

# Diplomas Now: Providing Solutions to the Education Crisis in America

Katherine Bennett 09 June 2011

## Summary

Diplomas Now is a unique data-driven collaborative that works closely with school administrators, teachers and other onsite providers to identify off-track youth and develop, implement and sustain comprehensive, targeted and intensive strategies to get them back on track.

Partnering organizations include the Philadelphia Education Fund, Johns Hopkins University, the School District of Philadelphia, City Year of Greater Philadelphia, and Communities in Schools of Philadelphia.

At United Way's second annual Strategic Partnership Conference: Creating Innovation and Impact Through Partnership, Diplomas Now was awarded a prize of \$2,500 for their program, which aims to decrease the number of school dropouts in the region. [Read about the Strategic Partnership Conference here.](#)

## Introduction

According to the nonprofit organization DoSomething.org (n.d.), every 26 seconds a student drops out of school in

the United States—7,000 students each day. Each year over a million students drop out of high school. These shocking statistics have wrought an educational crisis in America. Diplomas Now was established to tackle the crisis and improve the high school graduation rate in the nation's largest cities. Understanding the most vulnerable populations and the contributing factors involved, Diplomas Now has constructed an approach that improves curriculums and instruction techniques.

The ground-breaking public-private partnership born in Philadelphia has successfully identified early warning signals leading to student dropout. The overwhelming success of Diplomas Now has gained national recognition, and the initiative is being replicated in nine cities.

Diplomas Now is a highly collaborative partnership that has become a leader of a national transformational education movement.

## **The Problem: Addressing the Factors in High School Dropout**

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High school dropout rates are close to 50 percent in the largest American cities. The most vulnerable populations are minority students; nearly 50 percent of all African-American, Hispanic and Native American students fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Studies

conducted by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (Balfanz and Legters 2004) show that fifty years after *Brown v. the Board of Education*, we are still struggling to provide all youth with equal opportunities to obtain educations. Now more than ever, further engagement with inner-city students is needed.

Serving as a pilot to a national movement, Diplomas Now initially targeted and analyzed at-risk youth in the School District of Philadelphia. The District nationally ranks eighth in enrollment and serves a racially and ethnically diverse student population. Eighty percent of the student body is composed of African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American students. The current dropout rate hovers around 40 percent.

Research conducted by partners of Diplomas Now identified which students are most likely to leave the education system and pinpointed why exit occurs. Collaborative partner John Hopkins University identified the three strongest predictive indicators of dropout:

1. low attendance—exhibiting less than an 80 percent attendance rate,
2. poor behavior—demonstrating unsatisfactory behavior displayed in at least one course, and
3. course failure in literacy and/or math—receiving a final grade of "F."

The three indicators are known as the Early Warning

Indicators or ABCs (Attendance, Behavior and Course Passage). A student exhibiting one or more of the indicators has only a 10 to 20 percent likelihood of completing high school and receiving a diploma. Students likely to drop out of the educational system can be identified as early as sixth grade.

## **The Solution: Diplomas Now**

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Diplomas Now was established in 2006, beginning as a research initiative between John Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund. In 2008, the two formed partnerships with City Year of Greater Philadelphia and Communities In Schools of Philadelphia. The four agencies actively sought and engaged in a partnership with the School District of Philadelphia.

Each collaborative partner of Diplomas Now provides unique expertise and supplies dedicated capacities to the program. The four agencies' collective strengths work to achieve Diplomas Now's mission to identify at-risk students and develop and implement strategies to make high school graduation an attainable goal.

- **The Philadelphia Education Fund** works directly with school administration and staff, leading program design, on-site facilitation and data analysis. The organization also acts as a liaison to the nine national

sites.

- **Johns Hopkins University** provides research and technical assistance to participating Philadelphia schools. Additionally, the university's research has played an important role in scaling the program to the national level.
- **City Year of Greater Philadelphia** and **Communities In Schools of Philadelphia** directly engage with Philadelphia school students and families. Providing trained corps, City Year staff work in schools and offer assistance in the form of instruction, monitoring and mentoring to students who exhibit Early Warning Indicators. Communities In Schools of Philadelphia assigns each participating school an onsite coordinator. Each coordinator is responsible for connecting students and families to city and community assistance services.

Diplomas Now's innovative school-based approach utilizes the Early Warning Indicator system established by Johns Hopkins and the Philadelphia Education Fund and employs individualized targeted and intensive plans for achievement. Students receive direct support from multiple sources. Traditional academic instruction is received from school teachers and support staff; supplemental support is provided by City Year and Communities In Schools of Philadelphia staff who monitor behavior and provide exemplary role modeling and

mentorship. The approach enables Diplomas Now to understand and fully engage with inner-city youth to help reduce Early Warning Indicators. By utilizing teams of highly collaborative partners, the solution works to organize and align all school-based resources and institutionalize practices that positively impact attendance, behavior and course literacy.

## **Conclusion**

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Diplomas Now has demonstrated strong results since its inception. In 2009, Diplomas Now was employed in three schools in Philadelphia: Feltonville Arts and Sciences, Jay Cooke Elementary and Thurgood Marshall Elementary. The schools saw decreases in the number of students exhibiting Early Warning Indicators after the program was implemented. Data collected by Diplomas Now (n.d.) shows that collectively, the three schools witnessed 56 percent fewer students who were initially off-track in attendance, 53 percent fewer students off-track in behavior, and 82 percent fewer students off-track in math and 78 percent fewer students off-track in literacy.

Diplomas Now is unlike any other similarly focused initiative. It is a highly collaborative partnership that has become a leader of a national transformation movement. Utilizing a data-driven approach and employing four highly specialized organizations creates a distinctive

collaboration. Each partner supplies complementary talents, delivering best practices to students and the education system.

Diplomas Now has successfully united once separate organizations now working towards a common goal. Each organization commits itself through leadership, partnership, advocacy and funding to ensure that graduation rates across the nation improve. As a result of the overwhelming success in Philadelphia, the local initiative has been replicated in nationwide. Diplomas Now operates in 20 schools in 10 cities.

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**References**

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