

AN EXPLORATION OF THE 'I HAVE A DREAM' PROGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON  
URBAN STUDENTS' ACADEMIC TRAJECTORIES

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## ABSTRACT

The 'I Have a Dream' (IHAD) program is a philanthropic, community-based intervention committed to supporting pupils in impoverished and under-resourced school systems. The IHAD program presents disadvantaged youth with an equal opportunity to pursue higher education by providing scholastic and social-emotional supports to promote college readiness or successful entrance into the workforce. This dissertation assessed if an IHAD program in the northeast had positively impacted the academic trajectory for participants (Dreamers) and explored if its students' academic achievement and attainment was superior to their grade-level peers. Dreamers' Language Arts and Mathematics proficiency ratings on state proficiency examinations were compared to the proficiency ratings of students in the general population of the district. An analysis of graduation rates, school-drop out, and enrollment rates were compared between the Dreamers and aggregated peer data from senior cohorts. Results suggest that the Dreamers had made gains from Grade 4 to Grade 11 in both Language Arts and Mathematics, as evidenced through their proficiency scores on the state standardized assessments. The data also indicated that Dreamers fared comparably to non-IHAD peers with their academic attainment. Meaningful comparison of graduation rates between the Dreamers and senior peer group was not possible due to limited publically accessible data. Future research may benefit from examining Dreamers' sustained academic attainment through college enrollment and graduation rates. Prospective IHAD research may also benefit by examining how historical, cultural, and societal mechanisms may be contributing to disadvantaged youth's academic merit and aspirations.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
III. METHODS.....	25
IV. RESULTS.....	31
V. DISCUSSION.....	47
REFERENCES .....	57

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. Total Valid Scores for Each Group of Participants.....	34
TABLE 2. Percentage of Students Considered Proficient in Language Arts and Math and Average Test Score for Each Group of Participants .....	36
TABLE 3. Rate of Proficiency in Language Arts and Math.....	42

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Percentage of Students Achieving Proficiency in Language Arts in Grades 4, 8, and 11 .....	37
FIGURE 2. Percentage of Students Achieving Proficiency in Math in Grades 4, 8, and 11 .....	37
FIGURE 3. Change in Average Language Arts and Math Scores From Grade 4 To Grade 11 .....	40
FIGURE 4. Percentage of Students Achieving Proficiency in Language Arts and Math in Grade 11 .....	44



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

The impact of the ‘I Have a Dream’ (IHAD) program upon urban students’ academic trajectories in an undisclosed, centralized New Jersey school district was studied in this dissertation. Specifically, this dissertation intended to examine if the IHAD program model was a successful intervention in mitigating academic barriers and promoting minority and disadvantaged youth with access and resources to postsecondary education.

The IHAD program is a philanthropic initiative that provides financial, educational, and social support to disadvantaged students in low-income communities, in the attempts to present them with opportunities to pursue and acquire higher education (What, Works Clearinghouse, 2009). This incentive based program facilitates various services to promote and supplement students’ post-secondary education enrollment and optimal scholastic attainment, including: tutoring, mentoring, community service activities, recreational activities, as well as counseling and social services. These supports are offered and sustained throughout the pupils’ elementary and secondary education careers. The selected students, coined ‘Dreamers’, are insured tuition support for higher education contingent upon their participation in the program and completion of the

twelfth grade. Sponsors are unsolicited, generally wealthy individuals, who typically 'adopt' the Dreamers in their elementary years and promise college scholarships for Dreamers that complete their high school educations and secure enrollment in post secondary education and/or vocational placements.

Coons and Petrick (1991) helped to further highlight the intricacies and details behind the structure of the IHAD program. Sponsors of the IHAD foundation commit to working with the students throughout the life of the program. In addition to providing the Dreamers with funding for post-secondary education, sponsors connect the students with community resources by opening doors to summer jobs and special opportunities through personal contacts. A project coordinator is recruited and hired by the sponsor for the project, as s/he is pivotal in developing long-term social relationships with the Dreamers. The project coordinator is responsible for coordinating activities that will help to motivate each Dreamer to stay in school; s/he will help to organize tutoring, cultural events, and crisis interventions for the Dreamers. The project coordinator may frequently visit Dreamers' schools and homes on a regular basis, in the attempts of creating a link between the students, their parents, and the community. The project coordinator is also largely accountable for providing attention and flexibility to the selected students over an extended amount of time. The roles of both the sponsor and project coordinator are considered both supervisory and parental, as they may intervene with schools to ensure that Dreamers receive the appropriate academic classes and support.

According to Coons and Petrick (1991) and Hexter (1990), the ‘I Have a Dream’ community-based program began when Eugene Lang pledged to cover the expenses of college tuition to a group of sixty-one East Harlem sixth-graders in early 1986. The principal from P.S. 121 had informed Mr. Lang that most of the students would drop out of school prior to completing their post-secondary education. Mr. Lang implemented a tuition promise as a way to motivate these students to remain enrolled in school. A young caseworker, Mr. Rivera, was hired by Mr. Lang, in the attempts to facilitate and coordinate supports for the Dreamers and their families. In the subsequent ten years, Mr. Lang and Mr. Rivera worked as mentors and motivators for the Dreamers, constructing trusting and stable relationships with the Dreamers. Mr. Lang’s efforts eventually evolved into a national foundation, with projects established in New York City, Dallas, Cleveland, Trenton, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles shortly afterwards. Currently, there are over 150 projects being coordinated across the country. The program has eventually evolved to address and intervene with younger students and to “pick up where Head Start leaves off (Coons & Petrick, 1991, p. 89).”

The ‘I Have a Dream’ Foundation aims to empower children and their families from low-income communities, illuminating and underscoring the extreme adversities that these youth populations may need to surmount: “In the United States today, less than 15% of children from low-income families will get a bachelor’s degree, compared to 26% nationwide, and more than 50% in high-income communities”

([http://www.ihaveadreamfoundation.org/html/vision\\_mission.htm](http://www.ihaveadreamfoundation.org/html/vision_mission.htm)). The IHAD

foundation posits that the opportunity and availability of the aforementioned resources and services will enable the Dreamers to capitalize on their “talents, aspirations, and leadership” by developing successful professional careers and ultimately, contributing to a better world. Research indicates that Dreamers have been successful in securing positions in the legal, financial, and professional sports industries.

