



Policy Brief

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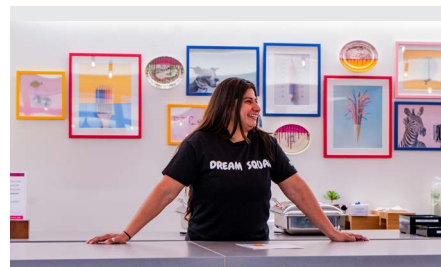
Series
**IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE**

Building Inclusive Schools: How NYC’s Dream Squads Initiative Supports Immigrant Students

By Ben Blanco

Executive Summary

In the United States, a quarter of all school-age children come from immigrant backgrounds, bringing rich linguistic and cultural identities to our schools.¹ While our nation’s self-image as a “nation of immigrants” historically and currently contrasts with its xenophobia and racism, immigrant communities have consistently advocated for themselves through schools and community organizations.²⁻⁶ Schools in particular are important sites to support immigrant communities with information, resources, and care.⁷⁻⁹ This policy brief examines New York City’s Dream Squads Initiative, an innovative program designed to create supportive school environments for



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immigrant students. Launched in 2021 with 25 schools, the initiative has expanded to 113 schools and 2 districts by the 2024-2025 school year, primarily serving schools with higher percentages of multilingual and economically disadvantaged students than the NYC average.

The Dream Squads Initiative establishes school or district-based teams of at least three educators who serve as advocates for multilingual and immigrant students. These teams participate in five virtual training sessions and an in-person convening to develop strategic plans focused on four key areas: school leadership, educator engagement, student empowerment, and family empowerment. The program's impact is significant, with 99% of participants recommending it to other educators and 70% reporting feeling better prepared to meet the needs of multilingual and immigrant students.

Based on interviews with five exemplary Dream Squad teams and the central Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team, this brief identifies five principles critical to the initiative's success:

1. Building upon personal identities, values, and experiences
2. Engaging leadership at all levels
3. Incorporating student, teacher, and community voices
4. Collaborating within and across schools
5. Strategizing for long-term impact

These principles offer practical guidance for school leaders, educators, and policymakers seeking to create more inclusive environments for immigrant students during a time of heightened political tension around immigration.

Introduction

New York City provides a model of school responsiveness through the Dream Squads Initiative. Since launching



If the collective goal of educators is to help young people graduate from high school and have a next step so that they can have a successful life and beautiful future, then sharing things that are working is critical. Why should we hold that here for our 500 kids? There are millions of kids in the city, right? Let alone if you think about the country. So if it's something that can spread [...] that's the goal. So that everyone's having these beautiful experiences."

in 2021 with 25 schools, the Dream Squads Initiative at NYC Public Schools has grown to 113 schools and 2 districts in the 2024-2025 school year. Dream Squads Initiative schools on average serve a larger share of multilingual and economically disadvantaged students than other NYC public schools (see Figure 1). Through the Dream Squads Initiative, schools have implemented family engagement initiatives, expanded student programming, hosted community events, shifted curriculum, and much more. From an internal survey of 115 program participants in 2023-2024, 99% would recommend the program to another educator and 70% felt more prepared to meet the needs of multilingual, immigrant students.

New York City's Dream Squads Initiative began as a training program in the fall of 2020, with the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team in the Office of Multilingual Learners hosting one-off, virtual workshops. In response to educators' growing need to address rising anti-immigrant, anti-Asian, and anti-Black sentiments in the spring of 2020, the team pivoted to a cohort model to train groups of educators through a sequence of trainings and events.

The mission of the Dream Squads Initiative is to create "school or district-based teams of 3+ educators who serve as multilingual and immigrant advocates to create and sustain a welcoming and inclusive environment that prioritizes the well-being and future goals of students. As part of this mission, Dream Squads ensure practices, policies, and programs in their school or district are inclusive of

the brilliance and needs of multilingual, immigrant, and undocumented students and families."

