Refining Remediation

Support Strategies for At-Risk High School Students in Three Urban Districts

A Report from The Keep the Promise Initiative:
A Three-Year Longitudinal Study of High School Academic Remediation in Boston, Springfield and Worcester

Fall 2005
Executive Summary

WHERE WE ARE NOW:
How schools in Massachusetts' three largest urban districts are refining high school remediation in a higher-standards world

Massachusetts remediation educators had been on the front lines of educational reform for at least five years prior to the implementation of the graduation competency determination in 2003. Keep the Promise research (along with previous Mass Insight Education research) undertaken from 2001 through 2003 revealed how the dynamics of higher-standards reform gradually began to take hold with students and educators in the state's three largest urban districts. In 2003-2004, the second year of the Keep the Promise initiative, we looked in greater depth at the workings of remediation in six focus schools in Boston, Springfield and Worcester, to determine what strategies their educators have evolved to help them support at-risk high school students, and — perhaps just as importantly — what challenges they still face in the daylight of a high-stakes world.

With its ground-level analysis of what's working, this report is intended to assist those responsible for planning and running remediation support for high school students: district superintendents and other central office staff, high school leadership teams, and educators developing and delivering remediation programs. We believe the insights from the KTP front line will be of interest to educators who are attempting to make informed choices about the nature and scope of remediation programs in their own schools and districts. While more rigorous analysis of effective practices, as identified and documented by performance outcomes, will follow in the next, final report from the Keep the Promise initiative, this manual of current practices and policies highlights a number of key findings and important questions for remediation practitioners and policy-makers alike.

Common Challenges, Promising Strategies

Keep the Promise (KTP) looked across the six focus schools at five common challenges — five areas of strategic concern shared by every district in Massachusetts in helping students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to pass the MCAS exams. These five challenge areas will be recognized by school districts everywhere, both within and outside of Massachusetts. In our study of the KTP districts, particular policies and practices stand out — some pursued by just one school or district; others practiced to some degree by all involved in the study. They include the following:

Challenge Area I: Staff, Time and Budget Management

- Finding 1. Worcester Public Schools' centralized remediation program, coordinated by a district-wide remediation management structure including dedicated "MCAS Specialists" at each high school, appears to offer strong, consistent support to the city's at-risk population and those who serve them.

- Finding 2. While schools tend to offer a range of remediation program models (including after-school, weekend, summertime, and off-site partnership programs), in-school regular-school-day remediation that provides full course credit has become established as the cornerstone of remediation provision.

- Finding 3. Boston, Springfield and Worcester managed to keep most eleventh and twelfth grade remediation running at some level despite drastic cutbacks in state funding in FY04. These cuts did, however, result in deep and damaging cuts to pre-tenth grade remediation, as well as to the ability of remediation educators to continue to innovate, to plan and work proactively to guide remediation efforts in a time of continued transition.

Challenge Area II: Curriculum and Instruction

- Finding 4. Some of the most exciting practices unearthed in the KTP districts feature not improvements in remediation provision itself, but in the linking of remediation strategies into the broader educational context.
collaboration among remediation and regular teachers, the inclusion of English and math department heads on after-school remediation teams, and the integration of MCAS remediation into core classes all work to ensure the centrality of standards-based learning as well as to help at-risk students in the focus schools.

Challenge Area III: Teaching Quality
- Finding 5. The time and mechanisms to enable collaboration and peer support appear in all three districts to be a vital factor for success.

Challenge Area IV: Participation and Attendance
- Finding 6. Despite the emphasis on in-school remediation, approximately half of students responding to the Year Two KTP survey attended at least one non-required remediation program. Attracting students sometimes involves extraordinary efforts to communicate with parents (especially non-native English speakers) through community groups and local media. Retaining students involves encouragement, personal contact, and (in some cases) the enforcement of learning contracts with consequences.

Challenge Area V: Helping the Most Challenged
- Finding 7. Increasingly high percentages of high school students now pass MCAS the first time, and after the first re-test. Those requiring continued remediation are disproportionately students with disabilities or English language learning needs, and also include individuals with motivational issues and family time commitments. The KTP focus schools are providing programs at alternative times and with a variety of motivational components, but are only in the early stages of crafting tailored, intensive learning approaches for SPED and ELL populations.

Challenges Yet to Be Addressed
In two areas, it is notable that major challenges remain without what we could identify as integrated, proactive strategies (at the school or state policymaking levels) to address them. These include:
- Lack of resources to allow remediation professionals to address the bigger picture of student achievement and plan proactively. Because of state cuts to MCAS remediation funding from their FY03 levels, remediation in ninth and tenth grades (prior to tenth grade MCAS administration) has shrunk dramatically in the KTP districts, setting the whole trajectory of student assistance back and possibly rebuilding the audience for post-tenth grade remediation for years to come.
- Subgroups of students who are clearly not being helped adequately by existing programs, including those who do not attend school regularly, special education students, and those with English language learning needs.

Where We Are Headed: From Refining to Redefining Remediation
As KTP field researchers discovered, remediation program managers and even district remediation administrators in our focus schools and districts are generally immersed in a "set-aside" mentality — working their hardest to design and deliver support with decreased resources, but within the remediation structures and expectations created with the injection of ASSP funding set aside for this purpose several years ago. In that sense, they are most centrally focused on refining remediation — seeking to improve the effectiveness of extra-help programs by:
- improving counseling
- targeting instruction to individual student needs
- decreasing class size
- offering more varied class times and other ways to attract and retain students
- experimenting with centralized or intentionally decentralized approaches to organizing traditional model remediation programs.

But it is clear to our researchers that KTP remediation and district educators are also beginning to expand the scope of remediation — to redefine remediation — by:
- moving remediation into the school day and incorporating it into regular student schedules
- offering course credit
- integrating remediation better with overall school planning and mainstream curricula
- focusing on better teacher collaboration and development around strategies to serve at-risk students
- incorporating features of effective remediation, particularly individualized student attention, into whole-school models serving disadvantaged and at-risk high school students.

These evolving concepts of remediation will be discussed in greater detail in the final Keep the Promise report, due to be released in 2006.