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# Helping Students Get Back on Track

What Federal Policymakers  
Can Learn from New York City's  
Multiple Pathways to Graduation Initiative



## The Imperative: Getting Students Back on Track

The nation is increasingly focused on the goal of ensuring that students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Meanwhile, millions of students are leaving high school under much less promising scenarios: they have dropped out due to academic failure, lack of engagement in their education, and challenging life situations. Nationally, there are 6.2 million young people aged sixteen to twenty-four who are not in school and are lacking a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> These students—disproportionately poor and of color—face a life of reduced opportunities, with economic, civic, and societal costs to the nation.

The call to action to address the dropout crisis has bubbled up to the federal level, where policymakers are dedicating funding and offering solutions, including proposals to be part of the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Much of this attention is rightly focused on the two thousand high schools with the lowest graduation rates, which together account for more than half the nation's dropouts.<sup>a</sup>

However, research and emerging practice across the country indicate that this school-centric strategy must be complemented with one that addresses the specific educational needs of those students most likely to drop out of school—off-track students—in an effort to prevent them from dropping out. Off-track students, or those who have fallen behind in credits or are over-age for their grade, make up a significant portion of students who eventually drop out of high school.

Federal policymakers developing and refining policy to support the goal of graduating all students ready for success in college and careers must consider the needs of the off-track student population. These policies must include a coherent strategy that aims both to prevent students from falling off the path to graduation and to offer recuperative options for reengaging students when they do. Federal policymakers should draw on research and best practice in this area, particularly the efforts in leading districts implementing an emerging approach known as “multiple pathways to graduation.” These efforts acknowledge that different high school students need to learn in different ways and in different settings in order to reach the same high standards. As a result, they are standards-aligned, data-based approaches that identify off-track students and build education options tailored to their particular academic and nonacademic needs and that remove barriers to graduation. Implicit in any multiple pathways to graduation approach is the goal of getting students back on track to graduate with a diploma that is based on rigorous academic standards and indicates their preparation for both college and careers.

Many of these efforts under way across the country are modeled after the New York City Department of Education's (NYCDOE) Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG) initiative, which has attracted national attention for its innovative approach, the size and scale of the effort, and early indicators of success. At the core of the data-driven, districtwide approach is the creation of a portfolio of recuperative schools and programs—all held to the same academic standards as other options within the system—designed to help off-track students meet state graduation standards and graduate prepared for meaningful postsecondary opportunities. The portfolio of recuperative options is based on the recognition that off-track students are a heterogeneous group and that different subsets of the group require different approaches to get back on track. These new education settings are characterized by three principles deemed necessary for student

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<sup>a</sup> For more information about these schools, see the Alliance's brief *Prioritizing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools*.

reengagement: (1) access to a range of rigorous academic settings designed to meet their particular academic needs; (2) relevancy created by connecting coursework with postsecondary opportunities; and (3) comprehensive support to mitigate academic and personal challenges.

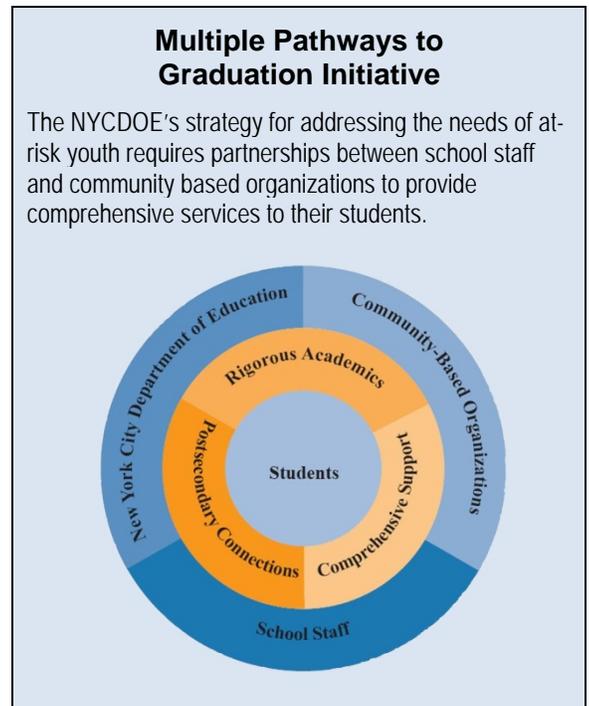
To implement these strategies districtwide, the NYCDOE collaborates with a cadre of community based organizations to build capacity for wide-scale reform and serve as partners to each site. The focus of the MPG initiative is the over-age and undercredited (OA–UC) student population—students who are at least two years off track relative to expected age and credit accumulation toward earning a diploma. In 2005, according to an analysis by the Parthenon Group, these students graduated at a rate of only 19 percent and represented 93 percent of all New York City dropouts.<sup>2</sup> Five years later, preliminary indicators of the success of the MPG initiative are starting to emerge. One piece of the initiative’s strategy, transfer schools, has a median graduation rate of 52.5 percent—significantly higher than the previous average of 15 percent for similar OA–UC students enrolled in traditional high schools.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the success of the initiative has been a contributing factor in districtwide improvements: according to New York State’s calculations, the city’s dropout rate has decreased by nearly half, from 22 percent in 2005 to 11.8 percent in 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Many connections exist between the New York City experience and the conversations going on at the federal level around policies to address students at risk of dropping out. While New York City’s situation is unique—few cities can boast the vast resources the district has, such as its large network of community based organizations—there is much to be learned about utilizing data to develop models designed specifically to address the needs of students at risk of not earning a high school diploma. Lessons can also be drawn from the challenges the NYCDOE has faced in implementing its approach and instances where existing policies or the limitations of the current system have posed barriers.

This brief examines the landscape of the federal role in addressing the nation’s off-track student population and explores ways that federal policy can be strengthened to better serve these students. It concludes with a look at the New York City experience as a case study of such work, drawing out relevant lessons learned that can provide valuable context for the federal conversation.

## The Challenge to Federal Policymakers: Address the Off-Track Population

Given the recent attention to addressing the dropout crisis and the historic federal role in targeting the lowest-performing and most disadvantaged students, the off-track population is a necessary focus for federal policy. Too often, the needs of these students and the realities of on-the-ground efforts to address those needs fall under the radar of the federal policy discussion.



In recent years, however, federal policymakers have moved to focus more attention on these students. After receiving no funding for several years, the High School Graduation Initiative received \$50 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, requested by the Obama administration for grants to school districts to provide dropout prevention and reentry programs to students most at risk of not earning a diploma. Currently, FY 2011 funding for this program is uncertain. In addition, Title II of the Graduation Promise Act, a bill reintroduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in early 2011 and pending reintroduction in the U.S. Senate, focuses on supporting the development of effective practices to address struggling high school students and to reengage those who have already dropped out.

As the reauthorization of the federal government’s primary piece of legislation related to education, ESEA, draws closer, federal policymakers are looking to combine these student-centered efforts with school-centric strategies into a comprehensive education bill. This section examines three of the policy goals emerging from deliberations about the impending reauthorization of ESEA. For each, the goal is considered from the perspective of off-track students and—drawing on the New York City experience implementing the MPG initiative for context—offers recommendations for federal policymakers to effectively address off-track high school students as part of ESEA.

