

RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOL

inaugural graduations at New York City's new high schools

A study by WestEd  for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

*New Explorers High School
For Film and Humanities*



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Introduction



In 2002, New York City initiated an ambitious campaign to transform its public high schools, which, on average, had been graduating only half their students. This initiative was adopted by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel I. Klein in 2003 and later expanded into part of their comprehensive reform strategy known as Children First. As part of Children First, the lowest performing high schools in the City were replaced with new and smaller schools intended to prepare students for successful postsecondary study or work.

This report looks at 14¹ of the new schools that were created in 2002 and graduated their first class of students in 2006. The results are impressive:

- New York City's new schools reported a preliminary graduation rate of 79 percent.² The graduation rate is especially impressive considering that, as incoming ninth graders, four out of five students (i.e., 82% and 81%, respectively) did not meet New York State's standards for English language arts or math.^{3,4}
- A large majority (81%) of seniors at these new schools applied to college and, of those who applied, approximately 85 percent were accepted. Fifty-three percent of the graduates were accepted by at least one four-year college, and 53 percent reported that they would be the first in their family to attend college.⁵

These schools are largely located in neighborhoods characterized by low socioeconomics and families of color, and they

accept students by lottery.⁶ Racial and ethnic data are not available for the 2006 graduating cohort, but data for entering ninth graders in 2005-06 reveal heavy representation by two subgroups – Blacks (29%) and Hispanics (56%), populations that historically have been underserved, more likely to struggle academically, and overrepresented among dropouts.⁷

In recent years, the high school reform movement has gained momentum nationally, supported by more than \$1 billion in federal and private funding.⁸ Nowhere is the movement more concentrated than in New York City, which now has some 200 new small schools as part of its New Schools Initiative⁹ – the New York City Department of Education's plan to systemically improve students' education opportunities by increasing the supply of quality schools and forging community and private partnerships to support schools' endeavors. This initiative has benefited from and built on a legacy of pre-existing small schools in the city.



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIPLOMA
MOTT · HAVEN · VILLAGE · PREPARATORY
THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT
Emilia Shawndra Robertson
HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS
OF THE
HIGH · SCHOOL · PROGRAM
AND HAS MERITED GRADUATION
June 28 2006
Joel I. Klein
Ana Torrez Malabar

Making Good

ON THE PROMISE OF SMALL SCHOOLS

In June 2006, 56 students walked across the stage to accept their diplomas from Bronx Aerospace Academy. Of the students who began the Academy four years earlier,¹⁰ 93 percent graduated in June,¹¹ an impressive rate for even the most prestigious high schools across the nation. More remarkable yet is that 94 percent of these students had entered the ninth grade scoring below grade level in English language arts and 88 percent scoring below grade level in mathematics.¹² The school reported that 90 percent¹³ of this group or “cohort” will attend college in the fall, many of these students the first in their family to do so. Had these students enrolled in high school four years earlier, the story would likely have been very different. In 2001-02, the year before Bronx Aerospace Academy opened, Evander Childs, the large comprehensive high school in whose building the Academy was established (and which has since been phased out), reported a graduation rate of only 31 percent: fewer than a third of the students who entered as ninth graders finished their secondary education.¹⁴

Bronx Aerospace Academy is one of 14 new small high schools in the New York City (NYC) public school system that graduated their first class this year and that are profiled in this report. Many of them reported similarly positive preliminary graduation rates, averaging 79 percent across the schools.¹⁵ Equally noteworthy, all achieved these rates with students from some of the city's most underserved communities.¹⁶

How did this small but significant accomplishment come about in a school system whose approximately 1.1 million students

make it the largest local school system in the country¹⁷ and whose low 2002-03 graduation rates recently earned it a ranking of 48th among the nation's 50 largest districts?^{18,19}

The seeds for this success were planted more than a decade ago, in 1993, by the Annenberg Foundation, which funded the efforts of New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit reform organization (i.e., intermediary) specializing in development of new small schools. In 2000, New Visions partnered with the NYC Department of Education, the United Federation of

Teachers, and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators to further that early small schools effort through creation of the New Century High Schools Initiative (NCHSI). Two years later, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Open Society Institute, NCHSI opened its first 14 new small schools, all of which, including Bronx Aerospace Academy, held their first graduations in 2006.²⁰ (A 15th new school, High School for Violin and Dance, also graduated a class in 2006; however, it was not created through NCHSI and, while it has achieved similar success, it is not included in this report.)

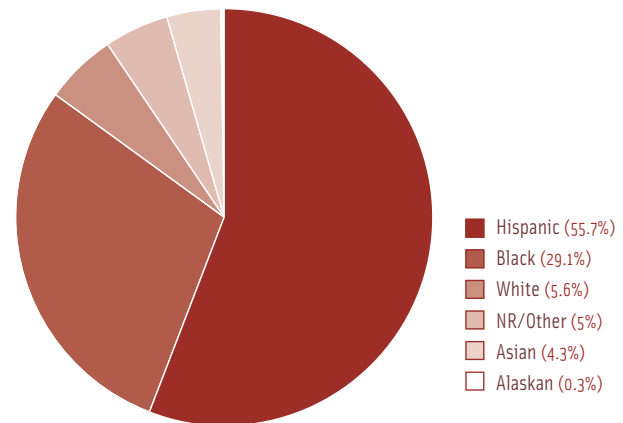
What follows is a snapshot of students from the 14 new schools featured in this report and the students' reported experiences. Due to the study's necessary use of incomplete and sometimes preliminary data, this report is descriptive in nature and not intended for making comparisons beyond the 14 schools considered in the study. The data suggest that the student populations at these 14 new schools tend to accurately reflect their communities.²¹ In addition, the data show that a majority of incoming ninth graders in these schools enter performing below grade level. In sum:

