Diploma On! Program

Background

Diploma On aims to re-engage students who drop 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 314 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 2021-2022 school year. In addition, this summary includes staff reflections and the stories of several students enrolled in Diploma On. These reflections are presented in blue callout boxes throughout this report.

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 they 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.

New opportunities for older youth

Historically, one of the most significant barriers to earning a high school diploma has been the age limit preventing youth age 21 and older from enrolling in public K-12 schools. However, Diploma On has since established partnerships with adult basic education (ABE) programs that allow students to transfer ABE credits back to their high school. The 2021-22 school year marked the first time that Diploma On students age 21 and older are able to earn their high school diploma from their home school using credits earned through ABE.

Program metrics

Diploma On has received 2,465 total referrals since the 2011-12 school year (Figure 1). In the 2021-22 school year, 464 referrals were received. Referrals have generally continued to increase over time. Most of the referrals were for students that had never been referred to the program in the past (91%).

During the 2021-22 school year, Diploma On staff received confirmation that 91 students referred to the program either earned their GED or high school diploma, the highest number since the 2011-12 school year. It is important to note that some of these students may have earned their GED or diploma prior to the 2021-22 school year, and program staff were not notified until the 2021-22 school year. Program staff may also not have been notified regarding all students who earned their GED or diploma.

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
2021-22	464	91%	20	71
Total	**2,465**		**65**	**249**

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.

As of July 1, 2022, 46% of students were actively enrolled and attending an educational program or enrolled to start a program in the fall of 2022 (Figure 2). Some students were not enrolled or attending a program (20%). For about a quarter of students, Diploma On has reached out but has not yet determined whether they are enrolled in an educational program ("outreach," 27%). Among enrolled students, most are enrolled at a high school (85%).

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 and school type of students on caseload

	% of students 2019-20 school year (N=291)	% of students 2020-21 school year (N=367)	% of students 2021-22 school year (N=445)
Current status			
Enrolled	42%	47%	46%
Not enrolled	31%	31%	20%
Initial contact	19%	16%	N/A
Outreach	N/A	N/A	27%
Closed	2%	<1%	3%
GED/diploma	<1%	4%	4%
Received case management services[a]	N/A	N/A	11%
Employment	N/A	N/A	5%
Accessing resources	N/A	N/A	4%
Career exploration	N/A	N/A	3%
Housing	N/A	N/A	1%
Mental health	N/A	N/A	1%
Transportation	N/A	N/A	<1%
Child care support	N/A	N/A	<1%
College exploration	N/A	N/A	<1%
School type among enrolled students	**N/A**	**N/A**	**% of enrolled students 2021-22 school year (N=205)**
High school	N/A	N/A	85%
GED prep	N/A	N/A	11%
Other (i.e., adult basic education coursework that will transfer to high school credits, diploma/GED classes, college, English classes required for diploma/GED, home school, military classes)	N/A	N/A	4%

[a] The numbers presented here are likely undercounted, as case management services were not tracked for all students, and Diploma On continues to provide case management services to youth served in prior years that aren't counted in the 2021-22 school year. Some students received multiple types of case management support.

Note. This figure presents data by student, not by referral. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. N/A indicates data not collected or tracked in previous years.

Definitions and notes about current status information in Figure 2:

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

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. This status was phased out during the 2021-22 school year.

Outreach: The assigned Diploma On case coordinator has reached out to the student but has not yet determined whether the student is enrolled. This status replaced the "initial contact" status in the 2021-22 school year.

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.

Staff reflections on a Diploma On student's 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 this specific student. Pseudonyms and they/them pronouns are used to protect this student's privacy.

When Sam first started working with Diploma On, they were working full-time and had been out of school for an extended period. They were interested in reenrolling in school and only needed a few more credits to graduate, but they didn't know how to navigate the reenrollment process or how to identify which program or school would be the best fit. Diploma On staff met with Sam and Sam's parent to discuss different program options, and they were able to find a program that fit Sam's needs. Eventually, Sam was able to complete the outstanding diploma requirements and earn their diploma.

Social workers were the source of about half of all referrals received by Diploma On in the 2021-22 school year (56%; Figure 3). Some referrals originated from school counselors (19%). Referrals from other types of sources have increased over time (9% to 23%). Referrals most frequently originated from the Osseo Area School District (28%), Robbinsdale Area School District (23%), or Intermediate District 287 (19%).

3. Referral source and district

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Referral source			
Social worker	50%	54%	56%
School counselor	17%	21%	19%
Principal/Dean	6%	2%	2%
Other (e.g., administrative staff)	9%	16%	23%
Missing/unknown	18%	7%	0%
Referral district			
Osseo Area School District	32%	31%	28%
Robbinsdale Area School District	19%	21%	23%
Intermediate District 287	27%	26%	19%
Brooklyn Center Community Schools	6%	5%	12%
Hopkins Public Schools	8%	5%	4%
Edina Public Schools	1%	1%	3%
Richfield Public Schools	<1%	3%	3%
St. Louis Park Public Schools	1%	3%	3%
Other (i.e., Eden Prairie Schools, Mound Westonka, Orono Public Schools, Wayzata Public Schools)	2%	4%	5%

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

Diploma On referrals include information on the student's most recent school. Referrals were most frequently for students previously enrolled at Park Center Senior High School (16%; Figure 4), and percentages were similar to previous school years. 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.