## 1. **Aligning accountability metrics to the new goals of graduating all students college and career ready.**

There is growing consensus around the idea that federal policy, specifically ESEA, must codify that the goal of K–12 education has shifted from graduating “proficient in basic skills” to graduating “college and career ready.” The widespread efforts to develop the common core state standards (now adopted by forty-four states) have done much to help define the knowledge and skills needed by students to be truly college and career ready. A critical next step is to design policies to help policymakers, the public, and educators evaluate students’ outcomes measured against these kinds of high academic standards. While it is not clear to what extent federal policymakers will retain, refine, or replace current law’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), most ESEA reauthorization proposals include a reconfiguring of the accountability system that better aligns accountability metrics to these new goals. To ensure that these policies address the needs of off-track students:

- **Federal policymakers should permit alternative settings to have reasonable flexibility in four-year graduation rate accountability.**

In order to effectively address the dropout crisis, schools, districts, and states must have a clear picture of their graduation and dropout rates and be held accountable for improving those metrics. For too long, these players did not have data that accurately portrayed the realities of the dropout crisis, nor did graduation rates play a prominent role in high school accountability determinations. Regulations promulgated by the U.S. Department of Education in late 2008 made significant and important improvements to high school graduation rate policy. Every state, district, and high school must now use a common formula to calculate an accurate four-year graduation rate and may also use an extended-years graduation rate that measures five- or six-year graduation. The 2008 regulations also require states to set long-term goals for graduation rates and set annual growth targets for high

schools to improve their graduation rates over time. A school's progress in meeting these growth targets will affect accountability determinations.<sup>b</sup>

To be effective and fair—and be accepted publicly as so—accountability tools and rules for alternative settings such as those that are part of New York City's MPG initiative must reflect their unique nature and situation. Because they are designed to serve students who have *already* fallen off track to graduate in four years, some considerably so, holding recuperative settings accountable for a four-year graduation rate does not always make sense. Instead, the goals of these settings are to reengage off-track students and ensure that they earn a diploma aligned to regular state standards as quickly as possible. Accountability measures for these settings should reflect these goals. Otherwise, there is little incentive for districts and educators to take on the difficult work of developing alternative settings for off-track students.

Federal policymakers should take steps to ensure that accountability metrics are both appropriate and useful for alternative settings. Despite recommendations from many in the education profession, the federal regulations did not acknowledge that some alternative schools, dual-enrollment schools, and other high schools are not designed to graduate students within four years and therefore should not be measured with a four-year graduation rate indicator. In cases where states elected to use only the four-year rate, all schools—including alternative schools—will be judged using only a four-year rate. Introduced during the 111th Congress and pending reintroduction this year, the Every Student Counts Act would codify the federal regulations with a few improvements, including an option for alternative schools to apply to states for flexibility around certain four-year graduation accountability requirements. Additionally, this legislation would allow the use of a graduation rate calculation that gives credit to schools that graduate students in more than four years while maintaining a primary emphasis on the four-year graduation rate. ESEA reauthorization should incorporate these and other provisions of the Every Student Counts Act.

- **Federal policymakers should help accelerate the ability to produce longitudinal statistics about students' actual outcomes in college and careers.**

Historically, alternative settings have a reputation for being dumping grounds for struggling students—a way for individuals to obtain a diploma or certificate without receiving a rigorous education. This poses a significant challenge for districts implementing systemwide strategies to provide off-track students with differentiated pathways to a diploma, such as New York City's MPG initiative. There is significant pressure—both internally and externally—to demonstrate that the students graduating from these alternative settings are receiving as rigorous an education as those in traditional schools.

Of course, the most direct way to measure the success of a school, district, or program in preparing students for college and careers is to track students' actual postsecondary participation and success. As the focus of the education system moves from proficiency in basic skills to college and career readiness, such detailed information must be available, transparent, and embedded in the daily business of education. Unfortunately, tracking students'

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<sup>b</sup> For more details on the 2008 regulations and federal graduation rate policy, read the Alliance's brief *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*.

postsecondary outcomes is beyond the capacity of most schools and districts, including those with alternative settings. In fact, often it is particularly difficult for alternative settings to obtain postsecondary outcome data for their students because many times students remain on the rolls of their original schools.

However, states can collect such data through statewide longitudinal data systems that house data about individual students over their academic career from multiple sources. There is growing momentum behind state efforts to link data across the P–20/workforce pipeline, and most states report that they have the ability to link K–12 data to workforce data (twenty-eight states) and postsecondary data (forty-one states).<sup>5</sup> This progress—due in large part to federal funding over the last five years—should continue. As a condition for receiving State Fiscal Stabilization Funds as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, every governor and chief state school officer committed their state to building statewide longitudinal data systems that can follow individual students from early childhood through K–12 and postsecondary education and into the workforce. Many states should be able to make progress on fulfilling those commitments as a result of federal grants allocated for the specific purpose of improving these linkages, including the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems program and the Workforce Data Quality Initiative.

However, states' progress in the ability to collect postsecondary data does not guarantee that information is being shared publicly or even with districts and schools. As of 2010, only nineteen states report providing feedback reports from postsecondary education to high schools.<sup>6</sup> Only eight states currently publicly report college remediation rates at the school level.<sup>7</sup>

Federal policymakers should help accelerate states' progress in collecting and sharing postsecondary success data by continuing to invest in the development of state data systems and increasing pressure on states to build linkages across the P–20/workforce pipeline. They could also require states to provide postsecondary success data on public report cards or provide feedback reports directly to high schools.

## 2. Leveraging data-driven approaches to high school improvement.

There is near-universal consensus that the current federal school improvement system needs to be reinvented, infused with more and better data, tailored to meet the individual needs of schools and students, and focused on addressing the lowest-performing high schools. To ensure that these policies address the needs of off-track students:

- **Federal policymakers should embed additional school performance indicators into school improvement systems, such as data on students' on-track status or the percentage of off-track students, and ensure that indicators used in alternative settings are appropriate.**

Current federal policy requires districts and schools that receive federal Title I funding and fail to meet annual progress goals—AYP—to implement a number of one-size-fits-all strategies that are not designed to improve teaching and learning or to address the specific challenges faced by the student population. In response to this issue, most current proposals include the use of additional indicators—beyond test scores and graduation rates—as an integral part of accountability and school improvement policies.

In order to ensure that school improvement strategies target the school's unique challenges, it is critical that state, district, and school leaders start using additional data to identify problems and implement solutions to improve low-performing high schools. For alternative settings such as those that are part of the NYCDOE's MPG initiative, these indicators could include the percentage of off-track students, attendance rates, and credit accumulation rates. Prioritizing and highlighting such data through improvement systems can help educators better understand and address student challenges and focus communities on the issues that are more relevant to student and school success.

Federal policymakers should require states and districts to include in these systems a set of school performance indicators with annual progress goals that will be used to differentiate among low-performing high schools, plan interventions based on that differentiation, drive resources, and measure progress. Federal policymakers should refrain from requiring a universal approach; at this point it is best to let districts and states experiment and innovate. Leading states and districts such as New York City are already implementing such strategies: federal policy should not overwrite or undermine these efforts. However, federal policymakers should ensure that recuperative settings or off-track students are subject to indicators that are reflective of their design and purpose.

### Federal Policy Highlight

Several legislative proposals aim to ensure districtwide secondary school reform efforts address the off-track student population. The Graduation Promise Act would invest \$2.5 billion in new funding for state and district strategies to turn around or replace low-performing high schools; districts could use this funding to analyze their student population, create appropriate settings to meet their academic needs, and implement improvement strategies like those discussed above. The Success in the Middle Act would target the middle grades that feed into those low-performing high schools, providing funding for the implementation of preventive activities such as early-warning systems and graduation plans. Both of these bills emphasize the role of external partners in successful implementation. These policies would support district efforts, like those in New York City, to address the lowest-performing high schools.

