

# **The Talent Development High School Model Context, Components, and Initial Impacts on Ninth-Grade Students' Engagement and Performance**

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## **Overview**

The Talent Development High School model is an education reform initiative that aims to improve the academic achievement of students in large, nonselective, comprehensive high schools. In operation at 33 high schools in 12 states across the country, the approach encompasses five main features: small learning communities, organized around interdisciplinary teacher teams that share the same students and have common daily planning time; curricula leading to advanced English and mathematics coursework; academic extra-help sessions; staff professional development strategies; and parent- and community-involvement in activities that foster students' career and college development.

MDRC is evaluating the model at the invitation of the organization that created it, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), based at The Johns Hopkins University. Funding for this report was provided, through CRESPAR, by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences.

The report describes the context in which Talent Development operates, details the model's components, and documents its implementation in five high schools in a large, urban school district. It presents findings on Talent Development's effects on student achievement during the first three years of program operation, focusing on impacts for ninth-graders. The analysis is based on an innovative quasi-experimental research methodology.

### **Key Implementation Findings**

- The high schools in the study are characterized by low student engagement, poor prior preparation among entering ninth-graders, low ninth-grade promotion rates, and continued problems in the upper grades.
- Each Talent Development high school focused its initial implementation on the ninth grade by creating small learning communities, enacting curricular reforms, and providing professional development for teachers. The implementation process was supported by a team of Talent Development organizational facilitators and coaches.

### **Key Impact Findings**

- For first-time ninth-grade students, Talent Development produced substantial gains in academic course credits and promotion rates and modest improvements in attendance. The percentage of ninth-graders completing a core academic curriculum increased from 43 percent on average before the implementation of Talent Development to 56 percent after implementation began. This increase is about three times the level of increase in similar schools in the district. Promotion rates in the Talent Development schools increased by just over 6 percentage points, while they fell by 4 percentage points in the comparison schools.
- Improvements in ninth-grade course credits earned, promotion, and attendance were strongest in the first three schools to begin using Talent Development, and these schools sustained improvements into the second and third years of implementation.

Because these preliminary results are based on a small sample of schools in a single school district at the early stages of implementation, they should be interpreted with caution. Still, the initial evidence of Talent Development's capacity to keep ninth-grade students on track for graduation is encouraging. Future reports will track outcomes for up to five years, include analysis of students in all high school grades, and examine the extent to which the fidelity of program implementation varies across schools and over time.