



Executive Summary

MOVING DOWN THE TRACK

Changing School Practices
During the Second Year of
DIPLOMAS NOW

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY
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Overview

Too many students in high-poverty, urban communities drop out of high school, and too few graduate prepared for college and careers. Three national organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — have formed Diplomas Now in an effort to transform urban secondary schools so fewer students drop out and more graduate ready for postsecondary education and work. Thanks to a validation grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s 2010 Investing in Innovation (i3) competition and matching funds from private sources, teams from all three organizations are implementing the Diplomas Now data-driven, tiered intervention model in schools across the nation. The model combines a comprehensive school reform strategy aimed at transforming the academic experience of all students with early warning indicators related to attendance, behavior, and course performance. By identifying students at risk of dropping out and intervening with targeted support, Diplomas Now attempts to get failing students back on track.

MDRC and ICF International are conducting an independent, experimental evaluation of the impact and implementation of Diplomas Now. During the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, 62 secondary schools in 11 school districts agreed to participate in this study. Thirty-two of these schools were randomly assigned to implement the Diplomas Now model while the other 30 schools were assigned to a control group, continuing their existing school programs or implementing other reform strategies of the districts’ or schools’ choosing. This second report shares second-year implementation fidelity findings, looks at the differences in school structure and staff practice between schools implementing and not implementing the program, and presents analyses of qualitative data that delve deeper into contextual issues and the integration of the program into the schools. Findings from this report include:

- As in the first year of implementation, during the second year schools implemented a majority of program components as the model’s designers intended, but still showed room for growth to meet ideal implementation.
- There are differences in organization and services between schools randomly assigned to implement the model and similar schools randomly assigned to not implement the model, suggesting that model implementation is changing schools’ practices in ways that align with the goals of Diplomas Now.
- Model implementation was somewhat hindered by factors external to the program such as staff turnover and budget cuts, but Diplomas Now staff members were able to support schools despite these challenges. Program staff members were most successful when they could align the program with school goals and garner school administrator and teacher support.

Preface

Too many young people growing up in U.S. cities are not graduating high school or are graduating unprepared for postsecondary education and the workplace. The Diplomas Now model aims to address that problem through an ambitious collaboration of three organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — offering a promising, multifaceted approach to secondary school reform and student support. The partners are implementing a complex set of reforms in middle schools and high schools in 11 of the largest school districts in the country, with the goal of keeping students from dropping out and helping more of them graduate high school prepared for college and careers. The model includes organizational, instructional, and curricular support to schools as a whole, and also aims to identify students falling off the graduation track and to intervene with additional academic and social service support.

This second report for the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) evaluation of Diplomas Now presents findings about the second year of implementation, and explores the context surrounding the implementation of the program and its integration into schools. It discusses how closely schools implementing the Diplomas Now model followed the intentions of the model's designers over the first two years, and also explores the differences in programs and services between the schools implementing the model and those not implementing it. This analysis of *service contrast* shows whether Diplomas Now is changing school structures and the services offered to students. It illustrates how schools are different from what they would have looked like without Diplomas Now. When the impact results become available, the analysis of service contrast will help reveal what parts of the Diplomas Now model are effective in creating positive change for students in the complex environments of public schools.

The next report will present results regarding the model's impact on students' attendance, behavior, and course performance, three important indicators of future school success and graduation. The more Diplomas Now changes school practices, the more likely it will be to have an impact on student success. Subsequent reports will explore longer-term outcomes, including ninth-grade completion for students who entered the study in sixth grade and high school graduation for students who entered in ninth grade.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This report could not have been accomplished without the efforts of a great many people. The study has benefited especially from the time, energy, and commitment put forth by the staff members in the participating school districts and schools and by the Diplomas Now staff members working within some of those schools, all of whom were vital in both supporting the data-collection efforts and providing the information detailed in this report. School administrators, teachers, and on-site Diplomas Now program staff members took time out of their busy schedules to participate in surveys. At case study schools and districts, school administrators, district leaders, teachers, on-site Diplomas Now program staff members, parents, and students took part in interviews and focus groups.

The assistance and cooperation of Diplomas Now staff members at the national level have also been invaluable to data collection and report writing. The Diplomas Now Implementation Support Team informed the implementation research design, including the survey protocols, and provided data on the fidelity of implementation. The Diplomas Now National Executive Team answered our many requests for program information and gave feedback on earlier drafts of this report.

