

Executive Summary

IMPLEMENTING NINTH GRADE ACADEMIES

in Broward County, Florida

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



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June 2013

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Overview

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University partnered with Florida’s Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in 2009 to launch an independent evaluation of the district’s initiative to implement Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) in every district high school. An NGA is a self-contained learning community for ninth-graders that operates as a school within a school. With its own administrative leadership, space, faculty, and teacher teams, it is designed to offer ninth-graders a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment. The willingness of BCPS leaders to partner with researchers on this study offered a unique opportunity to learn more about NGAs and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide policy and practice.

The study found strong district leadership at the outset and widespread uptake of core NGA components across the 18 high schools in the sample. The investigation also uncovered substantial variation in the overall quality and duration of NGA implementation across schools, however, with strong and sustained implementation of multiple components occurring in just three schools, even though many more had access to models of strong NGAs nearby. These implementation experiences in BCPS suggest that many schools will need more specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, secure resources, and tools to guide practice and facilitate scheduling if they are to implement fully fledged, continuously improving, and self-sustaining NGAs.

Key Findings

- District leadership for the initiative was strong at the outset, but not sustained as district priorities changed.
- While schools received some support through a cross-school professional learning community for NGA administrators, they did not receive any other technical or financial support for program implementation.
- The district’s definition of NGAs focused on structural components in each school — ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Improving ninth-grade curriculum, instruction, and student supports were not a direct focus of the initiative. In fact, other reforms in these areas aimed at improving student outcomes competed with NGA implementation.
- It was more feasible for schools to implement and sustain the administrative leadership and space components of NGAs than the dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teaming components.
- Only three high schools achieved strong implementation. Ten achieved a threshold level of implementation, and five fell below threshold. Most schools did not improve from the first to the second or third year.

Preface

Every year nearly a million children in the United States fail to graduate high school with their peers. Though graduation rates have improved in recent years, more than 20 percent of all students, 30 percent of Hispanic students, and one-third of African-American students still do not graduate from high school.

Many of these students stray off the graduation path when they first get to high school. Going to high school for the first time is a big change. New freshmen must find their way around an unfamiliar and typically much larger school than they are used to, adjust to more demanding coursework, develop relationships with new teachers and peers, and respond to unprecedented academic expectations and social pressures. Research makes it clear that this is a pivotal time. Students who navigate the transition into high school successfully are far more likely to stay in school and graduate than those who struggle. Poor attendance or failing even just one core academic course in ninth grade can put a young person off track and make it much more likely he or she will drop out.

For nearly two decades, MDRC has studied how to keep high school freshmen engaged in school and on track to graduate. This report on implementing Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) extends those efforts to build knowledge and guide policy. NGAs are self-contained learning communities for ninth-graders that operate as small schools within larger high schools, with their own administrative leaders, faculty, space, and team organization. They offer high school freshmen a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment. Research suggests that NGAs might improve students' attendance, behavior, and course performance, but there isn't yet enough rigorous empirical evidence about them to say for sure.

Starting in the mid-2000s, the school district in Broward County, Florida began trying to institute NGAs in all of its public high schools, which gave MDRC and Johns Hopkins University researchers a unique opportunity to study how they might work on a large scale. This report doesn't yet answer the question of how much of an effect this reform had; it first seeks to describe how well this large, urban school district succeeded at getting such a complicated reform into place.

It turns out that it was quite difficult. Of the 18 high schools in the district that tried to implement NGAs, only 3 did so consistently well. The results outlined here suggest that if a district wants to adopt NGAs, it will need to give its schools more backup than Broward County Public Schools was able to provide: specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, tools, and secure resources. With that in mind, the MDRC/Johns Hopkins research team is now partnering with Broward County on an NGA Enhancement Development Project, testing new ways to help schools make their NGAs all they can be.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This study was made possible by the vision, support, and full engagement of many individuals and organizations. It was funded through a unique Institute for Education Sciences (IES) program designed to promote evaluation of state and local programs and policies. We are indebted to Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) leaders Dr. Katherine Blasik, Dr. Joanne Harrison, and Dr. Elisa Calibrese for their courage in initiating Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) districtwide and in partnering with MDRC and Johns Hopkins researchers on the evaluation. We also thank our IES program officers David Sweet, Hiromi Ono, and James Benson for their encouragement and support.

To conduct the research in Broward County, we relied on invaluable partnership and collaboration with Dr. Gerene Starratt and BCPS staff members Ann Evans and Diego DeRose. Dr. Starratt worked closely with MDRC to conceptualize and launch the evaluation, and both she and Ms. Evans reviewed drafts of this report and have continued to play central roles in the NGA Enhancement Development Project.

