

# DIPLOMAS NOW

## FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST DECADE AND WHAT'S NEXT



How an evidence-based, collaborative, whole-school improvement model, leveraging AmeriCorps members and early warning systems, can accelerate student and school success in the highest-need schools

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February 2017

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Diplomas Now thanks its district and school partners who work tirelessly to achieve the best outcomes for students everyday.

# Executive Summary

## THE NEED

This is an exciting and critical time for K-12 education in the United States. Though progress has been made, the demands of the global economy keep raising the bar for student achievement. By 2020, two-thirds of U.S. jobs will require some post-secondary education, given technology demands and increased competition.<sup>1</sup> Yet today, fewer than 40 percent of American adults have an associate's degree or higher, indicating a significant educational attainment gap.<sup>2</sup>

Encouragingly, high school graduation rates are higher than ever and the number of low-graduation-rate high schools has declined significantly in the past decade, due in large part to the heroic work of teachers, principals and district, and state leaders.<sup>3</sup> However, vital work remains to ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive the educational opportunities and supports needed to graduate high school equipped with requisite 21st century skills. One million students still attend 1,000 high schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate each year. Millions more students attend low-performing middle and elementary schools that feed into these low-graduation-rate high schools.<sup>4</sup> In addition, 6.5 million students, including millions of low-income children, are frequently absent, missing three weeks or more of school each year, which dramatically impedes their academic progress.<sup>5</sup>

The bipartisan *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) provides states and districts with a unique opportunity to build upon the progress they have made and implement their visions for achieving educational excellence for all students. ESSA gives localities the chance to select the evidence-based school improvement strategies that most effectively meet local needs. This represents a crucial opportunity for states and districts. Struggling schools have been creating improvement plans for decades, but there is now data that shows what works, giving educators a powerful tool for selecting the right strategy, as opposed to having to rely on intuition, belief, or personal experience alone. The shift to using a tightly defined standard of evidence in choosing improvement efforts will produce better outcomes. A similar effort began in medicine a century ago and is in large part responsible for the subsequent sharp increase in the quality of medicine. Improvements on a similar scale are needed to make public education work for all students, given the educational and economic demands of the 21st century.

To effectively implement and maximize the impact of evidence-based approaches in high-need schools, it will be important for states and districts to select holistic strategies that harness the power of proven partners to help build both adult and student capacities.<sup>6,7</sup> These partners must be integrated into the fabric of the school community. They should collaborate with administrators and teachers on how to structure the school day, enhance teacher instructional practice, and bring in additional high-quality, cost-effective human capital, such as AmeriCorps members, to meet the scale of student need. Schools and

their partners need to address the challenges students face during and outside of the school day and accelerate student acquisition of both academic and inter- and intrapersonal skills. Finally, they need to build a school's capacity to engage in continuous improvement and integrate advances in the learning sciences, technology, and personalized approaches to account for individual learning differences. In short, comprehensive and integrated evidence-based strategies are required to build educator skill, meet student needs, and develop a culture of innovation and excellence.

National service is a cost-effective, high-yield strategy for driving much of this work. By providing high-need schools with additional human capital, AmeriCorps members can integrate into school communities, partner with teachers and school leaders, and help deliver critical evidence-based interventions and supports. Built upon a robust public-private partnership, these programs stretch the federal dollar and cultivate private and local support to maximize impact. Today, national service members are supporting more than 11,000 traditional district, parochial, and public charter schools nationwide.<sup>8</sup>

## DIPLOMAS NOW'S APPROACH TO ACCELERATING STUDENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

Over the past nine years, Diplomas Now has developed an evidence-based school improvement model that aims to support high-need secondary schools in accomplishing the aforementioned goals. Diplomas Now is based on the insight that the middle and high schools where most of the nation's dropouts fall off track to graduation are neither designed nor resourced to address the volume or intensity of the student challenges they encounter.

Diplomas Now responded by creating a comprehensive whole-school model that increases school capacities to both improve teacher practice to ensure students graduate with the academic and social-emotional skills required for college, career, and life success and also address the scale and intensity of student need. It recognizes the importance of providing each student with a caring relationship with an adult at school.<sup>9</sup> It takes an asset-based approach to instruction that recognizes individual students' developmental needs and creates a school and classroom culture and climate that is conducive to students not only acquiring critical competencies, but also identifying with their school experience, understanding its relevance to their future pursuits, and becoming empowered to affect change in their community.

Launched in 2008 by Talent Development Secondary at Johns Hopkins University, City Year, and Communities In Schools, Diplomas Now employs a data-driven, tiered intervention approach that combines whole-school reform strategies with an early warning

system to identify students who are off track in the early warning indicators (EWIs) of attendance, behavior, or course performance and provides the human capital needed to effectively respond. Preventing students from exhibiting one or more of these EWIs can boost the odds of graduation from approximately 25 percent to 75 percent, dramatically improving a young person's life trajectory.<sup>10</sup>

The Diplomas Now collaboration leverages the unique strengths of each partner organization. Talent Development Secondary provides whole school reform strategies and practices. These include supporting the school to restructure students into smaller learning communities with teacher teams who share common students and have common planning time, creating and refining effective professional learning communities, ensuring effective teaching and learning in every classroom through instructional coaching, and implementing early warning data systems to identify students in need of additional intervention.

A team of City Year's near-peer AmeriCorps members, who are diverse, highly-trained, full-time young adults, adds capacity by providing integrated academic and social-emotional whole-school, small-group, and individualized supports to students in response to the EWI data. They also work with administrators and Diplomas Now partners to conduct activities that improve school-wide conditions for learning. The team is led by an Impact Manager, a City Year staff member who coordinates with school leadership and the partner organizations to ensure the right students are receiving the right supports at the right time.

Communities In Schools provides a school-based Site Coordinator, who delivers school-wide prevention supports as well as case management for students with the most intensive needs. Communities In Schools Site Coordinators work with students and their families to connect them with community resources, including counseling, health care, housing, food and clothing. The Diplomas Now collaboration proves that organizations working together, supporting administrator and teacher visions for educational excellence, and adapting to school needs, can transform learning communities, and shift students' trajectories from potential dropouts to high school graduates prepared for college, career, and life success.

