POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

EVALUATION FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF THE *TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL* INITIATIVE

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June 2011

Prepared for:
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Contents

Summary

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) launched the Transition to High School initiative at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year with 33 programs. These programs, operated by nonprofit organizations in partnerships with schools, are part of DYCD's Out-of-School Time (OST) initiative. The Transition to High School programs target 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 that students face in achieving on-time promotion to the tenth grade. The evaluation examines the implementation and student outcomes of these programs during the 2009-10 school year, the first year of the initiative. Key findings from the evaluation are summarized below.

Participant Outcomes

The 33 Transition to High School programs recruited a total of 1,704 students, most of whom scored at Levels 2 or 3 on the New York State eighth-grade test of English Language Arts (ELA). Approximately 30 percent of the program's students were chronically absent during their eighth-grade year. Together, these statistics suggest that the Transition to High School programs served participants who could benefit from the educational and social supports provided by the program model. Overall, the results of the first-year evaluation indicate that the Transition to High School programs were successful in providing these supports.

- Seventy-seven percent of participants, all of whom were ninth-graders, earned 10 or more credits during the 2009-10 school year, an indicator of educational success in New York City schools. The promotion rate to the tenth grade for Transition to High School participants was 83 percent.

- On average, program participants experienced no significant changes in their overall attendance in ninth grade compared to eighth grade, indicating that the program may help participants to "hold the line" on school attendance patterns and avoid a common pattern of increased school absences in high school. The mean attendance rate for participants was 91 percent in both 2008-09 and 2009-10.

- Students who were enrolled in Transition to High School programs for a greater number of months were significantly more likely to earn 10 credits, compared to students who were enrolled for fewer months, even after controlling for eighth-grade ELA proficiency and the number of days missed during eighth grade.

- More than half of participants reported that the Transition to High School 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.

The authors thank Priscilla Little and Elizabeth Reisner for their insights and feedback on drafts of this report. The authors also thank Jeanine Hildreth and Rebecca Romash for their assistance with analysis and reporting.

Program Implementation

In the first year of the Transition to High School initiative, programs implemented the core features of the DYCD model through adaptation to their local context and preferences.

- Programs took different approaches to developing supportive cohorts of participants. They assigned participants to groups for after-school activities, used peer mentoring, created a cohort of the entire ninth grade, and used other, unstructured approaches. Overall, programs provided social supports and promoted friendships that helped participants make positive transitions into high school.

- Many programs hired staff who could serve more than one function, including provision of one-on-one counseling and group-based after-school activities. The majority of programs (24 programs) hired college-educated adults who were not guidance counselors, social workers, or certified teachers to serve as counselor-advocates.

- Program directors reported that they were able to develop strong, collaborative relationships with their partner schools and that the principal supported their program.

- Programs tracked participant progress through interactions with school staff, reviews of school attendance records and course-specific grades, conversations with participants, and school-day classroom observations.

- Programs supplemented the services provided by schools and other organizations by offering varied activities, including tutoring, academic support, and individual counseling, as well as special events such as college visits.

- To engage families, programs communicated with parents about participants' progress in school and about students' behavior.

Recommendations

The evaluation of the first year of the Transition to High School initiative provides evidence that the program can benefit ninth-grade students both socially and academically. However, the study team also identified several recommendations for the implementation of the model, including:

- **Clarify expectations for students to be targeted.** Programs seemed best equipped to serve students who performed at Levels 2 or 3 on the eighth-grade ELA assessment. Although DYCD established that students in Levels 1, 2, or 3 on the eighth-grade ELA test were eligible for the program, focusing on the lowest-achieving students who are most at-risk of dropping out requires major investments of time and resources. These resources may be better spent on

students who could benefit from less-intensive supports to stay engaged and succeed in high school.

- **Clarify expectations for the youth outcomes sought through the program.** Because promotion to the tenth grade in itself may not be a reliable indicator of whether students are on-track to high school graduation, DYCD could also encourage programs to focus on the number of days absent from school and the number of high school credits earned as performance indicators. In addition, DYCD might consider establishing benchmarks for social-emotional outcomes that programs are capable of developing.

- **Clarify expectations for model implementation.** The core features of the Transition to High School model, including the development of a supportive peer cohort, the assistance of counselor-advocates, the provision of one-on-one counseling and also group activities, and the engagement of parents, are all important. However, programs visited in the study expressed concern about whether their individualized, unstructured approaches "counted" towards the number of hours of service that DYCD required them to offer. DYCD's emphasis on service hours may in fact detract from programs' focus on effectively supporting individual students in ninth grade.

- **Provide guidance on strengthening parent engagement.** Guidance to programs on effective ways to engage parents in meaningfully supporting their child's transition to high school could strengthen programs. For example, DYCD could offer more models for parent orientation meetings and also materials that explain academic requirements for success in the ninth grade and in high school and that also provide parents with information about resources and supports available in the school and community to facilitate high school success.

Overview of the Initiative and the Evaluation

DYCD launched the Transition to High School initiative at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year, with 33 programs based in 27 Department of Education (DOE) high schools and six community-based facilities. The Transition to High School programs are part of DYCD's citywide Out-of-School Time (OST) initiative. These high school programs, operated by nonprofit organizations in partnerships with schools, target students entering the ninth grade for a one-year intervention to help them navigate the transition into high school by addressing the educational, personal, and social challenges that they face. The program model includes out-of-school time supports for participating youth, using a cohort model that fosters peer bonding and a culture of learning. The program also involves 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 high school staff. The programs are also designed to engage parents, in order to improve their ability to support their children during the high school transition. The programs' overarching goal is to keep students on track for on-time promotion through high school and for longer-term educational success.

Program Rationale

DYCD's Transition to High School model 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 indentifies 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. 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 compared with students who were not on-track, based on this indicator.

Analyses of national and local high school enrollment and graduation data highlight the difficulty students have 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" or "bottleneck," which 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 difficulties student face in the transition to high school, researchers have proposed a number of intervention strategies including: providing 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 could provide 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.

Evaluation Approach

The evaluation of the Transition to High School programs, conducted by Policy Studies Associates (PSA), is designed to answer the following questions:

- With what methods and what success did the Transition to High School programs recruit and retain intended participants?

- To what extent and in what ways did programs implement the model's components? What approaches did programs use to help participants navigate their transition into high school?

- What was the promotion rate into tenth grade for students who participated in the program? In what ways did participant success vary based on participants' demographic or educational characteristics?

Data collection for this study occurred during the 2009-10 school year, and consisted of the following activities:

- ***Youth survey.*** In spring 2010, PSA administered a survey to all Transition to High School participants who had appropriate parental consent to participate in the evaluation and whose school principal had provided approval for the research. The survey asked youth about their experience with the program, their relationships with their program cohort and their counselor-advocate, their academic motivation, and their educational goals. Surveys were administered to 1,466 participants in 32 programs, including 26 of 27 school-based programs and all six center-based programs. In total, 766 students from 28 programs responded to the survey, for a 52 percent participant-level response rate and an 88 percent program-level response rate.

- ***Program director survey.*** In spring 2010, PSA administered an online survey to the directors of all Transition to High School programs. The survey asked directors to report on the activities and services offered to youth and their parents, their student recruitment and retention methods, their communication and collaboration with host schools, and their experiences in implementing the program. Thirty-one of 33 program directors responded to the survey, for a 94 percent response rate.

- ***Site visits.*** In collaboration with DYCD, PSA selected four programs, each representing a different intended approach to implementation, in which to conduct three one-day site visits during the 2009-10 school year. The fall visit focused on youth recruitment and orientation, the winter visit on coordination with schools and tracking of student progress, and the spring visit on program outcomes—especially anticipated student promotion to tenth grade—and reflections on implementation. Site visits included interviews with the program director, counselor-advocates, a group of participants, and key school staff, as well as informal observations.

- ***DYCD Online data.*** PSA obtained and analyzed enrollment, participation, and activity data collected by all Transition to High School programs in the DYCD Online system during the period September 2009 through June 2010.

- ***DOE data.*** PSA received an extraction of demographic and educational data from the DOE student databases for all participating students with parental consent for evaluation. These included student-level data for the 2008-09 (eighth-grade) and 2009-10 (ninth-grade) years and also for the fall 2010 registration. PSA analyzed data for 1,147 participants who had valid promotion data and parental consent to participate in the evaluation.

This report summarizes findings from evaluation of implementation of the Transition to High School programs' first year. To place the outcomes findings in context, the report begins with an overview of the target population characteristics. It then presents analyses of the social and educational outcomes of youth who participated in the first year of the initiative, including their rates of promotion to the tenth grade. Following this discussion of youth outcomes, the report describes the ways in which programs implemented each of the core elements of the Transition to High School model, including analysis of the parts of the model that seemed to be most effective and those that seemed most challenging to implement or may have been less effective. Specifically, the report discusses these core elements of the Transition to High School model:

- The development of a cohort model to promote a culture of peer support and learning

- The use of counselor-advocates to provide students with personalized guidance and support and to help them identify and access resources needed to succeed in the ninth grade

- The implementation of supportive activities and services

- The recognition of the critical role that families play in the transition to high school

Target Population and Enrollment

DYCD designed its Transition to High School model to serve DOE 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 English Language Arts (ELA).[1] Each program was expected to serve 25 to 75 students who attended the same public school or public schools located at the same site or in the same neighborhoods. DYCD also targeted schools with below average

[1] On the New York State tests for grades 3-8, performance levels are defined as: Level 1—not meeting learning standards; Level 2—partially meeting learning standards; Level 3—meeting learning standards; and Level 4—meeting learning standards with distinction.

promotion rates, and required that Transition to High School provider organizations and host or feeder school(s) enter into an official partnership agreement.

Recruitment

Many after-school programs face challenges in recruiting, engaging, and retaining older youth in their programs. Compared to younger participants, high school youth have more interests and responsibilities that compete for their time (Deschenes et al., 2010). As one Transition to High School director observed, older youth want to exercise their independence in shaping their time outside the school day. Youth may opt to socialize with friends or participate in community sports and recreational activities. Other high school youth are charged with adult responsibilities and must work or attend to family obligations. Survey responses from youth who participated in the Transition to High School programs reflected this range of responsibilities, reporting different activities and obligations outside of the program. Relatively few youth reported participating in structured after-school activities aside from the Transition to High School program. As shown in Exhibit 1, youth most frequently reported going home to do homework (48 percent) or spending time with their friends (47 percent) after school.

Exhibit 1
Activities Outside of Transition to High School, in Percents (n=745)

Activity	Percent
I go home and do homework	48
I hang out with my friends	47
I participate in a club or sport	18
I take care of younger family members or neighbors	14
I go to another after-school program	10
I work	6

Exhibit reads: Forty-eight percent of participants go home and do homework after school when they do not come to Transition to High School programming.

Recruitment strategies. Transition to High School programs used multiple strategies to identify and attract participants during the 2009-10 program year. Prior research has indicated that programs successful at retaining youth over time use a blended approach to recruitment, employing multiple methods rather than relying solely on one method (Deschenes et al., 2010). As illustrated in Exhibit 2, 24 program directors reported presenting in classrooms and 23 reported identifying potential participants through their ELA scores. As noted later in this report, the majority of participants who enrolled in Transition to High School programs scored in Levels 2 or 3 on the New York State ELA eighth-grade exam, consistent with the goals of the initiative.

Exhibit 2
Recruitment Methods (n=31)

Method	Number Of Programs That Used the Strategy
Presented the program to ninth-grade classes at the start of the school year	24
Selected participants based on eighth-grade ELA score	23
Asked participants to submit applications	22
Selected participants based on guidance counselors' recommendations	19
Offered school credits for participation	17
Selected participants based on recommendations from high school principal	17
Selected participants on a first-come, first-serve basis	15
Interviewed potential participants	13
Recruited participants through summer programming*	4
Selected participants based on middle school staff's recommendations	4
Offered a stipend for participation	3

Exhibit reads: As part of their recruitment strategy, 24 percent of program directors reported presenting the program to ninth-grade classes at the start of the school year.

*Because 2009-10 was the first year of the initiative, programs had limited opportunity to recruit students during the summer. Additional summer programming is expected in summer 2010 for the 2010-11 school year.