From the study's inception to publication of this report, numerous MDRC senior researchers and staff played an important role. We thank Corinne Herlihy, Robert Ivry, James Kemple, and Alison Black for developing the original proposal and for serving as initial principal investigators, and Ivonne Garcia, Zeest Haider, Catherine Armstrong, Cathy Corbin, and Nicole Clabaugh for their skilled data collection, analysis, and technical and report production support. We are also extremely grateful to MDRC's William Corrin, Fred Doolittle, John Hutchins, Janet Quint, and Pei Zhu for reviewing drafts of the report. The final product benefited greatly from their insights and advice on how to sharpen the presentation of the findings.

We conclude with deepest thanks to the BCPS district leaders, high school principals, administrators, and teachers who shared their experiences of implementing NGAs during our site visits and interviews. We greatly appreciate their openness, generosity, and demonstrated commitment to advancing understanding of the best ways to support students' successful transition into high school. This report is dedicated to them and to ninth-graders everywhere.

The Authors

Executive Summary

The transition into high school is a volatile time for adolescents and a precarious point in students' educational progression. Ninth-graders who successfully navigate this transition are far more likely to graduate from high school with their peers and attend college than those who experience failure their freshmen year. Growing awareness of the importance of the first year of high school for future success has prompted schools and districts across the country to develop supports and interventions designed specifically for ninth-graders.

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University partnered with Florida's Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in 2009 to launch an independent evaluation of the district's initiative to implement Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) in every district high school. An NGA is a self-contained learning community for ninth-graders that operates as a school within a school. With its own administrators, space, faculty, and teacher teams, an NGA is designed to offer ninth-graders a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment.

Current research offers a mixed assessment of NGAs. Some practitioners report very positive experiences, while others have abandoned the NGA concept because they found it too costly and difficult. The most rigorous empirical study of NGAs was published by MDRC in 2005. It investigated the impact of NGAs as a core component of Talent Development High Schools, a comprehensive, whole-school reform model. Talent Development was implemented in five high schools, with each receiving intensive, on-site support from facilitators at Johns Hopkins University, where the model was developed. The study found that the model produced significant and substantial gains during students' first year of high school in attendance, academic course credits earned, and promotion rates. The improvements in credits earned and promotion rates for ninth-graders were sustained as students moved through high school. Though promising, these findings do not address whether it is actually feasible to implement NGAs on a large scale, in the absence of a whole-school reform approach and without external support—as was the case in Broward County.

The willingness of BCPS leaders to partner with researchers on this study offered a unique opportunity to learn more about NGAs and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide policy and practice. This report presents findings from the research team's study of how NGAs were implemented in BCPS. It represents the first large-scale examination of NGA implementation using multiple data sources and systematic qualitative methods. By providing an in-depth analysis of the BCPS initiative, the study provides practitioners and policymakers with a detailed picture of NGAs and the challenges to implementing them without external support across a large urban school district.

Research Setting and Approach

Located in southern Florida just north of Miami, BCPS is the nation's sixth-largest public school system, with more than 250,000 students. It serves the city of Fort Lauderdale and a number of its surrounding suburbs. When the research team entered the field in fall 2009, the district's 31 regular high schools had an average total enrollment of 2,224 students, average ninth-grade enrollment of 594 students, and a majority of students from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. BCPS leaders became interested in NGAs primarily as a way to personalize and improve learning for the diverse population of ninth-graders in these large high schools.

To study NGA implementation in Broward County, the research team first examined how the district launched the initiative, how NGAs were defined by BCPS and understood by principals, and the supports provided for implementation. The team analyzed relevant district documents and Web sites, and conducted semistructured interviews with BCPS district administrators and principals who had been involved at the district level in planning and launching the NGA initiative. The research team then examined the extent to which NGAs were implemented in 18 BCPS high schools. During site visits researchers observed NGA operations and interviewed over 200 principals, NGA administrators, counselors, teachers, and staff members. The research team used these data to assess the extent to which core NGA components were implemented in each school, how implementation varied across schools, the extent to which implementation was sustained over time, and factors that supported or inhibited implementation.

To rate NGA implementation in the 18 high schools, the research team focused on the four components schools were called on to implement, as clearly and consistently outlined in BCPS documents and district administrator interviews:

- A school administrator or administrative leadership team dedicated to the NGA
- A separate space for the NGA, such as separate hallways or a separate building
- Faculty dedicated specifically to the ninth grade
- Interdisciplinary teams of ninth-grade teachers

The research team developed a rubric for each component to measure the depth and quality of its implementation in each school for each of the first three years of NGA operation.¹

¹The research team examined implementation over each NGA's first three years in order to understand both NGA start-up and sustainability. See the full report and appendixes for further detail on the larger (continued)

Key Findings

- **District leadership for the NGA initiative was strong at the outset, but not sustained as district priorities changed.**

High school reform in BCPS began during the 2005-2006 school year, when district leaders established a High School Reform office staffed by a dedicated “principal on task assignment” (who was released from other administrative duties) and a full-time program coordinator. The High School Reform office also received strong leadership and support from the area (subdistrict) superintendent at that time responsible for overseeing all high schools.

