

Diploma On! Program

Background

The purpose of Diploma On is to re-engage students who have dropped out of school within member districts and ultimately increase the graduation rate in Hennepin County. Program staff obtain student contact information from identified referral sources within each district, normally after a 15-day drop. Next, they contact the student and/or caregiver to establish a relationship and attempt to reduce the barriers that are preventing them from attending school, with the goal of reenrolling the student in a program/school that fits their needs. Since its inception in spring 2012, at least 223 students referred to the Diploma On program have successfully completed their GED or received their high school diploma.

This summary presents some of the key data collected by program staff about the students who were referred during the 2020-2021 school year. In addition, this summary includes staff reflections on the 2020-21 school year. These reflections describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the stories of several students enrolled in Diploma On and the significant educational barriers they face, and how program staff and students define success. These reflections are presented in blue callout boxes throughout this report.

Program metrics

Diploma On has received 2,001 total referrals since the 2011-12 school year. In the 2020-21 school year, 378 referrals were received. As of July 1, 2021, 85% of the referrals were for students that had never been referred to the program in the past (Figure 1).

During the 2020-21 school year, Diploma On staff received confirmation that 80 students referred to the program either earned their GED or high school diploma. Sixty-three of these students earned their high school diploma, while 17 students earned their GED. It is important to note that some of these students may have earned their GED or diploma prior to the 2020-21 school year, and program staff were not notified until the 2020-21 school year. Program staff may also not have been notified regarding all students who earned their GED or diploma. In addition, it is extremely difficult for some students to complete their high school requirements in the same year they are referred, due to a high number of credits still needed or other limiting factors.

1. Number of referrals by school year and students Diploma On received GED/diploma confirmation for

	# of referrals	% of new referrals	Number of students who earned their GED ^a	Number of students who earned their diploma ^a
2011-12	37	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012-13	109	N/A	N/A	N/A
2013-14	90	N/A	N/A	N/A
2014-15	70	N/A	0	1
2015-16	48	N/A	0	7
2016-17	272	N/A	3	14
2017-18	335	87%	3	5
2018-19	354	82%	16	40
2019-20	308	84%	6	48
2020-21	378	85%	17	63
Total	2,001		45	178

Note. Diploma On started using a new data system during the 2019-20 school year, started tracking repeat referrals during the 2017-18 school year, and started reporting internal referrals during the 2016-17 school year, increasing the total number of referrals received.

^a These counts include students that were referred during any school year. Additionally, these columns present data by student, not by referral. Diploma On began collecting this data in the 2019-20 school year.

Defining success

While Diploma On aims to improve school engagement and increase graduation rates, there are other ways program staff and students define success. Focusing solely on graduation rates does not comprehensively capture students' efforts and the many other positive outcomes students experience. For many students, success may mean: obtaining health insurance; finding employment; earning some credits instead of zero, even if they still aren't on track of graduation; or forming meaningful relationships with school staff, which may be particularly important for students who have felt disconnected from school in the past. Positive outcomes such as these may ultimately contribute to students' academic engagement.

As of July 1, 2021, 47% of students were actively enrolled and attending an educational program (Figure 2). Nearly a third of students were not enrolled or attending a program (31%). Statuses were similar to the statuses at the end of the 2019-20 school year.

Program staff often provide case management services to students regardless of whether they are considered enrolled or not enrolled. Staff regularly attempt to connect with referred students unless their status is designated as “GED/diploma” or “closed,” though some students continue to receive limited support after graduating or earning their GED. In addition, students designated as “not enrolled” may still receive significant support or resources from program staff, despite not being enrolled in an educational program. Staff may also have made initial contact for some students designated as “not enrolled,” including providing support and resources, but may then encounter difficulties maintaining contact with the students and/or their caregivers.

2. Current status of students on caseload

	% of students 2019-20 school year (N=291)	% of students 2020-21 school year (N=367)
Enrolled	42%	47%
Not enrolled	31%	31%
Initial contact	19%	16%
Closed	2%	<1%
GED/diploma	<1%	4%

Note. This figure presents data by student, not by referral. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Definitions for Figure 2:

Enrolled: The student, family, or school has reported that the student is actively enrolled and attending an educational program.

Not enrolled: The student, family, or school has reported that the student is not actively enrolled or attending an educational program.

Initial contact: The assigned Diploma On case coordinator has been unable to connect with the student or family, but is continuing to attempt contact through various methods.

Closed: The student, family, or school has firmly denied services for the student at this time and in the future, or the student has reported they have moved out of the area.

