High School Reform in Perspective

Past Successes, Enduring Challenges, and Future Considerations

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Since 1994, MDRC has conducted rigorous research that has provided evidence on promising approaches to high school reform aimed mainly at helping underperforming schools and districts improve students' progress toward high school graduation and prepare them for success in postsecondary education and employment.

In a 2006 report, MDRC comparatively analyzed its evaluations of three comprehensive interventions — Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development — to identify strategies that address five critical challenges to reform: (1) creating a personalized and orderly learning environment, (2) assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills, (3) improving instructional content and pedagogy, (4) preparing students for the world beyond high school, and (5) stimulating change in overstressed high schools.

Since that report was released, overall dropout rates have been declining and graduation rates and student academic achievement have been improving. Yet, in some urban and rural areas with high poverty rates, high school student outcomes still lag behind. For instance, when in 2017 the national graduation rate reached an all-time high of 84.6 percent, 36 states still reported graduation rates of less than 80 percent for low-income students, with six of those states having rates lower than 70 percent.[1] Additionally, many students continue to struggle with the transition to postsecondary education and are underprepared for it, leading them to enroll in remedial education courses. In the 2015-2016 academic year, 39.1 percent of undergraduates reported having taken at least one remedial course after high school.[2]

Celebrating more than 25 years of work in education, MDRC is reflecting on its recent research through the lens of the five challenges described above, much as it did in its 2006 report. In particular, the discussion that follows focuses on the success of New York City's small high schools of choice (SSCs), which serve mostly low-income students of color. SSCs were developed and approved through a competitive proposal process administered by the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE). Through this process, educators, school reform advocates, and other stakeholders and organizations were able to develop innovative ideas for new schools intended to improve high school education in the city. SSCs increased high school graduation rates by a statistically signif-

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[1] Atwell, Balfanz, Bridgeland, and Ingram (2019).

[2] National Center for Education Statistics (2019).

icant 9.5 percentage points and rates of college enrollment immediately after high school graduation by a statistically significant 7.4 percentage points.[3]

CHALLENGE 1: CREATING A PERSONALIZED AND ORDERLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As students transition from smaller middle schools to larger high schools, they can find it difficult to feel a sense of community and recognition. Ninth-grade students sometimes grapple with feelings of anonymity and have trouble connecting with teachers and administrators at the start of high school. For students who struggle academically, these challenges tend to persist.

The SSC Response

As part of the application process to open a new small high school of choice, school proposal teams had to present a school structure that would facilitate student-teacher relationship development. Teachers also received training to develop and alter curricula in response to student needs, further encouraging a personalized learning environment where students feel known. An analysis of SSCs and their components suggests that personalized learning and mutual respect between teachers and students are two key elements that positively affect student outcomes.

For Further Consideration

Ninth Grade Academies offers another approach to address this challenge. These small learning communities seek to create a more close-knit environment for ninth-graders, helping them have a successful start to high school. However, an MDRC implementation analysis of Ninth Grade Academies in Florida's Broward County Public Schools revealed that school leaders were frustrated by the lack of information about how to set in motion systems of communication, collaboration, and personalization within the Academies. Findings from the subsequent impact evaluation, which focused on 27 Academies created in several school districts in Florida from 2001 to 2006, did not produce evidence of improved ninth-grade student outcomes. It appears that schools needed additional guidance on how to best use the Academy's structure. If schools are able to both establish new structures *and* learn how to take advantage of those structures, teachers and other school staff could be more likely (or more able) to build stronger relationships with students, provide personalized learning and individualized support, and potentially transform the school's environment. The Talent Development model discussed in the 2006 report, which had positive impacts on student outcomes, included these kinds of complementary implementation supports for its Ninth Grade Academies.

CHALLENGE 2: ASSISTING STUDENTS WHO ENTER HIGH SCHOOL WITH POOR ACADEMIC SKILLS

Some students enter high school academically underprepared. For example, the National Assessment of Education Progress found in 2017 that, on average, students are still scoring below a "proficient" reading level at the end of eighth grade.[4] As these poor student outcomes persist, high schools can struggle to find ways to effectively assist students who left the eighth grade unprepared for high school's more academically rigorous coursework.