## THE RESULTS

Nearly a decade into the work, encouraging results have emerged. Diplomas Now has partnered with administrators and teachers in some of the highest-need secondary schools across the country. In many of these schools, it is common for one-third of students to miss a month or more of school, be suspended or fail a core course, and often only a third of students achieve proficiency in math or reading. However, after partnering with Diplomas Now for three or more years, **80 percent of these schools have made meaningful improvements on state and district accountability measures.**<sup>11</sup>

In addition, early results from an ongoing experimental study of Diplomas Now—one of the largest and longest randomized control trials ever conducted of a U.S. secondary whole school improvement model—have demonstrated that it is possible to change the trajectory of students in the highest-need schools. Students who are clearly signaling through their low attendance, poor behavior, or course failure that they are on the path to dropping out can, in the critical sixth and ninth grade transition years, reverse their course when provided the right supports.

### The randomized control trial research demonstrated:

- Diplomas Now has a positive, **statistically significant impact on increasing the percentage of sixth and ninth graders exhibiting no EWIs** (i.e. low attendance, sustained poor behavior, or failing math or English) and is succeeding in reducing the number of students at the greatest risk of dropping out across entire schools.<sup>12</sup>
- Diplomas Now had a **statistically significant impact on reducing chronic absenteeism** in the middle grades.<sup>13</sup>

### This research also found that schools partnering with Diplomas Now improved their services, practices, and climate.

- Compared with schools without Diplomas Now, Diplomas Now schools implemented **more evidence-based instructional and school-based practices**, such as increased use of data to drive instruction, greater teacher collaboration, and improved coordinated academic and non-academic services for students.<sup>14</sup>
- Students at Diplomas Now schools were **more likely to report a positive relationship with an adult at school who was not a teacher**, which is critical given emerging research on the importance adult relationships play in school success.<sup>15,16</sup>
- Students at Diplomas Now schools were **more likely to participate in academically-focused afterschool activities** than students in non-Diplomas Now schools.<sup>17</sup>

In short, due to the collaborative efforts of administrators, teachers, Diplomas Now staff and AmeriCorps members, progress is being made in these challenged schools, which in some cases, had not made significant improvement in a decade or more.

There is tremendous opportunity to capitalize on these promising results. This report explores the research results, lessons learned, and future directions as Diplomas Now partners with states, districts, schools, and local decision makers to ensure that all students receive the integrated academic and social-emotional supports they need in order to graduate prepared for college, career, and life success.

# The Formation of and Impetus for Diplomas Now

## THE NEED FOR DIPLOMAS NOW

Diplomas Now designed its model around two central research findings. First, a decade ago, approximately 10 to 12 percent of high schools were found to disproportionately contribute to the nation's high school dropout crisis.<sup>18</sup> This suggested that a more intensive approach to building adult capacity and addressing student need in a relatively small subset of schools could have a major effect on improving the national graduation rate and long-term outcomes for students.

Second, prior research on EWIs showed that as early as the sixth grade, students who were on the path to dropping out were signaling that they needed help. These signals, or EWIs, became known as the ABCs: attendance, behavior, and course performance. Students who attended high-poverty middle and high schools and were either chronically absent—missing 10 percent or more of school each year; demonstrated sustained, even mild, misbehavior; or were failing a core course—particularly math or English—had graduation rates of only 20 to 30 percent. By contrast, in the same schools, students who exhibited no EWIs and progressed from sixth to tenth grade on track and on time had graduation rates of 70 percent or higher. Examining the middle and high schools that produced most of the nation's dropouts showed that hundreds of students within them were exhibiting one or more of these indicators and, without intervention, were falling off the path to graduation.<sup>19</sup>

Early warning indicators (EWIs) used to identify students for intervention:

- A** POOR ATTENDANCE
- B** DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR
- C** COURSE FAILURE IN MATH OR ENGLISH

## WHAT IT TAKES TO IMPROVE

The research implied that effective improvement efforts in these challenged schools needed to accomplish at least three goals.

Diplomas Now accomplishes all three.

1. First, to make substantial improvement, schools needed to collaborate with external partners who could support administrators and teachers in making changes to school organization, improving classroom instruction, and building

adult capacity to address high levels of student academic, social-emotional and basic needs.

Diplomas Now partners with the school community to conduct a needs assessment and reorganizes the schedule so each at-risk student has a consistent team of caring adults and receives additional math and English time. Teachers and administrators receive coaching and tools needed to improve achievement, such as rigorous curricula, common planning time, and professional learning communities.

2. Second, schools needed additional human capital to meet the scale and intensity of student need. This would provide students with consistent developmental relationships and supports to enable them to attend school regularly, focus in class, and complete their assignments, while offering case-managed, higher intensity support to the students who faced extreme out-of-school barriers to in-school success, such as homelessness or illness.

Additional student support is provided through an infusion of national service human capital. Full-time City Year AmeriCorps members welcome students to school, call students if they are absent, and offer integrated social-emotional and academic supports throughout the day. They intervene to help resolve problems and celebrate positive behavior. After school, AmeriCorps members help with homework and involve students in service and enrichment programs. For the most at-risk students, Communities In Schools provides school-based Site Coordinators who form support groups and connect students with community resources, such as counseling, health care, housing, food and clothing.

3. Third, schools needed to leverage data and bring together teams of teachers and other school personnel who shared common sets of students on a regular basis to use EWIs and a school-wide data system to monitor student progress, pool their knowledge of students, and create customized and strategic interventions.

Working with administrators and teachers, a Diplomas Now team, including a full-time, on-site School Transformation Facilitator, implements an early warning data system to identify struggling students and regularly reviews the data to set goals based on their attendance, behavior, and course performance. Teachers and the Diplomas Now team craft both individual student plans based on this data, and also identify the most strategic levels of intervention at the classroom, grade, school or district level. Local Diplomas Now teams meet regularly with school and district leadership to review the effectiveness of the partnership and make improvements.

## GETTING THE RIGHT SUPPORT TO THE RIGHT STUDENT AT THE RIGHT TIME

One of the key components of the Diplomas Now model is to support schools in the timely use of data to drive teacher and student support decisions. While the scope and type of data that schools and districts collect has grown significantly over the past several years, the ability to interpret data to drive short- and long-term decisions in schools has not kept pace. Diplomas Now supports schools in using frequent data reviews to improve student and school performance. These reviews include: regularly occurring EWI meetings with teacher teams, facilitated by Diplomas Now; monthly classroom, grade level, and school-wide trend analyses; and student intervention and support tracking for every student with an EWI in the school. City Year AmeriCorps members leverage their near-peer relationships and extensive training to provide students with the requisite evidence-based, integrated academic and social-emotional supports to improve student performance aligned with the EWIs. Communities In Schools personnel collaborate with teachers, administrators, and City Year AmeriCorps members to provide more intensive supports to the highest-need students.