GED/diploma: The student, family, or school have reported that the student has passed all GED tests or graduated with a high school diploma

Student experience

To illustrate the impact of the Diploma On program in helping students attain their educational goals, program staff reflected on their experiences working with specific students. Pseudonyms and they/them pronouns are used to protect students' privacy.

In reflection of a difficult and unique year for many of our students, the word **pace** continues to reflect the strength of our work. I look to three students to help recap the dynamic yet challenging year we have endured.

Let's start with Jordan. I initially got connected to Jordan two years ago. We worked on various goals including health care, job opportunities, and finishing school. It has been a challenge for Jordan to dedicate the time needed to be successful in education, as other needs, such as finances, often take priority.

As they approached the age of 21, they decided to give high school one more go. We connected Jordan to a great program, and the program made a plan so this student could finish this June. Yet after many conversations, this student simply didn't put in the work they needed to and will not be attaining their high school diploma. Nevertheless, we **pace** because we know that their story isn't finished, and their next opportunity is around the corner.

School staff may have tried alternative interventions before referring students to Diploma On. The most common intervention was suggesting alternative school (22%; Figure 3). Online courses were suggested less often this school year compared to prior school years (5% and 14%, respectively). This is likely due to the remote learning format many schools were already using in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Other interventions used prior to Diploma On

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Suggested alternative school	24%	22%
Suggested online courses	14%	5%
Suggested working with be@school	9%	4%
Suggested flexible/shortened day	8%	3%
Met with mental health professional	8%	3%
Met with chemical health professional	6%	1%
Other (e.g., offered credit recovery, study hall, in-person learning, outreach attempts and check-ins, meetings with caregivers, school counseling, changing housing, homebound services, IEPs, Job Corps)	14%	4%

Note. Prior interventions were not reported for all students, and some students received multiple interventions.

When a student is referred to the program, the referral source also includes information on the barriers the student faces in attending school. According to referral sources, mental health challenges are the most common barrier (15%), followed by unstable housing (7%), lack of engagement (7%), and COVID-19 and/or remote learning (7%; Figures 4 and 5).

4. Educational barriers

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Mental health	17%	15%
Unstable housing	10%	7%
Lack of engagement (e.g., poor attendance; low motivation for school-related tasks)	2%	7%
COVID-19/Remote learning (e.g., reduced engagement in remote format; lack of required technology resources; unspecified beyond "COVID-19")	<1%	7%
Work	3%	5%
Chemical health	7%	3%
Parenting/pregnancy	1%	3%
Transportation	4%	2%
Other (e.g., conflict with teachers, family conflict/concerns/ responsibilities, hearing loss, in foster care, legal issues, peer conflict/bullying, learning disability or attention-related concerns, poor school fit, experienced traumatic event, physical health, immigration-related barriers, language barriers)	8%	9%

Note. Barriers were not reported for all students, and staff reported multiple barriers for some students. Barriers are identified by the referral source, not by the student.

5. Word cloud visualization of educational barriers



Note. Barrier size reflects the number of referrals that identified the barrier as a concern for the referred student. Size may not directly correspond to the percentages presented in Figure 4 due to rounding (e.g., while COVID-19/remote learning was identified less frequently than unstable housing and lack of engagement, the percentages of all referrals are the same for all three of these barriers due to rounding).

Student experience

To illustrate the impact of the Diploma On program in helping students attain their educational goals, program staff reflected on their experiences working with specific students. Pseudonyms and they/them pronouns are used to protect students' privacy.

I met Cameron's mom two years ago, in the process of re-enrollment. Life was far from easy for Cameron, and school was no different. They would consistently struggle, only to come back to the same school. It was something about this school that Cameron found a healthy community and strength in connection.

About a few months ago, I had checked in with this student to work their next educational steps, and we began to formulate a plan. But this plan never met its completion, as their life was taken from them. It was devastating for their family, friends, and community. The work is never easy and the outcomes are never promised, but I am so proud that I had the privilege to *pace* with Cameron these two years.

Social workers referred about half of all referrals received by Diploma On in the 2019-20 school year (54%; Figure 6). Some referrals originated from school counselors (21%). Referrals most frequently originated from the Osseo Area School District (31%) or Intermediate District 287 (26%).