There are currently over 3,500 Dreamers within the United States and New Zealand with roughly 11,000 predecessors. Of these 3,500 national Dreamers, 57 students were identified as Dreamers as first graders in a public, metropolitan elementary school in northeast New Jersey. The 2000 census indicated that this particular urban city was comprised of roughly 48,000 individuals, with the predominance of the population identifying as African American (65%). The median income per household was \$46,683, with 15.9% of the residents living below the poverty line. Of the 15, 137 households in the area, 35% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 39% were married couples, 25% had a female household with no husband present, and 28% were non-families. This urban district houses seven K-6 schools, three K-8 schools, two schools for grades 7-8, and one high school ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plainfield, New Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plainfield,_New_Jersey)).

The pupils in this particular Dreamer group were selected as participants, as they were enrolled in a low-achieving elementary school, as based upon prior state standardized assessment scores and past cohorts’ high school graduation rates. These Dreamers have been affiliated with the program for nearly 12 years and have had their

scholastic education enhanced through after-school and summer programs, as well as conferences, cultural events, and trips. Financial assistance, including tuition packages and scholarships have been extended to Dreamers and their families. Youth within the program have been able to generate connections with reputable community leaders and organizations.

As limited research was available regarding the program's academic impact within this public school district, this dissertation assessed the scholastic influence and trajectory that the 'I Have a Dream' Program has imparted to this group of identified Dreamers. This objective was attained by analyzing the Dreamers' academic progress and aptitude levels for the past 11 years, as evidenced through their school enrollment, high school graduation rates, and school drop-out rates. Dreamers' standardized tests scores were also examined from grades 4, 8, and 11. Of particular interest were students' performances on the New Jersey Assessment Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) assessment and the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) measure.

The NJ ASK scores were of primary interest, as they are comprehensive, multi-grade assessments that help to identify elementary and middle school pupils that need additional academic supports to meet the state's Core Curriculum Standards. The HSPA scores from students' high school junior year were also examined, as this assessment seeks to determine students' achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics as specified in New Jersey's Core Curriculum Standards. The aforementioned archival data

for the Dreamers' was juxtaposed to the scholastic performance of peer groups that were not affiliated with the 'I Have a Dream' Program. This research endeavor helped to identify and highlight any between group differences that may have transpired because of participation in the 'I Have a Dream' Program.

This dissertation explored academic strengths and progress potentially associated with the 'I Have a Dream' program and helped to identify and disseminate the supports that are linked to disadvantaged students' academic acquisition. Collectively, the data and information accrued from this dissertation can be considered for application to other settings and student populations for optimal and adaptive scholastic growth. The examination of such a program contributed insight to the fields of urban education and school psychology. It helped to shed light on substantiated intervention and prevention methods that could alternate the academic trajectory of failing and disenfranchised students facing obstacles of low socio-economic status, limited resources, and other adversarial contextual variables.

The information gleaned from this study enriched the way prospective psychologists are trained within the program planning skill domain. This research is beneficial to professionals interested and involved in designing, implementing, and sustaining educational programs which endorse higher education for disadvantaged students. This study's results highlighted vital elements to consider and incorporate in a likened educational program. Through use of these results, future psychologists have the knowledge to supplement their programming skills to create or replicate programs that mirror the IHAD program. Furthermore, by considering and examining the mental health

tenets behind the IHAD program, school psychologists are in an optimal position to bolster students' social and emotional abilities to academically succeed. Training for consultation, program planning, and family-systems services could be enriched by an increased awareness of the psychological mechanisms behind disadvantaged youth's academic attainment.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The Urban Institute (2004) reviewed high school completion by examining graduation rates for the general student population in the United States. Researchers relied upon the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) as a graduation rate measure and also explored data from the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD) to calculate graduation rates for the 2001 high school classes in nearly every public school system in the country. Results indicated that the national graduation rate was 68% in 2001, with roughly one third of high school students failing to graduate. There were substantial racial gaps detected in the graduation rates amongst students. Pupils that were from historically disadvantaged minority groups had little more than a fifty percent chance of graduating high school with a diploma. These groups included American Indian, Hispanic, and Black youth. These results were lower than the national graduation rates for Whites (75%) and Asians (77%). These researchers deduced that students who were enrolled in schools that were characterized by poverty and racial segregation were 15-18% behind same-aged peers.

Greene & Winters (2005) reported that African American males are documented to have the lowest college completion rate of any ethnic groups and among both sexes. Nichols et. al (2010) noted that African American students are generally at a



disadvantage because of attending schools with “larger class sizes, less parental outreach, lower skill levels amongst students, and lower average socioeconomic status (p. 26).”

Such adversarial factors are hypothesized to preclude African American youth from attaining their highest academic potential. Such social barriers, lack of resources and prejudice may be responsible for minority students’ declining interest and devaluation in academic merit and aspirations.

Prospective research suggests that individuals who do not graduate with their high school diploma encounter greater socio-economic obstacles when compared to peers who completed their secondary education. Valentine (2005) underscored the community and national impacts with youth that do not complete their high school education, citing that non-high school graduates will earn roughly \$270,000 less than peers who are high school graduates. Valentine’s literature also indicated that high school dropouts are more likely to become incarcerated, which can cost the country billions of dollars on an annual basis. Past research studies have illustrated the public health detriments that could ensue if America’s youth are not engaged and invested in their scholastic lives. Archival data highlighted how substance abuse, violent behaviors, and early initiation of sexual behavior are more likely to manifest (Beets et. al, 2009).

Anthony (2008) further posited that urban poverty exposes its youth to several risk factors including persistent violence, drugs, residential instability, underperforming schools, and crowded housing conditions. The aforementioned variables are believed to

hinder youth's development by fostering negative self-identity, maladaptive social and coping skills, as well as antisocial peer influences. A similar research endeavor by Carswell, O'Grady, and Watts (2009), reinforced and illuminated the negative social and environmental risk factors that exist for youth residing in urban communities. Poverty, family adversity, inadequate parental monitoring and physical/emotional traumas were also identified as precipitants to students' poor academic performance and behavioral difficulties in the school context. Such impediments were also believed to be precursors to negative consequences of delinquency, drug trafficking/illegal drug possession, incarceration, the carrying of dangerous weapons, and premature death.

