

Project GRAD - Working to Close the Academic Achievement Gap

Our nation is sending more and more kids off to college, but there is an increasing number of high school graduates entering the work force without the skills and education to qualify them for more than minimum wage jobs. "Project Grad" seeks to address the consequences of this cycle and provide a proactive, results-oriented program that will soon revolutionize the future of Ohio students.

Nearly 70 percent of inner city and rural fourth graders cannot read at even a basic level. Imagine that: in the greatest, wealthiest nation the world has ever known, nearly 7 out of 10 fourth graders in big cities and rural areas cannot read. It is our greatest failure as a nation. It is our failure as a people. And we must do something about it.

Rod Paige
Secretary of Education
Commencement Address,
University of Connecticut 2001

There is a widening gap between the very best students and the very worst despite a decade long emphasis on lifting the achievement of all students.

New York Times
April 4, 2002

Public education is failing to serve low-income students. By the end of fourth grade, low-income students, by various measures, are already two years behind other students. By the time these students reach 8th grade, they are three grade levels behind in reading and math. And if they reach 12th grade, low-income students' achievement levels are about four years behind other young people. This means that 17 year-old African-American and Latino students have skills in English, Mathematics, and Science similar to 13 year-old white students. As a result, minorities obtain college degrees at only half the rate of white students. While, many efforts have been made to narrow or close these achievement gaps, African-American and Latino students have consistently performed below the average of other students and are much less likely to graduate from high school and enter and complete college. For example, Ohio, like many other states, graduates only 59% of African-American students from high school as compared to 85% of white students.

These gaps are everyone's concern. At the close of the last century, African-American and Hispanic children made up 34 percent of the school age population. As a result, the American workforce is changing. As the Anglo population ages, the younger adults who

will be responsible for the vitality and competitiveness of the economy in the 21st century are now more likely than ever before to be African-American and Latino. Additionally, many of the good blue-collar jobs the economy generated for most of the last century have largely disappeared. Almost all the jobs that pay enough to support a family now require higher levels of literacy, language fluency, and technical training than in the past.

Despite the grim realities, these gaps can be addressed. Project GRAD is a comprehensive, cost-effective reform model that is currently underway in nine urban school districts. It is generating evidence that it can narrow, and perhaps even close achievement gaps at those districts' lowest-performing schools, help more students graduate from high school, and make college a reality. GRAD's goal is to see at least 80 percent of students graduate from high school and 50 percent of these graduates enter college. Project GRAD works across all grades from K through 12 and focuses on improving the quality of the curriculum and teaching, as well as on increasing academic standards for student performance. Project GRAD helps to stabilize the community in which GRAD schools are located through partnerships with parents, colleges and universities, corporations, and faith-based organizations. The mission of the program is to ensure a quality public education for all children in economically disadvantaged communities so that high school graduation rates increase and graduates are prepared to enter and be successful in college.

Project GRAD's unit of reform is the feeder pattern; in effect a sub-system within the larger district. A feeder pattern or feeder system consists of all the elementary and middle schools that "feed" individual high schools. It is GRAD's theory of change that if an impact is of significant magnitude in an initial individual feeder, GRAD will spread to other low-performing feeders within the district, thereby becoming "systemic," and that GRAD will be sustained because of the results it produces, its low incremental cost, and its broad base of support.

By combining five program components and five structural components, GRAD schools have been independently evaluated to show that they produce:

- Students with better grades and higher achievement test scores
- Students with positive attitudes and classroom behavior
- Teachers with better training and on-going support
- Parents with more direct involvement in their children's education
- High school graduates with higher college enrollment rates
- College students with greater access to financial aid and scholarships

Project GRAD was founded in 1993 by Jim Ketelsen, former CEO of Tenneco, and began working in Houston in the Davis High School feeder pattern of schools. Since the program began, the number of students graduating from the Davis feeder pattern increased from an average of 175, before the program started, to 298 in 2001. Since 1992, the Houston Independent School District has seen a 9 percent increase in the number of students graduating from high school. During the same time, Davis High School has seen a 50 percent increase in the number of students graduating from high school. Prior to GRAD's implementation, fewer than 20 Davis High School graduates enrolled in college per year. Since implementation, the number of students attending college annually has risen to an average of 110 per year.

By the end of the tenth year of awarding the scholarship in the Davis Feeder Pattern, 1,108 Davis graduates had entered college. Project GRAD scholars from Davis are now attending universities such as Princeton, Cornell, University of Virginia, Drexel, Rice, Texas A&M, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas.

Project GRAD is now in five feeder systems in Houston, serving more than 74 schools and over 51,000 children. Project GRAD has also expanded nationally, with new sites in Akron, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Columbus, Knoxville, Los Angeles, Newark, and Roosevelt, Long Island with more on the way. Every existing Project GRAD city has plans to expand into additional local feeder systems. Nationally, Project GRAD serves more than 185 schools and 130,000 children.

In Houston, achievement gaps in GRAD schools in reading and math have been erased or greatly reduced in less than eight years. In Newark, results are following the same course. Mounting evidence indicates a number of GRAD expansion cities are on a trajectory to achieve comparable results to Project GRAD in Houston and new sites are also improving student performance and have become infused with new promise. These results, the low incremental costs and a broad base of support help ensure that GRAD can be sustained over time. Because of Project GRAD, families are finding new hope in their local schools; teachers are proud of their work and their students; and students are learning, graduating and going to college.

For more information on the Project Grad program, please visit www.projectgradusa.org.