What Works Clearinghouse

ies INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

Project GRAD

Program description[1]

Project "Graduation Really Achieves Dreams" (GRAD) is an initiative for students in economically disadvantaged communities that aims to reduce dropping out and increase rates of college enrollment and graduation by increasing reading and math skills, improving behavior in school, and providing a service safety net. At the high school level, *Project GRAD* provides four-year college scholarships and summer institutes to promote attending and completing high school. *Project GRAD* also provides services in those elementary and middle schools that feed in to the participating high schools.

Research[2]

One study of *Project GRAD* met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards with reservations. The quasi-experimental research design included ninth-grade students from 13 Houston high schools—three *Project GRAD* schools and ten comparison schools. The WWC considers the extent of evidence for *Project GRAD* to be small for progressing in school and for completing school. No studies that met WWC evidence standards with or without reservations addressed staying in school.

Effectiveness

Project GRAD had no discernible effects on progressing in school or on completing school.

	Staying in school	*Progressing in school*	*Completing school*
Rating of effectiveness	na	No discernible effects	No discernible effects
Improvement index[3]	na	Average: –4 percentile points Range: –2 to –7 percentile points	Average: –3 percentile points

na = not applicable

1. The descriptive information for this program was obtained from publicly available sources: the program's web site (www.projectgrad.org, downloaded June 2007) and the research literature (Snipes, Holton, Doolittle, & Sztejnberg, 2006). The WWC requests developers to review the program description sections for accuracy from their perspective. Further verification of the accuracy of the descriptive information for this program is beyond the scope of this review.
2. The evidence presented in this report is based on available research. Findings and conclusions may change as new research becomes available.
3. These numbers show the average and range of student-level improvement indices for all findings across the study.

Additional program information[1]

Developer and contact

Information on *Project GRAD* is available from Project GRAD USA, a national nonprofit organization that coordinates the initiative. Address: 1100 Louisiana, Suite 450, Houston, TX 77002. Web: www.projectgrad.org. Telephone: (713) 986-0499.

Scope of use

Project GRAD was first implemented in 1988 in the Houston Independent School District. Project GRAD USA reports that, as of May 2007, *Project GRAD* has served more than 130,000 youth in more than 200 schools.

Description of intervention

At the high school level, *Project GRAD* provides college scholarships and summer institutes. *Project GRAD* scholarships are provided to students who have a cumulative 2.5 grade point average or better, graduate within four years, complete a recommended college-preparatory curriculum, and participate in two summer institutes. Scholarships average $1,000 to $1,500 a year, although the amounts and criteria vary by site. Each *Project GRAD* high school has a scholarship coordinator who provides counseling, tutoring, and college admission preparation. The summer institutes allow students to experience a college campus-based program taught by college faculty, consisting of four to six hours of instruction and related activities a day for four to six weeks. The activities typically include reading, writing, math, science, academic enrichment, and remedial instruction.

Project GRAD works with the feeder elementary and middle schools that send students to *Project GRAD* high schools to address early problems that can affect high school completion. To help students arrive at middle and high school better prepared academically, *Project GRAD* elementary schools provide professional development and coaches for teachers of reading and math and also implement curricula such as *MOVE IT Math*™, *Everyday Math*™ or *Success For All*™. To improve classroom behavior, *Project GRAD* schools implement Consistency Management & Cooperative Discipline®, an instructional discipline management system in which the teacher acts as an instructional leader and students have leadership roles. It is based on five elements: prevention of disruptive behavior through classroom management, a caring environment, cooperation, classroom organization, and parental and community involvement activities.

Project GRAD also provides staff who deliver school-based social services and facilitate parent involvement. Some sites link with Communities in Schools (CIS), a dropout prevention and social service agency, to provide social service and parent involvement staff members. In sites where there is no local CIS organization, *Project GRAD* has established Campus Family Support (CFS), which customizes traditional CIS services to meet the needs within the feeder system. In addition to student services, staff organize activities to enhance communication between teachers and parents.

Cost

According to staff at Project GRAD USA, the additional cost of operating *Project GRAD* is about $550 per student per year. This estimate includes payment toward the scholarship component of the intervention.

Research

The WWC reviewed five studies of the effectiveness of *Project GRAD*. Three studies were included within one research report (Snipes, Holton, Doolittle, & Sztejnberg, 2006). Among the three studies included in the Snipes et al. (2006) report, the one conducted in Houston, Texas, met WWC evidence standards with reservations. The other two studies—which were conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, and Columbus, Ohio—did not meet WWC evidence screens. The remaining two studies of *Project GRAD* that were not part of the Snipes et al. (2006) report also did not meet WWC evidence screens.

