



Executive Summary

ADDRESSING EARLY WARNING INDICATORS

Interim Impact Findings from
the Investing in Innovation (i3)
Evaluation of DIPLOMAS NOW

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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 — partnered to form Diplomas Now in an effort to turn those numbers around. Supported by funds from a U.S. Department of Education 2010 Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant and private sources, Diplomas Now teams have been implementing their data-driven, tiered intervention model in urban secondary schools across the nation. The model combines a comprehensive school reform strategy, intended to transform the academic experience of all students, with more targeted interventions for students who have “early warning indicators” related to attendance, behavior, and course performance. By identifying students at risk of dropping out and providing individual support, Diplomas Now attempts to get struggling students back on a stable trajectory toward their diplomas.

MDRC and ICF International are conducting an independent, experimental evaluation of the impact and implementation of Diplomas Now. Sixty-two secondary schools in 11 school districts agreed to participate in this study between 2011 and 2013. 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 their choosing. Two prior evaluation reports focused on the first two years of Diplomas Now implementation. This third report shares interim impact findings for those years, paying particular attention to attendance, behavior, and course performance outcomes of students in sixth or ninth grade, their transition year into middle or high school — the first-year impacts of a multiyear program.

- The Diplomas Now model produced a positive and statistically significant impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators — students with better than 85 percent attendance, fewer than three days suspended or expelled, and passing grades in both English/language arts and math. Helping students maintain or reach these thresholds is an explicit target of Diplomas Now school teams.
- Diplomas Now did not have a statistically significant impact on the percentage of students meeting a more stringent threshold suggestive of a more stable educational trajectory: better than 90 percent attendance, no suspensions or expulsions, and passing all four core subject areas of English/language arts, math, social studies, and science.
- Diplomas Now did not produce a significant impact on average attendance, discipline, and course passing rates in sixth and ninth grades compared with rates at schools that did not implement the model. These outcomes improved from baseline in both Diplomas Now and comparison schools.
- There were more promising impacts for middle schools than for high schools. In middle schools, Diplomas Now had a positive, statistically significant impact on the percentage of sixth-graders with no early warning indicators. There were no significant impacts, positive or negative, on the attendance, behavior, and course performance outcomes of ninth-graders.
- Students at Diplomas Now schools reported participating in more academically focused after-school activities, and more reported having a positive relationship with an adult at school who is not a teacher, than their peers in the comparison schools. Students in both groups of schools reported similar perceptions of school safety and climate, and the Diplomas Now model did not have an effect on students’ self-perceptions or school behaviors.

Preface

American education has entered its next phase with the signing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by President Obama in December 2015. In a change from the prior education law (No Child Left Behind), states rather than the federal government now play the lead role in the identification of struggling schools and the kinds of interventions that can help them improve. Stressing accountability, ESSA encourages states to bring evidence-based practices to bear in this endeavor. The federal Investing in Innovation (i3) evaluation of Diplomas Now is a notable effort to collect such evidence.

Diplomas Now is a secondary school reform model that aims to change school structures and practices in ways that will affect students' engagement and persistence, starting with their transition year into middle school (sixth grade) or high school (ninth grade). The first two reports from this evaluation focused on the implementation of the Diplomas Now model. This third report provides a valuable interim look at the reform model's impact on students' attendance, behavior, and course performance — predictors of whether students graduate or drop out — as they begin their middle school or high school journeys. A later report will discuss the quality of model implementation across four years and its impact on two key four-year outcomes: ninth-grade completion for middle school students and high school graduation.

The opportunity for rigorous study of a whole school reform, nationally scaled and implemented for four or more years, is rare, and the signing of ESSA only increases its relevance. The information generated from the full scope of this evaluation will contribute meaningfully to the existing knowledge base of how best to support underserved students and communities, and can help states and their local education agencies make more thoroughly informed decisions about how they can improve the secondary schools that are most in need.

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 at the participating school districts who provided administrative records data; the school staff and the Diplomas Now staff working within some of the schools who helped organize survey administration; and the school administrators and teachers who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in surveys.