Most programs used multiple recruitment methods within a single program. For example, one program visited for this study received a list of all ninth-graders in the school, targeted low performers (based on ELA scores) first, and then opened the program to other interested ninth-graders. A strategy used to recruit these non-targeted youth was to specifically appeal to "the popular group who [were] influential with their peers" because "they bring their friends." However, while this worked initially, program staff noticed that over time attendance dwindled. Some staff members attributed the decline in attendance to participants becoming less interested in the program and getting involved with other activities such as Regents prep. To recruit more participants, the director and the ninth-grade school counselors worked from a list of ninth-graders who had failed a class in the first semester. They told these students that the program was "mandatory tutoring" and they were required to attend. Not all of the identified youth regularly attended, but according to the director, the method increased program participation.

Another program first worked with potential participants' eighth-grade counselors and their current ninth-grade teachers to identify youth who could benefit from the program. However, the resulting list of youth mostly included boys, and he/she explained, "I had to fight to get some girls. As a result, I had to recruit girls of a higher [ELA test] level." The program director and school

worked together to encourage both boys and girls to join. First, they branded the program as a leadership program that participants had to interview to join, consequently enrolling some students with a higher ELA performance than those originally targeted for the program at that school.

Another director viewed the blending of participants with varied academic performance as a good strategy because it did not single out a group of ninth-graders as "troubled." Additionally, this director believed that participants were able to learn from each other and interact with youth who they may not have otherwise known. This approach is consistent with recommendations from the Southern Regional Education Board to include a mix of at-risk and not at-risk students in ninth-grade transition programs (Bottoms & Timberlake, 2007). The director explained:

> *There needs to be a balance. It can't be only the kids doing poorly. There is an advantage to having some ninth-graders [who are] doing well: they can help each other. Having struggling students around those ninth-graders was a push and positive influence. [The program] can't be all kids at rock bottom, borderline, or at the very top. There needs to be a mix of students. [The program] should mix in kids who are doing fairly well so struggling kids can see and interact and develop some positive habits.*

When asked about successes in recruitment, program directors frequently referred to their partnerships with the schools. More than half of directors also reported that guidance counselors (19 directors) and high school principals (17) recommended students for enrollment. One director said, "A major surprise success [was receiving] student referrals from guidance counselors. [Another] success included doing direct recruitment of students with specific teacher[s] with whom we have a positive relationship." Transition to High School programs' relationships with their schools allowed them to not only seek input from school staff and make classroom presentations, but to also conduct outreach in the cafeteria, at school assemblies, and at parent-teacher nights.

In contrast, a few directors offered comments about the challenges of their relationships with the school. These directors identified issues such as the lack of access to data to identify potential recruits and school administration and/or teachers not being "fully on board with the goals and overall implementation of the program," which affected both recruitment and program implementation.

Incentives for enrollment. Research has identified best practices for attracting high school participants to out-of-school time programs, including the provision of incentives such as gift cards, food, money, or school credit (Deschenes et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2008) and this evaluation indicates that Transition to High School programs are employing some of these practices. While just three Transition to High School directors reported offering a stipend for participation, in 17 programs students received school credit for participation. In one school visited, receiving school credit provided youth with an incentive to attend the program's group activities. At another school, all ninth-graders were required to complete a portfolio of work over the course of the year. The Transition to High School program provided students with opportunities to produce work that could be included in this portfolio, which drew some students to participate.

When asked why they participated in the Transition to High School programs, ninth-graders reported they did so because of the activities the program offered and the support they received. Specifically, a little over a half of participants reported that a big reason they were

attracted to the program was because it offered the academic help they needed (54 percent), as shown in Exhibit 3. Other common reasons included: wanting extra supports to help in high school (51 percent), wanting to learn more about college (49 percent), and because the program activities were fun (49 percent). In contrast, few participants reported that they enrolled because of prior experiences in after-school programs in middle school (18 percent) or a summer program for new freshmen (12 percent).

Exhibit 3
Youth-Reported Reasons for Enrollment, in Percents (n=752)

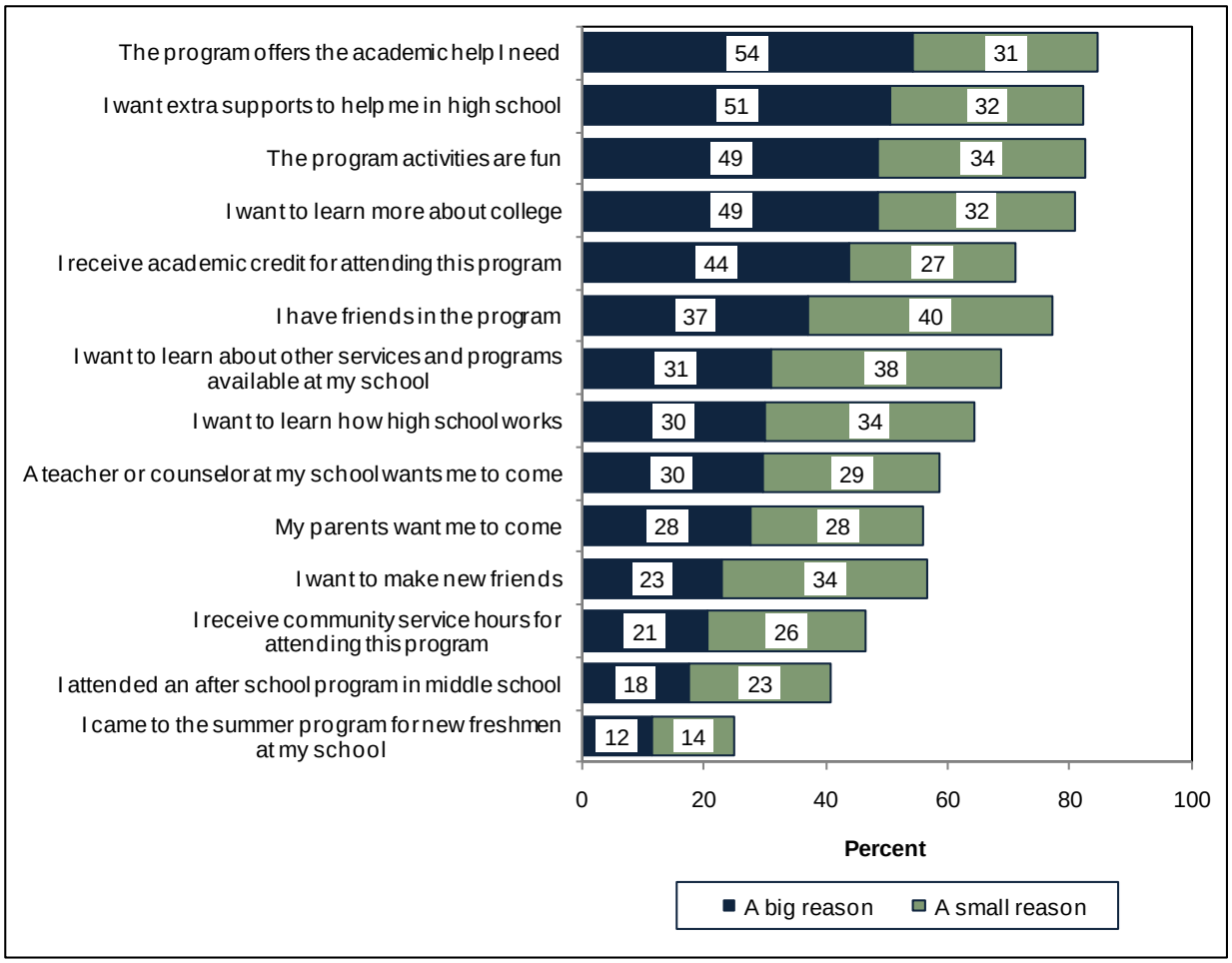

Exhibit reads: Fifty-four percent of participants reported that the program offering the academic support they needed was a big reason they enrolled in the Transition to High School program, and 31 percent said it was a small reason. The remaining students (15 percent) reported that this was not a reason for enrollment.

Program Enrollment

DYCD Online, the agency's management information system for youth enrollment, participation, and activity data, captured reliable information about enrollment in Transition to High School programs in 2009-10. However, data about hours of participation were unreliable because the system was not adapted for the Transition to High School model. For example, the system did not offer a distinct activity category for one-on-one counseling, a central component of

the program, and it is not known how or to what extent program directors labeled and recorded the time spent in individual sessions. DYCD began making changes to the DYCD Online system during the 2010-11 school year to more accurately capture youth participation in the types of program activities and services that take place at Transition to High School programs.

In the 2009-10 program year, the 33 Transition to High School programs enrolled a total of 1,704 ninth-grade participants. Enrollment was defined as attending a program service or activity at least once. Programs ranged in size from 14 to 130 participants, with a median enrollment of 41 participants.

Programs were contracted and funded to serve a certain number of students. However, many programs did not meet their enrollment targets. Peak enrollment across all Transition to High School programs, defined as the maximum number of students receiving program services, occurred in March 2010. As shown in Exhibit 4, during this month, 11 programs reached or exceeded their funded enrollment level, while 22 programs were below their target enrollment.

Exhibit 4
Program Enrollment in March 2010 (n=33)

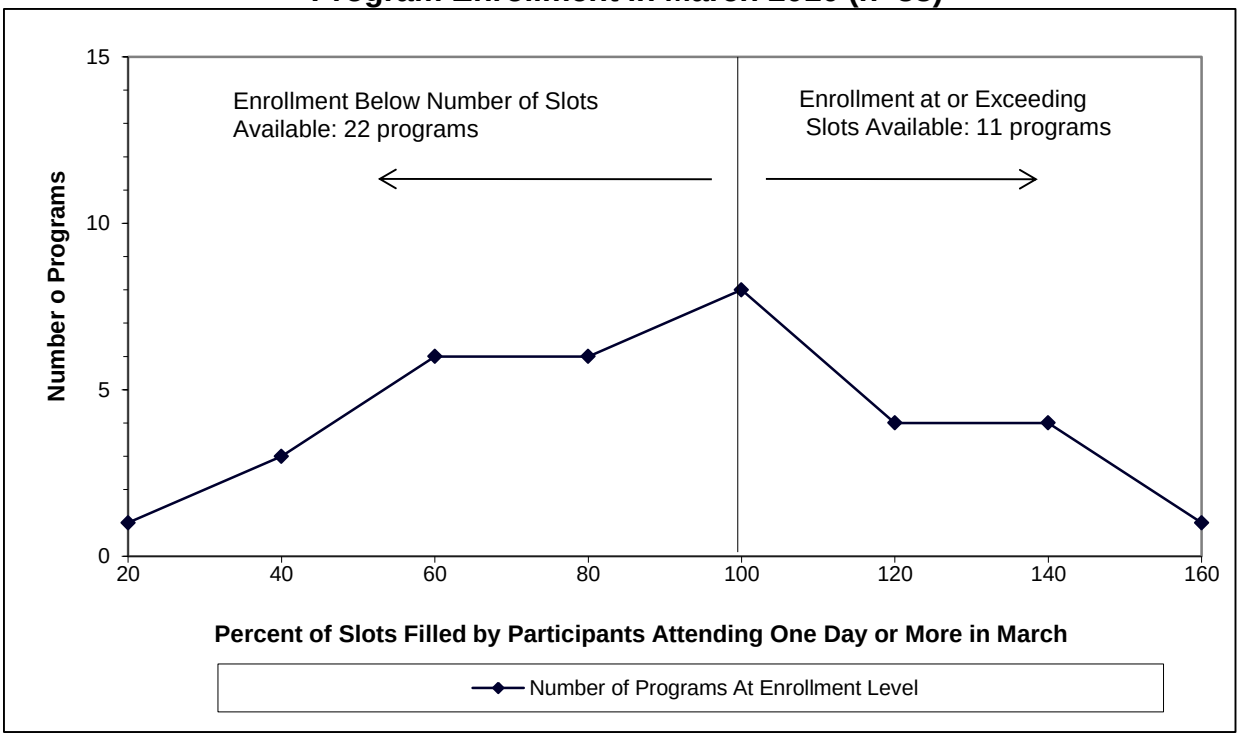

Exhibit reads: In March 2010, the month of highest program enrollment, 22 programs had fewer than their contracted number of students enrolled.

