

**EVALUATION FINDINGS FROM THE
NEW YORK CITY
*TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE***

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Executive Summary

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) Transition to High School initiative is part of DYCD's comprehensive portfolio of Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for youth. Transition to High School programs, operated by nonprofit organizations in partnerships with schools, target selected students entering the ninth grade for a one-year intervention to help them navigate the transition into high school by addressing the educational, personal, or social challenges they face in achieving on-time promotion to the tenth grade. Policy Studies Associates (PSA) evaluated the Transition to High School initiative in its first two years of operation. This report summarizes evaluation findings from the first year of the initiative (2009-10) and analyzes patterns of implementation and the outcomes of participating students in the second year (2010-11). Key findings for the 2010-11 school year are presented below.

Schools and Students Served

School characteristics. Transition to High School programs served ninth-graders attending 37 diverse New York City public schools in the 2010-11 school year, the second year of the initiative. These included all 33 schools that had partnered with a Transition to High School program in the first year of the initiative, plus four schools that were new to the initiative. According to the Department of Education (DOE) school progress reports, the 37 schools ranged in enrollment size from 78 students to 4,408 students.

The schools served by the Transition to High School programs enrolled large proportions of students who were likely to benefit from the supports and resources provided by the program. On average, the eighth-grade ELA and math performance of incoming students in the schools was at Levels 1 or 2, which is below grade-level expectations for meeting learning standards. In 28 of the 37 schools the average school attendance rate was lower than the chronic-absence threshold (20 days or more absent), suggesting serious problems in school engagement. Although in 15 of the 37 schools more than three-quarters of all first-year students earned at least 10 credits, an indicator of success, only three schools graduated three-quarters or more of their students within four years.

Characteristics of participating students. In 2010-11, the 35 Transition to High School programs for which enrollment data were available served 1,956 ninth-grade students.¹ On average, 33 percent of the ninth-grade class enrolled in the Transition to High School program, ranging from 2 percent in one school to 97 percent in another.

Overall the Transition to High School programs served students who could likely benefit from the additional supports to complete the ninth grade and remain on track to complete high

¹ Enrollment was determined based on the number of students entered in DYCD Online, the agency's management information system, who attended a Transition to High School program service or activity at least once. Data were consistently unreliable for two programs, which were both therefore excluded from analyses of enrollment and participation.

school. Across all programs, less than 1 percent of participating students performed at Level 4 (exceeding expectations) on their eighth-grade ELA test. Twenty-two percent of enrolled ninth-grade students had been chronically absent from school in eighth grade. However, the specific needs of the students served varied across programs.

The extent to which Transition to High School participants differed from nonparticipating ninth-grade students in their schools also varied by program. In general, within each school there were few statistically significant differences on measurable educational characteristics between ninth-graders who enrolled in the Transition to High School program and those who did not.

Program Outcomes

Credit accrual. Across all Transition to High School programs, 83 percent of participating students earned 10 credits during their ninth-grade year, the minimum standard established by DYCD for the initiative.ⁱⁱ The percent of students who earned 10 credits ranged from 56 percent in one program to 100 percent in two programs. More than three-quarters of Transition to High School participants in 20 of 29 programs earned at least 10 credits.

In nine of the 28 schools for which comparative data were available, a greater proportion of students who enrolled in the Transition to High School program earned at least 10 credits, compared to nonparticipating students. In the other 19 schools, the proportions of program participants and nonparticipants who earned at least 10 credits were not significantly different. A ceiling effect may be contributing to this finding: in 15 of the 37 host schools, more than three-quarters of all students earned at least 10 credits in their first year, leaving little room for dramatic growth or for large differences between participants and nonparticipants.

School engagement. Across all programs, the number of days absent for Transition to High School ninth-grade participants ranged from none to 154 days, with a median of eight days absent in 2010-11. The percent of participants who were chronically absent (i.e., they missed 20 or more days of school) during their ninth-grade year ranged from 5 percent in one program to 57 percent in another. In 12 schools, a smaller proportion of students who enrolled in a Transition to High School program were chronically absent in ninth grade than were other ninth-graders in their schools. The proportions of program participants and nonparticipants who were chronically absent in ninth grade were not significantly different in the other 16 schools.

Prior research (Mac Iver, 2010) has found a steady increase in the proportion of students who were chronically absent as students progress from the middle grades to high school. On average, while nonparticipating students reflect this trend (with the proportion of chronically absent students increasing from 30 percent in eighth grade to 34 percent in ninth grade), Transition to High School students appear to have avoided this negative attendance pattern. The percent of participants who were chronically absent stayed relatively steady, at 22 percent in eighth grade and 23 percent in ninth grade.

ⁱⁱ This evaluation examines the total number of credits accrued by the beginning of the 2011-12 school year; i.e., credits earned during the regular school year as well as credits earned during summer school.

Model Implementation

Analysis of the implementation of the Transition to High School initiative revealed that programs tailored the DYCD model to meet the needs of the students and schools that they served. Across all programs, youth most frequently participated in activities designed to provide them with academic support and engage them in learning, such as tutoring, field trips, and group discussions about community issues or about personal or social issues. Participants also reported frequent one-on-one interactions with program staff, consistent with the model’s counselor-advocate approach. Fifty-nine percent of participants reported meeting one-on-one (either formally or informally) with a program staff member at least once a week. Participants responded positively to these interactions, with nearly all participants reporting that they either met with a program staff member with the right frequency or would like to meet more often. This indicates that participants appreciated and relied on one-on-one meetings with program staff, an essential element of the Transition to High School model.

Within the parameters of the initiative’s intent to offer group activities as well as individual supports to students, Transition to High School programs emphasized varied elements of the initiative’s model in order to craft program approaches that could best serve students. In the programs visited for this evaluation, these approaches included emphases on:

- ***Fostering a sense of community among students***, by offering engaging arts-based and team-building activities to students otherwise not engaged in extracurricular activities
- ***Providing targeted academic supports*** to English Language Learners
- ***Connecting learning to the “real world”*** by engaging students in field trips to help them see the linkages between their school-day learning and future career opportunities
- ***Expanding the school’s resources*** by filling gaps in recreational and youth leadership opportunities at the school
- ***Encouraging students to be leaders in their community*** by engaging them in discussions and projects focused on their role in their community
- ***Providing counseling to support student learning*** by monitoring and serving as advocates for students during the school day
- ***Engaging parents in the high school transition process*** through orientation and commitments to support student attendance

Based on the lessons learned through the evaluation of the Transition to High School initiative, PSA offers the following recommendations for program implementation strategies that can lay the groundwork for helping students succeed in high school:

- Focus on offering individualized supports to students, which may include formal case management approaches or more informal opportunities for one-on-one conversations, depending on the needs of the student
- Ensure that Transition to High School program elements are designed to strengthen and complement the existing system of supports and activities for students at the host school, for example by coordinating with school-day guidance staff and other organizations offering services to ninth-grade students
- Define and limit staff responsibilities to best position the program for maximum effectiveness and build on the youth development expertise of the nonprofit organizations operating the Transition to High School programs

The full report presents more detailed analyses and findings regarding the patterns of implementation and outcomes of the Transition to High School initiative.

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The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) Transition to High School initiative is part of DYCD's comprehensive portfolio of Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for youth. Transition to High School programs, operated by nonprofit organizations in partnerships with schools, target selected students entering the ninth grade for a one-year intervention to help them navigate the transition into high school by addressing the educational, personal, or social challenges they face in achieving on-time promotion to the tenth grade. Policy Studies Associates (PSA) evaluated the Transition to High School initiative in its first two years of operation. This report summarizes evaluation findings from the first year of the initiative (2009-10) and analyzes patterns of implementation and the outcomes of participating students in the second year (2010-11).

