From Off Track to Diploma:

Understanding the Educational Path of Washington, DC, Recovery Students

Graduation Pathways Project

Executive Summary

In 2014, the Graduation Pathways Report offered an unprecedented, detailed look at DC's citywide high school completion rate. Chief among its findings was the discovery that DC public school students generally fall into one of six distinct segments on the route to graduation. Building on the findings of the 2014 *Graduation Pathways* report, this study offers insight into one particular segment of students who started high school with low attendance and low credit accumulation, but who ultimately turned around to graduate high school on time. This small, yet noteworthy, group of young people is known as "recovery" students.

In spring 2015, Raise DC conducted focus groups with 29 recovery students who were graduating from five public high schools and also interviewed school-based staff who supported these students on their paths to academic recovery. This qualitative study sought to unpack the recovery experience from the students' perspectives and to distill lessons that could inform decision-makers in developing strategies to support similar students who fall off track to graduation. Report findings describe key stages of students' recovery process, including reflections on middle school, struggles during their early high school years, and key reasons they get back on track to graduate.

During middle school, recovery students developed early patterns of low academic engagement, reflected in poor grades, disengagement during class, and excessive absences. Many experienced social promotion despite failing grades. Negative social activities and difficult family dynamics dominated student attention both in and out of school. As recovery students entered high school, many stumbled—some hard—as they found the academic expectations and increased responsibilities of high school disorienting. Students entered high school with crippling misconceptions about schooling, namely, the gatekeeping roles of course credits, GPA, and attendance. The subject orientation, high standards, and fast pace of high schools further precipitated their low or failing grades. Social distractions expanded and intensified in high school, now incurring real consequences that stood in the way of graduation.

The report also presents six key reasons recovery students get back on track to graduation. During high school, students pinpointed moments of clarity that sparked their commitment to change; their self-reflection triggered by seeing failing grades, experiencing concrete consequences of negative behavior, and increasing sensitivities to family members' concerns for their futures. Students found their "right" schools that met their needs or offered "fresh starts." At their graduating schools, students felt anchored by the development of positive adult relationships and school cultures that offered the structures to help students imagine, plan for, and work toward a future. They thrived in schools that embraced a practice of multiple chances for success through encouragement to revise class work, to frequently monitor their grades, or to utilize credit recovery resources.

The report concludes with five themes and related considerations to guide action by policymakers, administrators, and educators as they work to increase the number of off-track students who recover to graduate on time.

RAISE DC

Acknowledgments

About the Author

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About Cross & Joftus

Cross & Joftus is a certified small company dedicated to helping public education leaders achieve outstanding results. Our clients include districts, states, CMOs, foundations, and nonprofits with a focus on improving outcomes for all students. Practice areas include research and evaluation, school and district improvement, needs analysis and strategic planning, human capital, finance, expanded learning, special education, and career-technical education. For more information, please contact Scott Joftus, President, at scott@edstrategies.net.

About Raise DC

Raise DC was formed in 2012 to join public, private, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders together as the District's comprehensive cradle-to-career initiative with a focus on improving five core educational outcomes for youth:

1. Every child is prepared for kindergarten.
2. Every child graduates from high school.
3. Every youth who is not in school reconnects to education/training.
4. Every youth attains a postsecondary credential.
5. Every youth is prepared for a career.

Initially launched in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, Raise DC now sits at The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. Raise DC is a member of the StriveTogether Partnership—a national network of more than 60 communities that use collective impact to improve outcomes for youth through fostering a shared community vision, practicing evidence-based decision making, engaging in collaborative action, and promoting sustainability of efforts over the long term.

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Table of Contents

Introduction ... 1

Research Design ... 3

Recovery Students Today ... 4

Recovery Students' Characteristics Before Entering High School ... 5

- **Early Patterns of Low Academic Engagement** ... 5
- **Influence of Peer Relationships** ... 5
- **Neighborhood and Familial Contexts** ... 6

Why Recovery Students Struggled in the Early Years of High School ... 7

- **Increased Academic Expectations and Responsibilites were Disorienting** ... 7
- **Social Distractions Expanded and Intensified** ... 8
- **Challenges with Finding the Right Fit School** ... 8

Key Reasons Recovery Students Got Back on Track ... 10

- **Recovery Students Experienced a Moment of Clarity that Sparked a Commitment to Graduate** ... 10
- **Finding Their Way to the "Right" Schools** ... 12
- **Positive Adult Relationships Provided Recovery Students a Social and Emotional Anchor in School** ... 13
- **Recovery Students Thrived in High Schools that Helped Develop and Implement a Vision toward a Future** ... 15
- **Cultivating a School Culture of Multiple Chances for Student Success** ... 15

Considerations for Policy and Practice ... 19

About the Graduation Pathways Project

In support of Raise DC's citywide goal to improve high school graduation rates, the Graduation Pathways Project began in summer 2013 and widely engaged education agencies, school leaders, and civic partners. The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC Public Schools, DC Public Charter School Board, and individual public charters collaborated to conduct DC's first detailed assessment of our citywide high school graduation rate.

In September 2014, these report findings were publicly released at the first Graduation Pathways Summit. The convening catalyzed local systems-level and school-based leaders around this common set of data and set the stage for a collective effort to drive improvements in key high-impact areas. These areas include:

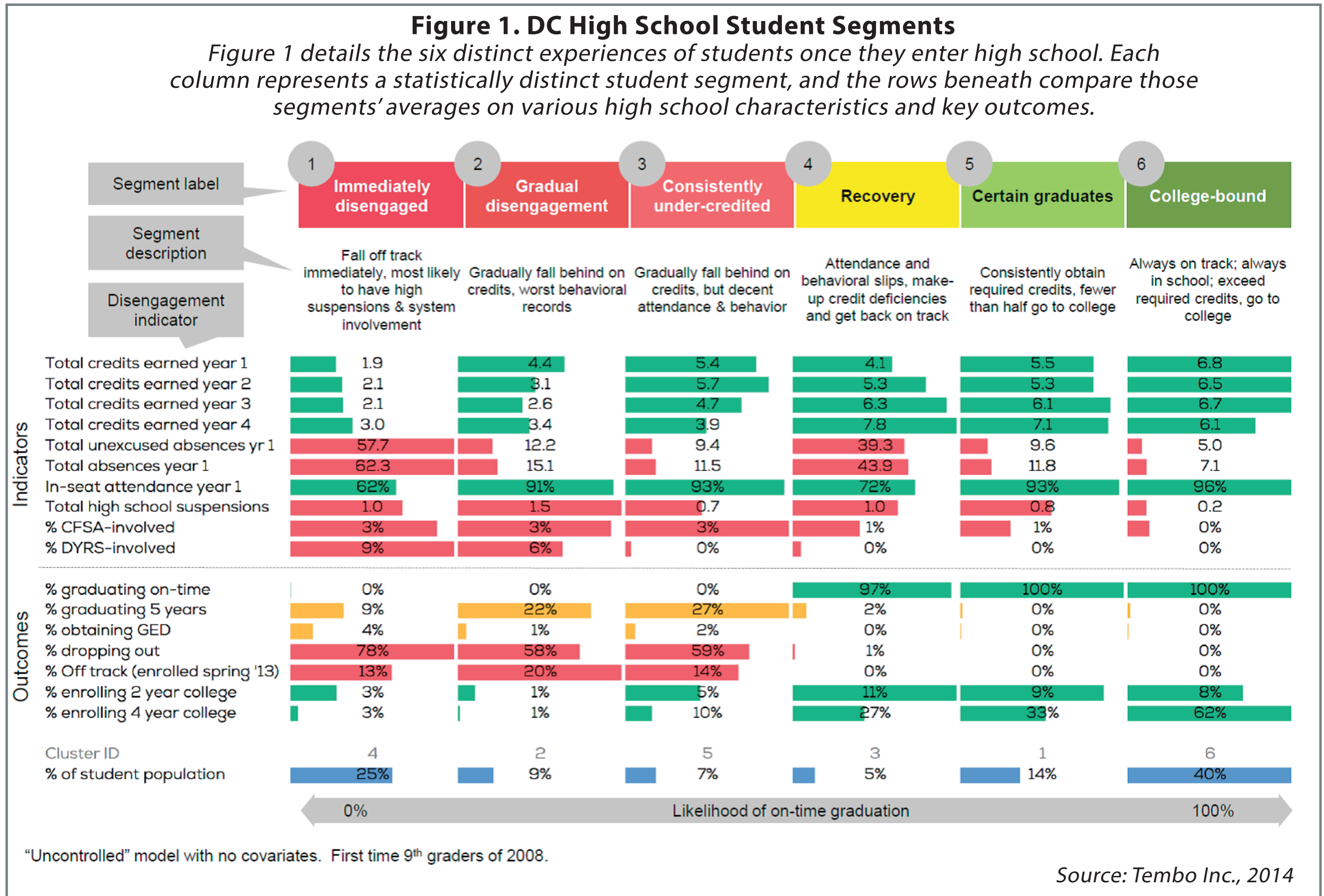
- *Fortifying students' transitions from 8th through 9th grade,*
- *Implementing more flexible paths to graduation, and*
- *Designing, aligning, and expanding the supply of "seats" to better serve "off-track" students and dropouts.*

Introduction

In Washington, DC, there has been an increasing focus on improving graduation rates. Encouraging new data shows that the percent of students completing high school is on the rise. However, while there is much to celebrate, still far too many young people don't make it to graduation, missing a critical gateway to opportunities in higher education and the workforce. With a citywide commitment to improving the high school graduation rate, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE), DC Public Schools (DCPS), the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and several public charter schools—under the banned of Raise DC—released the *DC Graduation Pathways* report, which provided an unprecedented, detailed look at the District's citywide high school completion rate across both traditional public and public charter schools (DME, September 2014). Chief among its findings was that DC students generally fall into one of six distinct segments on the route to graduation, as noted in Figure 1. Three of the segments (in red) were most concerning, reflecting a spectrum of student disengagement from school, ranging from "immediately disengaged" to "consistently under-credited." Two segments (in green) comprised students who begin and exit high school on time, many of whom matriculate into postsecondary education.

