



## **MORE THAN AN APPLICATION: How Two NYC High Schools Work with Students and Families on the Road to College**

A college degree can make a world of difference for a young person, opening doors to better employment opportunities and higher earnings.<sup>i</sup> In light of this, many high schools are paying more attention to helping their students apply to and enroll in college—and arming them with the skills they will need to succeed on campus. Despite these efforts, many schools are struggling to meet these goals for students who are underrepresented in college, including students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college goers.

This guide draws on the experiences of two New York City high schools, the High School for Law and Public Service (HSLPS) and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. These schools focused on strengthening college supports while participating in NYC’s Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), an effort to increase college readiness for Black and Latino young men. We believe the strategies featured in this guide are applicable not only to ESI’s target population of Black and Latino males, but also to other groups of high school students for whom college may seem out of reach.

Both schools provide multi-layered supports to students and their families on the pathway to college. The schools aim to address social, emotional, and academic needs for students *during* high school—beginning in 9<sup>th</sup> grade—and to provide very clear bridges to life *beyond* high school graduation.

**Learn more about the  
Expanded Success  
Initiative on page 17**

This guide outlines three programs:

- 1) Peer Mentoring at HSLPS: a weekly college-focused class in which 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade males are paired with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade males;<sup>ii</sup>
- 2) Core Pathways at HSLPS: a mandatory 9<sup>th</sup> grade course consisting of six skill-based modules; and
- 3) Early College Awareness Preparatory Program (ECAPP) at El Punte: a college preparatory program that includes student and parent/guardian workshops, one-on-one advising, and opportunities for students to meet recent alumni now attending college.

These programs provide real-world examples of how schools can thoughtfully and comprehensively weave college expectations and supports into students' high school careers. Along with a description of the programs, we include class materials, planning documents, and other tools educators and students have found successful in their own buildings.

We hope this guide will be useful for school leaders, teachers, and other staff working to provide more robust college support, particularly for students who may not see themselves in college or who lack knowledge about how to get there.



**When you see the book icon, visit the attached “Educator Tools” document to find resources that educators and students used as part of the featured programs. Feel free to modify these as needed for your own school.**

## HIGH SCHOOL FOR LAW AND PUBLIC SERVICE

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The High School for Law and Public Service (HSLPS) provides a wide array of college supports. Two of its most comprehensive programs are the school’s peer mentoring program and its Core Pathways freshmen seminar, described in detail on the following pages. The school also provides other college supports that span grade levels and are integrated into a variety of school activities. HSLPS teachers and students we spoke with believe that this multifaceted approach is key to improving college readiness.

About HSLPS <sup>iii</sup>	
<b>Neighborhood</b>	Washington Heights
<b>Borough</b>	Manhattan
<b>Grade levels served</b>	9-12
<b>Number of students</b>	671
<b>Admission criteria</b>	Educational Option <sup>iv</sup>
<b>Demographics</b>	
Asian	0%
Black	17%
Latino	81%
White	2%
English language learners	27%
Students with special needs	21%
<b>Student attendance rate</b>	88%
<b>Shared space</b>	Yes

# PEER MENTORING AT HSLPS

**The HSLPS peer mentoring program is designed to boost students' academic confidence and performance and increase college readiness through mentoring relationships and college prep activities.**

HSLPS staff were inspired to launch a peer mentoring program when a small group of senior boys created an informal support group as they prepared to apply to college. These students checked in on each other and worked together on different parts of the college search and application process—for example, writing personal statements. Teachers wondered if they could replicate the model with more male students. They developed a mentoring program as a strategy for bringing strong peer support to more students, especially those who were struggling academically.

## **The basics:**

- Elective course.
- Takes place during school hours.
- 30 students (15 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade mentees; 15 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade mentors).
- 3 teachers help facilitate.
- Teacher facilitators create pairs at the beginning of the semester.
- Mentees and mentors meet as a group, and in pairs, once a week.
- Mentors have a second weekly meeting to plan the next class.