Goals of the Transition to High School Programs

The Transition to High School initiative emerged from research about the needs of students as they enter the ninth grade and about best practices to support young people through this transition. DYCD's concept paper launching the Transition to High School initiative noted that the ninth grade is an important intervention point for keeping youth engaged in school and for achieving academic success (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, 2007; Bottoms & Timberlake, 2007; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). In addition, research identifies ninth-grade promotion as an important, early indicator of the likelihood of high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild & Farley, 2004; Roderick, 2006). Allensworth and Easton (2005) developed a ninth-grade "on-track" measure for students enrolled in Chicago Public Schools. Components of the on-track measure include the number of credits earned and the number of failures in core academic courses during ninth grade. Based on this indicator, the researchers found that students who were on-track at the end of ninth grade were almost four times as likely to graduate from high school when compared with students who were not on-track at the end of ninth grade.

Analyses of national and local high school enrollment and graduation data highlight students' difficulties in completing ninth grade. Haney et al. (2004) propose the "education pipeline" as a model of how students should progress from entrance into elementary school to high school graduation. On average, the number of students in one grade should be approximately equal to the number of students in the next grade. This relationship does not hold, however, when one examines enrollment data from the end of middle school to the beginning of high school; the number of students enrolled in ninth grade tends to be much larger than both eighth-grade and tenth-grade enrollments. Researchers describe the disproportionate enrollment of students in ninth grade as a bulge that results from the failure of students to make on-time progress from eighth to ninth to tenth grades (Bottoms & Timberlake, 2007; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). This ninth-grade enrollment bulge indicates that students are remaining in ninth grade for more than one year or are dropping out of school prior to reaching the tenth grade or both, and is evident in analyses of New York City data: from the 2006-07 to 2008-09 school years, the number of students enrolled in ninth grade was, on average, approximately 38 percent larger than eighth-grade enrollment and 9 percent larger than tenth-grade enrollment.

To address the issues students face in the transition to high school, researchers have proposed a number of intervention strategies including: establishing special academies for ninth-grade students (Bottoms & Timberlake, 2007); ensuring that all students receive needed support services (Wheelock

& Miao, 2005); and implementing school-wide instructional reform strategies (Mac Iver, Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2009). Research on small high schools in New York City found positive impacts on the transition to high school for ninth-grade students who enrolled in schools that were organized around small, personalized groups of teachers and students, in which teachers provided individualized socio-emotional and academic supports (Bloom, Thompson, & Unterman, 2010). In these schools, ninth-grade students were more likely to earn 10 or more credits, less likely to fail a core subject, and more likely to be on-track for on-time graduation than were comparable students.

DYCD's Transition to High School initiative provides these types of personalized supports for youth through out-of-school time services that foster the development of a cohort of ninth-grade peers and a culture of learning. Programs employ counselor-advocates who track student progress and ensure that students receive needed services. As part of their work, counselor-advocates are expected to maintain regular communication with school-day staff. The programs are also encouraged to engage parents, in order to improve their ability to support their children during the high school transition. These approaches address the overarching goal of Transition to High School programs of keeping students on track for timely progress through high school and longer-term educational success. On average, Transition to High School programs received \$61,800 in annual funding from DYCD, with award amounts ranging from \$27,000 to \$101,000. Award amounts were based on the number of students the program intended to serve and whether the program planned to offer programming in the summer in addition to school-year programming.

Evaluation Methods

In the second year of the evaluation (2010-11), PSA researchers collected data about the implementation of Transition to High School programs and about the outcomes for participating students, addressing the following research questions:

- With what methods and what success did the Transition to High School programs recruit intended participants?
- Did students who participated in Transition to High School programs earn credits and attend school at rates consistent with on-time promotion to the tenth grade?
- How did programs implement the model's components? What approaches did programs use to help participants navigate their transition into high school?

Data collection in the second year (2010-11) of the Transition to High School initiative consisted of the following activities, summarized in Exhibit 1:

- **Youth survey.** In spring 2011, PSA administered a survey to all participants who had parental consent to participate in the evaluation and whose school principal provided approval for the evaluation.¹ Surveys were administered to 1,578

¹ Thirty-four principals provided approval for the evaluation in their schools. One of these principals gave consent after youth surveys were distributed to schools with principal consent, so PSA administered the principal survey but not the youth survey in that school. In addition, two programs did not obtain sufficient levels of parental research consent for youth surveys to be administered.

participants in 31 programs. In total, 991 students from 29 programs responded, for a 63 percent student-level and a 94 percent program-level response rate.

- ***Program director survey.*** In spring 2011, PSA administered an online survey to the directors of all Transition to High School programs, all of whom were employed by nonprofit organizations. Thirty-six of 37 program directors responded to the survey, for a 97 percent response rate.
- ***Principal survey.*** In spring 2011, PSA administered an online survey to principals of schools that hosted a Transition to High School program and to principals of schools that were attended by the majority of participants at a center-based program. Thirty-four surveys were administered and 29 principals responded, for an 85 percent response rate.
- ***Site visits.*** During the 2010-11 program year, PSA conducted site visits to seven programs. Each program was visited twice, once in the fall and once in the spring. These programs were selected in collaboration with DYCD managers, with the goal of visiting higher-performing programs that varied in their approach to implementing the Transition to High School model and that operated in varied settings. Site visits included interviews with program staff, participants, and key school staff, as well as observations of program activities and services.
- ***Program participation data.*** PSA analyzed Transition to High School participation data entered in the DYCD Online system for the period July 2010 through June 2011. Reliable enrollment data were available for 35 of the 37 programs. PSA analyses focused on patterns of enrollment rather than participation in specific services because many aspects of implementation were not captured by DYCD Online. For example, only 19 programs entered any participation in individual counseling in the DYCD Online system. However, much individual counseling took place informally, and formal meetings generally lasted ten to fifteen minutes with each participant, which was too brief a period for capture by DYCD Online.
- ***Student performance data.*** PSA analyzed student-level demographic and educational data from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) databases for Transition to High School participants and for the ninth-graders in their schools who did not enroll in the program. Data were analyzed for the 2009-10 (eighth-grade) and 2010-11 (ninth-grade) years. DOE data were analyzed for 29 programs.

Exhibit 1 Evaluation data sources

| Data | Programs included | Programs responded | Individuals included | Individuals responded | Notes |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---|-----------------------|--|
| Program director survey | 37 | 36 | 37 | 36 | All 37 program directors were surveyed. |
| Program enrollment (DYCD Online) | 35 | N/A | 1,956 | N/A | In two programs, DYCD Online data were not reliable. |
| Principal survey | 34 | 29 | 34 | 29 | 34 principals consented to participate in the study and were surveyed. |
| Youth survey | 31 | 29 | 1,578 | 991 | Contingent on both timely principal and parent consent for the study. |
| Student performance (DOE) | 29 | N/A | Participants: 1,184 Nonparticipants: 5,891 | N/A | Contingent on principal approval and on matching school and participant data to the DOE databases. |

Exhibit reads: The program director survey was administered in 37 programs, and directors of 36 programs completed the survey.

Who Was Served by Transition to High School Programs?

DYCD designed its Transition to High School model to serve New York City public school students entering the ninth grade who had achieved a Level 1, 2, or 3 on the New York State eighth-grade standardized test in ELA.² Each program was expected to serve 25 to 75 students. DYCD targeted schools with below-average promotion rates, and required that Transition to High School nonprofit provider organizations and host or feeder school(s) enter into official partnership agreements.