### How Diplomas Now Uses Early Warning Systems

#### WHAT IS AN EWI MEETING?

A structure that is regularly and collaboratively used to:

- Monitor student progress
- Identify students in need of intervention
- Examine current interventions

#### WHAT HAPPENS DURING AN EWI MEETING?

An interdisciplinary team of teachers, school staff, and partners meet to discuss a small group of pre-identified students to:

- Collaboratively examine student data (attendance, behavior, and coursework)
- Problem-solve to support student achievement
- Agree upon appropriate interventions
- Identify an intervention “champion” to follow up and document each intervention

At the next meeting, the team discusses student progress and the effectiveness of the intervention and makes any appropriate adjustments.

## A Closer Look At The Human Capital Behind Diplomas Now

### DIPLOMAS NOW PARTNERSHIP STAFFING



City Year (CY)



Communities In Schools (CIS)

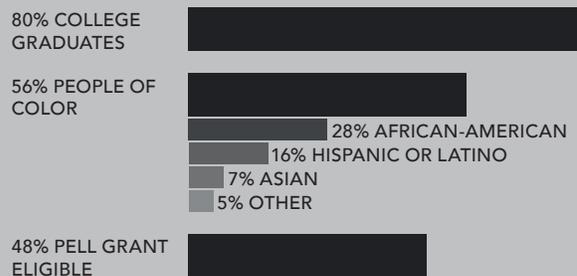


Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development Secondary (TDS)

SCHOOL	DISTRICT/CITY	NATIONAL
PRINCIPAL	TDS FIELD MANAGER	NATIONAL EXECUTIVES
INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES	CY & CIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS	IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORTS
TDS SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION FACILITATOR	CY & CIS IMPACT DIRECTORS	DEVELOPMENT/ SUSTAINABILITY
CY IMPACT MANAGER	TDS INSTRUCTIONAL FACILITATORS	RESEARCH AND EVALUATION
TEAM OF CY AMERICORPS MEMBERS	TDS SCHOOL & STUDENT SUPPORTS FACILITATOR	COMMUNICATION/ MEDIA
CIS SITE COORDINATOR		

### CITY YEAR AMERICORPS MEMBERS

3,100+ SERVING NATIONALLY



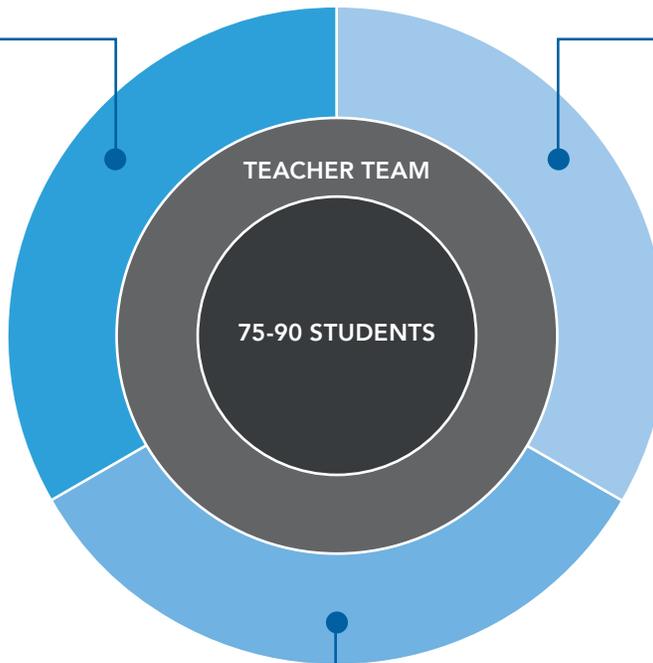
## DIPLOMAS NOW PARTNERSHIP MODEL

### Approach

- Reorganized school day to maximize teacher effectiveness and student support
- Staffing and coaching to build educator capacity and capabilities
- Ensuring effective teaching and learning in every classroom
- Tiered Response to Intervention, data-driven, personalized approach to provide the right supports to the right students at the right time
- Targeted interventions for students demonstrating EWIs in
  - Attendance
  - Behavior
  - Course Performance
- Integrated academics and social-emotional skill building

### STUDENT SUPPORTS TO MEET THE SCALE AND INTENSITY OF STUDENT NEED

- On-site School Transformation Facilitator to collect data and monitor interventions
- Team of full-time City Year AmeriCorps members to provide whole-school, small group, and individualized academic and socio-emotional supports
- Communities In Schools Site Coordinator to provide case-managed supports for highest-need students



### DATA DRIVEN SYSTEMS TO TARGET AND MONITOR SUPPORT

- Easy and frequent access to student data on EWIs
- Benchmarks tied to national and state standards
- Weekly, monthly, and quarterly data reports to assess student progress toward college and career readiness

### WHOLE-SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL AND INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS

#### School Organizational Supports

- Inter-disciplinary and subject-focused common planning time
- School scheduling and roster building
- Bi-weekly EWI meetings

#### Instructional Supports

- Double dose of time focused on math and English
- Extra help labs
- Common college preparatory or high school readiness curricula

#### Professional Learning Supports

- Job-embedded math and English instructional coaching
- Professional learning community
- Professional development aligned to grade level and subject content instructional practice

# Local Metrics and Data Reinforce that Diplomas Now Works

Across multiple districts and schools, local metrics and data show that when schools partner with Diplomas Now, student and school outcomes improve.