NYC Public Schools do not ask about or track the immigration status of students or their families, and schools are encouraged to make all resources available to all students and families. Keeping true to this practice, schools opt into the initiative at the start of the school year. Once part of the cohort, they participate in five virtual training sessions and an in-person convening to develop and implement strategic plans to support multilingual and immigrant students and families. These strategic plans focus on the initiative's four focus areas: School Leadership, Educator Engagement, Student Empowerment, and Family Empowerment.

The Office of Multilingual Learners and its Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team organizes and runs the core training sessions and annual convening. In addition to trainings, the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team offers in-school support and facilitates intervisitations and resource sharing across schools.

Methods

To learn more about the implementation and success of the model, I interviewed four school-based Dream Squads, one district-based Squad, and the Office of Multilingual Learner's Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team. During each interview, I asked about successes as well as challenges.

Interviewed Dream Squads were

selected by the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team as exemplars. Selected schools also differed in their share of multilingual learners and other demographics, to examine common practices across a range of schools (See Table 1).¹⁰ In addition to the four school teams, one district team, District 4, and the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted with at least two team members and lasted 45 minutes on average. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, then coded for challenges, factors of success, and school initiatives. Codes around leadership, inter school collaboration, student and community voices, and others were created as interviews were conducted. Once all interviews were completed, the emerging codes were organized into four initial principles. The interviews were then re-coded for the principles and written up.

Then, drafts of the brief were shared with the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team for feedback. Based on the feedback, a fifth pillar on teamwork and additional data was added to the brief.

In the course of the interviews, it became clear that successful Dream Squads draw on five principles:

Demographics of NYC Public and Dream Squads Initiative Schools

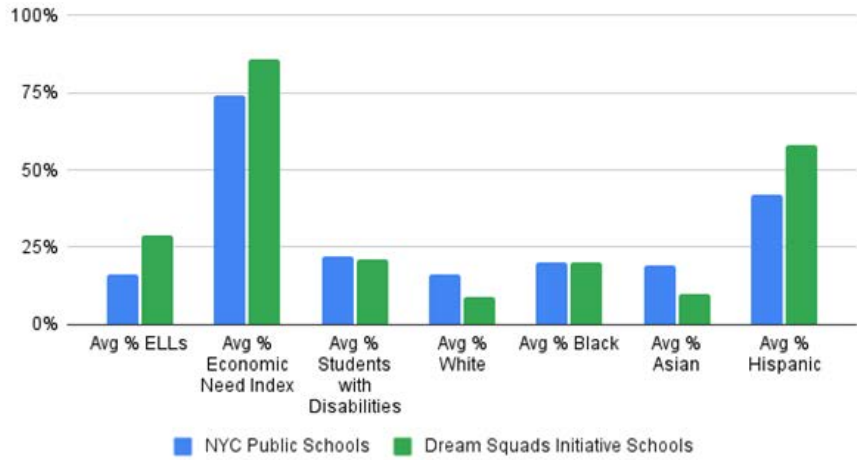


Figure 1: Demographics of NYC Public and Dream Squads Initiative Schools

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strong sense of shared values around supporting immigrant students. Teams invoked these values through personal experiences and stories, including family histories, personal migration stories, and connections in their communities or classrooms.

Drawing from these values, teams recruited members based on a shared vision for the Dream Squad. In doing so, they created teams that could hit the ground running. Describing this, one team shared, “When we first started, we invited all the bilingual teachers. But we realized that not all teachers were interested in investing in this work. Some team members transitioned out. But then we had new members transition in because they were passionate about the mission and connected to the work.”

Constructing teams with personal experiences and shared values led many teams to creative solutions. For example, at one school, the creation of a program to give parents their own ID cards and emails came from a team member’s family history. They shared, “I wanted to reach out to parents who were like my parents. [My parents] were not involved in my schooling because they were embarrassed. They didn’t

Principles Critical to the NYC’s Dream Squads’ Success

Principle 1: Building Upon Personal Identities, Values, and Experiences

A key component of success for the Dream Squads I spoke with was a

Table 1: Demographics of Interviewed Schools

	Townsend Harris High School	Academy of Innovative Technology	High School for Law and Public Service	Pan American International High School
Total Enrollment	1,335	399	450	522
Race				
Asian	58.3%	8.8%	0.9%	0.2%
Black	5.8%	32.8%	9.1%	0.2%
Hispanic	15.0%	53.6%	86.4%	98.7%
White	16.4%	2.8%	2.7%	0.0%
Language Learner				
Economic Need Index ¹	47.6%	79.8%	94.9%	95.0%



have IDs to go to the school. So, I wanted to open the door. I brought the idea to [a Dream Squad member], and she said, 'Yes, let's do this.'" All teams invoked parents, friends, students, and other relationships when describing their initiatives, demonstrating the link between experience, values, and action.