- *A majority of new schools' students are Black and Hispanic – populations that are generally considered to be most underserved by the traditional public education system. A majority of 2005-06 incoming ninth grade new school students are Black (29%) and Hispanic (56%).²² (See Figure 1 for details.)*
- *Most students enrolling in new schools are coming into ninth grade performing below grade level. A majority of*

the ninth graders entering school in 2005 did not meet New York State's standards for English (77%) or Math (69%).²³

- *New schools serve varying proportions of special education students and English Language Learners. On average, in 2005-06, 12 percent of incoming ninth graders at these schools were designated as special education and 18 percent as English Language Learners (ELLs), similar to systemwide averages of 12 percent and 12 percent, respectively.²⁴ The percentages of incoming ninth grade ELL students at new schools ranged considerably, with ELL students accounting for 1 percent at one school and 94 percent at another. The range, although not as significant, was also apparent for special education students who registered as 2 percent of the population at one school and 19 percent at another.²⁵*

Figure 1. Ethnic/Racial Populations of 2005-06 NYC's Incoming Ninth Grade New School Students²⁶





NEW SCHOOLS PREPARE STUDENTS TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

"Our school's mission is evident in the first line of our proposal, 'To provide a fundamental improvement in the educational lives of children in the Bronx.'"

– Captain Barbara Kirkweg, Principal, Bronx Aerospace Academy High School

From day one, new schools prepare students for success in life after high school, which may entail attending college or a university, entering the workforce, or joining the military. This section reports on the data collected from the first 14 NCHSI schools to graduate students, including interview data gathered at seven of the schools. When examining data on students at these 14 schools, WestEd found that

- attendance is high,
- ninth grade promotion rates are high, and
- a majority of students are graduating.

Attendance is high at new schools.

Research suggests a correlation between students' school attendance and academic achievement. The most recent data available indicate that in 2004–05, the average attendance rate for these 14 new schools was 89 percent.²⁷ Although a majority of students at these schools attend a school in their own neighborhood, others travel longer distances to attend their school of choice. One new school principal said that many of her students commute for two or more hours to get to school. One student, on track to graduate early, had to get up at 4 a.m. to get to school on time, yet never missed a day. This same school reported a number of students graduating with an attendance rate of 100 percent despite the three-day transit strike in 2005 that nearly shut down the city.

Ninth grade promotion rates are high across new schools.

Research suggests ninth grade promotion rates are indicative of whether or not a student will stay the course and graduate from high school. According to Roderick's 2006 study of the Chicago Public Schools, a student who is "on track" and academically

Growing New Schools in NYC

In 2002, the New Century High School Initiative (NCHSI) opened 14 small schools in NYC. The effort was nurtured and expanded when, in January 2003, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein pledged to provide all NYC students with a quality education through their comprehensive reform agenda, Children First. A key piece of this agenda was the New Schools Initiative,²⁸ aimed at raising students' graduation rates and preparing them for postsecondary success, whether in college or work. Central to the effort is the creation of small schools.²⁹

Since September 2002, 197 new small secondary schools have opened in New York City.³⁰ Many of these new schools were developed in partnership with NCHSI and other nonprofit intermediaries (e.g., The College Board, Urban Assembly, Asia Society, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound). The new schools are spread across all five boroughs of the city — with the highest concentration in Brooklyn and the Bronx. When Mayor Bloomberg first proposed his new schools strategy in 2002, he promised 150 by September 2008. Since then, he has redoubled his commitment, promising an additional 100 by 2009. Many of the new schools are housed together in buildings originally dedicated to large comprehensive high schools that have since been — or are being — phased out due to long histories of low performance.

able to move from ninth to tenth grade is more than three and one half times more likely to stay in school and graduate in four years than a student who is retained.³¹ The new schools studied focus particular attention on supporting ninth graders through this transition period. In 2005–06, the ninth grade promotion rate across the 14 new schools was 91 percent, and the year before the promotion rate was 92 percent.³²

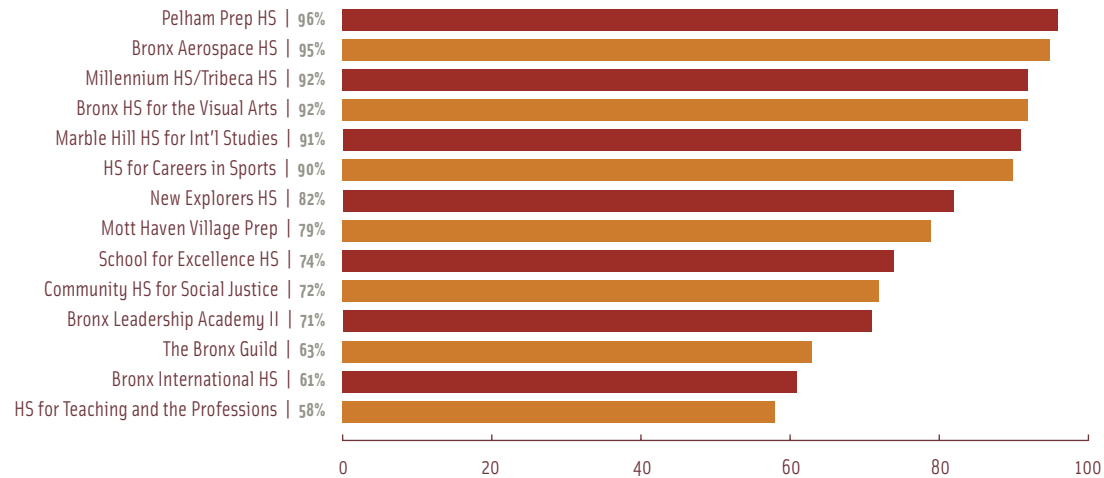
A majority of students are graduating from high school.