Schools Served by Transition to High School Programs

Transition to High School programs served ninth-graders attending 37 diverse New York City public schools in the 2010-11 school year. These included all 33 schools that had partnered with a Transition to High School program in the first year of the initiative, in addition to four schools that were new to the initiative.³ According to the DOE school progress reports, the 37

² On the New York State tests for grades 3-8 in 2010-11, performance levels are defined as: Level 1—below standard; Level 2—meets basic standard; Level 3—meets proficiency standard; and Level 4—exceeds proficiency standard.

³ The Transition to High School program in one of the original 33 schools was operated by a new nonprofit organization in the second year.

schools ranged in enrollment size from 78 students to 4,408 students.⁴ Twelve of the schools had more than 1,000 students, while eight of the schools had fewer than 300 students.

On average, the performance of incoming students in the schools was in the range targeted by the Transition to High School initiative, with average eighth-grade ELA and math performance levels varying from 2.27 to 2.82. Data on the high school academic progress of students in these schools indicates variation in student performance and in their context for supporting ninth-grade students in reaching on-time promotion to the tenth grade. As detailed later in this report, one indicator of progress towards on-time promotion is earning 10 or more school credits in ninth grade. The percent of students achieving this standard in schools with Transition to High School programs ranged from 66 percent to 98 percent in 2010-11; in 15 of the 37 schools, more than three-quarters of first-year students earned at least 10 credits.⁵

Another indicator of performance is school attendance. In particular, analyses in this report focus on chronic absence, as defined by 20 or more days absent. For an estimated 180-day school year, this translates to a school attendance rate of less than 89 percent. According to the DOE progress reports, the average school attendance rate for the 37 schools served by Transition to High School programs ranged from 71 percent to 94 percent. In 28 of the 37 schools the average school attendance rate was lower than the chronic absence threshold, suggesting serious problems with student engagement in these schools.

Projecting future success, for the 29 schools for which graduation data were available (some schools were new and did not yet have a graduating class), the four-year graduation rate averaged 52 percent to 92 percent. Only three schools graduated three-quarters or more of their students within four years.

Altogether, these data suggest that the schools served by the Transition to High School programs stood to benefit from the additional supports and resources provided to their students by the program. The next section describes the characteristics of students who were served by the initiative in these schools during the evaluation period.

Characteristics of Program Participants

In 2010-11, the 35 Transition to High School programs for which enrollment data were available served 1,956 ninth-grade students. Consistent with the Transition to High School goal of developing a cohort of students early in the school year to offer peer and staff support throughout all phases of the transition, available evidence suggests that the majority of participating students began engaging with the Transition to High School programs early in the school year. Although programs were inconsistent in recording participation data over the summer, DYCD Online data indicate that 81 percent of enrolled students first attended a program event or service in October or earlier.

⁴ Data retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm>.

⁵ The DOE counts students as earning 10 or more credits if they earn at least six of those credits in the core subject areas of math, science, English, and social studies in the fall, spring and/or summer terms. The analyses of Transition to High School students presented later in this report are based on the same time period, but do not take into account the subject areas in which credits were earned.

The Transition to High School programs varied in their approach to identifying student participants and in the proportion of the ninth-grade class served by the program. Examination of student performance data on the New York state tests indicates that program staff recruited incoming ninth-graders who had performed academically at the levels targeted by the initiative: across all programs, 60 percent of participants performed at Level 2 (meets basic standard) and 23 percent at Level 3 (meets proficiency standard) on their eighth-grade ELA test. Sixteen percent performed at Level 1 (below standard). Less than 1 percent of participating students performed at Level 4 (exceeds proficiency standard). In survey responses, 21 of 35 directors reported that they selected students based on the eighth-grade ELA score, and 18 identified students based on recommendations from the high school principal and guidance counselor. In interviews, program directors also described calls to parents and home visits to encourage enrollment.

PSA evaluators examined other educational characteristics of students who enrolled in Transition to High School programs, as shown in Exhibit 2. These characteristics indicate that overall the Transition to High School programs served students who could likely benefit from the additional supports to complete the ninth grade and remain on track to complete high school. Across all programs in 2010-11, 22 percent of enrolled ninth-grade students had been chronically absent (20 days or more) from school in eighth grade. This percentage was similar to that of the 2009-10 program year, in which approximately 30 percent of participants were chronically absent in eighth grade.

However, the specific needs of the students served varied by program. For instance, the percent of participants eligible for English Language Learner (ELL) services ranged by program from zero in one school to 79 percent in another. As discussed below, in many cases these program differences reflect intentional decisions on the part of the programs and their host schools to address specific needs and gaps in the services offered to students in the school.

Exhibit 2
Educational characteristics of participants

| Educational characteristic | Percent of participants (n=1,184) | Range by program (n=29) | |
|---|--|--|--|
| | | Minimum percent of participants | Maximum percent of participants |
| Level 1 or 2 in ELA in grade 8 | 76 | 43 | 100 |
| Level 1 or 2 in math in grade 8 | 63 | 17 | 96 |
| Chronic school absence in grade 8 | 22 | 0 | 50 |
| Eligible for special education services | 19 | 0 | 37 |
| Eligible for ELL services | 13 | 0 | 79 |
| Classified as recent immigrants | 6 | 0 | 43 |

Exhibit reads: Across programs, 76 percent of Transition to High School participants performed below grade level (Level 1 or 2) on their eighth-grade state ELA test. The percent of participants within each program who performed at this level ranged from 43 percent to 100 percent.

Source: Student-level records obtained from the NYC DOE.

Proportion of the Ninth-Grade Class Enrolled

On average, 33 percent of the ninth-grade class enrolled in the Transition to High School program, ranging from 2 percent in one school to 97 percent in another. As shown in Exhibit 3, in seven schools less than 10 percent of the ninth-grade class enrolled in the program, while in two schools more than 70 percent enrolled. In some cases, these patterns reflect differences in the size of the ninth-grade class. For example, in the school with 2 percent of the class enrolled in the Transition to High School program, there were 768 ninth-grade students. In the school with 97 percent participating in the program, there were a total of 76 ninth-grade students, making it feasible for program staff to engage a high proportion of the students. In an interview, the director of this program described intentionally recruiting both low- and higher-performing students, so as not to stigmatize the program as being only for academically low-performers.

Exhibit 3
Percent of the ninth-grade class enrolled in the program, by school (n=29)

| Percent of ninth-graders in the program | Number of schools |
|--|--------------------------|
| < 10 percent | 7 |
| 11 – 30 percent | 8 |
| 31 – 54 percent | 8 |
| 55 – 70 percent | 4 |
| 71 – 100 percent | 2 |

Exhibit reads: In seven schools, less than 10 percent of ninth-grade students were enrolled in the Transition to High School program.

Source: Student-level records obtained from the NYC DOE.

Transition to High School Students Compared to Nonparticipating Ninth-Graders

The extent to which Transition to High School participants differed from nonparticipating ninth-grade students in their school varied by program, as shown in Exhibit 4.⁶ In general, within each school there were few statistically significant differences on measurable educational characteristics between ninth-graders who enrolled in the Transition to High School program and those who did not. However, in 10 schools, more nonparticipating students were chronically absent in eighth grade than were program participants. Transition to High School programs were not designed as truancy-prevention programs and did not have the capacity to reach students who were already disengaged from school. These comparisons suggest that a few programs specifically targeted certain groups of students for enrollment in the program, resulting in clear differences between participating and nonparticipating students. For instance, in two programs, larger proportions of participating ninth-graders were eligible for ELL services and were recent immigrants than were nonparticipating students.

⁶ Although DOE data were available for 29 schools, in one school there were not enough nonparticipants to allow for comparative analyses. Therefore, all analyses that compare participating and nonparticipating students were conducted for 28 schools.