Figure 1. DC High School Student Segments

Figure 1 details the six distinct experiences of students once they enter high school. Each column represents a statistically distinct student segment, and the rows beneath compare those segments' averages on various high school characteristics and key outcomes.



		1	2	3	4	5	6
	Segment label	Immediately disengaged	Gradual disengagement	Consistently under-credited	Recovery	Certain graduates	College-bound
	Segment description / Disengagement indicator	Fall off track immediately, most likely to have high suspensions & system involvement	Gradually fall behind on credits, worst behavioral records	Gradually fall behind on credits, but decent attendance & behavior	Attendance and behavioral slips, make-up credit deficiencies and get back on track	Consistently obtain required credits, fewer than half go to college	Always on track; always in school; exceed required credits, go to college
Indicators	Total credits earned year 1	1.9	4.4	5.4	4.1	5.5	6.8
	Total credits earned year 2	2.1	3.1	5.7	5.3	5.3	6.5
	Total credits earned year 3	2.1	2.6	4.7	6.3	6.1	6.7
	Total credits earned year 4	3.0	3.4	3.9	7.8	7.1	6.1
	Total unexcused absences yr 1	57.7	12.2	9.4	39.3	9.6	5.0
	Total absences year 1	62.3	15.1	11.5	43.9	11.8	7.1
	In-seat attendance year 1	62%	91%	93%	72%	93%	96%
	Total high school suspensions	1.0	1.5	0.7	1.0	0.8	0.2
	% CFSA-involved	3%	3%	3%	1%	1%	0%
	% DYRS-involved	9%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Outcomes	% graduating on-time	0%	0%	0%	97%	100%	100%
	% graduating 5 years	9%	22%	27%	2%	0%	0%
	% obtaining GED	4%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%
	% dropping out	78%	58%	59%	1%	0%	0%
	% Off track (enrolled spring '13)	13%	20%	14%	0%	0%	0%
	% enrolling 2 year college	3%	1%	5%	11%	9%	8%
	% enrolling 4 year college	3%	1%	10%	27%	33%	62%
	Cluster ID	4	2	5	3	1	6
	% of student population	25%	9%	7%	5%	14%	40%

"Uncontrolled" model with no covariates. First time 9th graders of 2008.

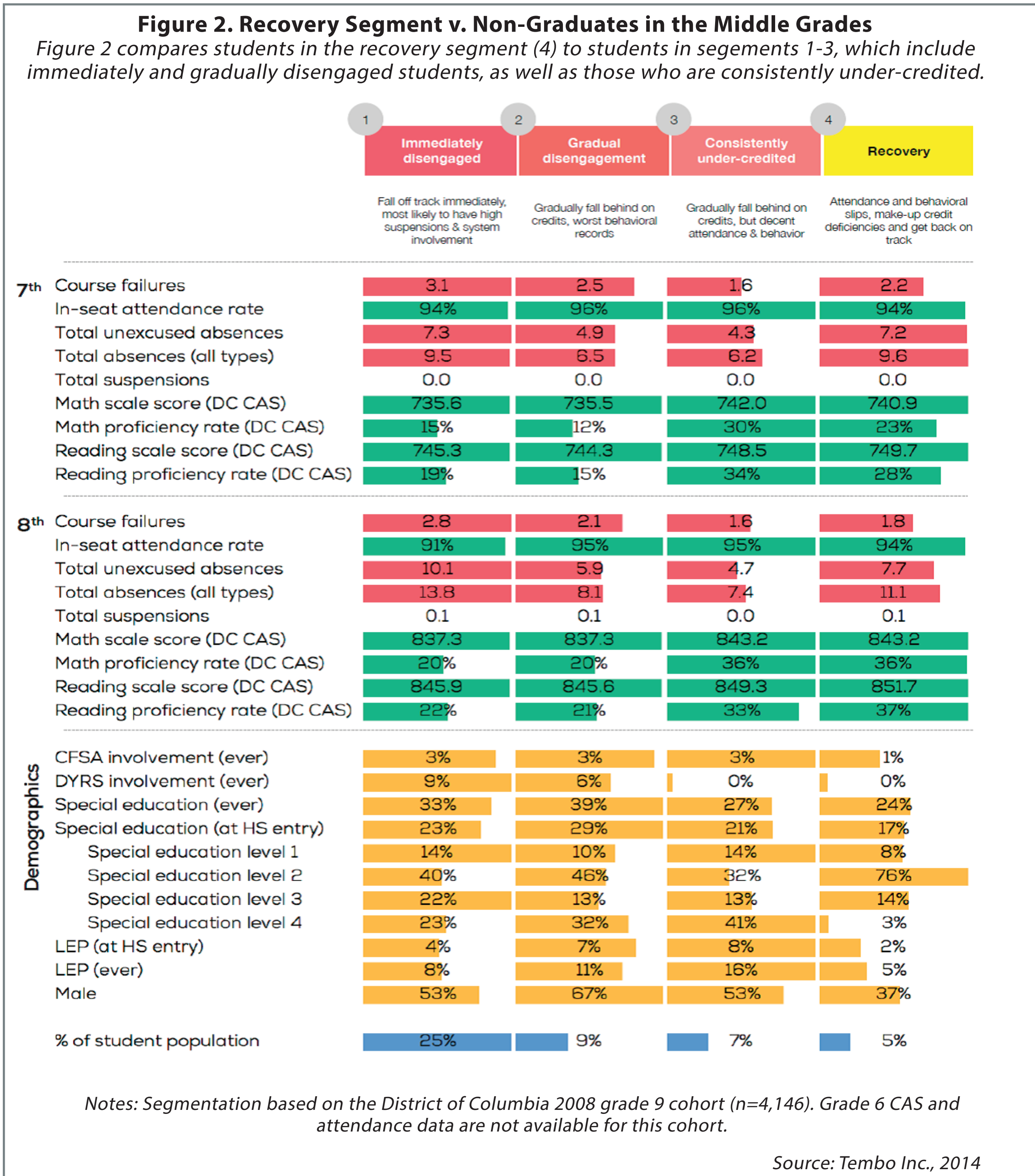
Source: Tembo Inc., 2014

For this study, a segment of interest was the 5% of students noted in cautionary yellow—so-called "recovery" students. These students stumbled when entering high school but were able to get back on track to graduate on time in four years. Recovery students were generally students who earned fewer credits in their first year or two of high school (average: 4.1 and 5.3 credits, respectively), which placed them at risk of dropping out. In year one of high school, they also had a high number of unexcused (average: 39.3) and total absences (average: 43.9), with in-seat attendance averaging only 72%. Recovery students also may have experienced, on average, one suspension during their high school enrollment.

Of particular note were the relative similarities in characteristics of recovery students to their off-track counterparts in Segments 2 and 3—not only in high school but in middle school, as well (see Figure 2). What is striking, though, were the differences in outcomes among these off-track segments: While the vast majority of students in Segments 2 and 3 eventually dropped out, 97% of students in the recovery segment turned around to graduate on time.

Figure 2. Recovery Segment v. Non-Graduates in the Middle Grades

Figure 2 compares students in the recovery segment (4) to students in segements 1-3, which include immediately and gradually disengaged students, as well as those who are consistently under-credited.



Notes: Segmentation based on the District of Columbia 2008 grade 9 cohort (n=4,146). Grade 6 CAS and attendance data are not available for this cohort.

Source: Tembo Inc., 2014

More detailed knowledge of these diverse recovery pathways—as experienced and described by students—can inform new interventions and strengthen current supports to help more students graduate from high school on time.

Research Design

Building upon the findings from the *Graduation Pathways* report, this study sought to examine the lived experience of the recovery process from the perspective of students, with attention to understanding the nature of their pathways from middle school through high school, including the choices, resources, and relationships that shaped their journeys. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study used focus groups to solicit the direct personal stories and experiences of recovery students who lived this transition in DC high schools and graduated in spring 2015. It also infuses insights gathered through interviews with school-based staff who supported these students on their path to academic recovery. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What were the characteristics of recovery students before they entered high school?
2. Why did recovery students struggle in their freshman year?
3. What were the key reasons that recovery students got back on track?
4. What lessons can be learned by high schools for ensuring that students graduate on time?

The study aimed to unpack the recovery experience from the students' perspective and to distill lessons that could inform decision makers in developing and refining strategies to support similar students who fall off track from graduation.

All student participants were 12th grade seniors who met the recovery student profile shown in Figure 1. Participating students were enrolled in five public high schools (four DCPS comprehensive high schools and one public charter school), each of which graduated different proportions of recovery students. These high schools varied in size from 500 – 1,100 students, with graduation rates ranging from 30% to 95% (SY 2013-2014); all were Title I schools and enrolled a majority of African-American students. None employed admission criteria for enrollment.

To understand students' views of their high school experiences, the research team conducted focus groups of five to seven recovery students at participating high schools, each lasting 60 – 100 minutes. A total of 29 high school seniors (75% male; 25% female) participated; all fit the recovery student profile. During these group conversations, researchers asked open-ended questions to surface students' first-hand experiences at different stages of their recovery process—e.g., middle school, transitioning to high school, stumbling, making a change, recovering, feeling on track—to trace their education pathways from 8th to 12th grade. Students described images that represented their journey, responding to the prompt, "Getting through high school was like a ___," and offered advice to students, educators, and parents about how to support their progress toward graduation. In describing stages of the recovery experience, students recounted their school life, including relationships and contexts that inhibited or facilitated their progress toward graduation, with a focus on critical events, people in their life, decision points, and resources.

Students were remarkably open in recounting their journeys, which included emotional stories of low points, self-discovery, and successes along the way. The timing of focus group discussions—near June graduation ceremonies, when recovery students would celebrate their hard work and accomplishments—facilitated student reflection on the high school journey. Interviews with teachers and guidance counselors familiar with recovery students at each school provided background information about school climate, available resources to support their journeys, and particular student pathways.

