The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Moving the Needle
Exploring Key Levers to Boost College Readiness Among Black and Latino Males in New York City

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College readiness is becoming an increasingly important standard by which to measure school success and student achievement. While high school graduation and dropout prevention remain critical issues for educators, there is a substantial gap in outcomes between students who only earn a high school diploma and those who go on to obtain a college degree. For example, young adults with a bachelor's degree earn almost twice as much—and are half as likely to be unemployed—as those with only a high school diploma.[i]

Given the importance of higher education, it is decidedly problematic that students of color, especially Black and Latino males, are underrepresented among those with college degrees.[ii] Nationally, only 26 percent of Black males and 18 percent of Latino males attain an associate degree or higher, compared to 41 percent of students overall.[iii] Not surprisingly, there are disparities in high school graduation rates as well. According to the Schott Foundation's *50 State Report*, of students scheduled to graduate in 2010, 52 percent of Black males and 60 percent of Latino males graduated from high school, compared to 78 percent of White non-Latino males.[iv]

For many decades, high school graduation rates in New York City lagged behind the nation, and low rates among Black and Latino students in particular were the focus of intense debate and criticism. Efforts to improve graduation rates and close gaps between subgroups of students have actually begun to pay off in recent years. High school graduation rates for Black and Latino males increased by 14 percentage points—from 43 and 45 percent, respectively, among those who entered high school in 2002, to 57 and 59 percent, respectively, among those who entered in 2006.[v] The needle on college readiness, however, has not moved to the same degree. Among students scheduled to graduate in 2010, only 9 percent of Black males and approximately 11 percent of Latino males graduated "college ready."[vi] Thus, while rising numbers of Black and Latino males are graduating from NYC high schools, very few of them are being prepared to attend and thrive in college.

Improving college readiness rates in NYC, especially for young men of color, will require a better understanding of the challenges they face—and of the levers that might serve to increase college readiness and enrollment. Our report, *Moving the Needle*, speaks to both issues by examining the trajectory of Black and Latino males

on their path to college and zeroing in on points along that path where schools might effectively intervene. The report describes college-related outcomes and other indicators that help predict college readiness for Black and Latino male students over time, and discusses key contextual factors that underlie these educational outcomes. It then uses this research to inform the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), an ongoing citywide effort to improve college and career readiness for young men of color, which the Research Alliance is evaluating.

The Path to College for NYC's Black and Latino Males: A Leaky Pipeline

Our analysis of the educational outcomes of Black and Latino males in New York City over the last decade shows that while graduation rates are improving, college readiness rates for young men of color remain startlingly low. Even Black and Latino young men who enter high school with relatively high 8th-grade test scores are less likely than their White and Asian male counterparts to graduate or graduate college ready, suggesting that some divergence in outcomes actually begins in high school. Antecedents to college enrollment, such as attendance, retention, and "on-track" status, hold promise as levers that could be used to find and support struggling students, thereby increasing college readiness for future cohorts of Black and Latino male students. Taken together, our findings paint a picture of a "leaky pipeline," with students falling off track at various points along the way. Identifying these leaks can provide direction for schools about how they might strategically target supports and interventions to yield the most impact for students.

Understanding the Barriers to Graduation and College

Using New York City data, national data, and relevant literature, the report examines underlying "opportunity gaps" facing Black and Latino males. In contrast to the typical focus on achievement gaps, the concept of opportunity gaps shows how environmental factors influence the likelihood that students will graduate and graduate college ready. Specifically, the report looks at the role of poverty, gender expectations, and language and cultural barriers in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of young men of color. It also examines school-level practices that negatively and disproportionately affect this population. Black and Latino boys are overrepresented in special education classes, for example, and among those who have been suspended and expelled. They also have less access to rigorous courses. All of these factors help explain the lagging graduation and college

readiness rates among New York City's young men of color. Policies and programs that address these underlying issues may be needed to achieve more equity—and across-the-board success—in the City's public schools.

Implications for Policy and Practice

It is interesting to consider the report's findings against the City's own effort to increase college readiness for young males of color. NYC's Young Men's Initiative (YMI)—the largest investment of its kind in the country—seeks to improve outcomes for Black and Latino males along four dimensions: education, criminal justice, employment, and health. By far, the largest educational component of YMI is the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), specifically designed to increase the college and career readiness of NYC's Black and Latino males. ESI includes an investment in 40 schools that have shown success in graduating males of color but are only on par with other schools in terms of getting these students ready for and enrolled in college. In addition to financial resources, ESI schools receive professional development, especially around culturally relevant pedagogy, and ongoing support in planning and implementing their ESI programs.

Our analysis of Black and Latino males' outcomes in the NYC school system highlights both the potential of this initiative as well as its limitations. For example, ESI is a school-focused initiative and cannot, therefore, adequately address the entrenched poverty that is so highly correlated with negative educational outcomes. Despite such limitations, ESI does touch on several levers that our analysis suggests are critical to increasing college readiness among Black and Latino young men. Below are the features of ESI that, based on the review of the research literature and the empirical findings presented in the paper, we hypothesize may have the most traction in achieving the aims of the initiative. While this list is not meant to be exhaustive, it suggests possible areas of focus for ESI schools as they work to improve postsecondary outcomes for young men of color:

1. **Focus explicitly on college readiness**: ESI schools not only work to increase academic preparedness, in terms of mastery of specific content and "higher-order" skills like critical thinking and problem-solving; they also aim to enhance "college knowledge" and other aspects of readiness, including help navigating the application, financial aid, and matriculation process as well as the cultural norms on college campuses. These college-focused

supports are especially important for students who are first-generation college goers and/or lack the social network to help them through the college admission process and the transition to college life.

