Beating the Odds

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Timely Graduation and

College Enrollment

Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform
AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

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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.

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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.

Beating the Odds

Across the nation, urban 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 ninth-grade 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 have demonstrated success in preparing low-performing ninth-grade students, who generally lack college-going supports in their families, for timely high school graduation and college going. Our study was designed to understand how these high schools are able to "beat the odds" and suggest how the success of these schools can be maintained and scaled up. The study was inspired by New York City high school students in the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide high school organizing group that raised demands for improved college-going rates in their schools and communities.

Thirteen Schools That Are Beating the Odds

The thirteen Beat the Odds (BTO) schools described in this report were identified in an earlier quantitative analysis, based on New York City Department of Education 2001-2002 data (Siegel et al. 2005).[1] Success was defined as: graduation from high school in four years; graduates' enrollment in the City College of New York (CUNY); and first-year academic success in CUNY. Although these thirteen high schools admitted ninth-graders with far below-average eighth-grade reading and math scores, they produced four-year graduation rates and/or CUNY grade-point averages that were better than their demographics and prior math and/or English achievement would predict.

While the current study attempts to analyze the practices in these thirteen high schools that lead to beating the odds with their students, it is important to understand that in the five years between the quantitative and qualitative studies, major administrative changes in the New York City school system dramatically altered the context in which the BTO schools operate. In 2003, mayor Michael Bloomberg and his appointed chancellor, Joel Klein, introduced their Children First reform initiative, which subsumed New York's thirty-two semi-autonomous community school districts and seven borough-based high school districts into a system of ten regions under centralized control. High schools were assigned to the regions in which they were located, and the new regions became responsible for developing structures of support to all schools.

[1] The Siegel et al. (2005) study was based on 2001-2002 data from the New York City Department of Education's *Annual School Report*, the Department of Education's school-based expenditure report, as well as aggregated student-level data from the Department of Education and the City University of New York. A regression analysis controlled for student demographic characteristics and eighth-grade math and English test scores to capture high schools' contributions to student success.

In conjunction with this reorganization, the Bloomberg/Klein administration introduced an "autonomy zone" in which schools, including high schools, selected for effective performance were freed from both systemic constraints and supports. Three years later, in 2006, school autonomy was expanded through the creation of an Empowerment School initiative, which included three hundred schools in 2006-2007, and in future years will expand to include all schools.

Since 2003, New York City high schools themselves have been the focus of dramatic change. With significant funding first from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Open Society Institute, and then from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Bloomberg/Klein administration began phasing out large, failing high schools and replacing them with campuses of theme-based small schools, ultimately opening close to two hundred new small high schools.

The administration also created the Impact School Safety Initiative, which increased the use of metal detectors, scanners, armed police, and surveillance cameras at large high schools with histories of poor performance and high rates of school safety incidents. In 2006, this strategy was augmented by random scanning at those middle schools and high schools without metal detectors at building entrances.

As we discovered during our qualitative study, rising student enrollments, combined with the dramatic centralization and reorganization of the school system, particularly at the high school level, directly affected the BTO high schools. Thus, our research has involved both understanding what these schools have done to beat the odds and identifying the effects of this changing context on their efforts.

The BTO Schools over Four Years

Though the BTO schools include two long-established technical-vocational schools, nine of the thirteen were created between 1993 and 1998, generally with support from intermediary organizations, as part of an earlier wave of high school reform in the New York City system. Two high schools resulted from the reconstitution of large, failing high schools.

Until 2003, eight of the thirteen schools were part of or worked closely with the system's Division of Alternative High Schools, a unit developed to administer, monitor, and support small schools. The remaining BTO schools were part of borough-based high school superintendencies. Thus, all the BTO schools were part of high school administrative structures responsible for their regulation and support before the introduction of the Children First reforms. Of the thirteen schools, one has since joined the new Empowerment School Initiative.

The BTO schools were and remain relatively small. In 2001, they averaged 642 students, less than half the citywide average of 1,487 students. In 2005, after the surge of new small high school development, New York City Department of Education data[2] show the average size of city high schools reduced by nearly a third, to 1,013 students, but school size among the BTO schools had grown to an average of 680 students. While

[2] The analyses in this report are based on data from the New York City Department of Education 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 Annual School Reports.

over half the BTO high schools still had 500 or fewer students, two BTO schools (one is a technical school) had more than 1,000 students. (See figures 3 and 4 in Appendix A for data about size and other characteristics of individual BTO schools.)

In 2001, as in 2006 when we visited the schools, the BTO high schools were housed in a range of facilities. Some occupied their own campuses, while others shared space (they had a floor or wing) with other schools in the same building. While some schools had state-of-the-art science and computer laboratories, in others, teachers and students worked with inadequate facilities and makeshift equipment. One BTO high school, which had been promised new facilities, remained in temporary and makeshift quarters at the end of its fourteenth year. Three schools were officially over capacity in 2005, and administrators in most of the schools complained of having to locate classrooms and mandated suspension centers in space that had been intended for other activities.

In both 2001 and 2005, the BTO schools had lower percentages of teachers with five or more years' experience than all New York City high schools (42 percent vs. 61 percent in 2001; 47 percent vs. 57 percent in 2005). In 2001, the cost per student in the BTO schools was 10 percent more than the citywide average ($10,438 vs. $9,396); in 2004, the latest year for which expenditure data is available, the cost per student was still somewhat higher than the increased citywide average, though the gap had been greatly narrowed ($11,598 vs. $11,282).

Also, in both 2001 and 2005, the thirteen BTO schools identified in the quantitative study served the city's most disadvantaged students. As measured by eligibility for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, the BTO schools' students had much higher poverty rates than students in all New York City high schools (78.6 percent vs. 51.3 percent in 2001; 60.8 percent vs. 51.2 percent in 2005; see Figure 3 in Appendix A). Almost all the BTO schools served predominantly Black or Hispanic students, and the students were somewhat more likely, on average, to be poor at entry into ninth grade at BTO high schools. (See Figure 1 in Appendix A.)