The assistance and cooperation of the Diplomas Now staff at the national level has also been invaluable. The Diplomas Now Implementation Support Team informed the creation of the survey protocols. The Diplomas Now National Executive Team has answered our many requests for program information throughout the project and provided 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.

Several ICF International and MDRC staff members and consultants worked directly with schools and school districts participating in the study. Rob Ivry, Stephanie Safran, and Jacklyn Willard worked with Diplomas Now staff members to recruit districts and schools to participate in this project. Many dedicated colleagues supported survey data collection efforts, including Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Allison Alexander, Ashley Briggs, Nicole Dutch, Elyse Goldenberg, Lisa Luo, Caitlin Murphy, Allison Nebbergall, Jackie Rhodes, Kathleen Wang, Eleanor Leahy, Rachel Pedraza, Stephanie Safran, Kelly Walton, and Seth Muzzy.

Many MDRC staff also supported the data processing, analysis, and report writing. Kristin Porter helped design the analysis plan, while Marie-Andrée Somers and Pei Zhu offered technical advice throughout the process. Leslyn Hall supported the survey design. Nicole Clabaugh, Katie Lashko, David Roy, Cathy Corbin, Rebecca Coven, Micah DeLaurentis, Zeest Haider, Heilyn Paulino, and Sara Staszak provided programming and analysis support. Katie Lashko also worked closely with school districts to collect school records data. Nick Commins supported the creation of some of the report exhibits. Larissa Saco and Nicole Clabaugh coordinated the report production and moved the report to completion. Rekha Balu, Fred Doolittle, Rob Ivry, Joshua Malbin, and Marie-Andrée Somers carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and offered helpful critiques throughout the writing process. Jennie Kaufman edited the full report, and Stephanie Cowell and Carolyn Thomas prepared the report for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Although the national high school graduation rate has increased over the past decade, one in five students still do not complete high school in four years.¹ Among low-income students, almost 30 percent fail to graduate on time.² Compared with high school graduates, dropouts are more likely to earn less money, live in poverty, suffer from poor health, be incarcerated, or be dependent on social services.³

Diplomas Now is a partnership of three national organizations — Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities In Schools — collaborating in an effort to transform urban secondary schools so that fewer students drop out and more graduate ready for postsecondary education and work. The Diplomas Now model is a comprehensive multiyear approach to whole-school reform that includes structural change, instructional materials and curricula, teacher and administrator coaching and support, and an early warning indicator and intervention system to identify and support students falling off track for graduation. The program brings additional human resources into the school both to bolster implementation of the model and to provide direct assistance to students. With the goal of a continuous system of support through secondary school, the model seeks to help more students graduate by improving their attendance, behavior, and course performance, particularly in English/language arts and math, during the middle grades and high school.

Acting as a representative for the partnership, Johns Hopkins University, home to Talent Development Secondary, was awarded an Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 to support the expansion of Diplomas Now from a few schools to more than 30 middle and high schools in more than 10 school districts. The grant funds also support a rigorous random assignment evaluation of the Diplomas Now model, led by MDRC.

This report discusses the early impacts of the Diplomas Now model on student and school outcomes at the end of the first and second years of model implementation. It focuses in particular on students during sixth and ninth grades, critical transition years into middle and high school. Accordingly, this report presents the *first-year* impacts of a *multiyear* program.

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

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

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

The Diplomas Now Model

The Diplomas Now partnership works with schools to ensure that students are getting the support they need to (1) get to school and to class, (2) behave in ways that facilitate learning, and (3) keep up with the lessons being taught. In other words, the pathway to student success in schools using the model is linked to attendance, behavior, and course performance: the “ABCs” that predict whether students graduate or drop out.⁴ The Diplomas Now model is a multidimensional system of organizational and instructional reforms and targeted student support services organized under the following Four Pillars.⁵

Pillar I. Teacher Teams and Small Learning Communities

Diplomas Now collaborates with school leaders to reorganize schools so that small groups of teachers work consistently with the same population of students. Not only does this allow teams of teachers to work together, the better to teach and support their students; it also creates a sense of community among the students. These teacher teams and small learning communities function best when teachers have a chance to collaborate within the daily schedule and when classes are 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 that includes an intensive peer coaching system for math and English/language arts teachers, teachers have an opportunity to sharpen their pedagogy. Diplomas Now also offers curricular materials aligned with college- and career-ready standards and ensures that schools offer accelerated remediation courses for struggling students so that all students can meet their potential.