- **Federal policymakers should require any federally funded, districtwide high school improvement efforts—those funded through Title I, including School Improvement Grants, or a competitive grant program—to analyze their data to identify, understand, and develop recuperative options for their dropout and potential dropout population.**

As mentioned above, current federal policy has primarily utilized a one-size-fits-all approach to improving high schools. It has also relied on school-by-school strategies without much attention paid to other activities necessary for improvement. As a result, school improvement funding is not necessarily used to implement data-driven strategies that will address critical districtwide challenges, such as addressing the off-track population. To meaningfully drive improvement, however, federal policy should require districts and schools to take a data-driven approach to identify and implement school- *and* district-level improvement strategies.

In New York City and other districts implementing systemic recuperative strategies, data-driven problem solving is an essential component of the work. Data helps district leaders identify, isolate, and understand critical factors of failure and success, find potential solutions, and demonstrate results, all critical to both leveraging continued support for the strategy and identifying areas of necessary expansion and improvement. Given the strong correlation between falling off track and dropping out of school, it is all but guaranteed that districts using a robust data analysis to inform their work will focus on off-track students.

Specifically, federal policymakers should require any federally funded, districtwide high school improvement efforts, including those funded through Title I, School Improvement Grants, or competitive grant programs, to (1) conduct analyses of their dropout problem to understand their off-track population; (2) in multi-school districts like New York City, use data to assess which middle and high schools in the district are successful at prevention or recuperation and, oppositely, which have the highest number of OA–UC students; (3) develop a districtwide strategy to address the off-track student population based on the data analysis in steps one and two; (4) ensure that recuperative strategies address the comprehensive needs of these students, including providing options that meet academic needs, addressing their nonacademic needs, and making deliberate connections to postsecondary life; and (5) partner with external entities, such as community based partners, to build capacity. This should be a real-time and iterative process, with the recuperative strategy changing as the characteristics and needs of the off-track population change. At the school level, federal policymakers should ensure that policies intended to either address low performance or stimulate innovation are designed to include a focus on the OA–UC population.

In districts where off-track students remain unidentified and underserved, these policies will focus attention on them. And in districts such as New York City where there are already systemic efforts under way, federal policy will merely be supporting current practices.

### 3. Investing in innovative strategies to experiment with new approaches and scale up best practice.

Federal policymakers are trending toward the use of competitive grants to fund states, districts, and partnerships that demonstrate high expectations and significant capacity and willingness for reform. To ensure that these policies address the needs of off-track students:

- **Federal policymakers should ensure that existing funding streams, such as those supporting professional development, preparation programs for both teachers and leaders, and the creation of partnerships, all address youth development principles and are targeted to the schools and programs serving the students with highest challenges.**

Federal policymakers should maximize existing federal programs to build the capacity of educators to serve off-track youth. Successfully educating and graduating off-track students requires a set of skills and strategies that is outside the capacity and knowledge of most educators. Systemically addressing off-track students' needs will require building these youth development skills and strategies into the traditional education system to help *prevent* students from getting off track. It will also require supporting educators serving in recuperative settings to develop those unique skills and address the needs of students who have fallen through the cracks. Finally, federal policymakers should encourage partnerships between schools and districts and community based organizations, which traditionally have expertise in youth development principles and can support schools and districts with this work.

- **Federal policymakers should dedicate a piece of the education research and development agenda to studying successful strategies for the off-track student population and to building the pool of potential partners for helping schools/districts provide nonacademic student supports.**

Successful approaches to addressing the needs of off-track youth have an additional benefit: their strategies should be embedded in traditional secondary schools to prevent students from falling off track. For example, New York City MPG sites continually focus on addressing adolescents' literacy deficiencies, operationalizing youth development principles, extending and improving instructional time through creative programming, and effectively partnering with community based organizations to address nonacademic needs. Federal policymakers should conduct research in these districts to identify how these strategies can be adopted and adapted in traditional secondary schools.

Implementing systemic strategies to address the off-track population will require new partnerships between the education system and external partners to build capacity and scale up reform. Unfortunately, few districts boast the rich pool of community based organizations and other entities that have the expertise and willingness to partner with schools in these areas. Federal policymakers should provide incentives for organizations with a track record of success to expand their services to additional districts with off-track populations and invest in the development of new partners.

- **Federal policymakers should continue to create opportunities to stimulate innovation.**

Every district that is implementing a systemic approach to address the needs of the off-track student population has found external funding to support the effort. Federal policymakers can help invest in these efforts through a variety of existing and proposed federal programs. The U.S. Department of Labor has provided funding to six cities to develop a multiple pathways to education approach. As part of the 2009 stimulus package, the new Investing in Innovation grants offered funding to districts and external partners to collaborate on innovative efforts to improve student outcomes; fourteen of the grant recipients have a secondary, middle, and/or high school focus.<sup>8</sup> The proposed Secondary School Innovation Fund Act would create a long-term funding stream for these efforts to stimulate innovation and replication in education. The efforts in New York City demonstrate how districts might use these competitive grants to implement innovative solutions.

Because of its breadth and scope, the New York City experience can provide valuable lessons to federal policymakers on all of these goals and recommendations. Though it should certainly not serve as a whole-cloth model for federal policy, the successes, failures, and lessons learned from the New York City initiative allow federal policymakers to learn from an extensive districtwide strategy to address off-track students.

## Background: New York City's Multiple Pathways to Graduation Initiative

New York City is the country's largest and most diverse school district. Its 1,400 schools and almost 75,000 teachers<sup>9</sup> serve nearly 1.1 million students, of which 80 percent are students of color,<sup>10</sup> 12 percent are English language learners,<sup>11</sup> and almost 70 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch,<sup>12</sup> a common measure of student poverty. In 2002, the four-year graduation rate was just 51 percent, and was even lower for poor and minority students.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in 2002, under the leadership of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his then chancellor of schools, Joel Klein, the NYCDOE implemented a strategic, data-driven approach to school reform intended to create a system of good schools and improve graduation rates. Many of the strategies employed were a dramatic scaling up of best practices implemented by groups of schools, some supported by external intermediaries.

Known collectively as Children First, these efforts have caught the attention of advocates, policymakers, and educators across the country for the breadth of the changes implemented and preliminary indications of success in improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps. Most promising is the steady increase of four-year graduation rates by as much as twelve points since 2005 according to state calculations and seventeen points since 2002 according to NYCDOE calculations.<sup>15</sup> (More information about the NYCDOE's districtwide strategy can be found in the Alliance's 2010 publication *New York City's Strategy for Improving High Schools: An Overview*, which describes the theory of action underlying the efforts and some of the specific strategies it has employed to improve high schools.)

In 2005 the NYCDOE opened the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) as a research and development center within the NYCDOE. The OMPG was charged with assessing the extent of the dropout problem, determining the specific causes of students' disengagement, and developing school and program models that would address these issues, reduce the dropout rate, and increase the number of graduates. As a result of this work, the OMPG developed and implemented a strategic initiative that employs a number of approaches that have relevance to high school reform efforts nationwide, including

- extensive use of **data** to identify and better understand the population of students who are at the highest risk of dropping out;
- development of a range of high-quality preventative and recuperative **education options** designed to meet the needs of various segments of the diverse at-risk population;
- a comprehensive approach to preparing students for success through the deliberate pairing of academic and nonacademic **support strategies** with clear connections to postsecondary education and careers to provide **relevancy**;
- maximizing the strengths of community based organizations through **school-based partnerships**; and
- implementation of **policies** to support successful recuperative strategies.