Exhibit 4
Comparison of participating to nonparticipating ninth- graders, by school (n=28)

| Educational characteristic | Number of schools with a greater proportion of participants | Number of schools with no significant differences | Number of schools with a greater proportion of nonparticipants |
|---|--|--|---|
| Level 1 or 2 in ELA in grade 8 | 3 | 24 | 1 |
| Level 1 or 2 in math in grade 8 | 1 | 22 | 5 |
| Chronic school absence in grade 8 | 0 | 18 | 10 |
| Eligible for ELL services | 2 | 25 | 0 |
| Eligible for special education services | 1 | 21 | 6 |
| Classified as recent immigrants | 2 | 22 | 0 |

Note: Four schools were excluded from analysis of recent immigrant status because there were too few students classified as recent immigrants to permit a comparison. One school was excluded from analysis of eligibility for ELL services for this same reason.

Exhibit reads: In three schools, a greater proportion of students who enrolled in the Transition to High School program performed below grade level (Level 1 or 2) on the eighth-grade ELA state test, compared with non-enrolled students. There were no significant differences in this proportion in 24 schools. A greater proportion of nonparticipating students performed below grade level in one school.

Source: Student-level records obtained from the NYC DOE.

Participant Needs

Transition to High School programs are intended to provide students with the supports and resources they need to address educational, personal, or social challenges and successfully achieve on-time promotion to the tenth grade. The evaluation explored the concerns raised most commonly by ninth-grade students and school staff.

Social Needs

In survey responses, principals identified certain social or developmental areas as major weaknesses for their ninth-graders, including goal-setting skills (24 out of 29 principals), communication skills (23 principals), and at-home support for school success (23 principals). In interviews, program directors also commented on the social needs of ninth-grade students. One commented, “[The ninth-graders] are much smaller. They look younger, and they’re shy. They’re just intimidated. To alleviate that, I was looking at ways just to make the groups mingle and get to know each other.”

Another director related how being at a large high school can be intimidating for new students, and how working on communication skills in the Transition to High School program has led to improvement in participants’ social skills: “The common issue is the adjustment to ninth grade. Number one, they’ve never been to a school this big. [...] I think the next big change is academic, and the third big thing is the social interaction. Now you’re in this school where there’s 1,200 freshman and you don’t know all of them, so a little freshman coming in feels overwhelmed.

We do the social interaction, we do the peer counseling, we do the relationship workshops. It's good to let them start building that level of communication, as long as it's respectful. We do a lot of that socialization and have seen tremendous improvement.”

Academic Needs

Principals also identified major academic needs for ninth-grade students, including improvements needed in literacy skills (reported by all 29 responding principals), math skills (27 of 29 principals) and study skills (24 principals). For example, when asked about participants' academic needs during a site visit, one program director said, “Most of the kids don't know how to study. That's one of the big issues. A kid will just look at a paper and say, ‘I studied.’”

Generally, participants in the Transition to High School program had high educational aspirations. In survey responses, more than three-quarters (76 percent) reported that they expected to complete at least a bachelor's degree, with nearly half (48 percent) reporting that they expected to receive a graduate degree. They also reported fairly high levels of academic motivation. More than three-quarters of participants said that, most or all of the time, they try hard in school (85 percent), come to class prepared (80 percent), pay attention in class (83 percent), and do well in school (81 percent).

However, survey responses also revealed that many participating students needed support and guidance to achieve their goals: 41 percent were not sure that they would be promoted to the tenth grade, and 30 percent were not sure that they would finish high school in four years. Thirty percent reported that they finish their homework only some of the time or never.

Many students enrolled in the program seeking help in achieving their academic aspirations: at least half of participants said that a big reason for enrolling was that the program offered the academic help they needed (54 percent) and that they wanted extra supports to help them in high school (50 percent). The program was also appealing to students: 52 percent said that they came to the program because the activities were fun. Fewer than a third of students came to the program because of pressures from parents (32 percent), school teachers or counselors (31 percent) or to make friends (27 percent).

Program Approaches to Meeting Participants' Needs

In the first year of the Transition to High School initiative (2009-10), PSA found that programs tailored the DYCD model to fit the needs of the students and schools that they served and to capitalize on the strengths of the nonprofit organization's focus and networks. In the second year of the evaluation (2010-11), PSA collected data to continue exploring the approaches to program services employed by the Transition to High School programs and the ways in which these approaches were selected to align with student needs.

Across all Transition to High School programs, youth most frequently participated in activities designed to provide them with academic support and engage them in learning. As shown in Exhibit 5, participants were most likely to report participating in tutoring (64 percent of participants)

and field trips (51 percent). In addition, nearly half of participants surveyed reported engaging in group discussions about community issues or about personal or social issues that matter to them (47 percent each). The remainder of this section focuses on the implementation of specific elements of the DYCD Transition to High School model, including approaches to summer programming, the formation of peer cohorts, and the role of counselor-advocates.

Exhibit 5
Participant reports of program services they received (N=962)

| Services and activities | Percent |
|--|----------------|
| Tutoring | 64 |
| Field trip (to somewhere other than a college campus) | 51 |
| Group discussions about issues that matter in my community or my city | 47 |
| Group discussions about personal or social issues that are important to me | 47 |
| Visit to a college campus | 33 |
| Arts activities | 29 |
| Sports | 27 |
| Community service project | 17 |

Exhibit reads: Sixty-four percent of participating youth reported receiving tutoring through the Transition to High School program.

Source: Student survey.

Summer Programming

DYCD guidance to Transition to High School programs encouraged summer programming to prepare incoming ninth-grade students for their first year of high school. In 2010-11, 20 of 35 program directors reported offering a summer program. In some cases, programs offered an orientation at the school, while others held summer programming at off-site centers.

In some programs, summer programming lasted several weeks and helped youth develop skills that would assist them in high school. For example, one program offered community service projects over the summer that included incoming ninth-graders as well as incoming tenth-graders who had participated in the Transition to High School program the previous year. Participants had the opportunity to meet their future classmates, and the previous participants helped recruit new students for the school-year program. Most of the ninth-graders who attended over the summer became the core group of participants during the school year. In another program, which enrolled mainly English Language Learners, the program ran summer English classes and took numerous field trips to help students learn about their community and city. Participants got to know one another during these activities, and staff encouraged them to remain in the program for the rest of the year.

The summer programming in these two Transition to High programs included engaging activities that both sparked students’ interests and met demonstrated participant needs. Students

bonded during those activities, and according to program staff and participants, participants had formed a mutually supportive group by the time the school year started. In contrast, in programs that sought simply to introduce incoming ninth-graders to their new school through an orientation focused on school expectations, addressing topics such as requirements for Regents exams and credit accumulation, incoming ninth-graders were not very engaged. In one of these programs, students interviewed said that they could not recall the expectations that they heard during orientation.

Peer Cohorts and Peer Support

One of the goals of the Transition to High School model was for programs to create cohorts of students that supported one another. In each of the first two years of the Transition to High School initiative, PSA found that programs took varied approaches to developing cohorts of participants. They assigned participants to groups for after-school activities, used peer mentoring, created a cohort of the entire ninth grade, and offered youth opportunities to interact in engaging activities for sustained periods of time. These groups were typically formed around the common interests or needs of participants. For example, as described above, in one program, students formed bonds during summer classes and field trips. The group of students involved was small, and they formed friendships that helped them during the school year.

In a center-based program, students were required to attend group programming one day a week, and were expected to attend the center at least one additional day per week, choosing from arts programming such as poetry, music, and theater. Many ninth-grade participants attended several different activities during the week. The program emphasized the creation of a safe space for youth to spend their time. With the opportunity to explore their interests and participate in engaging activities, many participants became invested in the organization and its culture.

