



*Executive Summary*

# LAYING TRACKS TO GRADUATION

The First Year  
of Implementing  
**DIPLOMAS NOW**

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(MDRC)

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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. Diplomas Now identifies students at risk of dropping out and intervenes with targeted support intended 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 report introduces Diplomas Now and the associated evaluation, describing the reform model, the research design, and the participating schools and districts. The report also shares first-year implementation fidelity findings, and discusses collaboration among the Diplomas Now partners and between those partners and schools.

- The 62 study schools represent the kinds of schools for which the Diplomas Now model was designed: schools serving students from low-income communities who face challenges inside and outside of school that put their progress to high school graduation at risk. Randomization resulted in two comparable groups of schools and will allow the evaluation team to assess the model’s *impact* on key predictors of graduation: attendance, behavior, and course performance.
- On average, implementation of the model got off to a good start in the 32 Diplomas Now schools in the first year. These schools were most successful in adapting a tiered intervention model and incorporating additional student support services like tutoring and after-school programs, but met with less success introducing new curricula and model-specific teacher professional development practices such as peer coaching.
- It is no small feat that three independent national organizations were able to come together and get this multifaceted, complex school reform model off the ground in the implementing schools. Not only did their staff members have to build relationships with one another, they had to collaborate with school personnel to begin changing structures and practices in the implementing schools. However, the roles and responsibilities of staff members from the Diplomas Now organizations were not always clear at the outset, which may have constrained early model implementation. As implementation continues, the Diplomas Now organizations continue to work with each other and schools in an effort to strengthen the cohesion and coordination of reform work by all stakeholders.



## Preface

Too many young people growing up in U.S. cities graduate high school unprepared for postsecondary education and the workforce. Many do not graduate at all. While urban districts have tried an array of reform strategies, success on a large scale is rare and school districts that want to invest in reform strategies with evidence of effectiveness have few choices. Fortunately, the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program is helping to expand the number of evidence-based initiatives districts can choose from by including evaluation requirements in its grant awards. Supported by an i3 grant, an ambitious collaboration of three organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — is implementing a reform model in middle schools and high schools intended to keep students from dropping out and help more of them graduate high school. This comprehensive model, called Diplomas Now, is being implemented and evaluated in 11 of the largest urban school districts in the country.

Talent Development Secondary supports instructional improvements and structural changes (like ninth-grade academies to help students transition into high school, and 90-minute instructional blocks in key subjects). In past evaluations, Talent Development Secondary has shown that it can strengthen the organization of schools and get staff members to agree on common goals and practices, and that this kind of systematic reform can make a difference for students. City Year and Communities In Schools are both organizations with national reach that bring additional people to schools. City Year places teams of AmeriCorps volunteers into struggling schools to support before- and after-school programs, provide tutoring and mentoring, and assist teachers in classrooms. Communities In Schools places site coordinators in schools who focus on the students most at risk of dropping out and organize services for them tailored to their individual needs.

This report is the first of three planned for the national evaluation of Diplomas Now. It introduces readers to Diplomas Now and the associated random assignment evaluation, presents findings about the start-up and first year of implementation of Diplomas Now, and discusses important issues regarding collaboration among the three Diplomas Now organizations and between the organizations and the school staffs with which they work. Subsequent reports will examine the continuing implementation of Diplomas Now and present results regarding the model's impact on students and on schools. If proven effective, this model would represent a wise investment of funds from sources like School Improvement Grants, the ambitious federal investment program that aims to fix the nation's most struggling schools by providing grants to help low-performing school districts implement reforms.

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 rich 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.

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, and Allison Nebbergall. 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, Lauren Durkee, Kelle Falls, Sarah Johnson, Kristen Peterson, Jackie Rhodes, and consultant Stephanie Safran. Elyse Goldenberg and Jackie Rhodes assisted with the coding and analysis of the qualitative data.