The preliminary graduation rates for these 14 new schools in 2006 — the first year in which these schools had a graduating class — are almost double the 2002 rates* of the traditional high schools in which many of these new schools are housed and which have been or are being phased out by the Department of Education.

- 2006 preliminary average four-year graduation rates for these 14 new schools was 79 percent and ranged from a low of 58 percent to a high of 96 percent³³ (see Figure 2). As with the system's traditional high schools, graduation rates varied considerably at these new schools but, overall, the graduation rates across these schools are higher than the average graduation rate citywide. The 2004–05 systemwide average graduation rate was 58 percent.³⁴

* The majority of new school students live in the neighborhood of their school. Had they started school four years earlier, they might well have attended the large traditional high school where their new school is now housed. Since some of these large "host" high schools have either been closed or are in the process of being closed, WestEd chose to compare graduation rates from the 14 new schools to the rates of the host schools at the point when they last existed as a fully intact school, which was four years ago.

Figure 2. 2006 Preliminary Graduation Rates: NYC New Schools³⁵ **



** While no longer the practice, two of the 14 small schools (Pelham Preparatory High School and Millennium High School) selected students for this cohort.

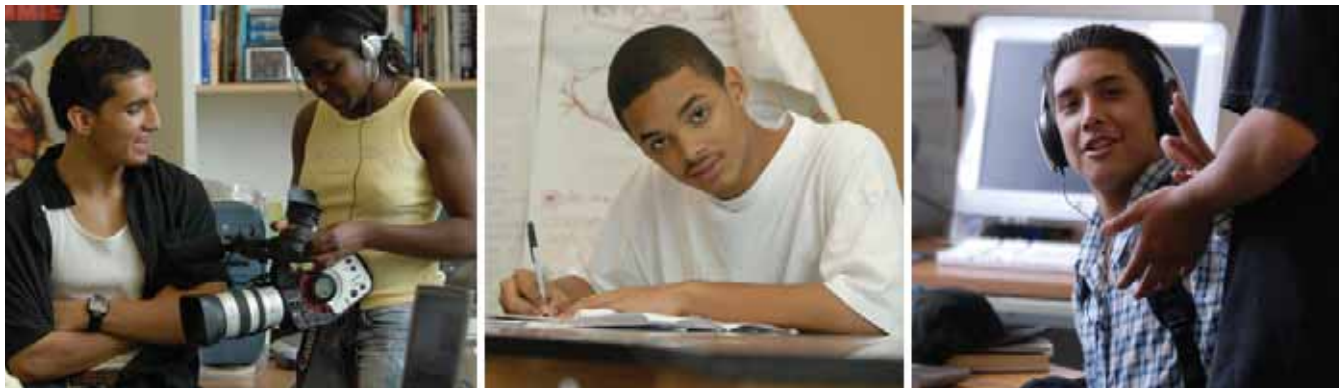
While some of the system's traditional high schools may offer some structures and programs similar to those of new schools, the focus of these new schools is consistent with the underlying principles of NYC's New Schools Initiative. Across the board they aim to

- promote academic rigor;
- ensure academic content is relevant to students;
- operate in a setting that allows strong relationships between teachers and students; and
- prepare and motivate students for postsecondary options, including college.

How these principles play out in the new schools highlighted in this report is described in greater detail below. All 14 were asked for the same data, but not all schools provided all the data requested.³⁶ The narrative below is based on the reported data, with specific examples and quotes drawn from the seven sites that were studied in more depth.

NEW SCHOOLS PROMOTE ACADEMIC RIGOR

Rigor is an elusive concept for researchers to measure, and reporting on rigor in New York City's new schools is no exception. Short of examining the content of each site's core courses, it is difficult



to assess the level of rigor. Thus, this report uses two proxies for rigor: students' access to advanced courses and attainment of a Regents diploma, an academically advanced diploma.³⁷

Instruction that challenges students with high-level academic material is an essential aspect of these schools' efforts. Promising evidence of rigorous learning opportunities includes access and enrollment in college-level classes. For those students who entered performing below grade level, additional support classes and time are available (e.g., before- and after-school tutoring). The combination of high expectations and adequate supports has helped students accelerate their learning and dramatically make up ground.

Access to advanced courses.