Prior research studies have documented the effectiveness of IHAD upon youths' development, primarily its influence on circumventing and mitigating the academic barriers for disenfranchised youth in various contexts. Of Lang's sixty-one original Dreamers, seven moved away. Of the remaining fifty four dreamers from Lang's original 1986 class who have remained in New York, forty-five have earned their high school or general equivalency diplomas, whereas dropout rates for students enrolled in comparable inner city schools is between sixty and seventy-five percent (Coons & Petrick, 1991). In June of 1999, two original Dreamers graduated with bachelor's degrees, while four others entered their senior year. Collectively, thirty-three of the original Dreamers, roughly fifty percent were enrolled at the time of Coons and Petrick's article.

Comparable scholastic and achievement results were detected in follow-up Dreamer groups in Chicago and Portland. A 1991 evaluation of the IHAD program conducted by the Arete Corporation in New York City indicated that 69% of Chicago Dreamers in the classes of 1993 and 1994 graduated within districts characterized by a 60% drop out rate. The Chicago Dreamer class of 1996 demonstrated even higher results, showcasing a graduation rate of 75%, which was roughly double that of control groups. Similarly, individuals in Portland's 1998 Dreamer group had graduation rates that were 10-15 percentage points higher than their control group peers, with two Dreamers graduating a year earlier. College attendance was also impacted by the IHAD program in Chicago, as students in the 1996 Dreamer group were three times more likely to attend college than their comparison group counterparts. Additionally, approximately half of the active Dreamers were projected to graduate high school on time and attend college within a year's span.

Kahne and Bailey (1999) presented findings from a two and a half year project that assessed the impact of IHAD on two programs in Chicago, IL. These researchers were interested in exploring how variables of social capital, including social trust, communication patterns, as well as behavioral norms, were potentially related to educational attainment and achievement in disadvantaged youth. The researchers were interested in assessing how the personal and academic components of the program impacted the students and employed limited interviews, focus groups, and student performance data as the variables to determine program impact. Kahne and Bailey

determined that Dreamers from the two identified programs had graduation rates roughly twice those of their respective comparison groups, which were comprised of students who were a cohort older than them (71% and 69% versus 37% and 34%).

The researchers examined the particular elements of IHAD that were instrumental in students' success and deduced that great success was attributable to the creation of strong and sustained relationships between youth and program staff. A substantial amount of Dreamers reported that relationships of trust and understanding enabled them to overcome barriers to their academic success. These relationships were further hypothesized to establish trust and support, which ultimately help with youths' acceptance of pro-social academic and behavioral norms. The trusting relationship that developed between staff and students in a context of "high academic focus/betterment" advocated and allowed for reinforcement and motivation in students' academic commitment (Kahne and Bailey, 1999, p. 330). Furthermore, these established relationships created a peer group that emphasized a broader range of norms and expectations for higher academic performance and allowed for access to supports/resources, such as job opportunities, artistic/extracurricular activities, and social service providers. The tutoring services directly provided to Dreamers also seemed to impact students' performance, as approximately fifty percent of Dreamers in one identified group attended sessions at least once a week. This result suggested that tutoring offered a focus on school and a sense that support was available for the students. Social trust was believed to be instrumental in helping youth in low-income neighborhoods

access and expand resources that would facilitate their academic attainment. The context of trust between staff and youth was hypothesized to be pivotal in endorsing high academic standards and appropriate social norms.

Strusinski's 1997 exploration of the IHAD program in Dade County Florida assessed if the program and its activities imparted any influence impact on the 100 third grade Dreamers' academic performance, attendance, and self-esteem. The records from parent, student, and teacher surveys, did not document any significant difference for attendance records and academic performance between the Dreamers and their peers from third grade cohorts that previously attended their school. Nevertheless, results obtained from surveys of the Dreamers, their educators, and their parents, illustrated how Dreamers' self-esteem had improved, as their reported self-esteem was Above Average when compared to the publisher's norms on the McDaniel-Piers Young Children's Self-Concept Scale. These results are consistent with the program's objective of helping students to remain in school by cultivating their self-esteem. Dreamers' improved attitudes towards school were noted by teachers and parents.

In reviewing literature of intervention programs that incorporated similar design/structure and objectives to IHAD, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) mirrored comparable result (Swanson, Mehan, & Hubbard, 1995). Similar to IHAD, the AVID program operates as part of a public school system and provides low-income, ethnic and linguistic minority students with supports to attain the primary goal of college enrollment. This support is extended throughout all four years of high school and

enrolls students that demonstrate high achievement test scores with low junior high school grades. AVID coordinators meet with students daily, help to arrange college tours, coordinate field trips, demonstrates note taking and writing skills, and provide personal supports for the students that may vary from school obstacles to difficulties within the home domain. The trusting and supportive relationship that is potentially created between the participants and program coordinator was found to motivate and enhance students' achievement. In analyzing data from 14 San Diego schools that employed the program, researchers found that the students who remained within the program for three years had a tendency to attend college at rates that exceed both local and national averages.

The Upward Bound federal program has also demonstrated considerable success with helping disadvantaged youth access higher education. According to Hexter (1990), the program was established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and aims to provide economically disadvantaged youth with the academic skills that are necessary for enrollment in post secondary education, including: instruction in precollege reading, writing, study skills, and Mathematics. The program traditionally offers these students personal counseling, as well as exposure to cultural events, tutorial services, and student financial assistance. Students are offered assistance in preparing college applications and financial forms and are also given exposure to a range of careers. There is a summer residential component to the program, where participants spend approximately two months on a college campus to experience college life. Participants are required to be

low-income and potential first –generation college students between ages thirteen and nineteen and there are 500+ programs nation-wide.

