EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Strategies for Improving School Culture

Educator Reflections on Transforming the High School Experience for Black and Latino Young Men

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers and practitioners increasingly recognize that positive school culture not only enhances students' day-to-day experiences, but also plays a role in raising student achievement.[1] Yet many schools struggle to create a welcoming and supportive schoolwide culture. Evidence indicates that students of color in particular—perhaps most notably Black and Latino young men—often face cultural barriers at school. For example, young men of color are highly overrepresented in disciplinary outcomes, tend to have weaker relationships with their teachers and less academically oriented relationships with peers, and often encounter lower expectations, compared to White and Asian students.[2]

How can educators address these barriers and develop a school culture that is more supportive, especially for Black and Latino young men? New York City's Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), an effort to improve college and career readiness for Black and Latino male students, has created an unusual opportunity for educators to wrestle with this challenge. Beginning in 2012, ESI provided 40 NYC high schools with financial resources and professional development to help them create or expand supports for young men of color. Many of the schools implemented strategies that were either implicitly or explicitly aimed at improving school culture.[3]

What Is School Culture?

Peterson and Deal (1998) describe school culture as "the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges."

While many other definitions of school culture exist, we find this one to be particularly useful because of its emphasis on problem solving and confronting institutional challenges, which underscores the very concrete ways that cultural factors may affect the functioning of schools.

As part of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools' ongoing evaluation of ESI, we have conducted hundreds of interviews and focus groups with ESI teachers and administrators, as well as a handful of in-depth case studies in ESI schools (which included additional interviews, observations of programming, and student focus groups). This work has provided a unique lens on educators' efforts to strengthen their school's culture for Black and Latino male students.

This summary highlights strategies that ESI schools have used to:

- Develop culturally relevant education,
- Adopt restorative approaches to discipline,
- Promote strong in-school relationships, and
- Provide early support for students' post-secondary goals.

While these are areas of school culture that ESI educators have consistently pointed to as notable or promising (and that past research has suggested are generally relevant for young men of color), the strategies we describe are by no means universal, or even typical, across ESI schools. Furthermore, they can be challenging to implement and may require a fundamental shift in perspective for some educators: As noted in the textbox on page vi, these strategies depend heavily on teachers and administrators taking a reflective approach to their work, assuming a great deal of responsibility for student learning, and focusing on students' strengths. This summary is meant as an introduction to the strategies ESI schools used as they worked to improve school culture for young men of color. More detailed descriptions of the strategies are available in our full report.

Developing Culturally Relevant Education (CRE)

Why CRE?

Research suggests that students of color often experience a disconnect between their cultural backgrounds and their experiences in schools.[4] Indeed, educators in ESI schools reported that their Black and Latino male students came from backgrounds and neighborhoods that were sometimes vastly different from those of their teachers. In NYC, where more than 85 percent of public school students are racial "minorities," 59 percent of teachers are White (and 76 percent are female).[5] Culturally relevant education (CRE) attempts to engage and empower students by incorporating their cultural backgrounds in classrooms and focusing on issues that are relevant to their lives. CRE also aims to address underlying biases educators may have about their students.[6]

> "There's an attitude that permeates the culture that these kids are at such a low level that we can't do a lot. I think that attitude puts so much of the emphasis on the students… Versus, 'Well, what can we [as educators] do to impact that?' I think that this emphasis on culturally relevant education has the potential to [change] that. Because then all of a sudden you're trying to look at these students… as individuals who have this range of experiences… Well, how do you use that to your advantage? How can you reach these young people who need to be reached and who could show tremendous growth, if we tried to address those issues the right way?" – Principal

CRE Strategies

Staff at ESI schools had the chance to participate in a wide range of trainings focused on CRE. As a result of these trainings, educators reported making changes to their curriculum and instruction, aimed at:

- **Affirming student's cultural identities.** Many schools modified their curriculum with an eye toward affirming students' racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This included selecting texts written by and/or featuring people of color and intentionally communicating positive messages about students' cultural backgrounds. One school, for example, displayed the names and images of Black scientists and discussed their contributions to the field. Another held schoolwide events celebrating the plethora of cultures represented at the school.

- **Making classrooms relevant to students' lives.** Teachers also reported weaving topics related to their students' lives into their instruction, especially current events affecting male students of color. For instance, several schools reported incorporating discussions about the Eric Garner case—in which police killed an unarmed Black man on Staten Island in 2014—into classrooms and lessons. In addition, educators described using different instructional strategies to better engage their students. They spoke about moving away from traditional lectures and presentations to more collaborative and creative student work and assessments, including hands-on activities, experiential learning, storytelling, group-based projects, and public speaking opportunities.

Changes Observed by Educators

In addition to changing instructional practices, many teachers also said their attitudes and beliefs about their students had evolved as a result of CRE training and practices. They reported greater understanding of and connection to their students. Some felt CRE had helped them better meet students' social and emotional needs—for example, by building students' self-esteem, making them feel valued, providing more leadership opportunities, and teaching students to advocate for themselves.

Adopting Restorative Approaches to Discipline

Why Restorative Approaches to Discipline?