The goal of the Transition to High School programs was to enroll targeted students early in the school year and retain them in a supportive cohort throughout the year. If implemented as intended, enrollment was expected to remain relatively stable throughout the year.

Although almost half of participants enrolled in September and October, programs continued to enroll youth throughout the year. As seen in Exhibit 5, new enrollment was also

high in November, with an additional wave of enrollment in January. The high enrollment in November may be a reflection of program start-up, with some programs not becoming fully operational until then. The November and January spikes may also suggest that youth—and their teachers or parents—became more interested in the program after the first marking period and at the beginning of the new semester.

Exhibit 5
Participants' First Month of Enrollment (n=1,704)

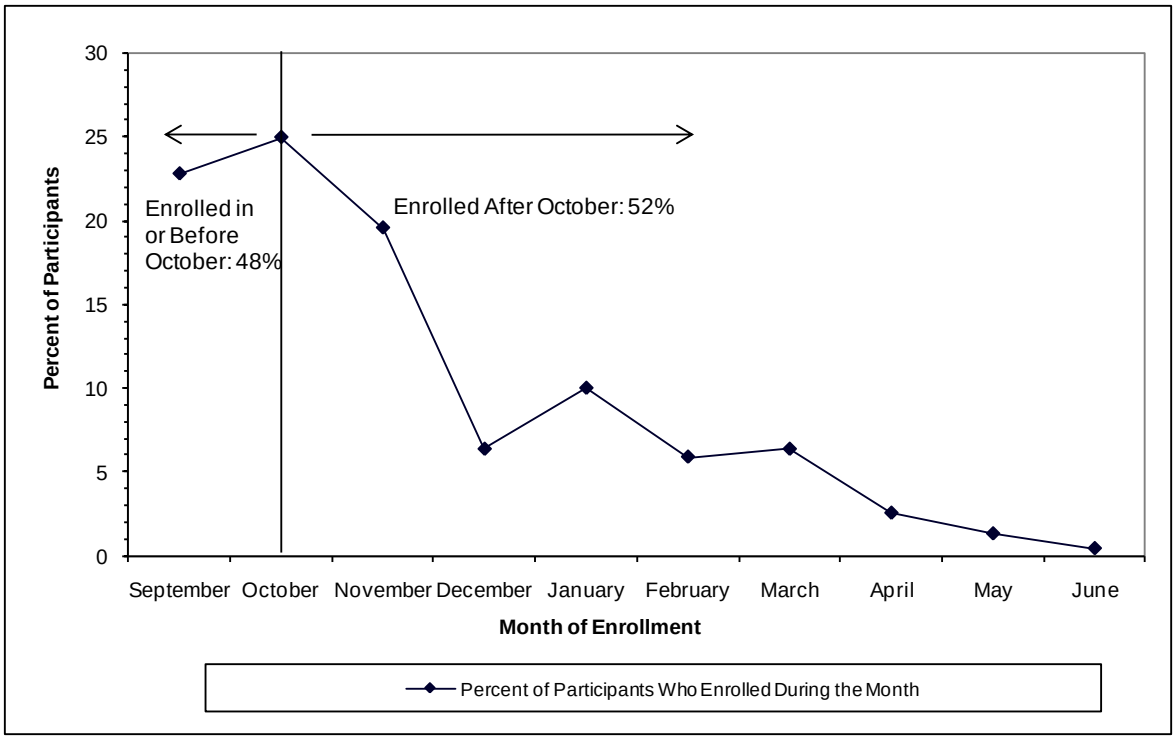

Exhibit reads: Forty-eight percent of participants enrolled in programs for the first time during or before October 2009.

Duration of participation. Almost half of program participants were actively enrolled in their Transition to High School for most of the school year. Forty-seven percent of students participated in program activities for seven or more months. Twelve percent of students participated for 10 months, and 14 percent participated for nine months (Exhibit 6). Students were counted as participating during a particular month if they attended at least one activity during that month. (Participating once in October and once in January counts as two months of participation.) By enrolling more students in September and October and encouraging them to remain engaged throughout the year, programs may be better able to both reach their enrollment targets and foster the development of student cohorts.

Exhibit 6
Duration of Participation, in Percents (n=1,704)

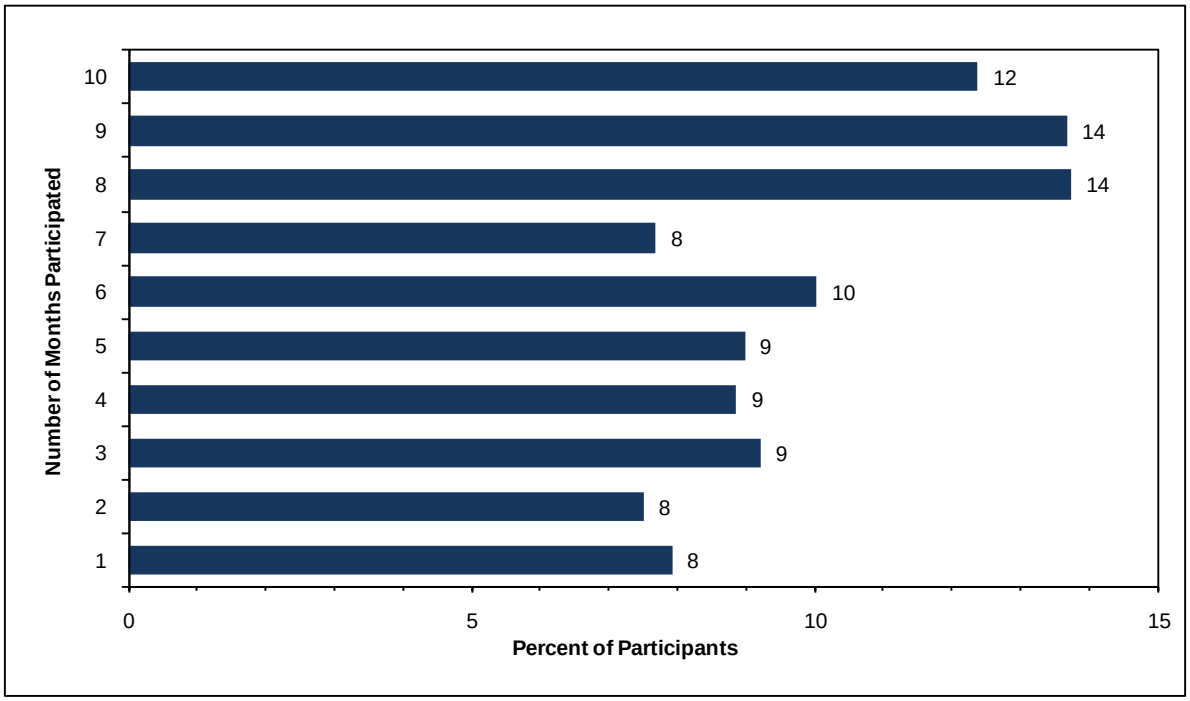

Exhibit reads: Twelve percent of participants attended program activities for ten months.

In survey responses, 35 percent of participants reported attending program activities three or more days per week, while 52 percent reported attending once or twice a week. Only 12 percent attended less than once a week. The variation in attendance reflects not only participants' attendance habits, but also the fact that some programs offered activities every day, while others only operated once a week.

Participant Characteristics

Demographics. According to student-level data from DOE databases, 51 percent of Transition to High School program participants were male, 17 percent received special education or related services, and 12 percent were recent immigrants. Forty-five percent of participants were Hispanic, 37 percent were African American, and 13 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders. (Data are available for the 1,290 students in the Transition to High School programs who had parental consent for evaluation, in the 32 of 33 programs with necessary principal approval for research.)

In comparison, 52 percent of DOE high school students were male in 2009-10. Thirty-nine percent of high school students were Hispanic, 32 were African American, and 16 were Asian. Fifteen percent of students at programs' host schools had an Individualized Education Program (IEP), indicating receipt of special education services.

Educational aspirations and attitudes towards school. Responses to the participant survey indicate that on average Transition to High School participants had high educational aspirations and positive attitudes toward school. When asked what level of school they expected to complete,

27 percent said they expected to obtain a bachelor's degree, and 48 percent said they expected to obtain a masters, doctorate, or professional degree. In comparison, across 15-year-olds surveyed throughout the United States in 2006 as part of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), 42 percent responded to the same question that they expected to obtain a bachelor's degree, and 32 percent expected to pursue a masters, doctorate, or professional degree.[2]

When surveyed in April and May 2010, 61 percent of participants said they were very sure they would finish high school in four years, while 34 percent said they probably would. For their more immediate expectations, 57 percent of participants reported they were very sure they would be promoted to tenth grade, and another 36 percent said they probably would be promoted. Regarding their attitudes toward school, most respondents (83 percent) indicated that they always come to class prepared "all the time" or "most of the time," try hard in school (82 percent), and do well in school (80 percent) (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7
Attitudes Toward School, in Percents (n=740)

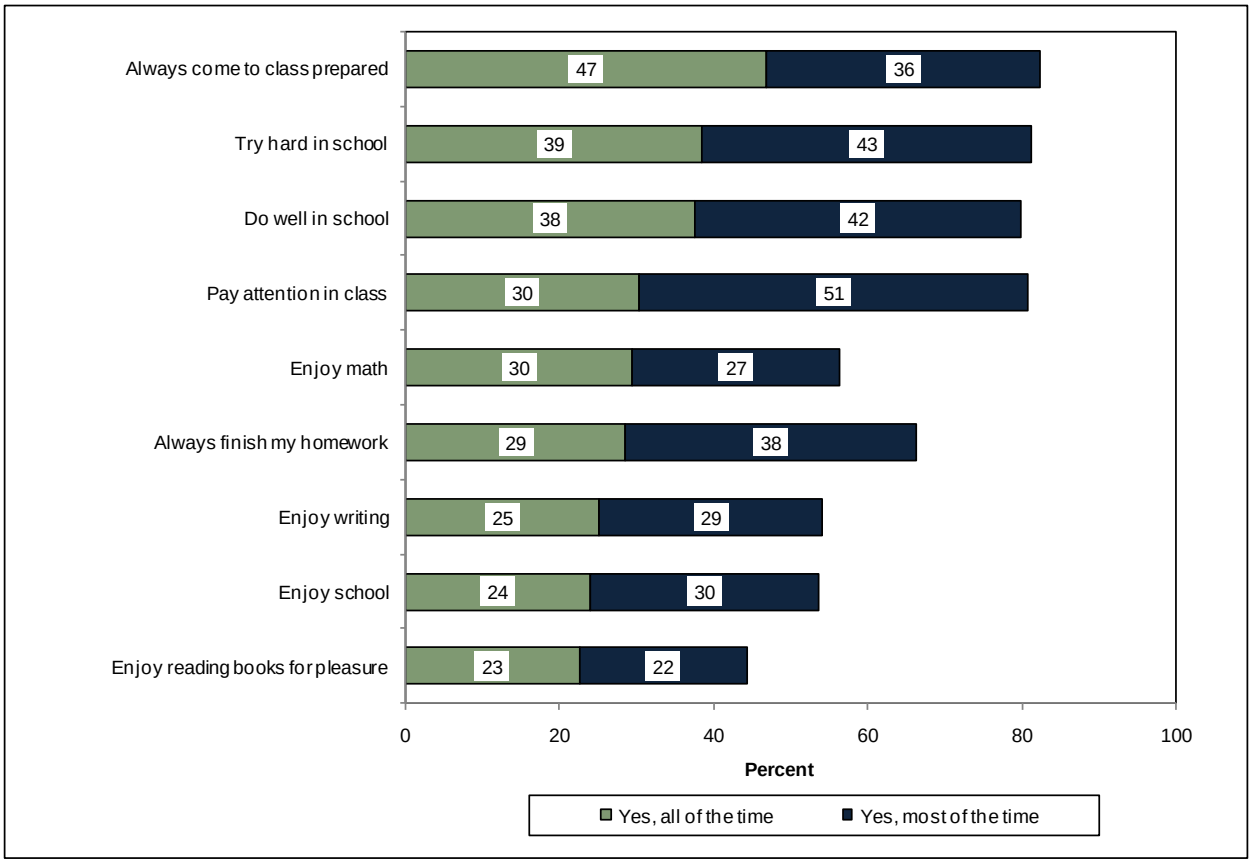

Exhibit reads: Forty-seven percent of participants reported that they come to class prepared all of the time, and 36 percent reported doing so most of the time.

