

Reforming Underperforming High Schools

MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.

Bottom line: Urban high schools are in trouble — high dropout rates, low student academic achievement, and graduates who are unprepared for college are just some of the disappointing indicators. However, recent research points to a select number of approaches to improving student outcomes and reforming underperforming schools — from particular ways of creating new schools to specific strategies for strengthening existing schools through whole-school reform to making school more relevant to the world of work.

What Do We Know?

Successful system-wide reform through the creation of new schools is possible. Over the past decade, the New York City Department of Education has executed a systematic, comprehensive reform of high school education in which large, failing schools have been phased out and replaced with new smaller, themed schools. Simultaneously, it created a universal choice system that gives every incoming ninth-grader the ability to express preferences for which of NYC’s hundreds of schools to attend. MDRC’s ongoing evaluation (including more than 20,000 students in more than 100 small schools) has demonstrated that these new schools have produced large, positive impacts on academic outcomes — most notably high school graduation rates — for disadvantaged students of color.

These new schools are more than just small: the schools were developed through a competitive proposal process that was designed to ensure that school founders met specified conditions and to stimulate innovative ideas from a range of stakeholders and institutions. In addition, most were founded with community partners who offer students relevant learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom and provide school faculty with additional staffing support and resources during start-up. The district also contributed start-up funding (with support from philanthropy) as well as assistance to each of the small schools to facilitate leadership development, hiring, and implementation. By integrating a demanding and comprehensive academic curriculum, personal attention to student academic progress, and support from career or community partner organizations, the new small schools intended to prepare students for both college and career. MDRC is conducting further analyses that will hopefully reveal the specific mechanisms that drive these positive findings.

Comprehensive whole-school reforms can turn around struggling high schools, improve student achievement, and put more students on a successful path to graduation. Short of creating new schools, systematic reform by a unified school staff can make a difference. Talent Development, a comprehensive reform initiative that grappled with the challenges of improving low-performing schools, had a positive impact on student academic progress and achievement. This program supported structural changes — like creating ninth-grade academies to help students transition into high school, plus 90-minute instructional blocks in key subjects — and instructional improvements, including supporting “professional learning communities” focused on pedagogy. Instead of shutting down and reopening schools or overhauling existing staff, Talent Development strengthened the organization of schools and got staff agreement on common goals and practices. An expanded version of this model called Diplomas Now is being implemented in the largest school districts in the nation, including New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Brockton High School in Massachusetts has also received attention for its staff-driven efforts to improve student outcomes by identifying gaps in its students’ skills and knowledge and then having instruction across *all* subjects focus sharply on addressing those needs.

College and career preparation can work in tandem. Too often, students in urban high schools are not adequately prepared for postsecondary employment and education. A long-term study by MDRC of Career Academies — a popular high school reform that combines core academics with career development opportunities — provides rigorous evidence confirming that the Academies can produce lasting employment and earnings gains, particularly for young men and at-risk students, without reducing the chances that students earn a postsecondary credential. Career-focused activities, like visits to workplaces, job shadowing, and internships, appeared to be instrumental in Academy success.

Implementing stand-alone programs that target a specific subset of the student population tend to have a limited impact and cannot revive a struggling school. Stand-alone programs can have positive impacts on students and are easier to implement than whole-school reforms, but their impacts are often modest in size and scope because they address only one aspect of a student’s educational experience and only serve a small subset of students. For example, double-period algebra courses (“double-dosing”) for select ninth-graders in Chicago helped them learn more math, but it also contributed to other students failing their regular single-period math. Instead, integrating stand-alone programs into a broader school improvement plan with other complementary interventions offers an opportunity for larger impacts. Double-period math was just one part of Talent Development’s comprehensive school reform model, which improved student course completion, promotion rates, and attendance.

What’s Next?

Policymakers and reformers should avoid jumping from one reform to the next — stay the course until the initiatives have been in place long enough for their effectiveness to have received a fair test. Turning around struggling high schools is complicated and it takes time for things to stick — and the larger the school system, the more complicated is the implementation. Research shows that comprehensive school reforms in place for five years or more have greater impacts than reforms with briefer periods of implementation.

High school students need better support and preparation as they transition to postsecondary education or employment. Many comprehensive reform models focus on improving high school outcomes, like increasing the number of students who graduate, but schools must also help prepare students for opportunities *after graduation*. High schools, supported by their state departments of education, can begin moving towards graduating more *college-ready* students by aligning their curricula and instruction to the Common Core Standards. Districts and high schools must also share responsibility with their local postsecondary educational institutions by collaborating on summer bridge (e.g., academic instruction on a college campus over the summer), college awareness, and other programs.

Expand the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program to support the funding of the creation of new schools or allow schools to adopt models that are supported by rigorous evidence. The federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program is an ambitious investment aimed at fixing the nation’s most struggling schools. Low-performing school districts can qualify for funds to implement reforms as long as they follow one of four approved intervention models — turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure. However, none of the prescribed models specifically fund the creation of new schools, which a growing body of work show is an effective intervention. For example, in addition to the positive results from the development of new schools in New York City, new schools in Los Angeles are showing promising impacts on student academic achievement in just their first year of operation. The SIG program should support school districts interested in developing new schools or at least fund the implementation of model approaches that research shows has significant effects on student outcomes.

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