Opportunities for advanced coursework demonstrate the commitment of these new schools to rigorous instruction. Data on course offerings were available for 12 of the schools.³⁸ Eleven of the 12 schools have advanced math courses, including pre-calculus, probability and statistics, Advanced Placement

courses, and "Math B," which prepares students for the New York State Math B Regents exam, a requirement for those seeking to earn a high school Regents diploma with advanced designation. Considered one of the most difficult Regents exams, Math B tests students on trigonometry, advanced algebra, and calculus concepts.³⁹ A majority of students from the schools reporting data had been enrolled in these advanced math classes. Several of these new schools offer additional advanced math classes (including calculus) through a local college. Students can also enroll in college courses in a range of topics if they have exhausted their schools' curricula.

Attaining Regents diplomas.

Preliminary results show that 50 percent⁴⁰ of the 2006 graduating cohort across these new schools earned a Regents diploma. These diplomas reflect not only stronger state exam performance, but also additional coursework beyond that required to earn a "local" diploma.

Principals, teachers, and students added life to these statistics with their accounts of schools pushing students to new

heights of achievement. They spoke of teachers leading their students through studies of advanced literature, diseases, and world conflicts, and of students who entered as underperformers and graduated with plans to begin postsecondary studies in political science and engineering the following fall. Students reported feeling able to perform at a higher level than expected because of the support they received in their school.

Helping students to make up ground.

When students enter the ninth grade performing significantly below grade level, they must receive intensive remediation in order to successfully take on challenging new material. Recognizing the critical importance of adequately supporting students who enter high school academically unprepared, these new schools offer a variety of assistance. WestEd consistently heard that students were bolstered by supports throughout their new school experience. What kinds of support make a difference? Recent research on high school reform indicates that high schools serving youth at risk for academic failure or for dropping out “can make substantial progress by targeting their efforts on students’ successful transition to high school, and, in particular, in reducing high rates of course failure freshman year.”⁴¹ In each of the seven new schools WestEd analyzed more thoroughly, researchers saw evidence of this type of support, provided in such forms as peer mentoring programs, summer orientations, and, in all cases, additional academic assistance. One 2006 graduate spoke of the strong positive influence her community mentor had on her entry and adjustment to high school. Anticipating enrollment at Fordham University (which she now attends), she said she intended to stay in touch and serve as a mentor herself for incoming ninth

On to Great Things

Olabisi Sobawale, the 2006 Class Valedictorian at Marble Hill School for International Studies, immigrated to the United States from Nigeria in 2001 speaking very little English. This fall she is attending Middlebury College in Vermont to study pre-med and science. She credits much of her success to the high standards set for her at Marble Hill. “I’ve been challenged mentally, emotionally, and academically here. Teachers believe you can do it and they have a very high standard for you, but if you need help they are always there for you.” Two years ago, through a community service club, Olabisi helped build a school house in a rural part of Nicaragua. The experience changed her life by helping her see that she could not only make a difference in her community, but around the country and in other countries as well. On pursuing a career in medicine, Olabisi says, “I’m looking at my dream now and know it’s going to be a reality – I know I can do it because [Marble Hill] believed in me and now I believe in myself.”

grade students to help ensure that they, too, successfully make the transition to high school.

A recent study of high school dropouts by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison⁴² demonstrates that these supports can make a significant difference. Forty-five percent of high school dropouts responding to Bridgeland's survey reported having started school either academically behind their peers or unprepared for high school curricula and not receiving adequate assistance to help them catch up. Specific academic supports offered by these new schools include double periods, which give students more time to explore challenging topics, extended day schedules, access to literacy labs, Saturday academic-support programming, and tutoring by peers, teachers, and college programs. These supports enabled incoming students to accelerate their learning and do well in their freshman year classes, ultimately reinforcing research findings suggesting that with a track record of early coursework success, high school students are three times more likely to graduate.⁴³

NEW SCHOOLS ENSURE ACADEMIC CONTENT IS RELEVANT TO STUDENTS

In the Bridgeland et al. study examining why students dropped out of high school, almost half of the survey respondents cited as a primary reason for dropping out their own lack of interest in their classes or a feeling of being disengaged from high school.⁴⁴ Moreover, when asked what might have helped them stay in school, four of five respondents identified “opportunities for real-world learning” and “more experiential learning.”⁴⁵ In an effort to make studies more relevant, new schools connect academic content to students' personal experiences, contemporary issues, and future career opportunities.

Drawing from students' personal experiences.

“Philosophically speaking,” said one principal, “students are our biggest resource.” Recognizing this, her teachers develop curricula that incorporate students' life experiences. At one school, where a majority of students are immigrants, many from war-torn countries, the Language Arts teacher has students write their life histories to help them bridge their lives outside and inside of school.

Connecting to contemporary issues.

Of the seven school principals interviewed, most attributed the success of their math programs to their efforts to present math through real-life experiences and to incorporate hands-on activities that make learning math a more active and experiential process. For example, at one school students were asked to conduct interviews with community members about socially relevant topics (such as recent incidents of genocide in African nations) and then plot, graph, and write equations to represent the interview data.

Bridging to career opportunities.

New schools also attempt to link students to the larger community and careers. One college-bound graduate, who plans to study film, media, and editing, reported that, as part of his school studies, he worked with the local chapter of the Anti-Defamation League to create a film about how people learn racism. He then showed one of the films he created at elementary and middle schools with the goal of teaching tolerance to younger children. He said it was access to classes in film and media during high school that helped him set his goal of becoming a filmmaker.

New York City's New Schools Initiative

New York City's new schools were developed according to principles widely accepted as essential for successfully preparing students for postsecondary education or work: rigorous academics, relevant coursework, and supportive relationships, both adult to student and student to student. The 197 secondary schools in this initiative share other common characteristics as well.