One-on-One Support

An important component of the DYCD Transition to High School model is individual support to students. DYCD set out guidelines for staffing Transition to High School programs, including the role of the counselor-advocate, whose responsibility was to provide students with personalized guidance and support for ninth-grade success. Counselor-advocates were expected to manage a relatively small caseload of participants, meet regularly with youth, and help refer youth and their families to needed services that were beyond what the school could provide. Program directors could play counselor-advocate roles, and programs could hire additional staff to lead activities. In practice, the roles of counselor-advocate, activity facilitator, and program director were fluid: staff did not always fit neatly into these categories.

In the first year of Transition to High School programming, PSA found that many programs hired staff to carry out more than a single function, including provision of one-on-one counseling and group-based after-school activities. The majority of programs hired college-educated adults without specialized training to serve as counselor-advocates. In the initiative's second year, staff also came from many professional backgrounds and played many roles. According to the program director survey, on average, Transition to High School programs had four paid staff members, with

two designated specifically as counselor-advocates. The counselor-advocates differed in their professional backgrounds: 14 of 36 directors said that they had counselor-advocates in their program who were adults with a college degree (not specifically teachers or guidance counselors); 11 directors said that counselor-advocates in their program were certified teachers; 11 said they had counselor-advocates who were guidance counselors, and 9 said counselor-advocates were college students. In addition, 18 program directors acted as counselor-advocates themselves. Thirty program directors said they had been trained in case management approaches. In addition, 13 program directors said that all other counselor-advocates in their program had been trained in case management approaches, and 15 said that some counselor-advocates had received training.

In survey responses, 19 of 36 program directors reported that they or other program staff informally checked in with each participant at least twice a week, and another ten reported checking in once a week. In many of the programs that PSA visited, most staff members, not just those labeled counselor-advocates, met with students one-on-one, reflecting an understanding that individualized supports were a shared responsibility for all staff. Staff communicated regularly with participants via email, phone, text message, online messaging, and in informal in-person meetings. In programs visited, PSA evaluators observed program staff frequently stopping students during the school day and after school to talk to them about issues specific to the student. Program staff got to know their participants and kept up with the particular issues each participant was facing. Informal check-ins allowed for timely follow-up with participants, such as asking about a test they had taken or if they had completed a homework assignment. For example, in one program, all staff interacted regularly with students and, when needed, encouraged them to seek tutoring from teachers, or helped them with day-to-day problems. Formal one-on-one meetings were less frequent: 13 program directors reported that program staff met formally with students once a week or more, and another 14 reported meeting formally every other week. For example, one program scheduled formal meetings for the end of the marking period, using report cards as a starting point for conversations about academic progress and student needs.

Overall, participants in the Transition to High School programs reported frequent interactions with program staff, as well as satisfaction with these interactions. Although 12 percent of participants surveyed said that they never met one-on-one with staff, 59 percent reported meeting one-on-one (either formally or informally) with a program staff member at least once a week. Participants also responded positively to these interactions. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of participants reported they met with a program staff member with the right frequency, while 21 percent wished they could meet individually with a program staff member more often. This indicates that participants appreciate and rely on the one-on-one meetings with program staff that are an essential element of the Transition to High School model.

School Partnerships

DYCD required Transition to High School programs to establish a partnership agreement with a host high school or, for center-based programs, with at least one high school from which participants would be recruited. Some programs operated at schools in which the sponsoring nonprofit organization already had a strong presence. In two schools visited in this study, the nonprofit organization was a founding partner of the school and was woven into the fabric of school life.

Fourteen of 36 program directors reported employing school staff. School-day teachers provided specific academic support to students. For example, in one Transition to High School program, academic support classes—a priority area for that program and its participating students—were taught by school-day teachers. Teachers’ efforts were complemented by the social support role of the nonprofit partner staff.

In each of the first two years of Transition to High School programming, program directors reported that they were able to develop strong, collaborative relationships with their partner schools and that the high school principal supported their program. In the second year, 34 of 36 responding directors reported that the principal supported the program and that both principals and teachers at the school understood the purpose of the program. In addition, 32 directors agreed that they had access to the student data that they needed, and 32 agreed that they could meet with the school guidance counselor to discuss concerns about participants. Principal survey responses also indicated an appreciation of the Transition to High School program in the majority of schools. Twenty-seven of 29 responding principals reported that the program supported the school’s mission and goals at least partially.

However, PSA found that some programs visited during the second year of the initiative were over-extended. When programs took on too many responsibilities within a school, their ability to implement the program model and focus on positive outcomes for ninth-graders was put in jeopardy. For example, to adhere to the desires of the school, one program visited offered its services to students from three grades instead of just ninth-graders, hence spreading the staff too thin and diluting the program’s transition purpose. The program’s main activity was homework help, which did not engage ninth-graders as effectively as other, more enriching activities might have. In this program, the school’s vision for the role of the nonprofit organization was at odds with the intended purpose of the Transition to High School program. The principal identified a rolling list of targeted students based on academic needs and attendance rates, and made enrollment in the program mandatory for these targeted participants; students were moved on and off the mandatory participation list throughout during the school year as their needs changed. The principal also gave the program the authority to assign detention if mandatory students did not attend. Although this approach validated the authority of the program in the school, having authority to assign detention positioned the program as less of a special and engaging place and more as a punitive activity. The program director also quickly discovered that tracking participants’ mandatory attendance required time that she and her program staff did not have.

Successes in Meeting Student Needs

Reported Benefits

Participants considered Transition to High School program staff to be a resource for the social concerns they faced. Sixty-nine percent said that they often or sometimes talked with program staff when having problems at home or with friends. Friends and parents or relatives were, not surprisingly, those to whom students were most likely to turn, at 88 percent and 72 percent respectively. In contrast, only 17 percent said that they would often talk to a school counselor and 13 percent to a teacher at school about these personal issues. Participants also had positive opinions of the ways in which program staff supported them. For example, the majority of participants

reported that staff treated them with respect (77 percent) and that staff thought they could learn new things (67 percent). Twenty-three of the 29 principals responding to the survey also reported that the Transition to High School program addressed the non-academic needs of their students at least to some extent.

In the first year of Transition to High School programming, more than half of participants reported that their program benefitted them academically by helping them understand what was expected of them in high school in terms of credits, promotion requirements, and school attendance. Similarly, in 2010-11, half or more of the ninth-grade participants surveyed reported that the program helped them understand the course and credit requirements to graduate from high school (56 percent), understand the requirements to be promoted to the tenth grade (54 percent), do better in school (50 percent), and learn about available resources for help with academic support (50 percent). Students also considered program staff to be a resource for advice with school work, with 77 percent reporting that they talked with program staff at least sometimes when they had problems with school work. In comparison, 73 percent reported going to a teacher for help with school work, and 68 percent to a school counselor. Of the 29 principals responding to the survey, 22 reported that the Transition to High School program addressed the academic needs of their students at least to some extent.

Credit Accrual

The DOE requires that students earn a minimum of eight credits for promotion to tenth grade. Ultimately, the DOE requires students to accrue 44 credits in order to graduate from high school. However, promotion policies within schools differ because principals can make decisions about specific students on a case-by-case basis. Schools can also adopt their own standards for promotion. In survey responses, nearly all principals of schools with ninth-graders participating in a Transition to High School program (26 of 29 who responded to the survey) reported that the school required more than the DOE minimum of eight credits to be promoted to the next grade. Sixteen principals said that students were expected to earn 10 credits to be promoted, eight expected students to earn 11 credits, and two principals expected students to earn 12 credits in order to be promoted.

In addition, 25 of the 29 responding principals reported requiring that students pass certain classes to be promoted to the tenth grade, and 15 required that students pass at least one Regents exam. Eleven principals reported that the school had an attendance requirement for promotion, three required community service hours to be completed, and two required ninth-graders to successfully complete portfolios.