At MDRC, Leslyn Hall supported survey design, and Seth Muzzy and Eleanor Leahy helped manage communications between MDRC and ICF International while ICF International was administering the surveys. Nicole Clabaugh, Nicholas Commins, Sophia Litschwartz, and Andrea Shane provided programming and analysis support. Nicole's tireless efforts coordinating the stages of report writing and production moved the report to completion. Rekha Balu, Gordon Berlin, Fred Doolittle, Joshua Malbin, Kristin Porter, and Marie-Andree Somers

carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and offered helpful critiques throughout the writing process. Anne Poliakoff at ICF reviewed, provided feedback, and edited early drafts of Chapters 3 and 4. Joshua Malbin edited the full report, and Carolyn Thomas prepared the report for publication.

# Executive Summary

## Background

Although the national high school graduation rate has increased over the past decade, too many students (one in five) still do not complete high school in four years.<sup>1</sup> Even if graduation rates continue to rise in school districts across the country, the decreasing number of students who are not graduating will increasingly represent those students who face the most serious barriers to earning their diplomas, those who most need a mix of intensive academic, social, and other interventions to make it through high school.

Research has shown that factors such as poor attendance, poor behavior, and course failure measured as early as middle school predict a student's likelihood of dropping out of high school.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, ninth grade is a critical year, the one when students are the most likely to drop out of school.<sup>3</sup> These research findings suggest that programs may have more impact if they intervene with students who are off track as early as middle school. The majority of dropouts occur in low-income, urban high schools, so programs may also have more impact if they concentrate their efforts there.<sup>4</sup>

Among those students who do graduate high school, many do not graduate ready for college and need to take remedial (developmental education) courses: roughly 40 percent of college undergraduates nationally and almost 60 percent of community college students enroll in such courses.<sup>5</sup> These facts suggest that programs to support struggling students need to prepare students for college as well.

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

<sup>2</sup>Robert Balfanz, Liza 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.

<sup>3</sup>Elaine Allensworth and John Easton, *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005); Corrine M. Herlihy and James J. Kemple, *The Talent Development High School Model: Context, Components, and Initial Impacts on Ninth-Grade Students' Engagement and Performance* (New York: MDRC, 2004); Janet Quint, *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform: Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models* (New York: MDRC, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Mary Bruce, and Joanna Hornig Fox, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, America's Promise Alliance, and Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>Paul Attewell, David Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey, "New Evidence on College Remediation," *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, 5 (2006): 886-924.

## **Diplomas Now: Transforming Schools and Responding to the Dropout Challenge**

Three national organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — have partnered to take on this combined task of school improvement and dropout prevention, creating *Diplomas Now*. The Diplomas Now whole-school reform model seeks to transform secondary schools in high-poverty, urban communities so that fewer students drop out and more students graduate high school prepared for college and careers.

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) arrive there ready to learn, and (3) keep up with the lessons being taught. In other words, the pathway to student success in Diplomas Now schools is linked to attendance, behavior, and course performance; as discussed earlier, these “ABCs” are predictive of whether students graduate or drop out. The Diplomas Now model is designed to help schools provide the right services to the right students on time and at the level of intensity necessary for students to have positive ABC outcomes. To do so, Diplomas Now has created a three-tier intervention structure to offer varying levels of support for students with different needs: whole-school organizational restructuring and instructional reform to strengthen the educational experience of all students (Tier I), individual student support (Tier II), and student case management (Tier III). To determine which students need extra Tier II or Tier III support the model relies on regular monitoring of Early Warning Indicator data, which include measures 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 National i3 Evaluation of Diplomas Now: Investigating Diplomas Now Implementation and Effectiveness**

Johns Hopkins University, home to Talent Development, was awarded a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant in 2010 to support the expansion and evaluation of Diplomas Now. This five-year grant supports the expansion of Diplomas Now from a few schools to more than 30 schools across more than 10 school districts. The grant funds also support a rigorous experimental evaluation of the Diplomas Now model, the results of which, if positive, will “validate” Diplomas Now as an effective secondary school reform model. The evaluation, being conducted by two evaluation research firms, MDRC and ICF International, explores not only the impact of Diplomas Now but also its implementation, providing lessons to the field about what it takes to implement the model and how it rolls out in different school and district contexts.