“If you’re serious about your future, you should definitely be in this program.”  
– HSLPS 12<sup>th</sup> grade student

### Who are the mentees and mentors?

- **Mentors:** Teachers invite 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys to apply to become mentors. Teachers don't necessarily look for the highest academic performers, but rather those who show commitment to being a leader for younger boys. Now that the program is a few years old, students who were mentees typically become mentors once they reach 11<sup>th</sup> grade.
- **Mentees:** Teachers invite students who are struggling (particularly those with GPAs hovering around 65) to participate as mentees. Once they are invited, students may choose whether they want to participate.

### What does a typical session look like?

- A typical session has three components:
  - Announcements by a teacher facilitator.
  - Presentation by a small group of mentors (usually designed to foster classroom discussion).
  - Pair activity for mentees and mentors.

### How does HSLPS promote attendance?

- The program takes place once a week during 3<sup>rd</sup> period, since more students tend to be in school toward the middle of the day.
- The school provides food (usually sandwiches) during the second half of class; teachers report that this helps keep students who are new to the program coming back.

“What I learned was that I could actually be a good student and achieve my goals, which I didn't think I could do as a freshman. I never thought of myself being where I am now. That's mainly because the program helped me realize what it is that I can do, what it is I'm capable of achieving, and because of that I was able to get my grades up. I was able to get this wake up call. A lot of students—they realize that they're screwed their senior or junior year. I realized that I better not end up like that.”

– HSLPS 12<sup>th</sup> grade student

## How does the peer mentoring program help students prepare for college?

- **Helping students set specific goals.** The program focuses on setting tangible, step-by-step goals that are essential to reaching college. For example:
  - Students receive a list of high school graduation requirements, including exams and courses they need to pass. The students use this document to track their progress over time and celebrate as a community when they reach certain milestones.
  - Students regularly review their transcripts together. They create lists of strengths as well as goals for each month and semester around attendance, coming to class on time, and academic performance. The program asks students to be explicit about the steps they are going to take to reach their goals, and to revisit the goals after each marking period. Students said that positive peer pressure from their mentor and from the larger peer mentoring group helped them set, focus on, and ultimately achieve their goals.
- **Building student confidence.** After each marking period, the class holds mini celebrations in which students who improved their GPA or reached one of their goals receive certificates and are publicly applauded. Students described these as confidence builders. One said, “You realize that you are more than what you thought you were beforehand, before joining the program.”
- **Exposing students to college life.** Both mentors and mentees participate in at least two college trips per year with the program. Sometimes, HSLPS alumni will lead a tour of their own college campus, relaying some of the challenges they face (e.g., living far from home, long reading requirements) and their tips for navigating college life (e.g., meeting with professors, getting a meal plan).
- **Sharing information about the college application process.** Participants learn about the minimum GPA requirements and average SAT scores for different types of two- and four-year colleges, as well as the importance of extracurricular activities and community service on college applications. They also review detailed information about applying for financial aid and scholarships, which students said was crucial, since many of them had assumed they couldn’t afford college.



### **Educator Tools:**

**Mentor Interest Form**

**High School  
Graduation  
Requirements  
Worksheet**

**Goal-Setting  
Worksheet**

**Second Marking  
Period Grade Review**

# CORE PATHWAYS AT HSLPS

## (A SKILLS-BUILDING COURSE FOR FRESHMEN)

**Core Pathways is designed to help 9<sup>th</sup> graders develop foundational skills that can be applied in academic courses and help prepare them for college and careers.**

Core Pathways is a mandatory theme-based advisory class designed to help 9<sup>th</sup> graders prepare for success in high school, college, and work. The class is divided into six six-week modules over the course of the year. Each module focuses on a specific skill—e.g., typing, public speaking, conflict resolution—and concludes with a final product or project.

### What skills does Core Pathways emphasize?

- **College and career knowledge.** One module, called “Plan It,” is specifically designed to increase students’ college and career awareness and aspirations, while providing them with tools to achieve their short- and long-term goals. For example, during this module, students learn about how salaries are positively impacted by having a college degree. One activity asks them to develop a budget using imaginary salaries based on differing levels of education. Students also learn about the characteristics of different types of colleges and walk through an entire college application process. Most importantly, they learn to identify what they can do—as 9<sup>th</sup> graders—to set them on the path toward fulfilling their academic and career goals.
- **Tools for academic success.** Other modules focus on developing skills that HSLPS staff see as instrumental to students’ success in college, but that may not receive enough attention in other courses. For example:
  - “Present It” provides opportunities to work on public speaking and learn how to present ideas in a compelling way.
  - “Type It” focuses on building typing skills.
  - “Code It” exposes students to coding and computer science.