Entering ninth-grade students in the BTO schools were also more likely to be over age for their grade than the citywide average in both 2001 and 2005 (28.8 percent vs. 25.7 percent in 2001; 31 percent vs. 28.9 percent in 2005). And BTO schools had higher percentages of special education students in both years (7 percent vs. 6.7 percent in 2001; 6.9 percent vs. 5.2 percent in 2005) than the citywide average.[3] However, in both 2001 and 2005, the BTO schools' students were less likely than the citywide average to be foreign born or English-language learners: in 2001, the proportion of English-language learners in BTO schools was 10.1 percent, compared with 16.6 percent citywide, and in 2005, English-language learners comprised 8.9 percent in BTO schools, compared with 12.5 percent citywide. (See Figure 1 in Appendix A.)

The four-year graduation rate in BTO schools in 2001 was 59.1 percent, exceeding the citywide graduation rate of 51 percent.

[3] This contrasts with lower rates of special education students in New York City's small schools noted by other researchers. See, for example, Citywide Council on High Schools (2006).

Moreover, the graduation rate at schools with similar high-needs students was 45.6 percent, considerably lower. Yet in 2001, students in the BTO schools received largely local, rather than Regents, diplomas. While 16 percent of all students citywide received Regents diplomas that year, only 3 percent of all students in the BTO schools received Regents diplomas. By 2005, as a result of state pressure to eliminate local diplomas, 33.4 percent of the class of 2005 earned a Regents diploma in BTO schools, compared to 35.3 percent citywide. Moreover, the four-year graduation rate in BTO schools in 2005 continued to exceed the citywide rate (68.2 percent vs. 58.2 percent). (See Figure 4 in Appendix A.)

New York City traditionally compares student achievement in all schools both with citywide averages and with "similar schools," based on student demographics. For this report we compiled demographic and outcome data on a comparison group of schools chosen for their similarity to BTO schools in 2001 on the basis of poverty rates (measured by percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch) among all students and incoming freshman, the percentage of incoming students who were over age, and the percentage reading below grade level (not at level 3 or 4). All schools falling within the range of BTO schools on these measures were included in the comparison group.

BTO schools had smaller student bodies and were more successful than comparison schools in all student outcomes except the rate of Regents diplomas awarded in 2001. In 2001 and 2005, BTO schools had a higher proportion of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students graduating in four years and planning to attend a four-year college. (See Figure 2 in Appendix A.)

Also impressive, 2001 data analyzed in the Siegel study showed that BTO schools enrolled students in both two- and four-year CUNY colleges at percentages similar to the citywide average and had much higher two- and four-year enrollment levels than other high schools with comparable student populations. While we have no data for *actual* college enrollment for 2005, 35 percent of the graduating students in the BTO schools *planned* to enroll in CUNY, compared with 28.3 percent in the comparison group. (See Figure 2 in Appendix A).

Additional data on BTO, comparison, and other New York City high schools in 2001 and 2005 are provided in Figures 1 through 4 in Appendix A.

About the Qualitative Research Study

Since the initial goal of our qualitative study was to understand how the thirteen high schools were able to "beat the odds," we began by establishing a framework of practices identified as important to successful graduation and college going, particularly for low-performing students. Our aim was to search for evidence of these practices in the BTO schools and to investigate whether other practices might also be related to graduation and college going.

To develop our framework, we began with the practices identified by the New York City high school students in the Urban Youth Collaborative who had inspired our study. We then conducted a review of the literature and interviewed a range of educators, both at the New York City

Department of Education and in national education and advocacy organizations concerned with increasing graduation and college-going rates. From this information, we developed an interview protocol focused on four areas of best practices that emerged as critical to high rates of graduation and college going among low-performing students:

- Academic rigor: a wide range of intensive, high-quality college-preparatory courses offered and high academic standards maintained across all curricula.
- Networks of timely supports: every student's progress tracked and interventions with targeted supports quickly provided.
- College expectations and access: a schoolwide belief that all students can graduate in a timely manner and go to college, and a range of programs provided to assist students with college going.
- Effective use of data: systems for regularly collecting and analyzing data on student progress through high school and college used to inform schoolwide practices.

We then created a rubric (see Appendix B) to document the level of implementation of the components of each of these areas of practice. We had hoped to rate the schools on each component, but we found such differing situations across the schools, partly in response to the changing New York City Department of Education administrative context, that a simple rating proved uninformative. Therefore, in the report that follows, we use the rubric as a way of organizing our information and providing more complex analyses of best practices across the schools.

Of the thirteen schools identified in the original quantitative study, we were able to visit ten.[4] In most of the schools, we were given a tour and, in some instances, we were able to visit classrooms. At each site we conducted an interview with the principal and other relevant administrators, including assistant principals and counselors. As the information contained in this report suggests, administrators in the BTO schools reported on their struggles to maintain their programs in the context of the changing environment of the New York City public school system, and so expanded our notion of what it currently takes to beat the odds.

Best Practices in the BTO Schools

Our interviews with the BTO high school administrators revealed that, despite a generally unsupportive district environment, the high schools share a common commitment to bringing each and every student to high school completion and to making it possible for them to attend and succeed in college. This section describes the practices that enable them to achieve that standard.

Academic Rigor

College going, at a basic level, is dependent on students taking rigorous college-preparatory courses, including, but not limited to a foreign language, physics, chemistry, and advanced math and algebra. According to a recent U.S. Department of Education report, the academic intensity and quality of students' high school curriculum is more important to their earning a bachelor's degree than their test scores or

[4] Three schools declined repeated requests to receive visits. This is not uncommon in small-school research, where staff are overworked, students receive the highest priority, and the schools are often over-studied. As judged by New York City Department of Education data, these three schools appear to be within the range in student demographics and success rates of the schools we did visit.

academic rank. The impact of a rigorous high school curriculum on degree completion is also more important for African American and Latino students than it is for White students and is "far more pronounced – and positively – for African American and Latino students than any other pre-college indicator of academic resources" (Adelman 1999).

Since the BTO schools take in low-performing ninth-graders and move them to high school graduation and college going beyond the levels predicted, our first interest was in the standards for rigor that these BTO schools developed and the courses they offered.

Standards across the Curriculum

Setting and maintaining high academic standards represents a particular challenge in schools where high-needs students make it tempting for faculty to water down instruction and accept weaker evidence of learning. In most of the BTO schools, staff used such formats as grade-level and departmental meetings to develop and sustain jointly held standards for curricular rigor and student work across disciplines, including both academic and technical/vocational courses.

