, the state should form a blue ribbon commission led by students, alumni, educators, counselors, administrators, community partners, internship coordinators, statisticians, and school leaders familiar with these schools to develop an accountability framework that ethically

- Uses methods other than standardized tests to assess graduation readiness and considers the effect of the assessment itself as an intervention that shapes school culture and student experience.
- Measures the social-emotional learning and nonacademic gains students make at transfer schools using qualitative data, such as interviews and focus groups.
- Establishes a robust peer-to-peer comparative database where student data can be assessed in comparison to like peers within and outside the school system, by factors such as age, credit, ELL and special education status, and other aspects of students’ educational experiences and background.
- Accounts for and celebrates student improvement before and after they transfer,
Conclusions and Recommendations

on measures such as GPA, attendance, and credit accumulation.
- Reassesses the use of high school cohorts, and implements measures such as overall completion rates, predicted versus actual graduation rate, and non-dropout rates to record the progress transfer students make without penalizing their schools for taking them if they have fallen behind on credit accumulation or other linear academic benchmarks.
- Includes qualitative and quantitative measures of student outcomes up to six years postgraduation, so that the experiences of alumni are included in the accountability framework.

Recommendation 3
Shift resources from policing to nurturing students through funding to transfer schools and their partner community-based organizations (CBOs).

Strengthening and amplifying the long-term and deep connections between schools and community-based organizations that have been built into alternative transfer schools need to be a priority, during the pandemic and after. This will require sustained and substantial investment from the city and state. The budgets of transfer schools and their partner organizations have been cut consistently over the past years and face the prospect of further cuts amid drastic budget shortfalls just as the need for alternative schools and student supports has increased. As transfer schools have received more students, and more students with special needs, they have received fewer resources to responsibly and ethically educate them. This report makes it clear that investing in social supports, culturally responsive teaching, and mental health partnerships, particularly in peer-led models, is crucial. The city and state need to prioritize financial support for innovative schooling models, like alternative transfer schools, that provide students with more flexible scheduling, internships and apprenticeships, social and emotional support, and culturally relevant curriculum and teaching.
Limitations of the Study

The Transfer School Student Discovery Project has significant “on the ground” validity, and yet some limitations as a research project. The survey was designed to be programmatic, to generate information to be “of use” to the schools and to Eskolta School Research and Design (see Appendix D for example survey questions). That said, the initial overarching questions were broad:

- What challenges and successes are participating students experiencing that aren’t measured or understood by city/state accountability metrics?
- What obstacles do students face and what are their schools doing to help them?
- How can the participating schools better know and support their students?
- What do participating students want from their schools and their education? What do their current schools offer them that previous schools they attended did not?

In terms of the sample, The Discovery Project was voluntary. School principals and administrators signed up to participate online. A majority of the schools that signed up had previous relationships with Eskolta. Students from twenty-one schools designated as transfer schools participated—almost 50 percent of all schools in New York City that are designated as transfers. Response rates per school varied, and schools were only included in the analysis if they had twenty students or more who responded.

The initial analysis of responses was conducted by Eskolta staff as part of the program for school support, and then the integration of official databases, quantitative survey data, and student narratives was the responsibility of the Public Science Project. Because of limitations in the sampling strategies and survey data collection, we were not able to conduct disaggregation (for example, by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or immigration). Additionally, identifying information, such as student ID number and name, were not collected in the initial survey, which meant we could not look at academic histories (grades, credit accumulation, test scores, etc.) for participants. Furthermore, as is previously mentioned, a profound limitation of this study is that it began with a participatory framework—including students and educators in the development and implementation of the survey—but this participation shrank as the project continued.

In terms familiar to critical participatory action research (Fine, 2017), we offer the findings not to argue that they are statistically generalizable to all young people who have attended alternative schools in New York City or the nation. We offer this report, which we believe to have high construct and contextual validity, because we hope to evoke what Fine has called theoretical generalizability. That is, we anticipate that the ideas contained here will speak to educators, policy makers, advocates, students, organizers, and researchers about the importance of multiple pathways and opportunities to succeed, particularly for the students who are most marginalized by our social, political, and economic decisions; will reveal the complexity of why young people leave school prior to
Limitations of the Study

graduation; will explore the stunning passions of those who seek to return to complete their educational journeys; and will recognize the relational depth of transfer schools that beat the odds.

In a time of global crisis, when the structure of inequality lies bare, we see this report as a crucial response to long-standing accusations of racial and socio-economic injustices laced throughout our education system. We hope to hand this report to legislators and policy makers, educators, students, community organizers, advocates in the Movement for Black Lives, immigrant rights’ activists, queer justice organizers, and practitioners and clients working for mental health and disability justice in/through schools. Privileged students get second chances daily. Young people who are marginalized by our collective social and political choices and systems deserve no less—and undoubtedly more.
Eskolta is a nonprofit organization that has worked with many of the transfer schools in New York City since 2010. Its mission is to work with educators to create a more equitable society by fostering a culture of compassion, respect, and high expectations in public schools, so students can thrive, particularly those students that have been denied an equitable education.

