

Recuperation and Innovation: New York City's Transfer High Schools

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The New York City school system has almost 550 high schools; fifty-six of them are transfer high schools serving students at risk of not graduating. Leaving high school without a diploma was once more common than graduating in the U.S.; the national high school graduation rate only reached 50% in 1940. In the years after World War II, young people without a high school degree had a robust job market to drop into. But by 1970, 80% of the country's youth had earned a high school diploma, Black and Latinx graduation rates lagged significantly behind white rates, and the formerly robust job market was fading. By 2010, the nation's graduation rate approached 85% and Black and Latinx rates had narrowed the gap with white rates. But young people without a high school diploma faced a bleak future as technological change, economic globalization and automation shriveled the prospects for meaningful and rewarding work.

Interventions such as transfer schools for students disengaged from high school have a long history in New York City. The first such efforts were street academies and storefront operations organized by the New York City Urban League during the late 1960s. Some fifteen Urban League street academies, financed by major city banks and corporations, collaborated with the city school system to help some 2,000 out-of-school Black and Latinx youth earn their high school diplomas.

By the early 1970s, NYC teachers and administrators had started a dozen alternative high schools for students who'd disengaged from their original city schools. These second-chance settings became known as transfer high schools because students could only enroll in them if they'd left a regular high school before graduating. These small alternative high schools pioneered new forms of curricula and instruction, innovative school structures, and supportive learning cultures throughout the last two decades of the 20th century. Several transfer schools such as the Urban Academy, the network of Satellite High Schools, City as School, West Side High School, Lower East Side Prep (originally an Urban League storefront school), Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School, and Brooklyn Academy High School have been serving over-age and under-credited students for almost 25 years.

A 2020 research study published by CUNY Graduate Center's Public Science Project, *And Still They Rise: Lessons from Students in New York City's Alternative Transfer High Schools*, analyzes the results of a participatory survey of 842 NYC transfer high school students. The study defines a range of obstacles that contribute to student disengagement from many NYC high schools: unsupportive, unchallenging, and non-valuing school cultures; mental health problems; the need to care for family members; demanding and debilitating financial responsibilities; school, neighborhood, and community violence; and housing instability. Additionally, the CUNY study reports that students disengage from their original high schools because of health care difficulties, pregnancy, family relocation, or dissatisfaction with their school's teaching and learning culture.

By 2000, some twenty NYC transfer high schools were serving some 6,000 students who'd left their original schools and were over-age for grade and under-credited (OA/UC). In 2006, a study by the NYC Department of Education's Office of Multiple Pathways documented a high school graduation rate of only 19% for over-age and under-credited students. To improve this dismal outcome, the Office of Multiple Pathways began a multi-year effort to strengthen school curriculum, instruction, programming, guidance, support structures, and accountability for those twenty existing transfer schools, and to create some 30 new schools to serve another 7,000 students. Currently, there are 56 transfer high schools including seven charter transfer schools within the city system, serving more than 13,000 students. The table below lists those transfer schools and details their student demographics, their percentages of over-age for grade and under-credited students, and their six-year graduation rates.