Mike Puma provided technical assistance to the evaluation team, and ensured that the team understood and met the standards set for Investing in Innovation (i3) evaluations regarding impact and implementation research plans. Kristin Porter and Rachel Rosen at MDRC helped draft research plans and offered support and advice on analyses.

Several MDRC and ICF International staff members and consultants served as school district liaisons and supported survey data-collection efforts: Eleanor Leahy, Rachel Pedraza, Stephanie Safran, Kelly Walton, Nicole Dutch, Lisa Luo, Allison Alexander, and Jackie Rhodes. Members of this group, along with Rob Ivry and Jacklyn Willard at MDRC, worked with Diplomas Now staff members to recruit districts and schools to participate in this project.

At ICF International, Caitlin Murphy helped lead the qualitative data-collection activities with support from Katie Campbell, Sarah Johnson, Kristen Peterson, and consultant Stephanie Safran. Elyse Goldenberg and Lauren Durkee assisted with the coding and analysis of the qualitative data.

At MDRC, Leslyn Hall supported survey design, and Seth Muzzy, Eleanor Leahy, and Nicole Morris helped manage communications between MDRC and ICF International while ICF International was administering the surveys. Nicole Clabaugh and Andrea Shane provided programming and analysis support, and Nicole and Larissa Saco coordinated the stages of report writing and production. Rekha Balu, Gordon Berlin, Oscar Cerna, Fred Doolittle, Joshua

Malbin, and Marie-Andrée Somers carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and offered helpful critiques throughout the writing process. Anne Poliakoff at ICF reviewed, provided feedback on, and edited early drafts of Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Joshua Malbin edited the full report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared the report for publication.

Executive Summary

Diplomas Now is a partnership of three national organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — to transform urban secondary schools so fewer students drop out and more graduate ready for postsecondary education and work. The Diplomas Now model is a comprehensive approach to whole-school reform that includes structural changes, instructional materials and curricula, teacher and administrator coaching and support, and an early warning system that identifies and targets students falling off the graduation track. The model brings additional people into the school to support model implementation and provide additional assistance for students. Acting as a representative for the partnership, Johns Hopkins University, home to Talent Development Secondary, was awarded a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant in 2010 to support the expansion of Diplomas Now from a few schools to more than 30 across more than 10 school districts. The grant funds also support a rigorous experimental evaluation of the Diplomas Now model, led by MDRC in partnership with ICF International, that explores Diplomas Now’s implementation and impact.

This report focuses on the second year of Diplomas Now model implementation. It presents several key findings:

- As in the first year of implementation, during the second year schools implemented a majority of program components with fidelity to the model, but still had room for growth to meet ideal implementation. On average, Diplomas Now schools (DN schools) were most successful in implementing those program components that involved adding new services and technology, provided directly by Diplomas Now staff members. DN schools have been less successful thus far in implementing those program components that require schools or districts to modify their curricula or to institute or expand their instructional coaching for teachers.
- Diplomas Now has resulted in differences between the programs of DN schools and those of similar schools not assigned to implement the model (non-DN schools), suggesting that model implementation is changing school practices in ways that align with the goals of Diplomas Now. These differences grew from Year 1 to Year 2, in part because non-DN schools reduced their services. This suggests Diplomas Now stabilized schools that might otherwise have lost services.
- Although model implementation was somewhat hindered by factors external to the program (such as principal turnover and budget cuts), Diplomas Now staff members were also able to support schools through these types of tran-

sitions. School and program staff members reported that the Diplomas Now school-based teams had often been successful by the second year in becoming part of the fabric of the school. Program staff members suggested they were most successful when they could align the program with school goals and garner school administrator and teacher support.

Background

Although the national high school graduation rate has increased over the past decade, one in five students still do not complete high school in four years.¹ Among low-income students, almost 30 percent fail to graduate on time.² Compared with high school graduates, dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, earn less money, suffer from poor health, be incarcerated, or be dependent on social services.³ Students who face the most serious barriers to earning their diplomas are in the greatest need of intensive academic, social, and other interventions to make it through high school, and most dropouts are concentrated in low-income, urban high schools.