### Educator Tools:

[Plan-It Module  
Daily Overview](#)

[Core Learnings in  
Core Pathways](#)

[Core Pathways  
Student Survey](#)

## Core Pathways Modules

### **Type-It (Typing Instruction)**

What successful students need to know to type quickly and accurately.

### **Resolve-It (Social/Emotional Learning)**

What successful students need to build character and resolve conflicts.

### **Plan-It (College Awareness)**

What successful students need to know about the college-going process.

### **Hab-It (7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens)\***

What successful students need to think and do to plan for success.

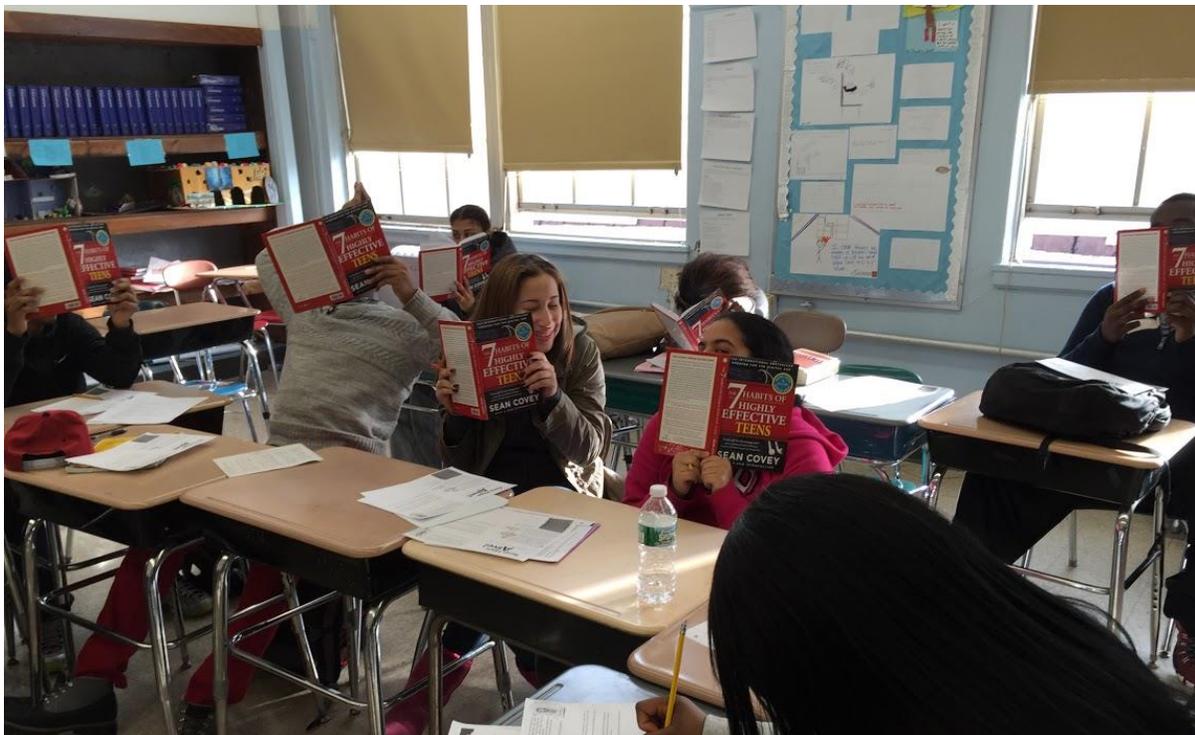
### **Present-It (Public Speaking)**

How successful students share what they have to say.

### **Code-It (Computer Coding, Math, and Tech Skills)**

How successful students approach math and science in school and think about future STEM education opportunities.

\* Hab-It has now been replaced by **Lex-It** (using the law and writing to communicate).



## OTHER COLLEGE SUPPORTS AT HSLPS

### College room

HSLPS set up an inviting room with attractive furniture, a college bulletin board, and a few laptops. Students in all grades can access the room to study quietly or print papers (although occasionally it is reserved for specific activities). The college advisor often makes herself available there to provide support and on-on-one attention.

