

Equity, Access & Diversity

Persisting Students:

Exploring the Pathways and Outcomes of Students Who Don't Graduate in Four Years, But Remain Enrolled in NYC High Schools

Summary

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About the *Equity, Access and Diversity Series*

Launched in recognition of the Research Alliance's 10th Anniversary, the Equity, Access and Diversity series is designed to illuminate important areas of progress as well as stubborn barriers to equity in NYC public schools. Focused on some of the City's most vulnerable students, the series aims to examine the mechanisms driving educational inequality and identify promising strategies to produce more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes.

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Persisting Students:

Summary of Key Findings and Implications

For years, increasing high school graduation rates and decreasing dropout rates have been a central focus of education policy—and a great deal of progress has been made on both fronts. Over the past decade, New York City’s four-year graduation rate has risen dramatically (from just over 60 percent of students who started high school in 2004, to nearly 75 percent of those who started in 2013). While there is much to celebrate in that change, it is important to note that roughly a quarter of each entering 9th-grade class still does not graduate on time. As shown in Figure ES-1 on the next page, some of these students permanently drop out within their first four years, but a much larger percentage actually stay enrolled (or reenroll after dropping out temporarily) and continue working toward a diploma in their fifth or sixth year of high school.¹

The Research Alliance recently undertook a [study](#) of these “persisting students.”² They not only are a large group (about one in five NYC students—or more than 12,000 per entering class), they are also particularly vulnerable. Yet, the fact that these students continue to have a connection to the education system offers a meaningful opportunity to intervene and provide them with much-needed support.

Who Are Persisting Students?

- Persisting students look similar to students who permanently drop out, in terms of demographic and early academic characteristics. Reflecting system-wide inequalities, these students are disproportionately Black or Latino and male, and more likely to be living in poverty. In middle school, they struggle academically. More than a third were chronically absent in 8th grade.
- These findings show that it is possible—from as early as middle school—to identify students who are unlikely to graduate on time. However, our study also highlights some of the limitations of administrative records for identifying students who are most at risk. We found that persisting students face a host of challenges not captured in administrative data, including abuse, homelessness, gang involvement, early parenthood, and serious health issues.

How Do They Fall Behind?

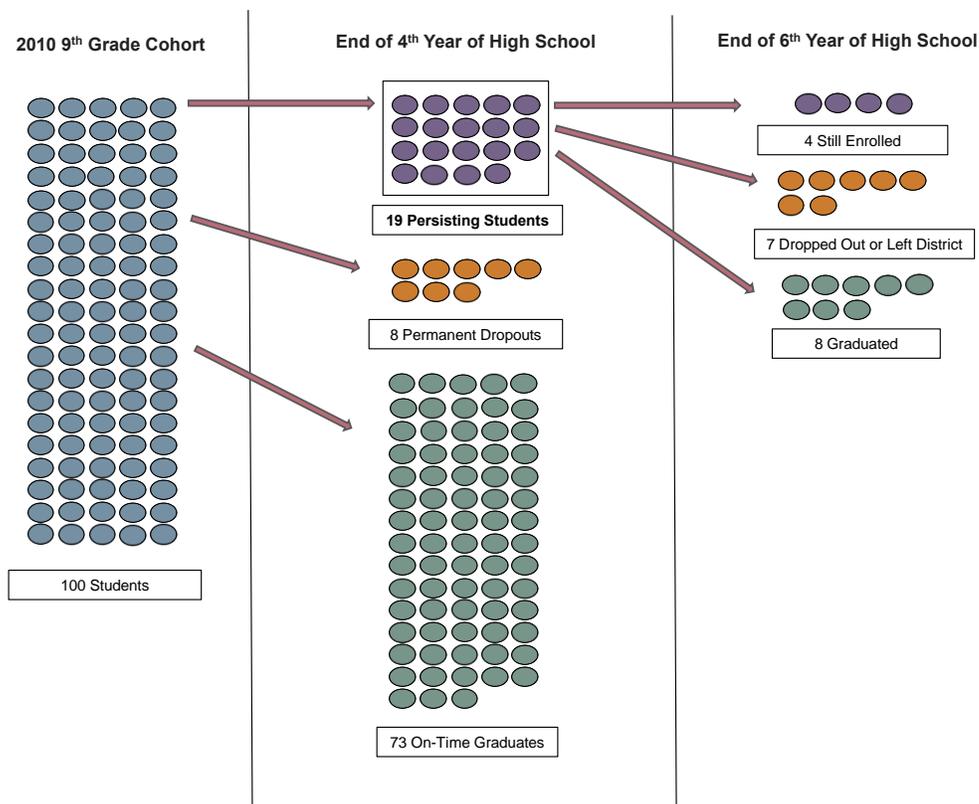
- Most persisting students are already off-track after 9th grade, but they continue to fall further behind as they progress through high school. Persisting students miss school frequently (their rates of chronic absenteeism increased each year—to more than 60 percent in 11th and 12th grade). This makes it harder to form relationships with school staff and limits access to the kind of academic and social-emotional support that might help them get back on track.
- Persisting students are also concentrated in high-needs schools. We found that a quarter of persisting students were enrolled in the same 20 schools during their 9th grade year (out of more than 400 high schools citywide). Based on the annual NYC

