

## Ensuring Educational Opportunities: A Best Practices Approach

### Introduction

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling specifically intended for public schools to desegregate, furthering the goal of equality in education. However, disturbingly low SAT scores and correspondingly low high school graduation and college attendance rates in urban communities indicate that this goal of equality has not been realized.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes point to a profound education crisis in the United States. Moreover, despite attempts to address this crisis, persistent racial/ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities remain.

Traditionally, the education crisis has been oversimplified and defined as a direct result of a lack of funding and resources.<sup>2</sup> However, funding alone has not and will not eradicate the problems facing our nation's schools, nor will interventions that function only to improve the school experience. The limited character of school-based approaches neglects the fact that children spend much of their days outside of school—in an environment that may be antithetical to academic performance and the achievement of educational goals. Still, other approaches to the urban education crisis are ephemeral, only assisting students through a small segment of their educational experience. Yet in Dallas, and other large cities across the nation, many programs *are* making a difference in the lives of children. Here, we detail best practice programs designed to enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for middle and high school students.

### Populations at Risk & Scope of the Problem

Children residing in distressed communities are, by definition, at risk. When compared to their suburban counterparts, young people in low-income urban areas experience a number of social risks, such as living in a single parent household, teen pregnancy, high rates of incarceration (for self, sibling, and/or parent), increasingly stressful life events, lower parental educational attainment, and low levels of economic resources and social

capital, which increase the probability of academic failure.<sup>3,4</sup>

Nationally, every year, an estimated 1.2 million students do not graduate from high school.<sup>5</sup> Notably, "[t]he national graduation rate is 68%, with nearly one third of all public high school students failing to graduate."<sup>6</sup> However, substantial gaps in graduation rates exist between lower and upper class, white and minority, and urban and suburban students. A recent study reveals that nearly half of the schools in the nation's 35 largest urban areas graduated 50% or fewer of the students who enrolled in the ninth grade.<sup>7</sup> According to the Urban Institute, "[g]raduation rates for students who attend school in high-poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag from 15-18% behind their peers."<sup>8</sup> Disturbingly, more than 50% of students who fail to graduate from high school are minorities.<sup>9</sup> The reality is that low graduation rates for schools serving poor urban communities with high minority populations have become the norm.

In the Dallas Independent School District (DISD), the 4-year graduation rate for the class of 2006 was estimated at 41.4%, down from 48.6% for the class of 2004; this translates into approximately 9,000 students in the class of 2006 who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but failed to graduate.<sup>10</sup> For Hispanic students in DISD, the graduation rate fell from 43% in 2005 to 37% in 2006.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, SAT scores indicate that DISD students fall below the national average of 1026 in 2004.<sup>12</sup> DISD students who took the SAT in 2004 generated a mean score of 852, over 150 points lower than the national average and 80 points lower than the mean score for Houston's ISD.

### Components of Successful Programs

While no combination of factors ensures a program's or school's success, numerous characteristics can be found among the nation's most successful education initiatives. Generally, best practice programs involve:

- A comprehensive approach that targets and addresses multiple levels of risk

- Proactive and reactive components that prevent at-risk students from falling through the cracks while also dedicating resources to those who have already experienced academic difficulties
- Incentives that provide students with a learning environment that recognizes and rewards their achievement
- Collaboration that empowers local communities, schools, principals, parents, and students to work together
- Mentoring, which provides positive role models to help students navigate their social and educational experiences
- Individualization that recognizes and tailors programs to the needs of each student
- Motivated personnel (teachers, staff, principals, leaders), working with students directly and inspiring them to achieve

## Best Practice Programs

Unfortunately, best practices research in education “has often come to mean scientifically-based, quantitatively tested educational practices which mirror selective pedagogy most often associated with white, elitist, market driven Western style education.”<sup>13</sup> These narrow measures of educational success limit best practices research. However, there is evidence that select programs have sufficiently set themselves apart as exemplary models. Based on innovativeness, effectiveness, and possibilities for implementation as a general model for educational reform, we discuss four model programs here.

### Public Housing Graduates

The Public Housing Graduates (PHG) program was founded by Othello Poulard of the Center for Community Change to address academic achievement among 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders in public housing. Despite its name, the PHG program represents a general model for education that has applications to all at-risk students. The program offers students monthly financial incentives to stay in school and excel in their studies, as well as providing computers in their homes to give them the resources necessary to succeed. PHG students also receive mentors from the community, tutors, life skill workshops, after-school activities, college preparatory visits, a neighborhood-based computer/study center, and many free cultural activities, among other elements.