In 2005, High School Reform office staff surveyed school principals and analyzed student data, finding that many ninth-graders were struggling with attendance, behavior, and academic performance. They also conducted a review of national high school reform literature and a scan of local strategies that were showing promise. The scan revealed that several BCPS high schools had begun implementing NGAs during an earlier wave of reforms. Observations, testimonials, and data from these local efforts and national accounts moved the district to make NGAs the centerpiece of the district’s high school reform action plan, launched in fall 2007.

Despite its strong start, BCPS did not sustain its focus on NGAs. By the time the study team entered the field in fall 2009, the superintendent had been replaced, the area superintendent who led the NGA initiative had moved to a different position in the central office, and the High School Reform office had disbanded. The district’s focus shifted to other strategies for improving high school students’ performance. Thus this analysis of NGA implementation covers both an initial period of strong district leadership and later years when schools were largely operating NGAs on their own.

- **While schools received some support through a cross-school professional learning community for NGA administrators, they did not receive any other technical or financial support for NGA implementation.**

The primary vehicle for supporting and loosely holding schools accountable for NGA implementation came in the form of “Leading in Ninth Grade as One” (LINGO), a professional learning community for NGA administrators that met monthly. These meetings gave NGA administrators opportunities to share and receive feedback on their NGA practice and were well received by those administrators. LINGO started in fall 2007 and ran for three years, ending in spring 2010.

evaluation, how the 18 schools were selected for the study sample, and the rubrics used to assess implementation of the four components.

Outside of LINGO meetings, school-based administrators and teachers were largely on their own as they worked through the technical and human challenges of establishing an NGA and fostering its growth. Further, no other district- or school-based support or accountability mechanisms were installed, and no sanctions were imposed on schools that did not implement NGAs.

- **The district’s definition of NGAs focused on structural components in each school — NGA administrative leadership, dedicated NGA space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Improving ninth-grade curriculum, instruction, and student supports were not a direct focus of the initiative. In fact, other reforms in these areas aimed at improving student outcomes competed with NGA implementation.**

The district’s effort to adopt NGAs on a large scale focused on four structural components designed to achieve smaller, more personalized learning environments — NGA administrative leadership, dedicated NGA space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Following the guidance of the research literature available at the time on the benefits of smaller learning communities, district leaders and principals envisioned that the focus, proximity, and collaborative routines created by these components would help adults get to know students well, nurture a positive climate where expectations were consistent, and allow teachers and administrators to intervene on students’ behalf when they encountered academic and social barriers to learning. A self-assessment provided to NGA administrators highlighted interdisciplinary teams as a key way to enact personalized instruction and academic and social supports for ninth-graders (such as tutoring, credit recovery, counseling, mentoring, and social services). Schools received very few specifics and no on-site support to help them determine how to schedule and implement teams, however. At the same time, BCPS was exploring other reform approaches focused on instructional improvement and data-driven progress monitoring. Though not inconsistent with NGA practice, these reforms were not integrated into the NGA initiative but conducted independently of it. They directly competed with fledgling NGAs in ways that multiplied priorities for school-based administrators and faculty, and made staffing and scheduling NGAs even more challenging.

- **It was more feasible for schools to implement and sustain the administrative leadership and space components of NGAs than the dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teaming components.**

Nearly every school in the sample was able to assign an assistant principal to oversee the ninth grade and designate a separate space to house the NGA, though implementation quality varied across schools. A principal could feasibly implement these components through

relatively independent and straightforward decisions about how the resources at his or her school would be allocated. Schools that achieved strong implementation of the administrative leadership component were aided by attentive and sustained support for the NGA from the principal, and either low turnover among NGA administrators or intentional strategies for mitigating the potentially disruptive impact of changes in leadership staff. Implementation of the dedicated space component was largely dependent both on the principal's willingness to make a priority of separate ninth-grade space and on available resources, including a school's physical layout and new construction opportunities.

