



PROJECT GRAD SEEN YIELDING MIXED RECORD

BY DEBRA VIADERO

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Project GRAD, a national high school improvement initiative begun in Houston almost 13 years ago, has yielded a mixed record in its effort to raise graduation rates and academic performance, according to an independent evaluation of the \$70 million program.

Now operating in 12 districts, Project GRAD—short for Graduation Really Achieves Dreams—is unusual for its focus on both high schools and the elementary and middle schools that send students to them. Its aim is to help disadvantaged students qualify for the college scholarships that the program offers.

For More Info

Read the reports on elementary and high schools using Project GRAD from MDRC.

But a pair of reports released last week by MDRC, a nonprofit research group based in New York City, suggest that Project GRAD faces significant challenges.

At the elementary school level, the MDRC researchers studied 52 schools in four districts—Houston; Atlanta; Columbus, Ohio; and Newark, N.J.—over time periods that varied depending on how long the programs had been in place. They found that students in Project GRAD schools improved about as much on state-mandated tests as students from demographically comparable schools in the same districts.

The pattern changed, though, on nationally normed tests. While scores dipped on those tests

in comparable schools without Project GRAD, they held steady or declined less in the Project GRAD schools.

Stepping Up Efforts

At the high school level, the program's best results were found at Jefferson Davis High School, its flagship Houston school.

There, the growth in the percentages of students successfully completing core academic courses and graduating outpaced that for the district's demographically comparable schools. That success in part spurred the program to go national in the early 1990s with the help of an \$18 million federal grant.

As the program spread to two other Houston high schools, though, the pace of improvement more

closely matched that of other district schools.

In Atlanta and Columbus, where the program has operated for less than five years, the increases in attendance and promotion rates at Project GRAD schools are beginning to outstrip those for comparable schools. The report does not address test scores at the high school level.