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CREATED IN 1974 BY THE FORD FOUNDATION and a group of federal agencies, MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve programs and policies that affect the poor. MDRC is committed to finding solutions to some of the nation’s most difficult social problems — from reducing poverty and bolstering economic self-sufficiency to improving public education and college graduation rates.

To that end, we design and pilot promising new interventions, evaluate existing programs using the highest research standards, and provide design and implementation assistance to build better programs that can be replicated and expanded. We helped pioneer the use of random assignment — the same highly reliable methodology used to test new medical treatments — in real-world agency and program settings and have developed new methods in implementation research and the study of variation in program impacts.

We also act as an intermediary, bringing together public and private funders to test new policy-relevant ideas and communicating what we learn to policymakers and service providers — all with the goal of changing public policy and mainstream practice to improve the lives of low-income individuals, families, and children.

From welfare policy to high school reform, MDRC’s work has helped to shape legislation, program design, and operational practices across the country. Working in fields where emotion and ideology often dominate public debates, MDRC is a go-to source for objective, unbiased evidence about cost-effective solutions that can be scaled up and sustained.

Over the years, we have brought our unique strengths — fielding rigorous research designs together with in-depth program operations capacity — to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. We first gained widespread visibility for our pathbreaking studies of state welfare-to-work programs during the 1980s and 1990s. Today, we also evaluate child care and early education programs, public school reforms, efforts to help low-income people succeed in college, initiatives to raise the income of low-wage workers, interventions for at-risk teenagers and returning veterans, and employment programs for ex-prisoners and people with disabilities. We are known not only for the high quality, integrity, and rigor of our research but also for the work we do in partnership with school districts; community colleges; federal, state, and local governments; foundations; and nonprofit organizations.

Our studies have taken us to nearly every state and most major cities in this country, to Canada, and to the United Kingdom. Our funders include government agencies and private, family, and corporate foundations. With a staff of some 350 in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is engaged in about 100 projects clustered around key themes within each of our five policy areas: Family Well-Being and Children’s Development, K-12 Education, Young Adults and Postsecondary Education, Low-Wage Workers and Communities, and Health and Barriers to Employment. In each of these areas, we strive to build a reliable body of evidence about what works and what doesn’t and to select new projects because they offer the potential to answer the next important question in a given area.

For our research to make a difference, it must reach a broad audience. We complement clearly written reports with policy briefs, how-to guides, and videos that distill the results of our studies and review their implications not just for policy but also for practice. We share our findings with the media and public interest groups, in testimony before Congress and state legislatures, through news bulletins e-mailed to more than 10,000 people and shared with thousands of followers on Twitter and Facebook, and on our website, which receives more than 40,000 unique visitors a month.
Forty years ago, skepticism abounded about the payoff of the Great Society antipoverty programs. Funders and policymakers were concerned that programs were being shaped by hunches, anecdotes, and untested assumptions. Ineffective policies wasted precious resources and fed public cynicism about government.

MDRC was founded by a consortium of public and private funders in 1974 as an antidote to this skepticism — to develop and test promising new approaches rigorously before they became public policy, evaluate existing programs to learn what was and was not working, and delve into the how and why of program effectiveness. The goal always has been to apply the knowledge we develop to improve both policy and on-the-ground practice — and help take effective programs to a large scale.

MDRC continues to be at the forefront of generating evidence that meets the needs of decision makers. In just the last few years we have evaluated education reforms that double completion rates for community college students and that increase graduation and college attendance rates for students who attend small public high schools. We have seen a model employment program we developed for public housing residents replicated with new federal funding. And we have designed or launched pilot tests of innovative new programs: an enhanced Earned Income Tax Credit for single workers, promising occupation-focused GED instructional reforms, and a pre-math intervention for preschoolers, among others.

The past decade has witnessed remarkable growth in the “evidence-based movement.” Now more than ever policymakers and practitioners are seeking to use rigorous evidence to inform crucial decisions about the funding and design of the programs and policies that affect low-income Americans. This increased emphasis on evidence has focused new attention on the way social policy evaluations and demonstration projects are designed and carried out. Funders and consumers understandably want studies to answer more complex questions, and they want those answers faster, and at lower cost. They also want to make better use of the evidence that already exists.

MDRC has been working to respond to these concerns. We are developing flexible new research designs. We are using implementation and qualitative research to illuminate why interventions work (or don’t) and to understand the path to large-scale expansion for the ones that do. We are improving cost analyses to help policymakers understand the return on their investments. In our groundbreaking behavioral science projects, we are conducting short, inexpensive tests of “nudges” — small interventions that seek to affect critical near-term outcomes, such as participation in publicly funded programs. In our capacity as an intermediary, we are actively partnering with nonprofit organizations, schools, and community colleges to strengthen existing programs and to create bold new interventions that build on the best research and practice.