**TABLE 1.
TRANSFER HIGH
SCHOOLS: SELECT
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS
AND OUTCOMES (2019-20)**

	School Name	Total Enrollment	Asian	Black	Latinx	White	Special Education	English Language Learners	Economic Need Index	Overage / Under-credited	Graduation Rate
1	Urban Academy Laboratory High School	137	4.4%	26.3%	41.6%	24.1%	20.4%	0.7%	62.5%	27%	82%
2	New Ventures Charter School	146	1.4%	14.4%	44.5%	37.0%	37.0%	2.1%	71.6%	62%	77%
3	Professional Pathways High School	206	10.2%	23.8%	38.8%	26.2%	21.4%	4.9%	75.3%	74%	72%
4	Voyages Prep - South Queens	317	8.5%	66.6%	19.2%	2.2%	12.3%	1.6%	73.6%	77%	71%
5	Emma Lazarus High School	307	37.8%	21.8%	29.3%	9.8%	0.0%	85.0%	96.0%	74%	70%
6	East Brooklyn Community High School	196	1.5%	81.6%	15.3%	1.0%	40.8%	4.6%	83.1%	81%	68%
7	The James Baldwin School: A School for Expedition	234	3.0%	45.3%	47.0%	4.3%	35.5%	7.3%	84.9%	62%	66%
8	High School M560 - City As School	607	4.3%	36.4%	40.9%	16.3%	27.7%	4.3%	73.3%	46%	66%
9	Innovation Diploma Plus	175	1.1%	29.7%	66.9%	2.3%	14.9%	9.7%	87.9%	55%	66%
10	High School for Excellence and Innovation	189	0.0%	6.9%	90.5%	1.1%	16.4%	59.3%	96.0%	49%	66%
11	Mott Haven Community High School	244	0.4%	29.5%	66.4%	3.7%	33.6%	10.2%	90.7%	80%	66%
12	Brownsville Academy High School	111	0.9%	79.3%	14.4%	0.9%	27.0%	1.8%	86.0%	64%	66%
13	Forsyth Satellite Academy	181	2.8%	40.3%	51.9%	3.9%	35.9%	7.2%	89.5%	73%	65%
14	Brooklyn Frontiers High School	186	3.8%	59.1%	32.3%	3.2%	40.9%	3.8%	81.8%	70%	64%
15	Lower East Side Preparatory High School	531	43.7%	11.7%	42.4%	2.1%	10.2%	70.4%	96.0%	67%	62%
16	The Judith S. Kaye School	147	8.8%	42.9%	39.5%	4.1%	42.2%	5.4%	84.9%	76%	62%
17	Concord High School	178	0.0%	32.6%	55.1%	11.2%	38.2%	3.4%	83.8%	79%	62%
18	Aspirations Diploma Plus High School	200	0.5%	83.5%	13.0%	1.0%	26.0%	2.5%	82.3%	60%	60%
19	Brooklyn Bridge Academy	168	3.6%	86.3%	7.7%	1.8%	31.0%	9.5%	78.1%	75%	60%
20	Bushwick Community High School	214	0.0%	22.9%	76.6%	0.5%	32.2%	6.5%	89.8%	88%	59%
21	Independence High School	342	2.9%	32.5%	60.8%	3.5%	28.4%	9.1%	90.4%	66%	58%
22	Bronx Haven High School	169	1.2%	24.3%	72.8%	1.2%	32.0%	12.4%	93.6%	82%	57%
23	South Brooklyn Community High School	177	3.4%	22.0%	69.5%	1.7%	44.6%	11.9%	90.9%	77%	56%
24	Metropolitan Diploma Plus High School	191	1.6%	80.6%	14.1%	1.6%	36.1%	5.8%	87.9%	81%	56%
25	New Dawn Charter High School	288	0.7%	58.7%	36.1%	2.1%	43.4%	8.0%	89.6%	76%	56%
26	Cascades High School	168	1.8%	44.0%	53.0%	0.6%	34.5%	4.2%	89.1%	77%	55%
27	Bronx Community High School	136	0.7%	34.6%	61.0%	2.9%	18.4%	3.7%	88.8%	83%	55%
28	Bronx Arena High School	195	2.1%	33.8%	62.1%	2.1%	17.9%	5.6%	93.0%	69%	54%
29	Liberty High School Academy for Newcomers	428	7.5%	26.6%	57.7%	7.7%	2.8%	87.4%	96.0%	59%	53%
30	Harvey Milk High School	61	0.0%	36.1%	57.4%	3.3%	36.1%	3.3%	80.9%	48%	52%
31	West Brooklyn Community High School	243	5.3%	10.3%	67.9%	14.8%	46.1%	11.9%	82.7%	81%	52%
32	English Language Learners & International Support Prep. Academy	316	4.1%	21.2%	67.1%	3.8%	0.9%	93.0%	96.0%	87%	51%
33	Bronx Regional High School	183	2.2%	43.2%	52.5%	2.2%	21.3%	9.3%	89.9%	60%	51%
34	Harlem Renaissance High School	213	0.0%	51.6%	43.7%	1.4%	31.5%	19.7%	89.4%	68%	50%
35	Jill Chaifetz Transfer High School	209	1.4%	27.3%	67.0%	1.4%	32.1%	9.6%	91.0%	70%	50%
36	Arturo A. Schomburg Satellite Academy Bronx	175	1.7%	28.6%	64.6%	3.4%	28.0%	12.6%	91.4%	71%	50%
37	Brooklyn Academy High School	146	0.0%	82.9%	15.8%	1.4%	31.5%	1.4%	87.6%	75%	50%
38	Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School	704	16.3%	33.2%	44.3%	5.0%	11.8%	51.8%	92.7%	80%	49%
39	Research and Service High School	321	0.3%	77.9%	18.4%	2.5%	33.6%	3.4%	87.8%	80%	49%
40	Liberation Diploma Plus	223	3.6%	42.6%	40.4%	11.2%	39.0%	5.4%	88.5%	85%	49%
41	Queens Academy High School	393	15.3%	13.5%	60.1%	10.4%	24.9%	11.5%	77.4%	66%	49%
42	VOYAGES Preparatory	240	6.3%	15.4%	72.5%	3.8%	13.3%	3.8%	73.5%	72%	48%
43	North Queens Community High School	162	13.6%	39.5%	34.6%	9.9%	8.6%	3.1%	70.4%	74%	48%
44	Queens Satellite High School for Opportunity	214	13.6%	46.7%	31.8%	4.2%	10.3%	5.6%	75.3%	68%	48%
45	John V. Lindsay Wildcat Academy Charter School	436	1.1%	38.8%	57.3%	1.8%	40.6%	9.4%	91.0%	80%	48%
46	Brooklyn Democracy Academy	196	1.5%	79.6%	16.8%	0.0%	30.1%	4.1%	85.6%	83%	46%
47	Urban Dove Charter School	298	0.3%	69.5%	25.8%	1.0%	43.3%	3.4%	90.0%	72%	46%
48	New Visions A.I.M. Charter High School I	175	1.1%	69.1%	22.3%	2.9%	46.3%	4.0%	92.5%	51%	45%
49	Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community	177	2.3%	71.2%	20.9%	2.8%	24.3%	2.3%	88.4%	82%	44%
50	Olympus Academy	191	1.6%	86.9%	9.9%	1.6%	25.1%	2.1%	71.4%	68%	44%
51	Satellite Academy High School	254	0.8%	31.1%	63.8%	1.2%	29.1%	9.4%	84.8%	87%	42%
52	Edward A. Reynolds West Side High School	381	0.0%	35.4%	60.9%	2.1%	42.5%	9.2%	90.0%	71%	40%
53	Providing Urban Learners Success In Education High School	237	0.0%	5.9%	61.6%	0.0%	20.3%	11.0%	90.9%	74%	40%
54	New Visions A.I.M. Charter High School II	214	1.4%	44.9%	50.9%	0.9%	41.1%	6.1%	96.0%	70%	21%
55	New Directions Secondary School	197	1.0%	22.8%	72.1%	1.0%	25.4%	48.7%	96.0%	34%	N/A
56	Urban Dove Team Charter School II	212	0.5%	38.7%	59.0%	1.9%	45.8%	15.6%	93.4%	75%	N/A
	Transfer High Schools Average		6.3%	39.9%	46.6%	5.0%	26.8%	19.4%	86.9%	71%	55%
	Citywide Average		16.3%	24.9%	40.6%	15.1%	20.4%	12.6%	71.9%	---	---