There is limited external data regarding the effectiveness of the MPG approach and the implementation of the specific models. NYCDOE-reported data indicates the following positive outcomes:

- The population attending MPG settings reflects the OA–UC population: 86 percent are Hispanic or African American, 83 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 16 percent are English language learners, and 11 percent are students with disabilities. This suggests that the initiative is effectively reaching its target population.<sup>16</sup>

### Securing Postsecondary Success Data About MPG Students

To measure the success of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG) initiative, the NYCDOE uses a number of familiar indicators of reach and impact, as can be seen in the text to the left. However, to collect postsecondary success data, the NYCDOE has had to rely on its community based organizations to survey MPG alumni: current response rates are just above 50 percent.<sup>14</sup> As described above, this is a challenge nationally. The city is in the process of establishing partnerships with external entities to manage postsecondary data, such as the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization that maintains electronic student records, to collect more comprehensive data. NYCDOE staff are hopeful that actual information about students' postsecondary success will provide evidence of the initiative's legitimacy and inform their efforts to improve the strategy.

- Since 2005, more than 15,500 students have graduated from MPG models.<sup>17</sup>
- The number of OA–UC students and dropouts under the age of twenty-one has been reduced by 13 percent, from 132,286 in 2005 to 114,584 as of March 2009.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2008–09 alone, more than 2,400 MPG students participated in internships provided through MPG.
- Roughly one quarter of the 2007–08 MPG graduates enrolled in two- or four-year colleges the following year.

In November 2010, Joel Klein announced his resignation from the chancellor post. In January 2011, Cathie Black, a former publishing executive, was appointed by Mayor Bloomberg to replace him. Three months later, Black resigned and Mayor Bloomberg announced Dennis Walcott, Bloomberg’s Deputy Mayor for Education and Community Development, as chancellor. While it is too early to know Walcott’s plans for the future of the MPG initiative,<sup>c</sup> the work done during the Klein years undoubtedly charted a course that will influence NYCDOE policy for a long time to come. The following pages summarize the MPG initiative as it was built under Klein.<sup>d</sup>

### **Data analysis demonstrates that “the dropout population is the over-age and undercredited population.”**

Using funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, OMPG partnered with the Parthenon Group—a strategic consulting firm based in Boston—to support comprehensive data analysis to better understand the dropout crisis and design solutions. Parthenon examined data on New York City youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, including students who had already dropped out. The core finding of the analysis—which would serve as the foundation for the NYCDOE’s decisionmaking process—is that nearly all New York City dropouts were at one time OA–UC, meaning they were at least two years off track toward graduation in terms of age or credit accumulation.<sup>19</sup> Other key findings:

- Approximately 138,000 New York City youth were over-age and undercredited and were either still enrolled in high school or had already dropped out.<sup>20</sup>
- This population included seventy thousand students who were enrolled in school.<sup>21</sup> This group of students alone is larger than the total student population in all but five other school districts in the entire nation.<sup>22</sup>
- Males, minorities, English language learners (ELL), and students with disabilities were overrepresented in the OA–UC and dropout populations.<sup>23</sup>
- Half of all students who entered the ninth grade in 1999 became OA–UC at some point in their high school career.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> In early 2011, the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation was moved under the NYCDOE’s Office of Postsecondary Readiness, signaling a shift toward incorporating MPG principles throughout the entire school system.

<sup>d</sup> Unless otherwise cited, details on the MPG initiative and MPG sites were obtained through site visits and interviews with NYCDOE administrators, students, and school- and community based organization leaders.

- Less than 20 percent of the OA–UC population ever received a diploma or GED.<sup>25</sup>

These findings are overwhelmingly clear; as noted by the NYCDOE, “The dropout population *is* the overage and under-credited population, just at different points in time.”<sup>26</sup> Regardless of the extent of their academic challenges when they entered high school, once students became OA–UC they were highly likely to drop out. Eighty-four percent of sixteen-year-olds with fewer than eight credits ended up leaving the system.<sup>27</sup>

### Segmenting the over-age and undercredited population.

In recognition of the fact that the OA–UC population is not homogenous, the NYCDOE used data to segment the population. The data analysis revealed that the OA–UC students who had dropped out fell along a spectrum of diverse age and academic progress variations. Most students were young and far from graduation, having earned less than one quarter of the credits necessary for graduation. Some OA–UC students were older and just missing a few credits—about five thousand were at least seventeen years old and very close to having the necessary requirements for a diploma.<sup>28</sup> Other students were close to aging out of the system at twenty-one but had few credits.

The OA–UC population was also diverse in terms of academic skills and reasons for becoming OA–UC. Many OA–UC students were already struggling when they entered high school: more than 70 percent of OA–UC students entered high school with insufficient literacy skills.<sup>29</sup> Yet one quarter of eventual OA–UC students entered high school with seemingly few academic challenges: they were on-age and had sufficient literacy skills.<sup>30</sup> These students must have, however, faced challenges—academic or nonacademic—during their high school years that derailed them from the goal of graduation.

### Identifying promising approaches for meeting the needs of OA–UC students.

Because of the academic diversity of the OA–UC population—in age, credits, academic skill level, and other factors—NYCDOE officials acknowledged that the necessary solutions would not be one size fits all. They also recognized that they did not need to reinvent the wheel: they could pull best practices from across the city into a comprehensive approach that would meet the diverse needs of the student population. Using the same data set as above, they identified existing schools and programs that had proven successful in educating and graduating OA–UC students in the past. The findings indicated that two particular settings had demonstrated promising outcomes with OA–UC students:

- Despite the fact that the city’s new small schools served higher proportions of students who are most likely to become OA–UC, fewer students enrolled in these schools fell behind in comparison to traditional high schools.<sup>31</sup> The NYCDOE concluded that these small schools were an effective *preventative* strategy for mitigating risk factors and keeping students from falling behind and later dropping out.
- OA–UC students in the city’s transfer schools—one type of alternative high school available in New York City—graduated at a much higher rate than those in traditional high schools. These transfer schools had significantly higher attendance, credit accumulation, and graduation rates than traditional high schools, even for ELL students and those entering high school at the lowest reading levels, who typically pose a challenge in traditional schools.<sup>32</sup> The NYCDOE concluded that these transfer schools were an effective *recuperative* strategy for reengaging and successfully educating OA–UC students, and expanding access to these schools should be part of their strategy.

## Developing high-quality, rigorous recuperative options for students.

NYCDOE officials explored the academic structures, instructional approaches, and nonacademic support that these successful settings used to effectively serve OA–UC students. With these findings—and the diverse needs of the OA–UC student population in mind, they designed a comprehensive, districtwide approach to help *prevent* students from becoming over-age and undercredited, and *recover* them even when they do. The set of recuperative models—referred to in this document as the MPG options—have very distinct academic purposes and are summarized here and described in more depth beginning on page 19. Except for the Access GED program, MPG options are all designed to usher off-track students to a regular diploma based on New York State’s Regents standards and are held accountable to meeting the same academic standards as other high schools in the district.

### Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG) Options

The NYCDOE created three distinct models, described in the boxes below, designed to serve different segments of the over-age and undercredited student population. Each MPG site participates in the Learning to Work initiative, described in the rectangle beneath the three boxes.

#### Transfer Schools<sup>e</sup>

Transfer schools are full-time day schools for OA–UC students who are already off track but still young and far from graduation. They are small, personalized environments with attention to individual success. To meet demand, the NYCDOE expanded the number of transfer schools that already existed in the system. These high schools are designed specifically for young students who have already started to fall behind in their freshman or sophomore year.

#### Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs)

YABCs are programs housed within traditional high schools and are designed to provide older students aged seventeen and a half to twenty-one who have already completed four years of high school with a flexible way to quickly satisfy graduation requirements without compromising academic rigor. Evening hours accommodate students who have already earned a significant number of credits but are having trouble completing high school because they have work or family responsibilities or are significantly older than their classmates.