[2] http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/idepisa/, accessed November 2, 2010.

Educational performance. Examination of student performance data on the New York State assessments indicates that programs successfully targeted students who performed in Levels 1, 2 or 3 of the ELA assessment in grade 8, suggesting a need for academic supports and consistent with the intent of the initiative (Exhibit 8). Ninety-seven percent of students who had eighth-grade test scores scored at Levels 2 or 3 on the ELA assessment. Although mathematics performance was not a criterion for selection into a Transition to High School program, 92 percent scored at Levels 2 or 3 on the mathematics assessment. Less than 1 percent of participants scored at Level 4 on the ELA (4 students), and 5 percent scored at this level on the mathematics assessments (50 students).

Exhibit 8
Eighth-Grade Performance on New York State Assessments, in Percents (n=1,019)

Performance Level	Percent of Students	
	ELA	Math
Level 1	3	4
Level 2	58	33
Level 3	39	59
Level 4	<1	5

Exhibit reads: Three and four percent of participants, respectively, scored at Level 1 on the eighth-grade ELA and math assessments.

Participant Outcomes

For the first year of the Transition to High School initiative, DYCD stated that it would monitor the success of programs in achieving a promotion rate at the end of the academic year (prior to summer school) that was at least five percent higher than the promotion rate of comparable students at the same school in the prior year. This policy was complicated by the fact that promotion standards vary across schools in New York City, with discretion for promotion decisions left to the school principal.

The DOE requires students to accrue 44 credits and to pass a minimum of five Regents examinations to graduate from high school with a Regents diploma (the lowest-level diploma indicating graduation). The Department has not, however, established standards for advancing from one grade to the next.[3] Generally speaking, the DOE expects that students will acquire a minimum of eight credits for promotion to tenth grade, although earning a minimum of 10 credits is typically considered a better indicator of on-track performance. Promotion policies within schools may also vary due to principals' latitude to make their own promotion decisions about specific students on a case-by-case basis. Some schools may also set standards for promotion. For example, small schools sponsored by New Visions for Public Schools, in which

[3] http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/offices/GT/TL/2009_GenEd_Grad_Card_FINAL.pdf

some of the Transition to High School programs are located, require ninth-grade students to earn 11 credits for promotion to tenth grade, in order to be on pace to earn 44 credits in four years.

Therefore, although an analysis of promotion rates is included below for this first-year outcomes analysis, PSA recommends focusing attention on other indicators that students are on-track for on-time high school graduation, including the accrual of course credits and school attendance (specifically, the number of days of school students miss school). Prior research has identified attendance as an indicator of the likelihood of successful progression through high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver et al., 2009).

This section of the report analyzes the performance of Transition to High School participants on each of these indicators. Where comparative data are available, participant outcomes are set within a larger context. The evaluation of the second year of the initiative (2010-11) will include a comparison group of New York City ninth-grade students who did not enroll in a Transition to High School program.

Educational Performance Outcomes

Promotion rate. The overall promotion rate for Transition to High School participants in the 2009-10 school year was 83 percent: 956 of 1,147 students for whom the evaluation had data were promoted to tenth grade for the 2010-11 school year.[4]

Analyses found substantial variation in promotion rates across programs. Rates of promotion to the tenth grade ranged from a low of 40 percent in one program to a high of 100 percent in four programs. Eleven of the 32 programs for which data were available had promotion rates above 90 percent (Exhibit 9). However, as noted above, because the standards for promotion vary by school, it is not possible to place these rates of promotion within a comparative context.

Exhibit 9
Rates of Promotion to the Tenth Grade by Program (n=32)

Student Promotion Rate	Number of Programs
<50 percent	1
51 – 75 percent	10
76 – 90 percent	10
91 – 100 percent	11

Exhibit reads: In one program, fewer than 50 percent of students were promoted to tenth grade for the 2010-11 school year.

[4] An additional 46 students were discharged from the school system prior to the end of the school year, and promotion data were not available for 97 students (including ungraded special education students). Available data do not allow an examination of the reasons students why students were discharged. Future analyses will explore the extent to which discharged students were recorded as transferring to other educational programs outside New York City or were recorded as dropouts.

Credit accrual. DYCD established a goal for Transition to High School participants to earn 10 credits by the end of the school year, consistent with the standard typically reported by the DOE. Analyses of DOE student-level data reveal that 77 percent of participants earned at least 10 credits during the 2009-10 school year. Demonstrating the variation in standards for promotion, of the 17 percent of Transition to High School participants who were not promoted to tenth grade, 25 percent had earned at least 10 credits. By contrast, 12 percent of those who were promoted had earned fewer than 10 credits.

As with promotion rates, the percent of students who earned ten credits varied from program to program, ranging from 29 percent in one program to 100 percent in two programs (Exhibit 10). Most commonly (15 programs), between 51 and 75 percent of Transition to High School participants earned at least 10 credits.

Exhibit 10
Participants Earning at Least 10 Credits, by Program (n=32)

Credit Accrual Rate	Number of Programs
<50 percent	3
51 – 75 percent	15
76 – 90 percent	9
91 – 100 percent	5

Exhibit reads: In three programs fewer than 50 percent of students earned at least 10 credits.

The percent of ninth-graders in 2009-10 who earned 10 credits in Transition to High School host schools ranged from 46 percent in one school to 98 percent in another. In 15 host schools, more than three-quarters of students earned at least 10 credits, compared to 17 of Transition to High School programs in which participants achieved this standard, thus outperforming the host schools overall.[5]

Duration of participation in Transition to High School programs was consistently related to an increased likelihood of earning 10 credits. The PSA team sorted Transition to High School students into quartiles based on the number of months that participating students attended program activities during the school year. Eighty-four percent of students who attended the program for nine months earned 10 or more credits, compared with 59 percent of students who attended for four months or fewer (Exhibit 11).

[5] Transition to High School students are included in the totals for host schools.

Exhibit 11
Credit Accrual by Months of Participation, in Percents

Number of Months Attended (attended at least one day in a month)	Percent of Students Earning 10 Credits
<4 months (n=291)	59
4 to 6 months (n=222)	71
7 to 8 months (n=285)	78
9 to 10 months (n=383)	84

Exhibit reads: Fifty-nine percent of students who attended Transition to High School activities for fewer than four months earned 10 or more credits.

School attendance rate and chronic absence. Student engagement and performance during the middle grades shapes success during high school. Prior research has identified student attendance during the middle grades as an early indicator of high school dropout (Balfanz, 2008; Mac Iver et al., 2009). Some research has focused on *chronic absence* or the extent to which students are absent for a significant portion of the school year. The number of days absent for Transition to High School participants ranged from none to 151 days per student, with an average of 14 days absent and a median of 8 days absent from school in 2009-10. For this report PSA defined chronic absence as missing 20 or more days of school; this measure translates into missing approximately one month of school. Approximately 30 percent of participants who attended eighth grade in New York City schools in 2008-09 were chronically absent during that school year, indicating that Transition to High School participants potentially faced significant barriers to success during the ninth grade and beyond.

The evaluation examined student attendance outcomes from two perspectives: overall attendance for the cohort of ninth-grade students and 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 experienced positive or negative changes in desired behaviors. Prior research has examined such data for the 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. The researchers hypothesized that student attendance rates were a proxy for engagement, and declining attendance may signal 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. Analyses of data for students who participated in the Transition to High School initiative do not reveal such declines in student attendance from eighth to ninth grade, a potentially positive sign for participants' progress through high school.

Although the DOE does not include attendance as one of the criteria for promotion, it typically monitors the percent of students who achieve at least 90 percent school attendance as a measure of success. The attendance goal for New Visions schools is also 90 percent. Overall, the average attendance rate for participants was approximately 91 percent in 2009-10, and the median attendance rate was 95 percent. This average attendance rate for participants was higher than the citywide average high school attendance rate of 87 percent for the 2009-10 school year.

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 and ninth grades in 2008-09 and 2009-10 (n=1,027). Analyses of eighth-grade data from the DOE records reveal that the average attendance rate for program students was approximately 91 percent in 2008-09. Analyses also indicate that program participants experienced no significant changes in their overall attendance on average in ninth grade, indicating that the program may help to "hold the line" on school attendance patterns: the mean attendance rate for participants was also 91 percent in 2009-10, their ninth-grade year.

Similar findings exist for the number of days that participants were absent from school. In 2008-09, participants with two years of data missed an average of approximately 16 days of school. This number declined to an average of 15 days in 2009-10. Individually, more than 60 percent of students experienced a decrease in the number of days missed from eighth to ninth grades. As further evidence of the relative improvement in attendance rates for participants, the percentage of students with two years of data who were chronically absent (i.e., they missed 20 or more days of school) decreased from 30 percent in 2008-09 to 24 percent in 2009-10. 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, Transition to High School students appear to have avoided this negative attendance pattern.

The evaluation explored the extent to which duration of participation in Transition to High School activities was related to the likelihood that a student would be classified as chronically absent from school. Students who participated in Transition to High School activities for a greater number of months were somewhat less likely to be chronically absent from school than were students who attended Transition to High School activities for a shorter duration. Twenty-one percent of students who participated in program activities for nine months were chronically absent in 2009-10, compared with approximately 30 percent of students who participated for fewer than four months (Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 12
Chronic Absence Status by Months of Participation, in Percents

Number of Months Attended (attended at least one day in a month)	Percent of Students Chronically Absent (missed at least 20 days of school)
<4 months (n=291)	30
4 to 6 months (n=222)	18
7 to 8 months (n=285)	18
9 to 10 months (n=383)	21

Exhibit reads: Thirty percent of students who attended Transition to High School activities for fewer than four months were chronically absent, compared to 21 percent of students who attended for nine months.

Impact of program participation when controlling for prior performance. The above analyses reveal that participation in Transition to High School activities is positively associated

with ninth-grade credit accrual and negatively associated with chronic absenteeism in the ninth grade. These analyses, however, fail to include the possible impact of eighth-grade academic performance and attendance patterns.

The likelihood of earning at least 10 credits in the ninth grade varied based on performance on the New York State ELA assessment in the eighth grade. Participants who scored at Levels 1 or 2 on the ELA assessment in 2008-09 were less likely to acquire ten credits as ninth-grade students in 2009-10. Fifty and 68 percent of Transition to High School participants, respectively, who scored at Levels 1 or 2 on the ELA assessment attained 10 credits in 2009-10, compared with 85 percent of students who scored at Level 3 and 100 percent of students who scored at Level 4. Similarly, students who performed at Level 1 or Level 2 on the ELA assessment as eighth-grade students were slightly more likely to be chronically absent in ninth grade (30 percent and 25 percent, respectively), compared to students who performed at Levels 3 or 4 as eighth-graders (21 percent and 0 percent, respectively).

To isolate the unique relationship among the duration of participation in program activities, credit accrual, and chronic absence, the PSA team created statistical models that included both program participation and eighth-grade data. The outcomes for the two models were credit accrual and chronic absence status. Predictor variables included number of months of participation in Transition to High School activities, proficiency status on the eighth-grade ELA assessment, and the number of days absent from school in the eighth grade.

The relationship between participation in Transition to High School activities and accrual of 10 credits was significant and positive in this statistical model. Students who attended Transition to High School activities over the course of more months were significantly more likely to earn 10 credits than were students who attended for a shorter duration even after controlling for eighth-grade ELA proficiency and the number of days missed during eighth grade.

However, the relationship between program participation and chronic absence was not statistically significant when the eighth-grade measures were included. The only significant predictor of ninth-grade chronic absence in the model was the number of days of school missed during the eighth grade. This finding highlights how critical early establishment of patterns of regular school attendance may be for later attendance patterns.

Participant Reports of Benefits

Participant perceptions of academic benefits. In survey responses, youth identified several ways in which the program helped them academically, particularly in understanding what was expected of them in high school in terms of credits, courses, and attendance. More than half of participants surveyed reported that their program helped them understand the credit and course requirements to graduate from high school "a lot" (56 percent), and an additional 34 percent said their program had helped them "a little" (Exhibit 13).

