



## MDRC'S EVALUATION OF PROJECT GRAD

### *MDRC's Publications*

Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD) is an ambitious education reform initiative designed to improve academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and rates of college attendance for low-income students. Launched first in Houston, Texas, it is an unusual reform model in that it intervenes throughout an entire “feeder pattern” of elementary and middle schools that send students into each Project GRAD high school. The initiative recognizes that high schools inherit problems that have arisen earlier in the education pipeline, making it essential to improve both elementary and secondary schools in order to increase the rates of high school graduation, college-going, and college graduation.

Project GRAD schools at all levels build support in the community for school improvement and college attendance, implement a classroom management program, provide students with access to needed social services, and receive special support from local Project GRAD organizations. To

help students arrive at middle and high school better prepared academically, Project GRAD elementary schools implement specific reading and math curricula, along with enhanced professional development for teachers. At the high school level, Project GRAD's model assumes that better-prepared students would come from the Project GRAD feeder schools, would benefit from special academic counseling and summer academic enrichment in high school, and would qualify for a scholarship to attend college, which is the “cornerstone” of the Project GRAD reform.

MDRC — a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization — conducted an independent evaluation to determine the effects of Project GRAD by comparing the changes in student outcomes at Project GRAD schools with changes at similar, non-Project GRAD schools in the same districts. The results of this study can be found in two reports — *Charting a Path to Graduation* focuses on 52 elementary schools in Houston and in three other

school districts (Atlanta, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio; and Newark, New Jersey), and *Striving for Student Success* focuses on three high schools in Houston and on high schools in two other school districts (Columbus and Atlanta). In general, Project GRAD student outcomes are tracked from the implementation of the first components of the model at each site (ranging from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s) until the 2002-2003 school year.

### What Did the Study Find?

MDRC's elementary school evaluation found that students at Project GRAD schools generally showed as much improvement on high-stakes state achievement tests as students at similar local schools — but without suffering the decline seen in comparison schools on national tests, which measure achievement more broadly.

The findings from the high school study tell a more complicated story:

- At Jefferson Davis High School in Houston, the initiative's flagship school, Project GRAD had a statistically significant

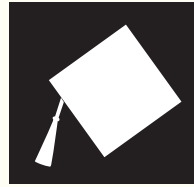
positive impact on the proportion of students who completed a core academic curriculum on time — that is, received an average grade of at least 75 out of 100 in their core courses; earned four credits in English, three in math, two in science, and two in social studies; and graduated from high school within four years.

- As Project GRAD expanded into two other Houston high schools, these positive effects on students' academic preparation were not evident. Student outcomes at the newer Project GRAD high schools improved, but generally this progress was matched by progress at the comparison high schools.

- Improvements in graduation rates at the three Project GRAD Houston high schools were generally matched by improvements in graduation rates at the comparison schools.

- Looking at early indicators of student success, the Project GRAD high schools in Columbus and Atlanta showed improvements in





## *“MDRC’s Evaluation” continued,*

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attendance and promotion to tenth grade that appear to have outpaced improvements at the comparison schools, although the differences are only sometimes statistically significant.

The very nature and complexity of the Project GRAD feeder system intervention, which posits that students would need to be exposed to the program over many years, combined with a limited amount of follow-up in the expansion sites, created a challenging set of conditions for a meaningful evaluation. While the Houston feeder patterns provide a reasonable test of the intervention, the results for Atlanta, Columbus, and Newark should be treated as more provisional. In addition, because the high school evaluation began concurrently with the implementation of Project GRAD in the expansion site feeder elementary and middle schools, the study was not in a position to capture cumulative effects of students’ exposure to the intervention in the earlier grades in those districts. Only in the latter years of

follow-up in Houston did this begin to be possible.

### **What Are the Implications of These Findings?**

What accounts for this pattern of findings? The evidence points to at least two hypotheses. First, it may be more difficult than expected to quickly improve the academic performance of incoming high school students by intervening in feeder schools — a core tenet of Project GRAD’s strategy. The Project GRAD strategy takes considerable time to unfold. In addition, it turns out that the feeder patterns for the high schools in this study were “leaky” — as a result of high rates of mobility and school-choice options, many students in the Project GRAD high schools had not benefited from exposure to the model in elementary or middle school. Second, the fact that Project GRAD did not intervene directly in classroom instruction at the high school level may help explain the lack of impacts on most ninth- and tenth-grade measures (and perhaps on graduation rates). On the

other hand, while Project GRAD did not produce improvements in graduation rates, its services were able to affect the course-taking of students at Davis High School who were already headed toward graduation.

Project GRAD is a dynamic organization that has responded to operational lessons and research evidence to modify its strategy over time. In fact, it has already begun to refine its high school approach to address some of the challenges suggested by this evaluation, including the effects of “leaky” feeder patterns, of the relatively slow rollout of the components of the Project GRAD intervention, and of the difficulties of transforming high schools without directly intervening in the classroom.

