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Charting a Path to Graduation

The Effect of Project GRAD on Elementary School Student Outcomes in Four Urban School Districts

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Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD) is an ambitious education reform initiative designed to improve academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and rates of college attendance for low-income students. It is an unusual reform model in that it intervenes throughout an entire “feeder pattern” of elementary and middle schools that send students into each Project GRAD high school. This report presents results of MDRC’s multiyear evaluation of the effects of Project GRAD on student achievement at elementary schools in six feeder patterns, encompassing a total of 52 schools in four cities: Houston, Texas (the original site); Atlanta, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio; and Newark, New Jersey. A companion report examines Project GRAD’s effects at the high school level in three urban school districts.

In elementary schools, Project GRAD implements reading and math curricula, with enhanced professional development for teachers. In addition, each elementary school builds support in the community for school improvement and college attendance, implements a classroom management program, provides students with access to needed social services, and receives special support from local Project GRAD organizations. At the high school level, Project GRAD’s model assumes that better-prepared students would come from the feeder schools, would benefit from special academic counseling and summer academic enrichment in high school, and would qualify for a scholarship to attend college, which is the “cornerstone” of the Project GRAD reform.

The key findings of this report are:

- Scores on *state achievement tests* at Project GRAD elementary schools in Houston and Atlanta improved in the years following implementation of the initiative. However, in an environment of strong state and local focus on state achievement tests, scores improved by similar amounts at comparison schools in these same districts.
- Project GRAD produced statistically significant positive effects on elementary students’ scores on *national achievement tests* in Houston and Newark; that is, while comparison schools experienced a decline in scores on these tests, Project GRAD schools saw scores remain constant or increase.
- In Columbus, the implementation of Project GRAD was initially weaker than in the other sites, and this appears to have lowered test scores — both absolutely and relative to comparison schools — in the early years of the initiative.