

## Diploma Plus

### Overview

Diploma Plus (DP) offers a rigorous, engaging, and supportive alternative educational pathway for young people who are not served well by traditional high schools and who are at risk of dropping out or may already have done so. The program has three distinct phases: the Foundation Level, the Presentation Level, and the Plus Phase. In the Foundation and Presentation Levels, sites deliver curricula in core subject areas that are mapped to explicit competencies. The Plus Phase transitions students into the world beyond high school, emphasizing postsecondary experiences, which include an internship and college course work, while providing strong supports to students as they complete high school.

Diploma Plus serves students who have had difficulty in traditional schools or have already dropped out, and one of their central aims is to increase the number and quality of educational alternatives for vulnerable youth. As of 2005–06, there are a total of 15 DP sites in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York, serving close to 2,000 students. It is anticipated that several new DP schools will open by 2007–08, including several in California. It is important to note that the DP model is designed to be applicable to different settings. Current sites include small district-run schools, charter schools, alternative education programs, and community college transition programs.

From its inception in 1996 until 2005, DP engaged in third-party evaluations to assess and improve its policies and practice, as one of the model's biggest challenges is balancing the high standards for achievement with the extensive academic catch-up in which many entering students must engage. The information included in this profile primarily draws upon the latest evaluation, completed in 2005 by Brigham Nahas Research Associates. Findings from this evaluation have informed many of decisions about Diploma Plus's recent expansion.

### Population

Diploma Plus serves young people who face personal, educational, and economic challenges that make success in a traditional high school setting difficult. The particular student population varies among sites, but DP participants primarily are students who have fallen behind and are overage for the grade in which

they are currently enrolled. In addition, certain sites primarily enroll students who have dropped out of school, immigrant students who are English language learners, entering 9th-grade students with significant risk factors, and 12th-grade students who have yet to pass the state's high school exit exams and are at risk of not graduating. Most DP students come from families with little or no history of postsecondary education. DP students' academic ability ranges from below the 6th grade through the 11th and 12th grades. The total population of students served through DP is ethnically and racially diverse. As of 2004–05, DP students were 43% African American, 36% Latino, 11% White, 8% other, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. They are 53% female and 47% male, 87% free or reduced-price lunch qualifiers, and 17% English language learners.

The student population included in the research conducted by Brigham Nahas Research Associates included 1,180 students across eight sites who were enrolled in programs between 2002 and 2004: 39% in a small school serving English language learners, 29% in three community-based programs, 19% in another small school, and 14% in three transitional senior-year programs located on a community college campus. All of these students participated in the program for at least two months. Within this group, there were approximately equal percentages of males and females. Students self-reported their race/ethnicity as 29% other, 25% Latino, 25% African American, 17% White, and 5% Asian/Pacific Islander. For 60% of the students, a language other than English was spoken at home.

### Key Findings

Research on students enrolled in the program from September 2002 to September 2004 produced the following key findings:

- Students were attracted to DP because of the opportunity to take college-level courses. According to survey data, 84% of students indicated that the opportunity to take a college class was important in their decision to participate in the program.
- As indicated in an end-of-the year graduate transition survey conducted of 197 students who hoped to graduate in June 2004, a high percentage of DP graduates (78%) reported plans to enter postsecondary education immediately after gradua-

tion, while another 18% reported their intent to continue education after taking some time off. Of those planning to continue their education, 56% planned on attending school full-time, 27% part-time, and the remaining students were unsure, as some students indicated they had plans to join the military, responsibilities to care for children or family members, or expectations to engage in community service.

- In 2004, 32% of the graduating students reported they had a job and approximately half had a full-time job. Forty-five percent of the graduates reported they were looking for a job, including those currently employed looking for a new job.
- In surveys during 2003–04, almost 90% of DP students said that the program was helping them plan and preparing them well for life after high school. In earlier surveys, 95% said the program made them feel better prepared for the future, 81% felt their aspirations had improved, and 87% were more interested in attending college.
- From Fall 2002 to Spring 2004, 226 Plus Phase students took college courses; 61% took a developmental-level/remedial course, and 39% enrolled in credit-bearing courses.
- Of students taking college classes while in the Plus Phase of the program between 2002 and 2004, 81% passed at least one course. Most (71%) earned a “C” or better in at least one course.
- In surveys conducted in 2003–04, students reported:
  - Being more engaged in the DP program than they were in their previous school;
  - Performing better in DP than their previous school (due in large part to the caring, committed adults who support them);
  - A safer, more supportive and respectful culture and structure at their DP school; and
  - Much more diligent completion of schoolwork while in DP (in comparison to their previous schools).

- Students reported that postsecondary education was “often” or “very often” discussed, with 82% reporting discussions on applying to colleges and other schools, 79% on going to two-year colleges, 74% on finding the right career path, 71% on paying for college or other schools, and 70% on going to four-year colleges. Fewer students reported that their programs provided information about attending training programs or trade schools (47%) or going into the military (15%).
- Of the students enrolled across the DP network between September 2002 and September 2004, 62% completed the program. Within this group, 33% graduated having completed all of the Plus Phase components, 26% graduated without completing all the components of the Plus Phase, and 3% completed all the program requirements, but did not pass the MCAS, the required state test for high school graduation.
- Results from a small follow-up study of graduates from one of the transitional senior year programs showed that six months after graduation, 15 out of 17 participants had passed the MCAS and earned a high school diploma. The two students who had not passed were appealing the decision. In terms of postprogram plans, most (87%) of those who completed the program and passed the MCAS went to college. One student was working and in a vocational education program, and another was neither working nor in college.<sup>1</sup>

### Additional Findings by Site Type

These findings also are based upon the research conducted by Brigham Nahas Research Associates on students enrolled between September 2002 and September 2004. DP has used these results to improve their program and practice.

- Of the students in the three transitional school year programs, 83% graduated with a diploma, meaning that they passed the MCAS, the state-mandated test required for graduation. An additional 9% completed the program, but did not earn a high school diploma because they did not pass the MCAS, and another 7% withdrew from the program prior to completion.