Diplomas Now seeks to strengthen secondary schools so that students follow a path that leads to their graduation from high school ready for college and careers. The Diplomas Now

## Box ES.1

### **The Diplomas Now Partners and Their Roles in a Tiered Intervention System**

#### **Talent Development Secondary**

Talent Development Secondary, based at Johns Hopkins University, provides organizational, instructional, and curricular support to schools. These Tier I interventions are focused on helping *all* students achieve at high levels and preventing them from falling off track. This school-wide effort includes reorganizing students and teachers into small learning communities, providing professional development and coaching to strengthen teacher pedagogy, and supplying college and career preparatory course content. Talent Development Secondary employs a school transformation facilitator who works with school leaders to develop a systematic school organization plan and oversees the implementation of instructional and curricular reforms.

For many students, the Tier I, whole-school organizational and instructional reforms of Talent Development Secondary are enough to keep them on track. However, for some students, additional and more intensive services are necessary. City Year and Communities in Schools play leading roles in providing additional services to these at-risk 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. A team of 10 or more City Year corps members is assigned to a school, increasing the number of adults in a building paying attention to students and working with them both in and outside of classrooms. The team is led by a City Year program manager and team leaders (typically second-year corps members), and the corps members are trained to provide a variety of Tier II academic and behavioral interventions intended to help students get on track and stay on track to graduate. 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 corps 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 organize services intended 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. The provision of these services represents Tier III intervention. Examples include professional counseling on anger management for a student with severe behavioral issues or long-term tutoring with a subject-area expert for a student falling far behind in class. A site coordinator will also provide direct service — for example, facilitating small student discussion groups on topics like conflict resolution or the transition to adulthood.

model does this through structural reforms, such as the creation of smaller learning communities with teacher teams that work with shared groups of students, and instructional reforms such as peer coaching and curricula designed to help students shore up key academic skills. However, these whole-school efforts that reach all students are not enough on their own. As discussed earlier, the Diplomas Now model also seeks to provide more intensive and targeted support to address the needs of students who exhibit the primary ABC indicators of falling off track that are predictive of dropping out (poor attendance, negative school behaviors, and course failure), particularly during transition years when students are most vulnerable to getting off track: sixth grade in middle schools and ninth grade in high schools. Because the timetable of the current evaluation is not long enough to follow students through high school graduation, the primary research question focuses on measuring the impact of Diplomas Now on ABC outcomes. For students in sixth grade and ninth grade, what is the *impact* of Diplomas Now on 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 result in more students being on track to high school graduation by the end of their middle school or high school transition years?

The evaluation also examines 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.

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. Five of the districts are among the 20 largest school districts in the country, and all but 1 are among the 100 largest.<sup>6</sup> The participating schools, all eligible for Title I funds, 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 also have weak promoting power (56 percent), suggesting that they struggle to move students from ninth through twelfth grade on time.<sup>7</sup>

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” practices and programs (non-DN schools), either maintaining existing practices and

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<sup>6</sup>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, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010).

<sup>7</sup>“Promoting power” is calculated as the ratio of twelfth-grade students to ninth-grade students three years earlier (for example, the ratio of twelfth-graders in 2010-2011 to ninth-graders in 2007-2008).

structures within their schools or pursuing other types of school reform. This random assignment design, often referred to as the “gold standard” in evaluation, creates circumstances under which any differences between the two groups of schools (DN and non-DN) that emerge after random assignment can be attributed to the program; in short, Diplomas Now *caused* the observed differences. Comparisons of the sizes, staff compositions, and student populations of the two groups of schools, as well as the types of programs the schools offered before the start of the evaluation, indicate that the two groups of schools were similar to each other before the evaluation began. This suggests that random assignment was successful and the non-DN schools provide a convincing representation of what would have happened in the DN schools had they not implemented the intervention.