Exhibit 13
Academic Benefits and Supports for Participants, in Percents (n=721)

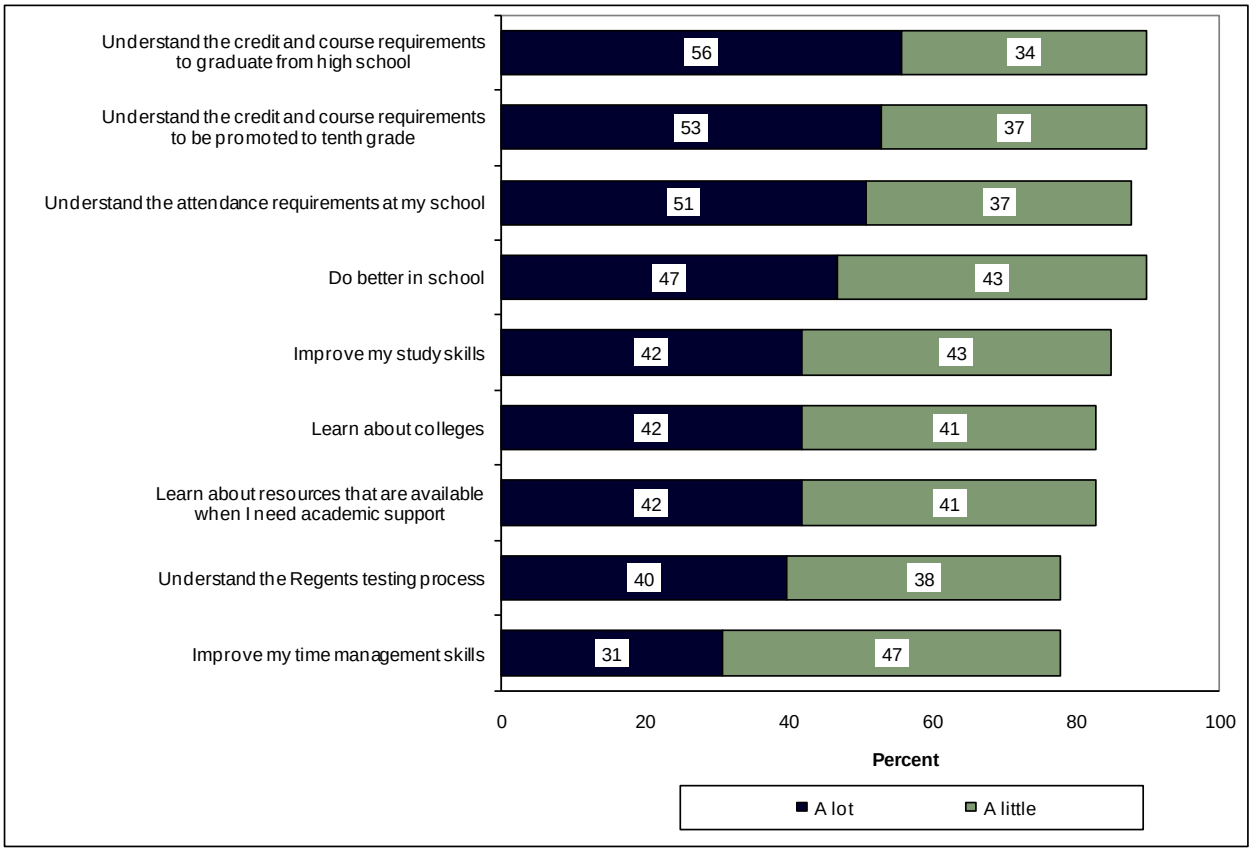

Exhibit reads: Fifty-six percent of participants reported that their Transition to High School program helped them understand the credit and course requirements to graduate from high school "a lot."

More than half of participants also said that their program helped them "a lot" to understand the requirements for promotion to tenth grade, as well as their school's attendance requirements. Forty percent of youth said that their programs had helped them understand the Regents testing process "a lot." Overall, 47 percent of participants reported that programs helped them do better in school "a lot"; 43 percent said their programs had done so "a little."

Program directors identified some of the successes they had achieved in working with youth. For example, one director responded:

> *Academically, students have gained practical skills, including study tips, communication strategies to better work with teachers and how to access academic support resources, like tutoring. Students have also learned what is expected of them to succeed as ninth-graders, as well as in high school in general.*

Another director said:

I believe that one of the outcomes we have helped participants achieve has been being more aware of college. The college tour that we accompanied them on opened their minds to the possibilities of college after high school.

Together, these first-year results indicate that the Transition to High School programs appear to have the potential to support the educational success of participants in important ways. However, a goal of this first-year implementation study is also to understand the specific components of the Transition to High School model that may contribute to these outcomes. The next section of this report describes the implementation of specific components of the model.

Implementation of the Model

As described above, the Transition to High School program model was developed based on prior research about successful high schools. The model has four core elements: developing cohorts; differentiating staff roles, including designated counselor-advocates; focusing on specific program features; and engaging families. This section of the report examines each of these elements, describing the similarities and differences in implementation of them across the programs and their potential benefits to youth. PSA examined the relationship between the implementation of these program elements and the youth outcomes described above, and did not find any significant patterns of association.

Cohort Development

In the Transition to High School program model, a cohort of entering ninth-grade students enrolls at the beginning of the school year and stays together in the program throughout the school year, developing a culture of peer bonding and mutual support. Provider organizations establish strong supports for students early in their transition, when they are most vulnerable. As reported earlier, data from DYCD Online show that 47 percent of Transition to High School participants were enrolled in the program for at least seven months, laying the groundwork for developing a strong cohort of peers.

Approaches to cohort development. Programs took various approaches to building positive bonding among their participants. The four programs visited for this study implemented this aspect of the Transition to High School model differently, as described below.

- **Group assignments.** One program expected students to choose one day each week to consistently attend group activities that included icebreaker activities and discussions of community issues and goal-setting. These group sessions formed the basis for cohorts, which anecdotally carried through to the school day. The guidance counselor reported that students from these cohort groups congregated in the lunchroom, which also helped students become integrated into the school.

The program has a few students who are new to the school. The best time to see [cohort groups] is at lunch. You'll see that Tuesday's group is there, Wednesday's group is there. For example, one student was new, she didn't speak to anybody. She started the program in November, and now she has a group.

- **Peer mentoring.** Another program used a peer mentoring approach to build a cohort of peers with both ninth-graders and upperclassman, assigning tenth-grade students to be mentors. In interviews, ninth-graders indicated that they valued the mentor-mentee relationship, citing new friendships and help they received with assignments as advantages. As the program director noted, the mentorship provided a social aspect to the program and an incentive to participate. She reported:

  Peer-to-peer [mentoring] gives them a reason to stay after school. They are in work groups that are more social, less classroom-like. The mentor checks in with them [during the school day] and asks if they will be [in the program] that night. Peer-to-peer gives it a different twist. It gives it a social as well as a learning setting at the same time.

- **Full grade cohort.** In a third program, because the majority of the school's ninth-graders were in the program, there was little distinction between students who were in the program and those who were not. However, the program's after-school activities provided an informal environment to forge friendships. In interviews, participants reported forming friendships through the program, facilitating their transition to a new school:

  In the beginning, I tried to stay to myself. And then I met [other people in this program], and one by one we formed a circle that stuck together. You have somebody to go to, and it is not all unfamiliar faces all the time.

- **Unstructured cohorts.** In the fourth program, students could come to any and all of eight tutoring sessions offered by the program during the week (two sessions a day after school, Monday through Thursday), without an intentional cohort assignment. However, the atmosphere at the program was warm, informal, and friendly overall, both among participants and between students and staff. This positive atmosphere was more evident in the spring, possibly because, as teachers in the program noted, students had opened up more over the course of the year and become more comfortable with one another and with staff.

Benefits of the cohort model. Findings indicate that regardless of the approach to cohort development that was taken by a program, students and staff reported that the program provided social supports and promoted friendships in ways that facilitated the transition into ninth grade. This suggests that as long as a program works to develop cohorts, the specific approach they use can be tailored to the context of the program.

One participant commented that meeting other students in the program had made the school day easier, "because if you are in the same class, you can ask them [other program

members] for help." Other students commented that they had made friends in the program. "I just came to this school. When I come to OST, I can meet new friends in OST, because the teacher helps us to meet each other, to talk, to have better communication. I feel better about school [than at the beginning of the year]." In another program, the school guidance counselor reported that the program "creates a community within the community." Participants at this program reported making friends with other participants, and giving each other advice on problems in each other's lives. One student said, "I felt supported; if I was sad, they would try to make me laugh." Another participant, who was being interviewed at the same time, added, "If she has problems, she tells me or her friends. We give her advice."

In surveys, participants also reported positive social benefits and supports as a result of participating in the Transition to High School program, regardless of cohort approach. Overall, 46 percent of participants surveyed reported that their program helped them to adjust to life in high school "a lot"; another 41 percent said the program helped "a little" (Exhibit 14). Forty-three percent of participants surveyed said that participating in the program helped them "a lot" to make new friends; another 40 percent said it had helped them "a little."

Exhibit 14
Social Benefits and Supports for Participants, in Percents (n=721)

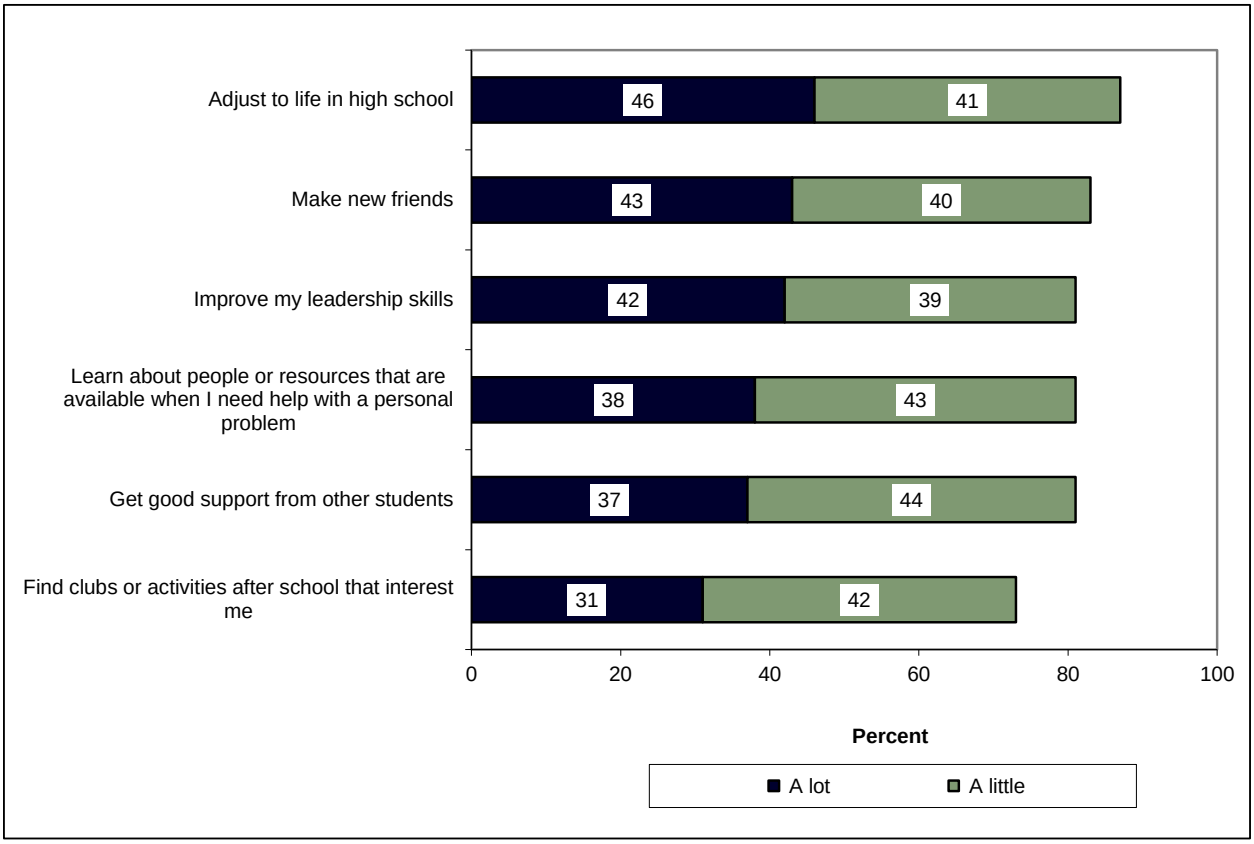

Exhibit reads: Forty-six percent of participants reported that participating in the program helped them adjust to life in high school "a lot".