4. Most recent school/program student enrolled in

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Park Center Senior High School	23%	19%	16%
Highview Alternative Learning Center	10%	11%	8%
West Alternative Learning Center	5%	7%	8%
Armstrong High School	5%	4%	7%
Cooper High School	4%	5%	6%
Brooklyn Center High School	3%	4%	6%
Early College Academy	1%	1%	6%
South Education Center Academy	2%	6%	4%
Hopkins High School	7%	6%	4%
Osseo Area Learning Center	4%	2%	4%
North Education Center Academy	12%	3%	3%
Edina High School	1%	1%	3%
Osseo Senior High School	2%	4%	3%
St. Louis Park High School	1%	3%	3%
Gateway to College	8%	7%	2%
Maple Grove Senior High School	2%	4%	2%
279Online (previously Distance Learning Academy)	0%	3%	2%
Other[a]	9%	16%	8%

[a] Other schools/programs include Ann Bremer Education Center, Bozeman High School, Brooklyn Middle School, Burnsville Alternative High School, County Home School, Crystal Learning Center, Eden Prairie High School, Elk River, VirtualEDU, Insight School of Minnesota, Intermediate District 287, Kennedy High School, Metro South Adult Basic Education, Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota Internship Center, Mound Westonka High School, North View Middle School, Orono High School, Paladin, PiM Arts School, Prairie Seeds Academy, PSEO, Richfield College Experience Program [RCEP], Richfield High School, Robbinsdale Virtual Academy, SEC InVEST High School, Wayzata High School, West Education Center, and Zenith Accelerated Academy.

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 2021-22 school year (27%), followed by Robbinsdale Area School District (21%; Figure 5). These percentages were similar to previous school years.

5.   Resident school district

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Osseo Area School District	34%	31%	27%
Robbinsdale Area School District	22%	19%	21%
Minneapolis Public Schools	8%	10%	9%
Hopkins Public Schools	9%	8%	8%
Brooklyn Center Community Schools	6%	5%	7%
Richfield Public Schools	1%	4%	5%
St. Louis Park Public Schools	3%	3%	5%
Eden Prairie Schools	5%	5%	4%
Wayzata Public Schools	3%	3%	3%
Bloomington	1%	2%	3%
Other[a]	8%	9%	9%

[a] Other school districts include Anoka Hennepin, Brooklyn Park, Burnsville, Central Public School District, Columbia Heights, Coon Rapids, Eastern Carver County, ISD 287, Edina, Elk River, Fridley, Minnetonka Public Schools, Mound Westonka, Mounds View, Orono, Rockford, Rosemount/Apple Valley/Eagan, Shakopee, Spring Lake Park, St. Michael's-Albertville, St. Paul, Tri-City United, and Westonka Public Schools.

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

Staff reflections on a Diploma On student's 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 this specific student. Pseudonyms and they/them pronouns are used to protect this student's privacy.

Diploma On started working with Ellis several years ago. Staff helped Ellis identify their life goals and start attending classes remotely. While Ellis struggled to engage with school consistently, Diploma On continued to provide support and work with Ellis to consider options for other programs and schools. Eventually, Ellis was able to complete the requirements for graduation, and they earned their high school diploma. Ellis shared, "I am very grateful to Diploma On for reaching out to me and giving me another chance in my life to get my diploma. I am so happy and stress free, now that I [graduated]!"

Barriers and previous 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 (17%), followed by unstable housing (9%), lack of engagement (8%), and transportation (8%, Figures 6 and 7).

6.   Educational barriers

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Mental health	17%	15%	17%
Unstable housing	10%	7%	9%
Lack of engagement (e.g., poor attendance; low motivation for school-related tasks)	2%	7%	8%
Transportation	4%	2%	8%
Chemical health	7%	3%	4%
Parenting/pregnancy	1%	3%	4%
Work	3%	5%	3%
COVID-19/Remote learning (e.g., reduced engagement in remote format; lack of required technology resources; unspecified beyond "COVID-19")	<1%	7%	<1%
Other (e.g., conflict with teachers, family conflict/concerns/responsibilities, hearing loss, in foster care, legal issues, on run, peer conflict/bullying, learning disability or attention-related concerns, poor school fit, experienced traumatic event, physical health or sleep concerns, immigration-related barriers, language barriers)	8%	9%	12%

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.

7.   Word cloud visualization of educational barriers
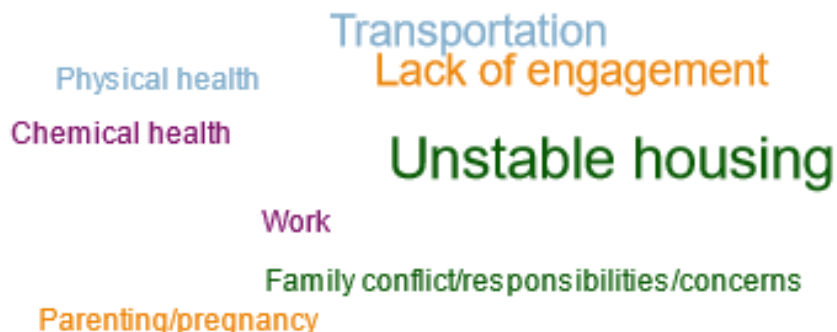
Note. Barrier size reflects the number of referrals that identified the barrier as a concern for the referred student. Size does not directly correspond to the percentages presented in Figure 6 to ensure readability.

