DIPLOMAS NOW

DIPLOMAS NOW BRIEF

i3 Early Impact Report: Analysis and Implications

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Diplomas Now Brief

Early Impact Report: Analysis and Implications

"Implementation of the Diplomas Now secondary school reform model produced a statistically significant, positive impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators, suggesting that a lower percentage of students were notably off track on the pathway to graduation." - MDRC

In 2008, three national organizations – Talent Development Secondary at Johns Hopkins University, City Year, and Communities In Schools – created the Diplomas Now partnership, an innovative, multi-year approach to whole-school improvement for our nation's most challenged middle and high schools. Diplomas Now uses an early warning system to identify students who are off track in attendance, behavior, and course performance in English and math – highly predictive indicators that a student will drop out of high school. Teams of full-time AmeriCorps members and professional staff provide students with individualized academic and social-emotional support and case management to get them on track to high school graduation and college, career, and life success.

Prior research shows that preventing students from exhibiting one or more of these early warning indicators can boost the odds of graduation from approximately 25 percent to 75 percent, which can dramatically improve a young person's life trajectory. Ensuring that high-need students end the sixth and ninth grades with no early warning indicators is one of the most effective strategies a school can implement to significantly increase the odds that a student in a high-need community will graduate from high school.

Now, with the release of a new report on one of the largest randomized control trials of U.S. secondary schools, we have strong evidence that:

- In high-need, high poverty schools, the number of students who end the key sixth and ninth grade transition years with early warning indicators can be reduced.
- It is possible to reduce chronic absenteeism in our nation's highest-need middle schools.

Emerging evidence reveals that more students report having positive relationships with non-teaching adults through the Diplomas Now partnership, which deploys teams of full-time AmeriCorps members and case managers.

We also see emerging evidence of Diplomas Now ensuring students who enter the sixth and ninth grade on track stay on track.

Background

In 2010, Diplomas Now received a $30 million Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand the program's reach across the country. The multi-year grant also supports one of the largest randomized control studies ever conducted of a secondary school model and is led by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization. The PepsiCo Foundation, Diplomas Now's founding private sector investor, provided $11 million to support the study.

Since the Diplomas Now study launched, MDRC has released two reports. The first report detailed school recruitment and program start-up, and the second report explored implementation and school operating differences between Diplomas Now schools and control schools.

This stakeholder briefing offers analysis and implications from MDRC's third and most recent report, *Addressing Early Warning Indicators*, which explores the early impacts of the Diplomas Now model on student and school outcomes. Subsequent reports, scheduled for release in 2018 and 2019, will examine longer-term outcomes, including high school graduation rates.

Methodology

Diplomas Now and MDRC recruited 62 schools from 11 large urban school districts[1] across the country to participate in the study: 32 of these schools were randomly assigned to implement Diplomas Now, and 30 schools were assigned to the control group, free to pursue alternative improvement strategies. This latest report focuses on the first year impacts of full Diplomas Now model implementation, in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, respectively, based on when schools began partnering with Diplomas Now.

The middle and high schools in the study are among the country's highest-need schools, with an average free and reduced-price lunch rate, a proxy for poverty, of over 90 percent. More than 60 percent of students in the study schools are not proficient in math and English, over 30 percent are overage, and 30 percent are chronically absent. The report's authors note that "random assignment resulted in two groups of schools (DN and non-DN schools) that were comparable on measures of attendance, student behavior and course performance at the start of the Diplomas Now model implementation. In general, the students in the analytic sample who attended DN schools were similar to the students who attended non-DN schools."

Key Findings and Context

This study found that Diplomas Now has a positive, statistically significant impact on increasing the percentage of sixth and ninth graders exhibiting no early warning indicators and is succeeding in reducing the number of students at risk of dropping out across entire schools. **This provides the first strong evidence (demonstrated by a randomized control trial) across multiple school districts that it is not only possible to identify sixth and ninth grade students who are on the path to dropping out, but also to change their course and get them back on track to high school graduation**.

According to MDRC:

> "Implementation of Diplomas Now resulted in a positive, statistically significant impact on the percentage of sixth- and ninth-graders without any early warning indicators — that is, students who had maintained an 85 percent attendance rate or better, were suspended fewer than three days, and passed English/language arts and math, the subject areas explicitly targeted for support as part of the Diplomas Now model."