#### Access GED

Students who are older and with too few credits to graduate before they age out of the school system at twenty-one can enroll in GED, not only to prepare for the GED exams but also to build skills such as literacy and critical thinking that will serve them once they earn the degree. Access GED, a full-time day program, provides a structured and community oriented environment, much like that of the other MPG options, that helps to keep students connected and engaged.

### Learning to Work Initiative

Underpinning each of these models is the Learning to Work (LTW) initiative. Each new MPG site participates in the LTW initiative: students receive additional programs and student support services, including support on nonacademic challenges to staying on track, guidance in career and college exploration and planning, opportunities for funded internships subsidized by the city, and job development assistance.

<sup>e</sup> There are several transfer schools and YABCs that were created prior to the OMPG work and do not participate in the Learning to Work initiative. Statistics provided in the following pages regarding the results of the MPG settings are limited to the settings that do participate in the Learning to Work initiative, and therefore provide the full range of academic and nonacademic support and postsecondary connection explored in this brief.

Each MPG site is a collaboration between the NYCDOE and a community based organization. The NYCDOE provides an increased per pupil expenditure to MPG sites, and partnering with community based organizations helps to secure public and private funds to cover the cost of support services for students. Through a separate Learning to Work funding stream that flows from the city government, the NYCDOE provides support for counselors and stipends for students' internships.

Students enrolled in transfer schools and Young Adult Borough Centers are held to the same academic standards as students in traditional high schools: they must meet state graduation requirements to receive a diploma and must receive the state-mandated curriculum. As is the case in all of the city's schools, school leaders choose the instructional approach that will best address their students' needs. Given the fact that many students enter MPG settings with significant literacy challenges that undermine their academic success, many school leaders have implemented instructional models with a strong focus on using literacy strategies across the curriculum and engaging students in their own learning.<sup>33</sup>

The NYCDOE has implemented a number of strategies to help students navigate these and the many other enrollment choices available to them. A component of this strategy is the creation of five Referral Centers—one in each of the city's boroughs—staffed by counselors, social workers, and academic specialists well versed in the city's many educational programs and options. At the Referral Centers, counselors help students understand their transcripts, what they need to graduate, and how the available school and program options—including but not limited to the MPG options—fit with the student's academic and social needs and outside responsibilities. The Referral Center staff members serve as neutral agents for students, encouraging them to keep coming back to the referral centers until they can collaboratively find an option that works for them. The NYCDOE hopes the Referral Centers can also help reconnect out-of-school youth back into the system; as one official noted, “we are making a concerted effort to reconnect younger students to either their home schools or credit-bearing programs, in turn growing our capacity [in the GED programs] to serve older students for whom a GED diploma is the only option.”<sup>34</sup>

See the appendix for further description of the various MPG models.

### **Providing relevancy, engagement, and comprehensive support.**

The NYCDOE recognized that at-risk students face a number of academic and nonacademic challenges that can result in a student becoming disengaged from school. To help ensure that every student's experience at every MPG school or program addresses these challenges, they created the Learning to Work initiative (LTW). LTW's four components—which are woven into each model described above and are seen by site staff as critical strategies for reengaging OA–UC students—are:

1. program and student support services to mitigate complicating personal or social problems that could otherwise impede their academic progress;
2. career and college exploration and planning in order to create relevancy, fuel motivation, and guide the application process;
3. funded internships to provide real work experience; and
4. job development to provide the necessary skills for future success.

These components are not traditionally present in high schools. While the core principles of the youth development philosophy have guided successful out-of-school youth and young adult programs for years, they have largely been absent from traditional high school education. Behind the MPG approach and the LTW initiative is the idea that, in order to successfully serve OA–UC students, sites must combine a rigorous academic approach with more comprehensive support for students that engages them in their educational experience. The Youth Development Institute—a New York City nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance, research, and policy recommendations related to youth services—works closely with the NYCDOE and MPG sites to improve staff capacity to integrate such strategies; their synthesis of the basic principles of youth development is captured in the box below.

Dropouts and off-track youth often reported in surveys that no one cared about them or that they had no real connection to the adults in the education system. The comprehensive approach described above is designed to ensure that every student receives a loud and clear signal: that their education matters and that the adults in their school building care about their success. At each MPG site, counselors, alternately called “primary persons” or “advocate counselors,” are assigned a small number of students, ranging from twenty-five to forty. These counselors develop personal relationships with each of their assigned students, help them address personal and social problems standing in the way of academic success, provide referrals to services, convene groups of students for group counseling, and act as attendance counselors, calling students and making home visits after an absence or repeated tardiness. In fact, every MPG site implements an aggressive attendance outreach strategy.

Dropouts and off-track youth are often disengaged from their education because they see no connection between their school experiences and the much more immediate concerns of employment and family obligations. Successfully reengaging these students requires helping them to see the relevancy of their high school experience to their life after high school and understand the long-term benefits of their high school education. The NYCDOE has formally built these connections into the MPG model: upon enrollment, staff at each site work with each student to develop an individualized graduation plan and begin the exploration of future educational and career goals. Staff at each site also assist students in obtaining internships and facilitate internship seminars that allow students to learn from their work experiences within a guided framework. When MPG students talk about their high school experiences, it is often these projects, opportunities, and relationships with adults outside the school that they highlight as what differs most from the traditional high schools they left and the reasons for their success.

<b>Youth Development Principles</b>
<b>Caring and Trusting Relationships with Adults and Young People (Personalization in Education):</b> Young people who have strong and sustained relationships with caring adults and other youths have higher educational and career aspirations.
<b>High Expectations:</b> High student performance is associated with an emphasis on academic success, problem solving, and high standards of behavior, in combination with caring relationships.
<b>Youth Participation—Making a Difference to Others:</b> Strong schools provide students with opportunities to contribute their ideas and actions to help shape their classrooms and schools, and to contribute to their communities.
<b>Designing Effective Learning Experiences In and Out of the Classroom:</b> Students are engaged and perform better if they are involved in learning experiences that present them with real options and choices; combine emotional, sensory, and intellectual involvement; have clear goals and rules; allow them to take on diverse roles and use different strengths; allow time for self-reflection; and provide feedback specific to the work they complete.
<b>Opportunities to Learn New Skills and Knowledge in Authentic Projects:</b> Experiences such as classroom-based team projects and other structured activities that require collaboration with others and allow students to reflect on these experiences help prepare young people to work with others, communicate clearly, and solve problems similar to those they will encounter in higher education and the workplace.
Source: Adapted from the Youth Development Institute. <sup>35</sup>

## Partnering with community based organizations to increase capacity.

The MPG approach—with its LTW initiative, youth development philosophy, and focus on individualized and comprehensive services—demands much from the education system and its staff. They must deliver quality instruction, provide comprehensive support services, and build postsecondary experiences and planning for every student. Even in a district as large as New York City, district and school staff do not have the capacity to deliver quality instruction and the other services without assistance. To increase the system’s capacity to implement these strategies, the NYCDOE has incorporated external partners into the system in a variety of ways.