**80% OF DIPLOMAS NOW SCHOOLS HAVE SEEN MEANINGFUL PROGRESS ON KEY STATE AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY METRICS.<sup>20</sup>**

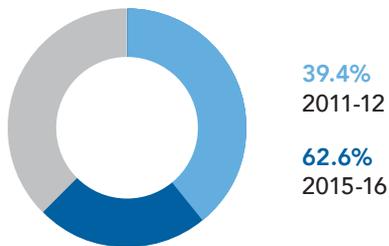
This progress is greater than other school improvement efforts funded through U.S. Department of Education School Improvement Grants.<sup>21</sup>

## Graduation Rates

Since partnering with Diplomas Now, many schools have seen impressive graduation rate increases:

- Cardozo Education Campus (Washington, DC) has increased its graduation rate by 17 percentage points, from 42 percent to 59.2 percent, the second largest gain of any school in the district.<sup>22</sup>
- Gage Park High School (Chicago) has increased its graduation rate by 23 percentage points, from 39.4 percent to 62.6 percent, outpacing the overall district graduation rate growth (15.8 percentage points).<sup>23</sup>
- Newtown High School (New York City) has increased its graduation rate by 8.5 percentage points, from 62 percent to 70.5 percent.<sup>24</sup>

### GAGE PARK HIGH GRADUATION RATES (CHICAGO)



### NEWTOWN HIGH SCHOOL TENTH GRADE STUDENTS ON TRACK TO GRADUATE IN FOUR YEARS (NYC)



## On-Track Rates

By partnering with Diplomas Now, high schools are seeing gains in student on-track rates.

In Chicago, the freshman on-track rate has increased since schools began partnering with Diplomas Now:

- Gage Park High School – nearly 10 percentage point increase, from 73.9 percent in 2011-2012 to 83.1 percent in 2015-2016.<sup>25</sup>
- John Hope College Prep High School – 15.9 percentage point increase, from 68.5 percent in 2011-2012 to 84.4 percent in 2015-2016.<sup>26</sup>

At Newtown High School (New York City), the percentage of ninth and tenth graders earning enough credits to be on track for graduation has grown substantially:<sup>27</sup>

- Ninth grade – 12 percentage point increase, from 70 percent in 2010-2011 to 82 percent in 2015-2016.
- Tenth grade – 14 percentage point increase, from 62 percent in 2010-2011 to 76 percent in 2015-2016.

## Other School Performance Ratings

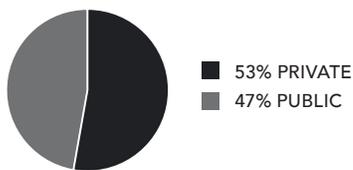
- Grover Washington Middle School (Philadelphia) is now ranked number four among all middle schools in the district after starting at number eight when first partnering with Diplomas Now.<sup>28</sup>
- John Ericsson Middle School 126 (New York City) has substantially increased the percentage of students passing core courses, with 95 percent of students passing all core courses in 2015-2016 compared to fewer than 82 percent passing in 2011-2012.<sup>29</sup>
- At Aki Kurose Middle School (Seattle), the percentage of students missing fewer than 10 days increased by 17 percentage points, from 42 percent in 2009-2010 to 59 percent in 2015-2016.<sup>30</sup>
- Students who had graduated from Broadmoor Middle School (Baton Rouge) earned more credits in ninth grade than the average student in both the district and the state, demonstrating that students supported by Diplomas Now in middle school are more likely to succeed in high school.<sup>31</sup>

# Multi-City Randomized Control Trial Validates Promising Results of Diplomas Now

In 2010, Diplomas Now received a \$30 million Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant from the U.S. Department of Education to enable the program to expand its partnerships with schools and districts across the country. The multiyear grant and extensive support from foundations, including founding partner PepsiCo Foundation, supported one of the largest randomized control studies ever conducted of a secondary school model. This public-private partnership research study is being led by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization.<sup>32</sup>

## Diplomas Now Public-Private Partnership Funding Sources

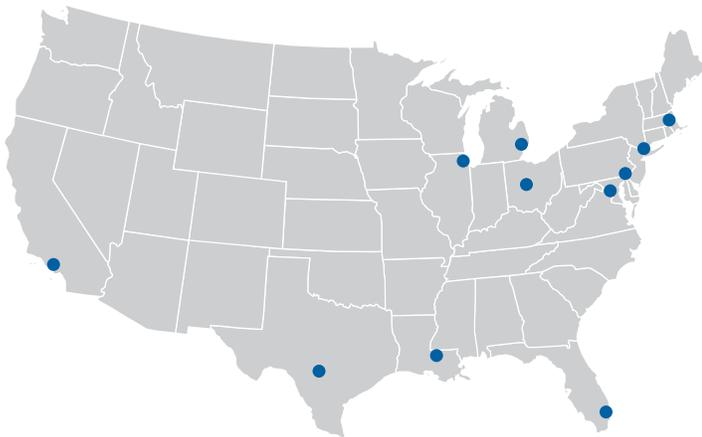
The Diplomas Now collaboration is a strong public-private partnership with funding from a variety of sources, including AmeriCorps, the Investing in Innovation (i3) fund, school districts, corporations, foundations, and individuals.



## STUDY DESIGN

Diplomas Now and MDRC recruited 62 schools from 11 cities<sup>33</sup> across the country to participate in the study; 32 of the schools were randomly assigned to implement Diplomas Now, and 30 schools were assigned to the control group, free to pursue alternative improvement strategies.

## Diplomas Now Research Partner Schools



The middle and high schools in the study were among the country's highest-need schools, with an average free and reduced-price lunch rate—a proxy for poverty—of over 90 percent. More than 60 percent of students in the study schools were not proficient in math and English, more than 30 percent were overage for their grade, and 30 percent were chronically absent. The random assignment resulted in two groups of schools that were comparable in terms of their student populations and on measures including attendance, student behavior, and course performance at the start of the Diplomas Now model implementation.

## KEY FINDINGS

Since the Diplomas Now study launched in 2011, MDRC has released three reports. The first report details school recruitment and program start-up. The second explores implementation and school operating differences, or “service contrasts,” between Diplomas Now schools and control schools.<sup>34</sup> This second report found that schools with the Diplomas Now model demonstrated higher levels of certain evidence-based teacher and student practices than comparison schools and the impact of the differential use of these practices grew over time. Schools partnering with Diplomas Now demonstrated an increase in practices such as greater use of data to drive instruction, more teacher collaboration, and increased coordination of academic and non-academic services.