The stakes are high: The nation’s slow recovery from the Great Recession, increased inequality, and reduced social and economic mobility all mean that the need for evidence-based solutions has never been greater. Real progress in combating poverty and its associated ills depends on knowing reliably what is and is not working. MDRC remains dedicated to developing the best evidence to help policymakers and practitioners improve the lives of low-income individuals, families, and children.

Gordon L. Berlin
President
Whether or not a program is successful at building a large-scale system for delivering its services ultimately depends on good information about what difference the program is making as it grows, and how and why.

The numbers that MDRC cares about are not good: 45 million Americans live in poverty, of whom 14.6 million are children; 8.6 million Americans are unemployed, of whom 2.6 million are the long-term unemployed. Nearly 7 million Americans are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. By 2020, it is projected that the United States will fall 5 million college-educated workers short of what it needs.

Some of these numbers have finally started to edge in the right direction — years into the nation’s recovery from the Great Recession — but they are still far too high. Their magnitudes call for large-scale responses. For any large-scale strategy to make a difference, the programs underlying it must be effective. The only way to ensure effectiveness is to invest in building reliable evidence.

Yet many small-scale programs supported by strong evidence have foundered when they tried to expand. Whether or not a program is successful at building a large-scale system for delivering its services or integrating itself into an existing system ultimately depends on good information about what difference the program is making as it grows, and how and why.

MDRC’s work in early childhood education provides a case study of how this kind of evidence can be built up deliberately. In 2007 MDRC launched Foundations of Learning, which trained more than 100 preschool teachers in Chicago and then Newark to encourage children’s positive behaviors and minimize their disruptive ones. The program did increase instructional time in the classroom and improve children’s behavior, attentiveness, and impulse control, although it did not lead them to do better academically. Foundations of Learning prepared MDRC to test three more approaches to improving young children’s social and emotional skills on an even larger scale. In the Head Start CARES Project, three social-emotional curricula were tested in over 300 classrooms across more than 100 Head Start centers. Two out of the three approaches did show positive impacts on children’s social and emotional outcomes. While these gains did not lead to improvements in academic skills, at least part of the promise of preschool is that it can improve people’s lives in a number of nonacademic ways that are thought to be important for outcomes into adulthood.

While those evaluations were under way, nonexperimental studies were published suggesting that early math skills are the strongest predictors of future success in both math and reading. Small-scale tests also showed that curricula focused on early math skills could be effective. In light of these findings MDRC launched Making Pre-K Count, evaluating a math curriculum in some 175 New York City preschool classrooms. Because many studies of preschool interventions have shown that gains in preschool “fade out” in the early elementary years, MDRC is now pilot testing a follow-on kindergarten addition called High 5s Clubs, in which trained facilitators seek to extend children’s preschool math gains by providing small-group math instruction to four children at a time, outside of regular class, using the same teaching framework.

Evidence also can and should inform the development and targeting of programs already operating on a large scale. For example, the United States spends $8 billion on the national preschool program Head Start, yet the evaluation of Head Start conducted in the early 2000s found that it has only a small and quickly fading effect on the academic performance of young children. Recently, however, MDRC researchers reexamined the data and found that the overall modest effect actually masks significant variation: Some Head Start centers are more effective than others, and some children benefit more than others. If future research can define which characteristics make Head Start centers effective, that existing $8 billion investment could make a much bigger difference.

These examples demonstrate the iterative power of evidence-building, whether one is improving on what has come before or distinguishing high performers from low performers to develop lessons for reforming a large system. In both cases, the goal at MDRC is not an up-or-down verdict but the creation of a body of evidence to improve policy and practice.

Mary Jo Bane
Chair, Board of Directors
ISSUES WE FOCUS ON

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

The best way to improve social conditions tomorrow is to better the circumstances and life prospects of children today. MDRC creates and evaluates early childhood education programs, strategies to improve family relationships, and interventions that focus on both parents and their children. **KEY AREAS:** home visiting to support new parents; responsible fatherhood; promoting children’s social and emotional development; identifying effective preschool programs; readiness for literacy and numeracy.

K-12 EDUCATION

The rising educational demands of the 21st-century workplace have heightened public and political pressure on schools to do a better job preparing students. MDRC is learning how best to help students succeed — as well as what it takes to put effective interventions into place and expand them. **KEY AREAS:** teaching reading and math in the elementary years; teacher training and curriculum improvement; extended learning after school and in the summer; high school reform; college readiness and access.