Data illuminated by Hexter indicated that 90 percent of Upward Bound participants entered postsecondary education, in juxtaposition to 72 percent of their non-participating peers. Seventy-four percent of Upward Bound participants enrolled in four - year institutions, in comparison to the 43% percent rate of non-participants and roughly 20% of Upward Bound students graduated from four-year institutions when compared to the 5% graduation rate of non-participating peers. As general research indicates that programs with the largest and longer effects are linked to earlier, longer duration, and more comprehensive evaluation, it is important to consider the early childhood interventions that provide supports to improve adult behavior and promote adaptive life opportunities. Long-term effects on school achievement, grade retention, and social adjustment in disenfranchised youth were determined in several early intervention programs that aimed to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children from economically disadvantaged families.

According to Barnett (1995), Programs such as the High Scope/Perry Preschool study and Head Start, were amongst the interventions linked to favorable and improved effects in the cognitive development, school success (grade retention, special education, and high school graduation rates), and socialization domains. Barnett postulated that such early intervention programs make significant differences in the lives of children from

low-income families/environments: “For many children, preschool programs can mean the difference between failing and passing, regular or special education, staying out of trouble or becoming involved in crime and delinquency, dropping out or graduating from high school (p. 43).”

According to Schweinhart (2002), The High Scope/Perry Preschool Study was an early childhood intervention that incorporated an active learning model to help enhance children’s intellectual and social development during the preschool years. The intervention encompassed an intimate student-teacher ratio and curriculum during their preschool years, as well as regular home visits by educators and parental group meetings. The program was created in the early 1960s, with the intent to combat school failure and grade retention for at-risk, poor, and minority students in their early years of education. In his 1995 literature, Barnett highlighted a High Scope/Perry Preschool study that selected students based on low IQ scores generally below 75. This particular HighScope/Perry Preschool program assigned 128 disadvantaged minority children to either a half-day preschool program with home visits by the teacher or a control group. The study followed 123 children from preschool into adulthood and found a “persistent effect on achievement tests through middle school (p. 9).” Additionally, the preschool group had better “classroom and personal behavior as reported by teachers, less involvement in delinquency and crime, as well as a higher graduation rate (p. 9)”. These changes seemingly translated into adulthood, as the intervention group was associated



with increased employment and income, as well as decreased welfare dependency and reduced arrests.

Such results are further corroborated in Weikart's 1998 review of a longitudinal study, in which a High/Scope Perry Preschool study documented positive results through the age of 27. In this study, 123 economically disadvantaged African American children were selected to partake in this intervention based upon family characteristics, including: limited education and low-income. Participants were also likely to be raised in a single parent home. The children were randomly assigned to the intervention and control groups at ages three and four. The High Scope/Perry Preschool intervention group received the preschool curriculum for "active learning" five days a week and also received an hour and a half home visit each week. Non-program children remained within their home with caregivers and were not provided with a program. Groups were assessed through school records, social services case files and police records on an annual basis until age 10 and were later evaluated at ages 14, 15, 19, and 27.

The results that are discussed in Weikart's literature suggested that the children who participated in the intervention demonstrated greater "social responsibility, earning and economic status, educational performance, and a major financial return to society on the investment made in early childhood education" when juxtaposed to their counterparts who were assigned to a non-program group (p. 234). As this dissertation examined the impact of interventions upon economically disadvantaged students' academic attainment,

it is noteworthy to highlight that the intervention group had a higher rate of graduating from high school or receiving their General Education Development certification (71% vs. 54%). Additionally, the intervention group had demonstrated significantly higher average achievement scores at the age of 14 and also demonstrated stronger literacy scores at the age of 19 when compared to non-program peers.

Barnett (2008) noted that Head Start programs encompass broad objectives that include improving children's scholastic attainment, health/nutrition and providing services to parents/guardians and the community. The program limits eligibility to children in families whose income is below the Federal Poverty Line or who are eligible for public assistance. In his exploration of numerous Head Start programs, he identified strong short term success in the Head Start Impact Study of a large national sample of children that were randomly assigned to attend Head Start or not at the ages of 3 and 4. Nine months of Head Start indicated cognitive effects that ranged from 0.05 to 0.25 standard deviations. Another Head Start study found effects of 0.33 to 0.55 standard deviations on literacy and Mathematics assessments conducted on four-year children who had completed a year of Head Start.

Long-term effects of Head Start were also assessed in Barnett's (2008) literature review. In a series of studies that compared children within the same family who did and did not attend Head Start, researchers found effects on achievement at kindergarten entry that were comparable for all ethnic groups. Long term effects on achievement test scores

and grade retention were discerned in Caucasian and Hispanic children, and grade repetition was substantially reduced for Hispanic children ages 10 and older. Results also demonstrated that Head Start helped to increase high school graduation rates by 22 percentage points for Caucasian students and help decrease arrests by 12 percentage points for African American children.

Additional research endeavors that will be discussed below have all uniquely contributed to increasing pupils' capacity to focus on academics through the introduction of certain skills and/or supports. A school-wide, preventative character development program assessed by Beets et. al in 2009 was linked to a reduction in the self-reported prevalence for substance abuse, violence, and sexual activity amongst the students who were in the intervention groups. The program incorporated interactive opportunities for students and addressed concepts of self, emotional regulation, moral development, and decision-making skills. This research yielded evidence to the notion that comprehensive school based programs can exert advantageous effects on students' deviant behaviors, ultimately allowing for and promoting their investment in their formal schooling.

Results from Anthony's 2008 research study also helped to highlight instrumental supports for youth residing in urban areas, primarily within the scholastic and behavioral domains. These researchers posited that the availability of resources within the community, coupled with the influences of individual and interpersonal relationships/transactions, were responsible for determining educational and behavioral

development. Results obtained from the assessment of middle school students in a western city illustrated how engaging youth in positive adult relationships enabled urban students to develop a sense of independence, positive self-identity, and social/coping skills, all of which ultimately served as protective factors. The adult relationships seemingly buffered against negative and anti-social peer influences and effective discipline through education and support were key in helping youth retain focus and investment in their education.