To accomplish its goals of improving academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and rates of college attendance for low-income students, Project GRAD may need to make a strategic choice: to intervene directly in classrooms (on its own or in partnership with

curricular reformers) or to target high schools where curricular reform is already under way and where Project GRAD’s services and scholarship offer would provide added value.

In many ways, Project GRAD’s multifaceted strategy was ahead of its time, prefiguring a variety of current reform approaches. The focus on the full span of grades, the connection to postsecondary education, and the need to work above the level of individual schools are now appreciated as important aspects of many district-level reforms. Project GRAD now has the opportunity to build on its strengths, incorporate additional components into its strategy to address its weaknesses, and develop strategic partnerships with other complementary school improvement efforts to create the next generation of its reform model.



## CHARTING A PATH TO GRADUATION

### The Effect of Project GRAD on Elementary School Student Outcomes in Four Urban Districts

BY JASON C. SNIPES, GLEE IVORY HOLTON, AND FRED DOOLITTLE  
*MDRC's Publications*

Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD) is an ambitious education reform initiative designed to improve academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and rates of college attendance for low-income students. It is an unusual reform model in that it intervenes throughout an entire “feeder pattern” of elementary and middle schools that send students into each Project GRAD high school. This report presents results of MDRC’s multiyear evaluation of the effects of Project GRAD on student achievement at elementary schools in six feeder patterns, encompassing a total of 52 schools in four cities: Houston, Texas (the original site); Atlanta, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio; and Newark, New Jersey. A companion report examines Project GRAD’s effects at the

high school level in three urban school districts.

In elementary schools, Project GRAD implements reading and math curricula, with enhanced professional development for teachers. In addition, each elementary school builds support in the community for school improvement and college attendance, implements a classroom management program, provides students with access to needed social services, and receives special support from local Project GRAD organizations. At the high school level, Project GRAD’s model assumes that better-prepared students would come from the feeder schools, would benefit from special academic counseling and summer academic enrichment in high school, and would qualify for a scholarship to attend college, which

is the “cornerstone” of the Project GRAD reform.

The key findings of this report are:

- Scores on *state achievement tests* at Project GRAD elementary schools in Houston and Atlanta improved in the years following implementation of the initiative. However, in an environment of strong state and local focus on state achievement tests, scores improved by similar amounts at comparison schools in these same districts.
- Project GRAD produced statistically significant positive effects on elementary students’ scores on *national achievement tests* in Houston and Newark; that is, while comparison schools experienced a decline in scores on these tests, Project GRAD schools saw scores remain constant or increase.
- In Columbus, the implementation of Project GRAD was initially weaker than in the other sites, and this appears to have lowered test scores — both absolutely and relative to comparison schools — in the early years of the initiative.



## STRIVING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

### The Effect of Project GRAD on High School Student Outcomes in Three Urban School Districts

BY JASON C. SNIPES, GLEE IVORY HOLTON, FRED DOOLITTLE, AND LAURA SZTEJNBERG  
*MDRC's Publications*

Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD) is an ambitious education reform initiative designed to improve academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and rates of college attendance for low-income students. Recognizing that high schools inherit problems that have arisen earlier in the education pipeline, Project GRAD intervenes throughout an entire “feeder pattern” of elementary and middle schools that send students into each high school. This report presents results of MDRC’s multiyear evaluation of the effects of Project GRAD on student progress at three high schools in Houston (the initiative’s original site) and at high schools in two other school districts (Columbus, Ohio, and Atlanta, Georgia). A companion report discusses

findings for Project GRAD elementary schools in four cities.

Project GRAD schools at *all* levels build support in the community for school improvement and college attendance, implement a classroom management program, provide students with access to needed social services, and receive special support from local Project GRAD organizations. Project GRAD elementary schools implement specific reading and math curricula, along with enhanced professional development for teachers. At the high school level, Project GRAD’s model assumes that better-prepared students would come from the Project GRAD feeder schools, would benefit from special academic counseling and summer academic enrichment in high school, and would qualify for a scholarship

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- At Jefferson Davis High School in Houston — the initiative’s flagship school — Project GRAD had a statistically significant positive impact on the proportion of students who completed a core academic curriculum on time. As Project GRAD expanded into two other Houston high schools, these positive effects on students’ academic preparation were not evident.
- Improvements in graduation rates at the three Project GRAD Houston high schools were generally matched by improvements in graduation rates at the comparison schools.
- The Project GRAD high schools in Columbus and

Atlanta in the early years of implementation showed improvements in attendance and promotion to tenth grade that appear to have outpaced improvements at the comparison schools, although the differences are only sometimes statistically significant.