School Survey, the high schools that persisting students attended were less likely to be perceived by students as orderly and safe, and adults in those schools were seen as less accessible, compared to the high schools that four-year-graduates attended.

What Strategies Might Make a Difference for Persisting Students?

- Identify at-risk students—and intervene early:** This study adds to a growing body of evidence highlighting the need for more scrutiny of students' middle school performance and experiences—in particular chronic absenteeism, standardized test scores, and retention in school. In addition to these quantitative measures, our conversations with students and educators highlighted the fact that increased and sustained attention to students' personal and family lives can help us better identify students who most likely will struggle to graduate from high school.

Figure ES-1: NYC Students' Pathways through High School



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). See page 5 for other notes.

Identifying at-risk students enables school staff to intervene before they have fallen too far off track. While we found that persisting students are often chronically absent during their first few years of high school, they generally do not stop coming to school entirely. This means that it is possible to work with them, perhaps by setting up regular one-on-one or small group meetings with a social worker or guidance counselor. Our interview findings suggest that students may benefit from earlier and more explicit communication about the consequences of missing school, before they fall significantly behind. School staff may need more flexibility and time in their schedules to implement such proactive measures.

- **Be more strategic about student placement:** At the system level, it is important to examine the uneven concentration of persisting students across NYC schools. If we can understand why students who struggle to graduate are more (or less) likely to enroll in certain schools as 9th graders, we can better disrupt processes that continue to generate inequitable experiences and outcomes.

A significant proportion of persisting students—almost a quarter—transfer into an alternative school at some point during their first four years. Indeed, this is one of the primary systemic interventions for students who fall behind. However, interviews with students and educators suggest that decisions about when and where to move persisting students sometimes occur in an ad hoc fashion. Providing educators with more information and clearer guidelines about available options might improve the process for assessing students' needs and identifying appropriate interventions.

- **Tailor interventions to students' needs:** Persisting students enter their fifth year of high school with a wide range of academic needs. About a quarter are only **marginally behind**—they typically have enough credits to graduate, but haven't passed all the required Regents exams. About 44 percent are **moderately behind** (lacking both credits and Regents exams), and 30 percent are **drastically behind** (they still have to complete several years of coursework and have only passed one Regents exam, on average—these students are at particularly high risk for aging out of the system before they complete the necessary coursework³). Our findings suggest that students across these three groups tend to have substantially different needs and outcomes. As such, they are likely to benefit from different types of intervention.

Our interviews highlighted several practices that educators and students in alternative settings⁴ see as promising, including:

- **A tailored academic program** focused on helping students earn the course credits they are missing or pass the Regents exams they have failed previously,
- **Targeted social and emotional supports** to help students deal with out-of-school challenges, and
- **A plan for the future** that helps students connect their current coursework with future employment.