Pillar III. Tiered Student Supports

The Diplomas Now partners collaborate to help schools provide the right services to the right students at the right time and at the right level of intensity.⁶ To do so, they use early warn-

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

⁵For more information on the Diplomas Now model, see William Corrin, Susan Sepanik, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, and Kathleen K. Wang, *Laying Tracks to Graduation: The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now* (New York: MDRC, 2014).

⁶“Tiered Student Supports” refers to different levels of support offered across the school or to individual students based on need. Tier I interventions support the entire school. Tier II interventions are individual support services offered to students identified as falling off track. Many of these interventions are provided by City Year AmeriCorps members who serve as mentors, tutors, and role models. Tier III interventions are for stu-

ing indicators to identify students who require different types of support. Teachers, administrators, and Diplomas Now staff members meet regularly to review students' attendance rates, disciplinary referrals or suspensions, and course performance and to plan interventions for students in need of support.

Pillar IV. Can-Do Culture and Climate

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

The National i3 Evaluation of Diplomas Now

In total, 62 schools (33 middle schools and 29 high schools) from 11 large urban school districts across the country were recruited to participate in the study starting in either the 2011-2012 or the 2012-2013 school year.⁷ By design, Diplomas Now works in high-needs schools. The participating schools, all eligible for Title I funds,⁸ serve large populations of low-income and minority students. Thirty-two of the participating secondary schools were randomly assigned to implement the Diplomas Now model (DN schools), and 30 were assigned to continue with "business as usual" (non-DN schools), either maintaining their existing practices and structures or pursuing other types of school reform.⁹ This random assignment design is often referred to as the "gold standard" in evaluation because the schools are all similar at the beginning of the study, and the decision about which schools will implement the program is not related to any preexisting characteristics of the schools. Therefore, any differences between the DN and non-DN schools that emerge after random assignment can be attributed to the program rather than to school characteristics; that is, Diplomas Now *caused* the observed differences.

dents at the highest risk of dropping out and are generally coordinated by a case manager from Communities In Schools.

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

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

⁹Two middle schools are not included in the analyses in either the first or second year due to issues with grade configuration. Two more middle schools are not included in the second-year analyses because one school closed and one school stopped serving sixth grade.

The study's experimental design makes it possible for the evaluation to assess the *impact* of Diplomas Now. This third report focuses on the early impacts of Diplomas Now on students' attendance, behavior, and course performance measures (the ABC outcomes), separately and in combination, during their first year in middle school or high school over the course of the first two years that the model was implemented in participating schools.¹⁰ Does the implementation of Diplomas Now have an impact on how many students are on a path to high school graduation by the end of their first year of middle school or high school? During that first year, what difference does Diplomas Now make for attendance rates, suspensions and expulsions, and successful course completion? This report also discusses the impact of Diplomas Now on possible precursors to the ABC outcomes, such as the climate of the school, support from parents and the community, and students' attitudes and relationships.

Early School and Student Outcomes

The Diplomas Now model is hypothesized to achieve its intermediate goals of improving attendance, behavior, and course performance, especially in English/language arts and math, through several mediating pathways. These early precursor outcomes include measures of positive school climate, the addition of academic after-school activities, and increased parent and community support, along with measures of student attitudes and behaviors, including self-confidence, engagement and effort in school, study habits, and relationships with adults and peers. Administrator, teacher, and student survey items were used to measure these outcomes. Analyses of Diplomas Now's impact on these outcomes found the following:

- The Diplomas Now model had positive and statistically significant impacts on teachers' perceptions of school climate during the second year of implementation. There were no other statistically significant impacts on early school outcomes as reported by administrators and teachers, but the findings tend to point in a positive direction.
- Students at DN schools reported participating more in academically focused after-school activities than their peers at non-DN schools. Students at both groups of schools reported similar perceptions of safety, climate, and behavioral issues at school during the first year of implementation.¹¹

¹⁰The primary analyses for this report focus on the second year of implementation, when the model was more mature.