Eskolta’s Transfer School Conference, offered in partnership with the New York City Department of Education, brings together more than one thousand educators from 35 to 40 of the City’s 55 transfer schools every year. Here, educators and their students engage in workshops and interactive opportunities to explore their successes and challenges, from academics to social-emotional supports, to programming and scheduling for a population of students who are not who the system was designed for.

Eskolta’s trained facilitators, many of whom are themselves former transfer school teachers and counselors, work with teams of educators at transfer schools to help them make gradual and concerted changes in practice to adapt to the unique needs of their student bodies. Eskolta’s school design projects often last six to nine months and result in teams designing new activities and protocols that they use to set goals with students, provide them with targeted feedback, create supportive counseling relationships, assess skills and competencies students are working to master, and more. These efforts are rooted in six best practices for equity and excellence: strength-based culture that cultivates students’ learning mindsets; mastery learning of comprehension skills through relevant content; transparent feedback that develops students’ metacognitive skills; student-centered scheduling and programming for individualized pathways to postsecondary success; personalized guidance on the path to successful life after graduation; and culturally-responsive classrooms that address historical inequities by promoting and honoring the cultures, lives, and experiences of students, their families, and their communities.

Eskolta’s efforts are not only rooted in research-based best practices but also in a commitment to actively engaging, exploring, and understanding the lived experiences of the students in transfer schools. In partnership with New York City Public Schools, Eskolta has offered two institutes for years: the Academic and Personal Behaviors Institute asks educators to better understand, explore, and thereby address the behaviors and beliefs that students need to succeed in the school setting; the Multiple Pathways Institute asks educators to explore and cultivate the academic pathways to success in transfer schools. More recently, Eskolta launched its own network with support from the Gates Foundation, bringing together schools in New York and Boston to explore together how they can better serve and support students who have fallen behind in school. The Transfer School Student Discovery Project was an effort to more deeply understand the students in transfer schools in New York City.
APPENDIX B

Why the Transfer School Student Discovery Project?

A Letter from Michael Rothman, Executive Director of Eskolta School Research And Design

The first time I met Evin, he began our conversation with an invitation: “Don’t let me scare you.” He shook my hand. “I mean, I guess I’m not what you expected.”

I didn’t know what I had expected. Evin was twenty, a good-looking young man, Dominican, and sporting a pencil-thin mustache. He walked with a swagger and wore a red do-rag. His principal had described him as a brilliant student who was reflective about his educational journey in the context of homelessness and gang involvement. I’m not sure what Evin expected of me, a gray-haired white man. I had asked him to speak at Eskolta’s annual conference, where hundreds of New York City educators who work in transfer schools (New York City’s alternative high schools) assemble to share practices.

At that first meeting, Evin and I didn’t know each other, and perhaps came with several assumptions about each other, but over the coming weeks, as Evin and I worked together on his speech, we got to know each other a lot better. He told me about his years on his own, his time living on the street in Florida, his brother’s problems with the law. He taught me about people I had never studied myself, historical figures who drew connections between slavery and housing projects, between the perception of race and social oppression. I urged him to connect all his ideas together on paper. We wrangled most of all on one point: Please, as you speak to hundreds of educators working with students like you, I asked him, end on a positive note.

On the day of the conference, he had rehearsed the whole speech with me, except the last line. For that, he cracked a wry smile and told me: “Don’t worry, it’ll work.”

The crowd hushed as Evin stepped up to the mic and spoke: “Many years of observing the many things that hold us, the people, back from being united leads to what I want to share with you today. . . . [He had the audience rapt from the start.] . . . Scared of what? The image of the streets? The thought that we are violent? Fear is often an illusion created by the mind to justify the very reason why we believe we can’t do something. . . . [The transfer school I attend] never will be just a school to any of the students that attend. [It] will and forever will be a home for those that are lost or spit through a system designed to fail us. That is what a transfer school can be for us.”

Finally, he closed: “I was told it would be best to close this with an overall message of hope. Sadly, that is not what I came here for. Hope is just another word to bypass the ongoing prob-
lems. We have to be the change that we wish to see in the world.”

Four years after his speech, I contacted Evin, now in his second year of college, to talk about a project we were working on. In the spring of 2018, more than twenty transfer school principals joined the Transfer School Student Discovery Project, an effort to better understand the experiences and lives of students enrolled at their schools. A pair of alumni and a team of students worked with us to develop a survey to investigate the experience and beliefs of their peers in New York City transfer schools and to help principals understand how this information could be used to nurture their students and report on their progress.