The NYCDOE was able to draw from the city’s large pool of community based organizations (CBOs) to support the MPG work. The Neighborhood Family Services Coalition—a group of New York City youth service providers and advocacy organizations—describes this resource as follows:

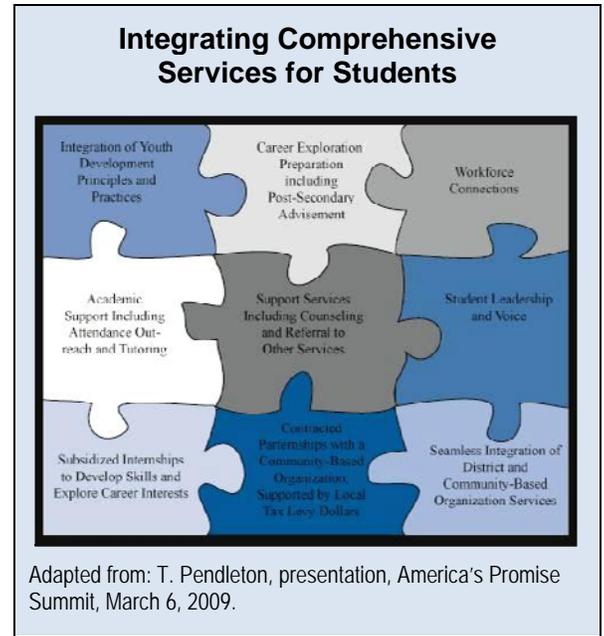
*New York City is recognized nationally as having a strong and diverse network of community based organizations that is unparalleled in other parts of the country. These programs are operated by organizations that range from small to large, including neighborhood groups, religious and cultural institutions, and local chapters of citywide and national organizations. Here, community partners and schools have worked together for more than twenty-five years, developing a variety of community-school partnerships that have become national models of collaboration and innovation, resulting in improved outcomes for children and youth. As such, community partners are viewed as a critical resource in the City’s efforts to develop a system of quality programs for all children and youth both in schools and in the out-of-school hours.<sup>36</sup>*

Partner CBOs are integrally involved at each MPG site. Sites are co-led by an NYCDOE employee and a CBO staff member. At these sites, CBOs deliver Learning to Work components and assist with other school and program needs, such as securing additional external funding and serving as an advocate for the school within the community. They provide on-site staff, including counselors, who are also responsible for securing internship opportunities with local organizations and businesses and following up with students for at least one year after they graduate. Of course, some sites are implementing the approach better than others. But at the best sites, the distinctions between NYCDOE and CBO staff are blurred; they collaborate to ensure that the connection between academic instruction and service delivery is seamless. As one staff member says, “The kids can’t tell the difference between the DOE and CBO staff.” The picture below is used by the NYCDOE to illustrate the range of integrated services provided to students. Twenty different CBOs have established contracted partnerships with LTW sites, and two CBOs work as technical assistance providers.<sup>37</sup>

The partnership with CBOs can help relieve some of the pressure on schools’ staff to address students’ academic and nonacademic needs. Vanda Belusic-Vollor, who currently serves as executive director of the OMPG, reflected on her experiences as principal of South Brooklyn Community High School, the transfer school that serves as the OMPG model: “These schools ... the staff and the students ... face significant challenges. In a traditional setting it’s really difficult for a teacher to be tough on say, a homeless student who hasn’t turned in their homework, when the teacher knows that student spent the night on the street. It’s difficult to find that emotional capacity to handle that situation. The shared leadership model with the CBOs helps clarify the roles and responsibilities of both sets of experts. The teachers can focus on the academics and the CBO staff can focus on the nonacademic issues.”

While the NYCDOE tapped CBOs primarily to implement its Learning to Work initiative, these partnerships have brought a number of benefits, including

- an expertise in working with disconnected youth that comes from years of working within the community;
- an ability, through CBOs’ other programs, to reach out to students who are completely disconnected from the school system, allowing more effective recruitment than the NYCDOE could do alone;
- established connections to other organizations and private foundations within the community that can cultivate fund-raising and other support for MPG schools and programs;
- a formal role for the CBOs that allows them to build their capacity and expand their reach beyond students they would typically serve; and
- external advocates for MPG models even if the administration or the system changes.



### Customizing school evaluation tools with metrics appropriate for alternative settings.

The NYCDOE has implemented multiple qualitative and quantitative tools to evaluate the progress and success of each school in the district, including a School Progress Report, which results in an A through F grade for each school. Jim Liebman, a former district official who led the development of the accountability tools, noted that “getting the accountability tools right” is one of the most important and most difficult components of a systemic improvement approach: “If people don’t view the metrics as fair, it undermines every other component of the strategy.”

#### Develop Leadership Capacity for MPG Schools

Districtwide, the NYCDOE’s strategy depends on having principals capable of effectively leading schools with increased authority, autonomy, and flexibility. The administration has taken a number of steps designed to improve existing principals’ leadership skills and to recruit and prepare new leaders to succeed in this environment. District officials also recognized that those principals charged with leading transfer schools face particular challenges because of their high-need student populations. To help train a cadre of school leaders to lead these schools, they created the Transfer School Scholars program. Five graduates of the program opened new transfer schools in 2007–08. Since that time, seven additional graduates have either opened new transfer schools or taken the helm of existing transfer schools. In addition, two graduates from this year’s program are set to open new transfer schools in September 2011.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, MPG models pose a particular challenge. In traditional high schools, the majority of students entering ninth grade together are expected to graduate, together, four years later. As a result, judging their progress and performance on a four-year adjusted cohort calculation reflects the schools’ design and purpose. By contrast, consider the transfer schools that are part of the MPG initiative. These full-time programs are designed to serve students who have already spent a year in high school. Students who enter the transfer school at the same time are at different stages of credit accumulation and progress, and will complete their program at different paces. By definition, transfer school students are not going to graduate in four years. As a result, judging transfer schools using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate would not accurately reflect their design, performance, and progress. This is true of various other alternative education settings across the country.

To ensure that the city's accountability system reflects the design of the MPG sites and accurately measures their performance and progress, the NYCDOE adjusted some of the metrics on the Progress Report for transfer schools and the Young Adult Borough Centers. Most notably:

- While traditional schools are evaluated based on four-year graduation rates and a six-year graduation rate, transfer schools are evaluated based only on six-year graduation rates.
- Traditional high schools are evaluated based on students' accumulation of eleven credits each school year. Because transfer schools serve students with a wide variety of credit accumulation histories and needs, each student's academic plan is tailored to their previous coursework and credit accumulation. To reflect this, transfer schools are instead evaluated based on students' average credit accumulation each semester.
- One of most significant academic challenges faced by transfer school students is poor attendance. To ensure that transfer schools are focused on implementing effective attendance strategies, transfer schools are also evaluated on improving students' attendance rates; traditional high schools are not.
- Traditional high schools are evaluated in comparison to a peer index of similar schools. Transfer schools are likewise evaluated in comparison to schools serving similar populations.

The NYCDOE continues to revise the progress reports and other tools to reflect the needs of the system, concerns of stakeholders, and schools' continuous progress.

## Conclusion

Local, state, and federal leaders have a responsibility to address the crisis in America's schools and help ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. As federal policymakers look ahead to opportunities to improve educational outcomes for all students, they should learn from research and emerging practice across the country. It is clear that addressing the needs of the off-track student population should be a core tenet of federal policy moving forward. These students present a significant challenge to the system, but the early signs of success for New York City's MPG initiative indicate that a robust, data-driven, and comprehensive strategy to address their needs has the potential to both change their individual lives and make a real improvement in the nation's dropout crisis.

## Appendix

### SNAPSHOT: Transfer Schools

Transfer schools are academically rigorous high schools that target students who are young but have already started to fall off the track to graduation or have already dropped out. Transfer schools are held to the same state curriculum standards and issue the same diplomas as regular NYCDOE schools.<sup>39</sup>

**Eligibility:** Each school sets its own admissions criteria in terms of age and credit requirements, but each is designed to accept students who have been enrolled in high school for at least one year and are sixteen or seventeen years old with fewer than the expected ninth-grade credits.