¹¹Sixth- and ninth-grade students were surveyed in the spring of the first year of implementation, so all early school and student outcomes coming from student survey items represent the first rather than the second year of implementation.

- The Diplomas Now model did not have an effect on students’ self-perceptions and school behaviors as measured by the student survey during the first year of implementation.
- Students at DN schools were more likely to report a positive relationship with an adult at school who was not a teacher, but the Diplomas Now model had no impact on student perceptions of relationships with teachers, administrators, and other students.

The areas in which Diplomas Now is having some positive effects — teachers’ perceptions of the climate of the school, and students’ participation in after-school activities and relationships with adults at school — align with specific reforms implemented as part of the Diplomas Now model.

ABC Outcomes

The long-term goal of the Diplomas Now model is to increase student graduation rates and college readiness by improving students’ success on the indicators that past research has suggested are connected to graduation: the ABC outcomes of attendance, behavior, and course performance.¹² Thus far, the study team has been able to explore early impacts for sixth- and ninth-grade students making the transition into Diplomas Now secondary schools during the first two years of model implementation in those schools. The reported impacts of the model on student outcomes are based on the first year of students’ experience with this multiyear intervention.

The Diplomas Now model includes structures and practices intended to help students stay above or move above two ABC outcome thresholds: The first serves as an intervention standard, below which the model targets students for additional support, and the second indicates a more secure course to graduation. Specifically, the first identifies students with “early warning indicators” of being at risk of not progressing successfully to high school graduation: daily attendance of 85 percent or less, suspensions or expulsions for a total of three or more days, and failing grades in English/language arts or math classes. Diplomas Now staff members work with school staff members in DN schools in an effort to increase the number of students without early warning indicators. Over time, Diplomas Now implementation ideally will increase the number of students who meet the second threshold, indicating a more stable educational trajectory: having better than 90 percent daily attendance, no suspensions or expulsions,

¹²Elaine Marie Allensworth and John Q. Easton, *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005); Balfanz et al. (2007); James J. Kemple, Micha D. Segeritz, and Nickisha Stephenson, “Building On-Track Indicators for High School Graduation and College Readiness: Evidence from New York City,” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 18, 1 (2013): 7-28.

and passing grades in all core courses (that is, English/language arts, math, social studies, and science). These higher “stability” thresholds represent normative expectations of secondary school students: to go to school regularly, to stay out of serious trouble, and to pass their classes. For students at this level, whole-school programming and instruction are deemed adequate support. Students in between the two levels are monitored by Diplomas Now and school staff members and may receive additional attention as needed.