> We build the rigor so that the kids can get in [to college] and stay there.
>
> – BTO Principal

This work was supported and reinforced by staff retreats and professional development sessions. Two schools had developed shared rubrics for course rigor, which they used across departments and grade levels. While several schools were still developing mechanisms for sharing standards of rigor across disciplines, they had started the process by focusing on a cluster of two or more subject areas, with the aim of expanding to all disciplines.

To monitor the implementation of these standards, administrators in several of the schools visited classrooms on a regular basis and conducted learning walks with faculty. Administrators also examined classroom data to understand where faculty was working well with students, which students might need additional help, and where curriculum and/or instruction might be falling short.

Advanced Placement Courses

All the BTO schools offered at least two Advanced Placement (AP) courses and/or opportunities for students to earn college credit through attending courses at nearby colleges. The AP courses included Spanish, English, world history, U.S. history, psychology, calculus, art, and computer science. In one school, the principal decided not to offer AP courses. Since these courses could not be offered to all students, the principal believed AP offerings operated as a form of tracking. As an alternative, students were encouraged to take courses in a nearby college.

Networks of Timely Supports

Creating a pre-college curriculum is only the first step in enabling low-performing students to succeed in academically rigorous courses. Since any academic subject can potentially be a source of frustration, discouragement, and failure, schools must provide the assistance and support necessary for students to succeed.

Research shows that students are less likely to fall through the cracks in small schools, and that these schools therefore have higher achievement and graduation rates. But studies of small schools have also made clear that a relatively small student body is "not a guarantor of increased student achievement or a positive social environment" (Weinstein et al. 2006, p. 4).

Indeed, research has identified several factors as important in generating high rates of graduation and college going in previously low-performing high schools. Among these are creating "a school climate of optimism and success for students and teachers"; starting with what you want students to know and achieve and working backwards to create tests and lesson plans; using school, teacher, and student data to decide what instructional and curricular changes to make; and implementing tutoring centers and grade recovery programs (Horowitz 2005).

Attending to the Academic, Behavioral, and Personal Needs of All Students

To generate timely graduation and create college-going pathways for low-performing students, adults in the BTO high schools kept track of every student's progress and intervened quickly with a targeted and efficient intervention when difficulties arose.

Despite growing enrollments, staff in every BTO school were organized to ensure that no student's academic, behavioral, or personal needs went unnoticed. All schools had structures for assigning each student to one or more adults on campus to make sure that no student's academic progress escaped scrutiny. Schools tracked their students' progress, both formally and informally, through multiple strategies. Several schools implemented advisories, often the initial sites in which faculty members engaged with struggling students. In several other schools, faculty and administration regularly reviewed transcripts to assess students' academic progress and credit accumulation. In addition, most schools relied on school secretaries and paraprofessionals for information on how students were progressing.

> "I tell my staff, 'Here's how you can work with your students so that no one falls off your plate.'"
>
> – BTO Principal

For BTO school staff, providing a solid preparation for graduation and college required a commitment that went beyond their class assignments and the regular school day to providing tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and other activities through which they maintained close relationships with students. One administrator intentionally hired teachers with multiple skills and interests, so that the faculty could assist students in after-school clubs and engage in direct work with students both inside and outside the classroom. Yet administrators were also clear that maintaining this level of staff commitment amid increasing enrollment pressures was becoming more difficult and that in some schools teacher turnover had increased; some administrators wondered whether students' difficulties would begin to go unnoticed without the needed attention.

Timely Short-Term Interventions

Through their understanding of students' needs, the BTO schools developed a range of timely interventions, from phoning a parent or guardian to academic interventions that included before- and after-school tutoring, Saturday school, lunchtime classes, and special classes that enabled students to revisit skills or other curriculum components they hadn't yet mastered. While the number of students enrolling in these recuperative efforts was described as high, the classes were also described as short in duration, enabling the students to return quickly to, and succeed in, the assigned course.

As part of working to respond to students' social and emotional as well as academic needs, two schools recognized that a segment of Black males was experiencing particular difficulty in focusing on academic coursework. These schools then implemented special after-school conversation groups, run by Black male faculty members, who operated as mentors for these young men.

Extended Day, Week, and Year

All the BTO schools were also open for extended hours before and after school, during the week, and on Saturdays for ad hoc academic programming and support for students. Most of the schools also offered summer school, including eighth-to-ninth-grade bridge programs. Through these structures, the schools also developed more intense levels of ongoing community building across the student body and teaching faculty. However, as administrators reported, these programs had been cut throughout the district in the time between our quantitative and qualitative studies; they were recently reintroduced for smaller numbers of students.

Multiple Strategies to Improve Test-Taking Skills

While most administrators in the BTO schools were critical of "test prep," their students were given multiple opportunities to prepare for and take the various Regents exams, as well as SAT/PSAT tests for college admission. Some of this preparation focused on offering practice in the types of problems the tests presented or in such skill areas as test-essay writing. One administrator, whose school had shifted its course sequence across grades to better meet the needs of its students, waited until a few weeks before the testing periods to briefly halt the school's innovative curriculum and prepare students for the tests. Some principals provided after-school and Saturday "cramming sessions," as well as counseling, pep talks, and meals to their students before tests.

Behavioral Standards Consistent with the Academic Focus

In the conviction that a focus on both academics and behavior was integral to the overall well-being of their schools, the administrators in all the BTO schools enforced ground rules for behavior that inculcated mutual respect between adults and students. Several schools required that students wear uniforms. In the schools without uniforms, dress codes were clearly delineated and enforced by the adults on campus.

Security

The twin focus on academics and behavior was also evident in how school security was handled. With two exceptions (one was a school that was entered through another school which housed the screener), these schools had consistently refused metal detectors or other screening devices on their campuses. Several administrators viewed screening devices as antithetical to the respectful, high-achieving academic environment they were working so hard to develop. Quantitative data substantiates our impression that the BTO schools were able to maintain extremely low incidents of violence on campus. Ten of the thirteen BTO schools reported 0–1 violent crimes in 2005 – lower than the citywide average.[5] BTO schools also averaged 5.1 suspensions per hundred students in 2005, compared with 8.2 per hundred in similar schools and 7.5 per hundred citywide (see Figure 4 in Appendix A).