Across all Transition to High School programs in 2010-11, 83 percent of participating students earned 10 credits during their ninth-grade year, which was the minimum standard established by DYCD for the initiative. Similarly, during the 2009-10 school year, 77 percent of ninth-grade Transition to High School participants earned 10 or more credits. The percent of students who earned 10 credits in 2010-11 varied from program to program, ranging from 56 percent in one program to 100 percent in two programs. As shown in Exhibit 6, more than three-quarters of Transition to High School participants earned at least 10 credits in 20 of 29 programs.

Exhibit 6
Participants earning at least 10 credits, by program (n=29)

| Percent of participants earning 10+ credits | Number of programs |
|---|--------------------|
| Less than or equal to 75 percent | 9 |
| 76 – 90 percent | 10 |
| 91 – 100 percent | 10 |

Exhibit reads: In 9 programs, 75 percent or fewer ninth-graders who participated in the Transition to High School program earned at least 10 credits.

Source: Student-level records obtained from the NYC DOE.

In nine of the 28 schools in which comparison data were available, a greater proportion of students who enrolled in the Transition to High School program earned at least 10 credits than did nonparticipating students. In the other 19 schools, the proportion of program participants and nonparticipants who earned at least 10 credits was not significantly different. In many of the schools hosting Transition to High School programs, a ceiling effect may be contributing to this finding: as reported earlier, in 15 of 37 schools, more than three-quarters of all students earned at least 10 credits in their first year, leaving little room for dramatic growth or for large differences between participants and nonparticipants.

Chronic School Absence

Consistent with other research on school attendance levels, PSA defined chronic absence as missing 20 or more days of school; this measure translates into missing approximately one month of school. Across all programs, the number of days absent for Transition to High School ninth-grade participants ranged from none to 154 days, with a median of eight days absent in 2010-11. The percent of participants who were chronically absent during their ninth-grade year ranged from 5 percent in one program to 57 percent in another.

In 12 schools, a smaller proportion of students who enrolled in a Transition to High School program were chronically absent in ninth grade than were other ninth-graders in their schools (in six of these schools, a smaller proportion of participants were also chronically absent in eighth grade). The proportion of program participants and nonparticipants who were chronically absent in ninth grade was not significantly different in the other 16 schools.

The evaluation also examined student attendance outcomes through a matched pair analysis comparing change in student attendance after the transition from eighth to ninth grades. Examination of data for the same students across multiple school years can provide insights into the extent to which individual students experience positive or negative changes in desired behaviors. Prior research has found a reduction in attendance rates of students as they move from middle school to high school. For example, Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008) identified a decrease in school attendance for Philadelphia students who moved from eighth to ninth grades. Those researchers hypothesized that student attendance rates were a proxy for engagement, and declining attendance

signaled lower levels of engagement. The researchers found that students who had low rates of attendance were more likely to fail courses and more likely to drop out of high school. In both years of the evaluation, analyses of data for students who participated in the Transition to High School initiative did not reveal declines in student attendance from eighth to ninth grade, a potentially positive sign for participants' progress through high school. The analyses of these data for the 2010-11 school year are described below.

To examine the extent to which students experienced changes in attendance during the transition to ninth grade, the evaluation examined data for participants who were enrolled in New York schools for both the eighth grade in 2009-10 and ninth grade in 2010-11 (n=1,179). In 2009-10, these participants missed an average of 13.78 days of school. In 2010-11, they missed an average of 14.61 days of school; this increase was not statistically significant. Individually, more than 50 percent of participants experienced a decrease in the number of days missed from eighth to ninth grades. In contrast, the number of days of school missed by nonparticipating students increased significantly, from 17.36 days in 2009-10 to 22.62 days in 2010-11.

The percentage of participating students with two years of data who were chronically absent (i.e., they missed 20 or more days of school) stayed relatively steady, at 22 percent in 2009-10 and 23 percent in 2010-11. Mac Iver's analyses of data on Baltimore graduates and dropouts (2010) found a steady increase in the proportion of students who were chronically absent as students progressed from the middle grades to high school. On average, while nonparticipating students reflect this trend (with the proportion of chronically absent students increasing from 30 percent to 34 percent), Transition to High School students appear to have avoided this negative attendance pattern.

Variations in Program Approaches to Model Implementation

Transition to High School program services typically reflected both the strengths of the nonprofit organization operating the program and the priorities established by the school principal. The examples reported below present the strategies and approaches used in the seven programs selected for evaluation site visits. Each of the programs emphasized a unique subset of elements of the DYCD model to meet the needs of their students and schools, resulting in distinct programs.

Fostering a Sense of Community Among Students

In its guidance for the Transition to High School initiative, DYCD encouraged programs to design services that would encourage the development of a supportive peer cohort of ninth-grade students. One program visited as part of the evaluation, operated by an arts-based organization, specifically targeted students who did not participate in other school activities in order to provide them with a sense of program connection so that they would not become disengaged. This center-based program drew students primarily from one small high school that serves approximately 400 students. The Transition to High School program served about one third of the ninth-grade class (35 out of 99 students).

The students who enrolled in this program had many factors putting them at risk for disengagement from school: 86 percent had performed below grade level on the eighth-grade ELA

state test, 37 percent were eligible for special-education services, and 20 percent were chronically absent in the eighth-grade. In survey responses, only 56 percent reported that they were sure that they would be promoted to the tenth grade.

The off-campus center hosted programming specifically for ninth-graders one day a week, which included homework help and team-building activities. The program met a social need, because it offered students a way to meet other youth and placed them in an environment in which caring adults were available to offer supports, although formal one-on-one meetings occurred relatively infrequently (once a month or less, according to the director survey). Participants were also expected to attend activities at the center at least one additional day per week, choosing from arts programming such as poetry, music, and theater. The program offered special events, including college trips and arts-themed block parties. Program staff emphasized the importance of creating a safe space for youth to spend their time, and many participants became invested in the organization's arts programming. Participants in this program reported participating most frequently in discussions about issues in their community (68 percent), arts activities (56 percent), visits to college campuses (52 percent), and discussions about personal or social issues (52 percent).

Despite the off-site program location, school-day staff and the staff of the Transition to High School program had frequent discussions about participants' academic and social needs. School staff viewed the relationships that formed between program staff and students as beneficial because the program meant that another adult would help keep their ninth-grade students on track. Program staff also supported the school's work in many ways; for example, prior to a field trip, staff checked with teachers about participants' academic standing and had them sign an academic contract to improve their grades in order to be allowed on the trip.

When surveyed, participants reported that the program helped them to improve leadership skills (52 percent), learn about people or resources that are available for academic support (50 percent), learn how to prepare for college (48 percent), and adjust to life in high school (48 percent). Sixty-nine percent of youth in the program earned at least 10 credits in ninth grade, similar to the rate of credit accrual for nonparticipants. Students in the program still struggled with school engagement, but at somewhat lower levels than nonparticipants. One-third (34 percent) of youth in the program were chronically absent in ninth grade, as were 42 percent of the school's nonparticipants.

Providing Targeted Academic Supports

Another program visited for the evaluation targeted services to immigrant and English Language Learner students by emphasizing opportunities to practice English-language skills and develop the social and cultural skills necessary to integrate successfully into high school and the local environment. The program was located at a large, comprehensive high school that served over 3,000 students; only 7 percent of the ninth-grade class participated in the program (45 students out of a ninth-grade class of 604). Sixty-seven percent of the participating students were eligible for ELL services, and 38 percent were recent immigrants (compared to 13 percent and 4 percent, respectively, for nonparticipating ninth-graders). Participating students had struggled in the eighth grade: 87 percent performed below grade level (Level 1 or 2) on the ELA state test, compared to 67 percent of nonparticipating students. Fewer than half were confident that they would be promoted to

the tenth grade (40 percent), according to survey responses, or that they would finish high school in four years (46 percent). Students also emphasized academic supports as their reason for enrolling in the program: 59 percent said that they enrolled because the program offered the academic help they need, and 58 percent said that they wanted extra supports to help them in high school.

