

Organization name: Diplomas Now, a collaboration between Talent Development Secondary (out of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Education), City Year, and Communities In Schools

In 2008, three national organizations – Talent Development Secondary at Johns Hopkins University, City Year, and Communities In Schools – created the Diplomas Now partnership, an innovative, multi-year approach to whole-school improvement for our nation’s most challenged middle and high schools. Diplomas Now was established with the shared belief that students’ trajectories could be changed from potential dropout to high school graduate by transforming schools.

Diplomas Now uses an early warning system to identify students who are off track in attendance, behavior, and course performance in English and math – highly predictive indicators that a student will drop out of high school. Prior research shows that preventing students from exhibiting one or more of these early warning indicators can boost the odds of graduation from approximately 25 percent to 75 percent, which can dramatically improve a young person’s life trajectory.¹

Teams of full-time AmeriCorps members and professional staff provide students with individualized academic and social-emotional support, teachers with professional development, school leaders with school organization support and case management for students all to ensure students get on track to high school graduation and college, career, and life success. Ensuring that high-need students end each middle and high school year no early warning indicators is one of the most effective strategies a school can implement to significantly increase the odds that a student in a high-need community will graduate from high school.

Evidence of Track Record of Student and School Outcomes: Diplomas Now is in the midst of one of the nation’s largest and longest randomized control trials (RCTs) of secondary school reform in the nation’s history, which is led by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization. Diplomas Now and MDRC recruited 62 schools from 11 large urban school districts² across the country, including East Baton Rouge Parish School System, to participate in the study: Of these schools, 32 were randomly assigned to implement Diplomas Now, and 30 were assigned to the control group, free to pursue alternative improvement strategies.

An interim report released in June 2016, found that Diplomas Now has a positive, statistically significant impact on increasing the percentage of sixth and ninth graders exhibiting no early warning indicators and is succeeding in reducing the number of students at risk of dropping out across entire schools. This report focuses on the first year impacts of full Diplomas Now model implementation, in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, respectively, based on when schools began partnering with Diplomas Now. These early impact findings provide the first strong evidence (demonstrated by an RCT) across multiple school districts that it is not only possible to identify sixth and ninth grade students who are on the path to dropping out, but also to change their course and get them back on track to high school graduation.

According to MDRC, “Implementation of Diplomas Now resulted in a positive, statistically significant impact on the percentage of sixth- and ninth-graders without any early warning indicators — that is, students who had maintained an 85 percent attendance rate or better, were suspended fewer than three days, and passed English/language arts and math, the subject areas explicitly targeted for support as part of the Diplomas Now model.”

¹ Neild, R.C., Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2007). “An Early Warning System.” *Educational Leadership*. 65(2), 28-33. Retrieved from http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Early_Warning_System_Neild_Balfanz_Herzog.pdf pp. 2-3.

² Boston Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Columbus City Schools, Detroit Public Schools, District of Columbia Public Schools, East Baton Rouge Parish School System, Los Angeles Unified School District, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, School District of Philadelphia, and San Antonio Independent School District

Reducing early warning indicators is the key metric that Diplomas Now was designed to improve. The early impact findings show that identifying early warning indicators and providing interventions to help students get back on track can occur consistently across major urban school districts and in the highest-need middle and high schools. The results are particularly encouraging given that they measure impact from the first year of a multi-year intervention. Furthermore, similarly rigorous randomized control trials rarely produce “statistically significant” impact.³

Other notable findings include:

Diplomas Now schools were implementing different practices than were the comparison schools, and the differences, and their impact, grew over time. According to MDRC, “From the first to the second year of implementation, Diplomas Now schools became more different from non-Diplomas Now schools in terms of their use of reform-oriented practices and structures — Diplomas Now schools showed sustained levels of reform implementation, while the levels declined in the non-Diplomas Now schools.” Key Diplomas Now practices include:

- Interdisciplinary teacher teams with shared students and common planning time
- Early warning indicator meetings with school and Diplomas Now partners to
- identify at-risk students and plan interventions for them
- Specialized support for struggling students, including academic tutoring, social-emotional
- development support, and case management
- Job-embedded professional development and ongoing coaching for teachers

As a result of these practices, by the second year of implementation, there were statistically significant differences between Diplomas Now and non-Diplomas Now schools in the frequency of:

- Teachers using data to drive instruction and target struggling students
- Teacher collaboration
- Teachers receiving support from instructional coaches
- Students receiving coordinated academic and non-academic services
- Math and English help for students
- In-class behavioral support for students

Diplomas Now middle schools had strong outcomes. Diplomas Now had a significant impact in middle schools despite decreased sample size, with notable impacts on increasing the percentage of students with no early warning indicators in the sixth grade, particularly among students who were not proficient in elementary schools, and on reducing chronic absenteeism overall. This report documents the highest level of evidence, proving that it is possible to reduce chronic absenteeism even in the highest-need schools.