Recovery Students Today

The contrast between how recovery students began their rocky journeys through high school—which have roots in the formative experiences of middle school and ends with achieving all requirements to graduate high school on time—is startling. Weeks away from commencement ceremonies, recovery students held a positive, hopeful outlook on their lives beyond high school. They described concrete plans for the future that included entrance to college or the workforce. Some secured summer work or internships to gain job experience or explore a profession, while others planned to look for such opportunities post-graduation. Students reported acceptance to two- and four-year colleges or plans to enroll in college after working for a while. Some intended to pursue a variety of professions that included nursing, emergency medical services, or physical therapy; childhood development to start a daycare; a medical doctor to help inner city young women; or positions in law enforcement or the security field. Other recovery students were actively seeking vocational or trade careers such as cosmetology, real estate, plumbing, and various technician positions (HVAC, electrical, and automotive), citing knowledge of shortages in given fields, the promise of stability, or stepping stones to other professions.

Students also framed their choices as inspired by personal experiences—family conversations, personal encounters with occupational fields, or critical incidents in their lives, such as a family tragedy. One student recalled a broken ankle in childhood that sparked interest in physical therapy; others cited experiences with aggressive violence or inadequate court representation as an inspiration to become a "good" police officer or lawyer "to care" and "help save lives." Other students planned to pursue professions that would enhance their families, such as following in the footsteps of relatives in nursing to "climb the ladder" to becoming a medical doctor. These initial occupational choices reflected strategic efforts to match their skills and interests with the pursuit of social goals and financial stability. They sought career paths that brought both stability and "security in life."

In reflecting on the journey toward graduation, recovery students drew on a variety of metaphors to characterize the experience and process. Recovery students characterized their experiences of getting through high school as "a miracle" for its implausibility and their tumultuous pathway as a "roller coaster with its ups and downs." Students likened the unpredictability of their high school pathway to surviving "Grand Theft Auto"—characterized as "day-by-day" and "wild and crazy," with initial difficulty "to lay out a plan." Other recovery students described the experience as one of perseverance, pushing against forces during high school that were constantly inhibiting their progress, described as "trying to walk down an escalator going up."

Overall, graduating high school on time was an act of will for recovery students: It required them to engage in intensive periods of study and extended time in school to recover credits lost in their early high school years. It required them to navigate the education system to understand their choices and develop a vision for themselves. And it reflected an ability to persevere in the face of adversity and to set and achieve personal and academic goals over an extended period of time, which for recovery students stretched across all four years of high school.

"...Trying to walk down an escalator going up."

Recovery Students' Characteristics Before Entering High School

To begin exploring the recovery phenomenon, students were asked to reflect on their experiences in 8th grade to describe what went well for them and what felt uncertain. While a number of students held fond memories of middle school as a "fun time" with friends, they also recalled minimal expectations from teachers, poor or mediocre academic performance, and a peer-dominated school culture. These reflections suggest that the adjustment challenge recovery students encountered in 9th grade—which pushed them "off track" to graduation due to lower course credit accumulation and attendance and discipline issues—were extensions of the negative behavior and disengagement they exhibited in middle school. Specifically, recovery students' 8th grade perceptions about the value of school-based learning—that class content was "boring," attendance was optional, and grades were inconsequential—provided a basis for student struggles as they entered 9th grade.

Early Patterns of Low Academic Engagement

Academic learning was not a priority for recovery students during middle school. While a few students framed their grades as "good" or "fine," the dominant experience was average, near failing, or failing grades, as noted in Figure 2. Students described their learning during middle school years "as a joke" and "really easy—way, way, easy." In retrospect, recovery students saw a stark difference between the academic expectations of their middle school and high school teachers: "You don't have to be as disciplined in middle school as you have to be in high school," one student explained.

Recovery students expressed ambivalence about their grades in middle school and what they were learning in class. Some noted their class grades were often related to their attendance and effort, rather than mastery: "If I was in school, I got A's and B's; if slacking, I get suspended and got D's and C's." Without any meaning attached to their school-based learning and work products—rewards, consequences, or any future planning—recovery students did not think to change their behavior. "I just wasn't doing some of my work," one student explained. "Some of it was easy. I wasn't really focused." Looking back, students recalled a mix of challenging and easy work, but none recalled a sense of purpose to their learning or how learning in middle school would prepare them for the rigor of high school.

Also, recovery students regularly skipped school in response to their disengagement in their classrooms. "I just did not want to go [to school] anymore," explained one recovery student with spotty middle school attendance. "I wandered the streets. I was a child. I didn't feel like being trapped in school. It was boring."

Now as seniors about to graduate, recovery students believed their middle school teachers held low expectations for their learning and development at the time. In retrospect, recovery students believed they themselves did not value their grades, because teachers told them that grades held no consequence for their advancement to the next grade. Those few students with failing grades across the board believed they were socially promoted—"They just passed me on," explained a recovery student, who was surprised to advance to high school. All believed their GPA did not matter in middle school. For the few recovery students who reported "barely making it" with C's or maintaining "good grades," these students played sports, which espoused a code of conduct and academic expectations. Even so, students all knew of exceptions to this rule; one recovery student with a GPA of 0.8 learned "it was enough to play ball" from a coach.

Overall, during middle school, recovery students reported hearing and internalizing messages that grades were not gatekeepers for promotion or high school entrance. Recovery students continued to hold this misconception as they transitioned into high school, where attendance and performance held direct consequences for graduation.

"They just passed me on."

Influence of Peer Relationships

For recovery students, their first recollections of middle school centered on friendships and social activities along with limited class discipline by teachers. All recovery students experienced irregular attendance in middle school, including arriving late or skipping class throughout the day, mostly due to their focus on developing and enjoying peer relationships. From the recovery student perspective, truant behavior was a pervasive practice among classmates: "Everybody was doing it."

Students also described a common routine of "running the [school] halls" during class to hang out with friends or escape a boring lesson. The truant behavior students developed in middle school set the stage for high absenteeism in the early years of high school. Although a number of recovery students received in-school detentions or were suspended during middle school, these absences did not adversely impact their promotion between grades within middle school or graduation onward to high school. The message recovery students heard from adults in middle school was that negative behavior brought few or no consequences.

In middle school classrooms, recovery students also described disengaged behavior focused on peers and away from class learning tasks. "In 8th grade, I used to let friends distract me from work and not pay attention in class," one recovery student explained. "I thought I was cool to sit in the back of the classroom doing nothing." Other students described themselves as very social in class with both students and their teachers, which—in retrospect—they believed inhibited their learning and performance: "I didn't skip school, though. I was talkative and playful. It kinda threw my grades off track. I didn't get my work done."

From a recovery student perspective, teachers enabled this peer culture focused on socializing in and out of school. While most recovery students eventually acknowledged their role in disrupting class learning, they remained critical of their middle school teachers for not disciplining students or controlling unruly classrooms. "They let us do whatever we wanted," one explained. "So I really had no guidance or nothing."

Neighborhood and Familial Contexts

Recovery students reported a range of neighborhood interactions and homelife circumstances that negatively influenced their middle school experiences. All students described their neighborhoods as potentially threatening places to walk through. Students reported pervasive fighting in their neighborhoods, with some becoming targets of violence from other groups. "Lots of people did not like me, and I got into fights a lot," explained one soft-spoken male student. As a coping strategy, some students spoke of a fighting code organized around relatives or friends—"people you hang with"—that pulled them into physical altercations due to social commitment or family loyalty. Many male recovery students felt an initial attraction to hanging out with a neighborhood group of guys, "getting into fights, stealing, and vandalism." Students also reported seeing illegal behavior and feeling threatened regularly. One student's reflection on his middle school experience captured how neighborhood life could initially shape recovery students' ability to focus, develop a vision of their future, and grow toward their personal and professional goals:

> *I was very childish in middle school. I think I had no hope, man. I went through a rough, rough school, in a rough neighborhood. Every time I would come outside, something was going on. It kinda painted a picture for me, because that is all I'd seen: shooting, drug overdose, like the streets, like the people, getting girls, getting money and all that stuff. I wanted to be like them. So that is how I was acting in middle school, like that.*

Recovery students also spoke of the influences of family obligations and dynamic on their middle school years. With working parents, many students took on responsibilities for taking care of grandparents or relatives who become ill for extended periods—one student even described a daily routine of sitting with a dying relative. Students described how the death of a grandparent led to a period of disengagement from everything in their lives, including school. The absence created by an incarcerated family member or one returning home from jail also altered student behavior in negative ways. During these periods of difficult family transitions, recovery students became detached from school, manifested by excessive skipping, disengagement during class ("I wasn't really into school"), and low completion of class assignments ("I was not getting all my work done").

Overall, each recovery student experienced one or more of these tensions during their formative middle school years. One recovery student's reflection captures well how multiple situations converged to weaken his capacity to develop positive relationships and focus on learning: "[Middle school] was like hell. I fought with my brother. Got suspended for 10 days for fighting with teachers and then got kicked out. There was lots of skipping classes to hang out with friends and run the [school] halls."

These challenges, attitudes, and patterns continued into the early years of high school, where teacher expectations, high stakes consequences, and social distractions multiplied.

Figure 3. Reflections and Advice from Recovery Students:
"What should 8th grade students know and do to graduate high school on time?"

- "Eighth graders need to focus—do their work, focus in class. They need to learn about GPA. Because they're messing up when they get into high school."
- "They need to be mentally prepared—put it in their head, know what they're about to face in high school. High school is harder."
- "Eighth graders should learn that when you get into high school it is not like 8th grade. They are going to push you a little bit more. They are not going to play with you like teachers in 8th grade do—just sitting around and babying you. You need to be on top of your stuff."
- "Teachers should try to instill in kids early that 8th grade is not a joke. Help them take it seriously, so they do good their first year in high school. Then you can play a little later."
- "I wish I had taken time to figure out what I wanted for myself because middle school time is when you are always with your friends. What did I want?"