Building on the nonprofit agency's experience working with immigrant populations and collaborating with school-day counselors, the program helped participants with language development, transitioning to a new environment, and coursework. During the summer, the program ran ELL classes and took numerous field trips to help students learn about their community and city. Eighty-eight percent of students said that they received tutoring in the program, and 49 percent went on a field trip. During the school year, the program used its assessment of students' language barriers to shape how it delivered its academic offerings. For example, the program identified science and history as a challenge for participants because of the specialized vocabulary. Accordingly, academic support was not formatted as typical homework help sessions; rather, academic support sessions reviewed what was taught during the school day. School-day staff also worked in the program, enhancing the quality of academic supports.

Analyses of ninth-grade data suggest that the program helped participants to overcome some of these challenges. Eighty percent of participating students earned at least 10 credits, and 11 percent were chronically absent. In comparison, 75 percent of nonparticipating ninth-graders in the school at least earned 10 credits, and 22 percent were chronically absent. Students were satisfied with the program services. More than half said that the program helped them improve their study skills (54 percent), make new friends (53 percent), understand course and credit requirements (53 percent), and do better in school (53 percent).

Connecting Learning to the “Real World”

Another approach to Transition to High School programming was to offer engaging off-site experiences that helped students stay motivated to do well in school and that helped them connect their school day learning to real-world experiences. In particular, one program visited for the evaluation offered field trips as rewards for participants performing well in school, including outings to a Yankees baseball game and to tapings of *The People's Court*. The program also offered trips that were educational in nature, including college visits and witnessing the swearing-in of a local congressman. Other trips were intended to show participants the importance of their education. For instance, one group of participants observed an adult education class on basic math at the nonprofit organization and then had conversations with the adult students about the connections between their poor educational choices early in life and the challenges they were currently facing. The program director believed that these experiences would encourage participants to do well in school, allowing participants to make connections between their lives and the various career and life paths they observed on these trips. In survey responses, 68 percent of participants reported that they had gone on a field trip with this Transition to High School program, and 41 percent had visited a college campus. In addition, 80 percent reported receiving tutoring.

In survey responses from this program, participants highlighted both the social aspects of the program and the academic supports it provided. More than half of the students reported that a big reason for enrolling in the program was that their friends attended (52 percent), suggesting that

the program was building a cohort of peers and that the program offered the academic help they needed (51 percent). Participants benefited in these areas as well, with 67 percent noting that the program helped them learn a lot about resources available for academic support and 56 percent making a lot of new friends in the program.

This Transition to High School program was located in a large, comprehensive high school which served about 4,400 students. The program enrolled 11 percent of the ninth-grade class, or 56 out of the 498 ninth-graders. Students who enrolled in the program performed somewhat better than nonparticipating students in both their eighth-grade and ninth-grade years. Sixty-four percent of the students recruited into the program performed below grade level in eighth grade, and 23 percent were chronically absent (compared to 73 percent and 37 percent of nonparticipating students). By the end of the ninth grade, students showed an increase in their school engagement, with 16 percent chronically absent (compared to 26 percent of nonparticipants). Eighty-two percent had earned 10 credits or more, compared to 74 percent of their nonparticipating peers.

Expanding the School's Resources

Another Transition to High School program partnered with a relatively new school with a small student population of approximately 400 students, housed in a building with two other schools. The program leaders and the school principal envisioned that the program would meet the extracurricular needs of the school, filling a void in school-day offerings by offering recreational activities, homework help, a student council, and service-learning. The program was open to all ninth-graders, and, ultimately, 63 percent of the school's ninth-grade class participated in program activities. The program director believed that by offering these activities participants would feel more connected to the school and a culture of school spirit would develop. Participants responded positively to these opportunities. In survey responses, more than three-quarters said that big reasons for enrolling in the program were that activities were fun (85 percent), that the program offered academic help (77 percent), and that they wanted extra supports to help them in high school (77 percent).

The nonprofit organization operating the Transition to High School program also hired a social worker to serve the school building in which the program operated. In addition to benefitting the school as a whole, the presence of this social worker allowed the Transition to High School program to refer participants to individual case management services as needed. Complementing these services, a social work intern trained in group facilitation and hired specifically for the program focused on offering group activities and conducting parent outreach.

Educational data reveal that both participants and nonparticipants struggled with school engagement in ninth grade (32 percent of participants and 34 percent of nonparticipating students were chronically absent). However, students who enrolled in the program had a very high rate of success in earning at least 10 credits (95 percent, compared to 85 percent of nonparticipating students). In addition, the majority of participants reported in survey responses that they program helped them learn about available resources (88 percent), understand the school's attendance requirements (88 percent), Regents requirements (84 percent), and get support from other students and make new friends (84 percent each).

Encouraging Students to Be Leaders in Their Community

One Transition to High School program was operated by a founding partner of the small host high school, and the nonprofit partner and school shared a mission to educate youth about their global impact and to build leaders who are active members of society. Aligned with that mission, the program focused its after-school efforts on engaging participants in critical thinking about their role within their communities. This program intentionally did not offer direct academic support. Instead, staff believed that weekly after-school discussion activities had an indirect but positive impact on participants' academic success. Activities focused on building leadership skills and encouraging connections to the community. Participants engaged in discussions about world issues and how they related to their own lives (as reported by 66 percent in survey responses). Program staff built on these conversations and provided opportunities for participants to develop leadership skills through service projects and youth-led presentations that tied into the issues discussed. The program also offered field trips, which were used as an incentive to encourage participants to attend the weekly sessions; 69 percent of participants reported visiting a college campus as part of the program.

This program served two-thirds (66 percent) of the ninth-grade class (40 out of 61 students). Education performance data suggest that the leadership opportunities appealed to students who had struggled in eighth grade but who were at less educational risk than their nonparticipating peers. Seventy-nine percent of participants performed below grade level in ELA in eighth grade, and 15 percent were chronically absent in that year. Even more of the students who did not enroll in the program faced these challenges: 94 percent were below grade level, and 42 percent chronically absent in the eighth grade. The ninth-graders who participated in the Transition to High School program appear to have steadied their school performance, with 82 percent earning 10 credits or more (compared to 56 percent of nonparticipants), and 23 percent chronically absent (compared with 60 percent of nonparticipants). Forty-six percent of participants reported that the program helped them perform better in school.

Providing Counseling to Support Student Learning

In one program visited, the program director was the only staff person and focused her efforts on serving as a counselor-advocate for the ninth-grade participants. In this role, she attended participants' Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings at the school, and conducted informal and formal classroom observations to track participants' behavior during the school day. She frequently met with participants' teachers to advocate on their behalf. Additionally, she acted as a liaison among parents, participants, and teachers and attended meetings between parents and teachers to ensure that she was in the loop and a facilitator of that relationship. This individual support approach was evident in student reports of their reasons for enrolling. Unlike many other programs, where enrollment was primarily self-directed by the student, 57 percent of participants in this program said that they enrolled because a teacher or counselor at the school wanted them to. In addition, students reported enrolling for the extra supports the program would provide (57 percent) and because they wanted to learn more about college (66 percent).

This program was located in a small high school and was run by the school's founding nonprofit partner organization. The school seeks to involve students in the health of their community and to expose them to careers in health fields. In 2010-11, the school enrolled a total of 228 students.