Research has shown that it is possible to predict a student's likelihood of dropping out of high school using indicators of poor attendance, poor behavior, and course failure measured as early as middle school.⁴ These findings suggest that programs may have greater success getting more students to graduation if they intervene with students who are off track as early as middle school. Moreover, ninth grade is a critical year, and researchers have shown that improving student course performance in the ninth grade can lead to substantial improvements in graduation rates.⁵

Among those students who do graduate high school, many do not graduate ready for college and need to take remedial (developmental education) courses: over 30 percent of college undergraduates and over 40 percent of community college students enroll in such courses.

¹Richard J. Murnane, "U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations," *Journal of Economic Literature* 51, 2 (2013): 370-422.

²Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Joanna Hornig Fox, Jennifer L. DePaoli, Erin S. Ingram, and Mary Maushard, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, 2014).

³Kristin Anderson Moore, *Making the Grades: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

⁴Robert Balfanz, Liz Herzog, and Douglas J. Mac Iver, "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions," *Educational Psychologist* 42, 4 (2007): 223-235.

⁵Melissa Roderick, Thomas Kelley-Kemple, David W. Johnson, and Nicole O. Beechum, *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year* (Chicago: University of Chicago, CCSR, 2014).

es.⁶ Beyond supporting struggling students to graduation, school improvement efforts need to ensure that all students participate and succeed in rigorous curricula that prepare them for college and careers.

The Diplomas Now Partnership

The Diplomas Now partnership works with schools to ensure that students are getting the support they need to (1) get to school and to class, (2) behave in ways that facilitate learning, and (3) keep up with the lessons being taught. In other words, the pathway to student success in DN schools is linked to attendance, behavior, and course performance: the “ABCs” that predict whether students graduate or drop out. Diplomas Now is a set of school reform interventions designed to be implemented in underfunded urban secondary schools with many students who are not performing well academically, in communities struggling with poverty, where many students drop out. The Diplomas Now partners collaborate to help schools provide the right services to the right students on time and at the right level of intensity. They do so by offering varying levels of support for students with different needs: whole-school restructuring and instructional reform to strengthen the educational experience of all students, individual support for students showing early signs of falling off track, and case management for students in need of deeper interventions. To determine which students need extra support, the model relies on regular monitoring of students’ attendance, behavior, and course performance. See Box ES.1 for more on what each of the Diplomas Now partners contributes to the overall model.

The Diplomas Now Model

The elements of the model are classified as “inputs” that the Diplomas Now partners implement in schools. Some of these inputs represent substantial interventions on their own, such as implementing a rigorous curriculum, or setting up a tiered intervention system to identify at-risk students and tailor interventions to their specific needs. Diplomas Now integrates these component interventions into a cohesive model focused on ensuring that all students have a path to graduation. The inputs are implemented in collaboration with school staff members and align with the Four Pillars of Diplomas Now, a characterization of the model used by Diplomas Now staff members to help them organize their work.

⁶U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *2011-12 National Postsecondary Study Aid Study (NPAS: 12): Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011-12*, NCES 2015-167 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Box ES.1

The Diplomas Now Partners and Their Roles

Talent Development Secondary

Talent Development Secondary, based at Johns Hopkins University, provides organizational, instructional, curricular, and data support to schools intended to help all students achieve at high levels. This school-wide effort includes reorganizing students and teachers into small learning communities, providing professional development and coaching to strengthen teacher pedagogy, supplying college- and career-preparatory course content, and creating an early warning indicator data system to identify students falling off track. City Year and Communities In Schools play leading roles in providing additional services for these students.

City Year

City Year is an AmeriCorps program through which young adults, ages 18 to 24, participate in a year of full-time national service. These “near peers” (given their proximity in age to the students) serve as tutors, mentors, and role models, personalizing the school experience of the students. In addition, the AmeriCorps members provide after-school programs and help teachers by working with students during class time.

Communities In Schools

Through a school-based site coordinator, Communities In Schools, a national dropout-prevention organization, draws on school and community resources to move the students at highest risk of dropping out back on track to graduation. The site coordinator assesses the needs of a student, develops an individual case plan for that student that lays out a strategy to address those needs, and connects the student to services aligned with the case plan.

Pillar I: Teacher Teams and Small Learning Communities

Diplomas Now collaborates with school leaders to organize schools such that small groups of teachers work with the same population of students. These small learning communities create opportunities for personalization where teams of teachers know the same students and can work together to best teach and support them. Students also share the same classes, and become known to one another. These teacher teams and small learning communities function best when there are opportunities for teachers to collaborate within the daily schedule and when they have classes long enough to cover material in depth and keep up the pace of instruction.