ENGAGING DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Only 68 of every 100 ninth-graders in public schools will graduate from high school on time. Some will drop out, and among those who do graduate, many will leave high school without the skills they need to succeed in college or the workplace. MDRC’s projects test interventions for vulnerable young people that offer the support and opportunities they need to become productive adults. **KEY AREAS:** educational programs, job training, and leadership development for out-of-school youth; comprehensive services for young people who are leaving foster care or are at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system; raising academic achievement for economically disadvantaged students.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is the pathway to better jobs and higher earnings. While college-going rates are at an all-time high, too few students earn credentials or degrees, particularly at community colleges, the entry point to higher education for most low-income students. MDRC is a leader in developing, evaluating, and expanding innovative programs to help low-income students enroll, progress, and graduate. **KEY AREAS:** financial aid reforms, including performance-based scholarships; replication of successful programs that use academic and social supports to boost achievement; reform of developmental education.
WORK, HOUSING, AND INCOME SECURITY

Major trends are reshaping the nation’s economy and labor markets, making jobs less secure, requiring that low-wage workers upgrade their skills, and increasing the need for new policies to promote and support self-sufficiency and help reduce poverty. MDRC is experimenting with new ways to raise the economic prospects of low-wage workers, people who are jobless, and communities where poverty is concentrated. **KEY AREAS:** expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to single adults without dependent children; antipoverty programs using conditional cash transfers; increasing employment among public housing residents and recipients of housing subsidies; affordable housing and community development; sector-based job training; savings mechanisms for low-wage workers; using insights from behavioral science to improve human services programs.

HEALTH AND DISABILITIES

Mental and physical health problems and disabilities are among the most common obstacles to steady employment. MDRC has built a portfolio of projects to test new ways to enhance health care services and health outcomes for low-income people, especially for individuals with health- and disability-related barriers to employment. **KEY AREAS:** the intersection of the welfare and Social Security systems for people with disabilities; women’s reproductive health and long-acting reversible contraceptives; identifying promising approaches to treatment of asthma among low-income children.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Former prisoners struggle to find meaningful employment and successfully reintegrate into their communities, and many return to prison. MDRC is testing a variety of interventions aimed at reducing recidivism. **KEY AREAS:** transitional employment programs and support services for recently released prisoners; innovative pilot programs using cognitive behavioral therapy; community supervision practices; an integrated services approach for young people involved in the justice system.
These findings offer convincing evidence that sustained, large-scale reform is possible within a public school system — even the nation’s largest.

FINDING OUT WHAT WORKS

SMALL SCHOOLS AND READING PARTNERS
Making a Difference for Low-Income Students

The need for education reform is widely recognized, even amid contentious debates about how to achieve it. Two initiatives that have made a difference for disadvantaged students are New York City’s decade-old small public high schools — which show big gains in graduation and college enrollment — and the nationally expanding Reading Partners program for elementary schoolchildren. Both offer students personal attention while remaining cost-effective.

The small high schools are academically nonselective and serve mostly low-income communities. But they are not simply small. Each was created through a competitive process with local input, emphasizing academic rigor, real-world relevance, and strong relationships between students and faculty members. The latest results from MDRC’s research show that the schools have raised college enrollment rates to 49 percent, compared with 41 percent among students at other New York City schools. And the small schools, while more expensive than large schools, achieve their results at a lower cost per graduate, because more of their students graduate from high school, and more do it in four years instead of five. These findings offer convincing evidence that sustained, large-scale reform is possible within a public school system — even the nation’s largest. Districts wishing to replicate the model can now apply for federal funding to do so, as it has won U.S. Department of Education approval on the basis of this research.

Reading Partners uses community volunteers to provide individual tutoring to struggling readers in low-income elementary schools. In a random assignment study of 19 schools in three states, MDRC found that the students who participated in the program gained approximately two months of growth in reading proficiency compared with a control group of students who did not receive Reading Partners tutoring. And because the tutors are volunteers, the cost is less than half that of other supplemental reading programs — making it affordable for schools where resources are scant.
By the time low-income children start kindergarten they are already behind their middle-class peers in reading and math, and that gap only widens over time. Small-scale studies have shown that preschool programs can have tremendous effects on these children’s lives, but it has proven difficult to replicate those results on a large scale. MDRC is tackling this challenge with research in two areas.