Although the evaluation research will analyze both the impact and the implementation of the Diplomas Now model, this report focuses on program start-up and early implementation in the DN schools. The report presents the model, describes the schools and school districts that are participating in the evaluation, shares findings about first-year implementation fidelity in the DN schools, and discusses how program and school staff members collaborated to implement the DN model.

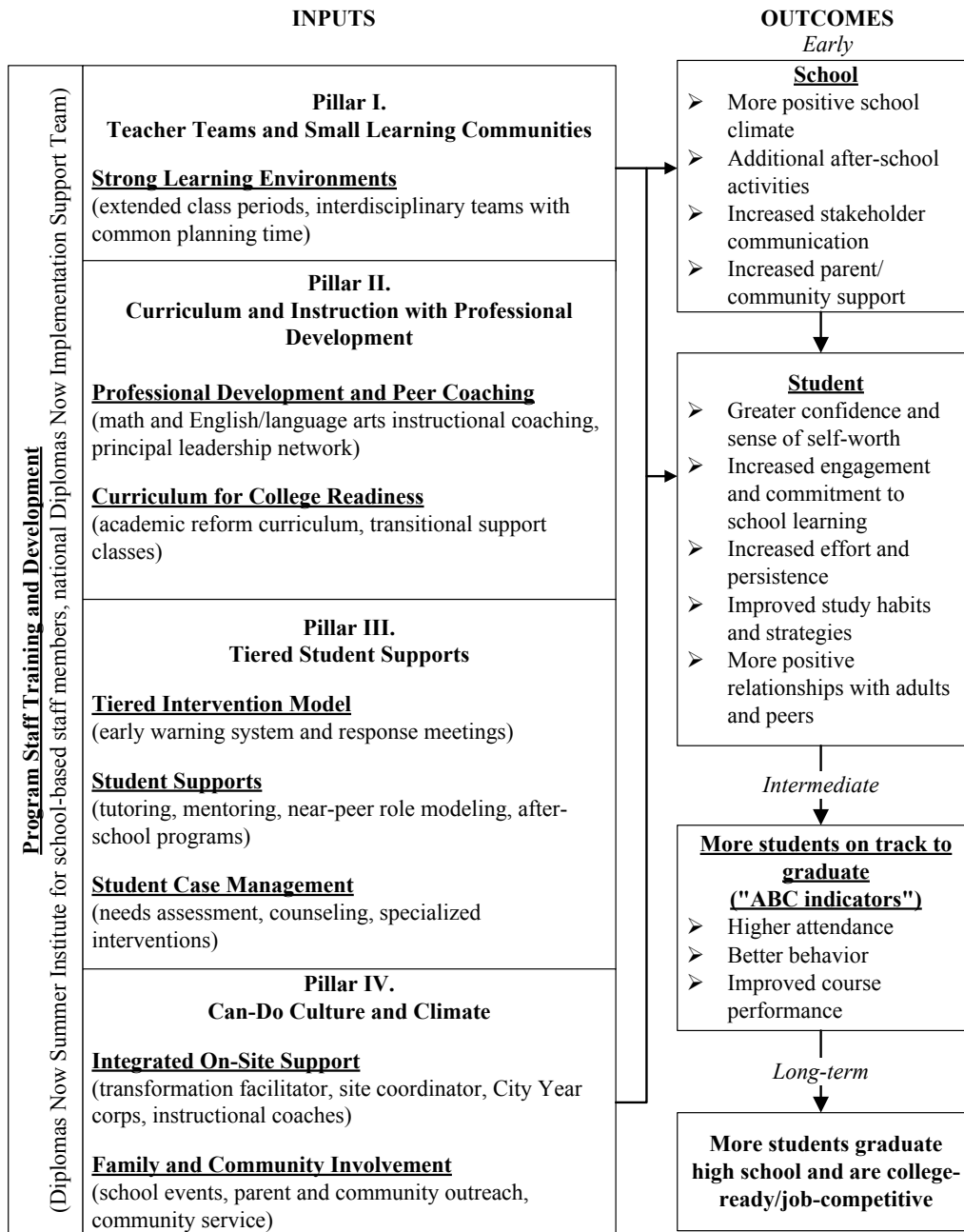
## **The Diplomas Now Model**

The Diplomas Now model is a multidimensional system of organizational and instructional reforms and targeted forms of student support. These elements are classified as nine “inputs” that the Diplomas Now partners implement in collaboration with school personnel. Some of these inputs represent substantial interventions on their own, such as implementing a rigorous curriculum or setting up a tiered system to identify at-risk students and tailor responses 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. Eight of these inputs 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. The Four Pillars and their associated inputs are presented in Figure ES.1.

