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MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN HIGH POVERTY MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A school reform plan developed at The Johns Hopkins University is bringing significant gains in student achievement and attendance to some of the nation's most challenging and impoverished middle schools, according to a recently released study.

The success of the university's Talent Development Middle Schools reform model in raising math achievement and attendance rates among eighth graders shows potential for improvements in other areas as well, according to MDRC, a New York-based non-profit research firm that recently released preliminary findings on the most extensive effort to expand the Johns Hopkins program. The MDRC study is available online at <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/400/overview.html>.

The evaluation focuses on six large schools in a northeastern city that is not being identified. Evaluating these schools, MDRC found statistically significant impacts in math beginning in the third year of the Talent Development reform and continuing for two more years. These included increases in math achievement and decreases in the percentage of students performing at the lowest level in math. In addition, attendance, especially among eighth graders, increased during the second and third years of the reform.

The evaluation found a positive trend in reading scores, but the improvement was considered statistically significant during only the second year of Talent Development.

In addition to recognizing the potential of the Talent Development model, developed over 10 years at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins, the evaluation

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bolsters whole-school reforms, which have come under fire and budget cuts recently. These comprehensive reforms attack many problems of failing schools – poor instruction, weak curriculum, disinterested students, unsafe and uninviting physical conditions – at once, rather than in a piecemeal fashion.

Critics have said they are too expensive and difficult to implement and often require schools to adapt to highly structured curriculum and instruction. Yet the MDRC report found that some of the most challenged middle schools in the country were able to implement the Talent Development model and make achievement gains on par with the long-term gains associated with reducing class size in the early grades.

“It is not common to find early impacts of this magnitude in evaluations of models of comprehensive school reform,” the evaluation concluded. “Although the early impact findings in this report should be considered preliminary . . . they are encouraging, particularly for math achievement among eighth-grade students.”

MDRC found that the strength of these improvements depended on the timing and intensity of the reform. Improvements occurred after the reform had been in use for several years and were greatest in math. These effects can have widespread practical results. For example, if they were applied to all 38 neighborhood middle schools in this district, 1,200 eighth graders would move out of the bottom quartile in math achievement each year.

“This is good news,” said Douglas MacIver, director of the Talent Development Middle Grades program. “In an era that is rightly demanding evidence-based school reforms, the results show that when comprehensive, research-based reforms are implemented and sustained significant progress can be made in reducing some of the nation's most troubling achievement gaps.”

Talent Development Middle Schools is a comprehensive reform initiative designed to improve the organization, curriculum, instruction, learning environment and teacher support in the middle grades with the aim of engaging students in learning and raising their achievement.

Before Talent Development was implemented in the district where MDRC examined its
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impacts, 75 percent of eighth graders had math and reading skills below grade level and 25 percent were chronic absentees. Many of the students were unprepared for high school, the report showed. While almost all eighth graders were promoted to ninth grade, only 60 percent of them moved to 10th grade the following year. MDRC compared the results for students in schools working with Talent Development to similar students in the same schools before the reform began and to students in matched schools in the same district.

MDRC will produce a follow-up report that will track the outcomes described above for an additional two years. To learn more about the Talent Development Middle Grades model and see additional research and findings go to <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdms/index.htm>.

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