Impacts for the Full Sample of Schools

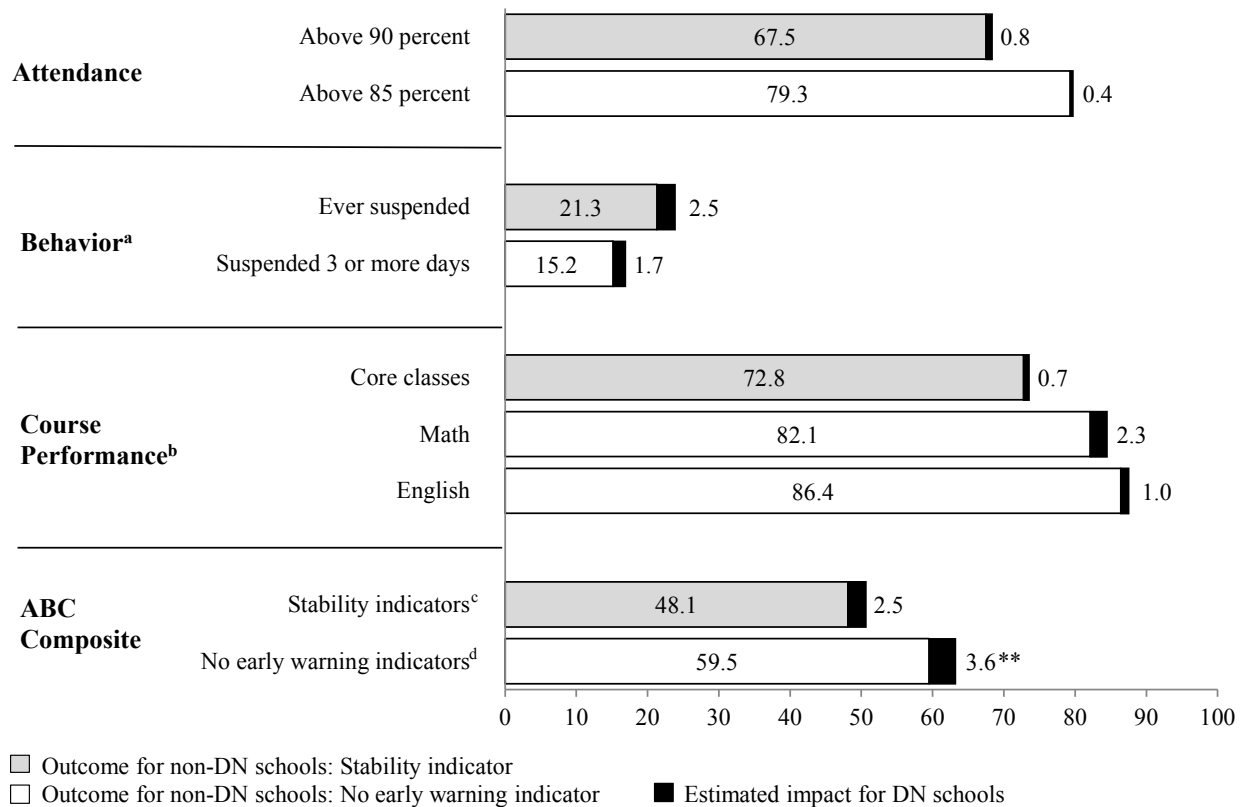
The evaluation team analyzed whether implementation of Diplomas Now had an impact on the percentages of students at both stability and early warning thresholds for *each* of the ABC outcomes, as well as the percentages of students at these threshold levels for *all three* of the outcomes combined. The results of these analyses are summarized in Figure ES.1.

- For the combined sample of sixth- and ninth-graders in the second year of implementation (that is, the second cohort of students), there was a statistically significant 3.6 percentage point impact of Diplomas Now on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators. That is, DN schools were more successful than non-DN schools in helping students stay above or move above the early warning thresholds for all three ABC outcomes in combination. The Diplomas Now model did not produce a statistically significant impact on the percentage of students meeting the stability threshold across all three ABC outcomes. (See the ABC composite section of Figure ES.1.)
- The Diplomas Now model did not produce a statistically significant impact on the percentage of students above either the stability or early warning thresholds for any of the *separate* ABC outcome measures.¹³ (See the attendance, behavior, and course performance sections of Figure ES.1.)

Table ES.1 displays the impacts of the implementation of the Diplomas Now model on continuous measures of attendance, behavior, and course performance outcomes — for example, the average percentage of days attended by students rather than the percentage of students meeting an attendance threshold — for the combined sample of sixth- and ninth-grade students. These analyses provide insight into whether the implementation of the Diplomas Now model, with its targeted interventions for struggling students and broader instructional and structural reforms, had an impact, on average, across the sixth and ninth grades.

¹³A student with only one early warning indicator will fall below the composite threshold; therefore, although impacts may not be significant when outcomes are measured separately, it is possible that these impacts in combination translate to lifting enough students over the composite threshold to be significant cumulatively.

Figure ES.1
Percentage of Students At or Above Threshold Measures,
by DN and Non-DN Schools, Cohort 2



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on student records obtained from school districts.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was used for all statistical tests presented in this table. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

^aBehavior outcomes include suspensions and expulsions.