It was more complicated to implement the dedicated faculty and interdisciplinary teacher team components well. Executing these components involved a high degree of leadership skill, scheduling knowledge, and technical capability — characteristics that were not evenly distributed across schools. A school was most likely to implement the dedicated ninth-grade faculty component if it had a school principal (or another NGA champion in an authoritative position, such as a veteran assistant principal) who made a priority of NGA staffing and was willing to expend political capital to handpick faculty for the NGA. Even the most committed principals and NGA administrators, however, struggled to implement and sustain dedicated faculty for the NGA in the face of pressures to expand advanced placement and honors classes and in the face of staffing cuts brought on by a districtwide financial crisis.

Implementing interdisciplinary teams presented the greatest challenge. It was a major technical hurdle to arrange teams' schedules so that they could have a common planning period, especially in schools operating on a four-by-four block schedule.² While some schools were fortunate enough to have skilled and experienced administrators or schedulers who could design daily timetables conducive to teacher teams, schools without these resources — the majority — did not receive additional support to help them do so. Further, schools did not receive any site-specific guidance about how interdisciplinary teaming might help support students, or how teachers could use common planning time effectively. Since working in interdisciplinary teams is unfamiliar territory for most high-school educators, the lack of concrete guidance and support in this area was a major barrier.

- **Only three high schools achieved strong implementation. Ten achieved a threshold level of implementation, and five fell below threshold. Most schools did not improve from the first to the second or third year.**

²Under a block schedule, students take four 90-minute classes each day. Some schools offer a four-by-four block schedule in which students take eight courses: four courses the first semester and four different courses the second semester.

While the district’s initiative to implement NGAs districtwide was bold in many respects, many schools struggled to implement this complex and multifaceted reform. Although every high school in the study sample attempted to implement NGA structures and practices, the research team discovered strong and sustained NGA implementation in only three schools.

In each of the first three years of their NGAs, all three of these schools achieved strong implementation of three core components — dedicated administrator, space, and faculty — and threshold or strong implementation of the interdisciplinary teaming component. These schools were characterized by committed and creative leaders, skilled schedulers, and low or well-managed turnover in key positions.

Just over half of the schools in the sample achieved at least threshold, but less than strong, implementation levels. Interdisciplinary teaming was the clear weak link in these schools. Nearly all schools in this group had some or strong implementation of the administrator, space, and faculty components, but four never implemented teacher teams and two abandoned their teaming effort by their NGA’s third year.

Nearly one-third of the schools were found to have overall weak implementation, indicating that they were missing some major NGA components and only nominally implementing others during the first three years of their academies. These NGAs were hindered by leadership turnover, faculty resistance to being organized as a ninth-grade team, weak scheduling support, and competing priorities, among other challenges. Many of these schools essentially gave up on their NGAs. Even among those that did not abandon their NGAs, most had no concrete plans to pursue deeper implementation.

Further analysis of NGA implementation trajectories shows that the majority of schools (11 out of 18) in the sample did not improve their implementation over their first three years of operation. Of those that did show improvement, only two moved into the “strong” category by their third year.

Conclusion

This study examined implementation of NGAs in BCPS over multiple years, finding an initial period of strong district leadership that was followed by a period of changing district priorities, when schools were left largely on their own to implement NGAs. The research team found widespread uptake of core NGA components among the 18 high schools in the sample, but also

uncovered substantial variation in the overall quality and duration of NGA implementation across schools. Most schools implemented NGAs at only a threshold level, with strong and sustained implementation of multiple NGA components occurring in just three schools, even though all had access to models of strong NGAs nearby. These findings suggest that many schools will need more specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, secure resources, and tools to guide NGA practice and facilitate scheduling if they are to implement fully fledged, continuously improving, and self-sustaining NGAs.

Earlier MDRC Publications Related to High School Reform, Smaller Learning Communities, and the Ninth-Grade Transition

Toward Ensuring a Successful Transition to High School.
2007. Corinne Herlihy.

*Emerging Evidence on Improving High School Student Achievement and Graduation Rates:
The Effects of Four Popular Improvement Programs.*
2006. Corinne Herlihy and Janet Quint.

*Making Progress Toward Graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School
Model.*
2005. James J. Kemple, Corinne M. Herlihy, and Thomas J. Smith.

Career Academies: Impacts on Work and Educational Attainment.
2004. James J. Kemple.

*The Talent Development High School Model: Context, Components, and Initial Impacts on
Ninth Grade Students' Engagement and Performance.*
2004. James J. Kemple and Corinne M. Herlihy.

Project Transition: Testing an Intervention to Help High School Freshmen Succeed.
1999. Janet Quint, Cynthia Miller, Jennifer Pastor, and Rachel Cytron.

Career Academies: Emerging Findings.
1997. James Kemple.

Career Academies: Early Implementation Lessons.
1996. James J. Kemple and Joann Rock.

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:

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- 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.