Participating Transition to High School students attended the director’s advisory period at the end of the school day, and then had the option of whether or not to stay after school to participate in group activities. The director engaged in case management and routinely documented student needs and progress. Initially, one-on-one case management occurred for all participants at least once every three weeks, with the program director pulling participants out of class. However, during the course of the year, the need for formal one-on-one meetings declined, and the program director and students met on an “as needed” basis. Nonetheless, nearly three-quarters of participants (73 percent) reported meeting with the program director one-on-one at least weekly.

This program did not maintain reliable enrollment or participation data in DYCD Online, and it is therefore not possible to compare the performance of participants and nonparticipants. In survey responses, 40 percent of participating students said that they were very sure they would be promoted to the tenth grade, but 90 percent reported that they expected to complete at least a four-year college degree, perhaps indicating a gap between current achievement and future goals that could be closed through the resources offered by the program.

Engaging Parents in the High School Transition Process

Parent engagement is one of the core strategies identified in the DYCD Transition to High School model. One program in particular embraced parent engagement as a cornerstone to its approach. Ninth-graders could only be enrolled in this Transition to High School program if their parents attended a mandatory orientation event and signed agreements committing their children to regular program attendance. Attendance was checked rigorously, and parents were contacted for any unexplained absence or behavioral issues. The program’s size and context enabled it to secure this level of parent buy-in. There were about 1,000 ninth grade students in the school, and the program served about 4 percent of the class, although the program was overenrolled with a waiting list. This high level of demand for the program allowed staff to be strict and to replace participants if they or their parents did not comply. Participant survey responses reflected this parent engagement. Although 60 percent of students reported enrolling because the program offered needed academic supports, students’ second most frequent reason for enrolling was that their parents wanted them to (40 percent). Nearly all (95 percent) said that their most frequent program activity was participation in tutoring.

Perhaps reflecting the high level of engagement and commitment that was required for enrollment, participating students were not as low performing as some ninth-graders who did not participate. Sixty-nine percent of enrolled students performed below grade level in ELA in eighth grade, and 11 percent were chronically absent in eighth grade. Among non-participating ninth-graders, 80 percent performed below grade level and 23 percent were chronically absent in eighth grade. These factors suggest that the program reached students who were willing to put in the effort required to succeed in high school and whose parents actively supported those efforts. Despite some evidence of struggles in ninth grade, participants outperformed their peers who were not enrolled in the program: 38 percent of participants were chronically absent in ninth grade, compared to 58 percent of nonparticipants, and 76 percent earned at least 10 credits (compared to 59 percent of nonparticipants).

Recommendations

The high rates of credit accrual and stable school attendance rates among ninth-grade students participating in Transition to High School programs suggest that these programs are helping students as they navigate their first year of high school. The recommendations offered here, based on interviews and observations conducted by PSA site visitors, are intended to highlight areas in which Transition to High School programs can continue to grow. By prioritizing elements of the DYCD model to best reflect the needs of the students they serve and strengthening their partnerships with schools, programs will be well-positioned to further support students as they progress through high school.

The central finding from the evaluation's first year – that programs implemented elements of the Transition to High School model in ways that best fit their school environment and the needs of their students—holds true for these recommended strategies. Some strategies will fit some program sites better than others. A focus on three essential elements of Transition to High School programs will set the stage for programs to best address participants' needs and support their transition to high school. These three elements include individualized supports for students, services offered with a youth development focus, and intentional partnerships with schools, adapted in ways to best fit each program's context.

Individualized Supports

The role of the counselor-advocate has emerged in the Transition to High School model as both effective and more fluid than set out in the original guidance from DYCD. The evaluation found that individualized supports for students often happened informally, with staff checking in with students in passing and on an as-needed basis. Although DYCD originally envisioned the counselor-advocate as a case manager for youth, few programs utilize a traditional case-management model as the predominant method of communicating with participants. Often, the responsibility for providing participants with individualized support was shared by all staff in the program. Based on survey results, participants appreciated and valued their one-on-one interactions with program staff, and the majority of program directors (20 out of 36) listed individual support or counseling services for students as one of the top three most effective elements of the Transition to High School program model.

Therefore, although a specific counselor-advocate staff position *per se* may not be necessary for programs, DYCD should continue to emphasize the importance of individualized supports and positive, personal connections between adult program staff and youth. For example, DYCD could recommend ways in which staff as a whole should support students' individual needs, such as through targeted academic support, encouraging personal connections with caring adults, and referring students as necessary to additional support services. Depending on programs' staffing configurations, these responsibilities might be taken on by staff with different job titles in different programs.

Partnerships with Schools

When the Transition to High School program is one element of a comprehensive, multi-faceted partnership with the school, both the program and students benefit. In a few programs visited for the evaluation, the nonprofit organization operating the Transition to High School program was a close partner with the school. For example, one nonprofit supported the school's advisory periods and health classes, and it built on the insights from this role to identify specific resources and opportunities needed by ninth-grade students in the Transition to High School program. Because the nonprofit staff coordinated closely with the school staff, they also had natural connections for collaborating with school-day teachers to ensure that program participants received the interventions they needed.

In another program, the majority of staff were also school employees; in particular, one of the counselor-advocates managed attendance, report cards, and home visits for the school. These built-in connections helped programs access student data and monitor student needs and progress. A director commented on how having staff from the school working in the program helped the program be considered an integral part of the school by both students and staff: "The kids were very comfortable with the people and the relationship just grew stronger because it was [...] just so cohesive. It was the same staff. They knew exactly what the school needed. They knew exactly how to go about getting things that we needed. So they knew how and when to ask the principal for certain things. It was like everything we asked for, we pretty much got."

However, developing this type of comprehensive partnership can be resource-intensive, and programs should be encouraged to braid funding sources as much as possible. The majority (21 of 36) of directors reported supplementing DYCD Transition to High School funds with other sources. For example, one organization operated an after-school program for each grade level using separate funding streams, so that the Transition to High School program served as a first entry into a broader after-school strategy for the school. Each after-school program in this school had a unique focus depending on the grade level of students served. The program benefited from economies of scale with this level of involvement, including the ability to share staff, organizational resources and structures, and to establish a strong working relationship with the school.

Youth Development Focus

Nonprofit organizations that establish partnerships with the school that go beyond just the Transition to High School program and that involve school-day staff in programming can develop more seamless supports for students. But programs also need to be careful to consider the limits of their program responsibilities so that their resources, and consequent impacts, are not spread too thin. Defining the role of nonprofit staff to provide student supports aligned most closely with their expertise, and allowing them to build on the youth development strengths of their nonprofit organizations, can help maximize the effectiveness of the program. By providing youth-development activities and supports for ninth-graders that the school would be missing if the program were not there, Transition to High School programs can create a niche for themselves that also adds value to the school.

The experiences of several Transition to High School programs highlight the importance of balancing the program's integration into the school with a focus on providing a set of core supports for ninth-graders. Programs visited for the evaluation that had a narrow focus on ninth-grade transition were generally stronger than those that tried to address a broad set of school needs. For example, one program offered sports teams as well as academic support and peer mentoring but was unable to support any of these components thoroughly. Another program had only one staff member to teach an advisory period class, conduct school day observations, run an after-school component, and conduct one-on-one meetings with students. This staff person was stretched too thin to effectively engage participants.

In contrast, in another program, staff from the nonprofit organization led activities and focused on getting to know students one-on-one through both formal and informal interactions, helping them address social and academic problems. However, the program staff did not spend time on academic support or tutoring; instead, they helped participants to seek tutoring from teachers in the academic areas in which they were struggling. This structure ensured that the program staff had the time necessary to deliver the other enrichment services of their program, track student progress, and support students individually.

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