Statistically significant “service contrasts” for students and teachers compared with schools without Diplomas Now

### FOR TEACHERS, INCREASED FREQUENCY OF:

- Using data to drive instruction and target struggling students
- Teacher collaboration
- Support from instructional coaches

### FOR STUDENTS, INCREASED FREQUENCY OF:

- Coordinated academic and non-academic services
- Math/English academic help
- In-class behavioral support

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“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.” - MDRC

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In June 2016, MDRC released their third report, *Addressing Early Warning Indicators*, which explores the early effects of the Diplomas Now model on student and school outcomes.<sup>35</sup> MDRC found that Diplomas Now has a positive, statistically significant impact on increasing the percentage of sixth and ninth graders exhibiting no EWIs (i.e. low poor attendance, sustained poor behavior, or failing math or English) and is succeeding in reducing the number of students at the greatest risk of dropping out across entire schools. The results are particularly encouraging given that they measure impact from the first year of a multiyear intervention. Furthermore, similarly rigorous randomized control trials rarely produce “statistically significant” results, underscoring the impact of the intervention.<sup>36</sup>

This provides the first strong evidence, demonstrated by a randomized control trial 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.

In high-poverty environments, even academically prepared students are at risk of falling off track during the sixth and ninth grades; emerging evidence indicates that Diplomas Now also 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 EWIs on track in ninth grade. This shows the value of early warning and tiered response systems to help guide and support students through the difficult transitions to middle and high school in high-poverty communities. The early impact findings also demonstrate that identifying EWIs 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.

Diplomas Now had a statistically significant impact on:

- Increasing the percentage of sixth and ninth graders exhibiting no early warning indicators
- Reducing chronic absenteeism in the middle grades
- Building stronger school relationships, climate, and culture

Diplomas Now also had a statistically significant impact on reducing chronic absenteeism in the middle grades. This research demonstrates, with the highest level of evidence, that it is possible to reduce chronic absenteeism even in the highest-need schools. The success of Diplomas Now in decreasing chronic absenteeism has influenced other major absentee reduction efforts spearheaded by local leaders across the country.

Additionally, the research showed that Diplomas Now helps schools create a stronger school climate and culture. Students in Diplomas Now schools were more likely to report a positive relationship with an adult at school who was not a teacher—often a City Year AmeriCorps member. Students also reported participating in more academically-focused after-school activities than did their peers in non-Diplomas Now schools. Teachers at Diplomas Now schools reported more positive and statistically significant perceptions of school environment.

Subsequent reports, scheduled for release in 2018 and 2019, will examine longer-term outcomes, including the interconnections between fidelity to program implementation and student outcomes, graduation rates for high school students, and ninth grade transition success for students supported by Diplomas Now in middle school.

## MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

JAN. 28, 2010

NYDailyNews.com  
**DAILY NEWS**

“...possible closure of Newton High School in Elmhurst – one of 10 Queens high schools the state Education Department has deemed ‘persistently lowest achieving.’”

JUL. 1, 2012

**The Boston Globe**

“Last chance for English High. Again.”

JUN. 27, 2015

**CBS**

“Newton rating went ‘D’ to ‘B,’ no longer in danger of being shut down.”

OCT. 25, 2015

**The Boston Globe**

“Newly released English High MCAS scores show major gains.”

## The New York Times

JUN. 7, 2014

### Stop Holding Us Back

BY ROBERT BALFANZ

“America’s graduation rate is at a record high...But one-third of the nation’s African-American and Latino young men will not graduate...We can provide our most vulnerable children with a better chance for adult success. They deserve no less.”

## The Washington Post

JUN. 28, 2016

Can ‘early warning systems’ keep children from dropping out of school?

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE  
**MONITOR**

SEP. 6, 2016

How US schools are combating chronic absenteeism.

**THE 74**

MAR. 15, 2016

The ‘Diplomas Now’ Way: Better Identify At-Risk Kids, Do Whatever It Takes to Get Them to Graduation Day.

## TIME

JAN. 18, 2017

### Arne Duncan: Obama Should Focus On Our Kids

BY ARNE DUNCAN

“We’ve made further progress by investing in innovative community partnerships like Diplomas Now, which...helps at-risk students overcome vast challenges at home and in the classroom and stay motivated through graduation day.”

## The Miami Herald

NOV. 5, 2016

With data, and helping hands, a school turns around its dismal dropout trend.

## EDUCATION WEEK

JUN. 21, 2016

Diplomas Now i3 Project: Early Monitoring Protects At-Risk Students.

**npr**

APR. 8, 2014

Putting Student Data To The Test To Identify Struggling Kids.

# Case Study: Homestead Senior High School in Miami, Florida

## HOMESTEAD BEFORE DIPLOMAS NOW

Homestead Senior High School is located on the southern tip of Miami, Florida in a working-class neighborhood bordering the Everglades. Its student population is similar to most Diplomas Now partners: 95 percent are minority students, 90 percent are economically disadvantaged, and in Homestead's case, many students are from migrant families—all numbers that far surpass the district and state averages.<sup>37</sup> Homestead's stated goal is to "achieve excellence by focusing on the 'whole child.'" The school envisions its students developing their talents and intellectual skills to become informed, caring, responsible, and productive citizens.<sup>38</sup>

However, at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, Homestead was struggling to fulfill these goals. Just 23 percent of students were proficient in reading and 29 percent were proficient in math, compared to state averages of 57 percent and 58 percent, respectively. The overall graduation rate was the lowest in the county; in 2011 only 54 percent of students graduated.<sup>39</sup> "When I came here, it was obvious there was low morale among the students and teachers," says Principal Guillermo Muñoz. "The poor results were reflected in the lack of school spirit and pride."

The Miami-Dade district knew action needed to be taken, and decided to partner with Diplomas Now to improve the school's structure and organization, provide teachers and students the support they needed, and most importantly, to help the students realize their own potential. The Diplomas Now team immediately worked with Homestead's administration and teachers to conduct a needs assessment to identify successful aspects of the school to strengthen and areas that needed improvement.

## DIPLOMAS NOW IN ACTION

The needs assessment identified that the Miami-Dade district was already providing curricular offerings and teacher coaching that are common Diplomas Now supports. Homestead also already offered the double dosage of class time focused on English Language Arts and math instruction and provided common teacher planning time that is core to the Diplomas Now model.

At the same time, school leaders recognized that the student data systems and additional human capital supports the Diplomas Now partnership provides would be critical to improve the school climate and offer students the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral interventions needed to succeed. "Our kids needed to feel safe to learn and the additional supports Diplomas Now provides were crucial to improving the school," says Mr. Muñoz.

