



Background and Mission

Diploma Plus was created by the Commonwealth Corporation in 1996 as a response to the alarmingly high dropout rate among urban youth of color, the low numbers of vulnerable youth entering or completing college, and the inadequate supply of high quality alternatives to traditional high schools. The mission of the Diploma Plus initiative is to create small high schools that incorporate a performance-based approach, a supportive school culture, future focus, and effective supports in order to increase opportunities for students so that they have the ability to graduate college- and career- ready.

The model combines high expectations for every student, a competency-based and standards-aligned performance-based approach, a personalized learning environment, opportunities to make academic and real world connections, and challenging post-secondary experiences while still in high school. Diploma Plus (DP) is intended for youth who have been failed by a traditional system that did not adequately nurture their gifts, curiosity, intelligence and power as learners. DP values the wealth of creativity, honesty, courage, and hopefulness our youth and their families bring. When students come to a DP School, they are making a commitment – to honor generations of struggle for the promise of education, to their families, legacies, and future. DP is an alternative in the best sense of the word. Its role is to transform students' learning experience from what they've been told they can't be to what we know they can and will be.

Since its launch in 1996, Diploma Plus has grown from a 100-student pilot at two sites in Boston to a proven model that, more than a decade later, will enroll over 3,000 students in 2007-08 at 17 schools and programs—eight across Massachusetts, five in New York City, three in California, and one in Providence, RI. Additional DP Schools are scheduled to open in New York City, California, and other areas across the United States. Our schools predominantly serve racial and linguistic minorities and those eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Diploma Plus provides a rigorous alternative for over-aged and under-credited students that want to earn their high school diploma. The DP model is designed to work in a variety of educational settings depending on the focus and mission of the school or program. DP Schools and programs enroll students from one to four years and range in size from 100 to 425 students. Most sites in the Diploma Plus Network offer a three to four year program of study, and are either small, alternative high schools run by districts or are charter schools. Other DP sites are district-supported alternative programs or programs implemented by community colleges in partnership with local school districts that serve students for shorter periods of time.

Program Model

Diploma Plus Schools look and feel significantly different than traditional high schools. Aside from their smaller size that provides for closer peer and adult-student relationships, and a safer and more supportive school community, Diploma Plus Schools are distinct in other important ways. One major difference is that rather than grade levels, students are placed into and promoted through three distinct Diploma Plus Phases (Foundation, Presentation, and Plus) that allow students to learn content and skills at the appropriate level, regardless of their age or previous credit accumulation. Another key difference between a DP School and the traditional school model is that throughout each of these DP Phases, students are involved in transitional experiences which culminate in enrollment in a college course, participation in a high-quality internship, and the development and completion of a Community Action Project during their Plus Phase (or senior) year. Perhaps the most important difference is the rigorous learning that occurs at Diploma Plus

Schools through the combination of Diploma Plus Competencies which are designed to allow students to critically interact with key content and skills, Gateway Portfolios to ensure that students deeply understand the Prioritized Standards before they are promoted or graduate, and student-centered classrooms designed to engage students in their learning.

The Diploma Plus model is rooted in four essentials that are designed to support student achievement while they are in high school and as they enter their post-secondary experiences. These four essentials are a Performance-Based System, a Supportive School Culture, a Future Focus, and Effective Supports. Each of these essentials is deeply embedded in our Diploma Plus Schools, and influence the school's academics, climate, expectations, and structure. Below are each of the four essentials briefly described.

1. Performance-Based System

Diploma Plus Schools provide curriculum, instruction and assessment that are focused on knowledge, skills, and understandings – on students “uncovering” meaning at their own pace, not on teachers “covering” a set of content standards in a prescribed period of time. In DP, rigorous curriculum, effective instructional practices, and authentic assessment are competency-based and standards aligned, and built into a performance-based promotion, and graduation structure. In addition, the DP model calls for the use of student-centered instructional strategies to engage students in learning and facilitate their skill development. The following Performance-Based System is in place in all Diploma Plus Schools.