College Expectations and Access

Low-income students of color whose families have not had access to college require special efforts to sustain their belief in the possibility of college going. Care must also be taken to ensure that they have the skills, coursework, and national tests required for college entry. These students must be helped to navigate the daunting complexities of choosing a college, filling out applications and financial forms, and meeting all application deadlines. These supports can only be provided by an individual or individuals with extensive knowledge of the world of colleges and what it takes for first-generation students to get there, as well as the time to devote to working with these students.

Most urban high schools have few counselors. In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education reported one counselor for every 479 public high school students, and the ratio was much higher in urban and low-income schools (Sable & Hill 2006). New York City reports a student-counselor average ratio of 400:1; however, this includes all counselors, of which only a small proportion are college counselors. Moreover, many high schools designate individuals with insufficient experience as college counselors. Yet college counselors, as opposed to guidance counselors, are viewed as particularly critical for low-income students, who are typically the first generation in their families to go to college (Oakes et al. 2006).

College Expectations for All Students

All the BTO schools began their relationships to their entering ninth-grade students by making it clear that the next four years would involve disciplined academic work directed to graduation and college or another form of post-secondary education. The technical schools helped their students understand that careers in their fields depended upon post–high school technical programs. The principal of one BTO technical high school believed that the high graduation and college-going rates in his school were the result of *all* faculty continually emphasizing to students the exact

> Look to the right of you and look to the left of you – everyone you see is going to college.
>
> – BTO administrator's affirmation to entering ninth-graders during their first assembly.

[5] The average for all NYC high schools in 2004-2005 was 2.14; when weighted by student population so big schools don't unduly skew the average, the figure is 3.54. Citywide, the number of violent crimes per school ranged from zero to 14 in 2004-2005.

post-secondary education programs needed to enter specific technical careers.

Visual and Physical Space Devoted to College Going

The BTO schools also made a point of giving prominent visual and physical space to the college-going process. However, administrators reported that this space had been increasingly threatened between 2001 and our 2006 school visits. Schools were asked to displace libraries and elective classrooms to devote physical space to additional students and to disciplinary and special education rooms in compliance with unfunded federal and state mandates.

All but one of the BTO schools still housed a college counseling office in 2006. Though often small and rudimentary, these offices displayed pictures of and information about colleges and offered computers and a quiet supportive room in which students could review their transcripts, write their essays, and work on other aspects of their college and financial-aid applications. Most schools showcased students' college acceptances, prominently displaying letters of acceptance and scholarship awards in the school hallways.

Creative Staffing Solutions to Support College Going

In some schools, college offices were staffed by college counselors, whose duties were devoted solely to assisting students in getting into college. In other schools, because of budgetary constraints, the counselor who staffed this program or office was assigned additional duties. Several schools reworked their budgets to hire college counselors on a part-time basis, and one school worked with a retired counselor with strong ties to colleges. This individual, a fierce advocate for students as they sought college entry, had for some years spent several days a week at the school, but had recently been cut back to a day a week and wondered how she could continue to adequately serve students.

Exposure to College and Careers

To impress on students the range of opportunities and options that awaited them after high school, all the BTO high schools hosted annual college and career fairs. They also established direct linkages to colleges, either through the contacts that administrators and teachers developed with admissions offices or through former students currently enrolled at these colleges. At one school, a graduate's success in a college had led to fifteen students being awarded full college scholarships at this college in the following two years. At several schools, we met graduates who had returned to visit with former teachers and talk to students. It was clear that the graduates expected – and received – warm welcomes and pride in their accomplishments. In one college office, we found a graduate engrossed in helping a student fill out a college application form.

Most of the BTO schools also worked with College Now, a long-standing CUNY program, and with outside nonprofit college-access organizations such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and FES (Foundation for Excellent Schools). In addition, some organizations, such as AYES (Automotive Youth Education Systems), were targeted toward specific careers. All these groups helped raise student expectations for college, assisted students in setting college-going goals, and

generally helped improve college access and smoothed the college-going process. The organizations also offered peer mentoring to individual students or groups of students.

Finally, the BTO schools collaborated with local community-based organizations, where students were able to participate in service learning and the kinds of extracurricular activities and community service opportunities valued by admissions officers – traditionally more available to middle-class students.

College Visits

In all the BTO schools, administrators raised private funds to sponsor yearly visits to a handful of colleges both in and out of state. These college visits involved overnight trips for significant numbers of students, mostly eleventh- and twelfth-graders. In two schools, an annual busload of students traveled south for a tour of the historically Black colleges. Other schools provided annual visits to northern colleges, including such high-prestige schools as Yale, Tufts, Ithaca College, and Cornell. Students in all the BTO schools visited local two- and four-year colleges (CUNY and others) and colleges in the State University of New York (SUNY) system.

Recruiting Parents in Support of College Going

Since most of the students in the BTO schools were the first generation in their families to attend college, administrators in these schools understood that parents' support for college going had to be built and sustained. Parents needed to understand college as a real possibility and an important benefit – even a priority – for their children. Thus, the schools used a variety of strategies to help parents keep track of their children's academic progress in relation to the requirements for graduation and college entry. Schools hosted parent nights, notified parents of tutoring or testing opportunities, and held college-going and financial-aid workshops for parents. One school made a point of inviting parents on the college tours, so that the tours became multigenerational.

In two schools, administrators talked of parents' apparent shame about their incomes and their reluctance to giving out accurate (or any) income information on financial-aid forms. Staff expended considerable effort overcoming this obstacle to students receiving critical financial assistance.

In all BTO schools, an individual or group of staff sought public and private scholarships and other funds to make attending college more feasible for their students. For several schools, finding money for undocumented students, who are not eligible for government scholarships, was an extra struggle. (Reluctance of undocumented parents and students to provide personal information was common and understandable.) One school with a number of undocumented students held a workshop addressing issues of college access and funding for undocumented students.