### Advanced Placement access

One shift in the school's practice was to pay more attention to gender equity in AP classes. Staff noticed that AP classes were typically dominated by female students. They then worked to expand access to males who showed interest in taking an AP course, even if their previous academic performance wasn't exceptional.

### College advising

HSLPS reallocated part of its budget so that instead of offering one-on-one or small group support for two periods a day, the college advisor is now available for four periods. As a result, the college advisor works with many more students—most notably, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders.

### Internships

Teachers and students reported that internships provided real-life experiences that helped students develop a sense of responsibility, time management, the importance of punctuality, how to fill out paperwork, and how to work successfully with different kinds of people and in different settings. School leaders established partnerships with several organizations that provided paid and unpaid internships, including the law firm Skadden, Arps, Meagher, & Flom; Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy; Wave Hill Public Gardens; Isabella Geriatric Center; The Museum of Natural History; and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. Internships take place both during the academic year and over the summer. Summer internships typically require 30-35 hours a week, while school-year internships usually take place on weekends.

“Before kids would say, ‘oh, freshman year doesn’t matter.’ Now other people are telling them, ‘You need to really work on your GPA from freshman year. You don’t blow it off and wait until 11<sup>th</sup> grade.’”  
—HSLPS Teacher

## Grading app

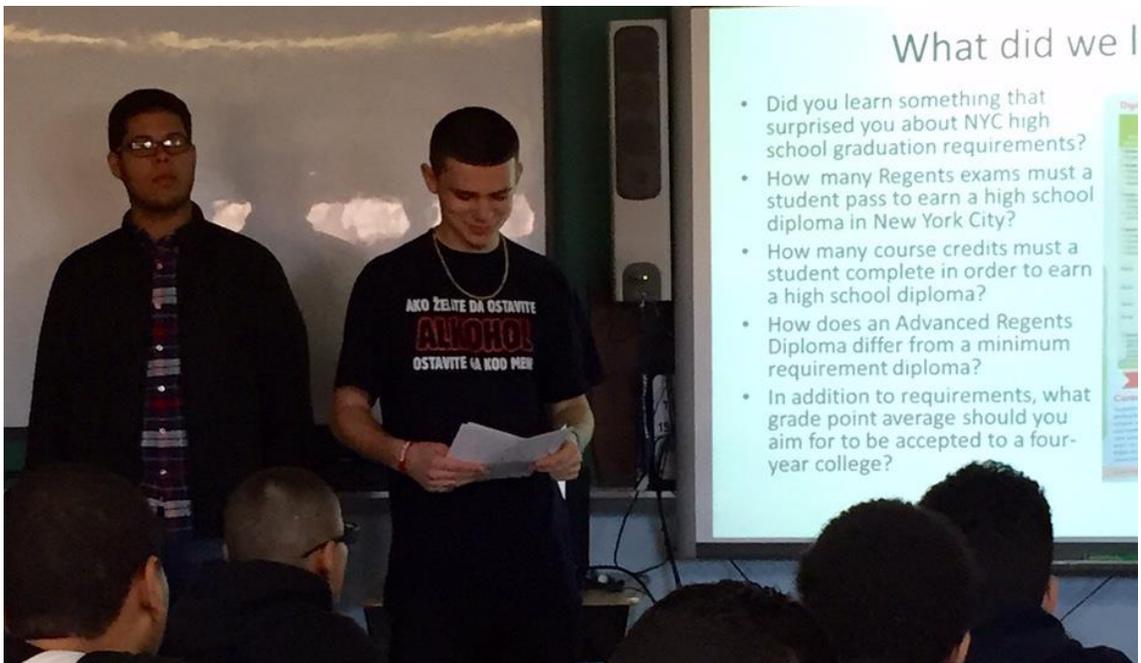
Teachers and students use an app called Skedula, which allows students to track their grades and scores on different assignments and courses. Teachers report that Skedula helps students take more ownership of their academic performance.

## Alumni involvement

Many HSLPS alumni come back to speak to current students, both as part of panels and informally. They provide insight on the transition from high school to college, which has been a powerful wake-up call to some students and an inspiration to others.