Almost any data point you can find about Evin painted him as a failure until he finally graduated from high school and was deemed, by dint of that single changed data point, a success. But every time I talk to students in transfer schools, I encounter teenagers, like Evin, who share stories of challenges far greater than anything I faced in my childhood and express insights far deeper than anything that was available to me in my youth. Their successes are too often invisible in our data, not only because we have not figured out the right data to collect, but also because the systems as they have been developed have been designed to shut out those stories and to keep those successes tamped down.

Many transfer school students have failed tests and failed classes. But how are we to understand failure? Thousands of statistically “successful” students who have earned good grades and passed state tests have grown up to be adults contributing to a society where income inequality continues to grow, where health outcomes are worse than most other developed nations, where human activity is contributing to the mass extinction of species. This is not to say that students who are chronically absent are saving the world while others are not; rather, it is to say that to focus on school data for which no causal relationship has been established with social progress is myopic at best. While we must indeed question how we are cultivating success in our schools, we must also question how we are defining that success, who is defining it, and why.

By learning from the stories and experiences of transfer school students, I hope that we can better discern the possibilities that are currently invisible in school data.

Michael Rothman
Executive Director, Eskolta School Research and Design
The “Students Talking about Transfer Schools” survey was implemented in 2018 as a voluntary programmatic exploration of transfer schools and their students. Initiated by Eskolta School Research and Design, the design of the survey was participatory. Questions were drawn from the experiences and input of students, counselors, graduates, and educators. A small intergenerational team of educators, staff, and students curated the final survey. Surveys were distributed through the Eskolta network of transfer schools. A sample of students was sought that could represent the geographic and demographic diversity that animates transfer schools. Eskolta staff organized the data and presented much of it back to schools to support their efforts to sustain their successful strategies and to think about where shifts might be needed.

All data was provided to the Public Science Project de-identified. Only schools with more than twenty complete responses were included in the data set to preserve an additional layer of anonymity. There was no researchable hypothesis and no expectation that findings would be generalizable.

The analysis of responses by the Public Science Project was done on two samples: (1) a quantitative sample of all 842 complete responses, and (2) a qualitative sample of 188 responses, selected as a representative sample based on demographic aspects of respondents (for example, age, ethnicity, gender, race, borough of school, number of credits). In the qualitative sample, open-ended questions were analyzed using grounded thematic coding.

Quotes and vignettes throughout the report are compiled stories of students across survey responses. No names were provided to the Public Science Project and any student name used is a pseudonym.
APPENDIX D

Sample Questions from the Survey

Following is a list of sections and example questions that students responded to. The survey combined multiple choice and open-ended questions about students’ experiences with their current schools and with previous schooling, as well as students’ struggles, successes, and goals. Note that several demographic questions were also asked that are not listed here.

“Students Talking about Transfer Schools” (2018) Sample Questions

Section: Growth, Goals, and Obstacles
- Tell us about a moment in your time in school when you grew a lot as a person. How did you grow? Who and/or what supported your growth?
- In a few sentences, tell us about what led you to transfer to your current school.
- Many students face obstacles in their lives. What have been the biggest obstacles to your progress as a student?

Section: Experience of Current School
- How has your current school helped you overcome obstacles you selected?
- How do adults that work at your current school view you as a student?
- What does success look like for you as a student at your current school?
- To what extent do you have a sense of purpose at your current school?
- Do teachers think you can succeed at your current school?
- Do your teachers think you can get smarter if you work hard at your current school?
- Do you feel like you can trust the adults at your current school?
- Which skills has your current school helped you to improve?
- Is there one skill that has been a major improvement for you? If so, which one and how did your school help you improve?
- Is the curriculum and teaching style different at your current school than at your previous school? In what ways?
- What do you wish your school offered that it doesn’t?

Section: Experience of Previous School
- To what extent did you feel like you had a sense of purpose at your previous school?
- Did teachers think you could succeed at your previous school?
- Did your teachers think you could get smarter if you worked hard at your previous school?
- Did you feel like you could trust the adults at your previous school?

Section: Impact of Transfer
- What is a specific example of how you think your life would be different if you had not transferred to your current school?
- If you could sit down with the new Chancellor of NYC schools and tell them about what gifts transfer school students have and why transfer schools are important, what would you say?
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New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) graduation results can be found at [https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/academics/graduation-results](https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/academics/graduation-results)

New York State Education Department (NYSED) statistics can be found at [http://www.nysed.gov/](http://www.nysed.gov/)


* Solutions Not Suspensions New York, [https://www.solutionsnotsuspensionsny.org/](https://www.solutionsnotsuspensionsny.org/)