In order to gather and analyze the data to identify the right supports, Diplomas Now School Transformation Facilitator, Orlando Martinez-Fortun, was hired. Mr. Martinez-Fortun collects data on students' potential EWIs—their attendance, behavior, and course performance—and analyzes the data to determine which students are off-track or in danger of falling off the path to graduation. Each week, Mr. Martinez-Fortun prioritizes three to four students in need of intervention and gathers a team of adults from the school, including teachers, counselors, and City Year AmeriCorps members, and works with them to determine appropriate interventions. A champion is identified to follow through and monitor the success of each intervention. Additionally, Mr. Martinez-Fortun helps to create and update a comprehensive list of students that tracks both current school performance and the supports and interventions every student in the school receives. He maintains close communication with Homestead's guidance counselors to ensure that students are taking the right classes and accumulating the credits needed for graduation and college and career success. According to Principal Muñoz, Mr. Martinez-Fortun is "like an assistant principal in the responsibilities I'm able to give him and the leadership and supports he provides the school."

Diplomas Now partner City Year deployed a team of its AmeriCorps members to Homestead to provide additional individualized, small group, and whole school supports to students and added capacity to the instructional team. City Year AmeriCorps members provide academic and social-emotional supports to Homestead's ninth and tenth graders. They leverage data to identify students who are struggling to attend school and make daily phone calls to ensure all students are in school every day, ready to learn. They partner with teachers to conduct small group work, personalize student instruction, and conduct math and reading interventions. Each morning, they energetically welcome students to school, provide supports throughout the day, and lead afterschool programming and tutoring where all Homestead students can access more help. This additional human capacity enables teachers to focus on improving their lesson plans, differentiating instruction, and focusing on the whole class while the City Year AmeriCorps members attend to students in need of individualized or small-group supports.

Diplomas Now partner Communities In Schools employed a Site Coordinator at Homestead to address the intensity of the challenges the most vulnerable students face. The Site Coordinator identifies community resources, such as counseling, health care, housing assistance, food, or clothing and offers referrals based on students' and families' needs. The Communities In Schools Site Coordinator conducts home visits for chronically absent students or those on the verge of dropping out to provide emotional and relational supports to ensure they get back to school and on track to graduate. "The Communities In Schools Site Coordinator is there as an extra

counselor,” says Mr. Martinez-Fortun. “Teachers know they can send their students who are struggling to the Communities In Schools Site Coordinator who will find a way to help support these students.”

The Diplomas Now Early Warning Systems have been critical to meeting individual student needs and improving school-wide outcomes. EWI meetings with teams of teachers, City Year AmeriCorps members, and other school personnel result in a variety of interventions to ensure students are on-track to graduation. Plans are developed for students struggling to attend school. Sometimes the supports provided are tangible resources, such as eyeglasses if a student has trouble reading the board. In other cases, Homestead and Diplomas Now staff leverage their knowledge of a student’s strengths and engage their family members to achieve desired improvements. For instance, Mr. Martinez-Fortun brought in a student’s older brother to discuss his potential gang-involvement and encouraged the older brother to speak with his younger brother about his future. After the conversation, the student’s behavior noticeably improved. On another occasion, school personnel recognized the artistic abilities of a ninth grade student whose grades and attendance were struggling. “Teachers were saying, ‘this kid knows art, but I can’t get her to do her work,’” recalls Mr. Martinez-Fortun. “So I introduced her to the art teacher at the school who also worked part-time as a curator at a local museum. He made her a deal—if she could keep her grades up and behave appropriately in school, he was willing to display her work in the museum.” Now a senior, the student has improved her grades considerably and as promised, her work is still on display.

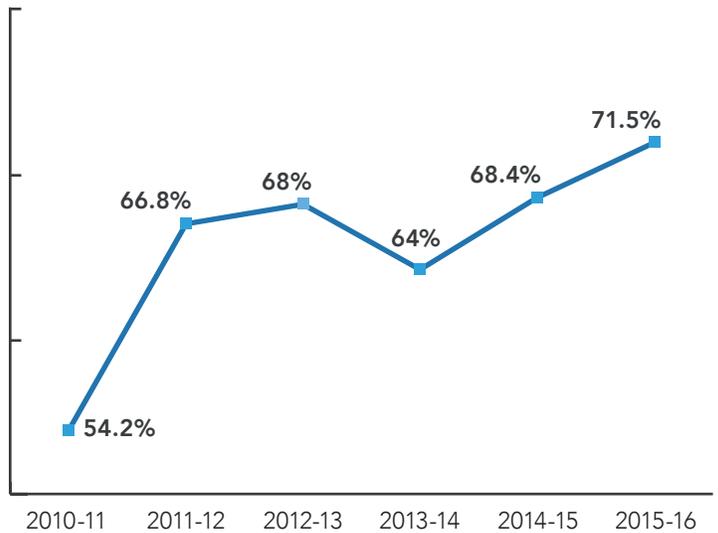
The Diplomas Now team has set up and assisted with report card conferences, chaperoned student events, and contributed to a more positive school climate. Mr. Martinez-Fortun says that Diplomas Now is focused on providing the necessary supports to help students succeed. “My Diplomas Now team goes above and beyond. We are here after school, at Open Houses, on Senior Night,” he says. “Diplomas Now staff are there to support in any way. The school, students and families know we’re here for them.”

## THE RESULTS

Homestead’s partnership with Diplomas Now, including the additional structural, data, and human capital supports, have led to measurable and positive results for students. Student reading and math proficiency on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test increased by 10 percentage points and 28 percentage points, respectively.<sup>40</sup> In the two years since implementing the new, more rigorous Florida Standards Assessment Test, reading scores have continued to increase. Attendance increases have been lauded as some of the highest in the district, and daily average attendance has reached an all-time high of 95.7 percent.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, the percentage of students on track to graduation has increased by 12 points from the start of the Diplomas Now partnership.<sup>42</sup> Most importantly, graduation rates have improved by 18 percentage points from the 2010-2011 to the 2015-2016 School Year.<sup>43</sup>

### HOMESTEAD SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES



SOURCE: FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

This progress has allowed for a new sense of possibility at Homestead. “You can see the improvements in the school in the data and you can also feel it in staff and most importantly students’ level of engagement,” says Principal Muñoz. “Diplomas Now’s partnership has been critical to supporting our students’ sense of possibility for their future.”