Carswell et. al (2009) implemented an after-school intervention program in an alternative setting to prevent the origination and escalation of risky, life-long problem behaviors amongst African American youth in an urban neighborhood. Participants were selected on self-reported alcohol and tobacco use, risky sexual behaviors, and conduct/adjustment problems manifested at school. Supplemental support services in the classroom, structured group mentoring, and community outreach services were recognized as helpful supports for these youth residing within socially and economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The exploration of this school-based effort illustrated how academic support services of small group remedial education, study skills exercises, and assistance with homework assignments were helpful to these at-risk youth. The introduction of social skills, in conjunction with increased community involvement efforts (such as cultural enrichment activities and field trips) helped to buffer against the deviant behaviors of the participants. The mentor/mentee relationships were also considered to be advantageous, as they allowed for the modeling of pro-social and

adaptive behavior. The data suggested that the previously mentioned supports collectively helped to facilitate and engender support for the participants' optimal academic development, as well as their personal strength and self-efficacy.

Research produced by Nichols et al. in 2010 discussed the educational aspirations of African American youth and explored the dynamic contributions of individual, family, and community factors that were tied to them. Researchers assessed 130 socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged African American adolescents that inhabited an urban setting. The students were selected based upon documented course-deficit credits, repeated grades, and high absenteeism rates and the majority of the sample identified as African American (97%). Results suggested that more positive attitudes towards education were correlated with high educational aspirations and community resources, such as organized/supervised sports and community recreation centers, were also found to be significant sources of positive educational outcomes, particularly when considering male students. Consequently, recommendations for improving students' attitudes towards education and promoting community resources to stress educational stress were underscored.

Social support and social-emotional competence were hypothesized to attenuate stressors associated with urban poverty and academic challenges, as per Elias and Hayes (2008). These researchers considered social support to be the individual's perception of available environmental resources should they be needed, whereas social-emotional

competence was referred to as skills that helped an individual to successfully “adapt” in existing circumstances. Elias and Hayes postulated that social support and social-emotional competence could serve as protective factors to students in low-income areas, as they had previously identified a positive relationship between “levels of academic success, ratings by teachers of responsible classroom behaviors, and education outcomes (p.447).” They further speculated that social emotional skills of self-control, cooperative interaction, assertiveness, and problem solving would produce greater academic attainment, as they would enable to students to prepare for taking examinations, completing tasks, and learning in larger contexts targeting academic learning.

Past research has demonstrated that students in low-income areas have the lowest academic achievement and the poorest development of social skills. Consequently, Elias and Hayes (2008) recruited two hundred and eight-two elementary-aged students for a north-eastern urban community and assessed if improvement in social-emotional competence and perceived teacher support were key in the prediction of academic success. The researchers utilized a children’s multi-dimensional measure of perceived support, a rating scale for social-emotional competence assessment, and report card grades to measure school outcomes. The participants were presented with an evidence-based curriculum as an intervention to integrate teamwork skills and prevent violence amongst the youth. The collected results corroborated that social-emotional competence and school outcomes were linked. The data also suggested that perceived increases in teacher support were moderately associated with students’ academic performance upon

the school year's conclusion. It is imperative to note that these results were found to be strongest primarily amongst African American youth.

The research endeavors and interventions mentioned above were instrumental in attenuating barriers for youth in socially and economically disadvantaged urban areas, ultimately fostering and allowing pupils' greater capacity for formal learning, academic attainment, pro-social behaviors, and proactive community engagement. The research studies have exposed different avenues for intervening with disenfranchised youth, all of which are potentially linked to long-term communal benefits of drug and violence reduction and healthier functioning, higher educationally achieving, and contributory citizens.

There are several parallels between the aforementioned programs and the IHAD effort, as the Dreamers in the identified residential area are provided with comparable program goals and supports including: community outreach, mentoring, tutoring, social-emotional skills training, and supplemental classroom support services. Intervention programs that are structured on similar objectives and supports to IHAD have catalyzed germane results in the realms of scholastic achievement, academic attainment, as well as social and behavioral development. Consequently, it was hypothesized that the data from the specified Dreamer group would produce and mirror similar positive and proactive gains. In particular, it was speculated that Dreamers would collectively demonstrate

higher standardized test scores, graduation rates, and current school enrollment than their non-intervention peers over the course of the past eleven years.

Prior research studies that examined educational initiatives comparable to the IHAD program have collectively demonstrated that disadvantaged youth's scholastic attainment and achievement could be fostered through academic and social-emotional supports in early childhood. Past IHAD research has largely concentrated on Dreamers' graduation and college enrollment rates and has been limited in longitudinally assessing Dreamers' academic progress throughout the years. This study helped to fill such information gaps by assessing and tracking a particular Dreamer group's performance on standardized achievement benchmarks through their formal schooling, in addition to their school enrollment, drop-out, and graduation rates.

It is vital to underscore that the 'I Have a Dream' program is not a singularly controlled treatment, but a combination of initiatives that are mostly driven and coordinated by the projected coordinator, with occasional assistance from others. This research study focused on the examination of aggregated educational data, instead of a program evaluation of the individual IHAD components.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### **Demographics**

The assessed Dreamer group was comprised of 57 students. Reports provided by the IHAD project coordinator indicated that 42 of the original 57 students enrolled in the 'I Have a Dream' Program are graduating on time with their cohort. Of the remaining 15 original Dreamers, 9 students were retained, but were continuously enrolled in school. Two Dreamers have obtained their GEDs prior to their anticipated graduation date, 1 student dropped out of school and 3 students were unknown. Twenty-seven of the Dreamers have remained within their district of origin, whereas the remaining 30 students have moved, transferred or dropped-out of their district's public school system.

Forty-five of the active Dreamers are of African American descent, 9 students are identified as Hispanic, 2 students are African American and Latino/a, and a single student is of Caucasian background. The Dreamer group is comprised of 35 females and 22 male students. At the time of this research study, 32 students were eighteen-years-old and 25 students were seventeen years of age.