Reducing early warning indicators is the key metric that Diplomas Now was designed to improve. The early impact findings show that identifying early warning indicators and providing

[1] Boston, Chicago, Columbus, Detroit, Washington D.C., East Baton Rouge, Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, Philadelphia and San Antonio

interventions to help students get back on track can occur consistently across major urban school districts and in the highest-need middle and high schools.

The results are particularly encouraging given that they measure impact from the first year of a multi-year intervention. Furthermore, similarly rigorous randomized control trials rarely produce "statistically significant" impact.[2]

Other notable findings include:

Diplomas Now schools were implementing different practices than were the comparison schools, and the differences, and their impact, grew over time

According to MDRC, "From the first to the second year of implementation, DN schools became more different from non-DN schools in terms of their use of reform-oriented practices and structures — DN schools showed sustained levels of reform implementation, while the levels declined in the non-DN schools." Key Diplomas Now practices include:

- Interdisciplinary teacher teams with shared students and common planning time
- Early warning indicator meetings with school and Diplomas Now partners to identify at-risk students and plan interventions for them
- Specialized support for struggling students, including academic tutoring, social-emotional development support, and case management
- Job-embedded professional development and ongoing coaching for teachers

As a result of these practices, by the second year of implementation, there were statistically significant differences between Diplomas Now and non-Diplomas Now schools in the frequency of:

- Teachers using data to drive instruction and target struggling students
- Teacher collaboration
- Teachers receiving support from instructional coaches
- Students receiving coordinated academic and non-academic services
- Math and English help for students
- In-class behavioral support for students

The impact on early warning indicators "increased from the first year of implementation to the second year of implementation."

Diplomas Now middle schools had strong outcomes

Diplomas Now had a significant impact in middle schools despite decreased sample size, with notable impacts on increasing the percentage of students with no early warning indicators in the sixth grade, particularly among students who were not proficient in elementary schools, and on reducing chronic absenteeism overall. This report documents the highest level of evidence, proving that **it is possible to reduce chronic absenteeism even in the highest-need schools**.

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[2] Fewer than 1 in 10 education studies report positive, meaningful results. Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, "Randomized Controlled Trials Commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences Since 2002: How Many Found Positive Versus Weak or No Effects," July 2013.

More analysis is needed to understand high school impacts

Diplomas Now had a positive impact on the percentage of ninth graders with no early warning indicators, particularly on first-time ninth graders who were not off track in eighth grade. But with the sample size reduced to only high schools, the impact was not large enough to reach statistical significance. Future reports will examine Diplomas Now's impact on the incremental reduction of early warning indicators, in addition to the impact on eliminating early warning indicators and to their effect on graduation outcomes. These analyses, along with more detailed study of the connection between implementation and outcomes, will provide a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges to high school impact. Diplomas Now did have a positive, statistically significant impact on the percentage students who passed math in the ninth grade among those who entered high school on track.

In high-poverty environments, even academically prepared students are at risk of falling off track during the sixth and ninth grades; emerging evidence indicates Diplomas Now helps these students stay on track

Diplomas Now schools had greater success than comparison schools in keeping fifth grade students who were academically proficient on track in sixth grade and in keeping eighth grade students who did not have early warning indicators on track in ninth grade. **This shows the value of early warning and tiered response systems to help guide and support students through the perilous transitions to middle and high school in high poverty communities**.

Diplomas Now schools create stronger learning environments

Students at Diplomas Now schools were more likely to report a positive relationship with an adult at school who was not a teacher and reported participating in more academically-focused after-school activities than did their peers in non-Diplomas Now schools. Additionally, Diplomas Now had positive and statistically significant impacts on teachers' perceptions of school climate during the second year of implementation.

Diplomas Now shows progress on impacting broader school outcomes

The study also examined Diplomas Now's impact on a broader school measure to determine if there were increases in the number of students who pass all their classes, attend at rates of higher than 90% and have never been suspended. MDRC defined this composite measure as the "stability threshold." Diplomas had a positive but not statistically significant impact on this metric overall, which provides emerging evidence that targeting core math and English classes for support, and students who have had suspensions, can have a broader effect. In particular, Diplomas Now had positive outcomes for three of four subcategories of students on this stability measure[3]:

- Students who entered sixth grade proficient
- Students who entered sixth grade not proficient
- Students who entered ninth grade above the stability threshold in eighth grade

Among students who entered ninth grade not meeting the stability threshold in eighth grade, Diplomas Now did not achieve positive or significant impact in meeting this measure in the ninth

[3] 6th graders were defined as on/off track based on academic proficiency and in 9th grade based on stability threshold

grade (although it did show positive impact on not demonstrating early warning indicators among this group).