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**“I am extremely satisfied with our partnership with Diplomas Now. Our administrative team, working cooperatively with the three components of the Diplomas Now team, have realized significant improvements in student achievement, attendance, and behavior...our Diplomas Now partnership has provided our students with the necessary sense of ownership over their academic success. This ownership has resulted in students performing at increased levels across the board.”**

**PRINCIPAL GUILLERMO MUÑOZ,  
HOMESTEAD SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

# Lessons Learned Through Diplomas Now Implementation and Research

## Schools desire the additional human capital and data-driven intervention systems Diplomas Now provides

The integrated student support and EWI components of Diplomas Now have been well-received by schools searching for ways to address the scale and intensity of student need. The instructional expertise of Talent Development Secondary combined with the high-quality, cost-effective human capital furnished by City Year AmeriCorps members and the ability to leverage community resources provided by Communities In Schools bring schools expanded capacity to make transformative changes.

## Multiple partners can collaborate to achieve greater impact

It is possible to integrate the efforts of multiple nonprofit partners to accelerate student and school success. Combining the whole-school reform strategies and practices of Talent Development Secondary with City Year's near-peer AmeriCorps member support and Communities In Schools case management amplified the effect of the coordinated effort beyond what each of the individual organizations could have helped the school accomplish on its own.

## Effective school organization structures and training unlock the potential of human capital

Organizing schools around teacher teams with shared planning time ensures an efficient and effective mechanism for combining early warning data with teacher insights to identify students in need of support and devise strong interventions. Diplomas Now's tiered intervention model, which combines whole-school organization and teacher support structures including non-evaluative professional development and an aligned whole-school climate approach, with more targeted and individualized supports for students identified through the EWI intervention process, can move the needle on academic and social-emotional indicators for students.

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**“The Diplomas Now program offers a phenomenal 21st century instructional framework to teachers that empower educators to use best practices for student success. Teachers are fully supported and students are learning the pivotal skills necessary for them to reach academic achievement. The Diplomas Now program has made an impactful difference on the students and staff at our school.”**

**WESLEY ELLIS, TEACHER & ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS COACH, MIFFLIN HIGH SCHOOL, COLUMBUS, OHIO**

## AmeriCorps is a high-impact, cost-effective source for the additional human capital required in our nation's struggling schools

Implementing evidence-based school improvement strategies requires additional human capital. National service offers a high-impact, cost-effective source for this human capital. National service AmeriCorps members serve full-time, making it easy to integrate them into the school community so they can provide the positive relationships students need, along with targeted supports throughout the school day and into the afterschool hours. Without national service, many school improvement strategies would not be fully implemented, denying students opportunities to attain better educational outcomes. Currently, more than half of AmeriCorps resources are focused on education initiatives. AmeriCorps members serve in one out of every four low-performing public schools.

Nationally, AmeriCorps members serve at more than 11,000 traditional district, parochial, and public charter schools, and national service has been shown to provide a four-to-one return on investment to local communities.<sup>44,45</sup> Additionally, participation in AmeriCorps supports the development of a robust teacher and educator pipeline that enables young Americans to enter the field of education with valuable skills and experience related to the unique needs of struggling schools and effective school improvement strategies.

## Whole-school transformation requires district support and dedicated funding

A comprehensive, multiyear collaboration to support school improvement requires investment from dedicated local, state, and federal funding sources. In recognition of this fact, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) astutely requires states to allocate a portion of their Title I funds to support multiple years of evidence-based school improvement activities in the highest-need schools. This funding will be crucial to the effective execution of school improvement efforts. Without this funding, efforts will stall and will fail to yield the full benefit for students and schools. As states and districts select evidence-based improvement strategies, it will be important for them to look for partners that can integrate into the school community and help schools achieve their vision for educational excellence by providing expert insight and the human capital needed to implement proven approaches.

## Planning time and leadership buy-in are critical

As with any school improvement effort, common vision and alignment are essential, beginning with the school leader and integrated through every level of school staff. Common vision and alignment enable improvements in adult practice and student support. Adult buy-in and capacity building require planning and learning time both before the changed practices are put into place and as they are rolled out.

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“What makes our collaborative work with Diplomas Now a truly successful partnership is the fact that we share a collective vision, responsibilities, and defined high expectations on achieving results.”

HEADMASTER LIGIA NORIEGA-MURPHY,  
THE ENGLISH HIGH SCHOOL, BOSTON

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### Conducting large-scale randomized control trials in schools requires sufficient time and significant financial and human resources

Conducting a school-level randomized control trial (RCT) of this magnitude requires substantial effort and time to appropriately set up and implement the study. This includes recruiting enough schools and districts to ensure a sufficient sample for an RCT, properly on-boarding schools to the evaluation and research requirements, and ensuring effective implementation conditions. Once the evaluation is in process, continuous implementation support, ongoing data collection, and regular communication between the schools, partners, and evaluator(s) are necessary, which can be time-intensive depending on the evaluation activities, number of reports, and program-led data elements collected.

Additionally, external evaluation can require significant financial resources—the larger and longer the evaluation, the greater the cost both for the evaluation itself and the implementation of the program that is being evaluated. A lack of dedicated funding at the outset of the RCT can lead to an ongoing need to fundraise, which can draw resources away from other necessary activities. Given these requirements, a dedicated team of staff members from the evaluated program is needed to project manage the evaluation activities and relationships, coordinate program implementation support, and ensure adequate funding.

This lesson is particularly important as the crucial work to meaningfully evaluate improvement strategies continues. Without high-quality evaluations, the education sector risks continued investment in ineffective approaches and missing out on the opportunity to learn what works in school improvement efforts.

# The Work That Remains: Strategically Scaling Diplomas Now Partnerships and Practices

There are few more challenging tasks in education than providing structure, supports, and rigorous learning environments to ensure that all students, particularly those from under-resourced communities, graduate from high school prepared for college and career success. The Diplomas Now partnership has demonstrated that it is possible to drive large-scale, multi-district innovation and validate the results using a randomized control trial study design. Diplomas Now has also shown it is possible to integrate the efforts of multiple nonprofit partners to support schools, staff, and students in synergistic ways that lead to greater outcomes than any of the organizations could have enabled on its own.

In capitalizing on the research and lessons learned from Diplomas Now, future efforts will focus on supporting schools and systems of schools to achieve their vision for educational excellence by comprehensively leveraging Diplomas Now's evidence-based practices and strategies. These efforts will include: working with state and local education agencies to partner with and improve the lowest-performing schools, as required under the *Every Student Succeeds Act*; advancing high performing Diplomas Now flagship schools to innovate and spread Diplomas Now's practices; and driving adoption of Diplomas Now's evidence-based strategies by whole networks of schools.

## SUPPORTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS REQUIRED BY THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

Diplomas Now is aligned with and primed for success under the policies outlined in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Under ESSA, states are required to identify schools in need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and schools requiring Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI). CSI schools include the lowest performing five percent of schools in the state and schools with lower than a 67 percent graduation rate. TSI schools include those where subgroups are consistently underperforming. States must set aside seven percent of Title I funds to support evidence-based improvement efforts in these TSI and CSI schools.<sup>46</sup> Diplomas Now has a track record of successful partnership with these types of schools.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Diplomas Now meets the highest level of evidence under ESSA with positive, statistically significant impacts—a rare level of effectiveness, as only one in 10 education evaluations result in statistically significant results.<sup>48</sup>

To ensure that Diplomas Now effectively meets student and school needs, the partners will work with district and school leadership to conduct a needs assessment. An evidence-based implementation plan will result from the needs assessment that leverages Diplomas Now practices and strategies aligned with local vision and resources. Diplomas Now looks forward to partnering with states, districts,

and schools to meet the school improvement requirements under ESSA, aligning its expansion within targeted feeder patterns to serve middle and high schools with the greatest numbers of students in danger of dropping out of school.

## EXPANDING AMERICORPS TO REACH MORE COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

To implement effective school improvement strategies in more communities and to support the academic achievement of more students, a robust supply of national service opportunities is necessary. AmeriCorps currently engages approximately 75,000 young Americans in intensive national service opportunities each year, providing cost-effective, high-impact services in high-need schools. However, demand currently outstrips supply, as five applications are received for every available service opportunity and there is growing demand from schools and districts.<sup>49</sup>

The federal investment in national service programs has overwhelming support among American voters. Eighty-three percent of voters—including 78 percent of Republicans, 84 percent of Independents and 90 percent of Democrats—want Congress to maintain or increase the investment in national service programs that are highly leveraged to cultivate private and local support and expand the scope and effectiveness of community-driven solutions.<sup>50</sup>

Scaling AmeriCorps and other national service opportunities focused on supporting high-need schools would not only benefit the current generation of students, but would prepare an upcoming generation of teachers and civic leaders through AmeriCorps service. Increased participation in AmeriCorps has the potential to develop a robust pipeline of teachers and educators who are knowledgeable about the challenges facing high-need schools and experienced in supporting effective school improvement strategies.

## INNOVATION, TRAINING, AND DEMONSTRATION AT FLAGSHIP DIPLOMAS NOW SCHOOLS

In order to further innovate and expose more educators to Diplomas Now practices and strategies, Diplomas Now will collaborate with its partner districts to establish flagship Diplomas Now schools. These flagship schools will be identified based on their high-fidelity and effective implementation of the complete set of Diplomas Now practices to achieve exceptional student results. Diplomas Now flagship schools will serve as hubs for regional innovation, teaching, training, and demonstration to support the development and scaling of Diplomas Now's signature practices to other schools and districts.

There is no substitute for witnessing a powerful practice in action, seeing the role AmeriCorps members play in executing improvement strategies, and being able to visit experienced practitioners of the model. Diplomas Now flagship schools will ultimately help other school and district leaders, teachers, and school partners develop the competencies and confidence to implement new evidence-based strategies, structures, and models effectively and with fidelity.

Additionally, City Year and the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University have established the School Design Division at City Year to accelerate ongoing collaboration and create a next-generation model of education to support the holistic development of learners and leaders with the competencies needed for success in the 21st century. In partnership with local public education leaders, the School Design Division supported the launch of a new school, Compass Academy, which recently opened in Denver and will continue to develop, refine, transfer, and replicate evidence-based school success practices. Innovations from the School Design Division, Compass Academy, and the Diplomas Now flagship schools, which will improve upon and create new strategies and practices to meet student needs, will result in an innovation pipeline that is best-in-class in the public education sector. Further, both the flagship schools and Compass Academy will serve as national examples of what is possible when AmeriCorps members are thoughtfully integrated into the fabric of schools and deployed to execute crucial school improvement strategies.

The Diplomas Now partners possess robust research and development capacities that focus on cutting edge experimentation, product innovation, and continuous evaluation and improvement. Combining this integrated research and development capacity with the innovations occurring at flagship schools and within Compass Academy will allow seamless integration between research and practice, and provide the ability to rapidly learn at the classroom and instructional level to support ongoing improvement in student achievement.

## **DISSEMINATION OF EVIDENCE-BASED DIPLOMAS NOW STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES**

Diplomas Now will seek to further codify and distribute its evidence-based practices across its current footprint of partners and beyond to benefit students and schools across the country. Diplomas Now's dissemination approach is designed to overcome barriers to scale by enabling core Diplomas Now components to be strategically unbundled. This will allow school districts to strengthen ongoing reform efforts to achieve higher impact while balancing innovation, buy-in and fidelity, as well as addressing cost-effectiveness and sustainability concerns.

The Diplomas Now model and lessons from its implementation are already being utilized and can be enhanced across the more than 300 schools where City Year AmeriCorps members serve. These partner schools and districts are already benefiting from core Diplomas Now practices, such as using attendance, behavior, and course performance data to identify students in need of support; planning and conducting interventions; and monitoring and adjusting those interventions throughout the year. Eventually, Diplomas Now practices and strategies can spread to the more than 150 urban, suburban, and rural school districts where one or more of the Diplomas Now partners currently work and to other community-based organizations across the country.

Through these innovation, expansion, and dissemination strategies, Diplomas Now can bring additional tools and strategies into schools and harness the true research to practice and policy power of the model. This will help to create widespread impact to ensure all students, especially those who live in our most at-risk neighborhoods, have the support they deserve to graduate high school equipped with the skills and knowledge to be successful in college and their adult lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The past decade of creating, piloting, validating, improving, and learning from Diplomas Now has taught us two things. First, with the right partners, funding, and supports, it is possible to work collaboratively with the most challenged schools in the United States to make major improvements that have a measurable effect on the lives of our nation's most vulnerable children. Second, building and using evidence is the only way to make these improvements and deliver on the promise of providing all students with access to an excellent education.

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