“The biggest success, I think, is the fact that our boys who are in college are doing well and didn’t just leave—you know, ride off into the sunset. [The alumni] continue to be involved. The ones who continue to be involved hopefully are having an effect on the ones who are in the school.”

– HSLPS Program Leader



## EL PUENTE ACADEMY FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

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El Puente has designed a single, comprehensive college preparation program for its students. The Early College Awareness Preparatory Program (ECAPP) provides opportunities and support for students in all four grade levels, their parents,<sup>v</sup> and recent alumni.

About El Puente <sup>vi</sup>	
<b>Neighborhood</b>	Williamsburg
<b>Borough</b>	Brooklyn
<b>Grade levels served</b>	9-12
<b>Number of students</b>	245
<b>Admission criteria</b>	Educational Option <sup>vii</sup>
<b>Demographics</b>	
Asian	0%
Black	12%
Latino	85%
White	1%
English language learners	16%
Students with special needs	24%
<b>Student attendance rate</b>	85%
<b>Shared space</b>	No

“We’re opening the gate to get students and their parent[s] interested in college. We are agents for change.”  
*- El Puente Academy ECAPP coordinator*

# EL PUENTE ACADEMY'S EARLY COLLEGE AWARENESS PREPARATORY PROGRAM (ECAPP)

**ECAPP aims to increase college awareness and preparation for all students in grades 9-12 and their parents through comprehensive college prep activities. ECAPP provides college advising, college application support, and connections to El Puente alumni who are in college.**

El Puente developed ECAPP based on interest shared by school leadership and a set of teachers in providing additional college-related assistance to all students.

## The basics:

- Workshops and classes for students in grades 9 through 12.
- Workshops for parents in all four years of high school.
- Managed by one full-time staff member with assistance from other school staff.

## Who participates in ECAPP?

**Students:** According to the ECAPP coordinator, “planning early is key”—especially for students who will be the first in their family to attend college. ECAPP offers a series of college-related workshops to all students in each grade, slowly building their understanding of the college-going process. Some are integrated into existing classes, and others are stand-alone credit-bearing courses. For classes that include English language learners, the workshops are also offered in Spanish.

**Parents:** El Puente staff believe that “a college-going culture cannot be just in the [school’s] four walls. It has to spread out to home.” The school holds two after-school workshops for parents in each grade, (which students are also encouraged to attend) both in English and Spanish. To encourage attendance, staff ask students to invite their parents, and call on parents who participated in past workshops to help recruit others. Materials about the workshops are sent home in Spanish and English. El Puente also makes it easier for families to attend the parent workshops by providing a structured activity for younger siblings of ECAPP students.

## 9<sup>th</sup> Grade ECAPP Supports

For Students	For Parents
<p>Twice a year, a regular class period is cancelled so that freshmen can participate in college workshops. Ninth grade workshops focus on:</p> <p><b>Building College Expectations.</b> The ECAPP coordinator talks to students about their current college-going goals and shares statistics about where recent El Puente alumni go to college. They also discuss different post-secondary options (e.g., two- and four-year colleges; vocational and trade schools, etc.). (October)</p> <p><b>Transcripts.</b> Students are shown real transcripts (with names and other personally identifying information removed), and talk about how to evaluate transcripts and grades. (Spring)</p> <p>In addition to the workshops, the school’s part-time guidance counselor has individual meetings with students to remind them of how many credits they need to earn in 9th grade. (Spring)</p>	<p>The ECAPP coordinator checks in with parents, sometimes along with the school’s part-time parent facilitator, about how they think their child is adjusting to high school and offers tips on supporting the transition. The ECAPP coordinator shares information about services and key personnel at the school, and suggests ways parents can help their children develop study skills (e.g., setting up quiet study hours for their child at the dining room table). (October)</p> <p>Staff provide parents with copies of their child’s grades, as well as information about internship opportunities and a list of colleges and universities in NYC or within 20 miles of the City. (May)</p>

“Every student who comes in through these doors in August knows that they’re expected to go to college. If, at the end of that four-year journey, they decide, ‘... I’m going to do something else,’ they have explored every possible option, they have been offered every possible opportunity, [and so] have their families, to explore and see themselves in college... which has been really powerful.”  
*- El Puente Academy ECAPP Coordinator*