**Offerings:** During School Year (SY) 2009–10, there were forty transfer schools, twenty-five of which are part of the Learning to Work initiative. Nineteen of the twenty-five have been opened since the beginning of the MPG initiative. Total seat capacity of all transfer schools at the beginning of SY 2009–10 was 11,800 students.<sup>40</sup>

**Academic structure:** Transfer schools serve students with a wide variety of credits and past coursework. Each student receives a customized academic plan tailored to their previous coursework and credit accumulation. As a result, a school's schedule, course load, and configuration constantly change to reflect current students' needs. To this end, transfer school classes are small, with differentiated instruction focused on critical thinking skills, literacy, and meta-cognitive skills.<sup>41</sup>

Transfer schools are very focused on preparing students for success after high school. Instruction is structured with links to college and careers with some courses co-led by a teacher and a CBO staffer that develop life skills, work development, and planning for the future. Coursework emphasizes project-based and cooperative learning through guided group work. Teachers and students monitor their progress through regular benchmark assessments that give them a clear picture of how they are doing in each of their classes.

**Student support:** Transfer schools are designed with a youth development focus and to create a sense of community within the school particularly by fostering positive, personal relationships between a student and his or her teachers and counselors. As one transfer school program director notes, "Forming relationships is the most important thing with these students ... they need to have a safe environment." Through the LTW initiative, the on-site CBO staff and school staff work together to provide seamless academic and nonacademic support. Counselors are free to come into the classroom or pull students out of class to provide extra assistance with classwork or other needs, and teachers are trained in the youth development model and relationship building to supplement the work of the counselors.

**Educator support:** Transfer school educators face a unique set of challenges and expectations that are new to many traditional teachers, including collaboration with CBO staff and holistic approaches to student learning. Like other district high schools, transfer schools must select a school support network to provide instructional and operational support. Transfer schools are in a variety of networks including a number that are part of the network supported by New Visions for New Schools. Through these affiliations, transfer school educators share best practices. In addition to this ongoing staff development program, the NYCDOE and the Youth Development Institute, a nonprofit organization in New York City that assists with the application of youth development principles in schools, provide monthly professional development meetings for transfer school staff citywide. Transfer school administrators also have the opportunity to network with each other at monthly NYCDOE-hosted gatherings facilitated by the Youth Development Institute.

**Student results:** Attendance and credit accumulation rates—important factors contributing to graduation rates—have improved.

- **Attendance:** On average, students in transfer schools have increased their average daily attendance, from 40 percent before to nearly 80 percent after entering transfer schools.<sup>42</sup>
- **Credits:** They also earn an average of 8.4 credits per year, compared to the 4.8 credits per year that similar students accumulate at large traditional high schools.<sup>43</sup>
- **Graduation rates:** The median graduation rate for transfer school students is 52.5 percent, compared to an average of 15 percent for similar OA–UC students enrolled in traditional high schools.<sup>44</sup>

**Accountability:** In SY 2008–09, the NYCDOE rolled out a refined Progress Report for transfer schools to better reflect their context: it included a peer index to allow for comparison to schools serving similar populations. Most transfer schools performed well on the measures, receiving an "A" or "B" overall score.<sup>45</sup>

### SNAPSHOT: Young Adult Borough Centers

Young Adult Borough Centers are small programs, averaging 250 students, designed for older students who have accumulated some credits but face in-school or out-of-school obstacles that have threatened their graduation. YABCs aim to provide students with a diploma, a post-high school plan, the skills to implement that plan, and the relationships to be successful. To do this effectively, YABCs are operated as a partnership between a host high school and a community based organization, combining a rigorous academic approach with youth development philosophy. Housing YABCs at a host high school provides a cost-efficient way to provide students with full access to facilities, recreational opportunities, and interaction with peers and adults.

**Eligibility:** Students must be at least seventeen and a half years old, have at least seventeen credits, and have been in high school four years. Students are referred from their home school.

**Offerings:** In SY 2009–20, there were twenty-three YABC sites, including twenty-two participating in the Learning to Work initiative. Total seat capacity of all YABCs at the beginning of SY 2009–10 was 5,750 students.<sup>46</sup>

**Academic structure:** YABCs are designed to facilitate progress toward graduation. Students are held to the same academic standards as students in traditional high schools: they must meet state graduation requirements to receive a diploma and must follow the state-mandated curriculum. YABCs mimic community college structures—to accommodate students' competing responsibilities, most courses are held between four and nine p.m. in ninety-minute blocks, so each class only meets two days a week. Sites only offer the courses that current students need to graduate in addition to test prep courses for those who need to complete their Regents exam requirements. Two semesters and a summer session also allow efficient credit accumulation while still maintaining the same rigor of a traditional classroom. The structure of classes depends on the course—in addition to formal instruction, YABCs incorporate independent, project-based, and technology-supported coursework to expedite credit accumulation. Other services and opportunities—including tutoring, group activities, counseling, seminars, and Learning to Work programs—are offered during the day and weekends.

**Student support:** In addition to flexibility and customization, YABCs are designed to create a strong sense of community and safety. A YABC staff member explains that the primary objective is to “get students into the building” by creating an inviting environment—“otherwise, nothing else matters.” Each student is supported through a continuous process of goal setting through the development of a personalized high school and a post-high school plan for college or work.

NYCDOE and CBO staff collaborate to deliver seamless academic and nonacademic services to their students. Teams comprised of both academic and nonacademic staff meet to assess each student's needs and strategize about appropriate responses. Counselors and teachers communicate regularly so that counselors are aware of their students' academic progress and teachers understand their social and emotional needs. This is essential, explains a YABC staff member, because “in day school, these students have fallen through the cracks and [at YABCs] they want someone to recognize them and help them.”

**Educator support:** YABC educators face a unique set of challenges and expectations that are new to many traditional teachers, including collaboration with CBO staff and holistic approaches to student learning. One YABC staff member described the role of YABC teachers not as teaching but as facilitating. To support educators to be successful in this new environment, YABCs are required to implement a robust staff development program. Each YABC partners with a technical assistance provider and a facilitation coach. In addition to this ongoing staff development program, the NYCDOE and the Youth Development Institute provide monthly professional development meetings for YABC staff citywide.

YABC teachers work part-time at the program and generally teach full-time in other schools during the day. This can pose a challenge to YABC leaders, because they must work around a teacher's day schedule to schedule professional development, an essential component of working with YABC students.

YABCs receive instructional and operational support from the network that supports the day school they are part of. Like those from transfer schools, administrators from YABCs also have the opportunity to network with each other through the Youth Development Institute.

**Student results:** The graduation rate for students at YABCs is 50 percent, compared to 35 percent for similar students enrolled in traditional high schools.<sup>47</sup>

**Accountability:** The NYCDOE is working to create a YABC Progress Report that will “identify successful programs while simultaneously providing the proper incentives to serve the over-age, under-credited population.” A pilot progress report was released in the spring of 2009, and the NYCDOE is publishing the first official YABC Progress Report in 2011. Also, while students are enrolled in a YABC, they remain linked with their home high school for accountability purposes and receive a diploma from that high school when they graduate.

### SNAPSHOT: GED Programs

Although the district's goal is to set OA–UC students back on track to earning a diploma, the NYCDOE's analyses identified a segment of the OA–UC population that does not have enough time to complete graduation requirements before they turn twenty-one and age out of the school system. For these students, a GED is the only way to receive a high school credential, and the city's part-time GED program was producing unsatisfactory results, with only a 19 percent GED attainment rate for OA–UC students. The NYCDOE sought to provide OA–UC students with GED options that would serve not just as test preparation for the GED but also as a springboard to training, college, and/or employment. They created Access GED, a comprehensive, full-time program designed to prepare those students not only for the GED exam but also for success in college and work. They also made improvements to the part-time GED program, and connected many of the full-time and part-time GED programs with the Learning to Work initiative. The NYCDOE's GED programs, including Access GED, fall under District 79, the alternative high school district.