It is notable that this level of support is time- and labor-intensive, and generally requires the involvement of non-teaching staff (e.g., counselors, student advocates, internship coordinators, etc.).

What More Do We Need to Learn?

By the end of their sixth year, 44 percent of persisting students have earned a high school diploma; 19 percent are still enrolled, and 37 percent have dropped out or left the district. Helping more persisting students achieve the goal of earning a high school diploma would not only improve Citywide graduation rates—given the demographic profile of this group of students, it could promote more *equitable* outcomes as well. Additional research is needed to inform these efforts and help educators and district leaders better capitalize on opportunities to support persisting students. Among the research questions that we see as particularly important:

- **What intervention strategies—already in place in traditional public high schools—are most effective?** Our work highlighted practices that students and educators in alternative schools see as most promising to help persisting students make progress toward a high school credential. However, many persisting students remain in traditional high schools. Learning more about practices used by traditional high schools that are successful at identifying vulnerable students—and intervening to help them recover—could provide useful guidance to educators across a broad range of school settings. Further research, including in-depth qualitative case studies and systemwide surveys, could help us to understand the specific routines, resources, or practices that are associated with better outcomes for vulnerable students.
- **How are persisting students distributed throughout the NYC system, and what are the consequences of this distribution?** Our findings show that students who struggle to graduate are highly concentrated in particular schools. A substantial portion of persisting students end up transferring into alternative settings; however many of those we interviewed felt the communication and decision-making around these transfer options often happens in an ad hoc way. Additional research—examining the concentrations of needy students across schools, patterns of persisting student mobility, and why and how educators, families and students make decisions to change schools—could offer valuable lessons about how to enhance school choice and referral processes.
- **Which educational settings are effective for various types of persisting students?** New accountability requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandate a more rigorous standard for four-year high school graduation rates than in previous legislation (67% as opposed to 60%, for schools to avoid identification as being “in need of intervention”). Few of the New York City schools serving large numbers of persisting students would be able to meet this standard. While other states have adopted differentiated metrics for alternative high schools, New York State has yet to do so. Further research that carefully accounts for variation in the student composition of different kinds of schools could provide more robust evidence to inform the dialogue about how to fairly hold schools accountable.

We hope our findings highlight opportunities to identify persisting students early, serve them more effectively, and perhaps produce more equitable outcomes over time. We are also excited by the prospect that this work may spur new research that can help answer the many important questions that remain about this vulnerable yet resilient group of high school students.

Endnotes

- 1 We focus here on the 2010 freshman cohort, because they are the most recent cohort for which we have a full six years of administrative data following their entrance into a NYC high school.
- 2 We define “persisting students” as those who have not earned a Regents or local diploma by October of their fifth year of high school but remain actively enrolled in high school for at least one subsequent semester.
- 3 In New York, students are only eligible to earn a high school diploma until the year in which they turn 22. After that, they are still eligible for a GED.
- 4 We conducted interviews with students and educators in a small sample of alternative school settings (two transfer schools and two Young Adult Borough Centers), which are specifically designed to serve students who struggle to graduate. See our full [research brief](#) for more details about our methods and findings.

Additional Figure and Table Notes

Key Definitions:

“Persisting students” are students who have not graduated by the end of their 4th year of high school, and are enrolled for at least one semester during their 5th and 6th years.

“Permanent Dropouts” are students who are not enrolled for *all* semesters during what should be their fifth and sixth years of high school. They do not have a high school credential; nor are they formally discharged to another school district.

“On-Time Graduates” are students who have earned a Regents or local diploma by the end of their 4th year of high school (including the subsequent summer).

Figure ES-1 includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as first-time 9th graders in 2010 (N = 66,811). This population of students does not include those who enrolled in NYC public high schools after their 9th grade year or students who were repeating 9th graders. The percentages of students in each group were rounded in this figure; we included students with missing data in the dropped out or left district category.

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The Research Alliance conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City's public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students' development and academic success.

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