According to MDRC, “The model’s effect on the percentage of students meeting the “higher bar” [stability threshold] indicating a stable pathway to graduation is not statistically significant, but it shows progress.”

Takeaways and Next Steps

Ultimately, the goal of Diplomas Now is to better prepare more students for graduation and for post-secondary success in the nation’s most challenged schools. The findings in this report are encouraging and indicate a path toward that goal.

“The focus of the Diplomas Now model, particularly with its early warning system and tiered support, is to reduce the percentage of students with early warning indicators,” the report states. “And this finding suggests those efforts are starting to make a difference after two years.” *Addressing Early Warning Indicators* provides rigorous evidence to support Diplomas Now’s theory of action: Combining whole-school reforms with enhanced student support, including additional human capital fueled by national service and case managed supports and guided by an early warning system, strengthens the nation’s most challenged schools and keeps more of the most vulnerable students on track to high school graduation.

The findings also underscore the need for providing students in the highest-need urban schools with multiple years of support. The study revealed several areas for improvement, including gains in student behavior as measured by suspensions and meeting the size and intensity of student need in high schools. Additionally, while Diplomas Now schools improved average attendance, discipline and course passing rates from baseline, the study did not find a statistically significant difference on these measures as compared to control schools.

These improvement areas validate Diplomas Now’s internal data analysis, which showed these challenges. During the third year of implementation (not captured in the report), the Diplomas Now team worked with many of its schools to implement a restorative justice approach to student discipline, which empowers students to resolve conflicts and contributes to safe and orderly school climate. Diplomas Now implemented more school-wide approaches to attendance and behavior, as well as start and finish strong campaigns for students, to bolster targeted approaches to the ABCs. The impact of these efforts will be examined in future studies.

MDRC will prepare two more Diplomas Now reports. The fourth, scheduled for release in 2018, will discuss which elements of the Diplomas Now model best predict positive outcomes for students. A final report, scheduled for release in 2019, will report on high school graduation of students who attended DN and non-DN high schools and on ninth grade performance of students who matriculated through DN and non-DN middle schools. The report will also present the same attendance, behavior, and course performance outcomes as this report did, but for the fourth cohort of sixth and ninth grade students.

The results of the study are particularly timely, as school districts begin to implement a new overarching federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, which emphasizes evidence-based initiatives and establishes new tiers of evidence for programs adopted by low-performing schools that receive additional federal funding to support school improvement

efforts. This Diplomas Now early impact report expands the evidence base, as it is the first large-scale randomized study encompassing multiple school districts to show that early warning indicators can be reduced in the nation's most challenged middle and high schools.

The i3 results demonstrate that the **human capital provided by AmeriCorps is a critical lever for reducing early warning indicators, providing capacity for more positive relationships with students and additional student supports at scale, including academically focused after school programs**.

"If these impacts are maintained," the MDRC report says, "following these students into high school will indicate whether Diplomas Now's encouraging intervention with students in the middle grades yields positive high school outcomes."

For more information and a copy of the full MDRC report, visit www.diplomasnow.org.

About Diplomas Now

Diplomas Now partners with the nation's most challenged middle and high schools to improve outcomes for students with the greatest needs. Diplomas Now provides whole-school improvement practices and an early warning system that identifies students who are off track in attendance, behavior and course performance. Diplomas Now then provides individualized academic and social-emotional support and case management to get them on track.

Diplomas Now was launched in 2008 by three organizations working in partnership: Talent Development Secondary at Johns Hopkins University, which provides curriculum and instruction support to teachers; City Year, which provides high-impact student, classroom and school-wide academic and social-emotional interventions; and Communities In Schools, which provides case management support to students with the highest needs.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and educational policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

About the PepsiCo Foundation

Established in 1962, the PepsiCo Foundation is the philanthropic anchor of PepsiCo, Inc., responsible for providing charitable contributions to eligible non-profit organizations. The PepsiCo Foundation is committed to developing sustainable partnerships and programs in underserved regions that provide opportunities for improved health, environment and education.