Rigorous Curriculum Diploma Plus Schools demonstrate a strong level of academic rigor throughout the curriculum. Rigorous curriculum is vital to the success of DP students, both while they are in high school and for their future success in college, career, and life. It is less about extensive and broad coverage of all standards, and more about demonstrating ability in the core Diploma Plus Competencies, through increasingly difficult content material in Prioritized Standards. DP Schools use competency-based and standards-aligned curriculum; backward planning; and appropriate materials and resources.

Effective Instructional Practices DP Schools develop, support, and provide quality and passionate instruction in all areas. In order to implement a rigorous curriculum, DP Schools provide competency-based and standards-aligned, student-centered, and engaging and rigorous instruction, as well as whole-school teaching and learning strategies.

Authentic Assessment DP Schools emphasize authentic assessment in order to help students make the connection between the content they are expected to learn and how they learn it. Diploma Plus Schools assess students on competencies because they are discipline specific skills that allow students to demonstrate how deeply they understand and can use the Prioritized Standards. DP Schools use competency-based and standards-aligned assessments; authentic products and performances; developmental and Gateway Portfolios; and continuous assessment.

Promotion and Graduation Structure DP Schools have a promotion and graduation structure that is designed to support the Diploma Plus Performance-based System. The promotion and graduation structure is commonly understood and consistently used by all members of the Diploma Plus School community. The promotion and graduation structure at DP Schools include having identified promotion and graduation criteria, including Gateway Portfolios required for every student in every phase; and individualized student pace and progress linked to standards and competency

attainment and not tied to seat-time. Schools also have an articulated scope and sequence aligned to the DP Phases; a competency-based tracking and reporting system; phases to identify and group students; intake assessments and placement; and a school-wide portfolio system.

2. Supportive School Culture

Diploma Plus Schools work intentionally to develop a positive and supportive school culture. This culture is developed through specific relationship-building activities and deep-rooted school norms that nurture the strengths of diversity and inclusivity. Diploma Plus Schools are committed to fostering positive relationship across all members of the school community, engaging youth leadership and voice, and providing a culturally responsive environment. The following indicators of a supportive school culture are in place in all Diploma Plus Schools.

Positive Relationships Diploma Plus Schools are built on positive relationships among students, staff, community partners and parents/families. These relationships are critical to student success. To support positive relationships, DP Schools include several key structures and elements: advisories that develop positive peer and adult-student relationships; school wide rituals, celebrations, and gatherings; opportunities for students in each phase to develop a group identity, norms, and relationships; parents, family, and/or caregivers engaged in the school in meaningful ways; collegial and professional learning communities for faculty; and positive connections to the wider community; and positive school norms.

Youth Leadership and Voice To support youth development, voice, and agency, DP Schools provide for significant youth involvement with the DP School and with a student's own education. In DP Schools, young people participate in decision-making with adults, mobilize and create or change policy, and take influential leadership roles in key school decisions. Active youth participation is seen as a benefit to the internal and external school community, as well as a benefit to the positive development of young people themselves. DP Schools facilitate this revolutionary approach to teaching and learning by developing a school community that is truly democratic by engaging students in critical reflection for positive and effective school change. In a DP School, there is, at minimum: student representation within school governance; a student advisory board or student council; ongoing opportunities for student input into school decisions; and student input on individualized, student-centered learning plans.

Cultural Responsiveness The role of cultural responsiveness in Diploma Plus Schools is to promote equity and increase greater access to opportunities, goods and services for all within the school community and beyond. Culturally-responsive teaching, learning and assessment, therefore, are critical elements of the school culture of Diploma Plus Schools. Within that context, DP Schools create and sustain a school climate that explores, respects and responds to the race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender-identity, religious beliefs, class, physical and mental ability, language, nation of origin, and physical appearance of all those who interact within the school community. In support of this, DP Schools are engaged in school-wide exploration of issues related to personal and group identity and privilege; strive to have faculty and staff who are representative of the DP student population; and have a faculty and staff that are committed to learning and responding to personal and group identities and cultures of their students.