Why Recovery Students Struggled in the Early Years of High School

As recovery students advanced to high school, they continued to draw on their beliefs, practices, and attitudes about schooling developed during their middle grade years, which conflicted with the expectations and organization of high schools. While recovery students eventually adapted to these new norms and graduated high school on time, the adjustment period varied for students in terms of length of time, trajectory, and the focal issues a given student had to overcome.

The structure and rigor of high school, coupled with personalized schedules and tiered course sequences, presented both opportunities and challenges for rising 9th graders. Across the board, recovery students reported feeling overwhelmed by the high academic expectations, grade-based accountability, and the high degree of personal independence. "I could not handle the high school atmosphere," recalled one recovery student who struggled during freshman year. "All of it—school work, teachers, uniform policy, being on time—everything."

As described by recovery students, the adjustment period to high school varied widely in length—extending from one semester for some to three years for others—as each student worked to clarify their academic goals, commit to graduating, and refocus their time and effort on this singular pursuit. This section describes when, how, and why recovery students struggled in the early years of high school.

Increased Academic Expectations and Responsibilities were Disorienting

Upon entering 9th grade, recovery students reported an initial "shock" at the performance expectations of academic work in high school. Students noticed expectations for higher levels of knowledge across their academic courses. Compared to their middle school experiences, recovery students encountered homework assignments that differed in both volume ("more—like, every day") and consequences ("it's graded" or "if you don't do it, you get a zero"). This shock reflected a realization that students were operating under a fundamental misunderstanding of how school works—a misunderstanding that was based on their 8th grade routines and practices that deemphasized academic learning. In retrospect, recovery students understood that academic experiences in middle school did not prepare them for the freedoms, rigor, and structure of high school academic work. They were also not prepared to monitor their steady accumulation of course credits each semester to support graduation in four years.

Figure 4. Key Reasons Recovery Students Struggled in the Early Years of High School

- Increased academic expectations and responsibilities were disorientating for recovery students
- Peer social distractions expanded and intensified in high school for recovery students
- Recovery students experienced challenges in finding their "right school"

The delayed understanding that grades had meaning and consequences in high school was common among all recovery students. "That's what they should teach us—about GPA and your credits," one student explained. "There are no credits in middle school. But in 9th grade, you got to have your credits. I know people who took classes, failed a credit or two, and have to stay back."

While in middle school, recovery students reported failing or "barely making it with C's," with a smaller proportion earning "good grades." This low performance continued into high school, but with all students struggling. "My grade point average went WAY down," noted a student who had actually performed well in middle school. Recovery students did not understand the new meaning of grades as gatekeepers until the end of their first semester, when report cards reflected one or more failed courses and a low grade point average.

Students responded differently to this 9th grade academic jolt. Some made a proactive change as they entered second semester or their sophomore year. For others, the adjustment period extended into junior or senior year of high school. "I learned a lot in my 9th grade. It taught me a lot, a lot of book learning," one student explained. "But I failed every class. Every class. I could not keep up at school. Middle school did not prepare me for high school."

Recovery students also noticed a dramatic shift in teacher disposition and performance expectations. They described 9th grade teachers as "serious" and "hard" from the very first day of school. They were surprised to encounter substantive lessons and homework at the beginning of the school year—particularly the first day of classes. One recovery student described his surprise:

> *When I got here, [high school teachers] just got straight to the point. They start giving us work, the first day. In middle school when we got there, they at least let you watch a movie or something. Or they make everybody introduce themselves. Here, they just give you work and teach you. That's all that matters. And I wasn't used to that.*

Recovery students described the challenge of juggling so many classes and different teachers—each with different expectations—as "overwhelming." In 9th grade, a common student response to increased expectations was to ignore class assignments and skip class, continuing established middle school patterns of negative behavior and attitudes. "[My first] high school had high expectations," explained one student. "I just did not take it seriously." Compounding expectations for more rigorous work was student adjustment to a new culture of teaching and learning. "High school [moves at] a fast, insane pace," in terms of daily routines and workload, explained one recovery student. "If you miss a couple of days, it's hard to catch up. Everybody moves fast."

Recovery students also struggled with time management as they entered 9th grade. They encountered not only new rules, but more rules to follow, and many came with consequences that required meeting deadlines throughout the day to different adults in the building. Students also encountered school rules that were enforced by administrators and teachers, which contrasted with their middle school experiences. Still, others experienced occasional or extreme tardiness due to lengthy and often unpredictable commutes due to instable housing circumstances.

Social Distractions Expanded and Intensified

Upon entering high school, recovery students continued to prioritize peer social interactions over academics—hanging out with friends, skipping class, and getting into fights with others either at school or in the neighborhood.

Over time, recovery students noticed the negative influence of social relationships carried over from middle school, which were hindering progress toward graduation. Students initially selected a high school because friends also enrolled. "Everyone I know was coming to this school," explained one recovery student. "I decided to come and have some fun. To stay with them, be with my set who I hang with." Said another, "I knew everybody in my high school, and I could not get focused. So, I just acted like I did in middle school—skipping class, leaving school early, and failing out." Acknowledging the negative influence of an expanding social scene, a student recalled, "When I transferred to high school, I was getting to know more people, and my grades fell." Another student recounted this disruptive pattern: "I was playing with friends—skipping classes, getting into trouble, detentions for stuff that I knew I should not be doing. I did the same thing in summer school. In 10th grade, I did the same things as in 9th grade."

For some, peer relationships outside of school led to negative interactions with the law, ultimately disrupting initial progress toward graduation. In high school, habitual skipping brought consequences in the form of court appearance and assigned probation officers. Student descriptions also suggested more coordinated gang activity or collective organizing among friends who agreed to "fight together." One recovery student recalled a difficult 9th grade year: "I was barely going to school, doing nothing. I stayed in the streets a lot." This extreme detachment from school was a strong formative experience for some recovery students who experienced jail or short placements in military-style schools in DC or Maryland to develop discipline and personal goals. These recovery students had experienced cycles of suspension and incarceration before "straightening up," as one explained, to return in 11th or 12th grade to earn high school diplomas.

Recovery students also developed adverse relationships with some teachers, which students characterized as "talking back" and "getting into it with teachers." Students reacted negatively to the strict dress or behavior codes of their 9th or 10th grade high school—typically when attending charter schools. They also scoffed at requirements to attend class on time and use a low voice during lunch. One recovery student, who struggled to adjust his behavior, experienced protracted consequences: "That school was not for me," he recalled. "Every day, they just cut and pasted my name on the detention list every day, basically, of my 9th grade year." As these reflections suggested, recovery students were beginning to think about the fit between their school environments and their ability to make progress toward graduation. While some students were proactive in changing schools, others were forced to initiate a search due to strong encouragement or expulsion by school leaders.

Challenges with Finding the Right Fit School

In the past decade, public high school options for rising DC freshmen have expanded significantly to include a wide range of specialty and themed schools in both DCPS and the public charter sector to fit the varied interests and needs of students. Students who do not identify a preference are assigned automatically to their local or "neighborhood" DCPS schools. Recovery students' experiences of the school selection process varied widely, stretching from one to four years, as many students changed high schools. While one-third of recovery students in this study remained enrolled through graduation in their chosen 9th grade school, about one-half attended two high schools, and a smaller proportion experienced more volatility, attending three or four high schools before graduating on time. For those attending two high schools, recovery students tended to switch schools midyear during 9th grade or enroll in a different school in 10th grade. The latest school transfer by a recovery student occurred in 12th grade, the final year of high school.

The diversity of school enrollment experiences among recovery students offers insight into their rationales for selecting and switching schools and the evolution of their search processes on the path to graduation. While the 29 recovery students in this study graduated from five high schools in DC, collectively, they attended a total of 20 public secondary schools, including eight DCPS high schools, six DC public charter schools, and six Maryland public schools.

Other issues for students included glitches in managing the school application process in freshman and sophomore years. Students reported taking the path of least resistance to their neighborhood schools as they missed opportunities to apply elsewhere due to a forgotten deadline or feeling “too lazy” to complete an entrance exam or prepare for an audition. Other students reported leaving their previous schools due to closures, poor behavior, or low academic performance.

Key Reasons Recovery Students Got Back on Track

Conversations with recovery students and staff familiar with their experiences offered insights into the resources, relationships, and mindsets that facilitated the reverse in trajectory from off track to graduating. Most notably, the students themselves engaged in self-discovery and learning processes that enabled each to graduate on time. Facilitating these processes were each student's own maturation and commitment to "make a change," the development of positive relationships at home and at school, and utilization of programs available through their high schools. School staff played important roles in students' recovery processes, contributing directly and indirectly to student maturation and ability to complete academic work at the high school level.

Figure 5. Key Reasons Recovery Students Got Back on Track

- Recovery students experienced "moments of clarity" that sparked a commitment to graduate from high school
- Recovery students find their "right school" using the school choice process and neighborhood options
- Positive adult relationships provide recovery students social and emotional anchors in school
- Recovery students thrive in high schools that help them develop and implement visions for the future
- Schools cultivate a culture of "multiple chances" for recovery student success

Recovery Students Experienced a Moment of Clarity that Sparked a Commitment to Graduate

At the heart of "recovery" is a deeply personal process in which the individual students became dissatisfied with their role in key spheres of their life—school, friends, family, or the neighborhood. Recovery students experienced critical moments when they became aware of their downward trajectory and committed to adjusting their goals and behavior. While this is an internal transformation, understanding this process may help adults and peers recognize when a troubled student may be open to a lifestyle change or to reengage in school-based learning.