2. **Invest resources in the 9th grade**: In Year 1 of ESI, all resources and programming must be allocated to the 9th-grade cohort in ESI schools (programming will then follow this cohort through their scheduled graduation). Several schools are using these resources to provide bridge programs that help students transition more smoothly from middle to high school. Moreover, many of the college-focused efforts that ESI schools were previously implementing with juniors and seniors are now being targeted toward 9th graders. Focusing on the 9th-grade cohort allows schools to identify students who are off-track for graduation early—an important strategy considering that students off-track by the end of their 9th-grade year are *56 percent less likely* to graduate, much less enroll in college.

3. **Increase opportunities for rigorous coursework**: ESI's academic component encourages schools to revamp their curriculum to better align with the Common Core, to increase the number of Black and Latino males taking AP and honors courses, and to reprogram academic schedules so students can take a higher number of math and science courses. But simply improving access to more rigorous courses is not enough—students must also be adequately supported to succeed in those classes. It will be important to understand how (or if) ESI schools are building in ramp-up courses or providing academic support in foundational skills to the students who will be taking these more advanced classes, particularly in math and science.

4. **Cultivate student leadership/student voice**: Socioemotional supports are critical to help address the environmental factors impeding the success of many Black and Latino boys. ESI's youth development component encourages schools to provide students with peer and adult mentoring, leadership opportunities, and structures such as advisory periods and Freshmen Seminars. Taken together, these efforts should help create a school environment in which male students of color can find support more easily, can have more of a voice on campus, and are less likely to fall through the cracks.

5. **Form strategic partnerships**: ESI's design calls for schools to allocate some of their ESI funding to partner with organizations that provide a range of support to educators and schools. Many of the organizations approved as potential partners provide enrichment programs that are geared toward young men of color and intended to increase their school engagement and improve their relationships with adults in the school. Other partner organizations provide schools with training in particular content areas, including writing instruction and high-level math curricula. In addition, many ESI schools are partnering with higher education institutions to provide students with opportunities to take courses on college campuses and get valuable internship experience while still in high school.

6. **Train school staff in culturally responsive education**: Perhaps the most unique feature of ESI is its focus on confronting underlying biases against young men of color and infusing ESI programming with culturally relevant or responsive education. While it is too early to say how widespread this will be among the 40 ESI schools, there are signs that principals and teachers (of all races and ethnicities) are having explicit conversations around race and gender, confronting their own biases, and challenging each other to rethink their expectations of Black and Latino young men. Schools are working to create a culture in which staff and students value the experiences, perspectives and cultural capital of students typically labeled as disadvantaged and believe in their ability to thrive in high school, college, and careers.

Taking these components of ESI into account, our forthcoming evaluation will assess the impact of ESI on students and the effectiveness of its implementation in schools. Whether through ESI, other school-based efforts, or district-wide policies, increasing college readiness for Black and Latino male students will take more than a strictly academic focus, providing rigorous coursework, or increasing college knowledge, though all are essential. Rather, it will require that schools identify and intervene with students who are off track even earlier on their educational pathways, offering both academic and socioemotional supports. It will require that educators trade in a deficit perspective for one focused on the promise and potential of male students of color. And it will require focusing on opportunity gaps that exist both outside and within our schools. Ultimately, improving college readiness rates

for Black and Latino males will take a multidimensional approach. In coming years, we hope the ESI initiative sheds additional light on strategies that effectively move the needle toward college readiness and success.

Evaluating the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI):
Upcoming Reports

Preparing Black and Latino Males for College and Careers: A Description of the Schools and Strategies in NYC's Expanded Success Initiative (Fall 2013)

- This report focuses on the 40 schools chosen to receive ESI funding. It examines the student populations and performance of these schools and provides an overview of the preexisting supports these schools directed toward Black and Latino young men. The report examines the structure of the ESI program, providing an overview of the application process and a snapshot of strategies planned for the first year of the initiative.

Year 1 summary report on ESI implementation and impact (Winter 2013)

- This report will present findings from ESI's first year, with a focus on the initial implementation of the different intervention components across 40 sites. We will explore opportunities and challenges that schools faced during program rollout and examine ESI's early impact on student achievement and other indicators, as well as the initiative's cost in the first year.

Year 2 summary report (Winter 2014)
Year 3 summary report (Winter 2015)
Year 4 summary report (Winter 2016)

- These annual reports will track ESI's progress, focusing on the challenges of continued implementation, further cost analysis, results from student surveys, and an analysis of ESI's ongoing impact on student outcomes.

Executive Summary Notes

[i] Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013.

[ii] It is important to note that while the racial designations used in this report—Black and Latino—reflect the standard classifications used by the government (and often by researchers), they do not reflect the diversity within these groups, including many ethnic, social and economic differences. In particular, the averages we report here obscure the fact that many Black and Latino young men are succeeding in high school, college and beyond.

[iii] Lee & Ransom, 2012.

[iv] Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012a.

[v] Based on Research Alliance calculations from its data archive compiled from administrative records provided by the New York City Department of Education. See Figure 1 and endnote 4 in the full report for more information.

[vi] Unless otherwise noted, the college readiness measure used in the report is based on the New York State Education Department's Aspirational Performance Measure, which is defined as earning a New York State Regents Diploma and receiving a score of 80 or higher on a Mathematics Regents examination and a score of 75 or higher on an English Regents examination. The Research Alliance is currently engaged in ongoing work to develop better indicators of college readiness.

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