Principle 2: Engaging Leadership at All Levels

All Dream Squads described the importance of leadership for buy-in and building resources across all levels. As an administrator said, "The advice I would give is [start] from the top down. [S]tarting with administration and making sure everybody knows the work that [the Dream Squad] is doing and everybody's on board."

Leadership support ranged from participating in and recruiting members to the Dream Squad to maintaining open communication and providing planning time, classroom space, and funding to pay Dream Squad members for time outside of school. One school described their administrator, saying, "She's always doing what she can. I don't think I've ever heard her say, 'No,' if it's something that's going to support students. She's like, 'How much? How many do you need?' Having that unflinching support from the top is important to implementing the initiatives that we need to."

Knowing that leadership mattered, the Dream Squads Initiative was designed to build support from the top. The training sequence included School Leadership as a core pillar of the program and provided benefits (i.e. in-school training, a central

team for support) to help staff build the case for a Dream Squad to school leadership. Finally, the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team invited district leadership to convenings and schools to see the impact on students and staff. This supported buy-in and funding at the school and district levels.

Principle 3: Incorporating Student, Teacher, and Community Voices

As Dream Squads developed their strategic plan and programming, they all made key investments in student, teacher, and community communication to improve engagement and receive feedback.

All Dream Squads described initial challenges sharing information about new initiatives with students, teachers, and families. To address this, teams engaged in new ways of outreach, including public bulletin boards, creating family WhatsApp groups, and translating documents and communication. As outreach and programming grew, teams began to collect student, teacher, and community feedback through student and parent surveys, conversations with students, community WhatsApp groups, and student representatives on Dream Squads. Building the infrastructure for collecting voices required money and time. One team with students on their Dream Squad set aside money to pay students to participate after school. Another team built a Lunch and Learn program, "a professional learning community built on topics that we felt our teachers needed more support with. We wanted to hear from our teachers to build these sessions and tailor them to their needs." Collecting feedback allowed teams to respond and pivot to shifting needs. In response to increasing student enrollment, one school implemented a Buddy program to pair new students with more experienced ones, sharing, "We were getting a lot of students coming in [...] learning to navigate this new educational system. Teachers were struggling. We were able to listen to student and teacher concerns.

I want [students] to feel safe to speak to all the adults, and I want adults to want to know their stories. I hope that down the road it's just a part of the culture, that it's woven into the fabric of the school. This is what we do. That students come here, and they feel safe, they feel seen, they feel heard, and their experiences are validated and uplifted and they're just intrinsically a part of who we are."

Then we brought it back to our team meeting and decided we could make it our school initiative [...] This buddy system came to light because we were able to listen to students' and teachers' voices. Then, we put it together to benefit everyone."

Principle 4: Collaborating Within and Across Schools

All Dream Squads spoke about the role of teamwork within their school and across the district to keep the work sustainable and implement initiatives. To support this, school and district-based teams were required to have three or more educators actively trained and engaged to participate in the initiative. Additionally, the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team organized school intervisitations where established Dream Squads hosted newer schools, showcased their work, and strategized.

Within schools, creating a team representative of the different roles across schools and districts was key to spread the responsibility of work and create initiatives that addressed students' complicated needs. Three of the four school-based teams I spoke with were composed of teaching and non-teaching staff and all teams had staff across multiple areas of the school, reflecting the staff composition of Dream Squads generally (see Figure 2). Interdisciplinary teams meant

Dream Squads could divide the work and coordinate across teams for the work and coordinate across teams for more complicated programming.