- **Maintaining small size.** Under the city's New Schools Initiative, the target new school size is fewer than 500 students for 9-12 schools. In comparison, the system's traditional high schools are much larger; for example, 32 of the city's public high schools have more than 3,000 students.⁴⁶
- **Using existing facilities.** While several of the New Schools are housed in locations new to the city school system, most are situated in existing school facilities due to space constraints.
- **Holding high expectations for all students.** The New Schools Initiative requires participating schools to include a rigorous, standards-based curriculum and to promote higher expectations for all students.
- **Establishing a college preparatory environment.** A majority of the new schools create a college-going culture that helps students meet high academic expectations and, in doing so, readies them to apply to any college. Many of these schools do so by using a theme or career focus (e.g., aeronautics, science and mathematics, film and media, international studies).
- **Engaging the community.** The new schools are developed in partnership with community-based organizations that provide important expertise, resources, and experiences for students. School partners range from arts institutions to community development groups.
- **Partnering with an intermediary.** Approximately 160 of the 197 new secondary schools were developed in partnership with an outside school developer such as New Visions. These school developers provide support in a variety of areas, including school design, development and implementation of curriculum, delivery of professional development, and funding.^{47, 48}

Giving Students an Edge

Principal Felice Lepore of Academy for Careers in Sports (ACS) realized that he and his staff needed to do everything they could to make their students more competitive and prepare them for college. To assist juniors in the all-important SAT exams, Lepore wanted to bring in an external test-preparation program, as many prosperous schools do. But he knew that the vast majority of ACS students could not afford the \$1,500 program fee. This past year, the school was able to secure the funds needed and enrolled every junior in a test-prep program. The difference has been enormous: Overall student scores on the SATs have increased an average of 270 points, putting ACS students a step closer to realizing their college dreams.

NEW SCHOOLS OPERATE IN A SETTING THAT ALLOWS STRONG TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Research suggests that when accompanied by high academic expectations for students, a strong school community helps improve academic achievement, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged students.⁴⁹ Those interviewed for this study (i.e., principals, teachers, and students) consistently reported feeling they are part of a family at their school. This strong sense of connection between these new school educators and students supports academic achievement in at least two important ways: students receive individualized attention, and educators connect productively with students' parents and families.

Individualized attention.

Research on youth resiliency⁵⁰ shows that when students encounter adults who care about and have high expectations for them in their schools, they can overcome adversity and lead productive lives. Many students come to these new schools with challenging education backgrounds and life circumstances, including limited formal education, gang involvement, war refugee status, recent immigration, and poverty. "Some kids are really good at covering inadequacies," one teacher explained. "They have been doing it for years." But the small size of these schools, which allows for closer connections between staff and students, means that teachers can more easily dedicate the attention needed to discover their students' strengths and challenges, to understand their struggles, and to take steps to help students meet their full potential. New school educators spoke of having the opportunity to adapt their instruction to each student. For their part, students consistently reported that their relationships with teachers enabled them to do their best work. One student said



her math teacher discovered that she had difficulties in math “right away” and immediately offered her individual assistance. This student is now attending the University of Vermont.

Productive connections with students' families.

In the previously cited dropout study, high school dropouts reported that when they were still in school there had been little communication between their parents or guardians and school staff.⁵¹ Additional research literature has described the interactions that do occur between students' families and the school as too often insufficient, off-target, or tension-filled.⁵² This same literature identifies three school communications strategies that parents find appealing and useful: providing parents with information and knowledge to help them support their children in school; both informing and listening to parents; and staying in touch with parents for reasons other than students' behavior problems. There was evidence of these strategies being used in all the new schools interviewed.

The smaller size and flexible structures (e.g., time set aside to meet with students individually) of these schools, which enable staff to get to know students better, also help staff get to know parents better. Once tuned into parents' needs and interests, schools can organize activities and outreach to address them. So, for example, many new schools reported that their students' parents participate in college readiness activities. These schools also engage in various outreach activities to parents, such as a telephone call any day a student is late or absent (in the Bridgeland et al. study, only half of the former high school students surveyed reported receiving such follow-up from schools⁵³). At one new school, parents challenged school staff to communicate with them more than twice a year, as had been standard practice. Staff now call each parent at least once a month for conversation that focuses on students' academic performance. At many of the schools that use student advisory periods, the advisors gather feedback from each of their students' teachers – who often collaborate regularly as part of a team – and share this assembled information with parents. In

School Choice in NYC

Similar to other large school systems across the nation, NYC offers school choice. While choice has existed for some time, in 2004 the NYC Department of Education revised its high school admissions process for providing students, parents, and guardians the opportunity to select a high school that best meets their needs. Although many NYC families appear to be aware of the variety of public school options for their children, some skeptics, both nationally and in NYC, suggest that the very existence of school choice disproportionately benefits those students and families who are relatively more organized, motivated, and aware than others. The result, these skeptics argue, is that certain schools — new small schools, for example — can easily end up with students who are more likely to succeed academically than those who choose the traditional, large comprehensive high school in their neighborhood. Recognizing this possibility, the department is continuously working to inform more community members about the full portfolio of available education opportunities; in doing so, it distributes printed materials, produces high school fairs and other informational sessions, and works through community-based organizations to brief and counsel families.

this way, parents have a small, manageable number of adults with whom they communicate within the new school. The end result of such efforts is that parents, like their children, know and are known by school faculty. Problems and needs can readily be identified and acted upon, with parents considered a resource for, rather than an obstacle to, student achievement.

