

Project GRAD

A Summary of:

“Project GRAD: Program Evaluation Report, 1998-99” (December 1999) University of Houston. By Kwame A. Opuni, Ph.D.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- ✓ Extended Learning

Overview

Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) began as a scholarship program in Houston, Texas in 1988-89. It has now grown into a private, not-for-profit organization that works in partnership with high schools and their feeder schools to implement multiple reform models that lead to higher graduation and college attendance rates. When a school system comes to Project GRAD for assistance, the staff institutes a series of interventions to improve classroom management and discipline, student reading and math proficiency, parent and community involvement, and finally, high school graduation and college acceptance rates. First, Project GRAD uses a Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline program that facilitates teacher/student cooperation in instructional consistency and behavior management. Second, Project GRAD implements educational initiatives, such as Success-for-All and MOVE IT Math, to supplement basic elementary and middle school reading and math curricula. Third, the initiative works through Communities in Schools to improve the quality and level of parental and community support for school activities. Finally, Project GRAD implements a comprehensive outreach program which includes a community-wide Walk for Success to recruit students and their parents, Parent Universities to

POPULATION

Project GRAD sites are located in inner-city schools, serving primarily minority students from low-income families. Nationally, Project GRAD serves approximately 68,000 students in 92 schools. The 24 Houston schools examined in the evaluation belong to the 2 high school feeder systems that have piloted the program in Houston: Jefferson Davis High School and Jack Yates High School. The evaluator detailed the socio-economic characteristics of the communities around the Davis and Yates high school feeder systems. Only 44% of the adults in the Davis community and 66% of those in the Yates community have completed high school. These feeder systems serve 26,000 students, the vast majority of whom were African American and Latino youth. In 1999, 89% of the students at Davis High School were Latino, 9% African American, 2% white, 18% limited English proficiency and 76% received free or reduced price lunch. That same year, 89% of Yates High School students were African American, 10% Latino, 1% Asian and 57% of the students received free or reduced price lunches.

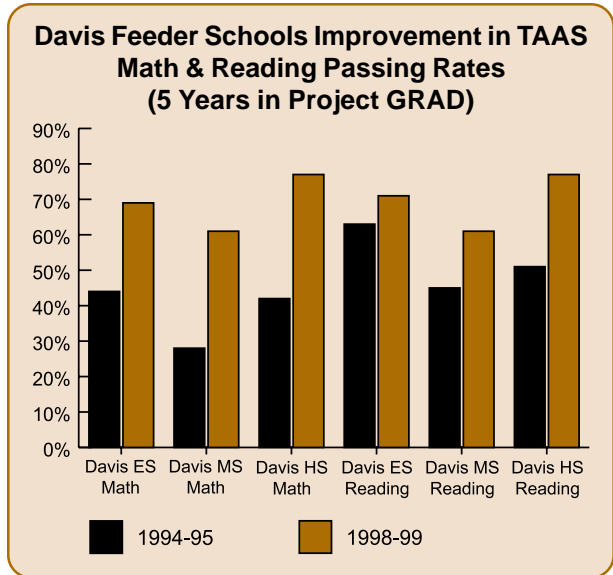
improve parental literacy and involvement levels and intensive summer institutes and college scholarships for students.

Key Findings

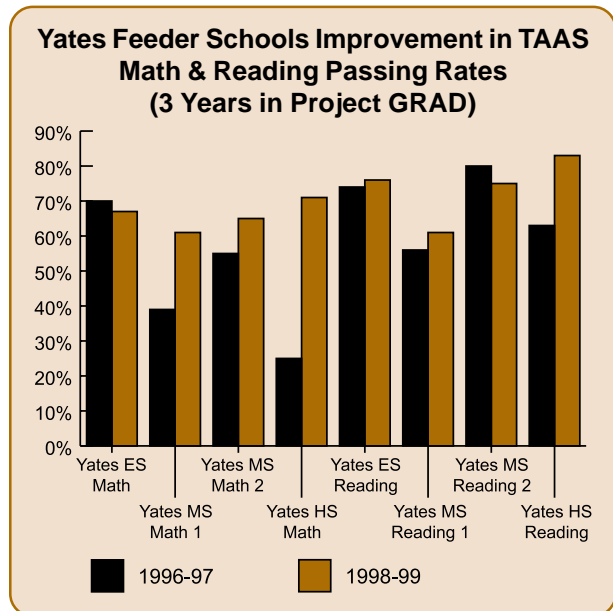
One of Project GRAD’s primary goals is to raise the college enrollment of graduates from its high schools. The program more than tripled annual college enrollment rates for Davis High School graduates, from 12% to 50%, between the first year it offered scholarships in 1989 and 1999.

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test was used to measure improvements in reading and math proficiency at all of the Davis and Yates feeder schools (Elementary Schools-ES, Middle Schools-MS and High Schools-HS) served by Project GRAD. Davis schools began implementing Project GRAD in 1994, while Yates schools began in 1996. Schools in both feeder systems experienced increased passing rates on the TAAS after implementing Project GRAD (see charts).

Evaluators compared Project GRAD schools to other Houston schools with similar student demographics and baseline achievement scores, using the Woodcock, TAAS and Stanford-9 tests to measure the effect of participating in Project GRAD.