One of the research lenses focuses on children’s social and emotional development, which has a direct effect on their future health and relationships and may also be important for learning. In the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years, MDRC and its academic research partners evaluated Foundations of Learning, which trained preschool teachers in Newark, New Jersey, and Chicago to encourage children’s positive behaviors and minimize their disruptive ones. The results were clear: Compared with control group children, children from Foundations of Learning classrooms were more attentive, controlled their impulses better, and had fewer problem behaviors and better short-term memory.

In Head Start CARES, a federally funded research project that spanned the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years, MDRC and its partners tested three different ways to affect children’s behavior and emotional development, each based on a different theory, in over 300 Head Start classrooms across the country. Two of the three showed consistently positive impacts on a range of children’s social-emotional outcomes, although not always as predicted.

The second research lens focuses on early math skills, which recent nonexperimental evidence suggests are particularly important to success in school. Full-scale implementation of Making Pre-K Count, a math-focused early childhood intervention funded by the Robin Hood Foundation, was concluded in the 2014-2015 school year in some 175 New York City preschool classrooms. The study will track children through at least third grade.
In order to further reduce poverty, there is a pressing need to devise new labor-market-oriented policies.

BUILDING A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

MAKING WORK PAY
Using Earnings Supplements to Reward Work

The long-term decline in wages and earnings lies at the heart of the nation’s poverty-related problems. In order to further reduce poverty, there is a pressing need to devise new labor-market-oriented policies. Beginning in the 1990s, MDRC’s “make work pay” experiments tested whether offering earnings supplements would increase employment and income and improve the lives of welfare recipients and their families. Low-wage jobs often leave families barely better off than subsistence-level welfare benefits. Programs that offer earnings supplements seek to resolve this conundrum by augmenting the earnings of individuals whose wages are too low to support a family.

MDRC conducted a series of evaluations of different earnings supplementation strategies in the United States and Canada. The studies examined the cost of supplements as well as their effects on work, welfare receipt, and the well-being of families and children. The results were promising: The programs increased employment, earnings, and income among parents, which, in turn, produced modest but important benefits for young children in school achievement. Ultimately, earnings supplements were incorporated into welfare policies in more than 40 states.

MDRC is overseeing and evaluating a groundbreaking pilot program in New York City, an antipoverty strategy for single adults called Paycheck Plus. The current federal Earned Income Tax Credit, the largest cash-transfer program in the United States, primarily benefits low-income families with children. The Paycheck Plus pilot expands the tax credit for single workers with no dependent children. Six thousand single adults are enrolled in the three-year study, which will assess the impacts of the earnings supplement on economic well-being, work, and other outcomes. MDRC’s work on financial incentives has continued in studies of performance-based scholarships for community college students and an evaluation of a conditional cash transfer program, which provided monetary rewards to families for meeting specific health, education, and employment-related benchmarks.
DOUBLING GRADUATION RATES

The City University of New York’s ASAP Program

ALTHOUGH ACCESS TO COLLEGE HAS EXPANDED, graduation rates at community colleges remain low, especially among low-income students who need remedial courses in math, reading, or writing. The City University of New York’s (CUNY’s) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) — an uncommonly comprehensive and long-term program targeting this category of students — has proven to help students graduate and do so more quickly. In a recent study, MDRC found ASAP’s effects to be the largest of any community college reform it has ever evaluated.

Launched in 2007 with funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, ASAP presents an opportunity and an obligation for students. It requires students to attend college full time and encourages them to take remedial courses early and to graduate within three years. The program provides enhanced career services, tutoring, and comprehensive academic advising. ASAP offers blocked or linked courses during students’ first year and a seminar course covering such topics as study skills and setting goals. The program provides a tuition waiver that fills any gap between students’ financial aid and college tuition and fees, free MetroCards contingent on participation in program services, and free textbooks.

MDRC’s random assignment evaluation of ASAP, which began in 2009 at three of the six CUNY community colleges that operated the program, found that it substantially improved students’ academic outcomes over three years, including almost doubling graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and increasing the number of students who enrolled in four-year colleges. Because the program generated so many more graduates than the usual college services, the cost per degree was lower in ASAP at the three-year point despite the substantial investment required to operate the program. By 2019, CUNY hopes that ASAP will serve as many as 25,000 students. In addition, MDRC and CUNY are working with three community colleges in Ohio to replicate the program.
BIAS researchers work on developing straightforward, low-cost changes in the way programs deliver messages and services.

ANY SOCIAL PROGRAMS EXPECT PARTICIPANTS TO TAKE CERTAIN ACTIONS to reap a benefit — from applying, to attending meetings, to completing forms — but people don’t always act as expected, and programs may fail as a result. Participants and administrators alike can procrastinate, become overwhelmed by choices, and miss details, which might prevent them from reaching their goals. Is there any way to change this behavior? Social scientists are now turning to the burgeoning field of behavioral economics to find some answers.