Pillar II: Curriculum and Instruction with Professional Development

This pillar is focused on teaching and learning, and on giving teachers the training and resources they need to deliver strong lessons. Through professional development and instructional coaching, teachers have an opportunity to sharpen their pedagogy. Having curricular materials aligned with college- and career-ready standards and accelerated remediation courses for struggling students helps ensure all students can meet their potential.

Pillar III: Tiered Student Supports

Providing more intensive support for students with greater needs is the core idea of this pillar. The tiered intervention model involves implementing an early warning system that draws on data on the ABC indicators for individual students. It relies on staff members having regular times to meet to review those data and plan interventions for students who are off track.

Pillar IV: Can-Do Culture and Climate

School reform is difficult, and school staff members often have much to do when they are asked to effect change. Diplomas Now brings at least a dozen staff members to a school to help coordinate school transformation, introduce new practices and structures, provide training and support, provide additional services to students, and engage with families and community organizations. All of these staff members are trained by Diplomas Now before and throughout the school year. Providing and organizing resources to assist the school's staff helps foster a culture and climate where it feels possible to improve the school and support students better.

Implementing the pillars is hypothesized to affect a series of school outcomes (such as the school's climate and communication among stakeholders) and student outcomes (like study habits and engagement with school), leading to improvements in students' attendance, behavior, and course performance, which should in turn lead to increased high school graduation rates.

The National i3 Evaluation of Diplomas Now

In total, 62 schools (33 middle schools and 29 high schools) from 11 large urban school districts across the country were recruited to participate in the study starting in either the 2011-2012 or 2012-2013 school year.⁷ By design, Diplomas Now works in high-needs schools. The schools in the study come from high-poverty urban areas where students struggle academically and drop

⁷Five of the school districts are among the 20 largest in the country, and all but 1 are among the 100 largest. Chris Plotts and Jennifer Sable, *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2007-08*, NCES 2010-349 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

out at high rates. The participating schools, all eligible for Title I funds,⁸ serve large populations of low-income and minority students (80 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; 83 percent black and Hispanic). Furthermore, the high schools participating in the study have weak promoting power (56 percent), suggesting that they struggle to move students from ninth through twelfth grade on time.⁹ Thirty-two of the participating secondary schools were randomly assigned to implement the Diplomas Now model (DN schools) and 30 were assigned to continue with “business as usual” (non-DN schools), either maintaining their existing practices and structures or pursuing other types of school reform. This random assignment design, often referred to as the “gold standard” in evaluation, means that any differences between the DN and non-DN schools that emerge after random assignment can be attributed to the program; in short, Diplomas Now *caused* the observed differences.

The study’s experimental design makes it possible for the evaluation to assess the *early impact* of Diplomas Now on students’ ABC outcomes during the first two years of the model’s implementation. For students who enter Diplomas Now in sixth or ninth grade, what difference does Diplomas Now make for three primary student outcomes: attendance rates (proportion of enrolled days in attendance), suspensions (in-school or out-of-school) and expulsions, and successful course completion? Essentially, does the implementation of Diplomas Now keep more students on track to high school graduation by the end of their middle school or high school transition years? The evaluation will also provide information about the *longer-term impact* of Diplomas Now: after four years, what is the impact of Diplomas Now on high school graduation rates and on the ninth-grade success of students from Diplomas Now middle schools?¹⁰

The first two reports from the evaluation focus on the implementation of the Diplomas Now model, documenting how this complex, multicomponent reform intended to transform secondary schools is implemented by multiple partners. The implementation research explores what it takes to implement the model, what factors facilitate or hinder implementation, and the nature of the collaboration among multiple actors from the Diplomas Now organizations and the schools. The first report from the evaluation, released in 2014, focused on program start-up and first-year implementation in the DN schools. This second report continues the implementation story, including findings about fidelity in the second year of model implementation. It also examines school structure and staff practice at DN and non-DN schools to see whether Diplo-

⁸Title I funds from the U.S. Department of Education go to schools with high numbers or high percentages of students from low-income families.