A program staff member reported on the ways in which the program improved students' attitudes towards school and self-confidence. She described once-shy participants as more talkative and self-confident by the end of the year:

One of the biggest impacts has been to help students with self-confidence issues. [Dealing with self-confidence] has been a big help for them. We had some students who were shy, but now are able to fit in. The program helps them to network. It is amazing to see the changes. They are able to speak up. I had a case of two twins who were completely isolated, and they didn't know how to fit in. Now they are participating in dancing. If they are struggling, they know who to go to for help.

Overall, programs helped their participants adjust to their new environment, make connections, and find a place where they felt comfortable. Further, the data suggest that implementing the Transition to High School cohort approach at the start of ninth grade contributed to students' positive attitudes and adjustment to high school.

Program Staffing and Role of the Counselor-Advocate

A second core element of the Transition to High School model is the presence of a counselor-advocate assigned to each student, whose role is to provide the student with personalized guidance and support and to help the student identify and access resources needed for success in the ninth grade. The counselor-advocate is responsible for tracking the ongoing academic and social progress of youth and for communicating with the school to address needs. In some cases, the program director may serve as a counselor-advocate, but the maximum ratio is one counselor-advocate for every 30 youth. In addition, programs may hire additional staff members to offer activities and services to youth through the Transition to High School programming.

Many programs hired facilitators who could serve more than one function. In one program, for example, several program staff members conducted after-school activities and provided one-on-one counseling. At another, the program director was the only staff member and took on the roles of activity facilitator, counselor-advocate, school liaison, and program administrator.

Program staffing strategies. In the programs visited, staffing strategies varied based on the programs' particular focus and approach. One program that had a strong tutoring focus hired school-day teachers to provide after-school services. Another program that emphasized social-emotional support hired social work graduate students to serve as counselors to participants. Some programs hired social workers or social work students to support their case management approach. For example, one program employed a second-year social work master's student to provide counseling services to participants. However, as shown in Exhibit 15, the majority of programs (24) hired college-educated adults who were not guidance counselors, social workers, or certified teachers to serve as counselor-advocates. Across all programs, nine program directors reported having social workers on staff, and nine had guidance counselors on staff.

In one of the programs that hired teachers from the host school as program staff, the director noted that they brought current experience with the ninth-grade curriculum to the after-school program, and that their presence led to improved communication and integration into the school: "Hiring a teacher that currently works for the school has made building a relationship

with school personnel much easier." Two programs that were visited staffed their homework-help sessions with teachers from the host school, providing continuity from the school day and aligned academic support. Because one of the programs is housed at a small high school, many of the teachers who offered tutoring in the after-school program are also the participants' regular teachers, and the relationships between teachers and participants carried over from the classroom to the after-school program; the high school that hosts the other program is large enough that most participants were not assigned to classes of the teachers who staff the after-school program, but the teachers were familiar with the ninth-grade curriculum that students were learning.

Exhibit 15
Program Staff Member Qualifications, by Role within Programs (n=31)

Staff Background	Counselor-Advocates	Other Staff
Non-specialist adults with a college degree	24	17
Guidance counselors	9	5
Social workers	9	2
Certified teachers	6	8
School-day paraprofessionals or school aides	2	1
College students	1	6
Non-specialist adults without a college degree	1	4
Teen staff (e.g., high school students)	1	1

Exhibit reads: Twenty-four program directors reported employing non-specialist adults with a college degree as counselor-advocates, and 17 employed them to serve in other roles in the program.

Role of the counselor advocate. The counselor-advocate role in the Transition to High School programs was developed based on research on dropout prevention that has tied positive adult-youth relationships to positive youth behavior and sense of attachment to the school community, leading to improved school attendance and credit accumulation (Dynarski et al., 2008). The counselor-advocate role differs from a typical guidance counselor, who usually has a heavy caseload and is involved in administrative duties. Rather, the counselor-advocate is expected to manage a relatively small caseload, meet consistently with youth, and help refer youth and their families to needed services that are beyond what the school can provide. In the four programs visited, counselor-advocates provided both academic and social supports to participants.

- **Academic support.** In interviews, Transition to High School staff said that they advocated for participants by serving as a bridge linking teachers, school administrators, and participants and by equipping participants with the skills to advocate for themselves. Transition to High School program staff helped to make sure that students fulfilled their academic obligations on a daily basis, reminding students to go to class or complete their homework.

One director, also serving as a counselor-advocate, reported that she checks in on participants during the school day to ensure that they are paying attention in class and completing their work. She also keeps track of participants' academic performance in each of their classes and discusses problems with them. A principal noted that the program staff indirectly provided youth with academic support as well: "There's routines to deal with outside of academics—time management, professionalism, every idea has value. They don't normally get that in a classroom, but they get that in this program."

- **Social support.** Transition to High School staff worked to develop positive relationships with students and to provide them with social supports. The overall positive rapport that participants had with program staff was evident in site visits to the four programs. PSA site visitors observed how staff often served as a sounding board for participants as they talked informally with staff about their day. Over the course of the year, participants became increasingly comfortable with program staff, freely walking in and out of the program's office to chat with staff. Staff made themselves available to speak informally and formally with participants.

  In an activity observed on site, participants engaged in a conversation with a counselor-advocate about criminal records and the transition to college. The counselor-advocate provided stories from his own experiences, and participants eagerly asked questions, seeking to understand how choices they made could affect their lives. Participants interviewed at each the four sites noted that they could express themselves comfortably with Transition to High School staff members. One participant said, "From all the teachers, I think [the program director] is the one that people most trust. I tell my teachers stuff, but more about school stuff; for personal stuff I go to [the director]."

Staff capacity. Staff capacity varied widely across the Transition to High School programs, with the reported number of staff ranging from one to nine paid staff members and from none to six volunteer staff members. Programs sometimes received supplementary funding from their provider organization or sought outside funders to pay for additional staff members. The number of staff members designated as counselor-advocates ranged from one to nine, with an average of three counselor-advocates per program.

Some programs reported that they lacked the staff to execute effective programming. One director reported facing the challenge of "not enough staff; it can be overwhelming for a full-time teacher to also work for the program." Another director said, "Some of the challenges have not really been with the staff we have but with staff that we do not have. I believe if we had a social worker on our staff, it would allow for us to holistically service the students."

The Partnership for After School Excellence (PASE) offered professional development training sessions focused on topics that included interpreting student data, establishing and operating a case management system, program design, establishing an effective advising process, group counseling, and assessing the program. Staff members from 31 programs attended at least one of these professional development sessions during the 2009-10 school year. The most highly attended training was on assessing the program's progress, with 38 attendees from 25 programs.

Several program directors reported that the trainings they and other staff members attended were informative and useful. At one program, a staff member attended the case management training and began to develop a case management system to be used in the program's second year.

Youth relationships with program staff. Research has shown that relationships with adults are a major factor in retaining older youth in out-of-school time programs (Deschenes et al., 2010). Forming positive relationships with youth was an important component of the Transition to High School model. One principal noted the value of the youth-adult connection:

> *I think the main thing besides academics is that it gives students the social-emotional growth. It gives them a chance to connect to a non-teaching staff member. Students want to connect to an adult, but they're afraid it might be held against their grade. They can get emotional support from [the program].*

Survey data indicate that the Transition to High School model had some success in promoting positive staff-youth relationships. In survey responses, more than half of youth reported relying on program staff as a source of support for personal or school-related problems. As illustrated in Exhibits 16 and 17, 21 percent of participants reported that they talk to program staff often when they have problems at home or with friends, and an additional 36 percent sometimes talk with staff in these situations. Twenty-five percent reported that they talked to program staff often when they have problems with school work; an additional 39 percent sometimes do.

Exhibit 16
Youth Reported Sources of Support for Problems with Friends or at Home, in Percents (n=736)

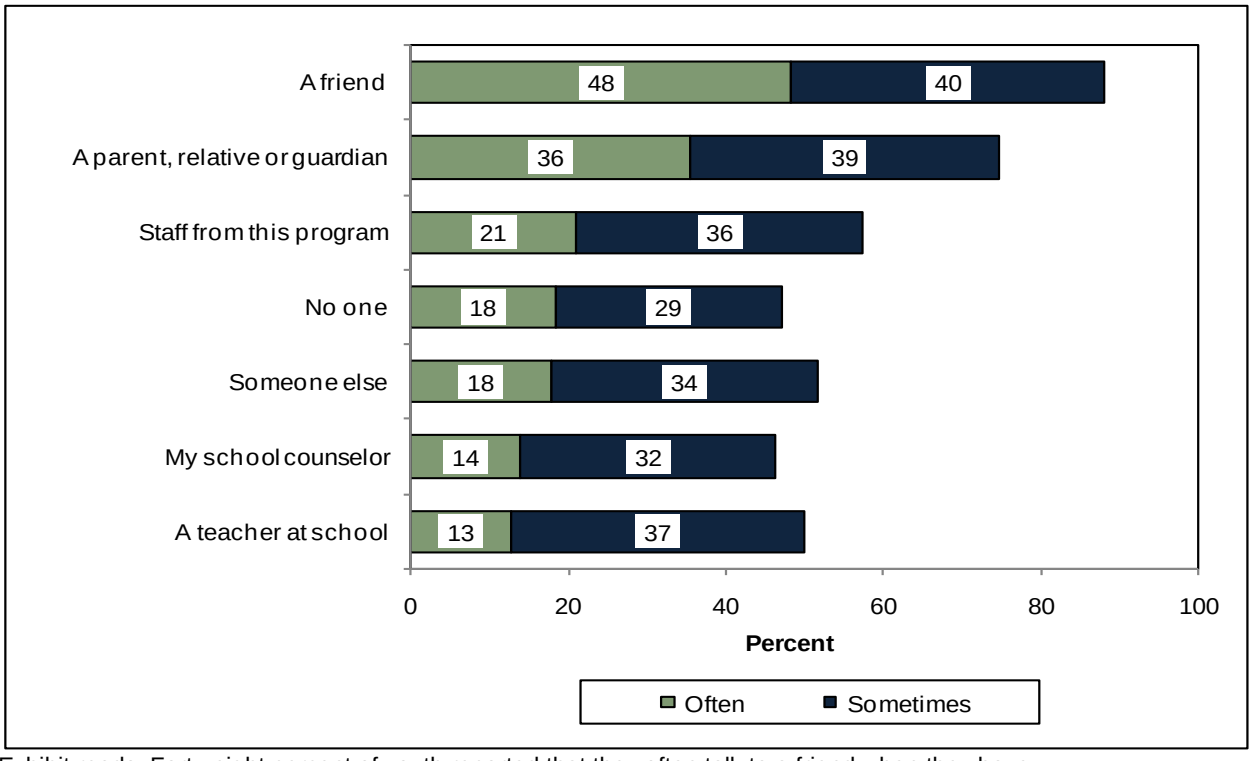

Exhibit reads: Forty-eight percent of youth reported that they often talk to a friend when they have problems at home or with friends, and 40 percent of youth sometimes do so.