How does this experience unfold for a recovery student in which "that new you" emerges to displace "that other me," who struggled during middle school and parts of high school? In retrospect, all recovery students quickly pointed to particular "moments of clarity" when each saw clearly how past decisions and actions negatively impacted themselves or others they cared about and committed to "make a change" in priorities, attitudes, behaviors, and relationships. Moments of clarity emerged when students reflected on their failing grades, negative behavior, destructive peer relationships, and attention to family. During these instances, each recovery student engaged not only in "doing school" by accumulating credits toward graduation, but also in constructing a new identity.

FAILING GRADES TRIGGERED SELF-REFLECTION. For recovery students, seeing end-of-semester failing grades on their report cards triggered self-reflection on effort and potential consequences. Recovery student responses to course failure varied. Some saw symbolic meaning in failing grades as more or less defining their identity in both personal and public ways, weakening their confidence. Many worried about how low grades would shape how others viewed their potential. "When I see those F's on my transcript, the worst thing is to be is dumb in black and white, on paper," one student explained. "That is how people know me. And they know I failed a class."

Another student expressed deep embarrassment by her extended "freshman status" due to course failures in her first year of high school: "Seeing that '9th grade' on my schedule scared me," she explained, concerned that it signaled low intelligence. "There is not one dumb person in my family," she continued. "Everybody graduated on time and went to at least a year of college." Stoking her fears was the school uniform policy that used shirt color to note student grade affiliation. She worried, "Would I have to wear a 9th grade colored shirt or 10th grade colored shirt?"

Some recovery students acknowledged their grades as reflective of effort, buckling down to repeat a course and accepting responsibility for their performance. A college-bound recovery student recalled feeling "upset" with her failing grades, recognizing that she truly did not "give it her all" during the course. Her self-composed response contrasted with her mother's "yelling" and "deep disappointment" by her grades at the time. Despite the low grade, this recovery student felt confident in her abilities, pledging to "get it together" the following year, which she did. The real loss for this student was a "missed opportunity" to enroll in an elective course.

Upon hearing of their retention in 9th grade, some students relied on school choice mechanisms to manage the perception of failure. One mother took charge of the situation, dismissing the school advice to repeat 9th grade because it might stigmatize her daughter, labeling her an "alternative child," which she worried would limit college options. Scanning the charter school options, the parent identified a school that allowed a 10th grade placement with course recovery options.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF PATTERNS OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR. Recovery students interpreted their negative behavior as within their control, not a function of the school environment. Recovery students came to see behavior as an extension of their own learning priorities at school. Students who switched schools—often due to expulsion or failure—expected their behavior and performance to improve immediately upon enrollment in a new environment: "Change schools, change friends, change performance," recounted one student's initial theory. For most students, however, their negative behavior and performance continued, despite simply changing schools. "I came to 10th grade in this school," one student recalled. "And everything that happened at my old school happened here." Recovery students continued cycles of skipping, playing, or fighting, but with new friends, and they continued to earn low or failing grades in the new schools. The recurrence triggered student reflection about the root source of the problem, often enhanced or initiated by conversations with an adult. Students realized their roles in this negative cycle: "The problem was me, not the school," one recovery student asserted.

With this new realization, recovery students developed techniques to manage negative peer interactions. "If you got a group in the class who goof around," complained one student, "it's difficult to follow and learn the lesson. Some people just don't want to learn." This disruption sometimes extended to the larger school environment, such as the library or cafeteria. These disruptions were problematic for recovery students, because they primarily completed homework at school, not at home. To manage the environment, recovery students spoke of making deliberate changes in their goals, attitudes, and behaviors; this included aligning their social circles with their new goals, developing techniques to manage old friendships, or isolating themselves.

Students realized their roles in this negative cycle: "The problem was me, not the school."

Recovery students who strategically isolated themselves from friends asserted self-orientations, declaring, "I choose me, not them" or "You gotta pick YOUR side." With this new perspective, changing schools did help some students manage their learning environments, providing fresh starts in new schools and developing new circles of friends. This act also provided opportunities to develop new habits and find students who shared their goals. By changing schools, one recovery student expanded his social circle to support his plan to complete schoolwork and attend college. "In the [new] school, I'm not with my friends. I had to make new friends," he explained. "I came here to isolate myself away from the negativity and start hanging around people who do positive stuff and who are on the same road I am." To this end, some students developed routines to maintain physical distance from playful peers to avoid distractions. "I just stay away from them or walk the other way," explained one student. Some pretend to listen to music: "When I put my headphones in, nobody talks to me…so I can stay focused and do my work."

Other recovery students strategically maintained old friendships while protecting their newly developed educational goals and emerging new identities. A recovery student who refused to let go of past friends explained: "You have your goofy friends. You have friends who want to skip class. You got your friends that want to be in the halls all day...they're still my friends." To manage diverse friendships, recovery students employed a range of interaction strategies that maintained a positive personal connection, while minimizing negative influences. For example, recovery students made quick physical acknowledgements of other students from afar: "I just wave or nod to them from across the cafeteria," one recovery student said. Other students used short conversations and controlled gestures to stay in touch with past "fun" friends: "I stop in the hallway and have a quick chat with them," explained a recovery student. "How you been? What you doing?" Recovery students framed these polite ritualistic exchanges as "hi's and bye's" with students they once knew well.

CONCERNS FROM FAMILY MOTIVATED CHANGES IN STUDENT BEHAVIOR. One of the most emotional elements of recovery students' experiences was reflected in their descriptions of how their parents and relatives internalized students' negative behaviors as "worry," fear, and disappointment. Students experienced moments of clarity when they chose to change their behaviors to reduce the "stress" of loved ones. Another aspect centered on recovery students mending and honoring troubled family relationships. One recovery student recalled the moment when she realized how her mother deeply worried about her truant behavior:

> *I saw my mother cry for me. I was always saying to myself, 'Nobody ever really cried about me.' She was worried for me—talking about how I was going to die in the streets. I didn't like that. So that put me in a position where I thought I probably got to do something with my life—just get off the streets. Now I was doing it for my mother…*

Other students recalled moments of clarity that were prompted by temporary separation from family due to incarceration or internal familial conflicts. For some, incarceration was a moment of clarity that helped reverse a downward trajectory. After being kicked out of school and spending time in jail, recovery students committed to "avoid prison" and "prove everybody wrong" by changing their behaviors and attitudes. One student focused on reclaiming family confidence in his abilities, with high school graduation his goal:

> *My moment [to commit to change] was when I came home from being incarcerated and everybody doubted me. They said I wasn't going to be alright…If I put my mind to it, I can do anything. I just started going to school. That was my motivation. My teacher said, 'If you stay on track, you can [graduate].'*

Other students described tension with family members that developed into short-term separations from home. During that time, students described school commutes as unpredictable, resulting in tardiness, and difficulty in maintaining their focus. When finally reunited, students spoke of their renewed focus on schoolwork. "That point in my life made me move on," a recovery student explained. "There was a roadblock, and I conquered that when I came back home [to live]. Family can do a lot of things."

FAMILY SUPPORT INSPIRED STUDENT EFFORTS. Some recovery students cited specific family members—either living or deceased—as inspiration for pursuing a high school diploma. One recovery student, after her grandmothers died and mother survived cancer, "committed to not act up" and to earn a high school diploma. For other students, advice from loved ones inspired their commitment to overcome obstacles on their paths toward graduation. A recovery student who struggled to stay in school explained how her father's advice stimulated a change in behavior before his death: "It wasn't the school [that helped me]. It did. But I HAD to change…to become a young lady. I had to graduate to become the person I wanted to be. My father told all his children, (singing) 'Go to school, learn the rules, and listen to your teachers, so you be cool.' That stays with me. I started doing that."

Another recovery student, stumbling in school, recalled a critical moment when his younger brother beat him in sports. This event—and the self-reflection it sparked—dramatically altered his trajectory toward graduation: "[My little brother] just demolished me in basketball one day, and I wondered, 'How did he get so much better than me on the court?'" He realized that smoking with peers had diminished his skills and that he needed a practice routine. Following this plan, he developed healthy habits and joined his high school basketball team, which led him to re-imagine a future path. "My new coach started telling me about colleges and stuff," recalled the student. "I started thinking I could probably go [to college]…so I decided to just use that as a step. And that's what got me here today. Basically, I changed my life, thanks to my little brother."

Finding their Way to the "Right" Schools

Regardless of the number of schools attended or selection rationales, by June of their senior year, all recovery students expressed satisfaction with their high schools at the time of graduation. "I'm glad I'm here [at my neighborhood high school]," one recovery student noted. "It helped me get on task. But it was not my first choice."

While this mobility brought uncertainty for many recovery students, and in some cases, complicated their paths to graduation, it also brought opportunities for "second chances" and self-reinvention, which recovery students appreciated in hindsight. Finding their "right school," as students called it, was a single choice for some students and an extended journey for others. Regardless of how they came to be there, all students felt satisfied with their graduating schools; they reported feeling socially comfortable and safe, explored areas of interest, and met academic and seat time requirements for graduation. The school also helped students address specific problems they experienced in other schools—high truancy, low credit accumulation, and poor social behavior—which previously inhibited their learning.

RECOVERY STUDENTS SOUGHT SAFE SCHOOLS. Students who experienced physical altercations in middle school or in their neighborhoods hoped to avoid conflict with others in high school. "My goal was to avoid jail," one recovery student explained. For some, police presence symbolized disorder and potential threat, a criterion students used to evaluate schools. These students believed that safe schools had little or no police presence. One student explained his search process with friends: "We were like, 'Let's go try it out, we'll see what's there.' There were no cops around. So we went in and signed up." For students, the absence or minimal presence of police outside the schools or in hallways suggested lower potential for conflict. Others avoided schools with reputations for gang behavior. Students who attended juvenile detention centers valued school environments with structure and discipline to help them stay safe and focused on school. Some found support through short enrollments in military style schools before enrolling in their graduating high schools.