Community Supports

All the schools were connected to local community-based organizations (CBOs) both formally and informally, and the resulting relationships provided an array of critical resources, from providing service learning for students and acting as partners for grant writing to bringing in working

professionals to speak with students about what it takes to succeed in their careers. The schools had different kinds of relationships with CBOs – some active and frequent and some less active and more sporadic. While some schools' original community partners were still deeply engaged with the school, in one school the relationship with the original partner had become problematic and the school had cultivated new community partners regarded as more helpful.

Effective Use of Data

Data-driven reform has become a complex and contested practice, given how the pressure of standardized tests has narrowed students' learning opportunities. While data collection and analyses are increasingly defined as integral to improving student achievement, administrators and teachers are generally viewed as reluctant users of data. Not surprisingly, a common criticism of college-preparation programs is the lack of systematic data collection and analysis (for example, see Hughes et al. 2005).

> I know I should be keeping track of all this data, but I just don't get the time to look at it carefully.
>
> – BTO principal

Analyzing Available District Data

School administrators and faculty in the BTO schools viewed the effective use of data as their weakest area of practice. Indeed, all the administrators reported needing to strengthen this area. In spite of this, all the BTO schools did use student data in a variety of ways to strengthen programs and practice. All the BTO schools analyzed their four-year and five-year graduation rates and regularly reviewed a range of other data to keep track of students and strengthen their instructional programs.

In two schools, administrators gave credit to the New York State Education Department and the New York City Department of Education for providing their schools with the student-level data necessary to analyze their students' performance. They used this performance data to assess and restructure their academic programs and support interventions.

Collecting and Analyzing Student-Level Data

In all the BTO schools, data was used to follow students' progress and to identify student weaknesses and strengths across different academic subjects. This information was also used to shape tutoring and other academic interventions and to provide feedback to the administration and faculty about how curriculum could be revised, modified, and reinforced.

The BTO schools also kept track of how individual students were accumulating credits. In one school, the principal maintained a cohort file with the program and graduation requirements of every senior. Students were asked to review the file regularly and to sign off as they accumulated the necessary credit requirements to graduate. In another school, the guidance counselor met weekly with all students who were behind in their credit accumulation, again asking them to sign off once they had jointly created a plan for moving forward and catching up.

All but two schools kept track of students' PSAT and SAT test-taking rates and results.

While most administrators were proud of high rates of PSAT/SAT test-taking, a principal who had raised money to pay for all sophomores taking the PSATs reported that low scores had greatly discouraged some students and that the goal of encouraging *all* students to take the PSAT needed to be rethought.

Out of concern for both those students in the school and those who had left but were staying in touch, one administrator spoke of the possibility of tracking GPA and GED scores in relation to college access and success, and referred to a program purchased by many suburban high schools that enables administrators to track students' college applications and analyze their schools' graduates as they proceed through college.

The level of information provided about college opportunities and scholarships varied across BTO schools, as did the sophistication of technology schools employed for keeping track of student data. As several administrators pointed out, a recent wave of retirements among guidance counselors had exacerbated information flow problems, since retiring counselors had taken their expertise and knowledge with them.

All the BTO schools had once been part of either the alternative high school superintendency or a borough-based high school superintendency. However, the Children First reform had replaced these structures with a regional structure in which all the BTO schools were part of a larger unit that included elementary and middle schools, as well as high schools. While some administrators lamented old linkages of command and support – "at least you knew where to go" – most reported limited assistance from their regional structures. No BTO school was currently sharing information informally with other New York City high schools, and isolation and lack of supports were common themes.

Students' College Experiences

Six schools tracked the percentages of students who applied to two- and four-year colleges. However, several BTO administrators expressed concern over their lack of knowledge about whether or not their students followed through on college acceptances. (Our ability to link New York City Department of Education and CUNY data was a revelation to several.) Moreover, the schools rarely knew whether students who entered a two-year college transferred to a four-year program. Nor did BTO schools have systematic data on how well their students did in different colleges or other postsecondary programs.

Less formally, most administrators and counselors used returning graduates to keep track of the colleges students actually enrolled in and how well they did once enrolled. However, since administrators assumed that those students who did well in college were more likely to return to their high school than those who were struggling or had even dropped out, they realized that this information was likely skewed.

Scholarships and other financial aid awarded to students were sources of pride in all the BTO schools. In two high schools, administrators and counselors knew exactly how much scholarship money had been awarded to students graduating in spring 2006 and, in a third school, the administra-

tor had a list of all the scholarships graduating seniors had received. However, information in this area depended on the efforts of the college counselor and/or principal, who, being over-stretched, regarded systematic data collection as a low priority. No school had information on how well former students who had received financial aid performed in college, even though this knowledge might influence the decision of a philanthropist or scholarship provider to fund other students from the same high school.

Administrators and faculty in all the BTO schools reported going far beyond their job descriptions to enable most of their students to graduate in a timely manner and enter college. The administrators worked long days and on weekends, and students regularly streamed into their offices, including during their interviews with us. Most were clear that they had reached the limits of what they could do, and that data was an area that suffered as they responded to the immediate needs of students. Yet all acknowledged the importance of finding ways to use data to better keep track of student progress both before and after graduation.

The Challenges of Maintaining and Scaling Up the Success of BTO Schools

It is cause for celebration when any student, against steep odds, graduates from high school and goes to college. It is equally cause for celebration when schools, against steep odds, produce high graduation and college-going rates with students who would not ordinarily graduate and attend college.

The administrators in the schools we visited were courageous, highly skilled, and relentless in developing and sustaining their programming initiatives and interventions on behalf of their students. All strived to create coherent and integrated academic programs and supports, which demanded a high degree of faculty buy-in. All understood that their expectations for their schools had to be consistently communicated to both faculty and students, at the same time as they negotiated district, state, and federal mandates – strengthening the positive effects and minimizing the negative effects of these mandates on their schools.

When asked, "Is there a way to do all this without being a hero or a heroine?" one BTO administrator laughed, shaking her head, and gave an emphatic, "No!" The only recourse, she explained, when exhaustion threatened, was to ask herself and her staff, "Wouldn't you do this for your own child?" Yet the solutions to "beating the odds" could not always be found within the schools themselves. Increasing enrollments and decreasing support were generating burnout and real or potential faculty turnover, and several BTO administrators wondered how long their staffs could expend the commitment and devotion necessary to sustain high graduation and college-going rates.

