



Best Practices in High-Performing Schools

Report to the Legislature

As required by Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4

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As requested by Minnesota Statutes, section 3.197: This report cost approximately \$4,998.18 to prepare, including staff time, printing and mailing expenses.

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Legislative Charge

This report is consistent with the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4, which states, “[T]he commissioner must annually report to the public and the legislature best practices implemented in those schools that are identified as high performing under federal expectations.”

Introduction

This report focuses on the most recent graduation data for school districts from within the original pool of partner districts for Minnesota’s State Performance Plan (SPP) under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In 2014, MDE conducted an extensive review of state data regarding students with disabilities, including academic performance, graduation and dropout rates, access to instruction, and discipline. Through the data and infrastructure analysis, it was clear that American Indian and Black students with disabilities should be the focus of state improvement efforts. MDE chose six-year graduation rates as the State-Identified Measurable Result, or the results that MDE would report to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Focusing on the graduation rates of American Indian and Black students with disabilities provided the opportunity to report a more comprehensive graduation outcome and reflect the benefits of appropriate transition services for students with disabilities ages 18 to 22. MDE also chose to focus on four districts with large numbers of American Indian and Black students with disabilities. MDE anticipated that improving the graduation rates in the four selected districts would have a positive impact on the statewide graduation rate of American Indian and Black students with disabilities.

(Between 2014 and the present, Minnesota has shifted most of its reporting of race and ethnicity to use a state definition of American Indian that differs from the federal definition. For continuity throughout the full time period being analyzed, this report uses the federal definition.)

Over the past ten years, MDE and four partner districts—Duluth, Minneapolis, Osseo, and Saint Paul—have collaborated with the University of Minnesota to implement Check & Connect¹ with fidelity. At the beginning of the project, districts had the opportunity to select any evidence-based program to improve graduation rates, but all the partner districts ultimately selected Check & Connect. Check & Connect is an intervention used with K-12 students who show warning signs of disengagement with school and who are at risk of dropping out. Check & Connect pairs adult mentors with identified students for one (acceptable) to two (preferred) academic years. Mentors closely monitor their mentees’ absences, academic performance, and disciplinary referrals. Mentors also provide case management and other supports to re-engage their mentees with school and, ultimately, graduation. Mentors also liaise with families to provide supports, as needed, so that families can also encourage

¹ Christenson, S. L., Stout, K., & Pohl, A. (2012). *The Check & Connect Manual*. University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, MN.

re-engagement with schools. Under Check & Connect, the goal of mentor-family interactions is to emphasize positive student behaviors and outcomes instead of focusing on negative information.

During the 2023-24 school year, MDE began partnerships with three additional districts, Deer River, Red Lake, and Redwood. Again, districts were given the opportunity to select any evidence-based program to improve graduation rates, but all districts selected Check & Connect. Minnesota now has 10 LEAs in various stages of implementing Check & Connect among their American Indian and Black students with disabilities.

Minnesota continues to see a gradual increase in both four-year and six-year graduation rates for these students due, in part, to SSIP partner districts' efforts, as well as district efforts across the state, to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The graduation data reported in fiscal year 2025 took into account students' time in high school through the end of the 2023-24 school year and—for students who had not yet graduated by the end of 2023-24—into the fall of the 2024-25 school year. While referenced as the graduation rate for 2024, calculating this required data from the 2024-25 school year as well.

The analysis considers both the interval from the launch of the intervention to the most recent year as well as the interval from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to the most recent year. Given both the disruptive effects of the pandemic on students and the intended protective effects of Check & Connect, evaluating the change since 2020 provides useful information about resilience.

Specifically, this analysis compares the six-year graduation rates of American Indian and Black students with disabilities in the four partner districts to the statewide rates for the same population and identifies those districts with a larger increase in graduation rate than the statewide increase either during the complete 2016-24 interval or the post-COVID-19 2020-24 interval.

Six-Year Graduation Rates for American Indian and Black Students with Disabilities

District/Organization	2016	2020	2024	Change from 2016 to 2024	Change from 2020 to 2024
Statewide	70.9%	74.2%	79.3%	8.4 percentage points	5.1 percentage points
Minneapolis Public Schools	42.7%	47.9%	55.5%	12.8 percentage points	7.6 percentage points
Saint Paul Public Schools	61.5%	52.6%	59.6%	-1.9 percentage points	7.0 percentage points

Implementing Check and Connect

One key factor for further analysis is the degree of implementation of Check & Connect between and within the partner districts. The University of Minnesota and MDE's Division of Special Education are in an ongoing process of conducting such an analysis, but some key features of effective implementation generally and of Check & Connect specifically are known.

The Check & Connect Manual identifies critical considerations when determining whether and how to use Check & Connect. These include integration with existing early warning systems and multi-tiered systems of supports among other interventions, as well as the ability for mentors to dedicate roughly one hour per student per week.

The core of Check & Connect is the relationship between mentors and students. An adult mentor maintains awareness of how a student is doing with respect to both experiences and outcomes. They then meet weekly to go over what the mentor and the student are seeing and to identify what specific plan, action, or supports will be most helpful for the individual student. The mentor also works with the student's family to ensure multiple types of support for the student.

When a school or district has decided to implement Check & Connect, the manual recommends that system leaders engage in planning, preparation, and their own training before mentors receive training and begin carrying out the practice. As with all effective implementation, once Check & Connect has been launched, the adults involved must track and adjust their own practices as appropriate to ensure the practice is being carried out with fidelity.

Conclusion

The careful expansion of support for districts focused on six-year graduation rates for American Indian and Black students with disabilities has produced some important lessons about the Check & Connect practice and effective implementation. While more analysis is still underway, the fact that two of the state's largest districts have demonstrated above-average improvement on this key measurement is a positive sign about the potential of this practice when conducted carefully and effectively.

Bibliography

Christenson, S. L., Stout, K., & Pohl, A. (2012). *The Check & Connect Manual*. University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, MN.