### **Pillar I: Teacher Teams and Smaller 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 smaller 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 see the same peers in their classes and become known to one another. These teacher teams and smaller learning communities function best when there are opportunities for teachers to collaborate within the daily

**Diplomas Now  
Figure ES.1  
Diplomas Now Logic Model**





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 activities and instructional coaching, teachers have an opportunity to sharpen their pedagogy. Having curricular materials aligned with college- and career-ready standards means that teachers have useful content to deliver to students. Professional development and curricular materials for accelerated remediation courses for struggling students are also aspects of this pillar.

### **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 of individual students. It relies on staff members who work with a group of students in common having regular times to meet to review those data and to plan interventions for students who are off track or at risk of going off track.

### **Pillar IV: Can-Do Culture and Climate**

School reform is difficult, and school staff members often have too much to do when they are asked to make change. Diplomas Now brings over a dozen staff members to a school to help coordinate school transformation, provide support to the school's staff, provide additional services to students, and engage with families and community organizations. 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.

The Four Pillars and their eight associated inputs are supported by a ninth input, Program Staff Training and Development, which involves providing the skills and knowledge to Diplomas Now staff members that they need to implement the other eight. This includes training during the summer and during the school year for school-level Talent Development Secondary, City Year and Communities In Schools staff members. To ensure successful implementation at each school, each of the Diplomas Now partner organizations has a support system for school-based staff members that includes local and national program experts with strong relationships to school districts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Additional information about Diplomas Now can be found on the Internet at <http://diplomasnow.org>. The Diplomas Now website includes information about the partner organizations and the model, as well as contact information for the organization.

Implementation of the nine inputs is hypothesized to affect a series of outcomes. (See Figure ES.1.) Initially, model implementation is supposed to lead to early-stage changes in school outcomes such as the quality of school climate and communication among stakeholders, and in student outcomes like study habits and attitudes about and engagement with school. These changes, in turn, are expected to lead to impacts on intermediate outcomes — the ABC indicators of attendance, behavior, and course performance. Positive impacts on ABC outcomes should then lead to increased high school graduation rates.

## **Fidelity of Implementation of Diplomas Now in the First Year**

The evaluation of Diplomas Now begins with an assessment of the fidelity with which the Diplomas Now model was implemented in the 32 schools randomly assigned to do so. That is, in the first year of implementation (2011-2012 for first-wave schools and 2012-2013 for second-wave schools), how well did the model as implemented match its design? How much of the Diplomas Now school-improvement effort was put into place in these 17 middle schools and 15 high schools?

Several primary findings regarding fidelity in the first year emerged from the implementation analysis.

- After the first year, overall model implementation in the 32 DN schools has gotten underway and achieved some traction. On average DN schools successfully implemented 61 percent of 111 separate program components across the nine inputs.

Complex, multifaceted whole-school reforms like Diplomas Now typically take a few years to reach full implementation. Getting the majority of model components implemented in the first year suggests that schools are off to a promising start with this reform.

- However, none of the DN schools were able to implement all of the 62 components of the model believed to be most critical by the Diplomas Now organizations.

The Diplomas Now Implementation Support Team identified a subset of the program components that it hypothesized were the most likely to lead to the desired changes in school and student outcomes. During the first year of implementation, the DN schools struggled to implement some of these “critical” components. For example, in some schools, school-level Diplomas Now staff members were not in place to begin work with school personnel by the start of the academic year. Many middle schools did not get the Diplomas Now reform curricula in place. Only about half of the schools managed to hold Early Warning Indicator meetings weekly. And although instructional support for English/language arts and math

teachers was provided at many schools, instructional coaches struggled to work with teachers as often as the model design prescribed. So while the schools got off to a generally strong start with implementation, it may be that they could have focused more intently on some aspects of the model hypothesized to be the most important.