Autonomy, Accountability, and the Need for Support

The BTO schools we investigated in our qualitative study should be considered strong schools – high administrative capacity to develop and sustain critical academic programming was reflected in high student achievement. Some BTO principals appreci-

ated the increased autonomy they had experienced over the past several years, saying it had allowed them to design curriculum and other interventions to meet the needs of their students. But they didn't believe that they could solve every problem internally. Indeed, BTO administrators stressed that their continued success was contingent on receiving necessary support from the New York City Department of Education and the intermediary organizations that worked with their schools.

Growing Enrollments and Inadequate Facilities

BTO principals consistently reported annual pressure to accept additional students. Although understandable in a district that is perennially short of seats, this pressure was felt between 2001 and 2005, when the average size of New York City high schools decreased by nearly five hundred students. Yet enrollments in the BTO high schools, small to begin with, grew by an average of forty students, and two schools ended the period with over a thousand students. These growing student bodies placed higher demands on staffs, created overcrowded classrooms and other spaces, and diminished access to critical resources such as computer and science labs and arts rooms.

Several BTO administrators reported that their schools had been scheduled for years to receive new facilities and were still waiting. Thus, their schools operated under conditions that had never been adequate and were exacerbated over time.

Negotiating with Outside Authorities

All principals play a mediating role between their school and their district, and the principals in these schools were vigilant about district mandates that might not be in the best interest of their schools. In two schools, administrators took considerable professional risks to negotiate schoolwide curricular changes that they believed better met their students' needs. Principals understood only too well that if they were wrong and their students did poorly on the district and state standardized exams, they would suffer the professional consequences.

> We may not be able to beat the odds if our enrollments keep going up.
>
> – BTO principal

Protecting the School Culture

BTO administrators also took risks in resisting the New York City Department of Education's imposition of metal-detection devices at the entry to their schools. In eight BTO schools, students walked through open front doors into unobstructed hallways, with only a security guard or guards at the door. (In two of these schools, the surrounding streets were considered particularly dangerous, yet the administrators believed that their schools were safe.) Several principals indicated that they had to reargue their position against metal-detection devices on a yearly basis. Moreover, their arguments were being made under increasing systemic pressure and a growing belief that only entry screening devices can protect schools against potential student violence. Although the physical premises of the ten schools varied – some were new or innovative; others older, more traditional, and in need of renovation – an overarching environment of intentionality and caring permeated all the BTO buildings.

Operating under the Radar

While BTO administrators welcomed the autonomy and lack of attention that enabled them to shape their schools, they also felt that the New York City Department of Education was generally unaware of their challenges and successes. In several schools, we were told that we were the first to identify their high graduation and college-going rates and to investigate the reasons behind them.

Key Issues to Address in Stabilizing BTO Schools and Scaling Up Their Successes across the City

This report describes thirteen New York City high schools that were able to beat the odds in bringing entering ninth-grade students with low reading and math scores to a timely graduation. The students were predominantly Black and Hispanic and were mostly from low-income families. The schools also produced high rates of successful college going, even though their students were often the first generation to attend college.

While small in scale, our research makes clear that the success of the Beat the Odds schools is not a question of chance. Our research also confirms what the high school students from the Urban Youth Collaborative who inspired this study believe matters most: high academic expectations, a quality instructional program and other academic support, and regular contact between students and adults. Indeed, while their methods differ, the BTO schools share a common faith in their students, along with a commitment to bringing their students to high school completion and making it possible for them to attend and succeed in college.

Of four practices identified by high school students, education experts, and the research literature as essential to assisting low-performing students to graduate and to enter and succeed in college – academic rigor, networks of supports, universal college expectations and access, and effective use of data – the BTO schools were deeply involved in the first three. Although administrators believed they needed to use data more effectively, they used data to track student progress, identify student weaknesses and strengths, and shape curriculum and academic interventions. Some of the schools also attempted to keep track of where graduates go to college and how well they do.

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.

Most important, to stabilize the work these schools are doing and to support other schools that might be able to "beat the odds" requires a better distribution of resources, greater control over enrollments, and a stronger system of district support and accountability. Also, following a model used with success in Philadelphia and Chicago, the New York City Department of Education should consider implementing an Office of Post-secondary Education.

A Better Distribution of Resources

The New York City Department of Education has decentralized budgetary decision making to the school level. But some schools do not have adequate resources, and state or district mandates interfere with the ability to allocate scarce resources to address school needs. In fact, BTO administrators report that almost all money allocated to schools is tied to the salaries of people filling mandated positions (including principal, school secretary, and parent coordinator) at mandated salary levels, leaving neither sufficient resources nor the necessary autonomy to make budgetary decisions critical to student learning.

Greater Control over Enrollments

New York City enrollments are continually increasing, which places understandable pressure on all schools. However, some 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

BTO administrators reported that, with few exceptions, the Department of Education remains largely unaware of the successes among high schools that are not part of the new generation of initiatives. Moreover, these administrators generally believed that their access to information about best practices, available resources, and opportunities to share with their colleagues had 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

The 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 by 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.