## 10<sup>th</sup> Grade ECAPP Supports

For Students	For Parents
<p>Twice a year, a regular class period is cancelled so that sophomores can participate in college workshops. Tenth grade workshops focus on:</p> <p><b>PSATs.</b> The ECAPP coordinator leads a workshop about the PSAT's purpose, why it is important, and logistics of taking the test. Students also receive sample PSAT questions. (October)</p> <p><b>Transcripts and College Goals.</b> Students examine their transcripts, and have one-on-one consultations with the guidance counselor about whether they're on track to graduate. The ECAPP coordinator also shares information about a specific set of two- and four-year colleges, which includes schools in NYC or less than 20 miles outside of the City, as well as schools where El Puente alumni are enrolled or the school has a contact. Students have a chance to discuss their interest in these schools. (May)</p>	<p>Staff introduce parents to the PSAT and discuss the school's expectations for student preparation. (Fall)</p> <p>Staff help parents interpret PSAT scores, and provide information on tutoring services, such as Kaplan and the El Puente Leadership Center. (January)</p>

### **Alumni Connections**

El Puente invites alumni to speak at parent workshops, attend school events, and meet individually with students (sometimes along with their parents) about specific schools or aspects of the transition to college. Alumni serve as resources by describing their college experiences and lessons they've learned; answering questions about college; helping students to complete the FAFSA; and more. For alumni, working with ECAPP provides valuable leadership opportunities, as well as a chance to give back to the school that they attended.

## 11<sup>th</sup> Grade ECAPP Supports

### For Students

The ECAPP coordinator leads a half-credit class for juniors, which meets two or three times a week. The course is designed so that students enter 12<sup>th</sup> grade with the knowledge they need to begin the college application process. For example, the 11<sup>th</sup> grade class covers:

**SAT Preparation.** The school has a partnership with Khan Academy that helps students register for the SATs (by creating a College Board account) and access SAT test prep materials.

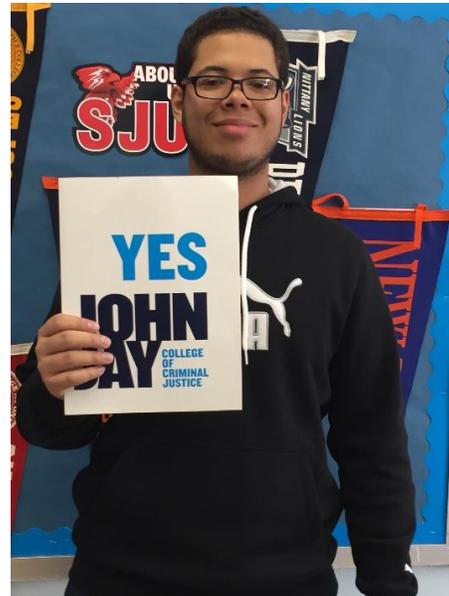
**Majors and Career Options.** Students research different career options based on their potential major and/or examples of majors provided by the ECAPP coordinator. This project encourages students to think about how their choice of a college major will influence their career options.

**Scholarships.** Students learn about online scholarship search and application tools, and use case studies to consider which students should receive which type of financial aid. For instance, the ECAPP coordinator provides examples of fictitious students with different GPAs and asks the class to decide who should receive financial aid and which kind (e.g., merit, institutional, and/or private scholarships). The ECAPP coordinator also encourages students to look at online databases of scholarships (such as Fastweb).

### For Parents

Staff encourage parents to envision their child in college, regardless of their academic performance. The ECAPP coordinator also discusses the importance of emphasizing study skills at home, preparing for the SATs, and starting to think about the college application process. (Early Fall)

The ECAPP coordinator helps parents understand their students' academic standing, and provides information about summer academic programs, internships (e.g., Summer Youth and Employment Program), and two- and four-year colleges. (May)