NEW SCHOOLS PREPARE STUDENTS FOR POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS

"Some kids feel like, 'We're minorities, we live in the Bronx, nothing great comes for us, nobody really cares what happens.' But, here, you see a whole family cares for you, one that wants you to go on and do better."

— 2006 Graduate, Pelham Preparatory Academy

Rigor, relevance, and relationships are all part of a college-going culture at these new schools. Taken together, they demonstrate the belief and expectation that students will continue their education and growth after they graduate from high school. To help ensure this, these new schools provide students with information about higher education, expose them to and explain the college admissions process, and help them navigate financial obstacles to higher education.

New school students receive exposure and access to higher education.

"It's not just about getting kids into college," said one new school principal. "It's about helping them to be successful in their postsecondary careers." These new schools weave together attitudes, actions, and structures that prepare their students for postsecondary education or the workforce. WestEd learned

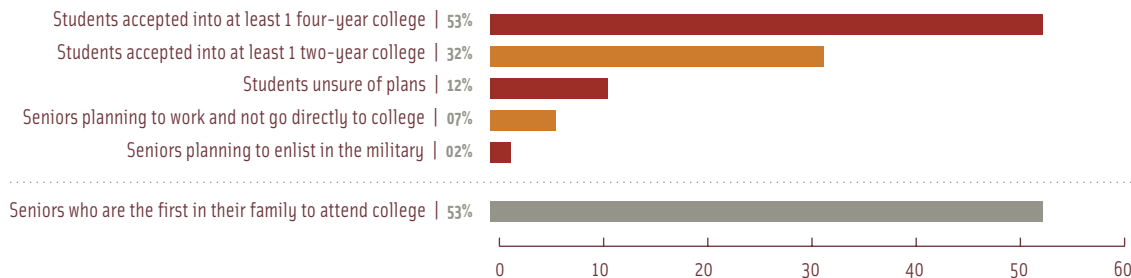
of principals who promote a college-going culture through weekly whole-school meetings, who insist that all students apply to college, and of schools that invite college graduates from their community to talk with students about college. “Ultimately, students want to know that there’s someone who looks like them that made it,” a principal explained. Teachers and guidance counselors familiarize students and parents with the college admissions process, provide information on financial assistance, and arrange college visits. These actions convey to students (and their parents) the message that college and careers matter deeply and are logical next steps for them. “They are so used to it,” one principal said of her students’ exposure to higher education. “It’s just a part of our life.”

In addition to the important acts of individuals, these new schools have created structures that steer students toward college. Regular student advisory periods,⁵⁴ during which a small group of students meets with a school faculty member, often

focus on college preparation activities. One school’s advisory periods provide four years of college readiness activities: ninth graders focus on developing study skills and transitioning to high school; tenth graders focus on exploring careers and colleges; and eleventh and twelfth graders focus on identifying prospective colleges and working on the application process. College-application writing is built into some schools’ English language arts curriculum. And in another school, all ninth grade students complete an application to the school’s partner university, which leads to some being invited to visit and experience college.

These attitudes, actions, and structures all contribute to the college readiness of new school students, both mentally and practically. Students receive the information, resources, experience and encouragement necessary to pursue higher education. While not all graduates from this sample chose to go on to college immediately, schools reported that students are prepared for higher education and the workforce. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Future Plans of NYC New School Seniors in 2006 ⁵⁵



Note: Not all schools provided data on students’ plans; therefore, the total does not equal 100%.

Students become familiar with admissions requirements and procedures.

Students receive detailed guidance on completing college applications, choosing high school classes necessary for college admission, developing portfolios that showcase their accomplishments, acquiring letters of recommendation, and writing and revising their personal statements for college applications. Many of these new schools invite postsecondary admissions officers to talk with students or, in some instances, to conduct actual on-site interviews. Helpful for all high school students, this supportive approach is especially important for the approximately 53 percent⁵⁶ of the students at these new schools who will be the first in their families to attend college.

Students navigate financial obstacles to higher education.

Family income strongly predicts students' college enrollment and completion, with lower income students having dramatically lower rates of both.⁵⁷ The multiple costs associated with higher education – not just escalating tuition costs but other expenses, as well, such as books, application fees, and preparation activities and courses – may make college seem out of reach to students whose families lack sufficient financial resources. Since a majority of students at the new schools in this study are socioeconomically disadvantaged, their schools have taken steps to increase access to college by bringing necessary resources to them. Schools acquire funding from community partners, school budgets, and outside funders for students to visit colleges (both near and far), for admissions exam preparation courses, and for staff to support these efforts. Also, many of these students have neither the financial nor social resources to explore different ca-

reer fields or areas of interest so their small schools give them a head start by exposing them to different undergraduate majors, colleges, and professional fields.

Based on reporting from eight of the 14 schools, it appears that more than \$4 million in financial aid was awarded to students in their collective 2006 graduating class. A majority of the scholarships were awarded based on students' academic achievement.⁵⁸

On average, for the 2005-06 school year, 81 percent of new school seniors applied to college. One school reported that all of its seniors applied. Of the students who applied, approximately 85 percent were accepted. For three of the 14 new schools studied, 100 percent of the students who applied to college were accepted.⁵⁹

AREAS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION FOR NYC NEW SCHOOLS

While initial data from this first cohort of graduating students from these 14 new schools are encouraging, it is important to note that the number of students who can actually enroll in new schools is relatively small. WestEd suggests that if the small school strategy is to be scaled up and become sustainable, the following issues must be addressed.