The demonstration project produced remarkable results; almost 90% of the PHG participants who entered their senior year graduated from high school, compared to a graduation rate of 63% for other students attending the

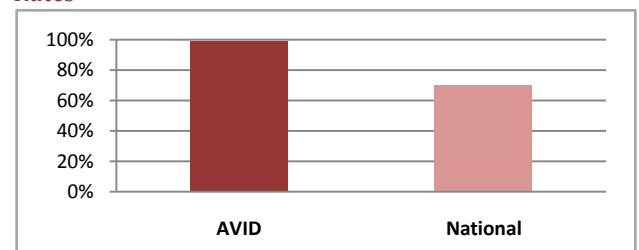
same schools.<sup>14</sup> None of the PHG participants failed to graduate due to pregnancy, and only one failed to graduate due to incarceration. The GPA of PHG students was also significantly higher (0.65 on a 4 point scale) than the control group. Finally, PHG students experienced success in applying to and attending college; 70% applied to colleges and/or vocational schools, with a remarkable acceptance rate of 100% for those who applied.<sup>15</sup>

### AVID

The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program is a nationwide school-based initiative that promotes educational achievement among students in the academic middle. While AVID classrooms exist within the structure of traditional schools, the model itself is touted as a comprehensive school reform effort because of its radical approach to education.<sup>16</sup>

The AVID program challenges 4<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade children in the “academic middle;” traditionally, these students have not qualified for other educational assistance programs or have been placed in remedial classes. Students participating in the program attend rigorous advanced classes, despite previous indications of average (B, C, or D) performance. While enrolled in advanced classes, students participate in an AVID elective course that provides study skills, enrichment activities, tutoring, and college preparatory work. The approach relies on students’ motivation, AVID faculty, individualized tutoring, and parents, who sign a contract indicating their support for the goals of the AVID program, and pledging their own participation. Results of AVID evaluations demonstrate overwhelming success.

Figure 1. A Comparison of High School Graduation Rates<sup>17</sup>



To date, almost 40,000 students have completed the AVID program and graduated from high school. Approximately 95% of these students report college enrollment, with over 77% enrolling in a 4-year college and over 17% in community colleges and vocational schools.<sup>18</sup> In addition to improvement in student performance, AVID functions to alter student culture by creating a collaborative, goal-oriented environment where students are motivated to succeed.<sup>19</sup>

## Talent Development Model

In 1994 the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University created the Talent Development Model (TDM) as a whole-school reform effort targeting middle and high schools. The model advocates for:

- Small learning communities (a Freshman Academy and career academies for students in the upper grades)
- A curriculum leading to advanced coursework in English and Mathematics
- Extra small-group and individual assistance and tutoring sessions, which include catch-up reading and math courses for ninth graders
- Staff professional development strategies and cultural relevancy
- Parent and community involvement in activities that foster students' career and college development

At the middle and high school level, the TDM currently operates in 33 schools nationwide.<sup>20</sup> Evaluations of the program were conducted in five pilot schools where fewer than two thirds of students who entered the 9<sup>th</sup> grade during the 3 school years prior to the model's application were promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and fewer than half were on track to graduate from high school in 4 years. Before the introduction of the TDM, 43% of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders completed core classes; after implementing the model, an average of 55% completed the core classes. The program also had a more substantial impact on 9<sup>th</sup> grade students' completion of math courses.<sup>21</sup> The results indicated that the program increased math course completion by 12%, specifically increasing algebra course completion by 19%.<sup>22</sup> The overall promotion rates from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade for TDM students increased by 6%, while a control high school's rates dropped 4 percentage points, producing an estimated 10 percentage point impact for the model in terms of promotion rates. In general, the likelihood of graduation improved by 8% in the two cohorts studied.<sup>23</sup>

## Quantum Opportunity Model

Assisting at-risk youth in making a "quantum leap" up the ladder of opportunity, the Quantum Opportunity Model (QOM) utilizes a combination of academic, community, and developmental activities over the course of students' high school careers.<sup>24</sup> The focus of the initiative is to help at-risk youth overcome poverty by providing them with resources that would be otherwise unavailable. The QOP curriculum consists of 96 courses (48 academic and 48

functional) that cover various topics, including employment, health, and consumer economics.<sup>25</sup> Students' educational activities take place at a computer-based learning lab near their campus; each location has a site coordinator who is accountable for coordinating the program with schools and other local agencies and planning activities for students. The coordinator develops a relationship with each student; he or she also drafts a contract, which includes a service learning component, for each student to follow.

Outcome evaluations for four of the program sites indicate that the rate of post-secondary enrollment among QOP students was markedly higher than for the control group; 2-year college attendance was more than twice as high as it was for nonparticipants.<sup>26</sup> QOP program impacts are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. A Comparison of QOP Participants with Control Group<sup>27</sup>

	QOP	Controls
High School Graduates	63%	42%
Postsecondary Enrollment	42%	16%
Dropouts	23%	50%
Received Honor or Award	34%	12%
Childbearing	24%	38%
Ever Arrested	7%	13%

In addition to promoting significant academic progress and increasing high school graduation rates, girls in the study were significantly less likely to have children than the students not enrolled in QOP.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Across the United States, many students are receiving a high quality education that prepares them for high school graduation, college attendance, and eventual employment. At the same time, enduring inequalities in our education system have generated disparities in graduation rates, college attendance, lifetime earning potential, and overall life success for other students. Those residing in inner cities often experience the brunt of the separate but unequal educational systems currently in place in the United States, as do many minority and lower class students. However, even those in the academic middle are at risk for poor school performance and educational outcomes.

A best practices approach to improving positive educational outcomes holds the most promise for enhancing students' opportunities and promoting equality in education. Proven program models demonstrate the far-reaching impact that comprehensive reform can have, while attesting to the profound influence that targeted

intervention can have on an individual child and the character of an entire community.

## Notes

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*Full best practices reports are being developed to accompany the Institute's Wholeness Index, and will be available in early 2008 at [www.wholenessindex.org](http://www.wholenessindex.org)*

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