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Appendices

Appendix A BTO School Data

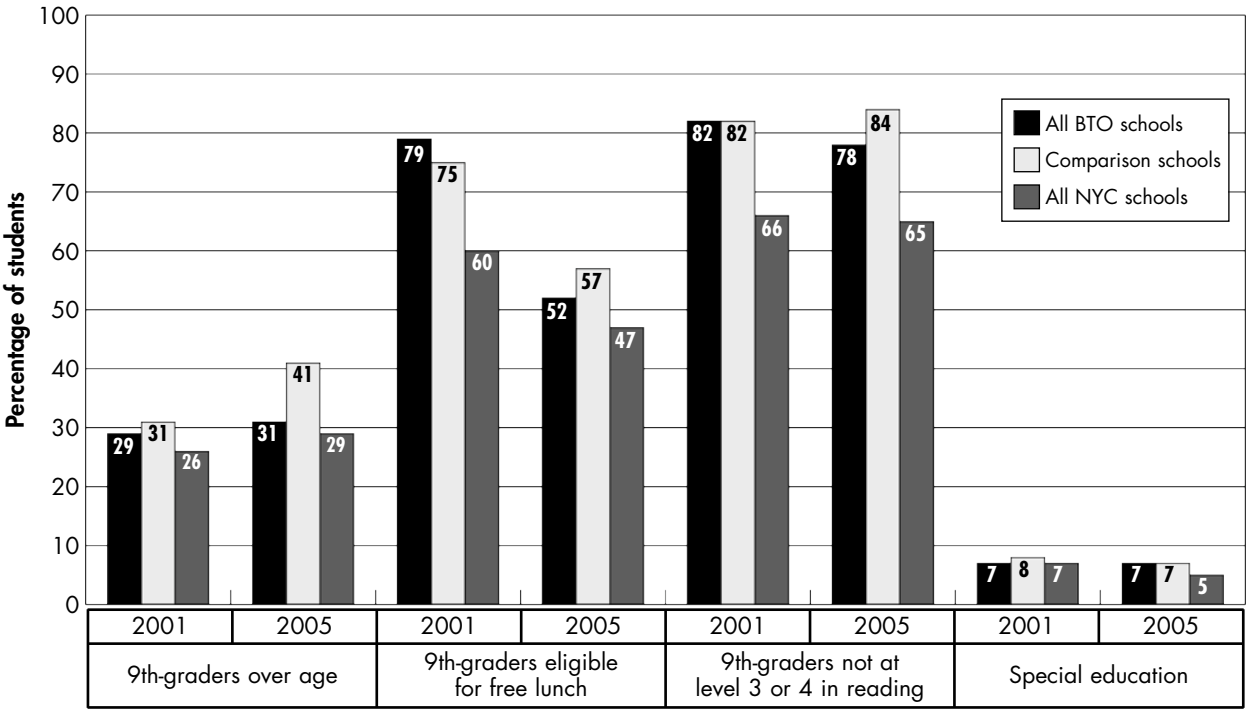

Figure 1. Percentages of students with certain special needs in BTO and other schools, 2001 and 2005

NOTE: The analyses in figures 1–4 are based New York City Department of Education data (2000-2001 and 2004-2005 Annual Reports).

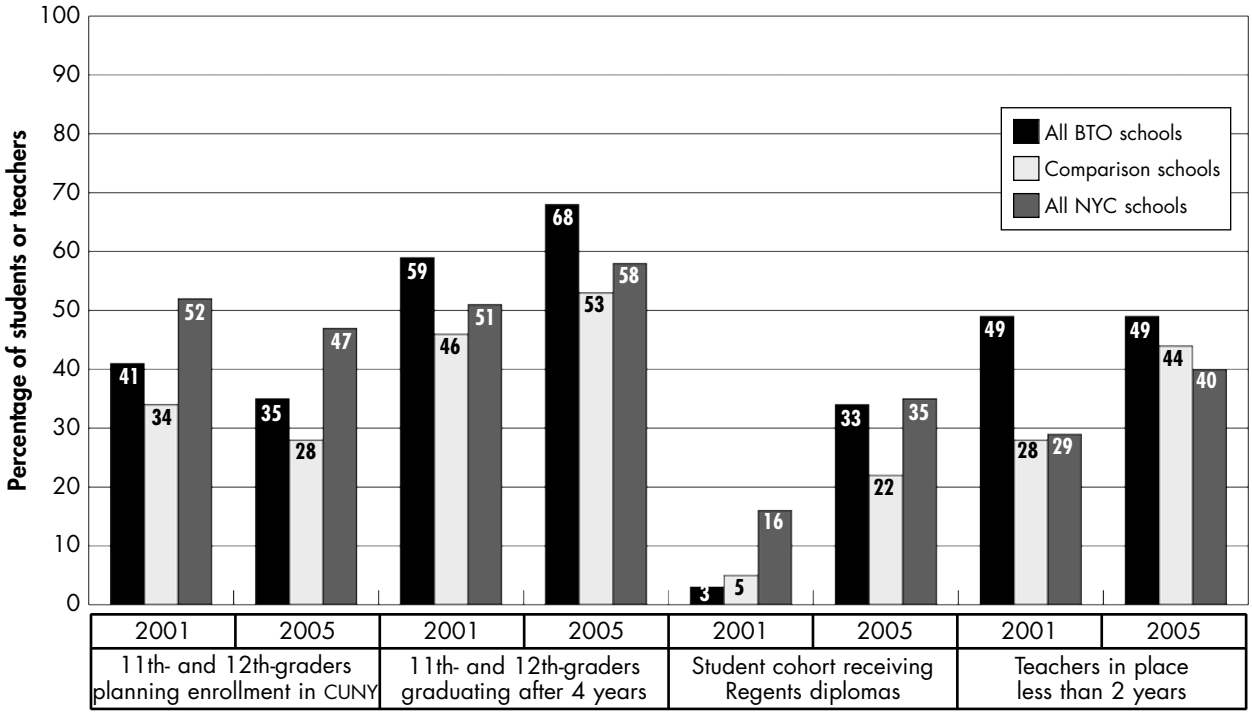

Figure 2. Student outcomes and learning environment in BTO and other schools, 2001 and 2005