- DN schools were most successful during the first year in offering schools integrated on-site support, implementing a tiered intervention model, and adding student support services like tutoring and after-school programs into the existing school structure.

Taken together, this means that Diplomas Now was most successful at combining data-driven identification of student needs (catching students who are off track) with the means to respond to those needs through coordinated programs and personnel (getting those students back on track). These are essential functions of the Diplomas Now focus on students' progress toward high school graduation.

- DN schools were less successful in adopting new curricula and implementing peer coaching models, both of which require gaining the trust and investment of school administrators and teachers, and which may require additional time to implement as a result.

Qualitative data reveal that school staff members were not always convinced of the value of implementing new curricula, and that some teachers were reluctant to be “coached.” These findings speak to the importance of giving a school’s staff a role in selecting some school-level program staff members, if possible, to encourage greater rapport and trust between school and Diplomas Now staff members. This is especially the case for instructional coaches, who frequently interact with teachers on a one-on-one, peer-to-peer basis.

## **Collaborative Interactions Among Diplomas Now Partners and School Staff Members**

School improvement necessitates that people act, react, and interact in new ways, and effective collaboration is essential to such change. Effective collaboration is at the heart of the complex Diplomas Now school reform, which deploys staff members from Talent Development, City Year, and Communities In Schools to work in concert with each other and with school staff members to implement the tiered model in school buildings. As designed, the program needs individuals from the three partner organizations to establish shared norms for working together, communicating continuously, sharing leadership responsibilities, and making decisions together in order to achieve the program goals of addressing student attendance, behavior, and course performance.

As part of its research, the evaluation team investigated the collaborations that were part of first-year implementation. These collaborations did not only include those among staff members from the three Diplomas Now partner organizations, but also those between Diplomas Now program staff members and school personnel.

- Two aspects of collaboration appeared to be most important across schools and various role groups: investment and role clarity.

Administrators and teachers are key stakeholders whose engagement in implementing the Diplomas Now model inputs is indispensable. In order to become actively engaged, it is important that they understand the model through activities such as information sessions and meeting school staff members at other DN schools. Continual communication, including regular meetings and informal check-ins, helps build the trust and acceptance necessary for the collaborative work of model implementation.

In addition, it is crucial that Diplomas Now school-based staff members establish their purposes and roles, with teachers and administrators as well as among themselves. The influx of Talent Development, City Year, and Communities In Schools staff members provided schools with the human resources necessary for the implementation of the Diplomas Now model. However, increased clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of these Diplomas Now staff members would have further improved model implementation in the first year. Considering the numerous program components implemented at DN schools, and the number of additional staff members enlisted to support implementation, it is understandable that both Diplomas Now program staff members and school staff members experienced uncertainty about each other's roles and expectations. Especially during the first year, it would be very helpful to clarify these roles, responsibilities, and expectations through additional guidance and program staff training, school staff training, and joint training. In their continuing work in the schools in this study, Diplomas Now has been taking such steps. Furthermore, hiring Diplomas Now school-based staff members before the academic year begins appears to facilitate cooperation that results in quicker implementation of short-term program goals and better planning for longer-term initiatives.

## **Next Steps**

This report is the first of three planned for this evaluation. Over the course of the evaluation, the impact and implementation research presented in these three reports will tell the story of what Diplomas Now is, what it took to implement the Diplomas Now model, what it looked like as implemented in schools around the country, and how it ultimately differed from business as

usual in the districts in which it was implemented. In addition, the evaluation will provide evidence about the impact of Diplomas Now on schools and students. The next two reports will present findings about the continuing implementation of Diplomas Now, whether implementation of the model is changing DN schools and making them different in their organization and practices from non-DN schools, and finally the impact of Diplomas Now on student outcomes.



## 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.