3. Future Focus

Diploma Plus Schools intentionally provide a focus on students' futures through awareness, exposure, preparation opportunities, providing transitional experiences for students in all DP Phases. This involves a multi-year sequence of career and college exploration activities and services that are embedded in advisories, classroom activities, and out-of-school time. These services include developmentally appropriate and progressively intensive experiences and activities in relation to college and careers in the Foundation and Presentation Phases, in addition to the required activities and experiences in the Plus Phase. The following experiences and opportunities are provided at all Diploma Plus Schools.

Post-secondary Education Preparation DP Schools provide post-secondary awareness, exploration, and preparation opportunities for their students. These post-secondary education experiences are embedded in every DP Phase, and culminate in the Plus Phase, when students take classes on college campuses and earn college credit while still enrolled at the DP School.

Career Preparation DP Schools provide career awareness, exploration, and workplace experiences for its students. In addition, Personal Competencies are used throughout the school and in every phase and addressed through the curriculum. In the Plus Phase, (or earlier, if appropriate), DP also includes learning-rich internships and workplace experiences.

Civic Engagement DP Schools also prepare youth to become responsible and engaged participants in their community. DP Schools provide opportunities that engage students in community awareness, exploration, and activities as well as service-learning opportunities and Community Action Projects, including a formal project in the Plus Phase.

4. Effective Supports

Diploma Plus Schools have external and internal structures that support programs and help ensure student success. The following effective supports must be in place in all Diploma Plus Schools.

Fundamental School Needs DP Schools have the basic school structures in place, including positive and functional relationships and effective operations.

Programmatic Autonomy DP Schools have sufficient autonomy to create a suitable school community by hiring and firing staff, enrolling students indicating an interest in attending a DP School, and recruiting and supporting the target population. DP Schools also control the school budget; have the autonomy to institute appropriate school structure by operating on a schedule and calendar that fit the DP model; establishing promotion, attendance and discipline policies; using performance-based promotion and graduation; and choosing curriculum and setting appropriate scope and sequence that support the DP model.

Shared and Effective Leadership DP Schools have shared and effective leadership in order to effectively implement the school's vision and mission through the DP model, develop and work towards the goals in the DP work plan, and sustain and grow the DP model over time. This means that DP Schools have shared governance structures, an effective school administration, and a Student Achievement Support Team.

Diploma Plus Network Services

As developer of Diploma Plus, Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp), a Massachusetts-chartered non-profit organization, continuously works with DP Schools to refine the model, supports program implementation at all sites, and convenes the DP regional and national networks.

More specifically, CommCorp provides technical assistance in all aspects of the program model, provides professional development in the Four Diploma Plus Essentials, develops and disseminates a wide range of implementation tools, and advocates for appropriate policy changes at the state and district levels to complement local site operations.

In addition, Diploma Plus is part of the Alternative High School Initiative, funded by the Gates Foundation, which supports and connects national school models designed to serve youth placed at risk.

Examples of Evaluation Findings

The most recent data for Diploma Plus Schools shows strong graduation rates and finds the majority of DP graduates are enrolling in college. Diploma Plus New York City's graduation rate was 90.2% with 87.5% of June graduates accepted to/planning on attending college.

In addition, students' passing rates on the state high school exit exam surpassed other comparable schools. Of students who took the Regents exams in 2006, 83% of students attending Diploma Plus New York City schools passed the Math A Regents test compared to 75% of students attending alternative schools across the district. On the Regents English Test, 86% of DP students passed the test whereas the alternative high school district found only 62% of the students passing.

At Diploma Plus New York City Schools, student one-year retention rates (78%) are higher than other comparable schools (65%). At one NYC DP School, individual student attendance significantly improved from 26.1% prior to enrollment to 72%.

We also have promising findings from the schools in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. For example, at E³ Academy in Providence, gains in literacy (as measured by the GRADE assessment) among 9th graders during one academic year far outpaced gains at other schools in Providence, as well as average gains nationally. At the Berkshire Arts and Technology (BArT) Charter School in western Massachusetts, skill gains among first year Diploma Plus students, over the course of the year, (as measured by the Terra Nova assessment) exceeded the national average (among students taking this test) in virtually all English Language Arts and Math sub-areas tested.

Additional Information

For further information, see the Diploma Plus website at www.commcorp.org/diplomaplus or contact:

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