6. Referral source and district

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Referral source		
Social worker	50%	54%
School counselor	17%	21%
Principal/Dean	6%	2%
Other (e.g., parent/caregiver)	9%	16%
Missing/unknown	18%	7%
Referral district		
Osseo Area School District	29%	31%
Intermediate District 287	27%	26%
Robbinsdale Area School District	19%	21%
Hopkins Public Schools	8%	5%
Brooklyn Center Community Schools	6%	5%
Other* (i.e., Eden Prairie Schools, Edina Public Schools, Orono Public Schools, St. Louis Park Public Schools, Richfield Public Schools, Wayzata Public Schools)	7%	11%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Student demographics

Referral sources also collect demographics on the students referred to the Diploma On program, including birthdate. Student birthdates were used to calculate student ages at the time the referral was opened in the Diploma On database. Referrals were most frequently for students age 19 (26%) and 18 (21%; Figure 7). Students referred during the 2020-21 school year were slightly older than those referred in the 2019-20 school year, with 43% of referrals reporting an age of 19 or older this year, compared to 22% last year. Most referrals were for students in 12th grade (28%) or behind on credits needed to graduate (27%), a similar trend to last school year.

7. Age and grade

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Age at time of referral		
14	3%	1%
15	9%	3%
16	15%	11%
17	23%	18%
18	28%	21%
19	16%	26%
20	5%	11%
21	1%	5%
22	0%	1%
Missing/unknown	<1%	2%
Grade in school		
7	0%	<1%
8	0%	1%
9	7%	7%
10	11%	17%
11	21%	20%
12	33%	28%
12 + (behind on credits needed to graduate)	28%	27%
GED or Transitional	<1%	1%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Student experience

To illustrate the impact of the Diploma On program in helping students attain their educational goals, program staff reflected on their experiences working with specific students. Pseudonyms and they/them pronouns are used to protect students' privacy.

When I first looked at Alex's referral, I thought, "This student will finish pretty quick." But two schools later and a year older, we found ourselves no closer to graduation. Communication became increasingly difficult, and as we approached this school year, it felt like this student may slip away from their high school diploma.

At the start of this year, I gave it one last go, and their brother miraculously answered. The student committed to finishing up, and we enrolled them in their local ALC just before turning 21. It felt like everything would be smooth sailing until we found ourselves on a call with the principal and the student with the message essentially stating, "You have until Monday at 2 p.m. to turn in an assignment, or you'll have to transition out of the program."

They committed to complete the work, but come Monday morning, nothing was turned in. We began to blow up Alex's phone to ask if they are really going to let this opportunity slip. We connected around 1:30 p.m. and they weren't at home, but they had the work done. They submitted the assignment with three minutes to spare.

We set a plan for finishing the rest of their work, and later that month, we found ourselves in a virtual graduation ceremony for Alex! I remember the joy beaming from this student's face, as the revelation of their accomplishment set in. In reflection of Diploma On's support for Alex, this student said, "They had faith (in me) and gave me the motivation to make sure I handled my business. They came by to see me and set up a plan to finish my assignments."

For future aspirations, Alex says they, "Dream of being successful. Of doing what makes me happy. Of making sure I can be the best me that I can be and spread positivity. To be a positive entity wherever I am at."

As Diploma On staff, we are so thankful for the opportunity to enter into, build relationships with, and **pace** with every student that comes our way.

Nearly half of referrals were for students who identified as Black or African American (49%), and 27% were for students who identified as White (Figure 8). In addition, 22% of referrals were for students who identified as Hispanic or Latino. Students most frequently use he/him/his pronouns (40%), with 21% of students using she/her/hers. She/her/hers pronouns were less frequently reported for referrals received during the 2020-21 school year compared to last year (21% and 34%, respectively). However, the proportion of missing or unknown data is greater this school year (38% compared to 18%).

8. Race, ethnicity, and pronouns

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Race/ethnicity		
Black or African American (includes African and Somali identities)	54%	49%
White	24%	27%
Hispanic/Latino	14%	22%
American Indian or Alaska Native	6%	8%
Asian	5%	7%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0%	1%
Other (e.g., multiracial with races/ethnicities unidentified)	<1%	1%
Missing/unknown	9%	3%
Pronouns		
He/him/his	47%	40%
She/her/hers	34%	21%
Other (e.g., they/them/theirs)	0%	1%
Missing/unknown	18%	38%

Note. Staff may select multiple racial and ethnic identities for each student they refer to the Diploma On program. Thus, these percentages do not total 100%. Percentages for pronouns may not total 100% due to rounding.

More than half of referrals were for students living in their parental home (52%). Seventeen percent of referred students currently have an individualized education program (IEP); however, about half of referrals are missing this data (44%). Similarly, 9% of referrals were for students identified as current English language learners, but more than half of referrals are missing this data (51%; Figure 9). Referrals most frequently reported students' families speak English at home (63%), followed by Spanish (15%). Fewer referrals selected English this year compared to last (78%). It is important to note that this information is reported by the referral source, with the expectation that the referral source is using information provided by the student and/or their caregivers.