Across schools, intervisitations allowed teams to share ideas, resources, and support. In this way, Dream Squads did not recreate the wheel, instead adapting other teams' materials and initiatives to their school sites. As one staff member described, "As a counselor, in grad school, there's no preparation in terms of support services for undocumented or immigrant families. There's a lot of misunderstanding of immigration rights and what opportunities are out there for immigrant, undocumented students when it comes to college or careers. During the intervisitation, we were able to share some information to a lot of schools that didn't know about certain programs or what students are eligible for."

Principle 5: Strategizing for the Long-term

While teams were faced with challenges, they all navigated them by orienting themselves to the long-term and taking on projects in progressive stages. This orientation was actively developed by the Dreams Squads Initiative through convenings that built a sense of community and emphasized sustainability.

When asked to reflect on their progress, all teams described navigating challenges in the first years by starting small and building up. Most started their first year curating a resource list or coordinating staff professional development. Then, they moved to more intensive initiatives: family engagement events, student support, or curriculum changes. This progression allowed teams to figure out their workflow, build off the work of other schools, and collect feedback. All teams emphasized multi-year processes of trial and error to get initiatives off the ground. Building in this

Dream Squads Titles and Roles (SY 2023-2024)

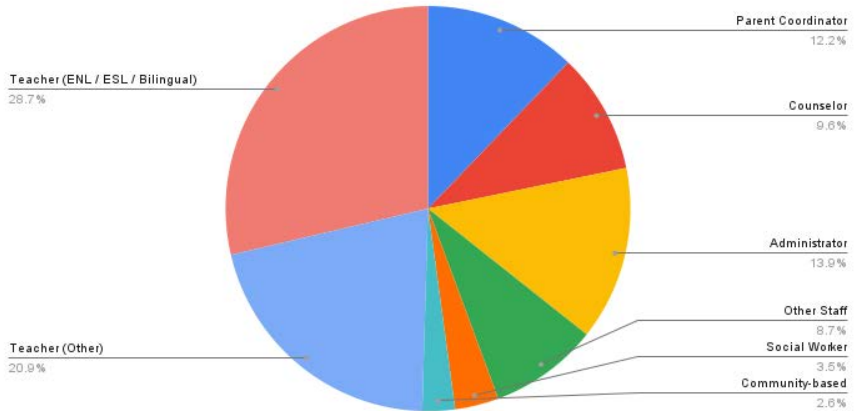


Figure 2: Dream Squads Initiative Teams' Titles and Roles

way also allowed teams to adapt to staff, administration, and district changes.

Convenings run by the Multilingual and Immigrant Student Support team supported long-term planning by building a connected community focused on long-term change. Convenings were designed to build community and activate educators' identities and personal motivations with presentations by school teams, students, community-based organizations, and researchers. As one teacher shared, "You go to the convenings, and you're in tears, right? And it's like, how often do you go to a [professional development] and feel this emotion that's tied to the work? It's not just the heavy stuff and the work, but the heart that's there, too. It's an opportunity for schools citywide to get together and see, 'Oh, I'm not alone in this work.'" This helped teams move past challenges to work for the future. As another educator shared, "When we go to these larger meetings, it re-energizes the work. We hear from the experiences of students and parents who speak to the work of their schools' Dream Squads and how it has made them feel. It gives us hope when it seems like we're not getting to where we want to go fast enough." Through convenings, the Dream Squads Initiative cultivated a theory of change tied to community and sustainable change.

Conclusion

The NYC Dream Squads Initiative offers a powerful model for creating inclusive school environments where immigrant students can thrive. Through building on personal stories, engaging leadership, incorporating diverse voices, fostering collaboration, and strategizing for long-term impact, these educator teams have transformed their schools into communities of belonging.

What makes this initiative particularly compelling is its dual focus on both practical support and emotional connection. Dream Squads don't simply provide resources—they create spaces where immigrant students feel seen, valued, and empowered. As one educator noted, the goal is for these practices to become "woven into the fabric of the school" so that students "feel safe, feel seen, feel heard, and their experiences are validated."