Research demonstrates that disciplinary approaches that involve removing students from classrooms, such as suspensions, are correlated with a host of negative outcomes, including poor academic achievement, being held back a grade, dropping out of high school, and becoming involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.[7] Because minority males are overrepresented among students who are suspended from school, alternative approaches to

discipline that reduce the need for student removals may be key for improving educational outcomes among Black and Latino males.

Restorative Discipline Strategies

Restorative approaches encompass a wide range of practices but are generally oriented toward building strong in-school relationships, holding students accountable to their school community, and mediating conflicts.[8] Approaches used in ESI schools included:

- **Developing peer mediation and conflict resolution programs**. In one school, conflict prevention was incorporated into the curriculum of the school's peer-led advisory program. Peer leaders talked with their advisees about how to deal with conflicts that might arise among friends. Another school focused on its youth court program, an alternative to the school's regular disciplinary procedures that placed a strong emphasis on understanding *why* students misbehaved and identifying supports they might need to get back on track.
- **Adopting a new mindset about student discipline.** Educators emphasized that restorative approaches to discipline were more about a mindset than about specific programs or supports. The primary goals of restorative approaches, as identified by ESI schools, were to prevent unnecessary suspensions and to provide opportunities to repair harm to relationships or to the community. ESI educators prioritized building relationships with students as a way to manage behavior.

> "We really try to get into the shoes of the student who has committed the infraction… no matter what the student did… [we] try to deep dive, so when we ask questions we really want to find out what is going on with the student and how to rehabilitate them… we try to get them to understand the consequences of the infraction on themselves and the community and try to get them to make a lifestyle change. We really, really take pride in that." – Youth Court Coordinator

Changes Observed by Educators

Many school staff felt there had been notable changes in student behavior following the introduction of restorative approaches. Educators described students taking more responsibility for their schoolwork and displaying a greater awareness of behavioral expectations. Educators in about a quarter of ESI schools also reported that the use of suspensions and removals of students from classrooms had decreased.

Promoting Strong Relationships in Schools

Why Promote Relationships?

Evidence suggests that positive relationships in school—including student-teacher relationships and relationships between peers—contribute to students' success.[9] However, these relationships may be more elusive for boys than girls. Studies have shown that girls tend to have closer relationships with their teachers and more academically oriented relationships with peers.[10] Many schools participating in ESI saw the initiative as an opportunity to help their Black and Latino male students develop and strengthen in-school relationships.

Relationship-Building Strategies

Many ESI programs involved creating opportunities for students to spend time with each other and their teachers, and to get to know each other better—both inside and outside the classroom. Specific strategies included:

- **Mentoring programs**. About half of the ESI schools implemented some kind of formal mentoring program. Some used traditional one-on-one adult-student mentoring. Other schools introduced peer mentoring by pairing older male students (11th and 12th graders or recent alumni) with 9th and 10th graders. While the structure and content of these programs differed across schools, they shared an explicit focus on nurturing strong, supportive relationships.
- **Advisories.** Many ESI schools implemented advisories—classes in which students are able to talk openly about non-school issues. Advisory curricula covered a variety of topics, such as goal setting, communication skills and conflict resolution, bullying, and graduation requirements. Some schools offered advisories and brotherhood groups in single-gender environments.

Changes Observed by Educators

Educators in many ESI schools felt that these relationship-building efforts had paid off. They described teacher-student relationships that were increasingly positive and respectful, as well as improved relationships between students and their peers. Some school staff noted that as peer relationships developed, students began holding one another accountable for doing well in school.

> "I saw with the seniors—the guys that left last year—and the juniors, study groups evolve just on their own… [they're] holding each other accountable. 'We gotta graduate. We're going to meet, and we're going to check in with each other. We're going to meet in the library.' I just saw things happen. We gave some pushes, but for the most part, things just evolved and grew on their own, which is good—really good." – Teacher

What Core Values Undergird These Strategies?

In keeping with the definition of school culture cited above—as an "underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals built up over time"—our conversations with ESI educators pointed to several important underlying values that connect and help undergird the strategies described in this report:

Teaching as Reflective Practice – Most of the strategies described here could not be implemented solely through top-down policies or formal guidelines, but rather depend upon the willingness of educators to reflect on their own experiences, assumptions, and teaching practice. ESI educators emphasized, for example, that successfully integrating culturally relevant education requires teachers to reflect upon their own identities and biases. Likewise, when implementing restorative approaches to discipline, teachers reported thinking carefully about *why* their students were misbehaving, how to support them to be more successful, and, in some cases, how teachers' own behavior may have been contributing to conflicts with students.

Taking Responsibility for Student Learning and Success – The idea that the onus for student learning and success falls, in large part, on teachers and school leaders is embedded in many of the strategies described here. Educators took responsibility for getting to know their students and developing relationships that they could leverage to encourage good behavior and choices. Similarly, when integrating CRE into their schools, teachers assumed responsibility for making their curriculum engaging and relevant to students' lives.

