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Contact: John Hutchins  
(212) 340-8604, john.hutchins@mdrc.org

## **Research Offers Lessons for Improving Low-Performing High Schools Studies Address Five Challenges Facing Educators**

(New York) — A new report from MDRC, *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform: Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*, offers research-based lessons for helping low-performing high schools, which are the focus of increased concern by federal, state, and local policymakers. MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization focused on education and social policy.

Dropout rates at American high schools remain stubbornly high — estimated at 29 percent nationally and even higher for African-American and Hispanic students. In fact, 46 percent of African-American students and 39 percent of Hispanic students attend high schools where graduation is no better than a 50-50 proposition. And too many high school students who *do* manage to graduate aren't ready for the worlds of work and college. For instance, 28 percent of all students entering public two- and four-year colleges in the fall of 2000 had to take remedial courses.

Recent research on three high school reform models — Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development — offers hope that programs can improve low-performing high schools. Together, these three interventions are being implemented in more than 2,500 high schools across the country, and various components of these models are being used in thousands more schools. Each model has been the subject of rigorous evaluation by MDRC, and each has been shown to improve some measures of student success. The new report offers lessons from across these three studies on:

- Creating personalized and orderly learning environments
- Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills
- Improving instructional content and practice
- Preparing students for the world beyond high school
- Stimulating change in overstressed high schools

In short, the report asserts that *structural changes* and *instructional improvement* are the twin pillars of high school reform. MDRC's research suggests that transforming schools into small learning communities and assigning students to faculty advisors can increase students' feelings of connectedness to their teachers. Extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high-quality curricula, and training on these curricula for teachers can improve student achievement. Furthermore, school-employer partnerships that involve career awareness activities and work internships can help students attain higher earnings after high school.

In addition, students who enter ninth grade behind academically can make better progress if initiatives single them out for special support. These supports include caring teachers and special courses designed to help them to acquire the content knowledge and learning skills

they missed out on in earlier grades. Freshman Academies housed in a separate part of the building may also be helpful.

Developed for an audience of policymakers and practitioners, MDRC's new research synthesis looks inside the "black box" of the three comprehensive reforms to draw reasoned conclusions about which particular aspects of the interventions made them effective (or, in some cases, proved ineffective). At the same time, because each reform model was evaluated as an integrated entity, conclusions about the effectiveness of particular components of the initiatives can never be as solidly grounded as conclusions about the impact of each program as a whole.

"Whether districts and schools adopt a comprehensive reform initiative like the ones MDRC studied or put together the elements of a comprehensive intervention on their own, much has been learned about what is needed — and what seems to work," noted report author Janet Quint. "What remains is to make sure that practitioners have the support they need to put that learning into practice."

For a copy of the report, *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform: Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*, by Janet Quint, visit the MDRC website: [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org). To set up an interview with an expert from MDRC, contact John Hutchins, (212) 340-8604 or [john.hutchins@mdrc.org](mailto:john.hutchins@mdrc.org).

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*Headquartered in New York City, with a regional office in Oakland, CA, MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization with more than 30 years of experience designing and evaluating education and social policy initiatives.*