⁹William Corrin, Susan Sepanik, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, and Kathleen K. Wang, *Laying Tracks to Graduation: The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now* (New York: MDRC, 2014). “Promoting power” is calculated as the ratio of twelfth-graders to ninth-graders three years earlier.

¹⁰While this report was being written, Johns Hopkins University was granted funding from the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to support an extension of the evaluation, which will make it possible to analyze the impact of Diplomas Now on student outcomes after four years.

mas Now is creating differences (that is, a “service contrast”) between the two groups of schools. Finally, it presents analyses of qualitative data that explore the context in which implementation was occurring, the integration of the model at schools, the importance of staff stability, and program sustainability.

Implementation of Diplomas Now in Year 2

This report assesses the implementation of the Diplomas Now model during the second year and compares the findings from the second year with those from the first. It first looks at the *fidelity* with which the Diplomas Now model was implemented in the second year by the 32 schools randomly assigned to do so. That is, did the model as implemented match the design? How much of the Diplomas Now school reform effort was put into place in these middle and high schools? Furthermore, it explores *service contrast*, or the extent to which the Diplomas Now intervention created differences between the practices of DN and non-DN schools.

Fidelity of Implementation

To create a measure of fidelity of implementation each of the Diplomas Now partner organizations detailed the components it felt were needed for full implementation of the model. Since this model as a whole has not yet been fully tested, it is not known which components are essential. Therefore, the fidelity of implementation score represents the model developers’ vision of ideal implementation. Given the complexity of the model, 111 components were identified. Each component is measured on a 0-1 scale with 0 equaling no or low implementation and 1 equaling high fidelity to the model. The overall average fidelity score during the second year for all of the components across all of the DN schools is 0.62, suggesting that on average schools were implementing a majority of the components with high fidelity to the model, but that they still had room for growth to reach ideal implementation. This second-year implementation score is similar to the first-year score discussed in a prior evaluation report, suggesting stability in program implementation even as some program components expanded into new grade levels during the second year.

Several primary findings regarding fidelity emerged from the implementation analysis.

- DN schools were most successful in obtaining, retaining, and training the auxiliary staff members needed to implement the model effectively (Pillar IV); using data to identify at-risk students; and collaborating to plan and provide individual interventions for those students (Pillar III).

Almost all schools had all of the necessary staff members in place to implement the model during Year 2 and program staff members from each of the partner organizations reported they had good access to each other. Implementation fidelity grew from Year 1 to Year 2 in

staffing and providing training to the auxiliary Diplomas Now staff, suggesting that Diplomas Now was better able in Year 2 to implement the components it had the most control over. Also, some staff members stayed from the first to the second year, making it easier to hire and support new staff members and ensuring that staff members were trained earlier and better.

A large majority of schools were also successful during both years in establishing a data system to track students' attendance, behavior, and course performance and ensure collaboration among staff members to plan and provide interventions for students falling off track. City Year AmeriCorps members were successful in providing extra and complementary services to students across all schools, but some schools were less successful in ensuring enough City Year AmeriCorps members were available to meet the needs of all the students.

Schools were also moderately successful in establishing small learning communities of students that share the same classes and teachers (Pillar I), but many schools struggled to hold frequent meetings of these communities' interdisciplinary teams of teachers.

- DN schools were least successful at offering the peer coaching to teachers needed to strengthen practice, implementing curricular additions to ensure college and career readiness for all students (Pillar II), and involving parents and community members in school activities and decisions (Pillar IV).

In both the first and second years of implementation, it was hard for schools to meet implementation goals in some areas where it was necessary to change school policy or structure or to get the school's staff on board. Most schools struggled to achieve consistent coaching for math and English/language arts teachers at the level desired by Diplomas Now, and most schools also did not provide the prescribed academic foundations and accelerated remediation courses for struggling students. Finally, on average schools were not meeting the ideal levels of implementation for involving parents and community members.

Service Contrast

DN schools were more likely to implement the types of activities found under several of the Diplomas Now pillars than non-DN schools, suggesting that Diplomas Now is making DN schools different from non-DN schools. Unlike the fidelity of implementation score, there was quite a bit of growth from Year 1 to Year 2 in service contrast. Key findings include:

- There was service contrast between DN and non-DN schools for the pillars that also showed strong and moderate implementation, including Pillar I (Teacher Teams and Small Learning Communities), Pillar III (Tiered Student Supports), and the part of Pillar IV (Can-Do Culture and Climate) focused on hiring and retaining the staff needed to implement the model.