Type of special need	School size		% all students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch		% 9th-graders over age		% 9th-graders eligible for free and reduced-price lunch		% 9th-graders not at level 3 or 4 in reading		% English-language learners		% special education	
School \ Year	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005
Acorn Community HS	623	661	74.7	82.5	32.0	32.1	76.0	85.6	82.7	78.9	1.8	4.5	0.2	7.1
Automotive HS	936	830	95.9	82.9	41.1	38.0	86.2	33.9	92.5	84.1	11.5	8.3	11.1	13.6
Banana Kelly Community Learning Center	219	266	82.4	86.5	40.0	45.0	71.1	38.8	71.9	82.5	13.2	11.3	0.0	6.0
East New York Transit Technology HS	1445	1582	78.9	75.0	15.0	15.4	85.2	26.3	72.4	67.5	3.9	2.8	8.6	8.5
EBC High School for Public Service	589	625	82.9	78.4	21.4	23.9	73.5	83.3	83.9	78.7	18.0	11.4	2.9	0.3
Erasmus Hall Campus High School for Business and Technology	896	638	77.5	72.3	36.7	57.1	68.3	42.9	88.0	100.0	12.5	10.3	5.4	5.2
Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies	243	376	84.8	76.6	18.8	31.5	82.5	87.9	70.3	67.6	7.4	9.3	3.7	6.4
Heritage HS	292	303	76.3	72.6	31.1	24.0	79.7	32.0	73.0	76.2	4.1	8.6	4.1	6.3
High School for Enterprise, Business and Technology	587	822	92.6	58.1	38.3	35.2	88.3	57.2	85.8	78.9	20.4	16.2	11.2	8.2
Humanities and the Arts Magnet HS	625	496	54.4	36.2	30.0	24.5	60.1	14.3	86.6	83.1	2.9	3.0	4.5	4.2
Manhattan Village Academy	N/A	345	N/A	64.8	18.9	17.6	52.2	74.5	76.1	46.6	N/A	6.7	N/A	2.3
Progress HS	602	1041	75.9	61.2	37.8	30.9	78.0	62.6	85.4	78.3	30.4	13.8	11.0	7.9
Wadleigh Arts HS	865	857	68.1	76.6	27.2	44.3	71.7	82.4	85.1	90.2	2.7	11.4	9.2	5.4
All BTO schools	**642**	**680**	**78.6**	**60.8**	**28.8**	**31.0**	**79.1**	**52.3**	**81.5**	**78.3**	**10.1**	**8.9**	**7.0**	**6.9**
Comparison schools	**1156**	**1329**	**75.3**	**72.5**	**30.6**	**41.0**	**74.7**	**56.6**	**81.8**	**84.0**	**18.9**	**14.4**	**8.3**	**7.0**
All NYC schools	**1487**	**1013**	**51.3**	**51.2**	**25.7**	**28.9**	**60.3**	**46.8**	**66.1**	**64.5**	**16.6**	**12.5**	**6.7**	**5.2**

Figure 3. Selected information on BTO schools, 2001 and 2005: special needs

Outcomes & learning environment	% of 11th- and 12th-graders planning enrollment in CUNY		Suspensions per 100 students		% of 11th- and 12th-graders graduating after 4 years		% of student cohort receiving Regents diplomas		% of teachers in place less than 2 years	
School \ Year	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005	2001	2005
Acorn Community HS	62.9	10.0	11.4	N/A	55.0	63.0	0.8	27.7	48.6	47.2
Automotive HS	9.3	19.6	22.8	3.5	46.0	48.1	2.0	15.6	49.3	53.8
Banana Kelly Community Learning Center	67.7	56.5	19.5	0.5	54.5	84.0	0.0	28.0	72.2	40.0
East New York Transit Technology HS	19.1	42.9	7.0	9.0	68.5	79.3	4.0	48.2	38.6	70.1
EBC High School for Public Service	40.2	0.0	12.1	14.0	62.7	72.1	2.9	8.2	59.1	60.5
Erasmus Hall Campus High School for Business and Technology	50.0	2.3	2.1	5.6	52.1	55.2	4.3	21.9	20.3	72.2
Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies	62.5	75.4	6.2	4.2	75.6	88.9	19.5	54.1	50.0	48.0
Heritage HS	35.7	56.0	11.6	2.6	70.3	74.0	2.7	34.0	70.6	40.9
High School for Enterprise, Business and Technology	58.8	54.1	6.8	2.8	61.9	71.3	2.0	34.4	53.3	50.0
Humanities and the Arts Magnet HS	46.6	6.4	7.7	6.5	53.4	51.4	1.1	24.3	36.1	53.6
Manhattan Village Academy	58.9	68.3	N/A	1.3	83.5	87.7	1.3	53.8	N/A	50.0
Progress HS	29.4	39.6	12.0	3.3	48.9	56.8	0.7	23.5	60.6	39.0
Wadleigh Arts HS	68.1	21.4	1.4	4.1	60.9	71.3	1.2	42.6	68.6	69.4
All BTO schools	**41.0**	**34.8**	**9.1**	**5.1**	**59.1**	**68.2**	**2.7**	**33.5**	**49.2**	**48.9**
Comparison schools	**34.1**	**28.3**	**7.8**	**8.2**	**45.6**	**53.1**	**4.8**	**21.7**	**28.0**	**43.9**
All NYC schools	**52.2**	**47.3**	**5.8**	**7.5**	**51.0**	**58.2**	**16.1**	**35.3**	**28.5**	**39.9**

Figure 4. Selected information on BTO schools, 2001 and 2005: outcomes and learning environment

Appendix B Rubric: Achieving College-Preparation Success for Low-Performing Students

Rubric Ratings

1. Almost no development
2. Beginning development
3. Reaching most students, most faculty aware
4. Reaching all students, all faculty aware

	Areas of best practices	Evidence (include grade level[s] and frequency of implementation)	Rating (1–4)
Academic rigor	A shared standard for academic rigor in all courses		
	College-preparatory and AP courses, as well as technical/career courses with academic content		
	Every student's progress is tracked		
	Early intervention and recovery (honest analysis of where students need help)		
	Tutoring/extra assistance		
	Test-prep strategies		
Expectations and support	Expanded teacher role/adult available to every student		
	Advisories or other structure(s) with detailed college-going and career objectives		
	Strategies to give youth ownership of their dreams of going to college		
	Structure for coordination between academic courses and college/career access strategies		
	College-oriented culture, with clarity about the relationship between college and future careers		
	Evidence from community members to show the possibility and value of going to college		
	Direct connections between school staff and colleges		
	Connection with graduates in college and careers		

	Areas of best practices	Evidence (include grade level[s] and frequency of implementation)	Rating (1–4)
College access	College visits		
	Strategies for undocumented students		
	Strategies for involving parents		
	Coordination with CBOs to support college preparation		
	Full access to, and strategies for sharing, information on: Required tests Course requirements College admissions process Financial aid Specific colleges (particularly in the area) Educational requirements for specific careers		
School-data collection and analysis	4- and 5-year graduation rates		
	PSAT/NMSQT and SAT/ACT test-taking rates		
	Percentages applying to, and going on to, 2- and 4-year colleges		
	High school GPA or GED scores in relation to college access and success		
	Data on financial aid related to student need		
	Graduates' college experiences		
	Which colleges attended by graduates have the highest retention rates		