^bMeasure indicates the percentage of students who passed all core courses (math, English/language arts, science, and social studies courses), all core math courses, and all core English/language arts courses, respectively.

^cStudents with stability indicators attended over 90 percent of days enrolled in the district, were never suspended or expelled, and did not fail any core courses (math, English/language arts, science, or social studies) attempted during the school year.

^dStudents with no early warning indicators attended over 85 percent of the days enrolled in the district, were suspended or expelled for fewer than three days, and did not fail any math or English/language arts courses during the school year.

Table ES.1
Impacts on Continuous Measures of
Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance, Full Sample, Cohort 2

Outcome	DN Schools	Non-DN Schools	Estimated Impact	Effect Size	P-Value for Estimated Impact
Attendance					
Percentage of enrolled days attended	89.7	89.3	0.4	0.03	0.602
Behavior					
Percentage of enrolled days suspended or expelled	1.5	1.2	0.3	0.05	0.177
Course performance					
Percentage of core courses passed ^a	86.6	86.6	0.1	0.00	0.924
Sample size	29	29			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on student records obtained from school districts.

NOTES: Across 58 study schools, 14,950 nonrepeating sixth- and ninth-grade students are included in the analyses. Among the sample, 6,997 students attended Diplomas Now (DN) schools and 7,953 students attended non-DN schools. Some students are not included in the analyses of course performance measures because data were not available on their grades for specific courses, and an entire DN middle school was dropped from these analyses because there were no baseline course data for the students attending that school. There are no more than 8 percent missing DN school students and 8 percent missing non-DN school students for any of the course performance measures.

Estimated impacts are based on a two-level model with students nested within schools controlling for random assignment block and school- and student-level covariates. The “DN Schools” and “Non-DN Schools” columns display regression-adjusted mean outcomes for each group, using the mean covariate values for students in the “DN Schools” column as the basis for the adjustment.

Effect sizes were computed using the standard deviations of all non-DN school students for the respective measures.

A two-tailed t-test was used for all statistical tests presented in this table. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

^aThe denominator includes all core courses (math, English/language arts, science, or social studies) each student attempted during the school year.

- Diplomas Now did not produce a statistically significant impact on students’ attendance rates, percentage of days suspended or expelled, or percentage of core courses passed.

Thus, after two years of model implementation, the Diplomas Now model has neither increased average attendance and course passing rates nor decreased disciplinary days beyond the levels

achieved in the non-DN schools; both groups of schools experienced similar levels of improvement on these measures.

Impacts for Middle Schools and High Schools

Middle schools and high schools typically vary in size and structure and serve students at different places in their developmental and educational pathways. Furthermore, ninth-graders have had more time to accumulate early warning indicators through middle school and may reach the ninth grade further off track.¹⁴ Given these differences, some aspects of the Diplomas Now model vary for middle schools and high schools. Therefore, impacts on student outcomes were analyzed for these two groups of schools separately as well as together.

- The Diplomas Now model had a positive and statistically significant impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators in middle school. (See Figure ES.2.)
- The Diplomas Now model had a positive and statistically significant impact on the percentage of middle school students who attended over 90 percent of enrolled days.

Although there are no other statistically significant impacts for middle schools, the middle school impact estimates across multiple analyses were more often positive than were those for high schools.

- On average, Diplomas Now did not produce statistically significant impacts at the high school level compared with the outcomes at non-DN schools.

Overall, results of the evaluation analyses suggest that Diplomas Now may have had a more positive early impact in middle schools than in high schools. While DN high schools did see improvements across ninth-grade attendance, behavior, course performance, and composite measures from the first to the second year of implementation, there were similar gains in the non-DN high schools as well.