Building on Student Strengths – ESI educators spoke at length about intentionally building on student strengths. Culturally relevant education encourages teachers to identify and promote students' assets, rather than blaming them for arriving in high school unprepared. Restorative approaches to discipline attempt to empower students to be part of the solution when problems arise. Efforts to improve relationships through peer advisories and peer mentoring explicitly draw on students' leadership capabilities. These approaches stand in stark contrast to the "deficit perspective" that prevails in many schools that serve low-income students of color, where the focus is often on the disadvantages the students face.

Providing Early Support for Students' Postsecondary Goals

Why Provide Early Support for Students' Postsecondary Goals?

While high school graduation rates for young men of color have risen dramatically, few of these students are leaving high school well prepared for college.[11] Compared to their peers, Black and Latino males are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and much less likely to earn a degree; nationally, 26 percent of Black males and 18 percent of Latino males earn an associate degree or higher, compared to 41 percent of students overall.[12]

Educators in ESI schools reported that many of their Black and Latino male students had aspirations to go to college, but were unaware of the steps needed to get there. Often, when

the time came to apply, these students found that they were missing basic requirements. Some also struggled with other barriers, including a belief that college is not for them, difficulty navigating the college search and application process, financial obstacles, and insufficient academic preparation.

Strategies to Provide Early Support for Postsecondary Goals

Many participating schools used ESI resources to provide early exposure to and awareness of college. Indeed, 19 ESI schools reported beginning this work in the 9th grade, often by providing students with the opportunity to visit colleges and helping them set specific college-related goals. Other strategies included:

- **Communicating college expectations**. Many ESI educators shared that they had consciously shifted their focus from ensuring that students graduate high school to ensuring that they are ready for college. They reported using a variety of approaches to communicate these high expectations, including planning formal events and structures (e.g., college days, a bulletin board featuring colleges attended by alumni of the high school) and having frequent informal conversations with students about college options, goals, and experiences.
- **Focusing on the concrete steps involved in preparing and applying for college**. ESI schools offered a wide range of classes and workshops about college requirements and the college application process; instruction and support for filling out the FAFSA; and help obtaining recommendation letters, selecting colleges, and getting loans or financial aid. Starting early in students' high school careers, ESI educators worked to familiarize them with the college search and application process—and to break that process down into small, manageable steps.

> "As a faculty, we're more on the same page. We definitely understand the importance of promoting a college-going culture, which was not the case three years ago. As much as we wanted kids to go to college, we didn't understand how little they knew about college. Now I think, as a faculty, we're very clear. Our kids need more college talk to get them ready to go."
> – Teacher

- **Providing academic supports to keep students on track for college**. Some schools provided intensive test preparation for the New York State Regents exams, the PSAT, and/or the SAT. Other strategies included modifying course sequencing and programming so that students take more math and science; focusing writing instruction on college-level writing and research papers; and partnering with higher education institutions that allow high school students to take college classes and earn college credit.

Changes Observed by Educators

Educators in ESI schools perceived that these supports were helping students to see college as a realistic goal for themselves. A number of educators cited the trips to colleges and universities during 9th and 10th grade as particularly "eye-opening" for their Black and Latino male students. As a result, some educators reported that students had become more conscientious about short-term goals associated with college enrollment.

Conclusion

We do not yet know whether the strategies described here will translate into measureable academic gains. But given the growing recognition that many young men of color feel alienated rather than embraced by their school, as well as evidence that school culture is related to student achievement, these strategies certainly bear closer examination. ESI educators perceive that these approaches have strengthened relationships in schools, improved student behavior, reduced the use of suspensions, and encouraged a college-going identity for Black and Latino males. As part of our ongoing evaluation of ESI, it will be important for the Research Alliance to systematically explore these areas, in addition to examining ESI's impact on academic outcomes (e.g., grades, graduation rates, college-going rates). Have ESI schools in fact reduced the use of suspensions, for example? Do students in ESI schools report stronger relationships, more college knowledge, or more support for college-related goals than other students in similar, non-ESI high schools? Future Research Alliance reports will address these questions.

It is clear that educators have used ESI as an opportunity to focus deliberately on developing a school culture that welcomes and supports Black and Latino young men. We hope their experiences and perceptions offer valuable insight for other schools that are interested in the same goals.

Find this report online at
http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/esi_school_culture

Notes

[1] Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Bryk, et al., 2010; Thapa et al. 2013.

[2] Rudd, 2014; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; McKown & Weinstein, 2002; Gershenson, Holt, & Papegeorge, 2015.

[3] While "school culture" is one of the three core domains of ESI (in addition to academics and youth development; see Klevan, Villavicencio, & Wulach, 2013 for details), we apply Peterson & Deal's definition of school culture throughout this report (see textbox on page vi).

[4] Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994.

[5] NYC Independent Budget Office, 2014.

[6] Fergus, 2010; Rudd, 2014.

[7] Arcia, 2006; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Fabelo et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2010; American Psychological Association, 2008; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008.

[8] NYC DOE 2013.

[9] Wells et al., 2011; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Haynie & Osgood, 2005.

[10] DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Giordano, 2003; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Wells et al., 2011; Hughes, 2001.

[11] Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, & Guidry, 2013.

[12] Ransom & Lee, 2012.

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