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3 Bloom and Unterman (2013); Unterman and Haider (2019).

4 A student is considered to have a "proficient" reading level if, after reading the text, the student can identify the relevant information, summarize the main ideas and themes, and make and support inferences.

The SSC Response

To ensure all students had the opportunity to succeed, the NYC DOE required that school teams describe how they would serve students performing below grade level in their applications to open a new high school. SSCs planned for and implemented key structural elements to support these students. For example, school schedules often lengthened instructional blocks, which offered more opportunities for students to receive individual attention and more time for them to grasp concepts. Additionally, teachers collaborated to develop lesson plans and strategies to get struggling students back on track. Through this approach, students were expected to receive consistent support throughout all four years of high school.

For Further Consideration

Another method to address this challenge is to identify ninth-grade students whose skills are below grade level and give them extra help to improve those skills. The Enhanced Reading Opportunities Study evaluated two year-long supplemental literacy courses intended for students entering ninth grade reading below grade level and implemented in the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. It revealed that these literacy classes, which students took in lieu of other elective courses, improved students' reading comprehension and had a positive impact on their academic performance in core subject areas during the ninth grade. These effects, however, did not persist in subsequent years. Interventions that address the academic needs of underprepared students can be effective, but they may not be enough to sustain *ongoing* academic success. Such programs may prove to have lasting effects if they are connected to complementary academic support services that are offered to students throughout high school.

CHALLENGE 3: IMPROVING INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY

Many teachers serving disadvantaged students have little teaching experience, which makes it difficult for them to effectively improve the content of their lessons and integrate high-quality instructional practices.[5] This lack of experience thus poses a barrier to promoting student academic success in high school.[6]

The SSC Response

As part of the model's design, SSCs were required to use a standards-based, academically rigorous curriculum. Teachers involved in the initial proposal process were able to shape this curriculum. Schools later provided teachers with professional development on relevant, new instructional practices. Throughout the year, teachers also worked in groups to assess student data and adjust teaching practices as needed to support student success. A study of SSCs and their components suggests that both empowering teachers to play meaningful roles in schools and using data-driven instruction have positive impacts on student outcomes.

For Further Consideration

Other interventions similarly provide teachers with professional development to enhance instructional practices and thereby improve student outcomes. The Content Literacy Continuum prepares teachers in all core subject areas to follow instructional routines and embed strategies that support literacy and content learning within their courses. However, it proved difficult to motivate teachers across core content areas to integrate these routines and strategies into their instructional practices. Though an evaluation of the program implemented in 33 midwestern high schools in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years found it to have a positive, statistically significant effect on reading

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5 Goldhaber, Lavery, and Theobald (2015).
6 Herlihy (2007).

vocabulary in ninth grade, it did not have a statistically significant effect on reading comprehension.[7] Improving both curricula and instructional practices requires buy-in from a critical mass of teachers. Promoting an environment where teachers can meaningfully contribute to these improvements could be key to successfully implementing new instructional content and practices.

CHALLENGE 4: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORLD BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL

High school is not an end point, but rather a stepping-stone for students to reach a more independent stage of their lives, whether they go on to college, work, or both. However, sometimes high schools struggle to see past graduation and thus do not align the educational support they offer to students with the demands of and opportunities in postsecondary education and the workforce. The high rate at which incoming first-year students at postsecondary institutions are placed in remedial courses suggests high schools are not preparing those students for the world after graduation.[8]

The SSC Response

SSC staff designed curricula that connected students' learning with college and career goals. The schools were also encouraged to develop lessons and activities around possible career themes, such as business, law, or performing arts, to give classroom learning real world relevance and encourage students to set career goals. A **policy brief** published in April 2019 indicates that SSCs had positive impacts on student outcomes after high school. For instance, there was a positive 4.8 percentage point difference between SSC graduates and their control group counterparts who were either working or enrolled in postsecondary education, or both, four years after graduating high school.