RECOVERY STUDENTS SOUGHT SCHOOLS WITH ATTRACTIVE EXTRACURRICULAR OFFERINGS. Recovery students expressed interest in schools with strong athletic reputations and a variety of sports—namely, football, track, and cheerleading, among others. With their coaches and teams, recovery students found a "family" of supports that included coaches who advocated for their success, peers who pursued similar goals, and structured time during practice sessions that included opportunities to complete homework with some tutoring support. Prior relationships with coaches facilitated recovery student enrollment or transfer. School choice options also helped recovery students switch schools to work with other coaches or play other sports, all while helping students remain positively engaged in school.

RECOVERY STUDENTS VALUED SCHOOLS WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL REINVENTION. Whether forced or by personal choice, by changing schools, some recovery students saw opportunities for a "fresh start" to their troubled high school experiences. For some students who enrolled in two or more schools, the process of finding the "right school" centered less on school characteristics and more on finding nonjudgmental settings in which to recalibrate their own behaviors and make school work a priority. Some students saw opportunities for reinvention in their initial anonymity. Explained one recovery student: "I chose that school because I didn't know anybody. I needed to be my own person." To reset their high school experiences and performance, students focused on developing positive relationships with peers, teachers, and administrators.

RECOVERY STUDENTS SOUGHT SCHOOLS TO EARN LOST COURSE CREDITS. As they entered their second year in high school, many recovery students were mindful of their tenuous positions in the system due to poor grades and low credit accumulation. Some recovery students leveraged their school choice options to catch up on lost credits, typically through short-term enrollments in DCPS or public charter schools that offered specific resources to address the particular hurdles to graduation.

Across DC, schools vary in credit requirements, with some theme or specialty schools requiring additional courses that reflected their special mission. One recovery student struggled to meet a four-year foreign language required by her charter school, so she transferred to a school with lower requirements and tutoring support. Other students shifted schools to retake failed courses only available over the summer at one school.

Students also used the choice process to identify schools that offered more flexibility in course enrollment. For example, a recovery student who failed English 1 learned he could not retake the class for a year. Rather than risk the stigma of being held back or losing time, the student found another school that allowed dual enrolment in English 1 and English 2; by switching schools, he could take both courses to "stay on track." The school choice process also addressed a concern raised by his mother—that he not be labeled an "alternative child" if forced to repeat a grade or fall back in course taking.

Other students chose to transfer to their final high schools because they had "reputations" for helping students graduate, offering them hope to complete high school. "If you messed up, you come here, and get back on track, basically," one student explained. These students had experienced social adjustment issues or were enrolled initially in schools they found "too advanced" academically. Some recovery students used the school choice process to find schools with particular supports that helped them meet basic course requirements for graduation. In all cases, students leveraged the diversity of the system to help them graduate on time.

Positive Adult Relationships Provided Recovery Students a Social and Emotional Anchor in School

In their graduating high schools, each recovery student quickly identified one or more adults in their school who knew them well and wanted to see them succeed. They credited these adults with helping them get focused on school and turn around their academic focus to make progress toward graduation. With these adults, recovery students could talk about problems they faced or share successes. "When you have someone here you talk to," explained one recovery student, "they understand you more." Importantly, recovery students also valued access to a safe space to visit during school—an office, the gym, or a classroom.

Students often referred to these special adults as "my person." A student would touch base informally with a teacher or administrator every day or weekly during the school year. "In here, certain students will go to some teachers to talk to them," one student said. "Like for me, I had Ms. A in 9th and 10th. Next person I had was Ms. B in 11th grade. She knows everything about me." These daily encounters varied in formality and frequency, but all focused on developing recovery students' social and academic lives. Looking back, some recovery students valued the length of the time they had known some school-based adults: "You have these relationships, and, over years," explained one recovery student, "they've seen me at my worst and best. They stuck with me."

Adults mentioned by recovery students spanned a range of roles: middle and high school teachers, social workers, counselors, school administrative staff, janitorial staff, school administrators, sports coaches, security staff, or adults from nonprofits working with DC schools.

RECOVERY STUDENTS VALUED ADULTS WHO PROVIDED INFORMAL COUNSELING. Recovery students found adults in their buildings who both observed their cycles of recovery and contributed to their current growth. These adults were accessible and interested in recovery students when they were struggling and were present when students were ready to change their behaviors and attitudes. "They help you—I can talk to them. Like the attendance office, Mrs. C," one recovery student explained. "They motivated us."

> ***"You have these relationships, and over years, they've seen me at my worst AND best. They stuck with me."***

Support came in two forms. Some recovery students relied on school staff to access basic school supplies. "When you come and you say you need something, they know it's worth getting," a recovery student explained. "Like, you need pencils and stuff to go to class with." Students also relied on school staff to stay focused on given days or before specific classes. "You need the right motivation," one student explained. "Maybe you say, 'I'm tired.' And they say, 'Come on, baby, you can do this.' They talk to get you up. And that gets you to class and that gets you sitting down…because nobody really likes to be in a classroom." The social connection and advocacy helped recovery students maintain attendance, focus, and momentum toward graduation.

RECOVERY STUDENTS VALUED FRANK FEEDBACK FROM ADULTS. A particular quality students highly valued in adults was frank feedback about their negative choices, outlooks, or assumptions about school or life—which they characterized as "ripping off the bandage" and "no sugar coating." "They will give you the talk that you need, to try to set you straight," a student explained. "These are the people [a social case manager, an administrator] I can talk to the most." Another added, "They try to push us, so we succeed."

Students valued adults for their "straight talk"—a willingness to speak the "cold hard truth" about their options, quickly followed with suggested strategies for changing their outlooks and behaviors. Recovery students valued how these adults helped them imagine their futures beyond school, which were not obvious to them. "They tell you that there is more to life than just what you see [at school]," one student said. These special relationships helped students focus on the bigger picture: "Like getting my life together," one student said. A recovery student found a path to recovery through frank conversations with a teacher who challenged her thinking and actions:

> *I found this teacher. When I first went to her class she was telling me, 'You failed all of your classes at the previous school. You just need to get your life together. You just need to be focused on what you're working on, what you want to be, and all that.' And she was like, giving me lessons. I used to always have a bad attitude, too. I really did. And I changed when I was talking to my teacher. Cause she said, 'You're not gonna get anywhere with that attitude. So, you just need to do your work and get good grades.' She was talking to me about colleges and all that stuff. [Pause] I really did [have an attitude]. And I changed.*

Recovery students recounted their intensive one-on-one conversations with their "person" who challenged them to think differently about themselves and the problems they faced. These conversations sparked student self-reflection on who they were and wanted to be by sharing observations about students' actions and current situations: "He told me (pause) 'You have no plan for your life,' or 'You have ambitions for college, but your GPA is low.'" Students expressed both surprise and relief at the frank comments by teachers, counselors, and nonprofit leaders at school, all pointing out that students' negative attitudes, lack of effort, and poor behaviors held them back. Once the shock of frank assessments soaked in, students described how their "person" acted coach-like, suggesting specific strategies the recovery students could adopt to make changes. Recovery students said they worked to enact this advice. These personalized conversations helped students develop new visions of themselves and their futures, and, importantly, embrace their roles in making these visions reality.

Many recovery students reported attention from two or more adults who expressed interest routinely in their well-being and growth. Theses adults reached out to check on students' homework progress and offer advice on the spot. A recovery student who spent time in juvenile facilities, benefited from support from adults—here a teacher and school security guard—who helped her stay focused and overcome obstacles to graduate on time.

> *For me, my person was one of the security guards and, well, a teacher who had been with me in another school—he found me when I got here. I had my GED, but wanted my high school diploma. They pushed me—just telling me to do everything. My old teacher came to all my classes, helped me with all my work and stuff. He feeled me out…knew my situation. And the security guard, he push me, too. We talked.*

Some students even credited the whole school as contributing to their recovery, describing the environment of supportive adults as "wraparound" and "unconditional." Some student views and experiences suggested coordinated efforts by adults or perhaps broader school cultures oriented toward supporting students: "The school is a motivator," explained a recovery student, an observation endorsed by others. "Teachers always have good advice. It motivates us to do better. We just have a chat. We catch up." One recovery student's journey captures the events, personal experiences, and intensive staff interventions that helped him get back on track, even after running into trouble with the law:

> *You got a lot of people here at this high school on your team. Here, I feel support that I have never felt in other high schools. Like the counselors, teachers, I now look at like family, and I've only known them for two years. Mr. E did a lot for me, in school, out of school. Ms. F been picking me up, looking after me, in school, out of school. After I got here, they just pulled up on me outside the school like 'Where have I been?' And they don't care who's outside watching—none of that. They just went straight at it, 'Why aren't you pushing in this class, this week? Why aren't you doing this work?' Those are the people…they give me work to do outside of school. [laughter] I wasn't too happy about it, but it helped me get through. They stuck with me the whole way—the ups, the downs. I even got locked up when I came here, and they still stood by my side. They never quit on me. They just stayed positive.*

While this frank talk was highly important, many students realized they were not able to act on it until later in high school. "Teenagers look for consistency. They need to know you are genuinely here for them. You care," one counselor explained. "That means you have to have the hard talk, the realistic conversation, in which you tell them what is at stake in failing a class. You don't sugar coat it." In fact, all adults who made differences in the trajectory of recovery students—which included administrators, counselors, teachers, and staff—adopted frank approaches in their conversations.

Recovery Students Thrived in High Schools that Helped Develop and Implement a Vision Toward the Future

IDENTIFYING PERSONAL INTERESTS. High schools provided recovery students with self-discovery exercises and guidance that helped them self-assess their knowledge, skills, and preferences. Before entering one high school, incoming freshmen attended a summer bridge program, one goal of which was to support freshmen in developing social bonds before school began to help teachers integrate new students into the large high school culture. Freshmen learned basic computer software skills and completed adaptive English and mathematics assessments that identified their grade-level proficiency, helping teachers and administrators group students for intensive tutoring. Interventions began before school started and continued as needed.