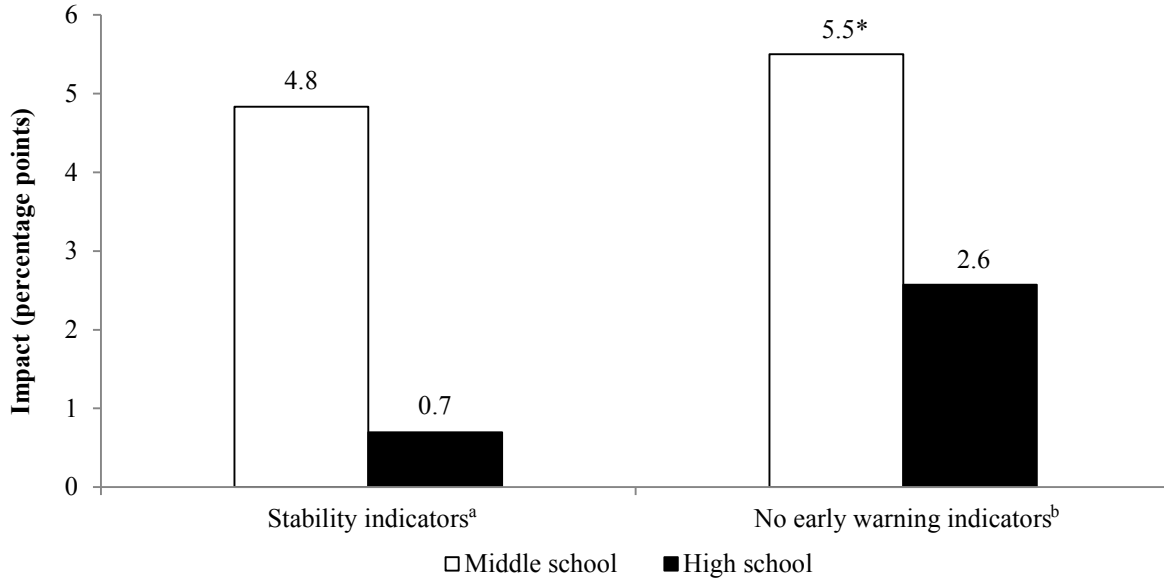
Impacts for More- and Less-Prepared Students

The Diplomas Now model seeks to help struggling students overcome early warning indicators and get on a more stable pathway to graduation as well as to prevent students who are on a more stable educational trajectory from slipping off that path. Thus, the evaluation team analyzed the impact of Diplomas Now on the outcomes of students entering high school or

¹⁴Ruth Curran Neild, Robert Balfanz, and Liza Herzog, “An Early Warning System,” *Educational Leadership* 65, 2 (2007): 28-33.

Figure ES.2

**Diplomas Now Impacts on ABC Composite Measures,
Middle and High Schools, Cohort 2**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on student records obtained from school districts.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was used for all statistical tests presented in this table. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

^aStudents with stability indicators attended over 90 percent of days enrolled in the district, were never suspended or expelled, and did not fail any core courses (math, English/language arts, science, or social studies) attempted during the school year.

^bStudents with no early warning indicators attended over 85 percent of the days enrolled in the district, were suspended or expelled for fewer than three days, and did not fail any math or English/language arts courses during the school year.

middle school according to how prepared they were for the transition, based on whether entering high school students were above or below the stability threshold at the end of eighth grade, and on middle school students' levels of academic proficiency at the end of fifth grade.¹⁵

- Although Diplomas Now had no statistically significant positive impacts at the high school level on average, implementation of the model had more success keeping the stable students above the stability threshold than moving the less stable students above that threshold.

¹⁵Because elementary school data across participating study districts did not consistently include the disciplinary and course performance metrics used to create the composite ABC indicators, the evaluation team used standardized state assessment scores to represent students' preparedness for middle school.

- The Diplomas Now model did have a statistically significant positive impact on the percentage of more-prepared students who passed math in ninth grade.

The students entering high school below the stability threshold — those who had been absent at least 10 percent of the time, been suspended or expelled, or failed a core course in eighth grade — posed a challenge for both the DN and non-DN schools. For example, in both groups of schools only about 30 percent of less-prepared students had no early warning indicators in ninth grade (compared with more than 70 percent of the more-prepared students), and only about 20 percent were above the stability threshold (compared with about 60 percent of the more-prepared students). This finding reinforces how valuable intervening successfully with at-risk students during the middle grades might be.