1. **Align K-8 reform efforts to support high school improvement strategies.** New school leaders noted the challenges of working with students with weak academic preparation and reported the need for additional supports to bring them to grade level. A majority of new school students enter ninth grade performing far below grade level, which limits the advanced courses they can take.

2. **Expand the rigorous course offerings available to students at small schools.** Given the nature of small schools, many are limited in their staffing and enrollment and, therefore, limited in the courses or services they can provide. To offer more course options, new schools might consider partnerships with other schools and postsecondary institutions and think about offering distance or online learning opportunities.
3. **Develop strategies to address pressures of increasing enrollment and limited facilities.** Financial constraints and limited space systemwide require new schools to compete with other schools for scarce space and, often, to share facilities with existing traditional high schools. As small schools meet their projected enrollments their need for space will increase.
4. **Apply the lessons of small schools to broader secondary reform.** Analyze small schools to understand which factors contribute to effective teaching and learning, especially as they relate to supporting underprepared students.
5. **Develop multiple strategies for tracking students after graduation.** If schools and education agencies can collect data about their graduates' postsecondary experiences, the data can be used to inform and improve their education programs. Current strategies range from Texas's assignment of a unique tracking number for each student, which stays with the student after high school graduation, to a decision by one charter management organization to offer summer employment, free tutoring, and other incentives for graduates to report their whereabouts and education status following high school.



The New Schools Initiative is one of several efforts that appear to hold promise for addressing the low graduation and college acceptance rates for students in the NYC public school system. While the initiative is still young, the data from the 14 schools featured in this report inspire hope. Their most recently reported schoolwide attendance rates (2004-05) averaged 89 percent. In their first cohort of students, 79 percent graduated, 81 percent applied to college, and 53 percent reported being the first in their family to attend college. The data suggest that these new schools provide their students, including many in subgroups generally considered at risk of academic failure, with a rigorous high school education that results in high graduation rates and that prepares them for successful postsecondary careers. The early data on upcoming cohorts at these schools is also promising: The ninth grade promotion rates for the most recent ninth grade cohort (2005-06) was 91 percent, and it was 92 percent for the ninth grade cohort in 2004-05. These figures suggest these students are on track to graduate at percentages that are equal to if not higher than the percentage graduating in 2006. Time and further study will tell.



Appendix

SITE SELECTION METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

In 2004, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation asked WestEd to report on the progress of New York City's new high schools. While that first piece reported on schools that had been underway for only two years, this report looks at them again as they have graduated their first cohort of students and explores their successes from a variety of angles, including their work in developing a rigorous academic content and a college-going culture.

For this report, WestEd examined data for all 14 of NCHSI's earliest new schools, which graduated their first classes in 2006, and conducted a more in-depth analysis of a subset of these schools considered by the Foundation to best embody the principles of the Children First Initiative.

There are two ways in which we collected data for this report. The first was to collect descriptive statistical information across these sites. This data, provided by the New York City Department of Education, included data on the ethnic make up of the 2001-2002 cohort, special population data including English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education, attendance data, and preliminary graduation data. New Visions provided preliminary data on post-graduate plans for students (e.g., number of students attending college, financial support for college, other post-graduate plans). We note this data was self-reported by principals and students.

The second approach to data collection was to conduct interviews at seven of the 14 sites. The sites were selected with assistance from staff at New Visions and the Gates Foundation. The intent of interviews was to learn from principals about the inner workings of their schools, and their approaches to support students through high school and to prepare students for post-graduate opportunities.

LIMITATIONS OF DATA

This report describes the first graduating cohort of these new small schools, how they did academically over the course of their four years, and their postsecondary plans. Quantitative information for the graduating students at these schools and their peers across the city's education system is limited: consistent with education data challenges nationwide, reported graduation rates have not yet been verified by the New York City Department of Education, and neither confirmed dropout data nor data on postsecondary enrollment patterns are yet available for the students at these new schools. Given the preliminary and limited nature of the student information, it is not yet possible to compare these new schools to other public secondary schools in the city. But while this report is descriptive only and must be read from that perspective, what it describes is intriguing and appears promising.