For Further Consideration

Some other high schools partner with colleges and employers on college-readiness interventions and vocational education programs. In 2013, Florida high school districts implemented the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) College Readiness System in partnership with several South Florida State College satellite campuses. This initiative sought to improve students' preparedness for college by training middle school, high school, and postsecondary instructors in a shared set of teaching strategies, enhancing the academic rigor of courses, and offering an elective class that covers study skills, critical thinking, and college and career readiness. As a result, students were expected to experience smoother transitions as they progressed through middle school, high school, and college. The **nonexperimental evaluation** of the College Readiness System found that AVID students were more likely to take advanced courses and earn more credits in high school. The evaluation, however, also revealed that schools found it challenging to execute the vertical alignment of teaching strategies and activities. Nevertheless, sustained relationships among schools and colleges may gradually improve the quality of their collaboration and make it easier for them to align their educational goals and practices. Ongoing studies such as the **evaluation** of the P-TECH 9-14 model, which builds partnerships among high schools, colleges, and employers to ensure students succeed in college and the workforce, will provide additional knowledge on partnerships between high schools and other institutions and employers.

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7 The effect size on tenth-grade reading comprehension was 0.10 standard deviation. The magnitude of this estimated impact is similar to effect sizes found in other research on comparable adolescent literacy programs, which varied in whether they were statistically significant.

8 National Center for Education Statistics (2019).

CHALLENGE 5: STIMULATING CHANGE IN OVERSTRESSED SCHOOLS

Many high schools facing some or all of the first four challenges have insufficient resources and are overstressed, making it all the more difficult to introduce changes and make them stick. In these schools in particular, implementing reforms without the appropriate support can be inefficient or even counterproductive.

The SSC Response

As part of the SSC reform initiative, New York City closed numerous underperforming large high schools and opened over 100 small schools of choice in their place. The initiative required each SSC to first submit a proposal through a competitive process intended to ensure that its leadership, teachers, and staff were prepared. Each SSC whose proposal was approved received up-front funding to help ensure a strong start. The SSCs phased in high school grade levels gradually. They began by admitting only ninth-graders and then added a high school grade level each subsequent academic year until they served students in all grades. In this way, SSCs avoided taking on too much at once. SSCs used a bottom-up planning process and benefited from the early provision of resources, both of which helped to limit stress on the schools.

For Further Consideration

Diplomas Now is a comprehensive reform model aimed at addressing many of the challenges described here with the intent of improving high school graduation rates. It entails structural changes to a school, new instructional materials and curricula, coaching and other assistance for teachers and administrators, an early warning and intervention system that uses data to help ensure students receive appropriate support when they need it, and more. To ease the burden of implementing these changes, the Diplomas Now organizations rely on people power. They place numerous additional adults in the school: a team of City Year AmeriCorps members, a case manager from Communities In Schools, and a school transformation facilitator supported by Talent Development Secondary at Johns Hopkins University. The interim report of an MDRC program evaluation found that Diplomas Now had no significant impacts on early measures of ninth-grade students' attendance, discipline, and academic performance, though future studies will examine more closely the primary outcome of high school graduation. No matter the approach, reforming a school is not a short-term process, and it takes time to see results. In fact, a meta-analysis of comprehensive school reforms found that a reform's strongest effects appear five years or more after it is introduced. Schools and policymakers should thus be patient and remain committed to interventions in the mid-term to give these reforms a shot at improving student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The five challenges presented here are interrelated and endure today. Improving high schools requires not only identifying the most pressing challenges in a given context, but also understanding how these challenges interact with one another. For example, creating a personalized learning environment for students is often attempted through changes to school structures without considering complementary changes to instructional practices. Professional development for teachers can be a valuable tool in this process by helping teachers learn and apply instructional practices that best take advantage of these smaller, more personalized environments. Thus, by considering how these challenges are interrelated, educators and school reform advocates can avoid pursuing incomplete, likely ineffective solutions.

There is still more to learn about these challenges, and more evidence is needed about reform models that have been implemented to address them. MDRC is excited about ongoing studies of reform initiatives and plans to continue developing knowledge in the future about what works to improve high schools. Nonetheless, not all successful practices can be applied broadly. Schools and districts must take into account their specific contexts and challenges as they con-

sider pursuing proven or promising reforms. It is essential for them to assess a potential reform's fit and adaptability to specific local circumstances, as there is no "one size fits all" reform.

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