#### **Procedure**

This dissertation examined the scholastic impact of the 'I Have a Dream' (IHAD) program upon publically schooled urban students residing in an undisclosed,

metropolitan city in central New Jersey. The research endeavor explored if supports provided by the IHAD program had positively impacted students' academic trajectory, as demonstrated by variables such as: school enrollment, school drop-out rates, high school graduation rates, and standardized test scores from the NJ ASK and HSPA standardized assessments. The aforementioned data were collected from the Dreamers' fourth, eighth, and eleventh grade educational records. In order to determine the potential effectiveness of the IHAD program for the supported students, their archival data was juxtaposed to the scholastic performance of non-intervention peer groups.

The data was used to explore if Dreamers were different from their peers in regards to their academic attainment and achievement and assessed how potential variations were influenced by the goals and structure of the IHAD program. Previous literature has presented similar programs that have successfully altered educational outcomes for disadvantaged youth through interventions provided during the students' elementary years. Given the robust literature documenting the effectiveness of programs that incorporate similar design, supports, and objectives to IHAD, it was hypothesized that comparable results would be reflected in the statistical results obtained from the proposed dissertation.

The collection of data variables was attempted for all fifty-seven Dreamers at the specified time points. The results were contrasted to the publicly accessible, aggregated data of non-intervention peers. This data, which was accessed through the New Jersey

Department of Education, allowed for comparison to a comparable, representative sample group.

As archival data were employed in the proposed dissertation study, an exemption from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was granted (see Appendix). Once consent from the IRB was obtained and authorization to initiate data collection was secured from the IHAD Project Coordinator and district superintendent, data collection was attempted for the Dreamers' elementary, intermediate, and high schools, for both in-district and out-of district Dreamers.

Upon data collection, comparative statistical tests were conducted to compare the Dreamers' data with the district's general student data. If the data met the statistical assumptions necessary for parametric tests, t-tests and chi-square goodness of fit analyses were conducted to compare test scores and percentages of proficient Dreamer and cohort students in Language Arts and Mathematics skills. If the data did not meet the statistical assumptions necessary for parametric tests, nonparametric alternatives were used.

All of the Dreamer data was collected and provided through the IHAD project coordinator, a former elementary principal within district, and the district's high school counseling department. Aggregated NJ ASK 4 and NJ ASK 8 scores for grade-level peers were obtained from a former elementary principal and an educational consultant involved in the IHAD program. All data regarding 11<sup>th</sup> grade HSPA scores for students in the

district's general population was obtained from the New Jersey Department of Education website, as was all available, aggregated information for cohort graduation rates, current student enrollment, and student drop-out rates.

Dreamers' identities remained confidential in the conduction of this dissertation. Each subject's data records were assigned an individual code and the master list that links the code to the individual's identity was maintained in a secure location. The obtained research data will be retained for three years following the conclusion of data analysis. Data records and written notes were protected in the principal investigator's lock box within a commercial bank. Upon the three -year completion period, all paperwork will be shredded. At no time will study data be available for public review. The analyses/results will ultimately be used to highlight and inform the educational and psychological communities of supports/interventions that have been documented to help promote optimal and adaptive academic acquisition for disadvantaged youth populations.

## ADDENDUM

The dissertation initially proposed to explore the potential impact of the IHAD upon Dreamers' academic trajectory, as demonstrated by variables including: school enrollment, school drop-out rates, projected high school graduation rates, and test scores from the New Jersey's standardized NJ ASK and HSPA assessments. These variables were intended to be collected from the Dreamers' fourth, eighth, and eleventh grade educational records. The effectiveness of the IHAD program was initially proposed to be determined by comparing the Dreamers' archival data to the publically accessible, aggregated data of their non-intervention grade-level peers. The dissertation also proposed to compare the Dreamers' data to non-intervention student groups that were two cohort groups above and one cohort group below the Dreamers in grade level.

Within the data collection stage of the dissertation, it became evident that the aggregated standardized assessment data for the peer groups that were two cohorts above and one cohort below the Dreamers was unattainable, despite the notion that such records were hypothesized to be publically reported due to state mandates. Attempted avenues for this data collection included: corresponding with the IHAD project coordinator in the district of interest, calling and leaving messages with the New Jersey Department of Education, searching the New Jersey Department of Education website, emailing past elementary school principals within the district, corresponding with the district's high

school guidance department, and emailing past professionals who were involved in the IHAD project at one point in time.

In order to proceed forward with the proposed dissertation, it became necessary to shift the focus of the comparison groups. Consequently, the Dreamers' data will only be compared to the aggregated data of their grade level peers at grades 4, 8, and 11, as such data has been accessible and collected.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) is a standardized state assessment that is administered to students in grades 3-8. These assessments are designed to provide information on how well students are achieving in the academic areas required by the state's Core Curriculum Standards, including: Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science. New Jersey's Core Curriculum Standards determine skills and knowledge that students should possess at the end of certain benchmark years. Students' academic attainment is reflected in total scores for the academic area, as well as through sub-scores for the major knowledge areas and skills within the particular content area. The NJ ASK standardized assessments are administered over the course of several days in April and May and are administered to most of the student population, including pupils with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Assessment items include multiple choice and open-ended questions ([http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/es/njask\\_info\\_guide.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/es/njask_info_guide.pdf)).

Similarly, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) provides information necessary for determining how well students and their school district are meeting New Jersey's Core Curriculum Standards for academic subjects, as well as identifying where improvements are warranted. The HSPA assesses if eleventh grade students are making

satisfactory progress towards mastering the skills and knowledge necessary to graduate from high school. The HSPA assessment is administered over several days in March to determine how well first-time eleventh grade students are meeting educational standards, as demonstrated through their Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science scores. If students do not pass the assessment in March, they are provided with an opportunity to retest for failed areas in subsequent years. Assessment items are comprised of multiple choice, open-ended, and essay questions

([http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/hspa\\_guide\\_english.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/hspa_guide_english.pdf)).

Total scores from the NJ ASK and HSPA assessments are reported in one of three proficiency levels: Advanced Proficient (pass), Proficient (pass), or Partially Proficient (fail). Scores that fall within the Partially Proficient level indicate that the student has not met the minimum level of proficiency required. Advanced proficient classifications included scores of 250+, Proficient scores fell within the range of 200-249, and Partially Proficient scores included scores that were <200.