## 12<sup>th</sup> Grade ECAPP Supports

For Students	For Parents
<p>In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, ECAPP provides:</p> <p><b>College Application Support.</b> The ECAPP coordinator, along with a few 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, meets with students three times a week in a half-credit class for the entire year. The course focuses on completing the Common Application, CUNY and SUNY applications, financial aid applications, and using scholarship databases. Drafts of students' college essays are reviewed in English class, and the ECAPP coordinator conducts a final review.</p> <p><b>College Advising.</b> Supplemental, individual college advising sessions with the ECAPP coordinator are available on an as-needed basis (as often as weekly). During these sessions, the coordinator helps the student select a list of colleges to which they will apply. The coordinator also learns about the student's home environment and works with them to collect documents that might be needed for Higher Education Opportunity Program<sup>viii</sup> and financial aid applications.</p> <p><b>Help Navigating Racial Bias on Campus.</b> Staff work to prepare students for meeting others from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds at college, and potentially facing micro-aggressions (i.e., racial slights or insults that may or may not be intentional). El Puente staff believe that these challenges can hinder students' transition to college. Therefore, staff talk with students about privileges that White students may enjoy on college campuses that students of color do not, uncomfortable experiences El Puente alumni of color have had (e.g., a professor calling on a student who is the sole representative of a racial group in a class to speak about their cultural experiences), and how to challenge false assumptions they may encounter.</p>	<p>The school invites recent alumni and the parents of alumni, who participated in ECAPP workshops in recent years, to attend the workshop and share tips with current 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parent(s).</p> <p>The ECAPP coordinator talks to parents and students about the paperwork their children will need for college applications (e.g., application fee waiver requests, tax documents, child support documentation). Parents receive a timeline for when paperwork is due, including college application deadlines. (September)</p> <p>In addition, parents and students are encouraged to meet directly with the ECAPP coordinator to share any sensitive or private information that may be relevant to financial aid or a challenge to college enrollment (e.g., if the student is from a single-parent household, if parents are unemployed, etc.).</p> <p>Finally, as students approach graduation and the beginning of college, the school offers tips to parents about how to support their children through this exciting and potentially challenging transition.</p> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 20px;">  <p><b>Educator Tools:</b>  <a href="#">Senior Parent Financial Aid Info Session</a>  <a href="#">Moving to College: How Can You Help?</a>  <a href="#">Supporting Your College-Student Child</a></p> </div>

This guide was authored by Tony Laing and Adriana Villavicencio.

## About the Expanded Success Initiative

In August 2011, New York City launched the Young Men’s Initiative, a combination of new programs and policy reforms designed to address higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and unemployment among young Black and Latino men. Of the \$127 million being invested in this effort, \$24 million was dedicated to the [Expanded Success Initiative](#) (ESI), which aims to increase college readiness and other key outcomes for Black and Latino male students in the City. A substantial part of that funding supported the development and expansion of programming in 40 NYC high schools, with the ultimate goal of identifying and disseminating successful practices that might be scaled up to other schools across the district.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools led a mixed-methods, longitudinal evaluation to learn about the services and supports schools provided through ESI, and to measure ESI’s impact on a set of academic and social and emotional outcomes. To learn more about our evaluation, please visit our website: [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/research/projects/esi\\_evaluation](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation)

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Source: Pew Research Center, February, 2014, “The Rising Cost of Not Going to College.” See: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>

<sup>ii</sup> HSLPS now offers peer mentoring for female students too; the peer mentoring programs remain in a single-gender context.

<sup>iii</sup> Source: [http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School\\_Quality\\_Snapshot\\_2016\\_HS\\_M467.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School_Quality_Snapshot_2016_HS_M467.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Educational option schools are meant to serve a wide range of academic performers. Based on standardized test reading scores from the prior school year, applicants are admitted based on the following target distribution: 16% high reading level; 68% middle reading level; 16% low reading level. See: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/00F2DEB3-4F50-4747-A14E-E53295E078DC/0/2017NYCHSDirectoryCitywideENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> When this guide refers to parents, it refers to parents and/or guardians.

<sup>vi</sup> Source: [http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School\\_Quality\\_Snapshot\\_2016\\_HS\\_K685.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School_Quality_Snapshot_2016_HS_K685.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> Source: [http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School\\_Quality\\_Snapshot\\_2016\\_HS\\_K685.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School_Quality_Snapshot_2016_HS_K685.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> A NYS program designed to support students who are academically and economically disadvantaged attend college. See <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/kiap/colldev/HEOP/>

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools 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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