Exhibit 17
Youth Reported Sources of Support for Problems with School Work, in Percents (n=733)

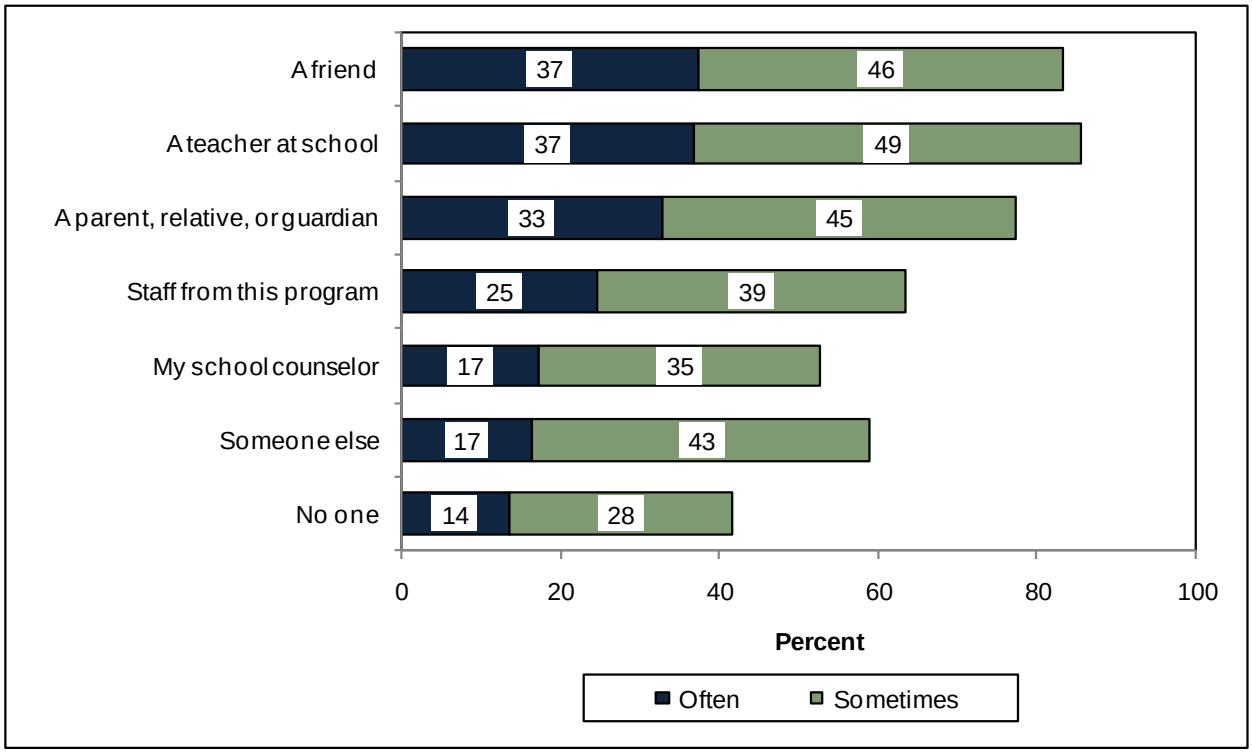

Exhibit reads: Thirty-seven percent of youth reported that they often talk to a friend when they have problems with school work, and 46 percent of youth sometimes do so.

Implementation of Structures for Supportive Activities and Services

In a survey of high school dropouts and potential dropouts (Dedmond, 2005), youth were asked about reasons for leaving school. Forty-seven percent reported boredom, and 42 percent said that they did not see the relevance of the work they were doing. Transition programs can support youth by helping them set future goals, develop skills to achieve those goals, and relate their school work to their future aspirations.

To achieve these goals, the DYCD Transition to High School program model calls for programs to address four key features that prior research indicates are important to effective high school programming: (1) partnerships with schools; (2) tracking participant progress; (3) providing opportunities students might not otherwise be exposed to; and, (4) offering one-on-one supports.

This model differed from previous expectations of out-of-school time programming for high school youth. Seven of the program directors who responded to the survey administered a DYCD OST program at the same location the year before the Transition to High School initiative began, and their experience sheds light on some of the differences in programming. When asked how their Transition to High School programs differed from their previous OST programs, five out of seven said they now collaborate with guidance counselors at participants' schools much more. Five out of seven directors also said they collaborate with teaching staff at participants' schools somewhat more, and four of seven said they refer participants to other social services somewhat more. These changes indicate the increased attention given to personalized assistance in Transition to High School programs.

This section of the report examines each of the four core program implementation features. Overall, the study team found these features to be present across programs despite variability in the implementation of specific approaches. This finding suggests that programs are adapting features to accommodate the contextual factors and budget constraints of their individual programs. DYCD reimbursed programs at a rate of $900 per contracted participant for school-year only programs and $1,350 per participant for year-round programs; only 12 of 33 program directors reported receiving funds to support their program from sources other than DYCD, such as private foundations and donors.

School partnerships. An important feature of the Transition to High School programs is that they are expected to operate in close partnership with the school, or schools, that their students attend. Developing a positive relationship between the program and school staff is vital to the success of the program and its ability to recruit participants, identify student needs, and address logistical issues of schedule and space. One program director noted that to be effective the program needed to merge itself with the culture of the school. By helping to support the school's academic goals, the director believed she could better tailor program offerings to meet the needs of the school. For example, the program provided Regents test preparation sessions during the second half of the school year.

Transition to High School program directors generally responded positively about their partnership with the host school (Exhibit 18). All 31 directors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the relationship between their program and school was strong, and that the principal supported their program.

Exhibit 18
Assessment of Partnerships with Schools (n=31)

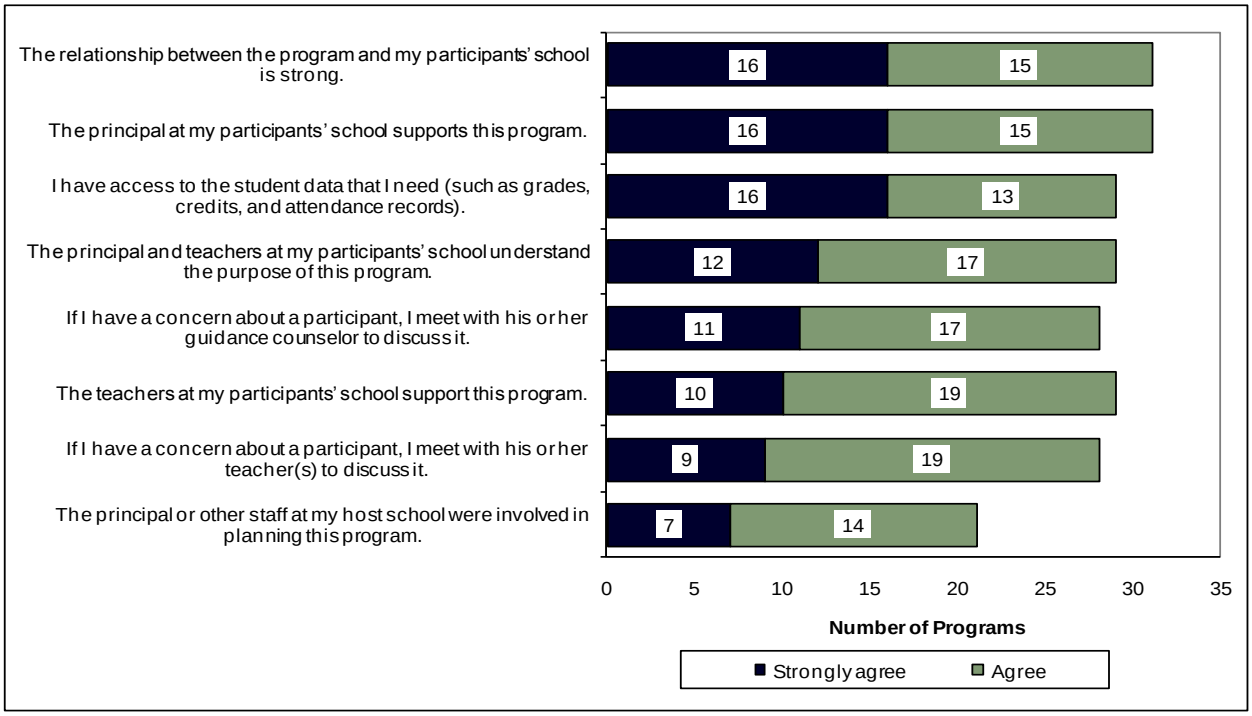

Exhibit reads: Sixteen program directors strongly agreed that the relationship between their program and their participants' host school is strong. Another 15 directors agreed.

Strategies for collaboration with schools varied across the programs visited. Two programs were operated by agencies that also helped to found the school. Because of this relationship, the agencies had a distinctive role in the school, and program staff members were perceived as a part of the school. In one, program staff could directly access student data, while program staff at other schools often had to work with staff liaisons such as a guidance counselor to obtain student academic information. At both of these schools, program staff served on school committees, allowing them to build relationships with school staff, take part in the school's decision-making process, and keep abreast of the issues the school faced at any given time. For example, a staff member used teacher team meetings as a mechanism to keep in touch with teachers:

> *They have weekly or biweekly meetings of ninth-grade teachers. This semester, I stopped in and reminded them what students we're working with. I told them to stop by with any concerns. We're welcome to those spaces. We can't go to staff meetings every week because we're running programs, but having those spaces is helpful.*

In general, presence during the school day helped foster strong relationships with school staff. Some program staff also participated in high-school classes, so that students saw them as an integrated part of the school environment. A presence in the school building during the day also allowed program staff to hold informal discussions with school staff about participants and about what was going on in the school. In some cases, program staff also used the school day for program activities such as one-on-one counseling. Program staff sometimes performed other functions in the school such as providing supervision between classes.

At other schools, however, the program was not well integrated with the school day. One director commented, "School staff, as a whole, do not understand our role and how best to work with us for the student's benefit. We have built relationships with key teachers, but due to their schedules and full days, [we] have been unsuccessful in educating the whole ninth-grade team about working with us." At another, the program director also struggled with developing a positive partnership with the school. She explained, "One of the challenges we have been having is the full collaboration. We are there providing a service to the students, and sometimes we get the feeling that we are just guests and have not been fully invited into the school culture. Some have bought in more than others."

The six center-based Transition to High School programs faced a unique challenge in building a relationship with their participants' school since program staff did not work in the schools. Programs typically recruited participants from a single feeder high school and developed a relationship with that school. One center-based program initially held their sessions at their feeder school before moving programming to their center off-site. Two program directors reported serving on school committees to participate in planning and improve communication. Some programs reported facing communication issues, including unresponsive administrative staff and school staff providing misinformation about the program to participants.

Tracking participant progress. DYCD's guidance to programs recommended that programs track participant needs and progress, both academically and socially. Monitoring individual student progress was a central part of the Transition to High School program model, because it allowed program staff to adjust programming to address gaps in support or provide referrals to additional services that could not be offered by the program, based on the perceived

needs of participants that arose throughout the year. Program staff tracked participant progress through both formal and informal methods, as described below. Overall, 16 of 31 program directors strongly agreed that they had access to the student data they needed such as grades, credits, and attendance records, and 13 agreed with the statement. In some cases, tracking participant progress met with resistance. For example, one program director expressed hesitation at the beginning of the year to documenting student progress because she felt it violated the participants' trust to record information that they would not see. As the year progressed, however, she began to record some student-level academic information in order to maintain complete records on participants.

- **Interactions with school staff**. Program staff often gathered information about participants through conversations with school staff: 28 program directors reported having conversations with school day teachers to collect information about participants at least one or two times per month, while 26 reported having at least one or two conversations with guidance counselors each month. Sharing information with school staff allowed program staff to better understand and support the participants in their program.

- **Review of student records.** More than half of program directors also reported reviewing school attendance records and student grades in school at least once a month (21 and 19 directors, respectively). Nine directors tracked student credit accumulation with this frequency; this lower level is not surprising since the credit data are less frequently updated and available.

- **Conversations with participants.** Program staff often checked in with participants about their progress both formally and informally. At one program visited, students casually wandered in and out of the organization's office space to use their facilities and chat with staff members. Another program director explained, "We often pull our youth aside and speak with them casually—youth need to build trust and trying to meet with them one-on-one can be tricky. They come to us when they want to talk and we make ourselves open for that, but younger youth are not comfortable in clinical settings."

- **School-day classroom observations.** Eighteen directors reported that they observed participants in their classrooms one to four times per month, and five said they observed classroom activities almost daily. Through these observations, program staff could see participant behavior and academic progress first-hand and address any issues in later conversations. At one program, the director spent the full school day in the building and was able to visit classes and observe participants. If she saw an academic or behavioral problem, she could work with the participant and teachers to address the issue.