In today's political climate, where immigrant communities face increasing challenges, the Dream Squads model serves as an example of how schools can become crucial sites of support and advocacy. The initiative's growth from 25 to 113 schools in just four years speaks to both its effectiveness and the urgent need it addresses.

For policymakers, the Dream Squads Initiative highlights the importance of investing in educator-led, school-based teams with the autonomy to develop contextually appropriate solutions. For educators, it illustrates how collaborative approaches can distribute leadership, prevent burnout, and create sustainable change.

As we look toward the future of education for immigrant students, the Dream Squads Initiative reminds us that creating inclusive schools is not just about implementing programs—it's about building communities where all students can develop a sense of belonging and pursue their dreams. By sharing these practices widely, we can work toward ensuring that every immigrant student has access to the supportive educational environment they deserve.

How to Support Multilingual, Immigrant Students

Build resources and opportunities for students

- Create list of internships and programs for students with different documentation status and language skills
- Administer student needs and socio-emotional assessment survey
- Post a school resource board with resources for immigrant students in multiple languages
- Educate staff about services and resource lists to share with students

Support community needs

- Administer family needs assessment
- Create and share list with food, legal, health, and housing services in multiple languages
- Provide food, clothing, health, and other needs on campus (food pantry, Catie's Closet)
- Host Adult English as a Second Language classes on campus

Invest in family engagement

- Budget for document translation and

translators

- Translate all school documents and communications
- Sign parents up for grade portal and school communications during events or visits
- Create Parent ID for parents to use when coming to school building
- Create family WhatsApp group

Develop culturally responsive instruction and materials

- Host Lunch and Learns for teachers to share their instructional needs and receive support
- Compile and share list of culturally responsive teaching practices
- Ask your district team for resources
- Develop curriculum that incorporates student-selected texts from home countries
 - Give teachers in-school planning time
 - Budget and pay teachers for out-of-school work
- In-school professional development

Build an inclusive school culture

- Remove barriers for multilingual, migrant students to join student government and Dreams Squad. Budget for afterschool work and language support
- Create Buddy or Ambassador system for current students to support new students

Document success and advocate for resources

- Document Dreams Squads work (take photos, create presentation, meeting notes) to share. BONUS: Submit materials as artifacts for end-of-year evaluations
- Invite school and district leadership to events

How to Run a School-based Dream Squad

Principle 1: Build on personal stories and identities

- Recruit initial team members based on similar goals and vision

- During first meetings, share stories and personal motivations for joining Dream Squad

Principle 2: Engage leadership

- Invite admin to join Dream Squad OR create clear line of communication with admin
- Ask admin about budget for translation or paying students or staff for afterschool work
- Invite leadership to events and convenings

Principle 3: Incorporate student, teacher, and community voices

- Administer student, teacher, and family needs survey
- Secure budget for document translation and translators at events
- Evaluate and build family engagement. How do families hear from the school? What other methods could be used (WhatsApp, in-person, community resource fairs)?
- Brainstorm initiatives from personal experience of team and students

Principle 4: Collaborate within and across schools

- Recruit team members from different roles and school departments
- Attend and host intervisitations
- Reach out to other schools for materials and advice on new initiatives

Principle 5: Strategize for the long-term

- Start with "low hanging fruit" (resource lists, family WhatsApp groups, in-school training) before moving to more complicated projects
- Attend annual convenings. Invite students, teachers, and parents to speak at convenings.

Educator Promising Practice: Buddy Program

Most of the teams I spoke with developed a Buddy or Ambassador program at their schools. In these programs, newly arrived students are paired with current students.

In the High School for Law and Public Service, on their first day in their new school, students go through their schedule, tour the school, and hang out with their buddy. Throughout the year, buddies and students stay in touch. For this school, the program built a sense of community, empowered students, and allowed schools to adapt to changes in enrollment.

A staff member shared, “We were giving the teacher at least a day to play around with, to prepare to welcome new kids [...] the difference is night and day. The [newly arrived students] don’t have to be by themselves [...] and it also allows our students that have been here for a little bit to have a leadership role [...] It’s helpful in every aspect.”

To view the High School for Law and Public Service’s Buddy Checklist, click [here](#).

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The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