The Houston study included in the Snipes et al. (2006) report focused on three Houston high schools that implemented *Project GRAD* from 1998 to 2004. These three schools were matched to 10 high schools in the district that did not implement

Research *(continued)*

Project GRAD but had similar performance on achievement tests and similar percentages of students in key demographic groups. To estimate the effect of the program, the researchers first compared the average outcomes of ninth graders who entered *Project GRAD* high schools in the years immediately after the program was implemented with those of ninth graders from these schools in the years just before program implementation; the baseline period is defined as the three school years prior to the first year of program implementation. The study made similar calculations for the comparison schools. Their estimates of the effect of the program represent the difference between these pre- and post-implementation comparisons in *Project GRAD* high schools and the comparison schools. The evaluation focused on the effects on students in *Project GRAD* high schools; it did not examine *Project GRAD's* effects on elementary and middle school students.

Extent of evidence

The WWC categorizes the extent of evidence in each domain as small or moderate to large (see the What Works Clearinghouse Extent of Evidence Categorization Scheme). The extent of evidence takes into account the number of studies and total sample size across the studies that met WWC evidence standards with or without reservations.[4]

The WWC considers the extent of evidence for *Project GRAD* to be small for progressing in school and for completing school. No studies that met WWC evidence standards with or without reservations addressed staying in school.

Effectiveness

Findings

The WWC review of dropout prevention programs addresses student outcomes in three key domains: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. The Houston study by Snipes et al. (2006) assessed outcomes in the progressing in school and completing school domains.

Progressing in school. In the Houston study, Snipes et al. (2006) found no statistically significant differences between *Project GRAD* students and comparison group students in the number of credits they earned during ninth grade or the rate at which they were promoted to 10th grade. The average effect size across the two outcomes was not large enough to be considered substantively important, according to the WWC criteria (that is, at least 0.25).

Completing school. In the Houston study, Snipes et al. (2006) found no statistically significant difference between *Project GRAD* students and comparison group students in the proportion who ever graduated, looking ahead at least three years. The effect size for this outcome was not large enough to be considered substantively important according to the WWC criteria.

Rating of effectiveness

The WWC rates the effects of an intervention in a domain as positive, potentially positive, mixed, no discernible effects, potentially negative, or negative. The rating of effectiveness takes into account four factors: the quality of the research design, the statistical significance of the findings,[5] the size of the difference between participants in the intervention and the comparison conditions, and the consistency in findings across studies (see the WWC Intervention Rating Scheme).

4. The Extent of Evidence Categorization was developed to tell readers how much evidence was used to determine the intervention rating, focusing on the number and size of studies. Additional factors associated with a related concept, external validity, such as students' demographics and types of settings in which studies took place, are not taken into account for the categorization.
5. The level of statistical significance was reported by the study authors or, where necessary, calculated by the WWC to correct for clustering within classrooms or schools and for multiple comparisons. For an explanation, see the WWC Tutorial on Mismatch. See Technical Details of WWC-Conducted Computations for the formulas the WWC used to calculate the statistical significance. In the case of *Project GRAD,* no corrections for clustering or multiple comparisons were needed.

The WWC found *Project GRAD* to have no discernible effects on progressing in school and completing school

Improvement index

The WWC computes an improvement index for each individual finding. In addition, within each outcome domain, the WWC computes an average improvement index for each study and an average improvement index across studies (see Technical Details of WWC-Conducted Computations). The improvement index represents the difference between the percentile rank of the average student in the intervention condition versus the percentile rank of the average student in the comparison condition. Unlike the rating of effectiveness, the improvement index is based entirely on the size of the effect, regardless of the statistical significance of the effect, the study design, or the analyses. The improvement index can take on values between –50 and +50, with positive numbers denoting results favorable to the intervention group.

The average improvement index for progressing in school is –4 percentile points, with a range of –2 to –7 percentile points. The improvement index for the single outcome in the completing school domain is –3 percentile points.

Summary

The WWC reviewed five studies of *Project GRAD*. One study met WWC standards with reservations; the remaining studies did not meet WWC evidence screens. Based on this one study, the WWC found no discernible effects on progressing in school and completing school. The evidence presented in this report may change as new research emerges.

References

Met WWC standards with reservations

Houston study

Snipes, J.C., Holton, G.I., Doolittle, F., & Sztejnberg, L. (2006). *Striving for student success: The effect of Project GRAD on high school student outcomes in three urban school districts.* New York, NY: MDRC.

Did not meet WWC standards

Atlanta study

Snipes, J. C., Holton, G. I., Doolittle, F., & Sztejnberg, L. (2006). *Striving for student success: The effect of Project GRAD on high school student outcomes in three urban school districts.* New York, NY: MDRC.[6]

Columbus study

Snipes, J.C., Holton, G.I., Doolittle, F., & Sztejnberg, L. (2006). *Striving for student success: The effect of Project GRAD on high school student outcomes in three urban school districts.* New York, NY: MDRC.[6]

Opuni, K. (1999). *Project GRAD: Graduation Really Achieves Dreams. 1998–99 program evaluation report.* Houston, TX: University of Houston.[7]

Opuni, K., & Ochoa, M. (2002). *Project GRAD: A comprehensive school reform model.* Houston, TX: University of Houston.[7]

For more information about specific studies and WWC calculations, please see the WWC *Project GRAD* Technical Appendices.

6. Confound: there was only one school in each study condition, so the analysis could not separate the effects of the intervention from the effects of the school.
7. The study did not use a comparison group.