School staff may have tried alternative interventions before referring students to Diploma On. The most common intervention was suggesting alternative school (22%; Figure 8). Intervention percentages were similar to previous school years.

8.   Other interventions used prior to Diploma On

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Suggested alternative school	24%	22%	22%
Suggested online courses	14%	5%	12%
Suggested working with be@school	9%	4%	10%
Met with mental health professional	8%	3%	9%
Suggested flexible/shortened day	8%	3%	8%
Met with chemical health professional	6%	1%	2%
Other (e.g., credit recovery, study hall, in-person learning, outreach attempts and check-ins, caregivers supports, school counseling, housing support, homebound services, individualized education programs (IEPs), Job Corps)	14%	4%	16%

Note. Prior interventions are likely underreported, as they are not tracked for all students. Additionally, some students receive multiple interventions.

Student demographics

Referral sources also collect demographics on the students referred to the Diploma On program, including birth date. Student birth dates 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 17 (23%) and 18 (29%; Figure 9).

Most referrals were for students in 12th grade (34%) or behind on credits needed to graduate (23%), a similar trend to previous years.

9.   Age and grade

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Age at time of referral			
14 or younger	3%	1%	4%
15	9%	3%	8%
16	15%	11%	15%
17	23%	18%	23%
18	28%	21%	29%
19	16%	26%	12%
20	5%	11%	7%
21	1%	5%	3%
22	0%	1%	<1%
Missing/unknown	<1%	2%	<1%
Grade in school			
7	0%	<1%	<1%
8	0%	1%	0%
9	7%	7%	7%
10	11%	17%	13%
11	21%	20%	20%
12	33%	28%	34%
12 + (behind on credits needed to graduate)	28%	27%	23%
GED or Transitional	<1%	1%	2%

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.

Diploma On started working with Jaden in 2019. At that time, Jaden was significantly behind on credits needed to graduate, and they were facing a wide variety of challenges, including unstable housing, lack of employment, the COVID-19 pandemic, and financial instability. Despite these challenges, Jaden persevered and Diploma On continued to provide on-going support.

While working with Diploma On, Jaden tried out several different schools and programs. Diploma On staff helped Jaden identify and work toward their goals, such as exploring out-of-state colleges, finding a car to secure more stable transportation, preparing for entrance exams, finding stable housing, coping with a family tragedy, and creating a personal finance budget, all while Jaden was still working toward graduation. Two years later, Jaden earned their GED.

Diploma On staff are committed to pacing with our students as long as they will pace with us. For our students, there is no "traditional" pathway to graduation, and journeys look different for every student. Jaden is now onto the next segment of their journey, living out of state and attending college. And personally, I am so thankful to have done life with this student.

Nearly half of referrals were for students who identified as Black or African American (48%), and 27% were for students who identified as White (Figure 10). In addition, 24% of referrals were for students who identified as Hispanic or Latino, an increase since the 2019-20 school year (14%).

10. Race and ethnicity

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Race and ethnicity			
Black or African American (includes African and Somali identities)	54%	49%	48%
White	24%	27%	27%
Hispanic/Latino	14%	22%	24%
American Indian or Alaska Native	6%	8%	3%
Asian (includes Hmong identities)	5%	7%	8%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0%	1%	1%
Other (e.g., multiracial with races/ethnicities unidentified)	<1%	1%	2%
Missing/unknown	9%	3%	3%

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%.

More than half of referrals were for students living in their parental home (59%), though this information is missing for about a quarter of referrals (26%; Figure 11). Referrals most frequently reported students' families speak English at home (61%), followed by Spanish (15%). Fewer referrals indicated English in recent years compared to the 2019-20 school year (78%), but 19% of referrals were missing this information. 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.

11. Living situation and languages spoken at home

	% of referrals 2019-20 school year (N=308)	% of referrals 2020-21 school year (N=378)	% of referrals 2021-22 school year (N=464)
Current living situation			
Parental home (biological or adoptive)	56%	52%	59%
Relative/extended family home, including living with siblings	4%	4%	6%
Independent living/living with friends/ significant other	2%	3%	5%
Emergency shelter or homeless with or without parent	6%	2%	3%
Other (e.g., on run, group home, foster home	3%	1%	2%
Missing/unknown	28%	38%	26%
Main language spoken at home			
English	78%	63%	61%
Spanish	12%	15%	15%
Somali	2%	3%	<1%
Hmong	1%	2%	2%
Other (e.g., Arabic, Creolized English, Oromo, Yoruba, Tamil, Filipino, Mandingo, Vietnamese)	3%	4%	3%
Missing/unknown	9%	14%	19%

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