This chapter includes a section comparing the students in the general population of the Dreamers and the District at grades 4, 8, and 11 on Language Arts and Mathematics scores and proficiency ratings on the NJ ASK 4, NJ ASK 8, and HSPA, excluding exempt and special education students. Following this, a HSPA comparison between all of the 11th Grade Dreamers and their peers in the district, including students who were exempt or in special education will be presented. The comparison groups will



involve all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students within the district from the academic years of 2010-2011, 2009-2010, and 2008-2009. This section will conclude with an analysis of graduation rates, school-drop out, and enrollment rates, in which the aggregated peer data from the classes of 2009-2010 and 2008-2009 will be compared to the Dreamers.

### **Standardized Assessment Scores**

The average Language Arts (LA) and Mathematics (Mathematics) scores for 56 students enrolled in the 'I Have a Dream' program (Dreamers) were collected at grades 4, 8, and 11 and compared to same grade-level peers in the district's general population. Special Education students, students who were exempt from testing, and students with limited English proficiency were not included in the analysis to preclude any outliers from skewing the data results.

Language Arts and Mathematics scores for 56 enrollees in the 'I Have a Dream' (IHAD) program were collected at the three testing periods in grades 4, 8, and 11. As with any longitudinal data set, the set includes missing values due to errors, students moving to other states and having no comparable tests, or lack of testing. The proportion of students submitting valid scores at any of the testing periods ranged from 39% - 57% of students initially enrolled in the program. Two Dreamers opted to obtain their GED and enter military service and one dropped out of school. Other reasons for missing data include errors and lack of reporting. The valid scores of the cohort decreased during this time period as well, from 485 in Grade 4 to 235 in Grade 11, a loss of nearly 51%. No

reasons were provided to explain this decrease, which might include lack of testing, a decrease in student population, students dropping out, or other causes.

After removing special education and exempt students, 30 Language Arts scores and 32 Mathematics scores were obtained from Grade 4 Dreamers. For Grade 8 Dreamers, 29 valid Language Arts scores and 28 valid Mathematics scores were obtained. For Grade 11 Dreamers, 22 Language Arts scores were obtained, but one was a low outlier and was removed from the data set, leaving 21 scores for analysis. Twenty-eight valid Mathematics scores were obtained. In comparison, 484 valid scale scores for Language Arts and 485 valid scale scores for Mathematics were obtained from the general population of students in Grade 4. Four hundred and seventeen Language Arts scores and 409 Mathematics scores were reported for the general population in Grade 8. For Grade 11, 239 Language Arts scores and 238 Mathematics scores were collected.

	Dreamers		General Population	
	Language Arts	Mathematics	Language Arts	Mathematics
Grade 4	30	32	484	485
Grade 8	29	28	417	409
Grade 11	21	28	239	238

*Table 1.* Total valid scores for each group of participants.

In Grade 4, 70% percent of students in the IHAD program achieved scores that ranked them as proficient in Language Arts ( $M = 205$ ), compared to 75.5% ( $M = 212.7$ ) in the cohort group of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in the general student population. Nineteen (19%,  $M = 180.3$ ) percent of Dreamers achieved proficiency in Mathematics, in comparison to 55.5% ( $M = 206.2$ ) of the general student cohort of 4<sup>th</sup> graders.

In Grade 8, 55% percent of students in the 'I Have a Dream' program achieved scores that ranked them as proficient in Language Arts ( $M = 207.8$ ), compared to 48% in the cohort group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the general student population. Twenty-nine (29%,  $M = 183.3$ ) percent of Dreamers achieved proficiency in Mathematics, in comparison to 28% of the general student cohort of 8<sup>th</sup> graders. No valid scale scores for the cohort 8<sup>th</sup> grade group were available for Language Arts or Mathematics.

In Grade 11, 78% percent of students in the 'I Have a Dream' program achieved scores that ranked them as proficient in Language Arts ( $M = 212$ ), compared to 76% ( $M = 213.7$ ) in the cohort group of 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the general student population. Twenty-nine (27%,  $M = 186.1$ ) percent of Dreamers achieved proficiency in Mathematics, in comparison to 32% ( $M = 189.3$ ) of the general student cohort of 11<sup>th</sup> graders.

	Dreamers				General Population			
	Language Arts		Mathematics		Language Arts		Mathematics	
	Proficient	Average Score	Proficient	Average Score	Proficient	Average Score	% Proficient	Average Score
Grade 4	70%	205	19%	180.3	76%	212.7	55%	206.2
Grade 8	55%	207.8	29%	183.3	48%	NA	28%	NA
Grade 11	78%	212	27%	186.13	76%	213.7	32%	189.3

*Table 2.* Percentage of students considered proficient in Language Arts and Mathematics and average test score for each group of participants.