9. Living situation, individualized education program (IEP) status, and languages spoken at home

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Current living situation		
Parental home (biological or adoptive)	56%	52%
Relative/extended family home	4%	4%
Independent living/living with friends/significant other	2%	3%
Emergency shelter or homeless with or without parent	6%	2%
Other (e.g., on run, group home)	3%	1%
Missing/unknown	28%	38%
Current individualized education program (IEP)		
No	30%	38%
Yes	14%	17%
Missing/unknown	56%	44%
Current English language learner		
No	37%	40%
Yes	14%	9%
Missing/unknown	56%	51%
Main language spoken at home		
English	78%	63%
Spanish	12%	15%
Somali	2%	3%
Hmong	1%	2%
Other (e.g., Arabic, Creolized English, Oromo, Yoruba, Tamil, Filipino, Mandingo, Vietnamese)	3%	4%
Missing/unknown	9%	14%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Diploma On referrals include information on the most recent school the student was enrolled in. Referrals were most frequently for students most recently enrolled at Park Center Senior High School (19%; Figure 10). Note that some students may have not ultimately attended the school, and some students may have been enrolled within specific programs at the school, such as online programs.

10. Most recent school/program student enrolled in

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Park Center Senior High School	23%	19%
Highview	10%	11%
West Alternative	5%	7%
Gateway to College	8%	7%
South Education Center Academy	2%	6%
Hopkins High School	7%	6%
Cooper High School	4%	5%
Brooklyn Center High School	3%	4%
Osseo Senior High School	2%	4%
Armstrong High School	5%	4%
Maple Grove Senior High School	2%	4%
Distance Learning Academy	0%	3%
St. Louis Park High School	1%	3%
North Education Center Academy	12%	3%
Eden Prairie High School	2%	2%
Richfield College Experience Program	0%	2%
Osseo Area Learning Center	4%	2%
Other (i.e., Ann Bremer Education Center, Bozeman High School, Brooklyn Middle School, County Home School, Early College Academy, Edina High School, Intermediate District 287, Metro South Adult Basic Education, Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota Internship Center, Mound Westonka High School, North View Middle School, Orono High School, Paladin, PSEO, Richfield High School, Robbinsdale Virtual Academy, Wayzata High School, Zenith Accelerated Academy)	7%	7%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

The Osseo Area School District was the most frequently reported resident school district for referrals received during the 2019-20 school year (31%), followed by Robbinsdale Area School District (19%; Figure 11).

11. Resident school district

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)
Osseo Area School District	34%	31%
Robbinsdale Area School District	22%	19%
Minneapolis Public Schools	8%	10%
Hopkins Public Schools	9%	8%
Brooklyn Center Community Schools	6%	5%
Eden Prairie Schools	5%	5%
Richfield Public Schools	1%	4%
St. Louis Park Public Schools	3%	3%
Wayzata Public Schools	3%	3%
Bloomington	1%	2%
Other (i.e., Anoka Hennepin, Brooklyn Park, Central Public School District, Columbia Heights, Coon Rapids Eastern Carver County, ISD 287, Edina, Minnetonka Public Schools, Orono, Rosemount/Apple Valley/Eagan, Shakopee, St. Paul, Tri-City United, Westonka Public Schools)	8%	9%

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Reflections: Staff perspectives of the 2020-21 school year

Diploma On staff members reflected on the school year and the unique challenges and impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on the Diploma On program and the students they serve.

Barriers shifted. For example, some students lost access to childcare, some students needed increased access to technology, and transportation barriers became less significant for many students.

The remote learning format was a challenge for some students, while others found it beneficial. Some students found it easier to engage with schoolwork in a remote learning format, while others found it more challenging. The flexibility of remote learning also made it easier for some students to work while continuing to attend school.

Students were able to access GED classes online for the first time, improving access for many students.

Many programs provided WiFi hotspots and personal devices (e.g., Chromebooks, iPads, Laptops) to help students access remote classes. Additionally, these resources helped some students complete classwork outside of school hours.

It goes without saying that the 20-21 school year was a tough year. It was tough for students. It was tough for families. It was tough for educators, administrators, and school staff. It was tough for the academically gifted, for those who have struggled with academics, and for everyone in between. We have seen the value of in-person connection, and how worlds are shaken when that is removed.

Nevertheless, we have seen many of our students prevail. When there is a will, there will always, always be a way. And our students are showing us the depth of their perseverance, despite losing loved ones to COVID-19, enduring housing instability, and embracing various physical and mental health challenges. Yes, we do have many students still on the journey of graduation, but they too have the opportunity to prevail. And I am thankful to be on this journey with them for the long haul.