High schools scaffolded student thinking about college and work through formative experiences beginning in 9th grade. Some recovery students valued weekly "advisory periods," when they conducted self-discovery assessments to identify their personalities, dispositions, and preferred work environments. They also developed general study skills to enhance their learning and explored future careers. Some took personal interest assessments and engaged in financial literacy activities, which helped them create "10-year plans." After students identified material goods that supported their future lifestyles—type of car, house, and annual vacation—the program calculated income needed and related professions. One student takeaway: "Everything costs money. I gotta get a good job."

IMAGINING COLLEGE. High schools identified college enrollment as a goal for all students, building into their curriculum knowledge and experiences that support student planning. Setting expectations for performance was an important signal to recovery students, although many did not take action until upper grades. "From day one, graduation is preached to them," one counselor explained. "You are expected to graduate from high school in four years. So your teachers, counselors, administrators—everyone is preaching that to you." To reach this goal, high schools offered a variety of supports that helped students develop the dispositions, knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to achieve that goal.

To ease the transition from middle school, some high schools have adopted 9th grade academy models. Academies provide new students more personalized learning environments to facilitate their adjustments to high school. Supports included direct guidance on the transitions, dedicated faculty, and time to develop positive routines and relationships that promote their learning and growth. Importantly, academies enabled students to focus on developing productive academic routines to support steady credit accumulations toward graduation—addressing key knowledge gaps recovery students reported struggling with.

Students engaged in strategic planning and practice to support their transitions to work or college after graduation. Some schools with academy models required students to apply for acceptance to themed academies in the upper grades. Through the process, rising 10th graders were coached on appropriate dress, attitudes, and behaviors for job/college admissions interviews; how to present their interests and skills; and how to write essays to communicate their backgrounds and ambitions. Students took the process seriously and valued these simulated experiences. "The students are really cute, really being nervous about their interviews," one teacher recalled.

To emphasize college going, students toured college-campuses. To support the process, schools required students either to submit applications or be accepted by colleges as the requirement for graduation. Last year, one neighborhood school helped "everybody apply" to college, with most students applying to local four-year universities, two-year junior colleges, or community colleges. Schools varied in pressure to attend college, from mild ("we encourage") to uncompromising ("Our mission is all about college; we discourage conversation about anything but college"). Counselors associated the push to college as supporting DCPS' goals. "We have to share this vision, and we pushed forward to make it happen," one counselor explained. "And when you 'see it' happen with students, it feels so worth it!"

Cultivating a School Culture of Multiple Chances for School Success

Recovery students struggled to make progress in high schools given seat time requirements, one-shot summative course assessments, and rigid course sequences. High schools that supported recovery student success were able to adapt this model of schooling in two important ways: 1) Educators espoused standards-based orientations toward student growth as they supported the learning of struggling students; and 2) school structures and resources reflected a range of instructional supports for struggling students, tutoring for those at risk of failing, and alternative course-delivery options that allow students to retake failed courses.

DEVELOPING A GROWTH MINDSET AMONG SCHOOL-BASED EDUCATORS. School staff adopted standards-based growth mindsets toward student learning that facilitated recovery student recovery and course completion. While recovery student progress depended on student motivation and effort, it was teacher support and approach to credit recovery that enhanced the learning experience. Teachers who supported the success of recovery students held a growth-oriented mindset toward student learning, extending opportunities to students to retake a failed course—for example—to demonstrate content mastery. Explained one such teacher:

We are trying to get back to standards-based grading as teachers and the whole concept that you get a grade because you have demonstrated that you master the standard. So all the time you take to practice is erased—as long as, in the end, you master.

To help focus attention on meeting a standard, some teachers did not count class participation in student grades. For teachers, it sets up conversations with students that "emphasize [student] effort and progress is valued, no matter what point you start." Teachers emphasized that while students "all start at different places," they "should all reach the same point" in their learning. Under this philosophy, students were taught to expect variation in their learning process and to get to know themselves "as learners." One teacher offered no points for participation in class. "This is all about meeting the standards," explained the teacher to her students. "This is how you performed on the standard. This is your grade. Do you want to fix it? Here is what you need to work on."

Student reflection during the revision process helped teachers manage their learning. Students could see the root cause of their performance—in the test, the essay, the worksheet—and study what they missed, then make corrections in their understanding, and then their performance. "The students buy into it," one teacher explained. "They love the fact that they can 'own their F's'."

For some recovery students, the first critical lesson centered on learning to turn in assignments or making the effort to complete assignments in full. "Students first internalize the logic that it is about effort. They say, because I didn't do something, or I didn't revise something…my score is low." From there, teachers helped students develop study strategies focused on course knowledge and application. Facilitating the opportunity to pass courses and recover lost credits is the notion of flexible time.

Of note was that teachers recognized that student growth mindsets were not yet fully implemented across their schools or even within their own classrooms. Teachers found it easier to use this type of assessment more frequently with smaller groups of students during lunchtime tutoring or after school than during the regular school day. Teachers estimated that a majority or more of their peers subscribed to the standards orientation that included improving student grades based on revised work. But a challenge remained in helping teachers move beyond standards-based grading, which is oriented toward summative assessment, rather than formative assessments aimed toward improvement.

DIVERSE SCHOOL PROGRAMS SUPPORTED CREDIT RECOVERY. School programs provided recovery students structure and support when working to reclaim lost credits. High schools provided a range of tiered supports—including extended learning time, unit recovery, credit recovery, and independent study—with the goal of helping students successfully pass courses to accumulate credits toward graduation.

Recovery students participated in extended learning time at lunch or after school. This tutoring program aimed to strengthen student performance in courses during their initial enrollment. Teachers viewed extended learning time as aligned with schools' overarching view that "every teacher is a tutor."

Teachers tutored two days a week by contract, but those working with recovery students spent additional time on case-by-case bases. All instruction was academically focused, with students seeking a range of supports, including homework help or a review of a previous class lesson. Some teachers took proactive stances, inviting students to stop by at lunch or after school if they noticed deficits after classroom observations, reviews of student work products, or test data. These mandatory sessions ranged in time, typically concluding when teachers felt satisfied with student performance.

Some recovery students also accessed a newer resource called "unit recovery." This program offered specialized tutoring for students who have nearly failed classes or held incompletes but still had time to catch up to earn passing grades before the end of the school year. Tutoring was provided to individual students or small groups by their course teachers and took place during lunchtime. Typically, teachers offered students additional tutoring that incorporated more hands-on and directed work to extend learning time. While initiated to support student athletes, the program expanded to include all students in the school.

School-based credit recovery programs were the most common and valued supports among recovery students. Students reported enrolling in one or two courses each semester, with some also attending summer school. Typically, different teachers from those teaching the students' original courses led the credit recovery classes. Students who experienced conflict with previous teachers appreciated the opportunity to start fresh with other adults. Students attended credit recovery every day after school into the evening during a semester, enrolling anytime between 9th and 12th grade.

During focus groups, students described their experiences attending credit recovery sessions. Some reported working quietly alone on computers with course software. Other students reported access to classroom-based teachers who helped them find resources to finish lab sections of the science module, for example, or clarify lessons that seemed too abstract. The following student descriptions of their time during credit recovery reflected different levels of prior knowledge, confidence, and independent work during the classes.

> *Credit recovery class? It's easy…Sometimes there's a teacher. Sometimes you just complete it yourself. There are lessons. I went for US history. You go to a computer. It tells you how many lessons—like 15. There is a tutorial to tell you what you are gonna do first, how you're going to do it. Then you take the test. If you pass, you move on to the next lesson. You're supposed to do it on your own.*

> *There a lot of students taking reading recovery. During credit recovery, it's like, everybody is focused. They're like, if I'm going to spend my time after school, waste my [free] time, then I'm going to be serious about it…My credit recovery class was really easy because I had already passed Biology II, but had to take Biology I for credit recovery. The teacher who was there helped me a lot. But some teachers probably get irritated by me asking 100 questions (about materials for experiments). Instead of just leaving me on my own, she helped me out a lot.*

Finally, schools also offered independent study options to recovery students who needed high degrees of differentiated instruction. These flexible courses provided teachers broad discretion in working with students and were based on mutual agreement. This course option was used to support seniors.

These distinctions among programs were not always clear to students, who tended to focus on the desired outcomes, namely "passing this course." While the range of support has expanded, the demands on both teachers and students to participate in this portfolio of supports are high. Some recovery students reported being in school continuously—"nonstop"—for three years, with no summer break. During the school year, they may be at school from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day, which reflected full days of school and two recovery classes in the late afternoon. Some students also reported attending Saturday school for part of a year. Depending on the number of credits students needed to recover, opportunities for participation in extra-curricular activities beyond sports were limited.

"Some teachers probably get irritated by me asking 100 questions… Instead of just leaving me on my own, she helped me out a lot."

DEVELOPING PERSONAL ROUTINES TO MONITOR GRADES. Recovery students "owned" their academic growth with the availability of critical and timely information on course performance. A major growth point for recovery students centered on understanding the connections between their classroom performance, their grades, and the accumulation of course credits toward graduation. Schools utilized a range of approaches to draw students' attention to their grades and to help students monitor their progress over the school year.

Schools provided real-time access to course grades to help students and families monitor progress during the school year. Students could see assignment guidance and their grades for each, including teacher comments, as well as missing work. Recovery students valued information about their academic progress, especially their grades. While students received traditional report cards at the quarter, semester, and end of year, it was the daily electronic access to grades that signaled the need to "catch up" on missed work or poor grades. Some schools provided this service through online websites or through an "app" students downloaded to their phones. Students liked the app, as they felt in control of their progress because they could see their cumulative scores, which signaled responses such as: "Dang, that's trouble", "I'm good", or "let's party." Teachers viewed the grade tracker as an information tool helping students "message about things we need to do" and "to see the problems that they need help with" to manage their progress.

Electronic access to grades also enabled students to see how individual assignments added up to final quarter or semester grades. For some students, seeing their recent grade and assignment feedback prompted responses to make changes—either to talk to the teachers to resubmit the assignments or do extra work to improve the grades. One student who checked her grades every day called it "addictive." Teachers pointed students toward this resource to help students become independent. "When they ask me for their grade," one teacher explained, "I tell them to look it up so they can be more self-sufficient."