In high-poverty environments, even academically prepared students are at risk of falling off track during the sixth and ninth grades; emerging evidence indicates Diplomas Now helps these students stay on track. Diplomas Now schools had greater success than comparison schools in keeping fifth grade students who were academically proficient on track in sixth grade and in keeping eighth grade students who did not have early warning indicators on track in ninth grade. This shows the value of early warning and tiered response systems to help guide and support students through the perilous transitions to middle and high school in high poverty communities.

Diplomas Now schools create stronger learning environments. Students at Diplomas Now schools were more likely to report a positive relationship with an adult at school who was not a teacher and reported participating in more academically-focused after-school activities than did their peers in non-Diplomas Now schools. Additionally, Diplomas Now had a positive and statistically significant impact on teachers’ perceptions of school climate during the second year of implementation.

³ Fewer than 1 in 10 education studies report positive, meaningful results. Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, “Randomized Controlled Trials Commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences Since 2002: How Many Found Positive Versus Weak or No Effects,” July 2013.

How will you differentiate your services to meet the unique needs of schools and districts in Louisiana? Diplomas Now is not an off-the-shelf model. We meet schools where they are, build on the strengths they already have, and work with existing staff to improve the school. Diplomas Now will work side by side with our partner schools and districts – pairing experienced Diplomas Now field staff with district-identified leaders and school principals – to conduct needs assessments, and then assemble and implement, in the most cost-efficient manner possible, the key evidence-based Diplomas Now practices needed to combine whole school improvement efforts with enhanced student supports guided by an early warning system. If a school has specific initiatives in place that are producing solid outcomes for students, we want to leverage those – not start over. Our model is flexible in terms of where the starting point is and how we engage with schools to build trusting relationships.

What are the attributes of your ideal partner school or district? Diplomas Now prefers to work with middle and high schools within feeder patterns to ensure continuity of support for students through their secondary school years. Diplomas Now seeks to build transformational relationships with its school and district partners, in which each party expects to learn from one another (individually and organizationally) and from their work together in ways that can lead to deep change. Characteristics of this type of partnership include:

- All decisions driven by doing what’s best for students and schools
- Shared vision and joint focus - clear, shared scope of work and criteria for success
- Goal alignment – pursuing the same results and outcomes
- Clear channels of communication and regular dialogue about the work and results
- Coordination of resources
- A culture of trust and mutual accountability

Describe your experience working with other third party providers to support coherent school and district improvement. Since 2008, Diplomas Now has operated as a collaboration of three distinct and separate nonprofits, and is currently partnering with 29 schools in 13 school districts across the country. In each of these schools, Diplomas Now seeks to ensure that all partners in a school are working together in a coordinated way, rather than simply being co-located in the same building.

One of the key components of the Diplomas Now model is the integrated and timely use of data across all partners and staff in the building to drive teacher and student support decisions. While the scope and type of data collected by schools and districts has grown significantly over the past several years, the ability to interpret data to drive short and long-term decisions in schools has lagged behind. Diplomas Now supports schools in bringing all parties together for frequent data reviews to improve student and school performance. These data reviews include: regularly occurring Early Warning Indicator (EWI) meetings with teacher teams; monthly classroom, grade level and school-wide trend analyses; and student intervention and support tracking for every student in the school to ensure their individual needs are met.

What support from the state, district or school partners would enhance your success in Louisiana? Diplomas Now prefers to work with schools that have an active role in choosing to partner with us, as it facilitates faster and stronger implementation of the model. As partners, we will work to ensure a shared vision and alignment, starting with the school leader and integrated through every level of school staff. This allows for supported change of adult practice and student support. One of the keys to ensuring this happens is dedicated planning time to establish the partnership and ensure school leadership and staff buy-in of the partnership and the shared work ahead.