Endnotes

1. A 15th school also graduated its first cohort of students in 2006, with similar results, but it is not included in this study because it was developed in a slightly different fashion, as explained later in the report.
2. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 30, 2006. Calculations reported are for a four-year cohort as defined by New York State. For more information on the definition of Longitudinal Cohorts see http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/reports/Class%20of%202005_Four-Year_Longitudinal_Report.pdf
3. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 18, 2006.
4. New York has a four-level accountability system: 1= Basic, 2= Basic Proficient, 3= Proficient, and 4= Advanced. Levels 1 and 2 are considered below proficient and as failing.
5. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools, collected July 19, 2006.
6. While no longer the practice, two of the 14 new schools (Pelham Preparatory High School and Millennium High School) selected students for this cohort rather than choosing them by lottery.
7. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected September 28, 2006.
8. For background information on the national small schools movement, see: Kafka, J. (2006). *Thinking big about getting small: A genealogy of small school reform*. Prepared for 2006 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco; and also: Raywid, M. A., Schmerler, G., Phillips, S. E., & Smith, G. A. (2003). *Not so easy going: The policy environments of small urban schools and schools-within-schools*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.
9. Huebner, T. (2005). *Rethinking high school: An introduction to New York City's experience*. San Francisco: WestEd.
10. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected June 26, 2006.
11. An additional 2 percent graduated in August, bringing the preliminary 2006 graduation rate to 95 percent. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 30, 2006.
12. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 18, 2006.
13. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools, collected May 11, 2006.
14. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected June 26, 2006.
15. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 30, 2006.
16. Based on race and ethnicity. For information, see: EPE Research Center. (2006). *Diplomas count – New York: An essential guide to graduation policy and rates*. Bethesda, MD: Education Week.
17. Information from National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch>, collected June 26, 2006.
18. EPE Research Center. (2006). *Diplomas count – New York: An essential guide to graduation policy and rates*. Bethesda, MD: Education Week.
19. Reported graduation rates vary considerably, from 40 percent to 58 percent, depending on the criteria used; however, most sources report the number closer to 50 percent. Recent reports have brought into question how graduation rates are calculated by states, districts, and schools. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) defines the high school graduation rate as the “percentage of students, measured from the beginning of high school, who graduate from high school with a regular diploma (not including an alternate degree...certificate, or a GED).”
20. Three schools: Bronx Aerospace Academy, New Explorers High School, and High School for Careers in Sports started as programs in 2000 and opened as schools in 2002.
21. A zip code analysis conducted by the New York City Department of Education in Spring 2006 suggests that in the 2001–02 school year the South Bronx Campus served students from the same 11 zip codes as 2005–06 new small school students housed on the campus. In 2001–02, 82 percent of the students were from 11 zip codes as compared to 75 percent in 2005–06.
22. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected September 28, 2006.
23. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 17, 2006. (Note: data not available for Bronx International High School since cohort was largely untested in 8th grade: New immigrant ELL population.)
24. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected September 28, 2006.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.

27. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 17, 2006.
28. New York City's comprehensive secondary reform agenda currently includes the development of (a) new small schools to replace the lowest-performing high schools in the system; (b) alternative or "Multiple Pathways" schools targeting over-age and under-credited youth, those students most at risk of dropping out; and (c) small learning communities in a handful of large, comprehensive high schools.
29. Ibid.
30. This includes secondary schools as defined by NYCDOE: middle schools, middle high schools, high schools, and alternative schools.
31. Roderick, M. (2006). *Closing the aspirations-attainment gap: Implications for high school reform* (p. 15). Chicago: MDRC, The Consortium on Chicago School Research.
32. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 17, 2006.
33. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 30, 2006.
34. Information from the New York City Department of Education. http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/reports/Class%20of%202005_Four-Year_Longitudinal_Report.pdf
35. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected October 30, 2006.
36. While similar data was requested from all 14 sites, the data received was inconsistent. Therefore, statements are based on the following: 8 schools provided data on scholarships students received; 12 provided data on advanced math course attendance; 9 provided data on students who were the first in their family to attend college; 13 provided data on the students applying and accepted to college; and, 12 provided data on their future plans.
37. New York State has a three-tiered diploma system: Local, Regents, and Advanced Regents. For more information see http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/reports/Class%20of%202005_Four-Year_Longitudinal_Report.pdf.
38. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools, collected July 19, 2006.
39. Information from New York State Education Department, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/part100/pages/1005a.html>, collected August 9, 2006.
40. Data provided by the New York City Department of Education, collected July 28, 2006.
41. Roderick (2006). (p. v).
42. Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morison, K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises.
43. Roderick (2006).
44. Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison (2006).
45. Ibid. (p. iv).
46. Information from <http://schoolmatters.com/>, collected June 26, 2006.
47. The role of the intermediary varies at each site – from a fiscal agent to a hands-on governing body. Also, the number of schools with which each organization works varies considerably, from one school to 77 schools. Currently, there are 14 organizations partnering with NYCDOE on the small schools initiative, each with a unique theme or focus.
48. New Visions is the intermediary organization for the NCHSI and the schools at issue in this report.
49. For information, see: Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. B. (1999). *Social support and achievement for young adolescents in Chicago: The role of school academic press*. American Educational Research Journal, 36(4), 907-945; Shouse, R.C. (April, 1995). Academic press and school sense of community: Sources of friction, prospects for synthesis. Prepared for the 1995 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
50. For information on resiliency and school connectedness literature, see Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco: WestEd.
51. Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison (2006).
52. Roderick, M., Stone, S. (1998). *Changing Standards, changing relationships: Building family-school relationships to promote achievement in high schools*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago Schools Research; Lightfoot, S.L. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York, NY: Random House.
53. Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison (2006).
54. Although the strategy of using student advisories is sound, recent studies have found that their structure and implementation vary considerably from school to school. Rubenstein, M., Reisner, E., Coon, M., & Fabiano, L. (2005). *New century high schools: Evaluation findings from the second year*. New York: Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
55. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools, collected May 11, 2006.
56. Ibid.
57. Mortenson, T. G. (2000). Poverty, race, and the failure of public policy: The crisis of access in higher education. *Academe* 86(6), 38-43.
58. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools, collected May 11, 2006.
59. Ibid.

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