Sources: NYC DOE. Demographic Snapshot, 2019-20.

NYC DOE. 2019-20 School Quality Snapshot. (Overage/Under-Credited & Graduation Rate) <https://tools.nycenet.edu/snapshot/2020/>

Notes: The Economic Need Index (ENI) estimates the percentage of students facing economic hardship.

The metric is calculated based on whether the student is eligible for public assistance from the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) or lived in temporary housing in the past four years or the percentage of families with school-age children in the student's Census tract whose income is below the poverty level, as estimated by the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate.

To maintain student privacy, schools with ENI values below 5% or above 95% have had their exact values for each category replaced with "Below 5%" and "Above 95%", respectively. Seven transfer High Schools had an ENI of "Above 95%." To calculate an overall Transfer High Schools Average, we converted this value to 96.0%, thus the overall average is likely to be higher.

A student is considered **overage/under-credited** based on the following criteria (where the age is as of December 31 of the entry school year, and the credits and Regents are before the start of the entry school year): Age 16 (under 11 credits, or under 22 credits and zero Regents passed); Age 17 (under 22 credits, or under 33 credits and zero Regents passed); Age 18 (under 33 credits and 4 or fewer Regents passed); 19 or older (under 33 credits, or under 44 credits and 4 or fewer Regents passed, or 2 or fewer Regents passed).

The **graduation rate** for Transfer High Schools is based on whether students graduated within 6 years of starting HS, or 7 years for students who entered HS very off track for their age. Other students (from prior cohorts) who graduate that year are also included.