Teachers at DN schools were more likely than teachers in non-DN schools to report teaching in extended class periods and collaborating with interdisciplinary teams that shared the same students; using data to identify at-risk students and meeting with other school staff members to plan interventions for them; and seeing students receive academic, behavioral, or emotional support.

- Even though the implementation of teacher professional development and coaching did not fully meet the model’s goals, the service-contrast findings suggest that teachers at DN schools received more coaching than teachers at non-DN schools. However, teachers at DN schools reported similar levels as teachers at non-DN schools in the use of college readiness curricula.

Math and English/language arts teachers at DN schools reported receiving more coaching than teachers at non-DN schools. Both groups of teachers reported similar, relatively high levels of adoption of academic reform curricula, incorporation of transitional support classes for struggling students, and use of student-centered and college and career readiness-focused strategies in the classroom, suggesting that many schools may have been implementing curricular reforms similar to those included in the Diplomas Now model.

- The contrast between DN and non-DN schools increased from Year 1 to Year 2 in several areas, including collaboration of teachers within interdisciplinary teams (Pillar I), professional development of teachers (Pillar II), and the use of data to identify struggling students (Pillar III).

From Year 1 to Year 2 practices and structures aligned with the Diplomas Now model were maintained or slightly improved in DN schools, while similar structures and practices were less evident in non-DN schools in Year 1 and became even less evident in Year 2, suggesting that Diplomas Now helped stabilize resources and programs at the DN schools.

Continued Challenges and Emerging Successes in Year 2

Qualitative data were collected in nine DN schools to examine how schools’ contexts are affecting implementation, to explore the successes and struggles of implementing this complex program, and to investigate the sustainability of the Diplomas Now model.

Factors External to the Diplomas Now Program

Various factors external to the program (such as school closures, principal turnover, and budget cuts) affected the implementation of Diplomas Now. Since DN and non-DN schools were both likely to be affected by these issues, at least in some cases Diplomas Now was able to offer schools some consistency and additional support to deal with them.

Embedding Diplomas Now in Schools

It emerged from the qualitative data that program staff members can foster stronger Diplomas Now implementation at a school in two main ways: (1) aligning program goals with school priorities and (2) securing administrator and teacher support for the Diplomas Now model. Case study data from Year 2 implementation indicated that Diplomas Now staff members better understood how to do those two things, and as a result were able to make Diplomas Now more “part of the school.”

Challenges Caused by Diplomas Now Staff Turnover

Despite gains from Year 1 to Year 2 in hiring and training program staff members, in some schools program staff turnover did cause setbacks in implementation and increased the burdens on the remaining staff members. Maintaining at least some consistency in Diplomas Now leadership preserved useful institutional knowledge about the successes and challenges of the first year of Diplomas Now implementation, and the collaborative relationships among partner organizations allowed for some flexibility to support consistent implementation.

Sustainability of the Diplomas Now Model at the Schools

The Diplomas Now plan for sustainability includes promoting local investment in City Year and Communities In Schools to maintain direct services to students in the long term while building schools’ ability to take charge of the school-wide reforms. Program sustainability was not yet a primary focus for school or program staff members, but some schools have made progress toward sustaining elements of the model. Sustainability efforts include: maintaining data systems and meetings that identify struggling students and interventions to support them, training school staff members to analyze data and lead these meetings, and promoting elements such as small learning communities and shared planning time to the school as a whole. Such efforts make features of the Diplomas Now model part of regular practice and school culture, and over time reduce the need for full support from Diplomas Now teams.

Next Steps

The implementation story told in this report sets the stage for the next report, which will provide evidence about the impacts of the Diplomas Now model. It will explore the impacts on school culture and climate, on student attitudes and behaviors, and on the key student outcomes of attendance, behavior, and course performance that are the precursors to high school graduation and college and career readiness.

Earlier MDRC Publications on Diplomas Now

Laying Tracks to Graduation

The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now

2014. William Corrin, Susan Sepanik, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, Kathleen K. Wang

Data Collection Instrument Supplement to Laying Tracks to Graduation

The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now

2014. William Corrin, Susan Sepanik, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, Kathleen K. Wang

NOTE: All the publications listed above are available for free download at www.mdrc.org.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education 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.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.