- ◆ The Woodcock, Stanford-9 and TAAS tests revealed that students who began kindergarten in the Davis system the same year that Project GRAD started (1994) outperformed a comparison cohort for three consecutive years in mathematics and two consecutive years in reading.
- ◆ The evaluator also charted longitudinal increases in grade equivalent scores on the Stanford-9 test for 472 students in the Yates feeder system after three years of participation in Project GRAD. The average, pre-Project GRAD grade equivalent score of these students was one month above the national average in reading and three months below the national average in math. After three years in the program, they performed at three months above the national average in both reading and math.



After four years of implementation, Project GRAD reduced disciplinary referrals to principals’ offices in Davis elementary schools by 74% (from 1,017 to 268). The Yates feeder schools also saw a disciplinary referral decline of 22% (from 935 to 729) by the second year of the program.

Program Components

When Project GRAD partners with a school feeder system, it brings a constellation of reform efforts that cover each level of schooling from kindergarten through high school.

- ◆ Consistency Management & Cooperative Discipline (CMCD) is a classroom management initiative that builds consistency in instructional and disciplinary practices by involving teachers, students and parents in a behavioral management partnership.
- ◆ MOVE IT Math (MOVE IT is an acronym for Math Opportunities, Valuable Experiences and Innovative Teaching) uses songs, games, literature and hands-on manipulatives to teach concepts and the importance of mathematics to students in grades K-6. Students learn basic math (arithmetic) and advanced math (algebra) at an early age.
- ◆ Success for All (SFA) is a research-based, school-wide reading and writing program for grades K-5 (see pp. 162-164).
- ◆ Communities in Schools (CIS) is a non-profit, dropout prevention and social service program that tailors counseling, guidance and family case-management services to individual students and their families.
- ◆ Walk for Success is a grassroots effort to inform parents and recruit student applicants for the Project GRAD scholarship program. Alumni, teachers, staff, mentors, university volunteers and community leaders go door to door to raise awareness of the program.
- ◆ Scholarships of \$1,000 per year for college are guaranteed to students who: graduate on time from a Project GRAD high school; take a minimum of three years of mathematics, including algebra I, geometry and algebra II; maintain a 2.5 grade point average in core academic subjects and complete a minimum of two summer institutes sponsored by the program at local universities.

Contributing Factors

Professional Development and Support

Project GRAD recognized that the high turnover rates of teachers in inner-city schools necessitated ongoing training of all teachers hired after the first year of intensive training and project implementation. Facilitators from Project GRAD therefore provide on-going material and curricular support in CMCD and SFA. According to the evaluator, teachers feel free to come to these facilitators with their problems because of the fact that the facilitators “operate outside of the teacher appraisal process.” In addition, a Social Worker/Project Manager is housed at each school to work with students, teachers and parents to support various aspects of the program.

Sustainability

“Unlike many educational initiatives that promise a quick fix and then often cut funding prematurely before meaningful results occur, Project GRAD’s programmatic perspective and commitment are long-term,” noted the evaluator. Project GRAD also relies on diverse funding sources for support of its programs.

Ongoing Evaluation and Model Refinement

Teachers, administrators and Project GRAD facilitators track student test scores, discipline reports and evaluation findings to ensure that students receive adequate support and benefits from the program. Benchmark data also ensure that the program is having a positive, aggregate impact on the schools.

Comprehensive Reform

Project GRAD recognizes that a reform model focusing only on high school might be hampered by weak elementary or middle schools in the high school's feeder pattern. The evaluator believed that the scope of the reform initiative, involving teachers and administrators from all of the feeder schools has been crucial to Project GRAD's success.

Parent and Community Empowerment

Project GRAD empowers parents and community members by involving them in school reforms through CIS initiatives (GED programs, Citizenship Classes and health and employment referrals, for example). Shared Decision-Making Committees (principals, parents, teachers and community leaders) manage Project GRAD feeder schools.

Evaluator Comments

Project GRAD schools must work on retaining teachers, according to the evaluator, because of the high turnover rates of teachers in inner-city schools. Such turnover rates mean the loss of many hours of program training. The evaluator found that the

most substantive criticism of the program from teachers pertained to the perceived, rigid structure and lack of phonics-based instructional emphasis in Success for All, one component of Project GRAD's reform strategy.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The evaluator used school data, statewide and national test scores, as well as teacher surveys to chart the increases in academic achievement among the cohorts of Project GRAD students. Because of high, annual student mobility rates (24%) in the pilot schools, the evaluator also used a quasi-experimental design involving matched comparison schools with similar student demographics and baseline achievement data to determine the effect of Project GRAD on student achievement. Site visits, interviews with students and teacher surveys offered a more qualitative evaluation of the program.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The evaluation was funded by the University of Houston System. More than 65 public and private foundations, organizations and corporations fund Project GRAD. Some of these funding initiatives are multi-year, multi-million dollar grants, to expand and replicate the Project GRAD model.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

Project GRAD began in Houston, Texas, but it has now been replicated in Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Newark, New Jersey; Columbus, Ohio and Nashville, Tennessee. Future plans include the possibility of replicating the program in San Antonio, Texas.

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