For teachers who allowed students to improve their grades through revision, the online availability of both grades and teachers' comments about their work helped to stimulate continuous improvement mentalities among students. One teacher explained the student culture it stimulated among some: "For example, I have a student submit a project on Monday. I grade it Monday afternoon. And that evening, I have a student at my desk saying, 'I would like to improve my grade, so I'm going to fix it.' So students track their grades and assignments consistently."

For recovery students with no online access to grades, some checked in personally with teachers or guidance counselors, who also included pep talks: "She told me what I need to do," one student said. "And that I need to get my act together."

SYSTEMICALLY IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WHO WERE FALLING BEHIND. Counselors at some schools worked to design and put in place "early warning systems" that identified students at risk of not graduating on time. A focal point centered on identifying at-risk students as they entered high school from the middle grades, preferably in the summer months or first weeks of school.

The primary obstacle centered on accessing freshman background information about their performance and behaviors in middle school. Specifically, counselors sought information about middle school experiences, including data on 8th grade behavior, attendance, and GPA. To compensate, counselors sought proxies, scanning rosters for older entering freshmen, which offered clues that "something happened before high school." While these inference-based strategies were creative and logical, they were imperfect diagnostics. As one proactive strategy, counselors worked to pool statistical data and the first-hand knowledge of the teachers, administrators, and staff who interacted daily with troubled students. During this collective diagnostic, adults explored variations in student behaviors and performance in different classroom settings, with the goal of customizing supports for the recovery students. Counselors also gleaned ideas about potential formative intervention that could help de-escalate negative situation for the students.

At the time of the study, guidance counselors were initiating conversations in schools to establish protocols and systems that identified high school students who may be at-risk or are falling behind in credits. Some counselors were utilizing software to track students' academic progress and to understand the issues they encountered on their paths to graduation.

Upon identifying students who were at risk of not graduating, lists were distributed to faculty—an activity that took place throughout the school year, typically at the end of marking periods, when student grades are posted. Those students with low or failing grades were flagged and invited to attend information sessions focused on the next steps to pass particular classes. Volunteers were sought out to take responsibility for checking in weekly with students to monitor their progress and provide informal advice to the students. "We tell all faculty, 'If you see any of these [struggling] students, encourage them and talk to them,'" one counselor explained. Faculty worked to motivate students, through small personal encounters in the hallways or lunches, encouraging students to work hard, stay focused on their assignments, and attend classes. As needed, specific faculty were asked to tutor recovery students one-on-one.

Such actions reinforced the previous reflections by students that they benefited from school-wide efforts to provide a coordinated layer of adult support for recovery students. One recovery student captured this sentiment: "My teachers push me. Counselors push me. Everyone was pushing me."

Figure 6. The Look and Feel of "Recovery" as Students Made Progress Toward Graduating High School

"I'm confident! I'm confident! I know I have the determination. I still feel a little, you know, nervous, going out there [beyond high school]. But I feel as though I can get it done. I know I can get it done."

"It was the summer after 9th grade. I started going to my new school. I started getting like, A's. Then I was finally going to honor roll assemblies. I was like, 'This feels good and I want to just keep doing this!' And then once, since I've been getting A's since 10th grade…I thought, 'I can do anything I want to do in life.' So why not reach for the stars."

"I just plan out my day now. When I was a kid you know how everyone always gives you the quotes and stuff. I just started to implant that in my head every day when I woke up, 'Do better.' And I started doing better. And I pounded that in my head every day. Today, I woke up, 'You get what you put out right [Right. That's a good one] Yeah 'If you work hard, you get back what you want.' "

"I remember the moment when I knew like I was actually going to 'make it.' It was like when I first came here, and I got my first honor roll, for my whole high school career. I was just like shocked. I was so surprised by myself that I didn't even…I was so used to just barely making it. So when I made that I was just like, 'Well, I could do anything now.' Now I just kept on getting honor roll. So, yeah…That's when I knew I was going to make it."

"My moment when I got back on track was my 11th grade year. I felt very excited because I knew that there was nothing that was going to stop me from going in the direction I was going in. So I felt very excited and there was no telling where my work ethic is going to take me. That's it."

"My 11th grade year when I got accepted for the scholarship, I felt as though I needed to step up my game, get honor roll throughout every quarter so that when colleges I want to go to, they will look at it (snap snap) and say, 'I want this kid to go to my school' and stuff like that."

Considerations for Policy and Practice

This study gives voice to a noteworthy and inspiring group of young people—those who "beat the odds" by graduating high school on time, despite statistically resembling high school dropouts. Their experiences can serve as powerful insights as policymakers, administrators, and educators continue to grapple with the question: What can be done to ensure that more off-track students "recover" and graduate from high school rather than drop out?

In answering this question, there are two important points to bear in mind.

First, the middle and early high school experiences for many of these recovery students precede an increase in initiatives aimed at supporting off-track students in recent years, both among individual charter schools and across DC Public Schools (DCPS). Most prominent are several systemic efforts within DCPS, including improving electives for middle and high school students; instituting processes for flagging and targeting supports for students who are at risk of not being promoted and those with low course marks; launching 9th and 10th grade academies—as well as "Second Chance" academies for repeating 9th graders; and rolling out a new grading policy that allows students and families to monitor grades.

Second, it is the general nature and purpose of qualitative research to capture anecdotes from the individual perspective—and while common themes may (though not always) emerge, well-intentioned and well-meaning people may disagree about the implications for policy and practice. Hence, this section refrains from overlaying a specific policy framework on student expressions of their recovery experiences. Instead, it seeks to frame these expressions in a way that can empower system and school leaders as they make decisions, implement policies, and gauge the success of practices that respond to the needs of students who are at risk of school failure.

Below are five themes culled from student reflections and related key considerations for policymakers and practitioners who are focused on continuing to improve outcomes for off-track students.

1. Students need adults to believe in them and support them, especially when doing so is difficult. Some students behave in ways that would try anyone's patience. But the recovery students in this study stated clearly that sometimes all students need is a bit of time to mature and at least one adult who believes in them, develops an honest rapport with them, and consistently engages them as they identify and overcome challenges. So, high expectations are critical but so, too, is an understanding that many students are still finding their way and managing complex (and sometimes dangerous or tragic) events and relationships.

   Considerations for policymakers, administrators, and educators:

   - Schools should intentionally recruit and train staff who can develop mentoring relationships with students beyond the classroom.
   - Schools should develop structures and processes that provide supports beyond 9th grade for students who continue to struggle or who have a "moment of clarity" later in their high school years.

2. Disengaged students are more likely to succeed when they are empowered to track their own academic progress and are provided multiple opportunities to revise assignments, access needed courses, and earn credits. Recovery students simply would not have graduated from high school had it not been for their classrooms' and schools' emphasis on content mastery rather than traditional grading practices (which typically rely on seat time, class participation, and one opportunity—a test, paper, or homework assignment—to demonstrate proficiency). Many recovery students' teachers and administrators allowed and encouraged students to revise unsatisfactory assignments, retake tests, and seek additional help, and they provided multiple options for doing so, including before and after school, during the summer, and using computer-based programs. Some students went so far as to change high schools in order to access courses they needed to graduate.

   Considerations for policymakers, administrators, and educators:

   - Technological and/or counseling supports should be made available for students to continuously track their academic progress in a timely way. Where such tools currently exist, monitoring on-the-ground implementation to ensure that students are actively utilizing this resource is critical.
   - School and system policies and processes should be in place to encourage and support students seeking to revise unacceptable work products, access needed courses, and earn needed credits.
   - Schools—especially those serving large numbers of off-track youth—should recruit, train, and support teachers, counselors, and administrators in providing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery.

- Policies should be designed and implemented to allow greater flexibility for students to access specific courses to recover credits, without necessarily needing to enroll in different schools.

3. Recovery students felt overwhelmed as they entered high school. Recovery students in this study made clear how and why middle schools are not working for them and many of their peers. Many recovery students reported being shocked by high school teachers' high expectations, the increased rigor of high school, new class schedules, and social dynamics. Recovery students even admitted that that they failed to understand the importance of passing grades and the need to earn credits to graduate.

   Considerations for policymakers, administrators, and educators:

   - Middle schools should develop opportunities to help familiarize rising 9th graders with the functions of GPA and high school credit accrual.
   - Middle schools should be engaging, relevant, and rigorous, responding to the unique and evolving needs of early adolescents, while preparing them for the rigor and challenges of high school.
   - Schools should continuously assess the effectiveness of various structures (e.g., summer bridge, 9th grade academies) and processes (e.g., counseling) in helping students transition from middle school.

4. Schools need access to high-quality data for incoming students that will help link effective interventions with students who are at risk of failure before the failure occurs. Too often, counselors or other school staff must use anecdotes or piece together data and information from disparate sources to identify students and determine the services they need to be successful. While there has been attention paid to improving access to data for students within local education agencies (LEAs), a particular challenge noted by interviewed staff was accessing freshman background information about student performance and behavior in middle school, especially considering DC's range of DCPS and public charter schools, each with its own data systems.

   Considerations for policymakers, administrators, and educators:

   - Cross-school and cross-LEA systems and protocols should be instituted to facilitate easy and timely access to key information about newly enrolled students for educators, counselors, and school administrators.

5. Schools cannot—by themselves—address all of the needs of off-track youth. The stories told by recovery students—funny, honest, upsetting, and sometimes heartbreaking—remind us that children and youth are influenced greatly by families, neighborhoods, and peers that are, in turn, influenced by societal inequities, violence, poverty, joblessness, and lost hope.

   Considerations for policymakers, administrators, and educators:

   - Schools and LEAs should be encouraged and supported in building strong connections with nonprofits, government agencies, and other service providers to deliver a comprehensive web of services for students and their families.