

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

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**HIGH SCHOOL REFORM BOOSTS ACADEMIC PROGRESS
FOR STUDENTS IN LOW-PERFORMING URBAN SCHOOLS**
***Talent Development Increases Attendance, Credits Earned, and
Promotion Rates in Philadelphia***

(New York) — Talent Development, a high school reform initiative that seeks to transform the ninth grade, produced substantial and pervasive educational gains for students in very low-performing schools in Philadelphia, according to a new study from MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization. The study found that Talent Development increased school attendance by nine days per year for each student. For a high school with 500 first-time ninth-graders, it helped an additional 125 students pass algebra and an extra 40 students get promoted to tenth grade. There are also indications that positive effects are beginning to extend to eleventh-grade math test scores and to graduation rates.

This report comes as President Bush, the nation's governors, philanthropists, and business and education leaders are seeking new solutions for the distressing state of many urban high schools. In fact, in a typical city high school in a high-poverty neighborhood in the United States, less than half of entering ninth-graders eventually graduate — and even those students who do are often unprepared for work or postsecondary education.

“Ninth grade is the largest leak in the educational pipeline, where struggling students often fail to make the transition from middle school to high school,” said James J. Kemple, Director of MDRC's K-12 Education Policy Area and lead author of the report. “Talent Development eases the way for students during this ‘make-or-break’ year both by strengthening instruction in math and English and by changing the structure of school to make it feel smaller and more personalized.”

What Is Talent Development?

The centerpiece of Talent Development is the Success Academy, in which ninth-graders are taught by teams of teachers in “small learning communities.” The students receive instruction using specialized curricula in extended classes — with double doses of English and math. Other features include a Twilight Academy, an after-hours program for ninth-graders having special difficulties, and Career Academies in the upper grades to extend the small learning communities concept and to provide course choices built around career themes. Teachers also receive sustained professional development on site as well as in-class coaching support.

The Talent Development model, supported by researchers and practitioners at The Johns Hopkins University and facilitated in Philadelphia in partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund, is currently operating in 83 high schools in 20 states. The MDRC evaluation of Talent Development in five Philadelphia high schools, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, used a stronger research design than is usually found in evaluations of education reform — one that provides a high degree of confidence that the changes in student outcomes were caused by Talent Development and not by other factors.

Key Findings

The main findings of the study are:

- Talent Development led to substantial positive effects on a broad range of education outcomes, including attendance, academic course credits earned, tenth-grade promotion, and algebra pass rates — and, in the two schools in which students were tracked through twelfth grade, on math test scores and graduation rates.
- The positive impacts for ninth-graders were seen in the first year of implementation, and the early effects were sustained for students as they progressed in school.
- The positive effects of Talent Development seem to be driven by two main factors: (1) the intensity of the intervention for ninth-graders and (2) the blend of *structural reforms*, which created smaller, supportive learning environments for students and teachers, and *instructional reforms*, which enabled students to catch up and make progress on a core academic curriculum. This suggests that structural reforms that create smaller schools may be necessary but not sufficient for improving educational outcomes.
- While many students benefited from Talent Development, the schools in Philadelphia still face the prevailing national challenge of preparing all students for graduation, postsecondary education, and employment. Even in the Talent Development schools, the typical ninth-grader still misses about 40 days of school per year, nearly a third of ninth-graders will not be promoted to tenth grade, and more than half of incoming ninth-graders will not be ready to graduate in four years. In addition, Talent Development had little impacts on reading assessments or on educational outcomes for repeating ninth-graders.

“Educational reformers need good evidence about what works in order to make a lasting difference in American high schools. These Talent Development findings are unusually rigorous, and they describe a model that is uncommonly effective across a variety of educational outcomes,” said Gordon Berlin, MDRC President. “Creating smaller communities of learners to overcome the anonymity of the large urban high school is necessary, but it may not be sufficient. High school reformers must also tackle what gets taught and how it is taught.”

For a copy of the report, *Making Progress Toward Graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School Model*, by James J. Kemple, Corinne M. Herlihy, and Thomas J. Smith, or to set up an interview with an expert from MDRC, contact John Hutchins, (212) 340-8604 or 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 30 years of experience designing and evaluating education and social policy initiatives.