The table's bottom two rows list the overall transfer school and citywide averages for student race/ethnicity, Special Education and English Language Learners, as well as each school's Economic Need Index, their average proportion of over-age/under-credited students and their six-year graduation rate.

The table identifies several key characteristics of the transfer sector's schools. Transfer high school students are predominantly more Black and Latinx and significantly less Asian and White than the citywide schools' average. Transfer schools have considerably higher percentages of students receiving Special Education services and considerably more English Language Learners than schools citywide. Transfer schools' students' families are much poorer, with an Economic Needs Index of 87% compared to a citywide average of 72%. Finally, transfer schools have a 71% over-age/under-credited population and a six-year graduation rate of 55%. (See the table's notes for the Department of Education's definitions of Economic Need Index, over-age/under-credited, and the transfer school graduation rate.)

Some transfer schools are part of networks established to serve disengaged high school students. Good Shepherd Services started one of the earliest programs for second-chance students in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood as an outreach center of John Jay High School in the 1980s. That center evolved into South Brooklyn Community High School, which became an official transfer high school in 2002 with structural and instructional principles designed for the transfer schools that Good Shepherd subsequently helped to develop—the Bronx and West Brooklyn Community High Schools and the Brooklyn Frontier High School. Another transfer school network originally included the Satellite Academy in lower Manhattan as well as the Forsyth, Schomburg, and Queens Satellite Academies. Those four Satellite schools are now formally independent, and all are members of the New York State Performance Consortium along with the Urban Academy, a founding member.

The very high percentages of ELL students in several transfer high schools, including the English Language Learners & International Support Preparatory Academy (93% ELL and a member of the International Schools network), Liberty High School Academy for Newcomers (87% ELL), Emma Lazarus High School (85% ELL), Lower East Side Preparatory High School (70% ELL), HS for Excellence and Innovation (59% ELL), Manhattan Comprehensive Night & Day HS (52% ELL), and New Directions Secondary School (49% ELL), all target non-English speaking students and most use innovative modes of instruction to develop English fluency while maintaining students' original languages.

The percentage of overage for grade and under-credited students is predictably very high because transfer schools target students who struggled academically in their previous settings. Most transfer schools' percentages of over-age and under-credited students cluster above the transfer schools' mean of 71% (32 out of 56 schools); only five schools have an OA/UC percentage below 50 percent. Given the many obstacles transfer students encounter, the sector's six-year graduation rate of 55% seems a highly commendable achievement. But because the federal government's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required, in 2018, that all public high schools maintain a 67% graduation rate, the New York State Education Department faces an ongoing dilemma--how to effectively and equitably respond to NYC's transfer schools' graduation rates. Since, in the 2019-20 school year, only six of the 56 NYC transfer schools met or exceeded the ESSA 67% graduation standard, almost all the sector's schools are vulnerable to state regulatory action if their graduation rates do not improve. Thus a sector of schools founded to serve students at high risk of not graduating is threatened even though the transfer sector graduates more than half of the students it initially enrolls.

And Still They Rise, the CUNY survey of transfer high school students, identifies four core principles of transfer schools' practices:

- (1) The sector's schools align opportunities and resources with student needs,
- (2) The sector's schools build cultures of care and compassion,
- (3) The sector's schools provide high expectations attuned to student needs and supports,
- (4) The sector's schools build ecologies of personal and collective responsibilities.



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And Still They Rise also found that most NYC transfer high school students thought their schools helped them overcome the obstacles they faced in their previous schools. Transfer students felt they trusted adults in their transfer schools more than they trusted the adults in their previous settings. Finally, transfer school students reported a higher sense of purpose and belief about student success among the adults in their transfer schools.

Given these survey findings, the current demographic and outcome profile of transfer high school students detailed in the table above, and the 25-year history of the transfer sector's outcomes, current transfer schools deserve an accountability system that assesses students' credit accumulation rates and progress toward graduation, compared to the same factors in their previous high school experience, rather than an arbitrary graduation standard.

The ultimate reason to sustain and improve the transfer high school sector is that it helps us learn how best to respond to the 15-20% of students who disengage from their original high schools. NYC's transfer school sector is reducing this percentage by more than half since 55% of the transfer school population currently graduate. We should define the transfer sector as not only an effective recuperative effort but an innovational field in which previously disengaged students are challenged by new forms of curriculum and instruction; where they find support through new modes of programming and guidance structures. The transfer sector's interventions can help us develop more effective schooling for all our high school students.