

Beating the Odds



C O L L E G E

How Thirteen

NYC Schools Bring

Low-Performing

Ninth-Graders to

Timely Graduation and

College Enrollment



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Institute for
School Reform

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Executive Summary

Across the nation, urban school districts struggle to raise often abysmally low high school graduation rates. New York City, with a four-year graduation rate of 57 percent, is no exception. Yet, some high schools in New York, as elsewhere, succeed beyond expectations in bringing students with low academic skills and high needs to graduation in four years, followed by enrollment in college.

This report describes a follow-up qualitative study, conducted in 2006 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, of a small group of New York City high schools that, according to 2001 data, were “beating the odds” in preparing low-performing ninth-grade students for timely high school graduation and college going. The thirteen schools included two long-established technical-vocational schools, nine small high schools created between 1993 and 1998, and two high schools created in the reconstitution of large, failing high schools.

The study was inspired by students in the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide high school organizing group that works to improve college-going rates in their schools and communities. Institute staff designed interviews with administrators, counselors, and other relevant staff to understand how the thirteen high schools identified in the earlier study were able to beat the odds, and to suggest ways that the success of these schools could be maintained and scaled up.

Effective Practices in “Beat the Odds” Schools

The beat the odds (BTO) high schools use four key strategies to help some of the city’s most disadvantaged students move successfully through high school graduation and on to college.

Academic Rigor

Standards for curricular rigor and student work across all disciplines are shared by all faculty in the schools, and Advanced Placement courses and/or opportunities to earn credit at nearby colleges are available to all students. Rigor is further reinforced through a culture of mutual respect between adults and students, including ground rules for both academic effort and behavior.

Networks of Timely Supports

The schools meet with students in advisories and conduct regular reviews of student transcripts to track students’ academic progress, credit accumulation, and areas of need. They also employ a range of timely short-term interventions, from communicating with parents or guardians to after-school tutoring, Saturday school, and lunchtime classes to enable students to revisit skills, master curriculum components, and practice for tests.

College Expectations and Access

The schools make clear to entering ninth-graders that the next four years will involve disciplined academic work directed to graduation and college or another form of post-secondary education necessary to their chosen career. Prominent visual and physical space is devoted to college going. Schools are staffed with full- or part-time college counselors, and annual college and career fairs and visits to colleges are big events for students. Parents are involved in college planning through workshops on testing, college requirements, and financial aid. Relationships with local community-based organizations provide an array of critical resources, from student internships to help with college essays.

Effective Use of Data

Although administrators believe they can do better in this area, school- and district-generated data are used to track student progress, identify student weaknesses and strengths, provide feedback on curricula, and shape academic interventions. Some of the schools also attempt to keep track of where graduates go to college and how well they do.

Maintaining and Scaling up the Success of BTO Schools

While BTO schools provide strong examples that high schools can turn students who enter ninth grade with low skills into timely graduates and successful college-goers, several important elements are needed for these schools to continue their success and for their practices to be scaled up to a wider group of New York City high schools.

A Better Distribution of Resources

The New York City Department of Education has decentralized budgetary decision making to the school level. But some BTO schools do not have adequate resources, and state or district mandates interfere with their ability to allocate scarce resources to address school needs. Thus, all high schools need both sufficient resources and the necessary autonomy to make budgetary decisions critical to student learning.

Greater Control over Enrollments

Increasing enrollments in New York City place understandable pressure on all schools. However, BTO schools are experiencing disproportionate enrollment increases, and schools in old and overcrowded facilities are particularly strained by growing enrollments.

A Stronger System of Support and Accountability

The New York City Department of Education appears largely unaware of the successes among BTO high schools. Moreover, BTO administrators generally believe that

their access to information about best practices, available resources, and opportunities to share with their colleagues has diminished over the past years. While a new system of high school networks is currently under development by the Department of Education, it remains to be seen whether this will provide the kinds of early warning and support that troubled schools need.

An Office of Post-secondary Education

Efforts to coordinate post-secondary planning under a single office in Chicago and Philadelphia could serve as a model for New York City. Such an office could:

- document, monitor, and provide training on college-going practices and strategies across instructional support networks;
- create structured opportunities for sharing information about existing resources and successful practices among schools and networks;
- lead schools in developing and implementing data-collection systems that enable them to monitor student progress and to track student access to supports such as college advising, guidance counseling, tutoring, and financial-assistance information; and
- reformulate safety and disciplinary policies to support college-going goals and supportive school cultures, including increasing school-level authority over, and student input into, school safety practices.



Enabling all students to graduate in a timely manner and attend college or other forms of post-secondary education should

not depend on the heroic commitments of a few educators. To do this hard work, high schools need resources, accountability, support, and acknowledgment.