- In general, the patterns of impacts were similar for sixth-grade students whether or not they were proficient on state English/language arts and math assessments at the end of elementary school.

Next Steps

After two years, implementation of the Diplomas Now secondary school reform model produced a statistically significant, positive impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators, suggesting that a lower percentage of students were notably off track on the pathway to high school graduation at DN schools compared with non-DN schools. The focus of the Diplomas Now model, particularly with its early warning system and tiered support, is to reduce the percentage of students with early warning indicators, and this finding suggests those efforts are starting to make a difference after two years. The model’s effect on the percentage of students meeting the “higher bar” indicating a stable pathway to graduation is not statistically significant, but it shows progress: The 2.5 percentage point impact for the second cohort of sixth- and ninth-grade students was about 5 percentage points higher than the impact for the first cohort of students (-2.6 percentage points).¹⁶ The increased impact for the second cohort aligns with two-year implementation findings from this evaluation. From the first to the second year of implementation, DN schools became more different from non-DN schools in terms of their use of reform-oriented practices and structures — DN schools showed sustained levels of reform implementation, while the levels declined in the non-DN schools.¹⁷

¹⁶The impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators increased 3.4 percentage points from the first cohort to the second cohort. This increase was not statistically significant.

¹⁷Susan Sepanik, William Corrin, David Roy, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, and Kathleen K. Wang, *Moving Down the Track: Changing School Practices During the Second Year of Diplomas Now* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

Overall, the early impacts of the model during the second year of implementation were stronger for sixth-graders than for ninth-graders. In particular, higher percentages of sixth-graders in DN schools had better than 90 percent attendance and no early warning indicators than their peers in non-DN schools. Although ninth-graders in DN high schools did not have better outcomes compared with their peers at non-DN high schools, ninth-grade outcomes improved from the first to the second year of implementation at both groups of schools.

Johns Hopkins University was granted funding from the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to support an extension of this evaluation that will make it possible to analyze the impact of Diplomas Now on the longer-term student outcomes that represent the model's primary target: What is the impact of Diplomas Now on high school graduation rates and on the ninth-grade success of students from Diplomas Now middle schools? This will allow the study team to see whether the increase in impacts from the first to the second year continues over a longer period of implementation, and how well implementation is maintained over that period. Furthermore, given how much better the ninth-grade outcomes were for students entering high school above the stability threshold, the promising impact findings for middle school students are worth continued attention. If these impacts are maintained, following these students into high school will indicate whether Diplomas Now's encouraging intervention with students in the middle grades yields positive high school outcomes. The study team will also be able to explore the ABC outcomes, including the composite measures, of sixth- and ninth-graders in the fourth year of implementation, when the model has had even more time to mature in the schools.

As of the publication of this report, the Diplomas Now partners had managed to maintain model implementation for at least four years in almost all the DN schools. Since whole-school reform efforts implemented for several years have been shown to have greater impacts on student outcomes than those implemented for only a couple of years, analyzing the longer-term effects of this model is important.¹⁸ Furthermore, the extension will also allow for some exploration of the variation in implementation and outcomes found across schools and students, which may support a better understanding of best practices and generate hypotheses that could inform practice moving forward.

¹⁸Geoffrey D. Borman, Gina M. Hewes, Laura T. Overman, and Shelly Brown, "Comprehensive School Reform and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of Educational Research* 73, 2 (2003): 125-230.

Earlier MDRC Publications on Diplomas Now

Moving Down the Track

Changing School Practices During the Second Year of Diplomas Now

2015. Susan Sepanik, William Corrin, David Roy, Aracelis Gray, Felix Fernandez, Ashley Briggs, Kathleen K. Wang

Laying Tracks to Graduation

The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now

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

Data Collection Instrument Supplement to Laying Tracks to Graduation

The First Year of Implementing Diplomas Now

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

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

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

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

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

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

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