**Eligibility:** Students aged eighteen to twenty who can attend classes five days a week.

**Offerings:** In SY 2009–10, there were ten GED sites participating in the Learning to Work initiative, including three full-time Access GED sites and seven part-time GED Plus sites. Total seat capacity for these ten sites for SY 2009–10 was 950 students.<sup>48</sup>

**Academic structure:** The model also provides a formal structure for advancement that is unique to GED programs. The five phases of the model—Intake, Discovery, Demonstration, Application, and Commencement—provide students with a sense of progress as they proceed through the program. During the Intake phase, students meet for the first time with their individual counselor to establish a bond, plan their course of study, and identify and work to mitigate barriers to attendance and success. In the Discovery phase, students develop relationships with their peers, assess their study habits, and explore career options of interest to them. The Demonstration phase is the time when students take courses to build skills according to their individual needs. Students who enter Access GED at a ninth-grade reading level or higher may skip this phase and proceed to the Application phase, where students apply for the GED exams, engage in LTW workshops and internships to solidify their post-graduation plans, and attend intensive test preparation courses. In the final phase, Commencement, students receive assistance in the transition from Access GED to work or college.

The academics at Access GED sites are meant to be rigorous, even if they do not lead to a rigorous diploma, and entering students must demonstrate their willingness to strive to meet the challenge. The Access GED model is centered on creating a sense of community in an environment that otherwise would be a "community of strangers," as one Access GED principal describes a typical GED setting, due to continuous entry of students. In the Access GED model, there are controlled points of entry, creating cohorts that allow students to build relationships with each other as they move from class to class together as a group for the first six to eight weeks.

Courses are offered in six-week cycles according to current students' needs. All courses are interdisciplinary and integrate work and life skills while focusing on developing critical reading skills so that students are prepared to succeed in their next steps after passing the exam. Students complete intermediate benchmarks at various points during a course to measure their progress and identify areas for improvement. Students set their own pace and progress according to their individual needs. Students are encouraged to take their time through the phases in order to maximize their experience and make themselves as competitive as possible once they graduate.

Since students in GED programs typically do not have the opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency through standardized exams or assigned papers in courses, the Access GED model guides students to develop personal portfolios. These portfolios give students the opportunity to build a collection of work that includes autobiographical essays, a cover letter, and samples of work from their studies in GED exam content areas. Once students pass the GED exam, they can walk away from Access GED with a body of work in hand that can help them to secure their next steps in careers or postsecondary education.

**Educator support:** Access GED teachers are supported in various ways through this unique teaching and learning environment. The NYCDOE's District 79, the alternative high school district under which Access GED schools fall, provides instructional professional development for teachers, and principals may contract with other providers for additional professional development services. CBO staff provide teachers with professional development, particularly on youth development, and also facilitate LTW workshops for Access students, which affords teachers time for planning periods that they otherwise would not have.

Because they are not diploma-granting schools, Access GED programs are not a part of the Children First Empowerment or Accountability structure. Access GED principals receive instructional and business services from the district.

**Student results:** There has been a shift in enrollment patterns in the NYCDOE's GED programs since the MPG models were first developed. Because there are now other options for students who have dropped out or fallen behind and referral services available to help students choose the best option for them, the NYCDOE reports that the average age of students enrolled in any NYCDOE GED program, not necessarily just Access GED, has increased.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that younger OA–UC students who have more time before they age out are opting to pursue a more appropriate diploma-granting route by enrolling in transfer schools or YABCs instead of opting for the GED route. However, data also shows that only 1.6 percent of New York City's GED-eligible population took a GED test in 2006, and only 43 percent passed the exam.<sup>50</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Center for Labor Market Studies, *Left Behind: The Nation's Dropout Crisis* (Boston: Author, May 2009).
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- <sup>4</sup> New York City Department of Education, *NYC Graduation Rates, Class of 2009 (2005 Cohort)* (New York, NY: New York City Department of Education, 2010).
- <sup>5</sup> Data Quality Campaign, 2010 State Survey Results, available at <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/stateanalysis/actions/1/> (accessed March 15, 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> Data Quality Campaign, "Data for Action 2010: DQC's State Analysis: Preparing All Students for College and Careers" (Washington, DC: Author, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Achieve, Inc., *Closing the Expectations Gap 2010* (Washington, DC: Author, 2010).
- <sup>8</sup> Analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> New York City Mayor's Office of Operations, "Mayor's Management Report," available at [http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/downloads/pdf/\\_mmr/doe.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/downloads/pdf/_mmr/doe.pdf) (accessed March 15, 2011).
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- <sup>11</sup> University of the State of New York and the New York State Education Department, *New York: The State of Learning: A Report to the Governor and the Legislature on the Educational Status of the State's Schools* (Albany, NY: New York State Education Department, 2004).
- <sup>12</sup> Broad Prize for Urban Education, "The 2007 Broad Prize Data Report" (Los Angeles, CA: Author, 2007), available at <http://www.broadprize.org/data/2007DistrictDataReportNewYork.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> J. Bell-Ellwanger, "2006–2007 Achievement Highlights on Graduation Rates, ELA and Math Results" (New York, NY: New York City Department of Education, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> T. Crotty and T. Pendleton, *The Learning to Work Initiative, Year 4: Mid-Year Report—Continuing Innovation* (New York, NY: New York City Department of Education, 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> There are multiple graduation rate calculations available. The method used here is the NYC traditional calculation, which includes local and Regents diplomas, GEDs, special education diplomas, and August graduates. It does not include disabled students in self-contained classrooms or District 75 students. New York City Department of Education, *NYC Graduation Rates, Class of 2009 (2005 Cohort)*.
- <sup>16</sup> Data received from the New York City Department of Education, February 23, 2011.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Crotty and Pendleton, *The Learning to Work Initiative, Year 4*.
- <sup>19</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Multiple Pathways Research and Development."
- <sup>20</sup> J. Lynch and L. Hamilton, New York City Department of Education, "Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation: Over-age and Under-Credited Student Population Overview," presented at the American Youth Policy Forum briefing, December 6, 2007, Washington, DC.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Multiple Pathways Research and Development."
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> L. Hood, "The Impact of Data on Education," *Carnegie Reporter* 4 (spring 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Multiple Pathways Research and Development."
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> New York City Council, transcript of the minutes of the Committee on Education, April 26, 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Multiple Pathways Research and Development."
- <sup>33</sup> New York City Department of Education, *A Professional Learning Path to Rigorous and Relevant Instruction: Key Lessons from the Transfer School Institute* (New York, NY: Author, 2009).
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- <sup>37</sup> Crotty and Pendleton, *The Learning to Work Initiative, Year 4*.
- <sup>38</sup> Data received from the New York City Department of Education, February 23, 2011.
- <sup>39</sup> Hood, "The Impact of Data on Education."
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- <sup>41</sup> New York City Department of Education Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, *A Professional Learning Path to Rigorous and Relevant Instruction*.
- <sup>42</sup> New York City Department of Education, "Multiple Pathways Research and Development."
- <sup>43</sup> Data received from the New York City Department of Education, February 23, 2011.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Crotty and Pendleton, *The Learning to Work Initiative, Year 4*.
- <sup>46</sup> Data received from the New York City Department of Education, February 23, 2011.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Data received from the New York City Department of Education, August 19, 2009.
- <sup>49</sup> C. Anderson, personal communication, February 3, 2009.
- <sup>50</sup> L. Treschan, testimony before the Council of the City of New York's Education and Youth Committees, January 14, 2009.