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project is the first major opportunity to apply behavioral economics principles to programs for poor and vulnerable populations. Sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and led by MDRC in partnership with behavioral science experts nationwide, BIAS researchers work on developing straightforward, low-cost changes in the way programs deliver messages and services — for instance, simplifying complex forms, framing information to accentuate individual benefits, or sending appointment reminders.

Working with the Texas Office of the Attorney General’s Child Support Division, the BIAS team designed user-friendly instructions and forms to make it easier for incarcerated noncustodial parents to apply for a modification of their child support orders, which might prevent an accrual of arrears. The BIAS team also partnered with the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) to change the “hold” message that callers hear in order to reduce the number of people who hang up before talking to an NDVH staffer. Other BIAS projects are focused on getting more parents to select quality-rated child care providers and renew their child care subsidies on time in Indiana; encouraging welfare recipients to use job search assistance in Illinois; and increasing the number of parents who make their monthly child support payments in Ohio.
MDRC is one of our closest partners in our efforts to lift the life trajectories of disadvantaged youth. We rely on MDRC to provide our grantees with best-in-class expertise on evaluation and program replication.

— Nancy Roob, President, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

THE SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND
Expanding the Reach of Effective Programs

MDRC HAS LONG BEEN KNOWN FOR ITS PARTNERSHIP with public and private funders, nonprofits, and community organizations to find and test solutions to problems related to poverty — and to strengthen and expand the programs that work best. A good example is our participation in the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a federal initiative administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The SIF awards grants to private intermediaries, which match the government’s monies. The pooled funds go to outstanding nonprofits and public entities that are running evidence-based programs and are making a difference in their communities. The SIF’s aim is to expand the organizational capacity and reach of these promising programs and identify ways to improve their effectiveness as they grow.

In one SIF project, MDRC has partnered with New York City’s Center for Economic Opportunity to transplant five New York-based antipoverty programs in six additional cities — Cleveland and Northeast Ohio, Memphis, Newark, Kansas City, San Antonio, and Tulsa — and to evaluate the programs as they are implemented on a larger scale. The models encompass a range of training, employment, asset-building, and financial incentive services.

In another SIF initiative, MDRC has been working closely with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) through its True North Fund. This project aims to increase the number of vulnerable and economically disadvantaged young people served by organizations that can help them improve their educational skills, prepare for and find employment, prevent teen pregnancy, and avoid criminal activity. MDRC worked with EMCF to select 12 organizations through a competitive process and has been evaluating seven of the programs.

In partnership with Jobs for America’s Graduates and Jobs for the Future, MDRC is working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation as its early evaluation adviser on a new SIF-funded initiative to increase employment and educational opportunities for young people ages 14 to 25 — particularly those who have been involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The initiative will work with selected sites to help young people succeed using two evidence-based models.
FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS

2015 BUDGET: $90 MILLION

Expenses for MDRC activities $49 million 54%

Pass-through funding for other organizations $41 million 46%

USES OF FUNDS 2014

K-12 education 13%
Low-wage workers and communities 16%
Youth and postsecondary education 7%
General and administrative 13%
Health and barriers to employment 20%
Families and children 28%
Information dissemination and program development 3%

SOURCES OF FUNDS 2014

Government 39%
Foundations, corporations, and individuals 49%
Investments and fees 4%
Other 8%

* Pass-through expenses include payments to sites for program expenses, to subcontractors for services, and to survey firms.
OUR FUNDERS

American Institutes for Research
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
AVID
BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life)
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Bloomberg Philanthropies
Change Capital Fund (CCF)
Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation
Children’s Institute, Inc.
College Futures Foundation
Columbia University
Communities In Schools
Corporation for National and Community Service
Daniel and Corinne Goldman
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation
Ford Foundation
Garland Allen
Gateway to College National Network
The George Gund Foundation
George Kaiser Family Foundation
George Lucas Educational Foundation
Goldman Sachs
The Grable Foundation
Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation
The Greater Cincinnati Foundation
The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation
The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation
The Heckscher Foundation for Children
The Heising-Simons Foundation
Helios Education Foundation
Houston Endowment
Isabel V. and John C. Sawhill Charitable Fund
Jack Kent Cooke Foundation
Jan Nicholson
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
John S. Reed and Cynthia Reed Foundation
Johns Hopkins University
The Joyce Foundation
The JPB Foundation
KnowledgeWorks Foundation
The Kresge Foundation
Laura and John Arnold Foundation
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