As shown in Exhibit 19, most program directors reported using the available information to monitor the progress of individual participants (30 of 31 directors), as intended by the Transition to High School model. Twenty-six directors designed activities, and 25 made improvements to existing activities based on the participant data. For example, one program director said, "Access to data has been critical in shaping our activities and programs this year.

Because the students were having a lot of difficulty with their U.S. History class, I used that as the focus for a lot of our after-school activities and in the process was both able to recruit more students and significantly affect the ninth-grade academic performance each semester."

Exhibit 19
Uses for Data Collected About Participants (n=31)

Use of Data	Percent
To monitor the progress of individual participants	30
To design activities for participants	26
To make improvements to existing activities	25
To evaluate the success of the program overall	25
To refer participants to particular activities or services	19

Exhibit reads: Thirty program directors used the data they collected to monitor the progress of individual participants.

Providing new opportunities to students. Twenty-three programs offered group activities at least twice a week, with some programs offerings activities every school day, and an additional seven programs offered group activities once a week. Some programs operated as traditional out-of-school-time programs, offering homework help and recreational activities every day after school. Others operated as clubs, with weekly programming focusing on the arts, leadership, and community service.

One program director interviewed for the study explained that the school was new and small, and as a result did not offer many clubs or sports teams. Her goal for the after-school program, which combined the Transition to High School model with a more traditional out-of-school time program to offer activities five days a week, was to help develop a sense of school spirit and unity and to provide recreational activities that were not otherwise available at the school. According to this director, the combination of academic and social supports with recreational activities kept participants engaged in the program. The program director believed that the recreational activities helped to attract participants to the program because "staying in school just for the sake of improving their grades [was] not going to help those kids [who were] doing poorly."

Overall, the Transition to High School initiative was designed to supplement the services already provided by schools and other organizations and fill in the gaps of support for ninth-graders, and, as shown in Exhibit 20, programs succeeded in filling key gaps. For example, all directors said that they offered college visits, an activity that was only available to participants through the school at two programs and through other organizations at six programs. Twenty-nine programs provided individual counseling on academic issues, which only 12 schools were able to offer. Other activities that Transition to High School programs provided that were not usually available elsewhere included discussions about personal or social issues that were important to participants (28 programs), academic enrichment activities (28 programs), and activities designed to improve study skills (27 programs).

Exhibit 20
Activities Available to Program Participants (n=31)

Program Activities	Provided to Participants by at Least One Source	Provided by the Transition to High School Program	Provided by Participants' Schools	Provided by Other Programs
Visits to college campuses	31	31	2	6
Individual counseling on academic issues	31	29	12	2
Individual counseling on social issues	31	27	13	4
Tutoring or homework help	31	26	12	7
Discussions about personal or social issues that are important to participants	29	28	6	5
Academic enrichment activities	30	28	9	6
Activities designed to improve study skills	29	27	7	2
Discussions about issues that matter in participants' communities/cities	29	27	5	6
Activities designed to build leadership skills	27	22	5	7
Sports and recreation activities	27	16	17	7
Test preparation	27	14	16	4
Activities designed to improve time management skills	26	24	4	2
Arts activities (music, visual art, etc.)	26	18	13	6
Community service projects	25	21	5	10
Peer mentoring	19	15	3	4

Exhibit reads: All program directors reported that their Transition to High School program offered visits to college campuses, two reported that participants' schools did so, and six reported that other organizations did so. (Program directors could check more than one option for each type of activity.)

Site visits shed light on the importance of offering these additional opportunities:

- **Tutoring and academic supports.** In one program, many participants were English Language Learners who struggled academically. The Transition to High School staff offered tailored tutoring to these students after school. Program staff grouped participants by ability level and worked with them to determine the subject areas to focus on as a group. At another program, the focus of programming changed mid-year to meet participants' academic needs: as Regents testing approached, the program provided activities to help prepare participants for the tests.

- **College visits.** Many programs emphasized college as a goal for their participants and offered college visits to allow participants to learn more about college. At some programs, the college visits were popular offerings: one used college trips as a recruitment and attendance incentive, giving participants who regularly attended programming priority to sign up for spaces. Programs often relied on outside funding in order to offer college trips; one program reported, "If we had more funding, we could send our students on more [college] trips, which I feel is vital because it helps students to see that there is life after high school."

- **Community service.** Community service projects were offered at 21 programs. Some programs offered community service hours to help participants meet graduation requirements for service, while others used the service projects to build leadership skills and teamwork. For example, one site organized a march to help inform the community about diabetes. Participants made posters during after school programming to carry during the march.

One-on-one supports. The Transition to High School program model calls for a combination of individual support services and group activities. One-on-one counseling is a required part of the Transition to High School program model, and program directors reported using these one-on-one sessions in different ways. Depending on the participant's needs, the one-on-one meeting might focus on academics, credit accumulation, social or behavioral issues, college preparation, or referrals to outside services. Some programs offered individual counseling sessions during after-school programming, while others made arrangements with the school to meet with participants one-on-one during the school day.

The frequency of one-on-one meetings varied widely. Seven program directors reported that staff met with some participants one-on-one twice a week or more, and another five said that one-on-one meetings took place once a week, providing an opportunity for staff to build relationships with students and gain information about their needs through conversation. Some programs only offered individual meetings to the neediest participants on a regular basis, so some participants may have received individual attention while others in the same program did not.

Participants generally responded positively to one-on-one sessions with staff members, and wanted more of these. Thirty-five percent of participants reported that they did not meet often enough with a program staff member, while only seven percent felt that they met too often. One participant described his one-on-one meetings, saying, "We talk about our grades, future goals, what we're doing in class. I like meeting because it helps you get stuff off your chest. Staff aren't like a teacher that could go tell everyone." Overall, 54 percent of participants reported meeting one-on-one with program staff at least once a week, while 21 percent reported that they never met with program staff individually.

Individual meetings allowed program staff to develop close personal relationships with participants, and this enabled program staff to connect students and their families to community resources. For example, one participant faced severe family issues that began to interfere with

her school work. The program director attended meetings with school administrators and social workers to develop a support plan for the participant. She also provided informal support for the student by being available to talk as needed; the participant reported stopping by the program director's office virtually every day.

The director at another program also reported that many of the participants faced severe challenges that required extra support. In order to accommodate such situations, counselor-advocates provided referrals to outside services when feasible.

> *Most of those kids [who participated] had underlying issues that were so much deeper than academic support, and we found ourselves in deeper than we could handle. Now the majority of those kids are in situations that are beyond what we can do anything for. Some are in school, some have been suspended, some are facing penitentiary time. Some have been referred to ACS [Administration for Children's Services]. We spend so much energy dealing with social issues kids have that academics take a backburner. It's not possible in three hours of after-school time.*

Family Engagement

Another major component of the Transition to High School model is engaging families in supporting participants as they enter the ninth grade. The goal of this engagement is to help parents or guardians understand the demands of high school and associated promotion and graduation requirements. Communicating with parents and guardians allowed program staff to gain a better idea of what was happening to the student outside of school and to keep families informed of participant progress so that support could continue at home. Twenty-nine programs communicated with participants' parents or guardians through phone calls, 18 communicated with them through program events, and 17 through in-person meetings.

As shown in Exhibit 21, conversations with families most frequently focused on participants' progress in school (25 programs) or behavior (25 programs). Program directors also engaged parents by talking with them about extracurricular activities and upcoming events. For example, one program director reported in the survey, "We had limited interest from participants about attending our college trip. Once we spoke with parents about the opportunity, they were great partners in building interest in the event."

Some programs visited in the study reported success in building strong relationships with families. One program director frequently contacted parents and documented the communication in each participant's file. In contrast, another director said she wanted to have more parent engagement, but had not yet established a strong method for doing so; she hoped to involve families to a greater extent in the program's second year.

Exhibit 21
Topics Discussed with Parents (n=30)

Topic	Number of Program Directors
Participants' behavior	25
Participants' progress in school	25
Participants' extracurricular activities	24
Participants' attendance at school	24
Upcoming program events	24
Services for families provided by your program, your CBO, or your host school	22
Participants' plans for high school (classes, Regents, etc.)	20
Requirements for promotion to the tenth grade	18

Exhibit reads: Twenty-five program directors discussed participants' behavior with students' parents.

Program Director Reflections on the Model

Program directors were asked to identify the three most important aspects of the Transition to High School model. As shown in Exhibit 22, 21 directors cited group programming and activities as one of the most effective elements, followed by individual support or counseling services (19), and tracking participants' progress throughout the year (17), reflecting survey findings as well as the relative priorities of program elements observed during site visits. In contrast, very few directors considered parent engagement and referrals to services to be essential elements of the model.

Exhibit 22
Most Effective Elements of the Transition to High School Model, According to Program Directors (n=31)

Program Element	Number of Directors
Group programming and activities	21
Individual support or counseling services for students	19
Tracking participants' progress throughout the year	17
Communication and collaboration with school personnel	15
Development of peer groups or cohorts among students	13
Orientation activities	3
Parent engagement	2
Referring participants to other activities and services	1

Exhibit reads: Twenty-one program directors identified group programming and activities as one of the three most effective elements of the Transition to High School model. (Program directors were asked to check three options.)

Recommendations

Overall, in the first year of the Transition to High School initiative, programs were successful in enrolling ninth-grade participants who needed academic support, based on their eighth-grade ELA scores, and in retaining them in the program throughout the year. The programs adapted the core features of the Transition to High School model established by DYCD to meet their local context. Overall, participants reported in surveys and interviews that the Transition to High School program helped them improve their understanding of high school requirements and develop social connections to facilitate their transition to a new school.

Eighty-three percent of participants were promoted to tenth grade. In addition, 77 percent earned at least 10 credits in ninth grade. On average, participants maintained school attendance rates comparable to their eighth-grade attendance or showed a decrease in absences, suggesting that they avoided the typical pattern of declining school attendance in high school. Finally, students who attended Transition to High School programs for a greater number of months were significantly more likely to earn 10 credits as ninth-graders than were students who attended for a shorter duration, even after controlling for eighth-grade ELA proficiency and the number of absences during eighth grade.

Although the first year of the Transition to High School initiative shows clear signs that the program can benefit youth both socially and academically, the study team also identified possible approaches for program improvement:

- **Clarify expectations for students to be targeted.** Although DYCD established that students in Levels 1, 2, or 3 on the eighth-grade ELA test were eligible for the Transition to High School program, some programs reported pressure from their host schools to focus on the lowest-achieving students who were most at-risk of dropping out. Focusing on these students required major investments of time and resources, which may be better spent on the Level 2 and 3 students, who could benefit from less-intensive supports to stay engaged and achieve in high school.

- **Clarify expectations for the youth outcomes sought through the program.** As noted in this report, promotion to the tenth grade in itself may not be a reliable indicator of whether students are on-track to high school graduation and whether programs are helping students succeed. DYCD could also encourage programs to focus on more concrete performance indicators, including the number of days absent from school and the number of high school credits earned. In addition, DYCD might consider establishing benchmarks for the social-emotional outcomes that programs are capable of developing, including, for example, establishment of supportive relationships among peers and reduction of risk behaviors known to be associated with school drop-out.

- **Clarify expectations for model implementation.** The core features of the Transition to High School model, including the development of a supportive peer cohort, the assistance of counselor-advocates, the provision of one-on-one counseling and group activities, and parent engagement, are all important. However, programs should be given the flexibility to implement these elements in

ways that are best suited to their school context, as long as they are intentionally geared towards promoting the success of each individual participant, irrespective of the total hours of service provided. As described in this report, for example, while some programs required daily participation in group activities, others allowed a drop-in approach and relied on informal, as-needed one-on-one interactions with participants. Programs visited in the study expressed concern about whether these interactions "counted" towards the number of hours of service that DYCD required them to offer. DYCD's emphasis on numbers of service hours may in fact detract from programs' focus on effectively supporting individual students.

- **Provide guidance on strengthening parent engagement.** Although programs reported conducting outreach to parents about participant behavior and progress, few directors prioritized parent engagement as one of the most important elements of the model. Additional guidance to programs on effective ways to engage parents in supporting their child's transition to high school could strengthen programs. For example, DYCD could offer more models for parent orientation meetings or materials that explain academic requirements for success in the ninth grade and in high school and that also provide parents with information about resources and supports available in the school and community to facilitate student success.

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