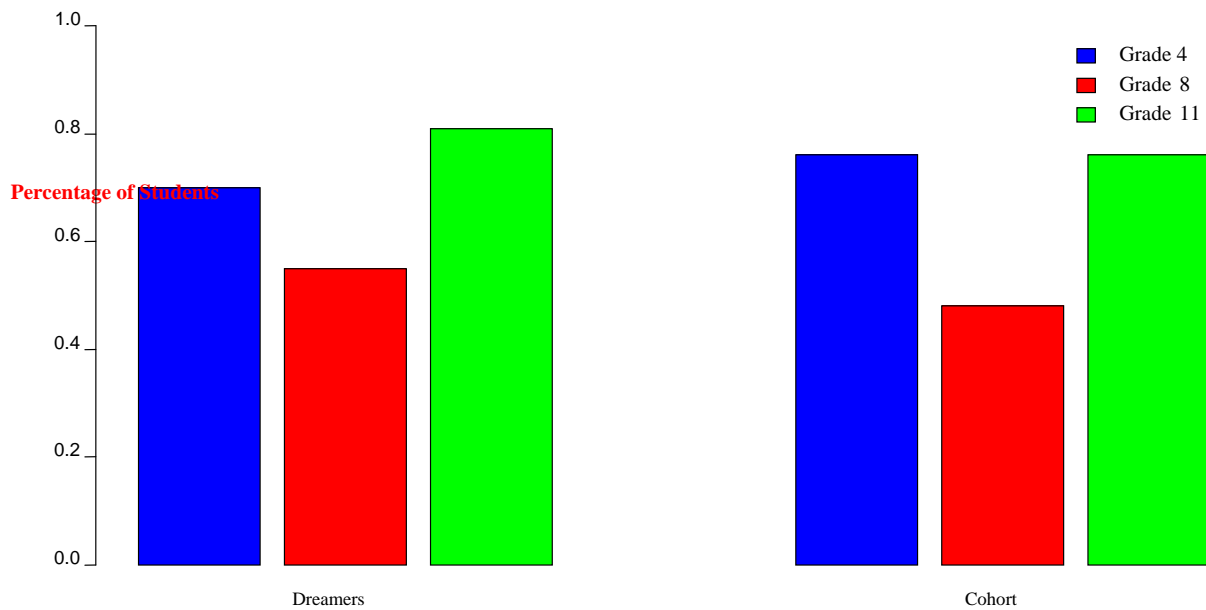


Figure 1. Percentage of students achieving proficiency in Language Arts in Grades 4, 8, & 11

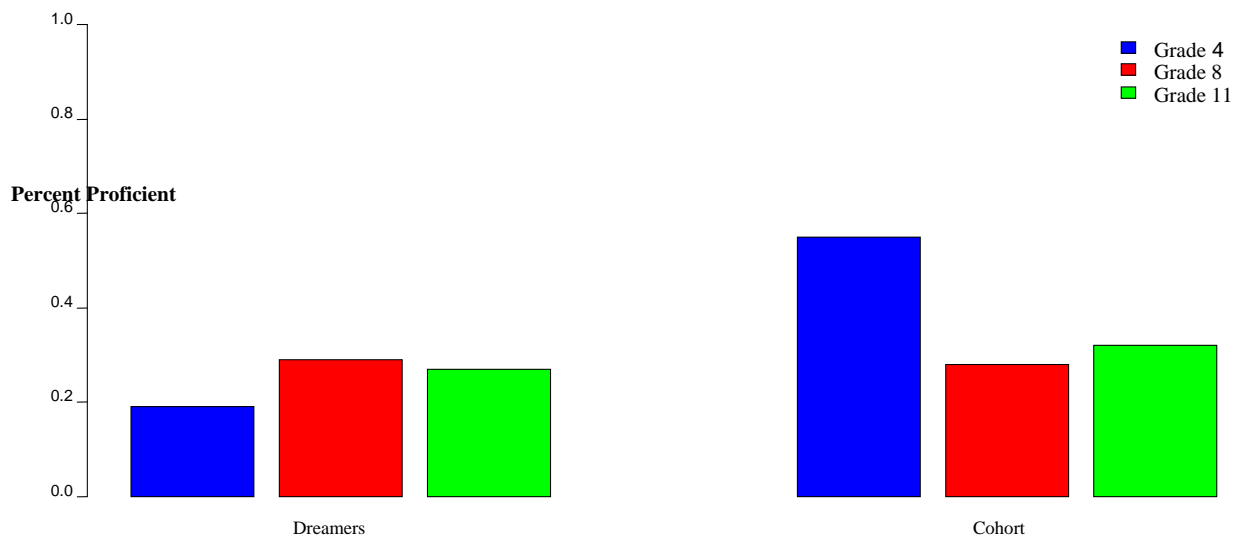


Figure 2. Percentage of students achieving proficiency in Mathematics in Grades 4, 8, & 11

## **Data Exploration**

Plots of the scores for each measure showed that each set of scores was normally distributed, meeting the assumptions for using parametric tests such as *t*-tests and significance tests for proportions (i.e., chi-square goodness of fit tests). One Dreamers' score in the Language Arts data for Grade 11 was an extreme outlier and was removed from the analysis.

## **Proportions of Students Who Were Proficient in Language Arts and Mathematics in Grades 4, 8, and 11**

Although the data set did not include the Language Arts or Mathematics scores for the cohort in Grade 8, the sample sizes and proportions of students in each category of proficiency were included in the data set. Using these proportions, comparisons between the Dreamers and their respective cohorts were made.

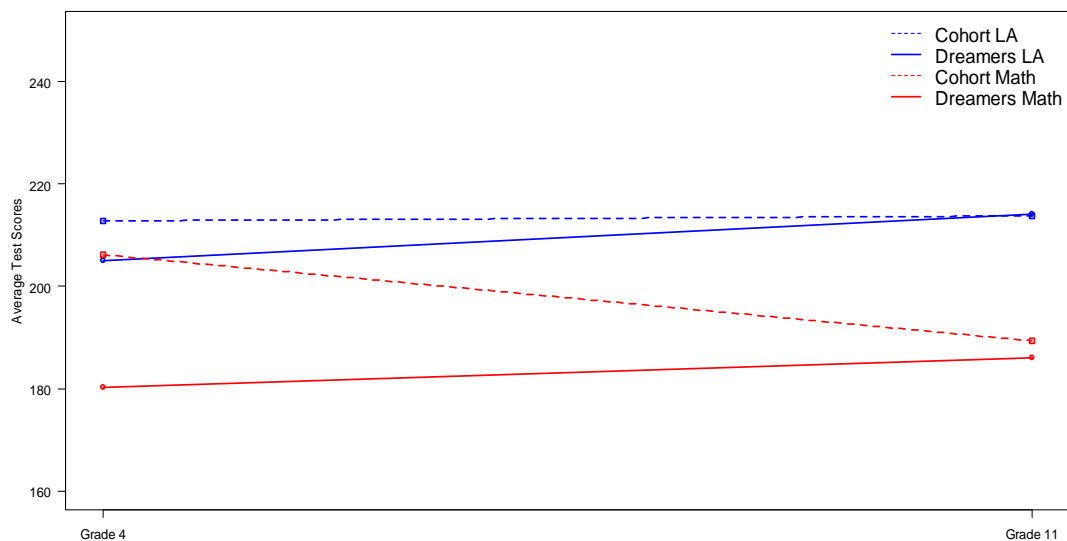
A chi-squared goodness of fit test to assess the equality of proportions for two samples indicated no statistically significant differences between the proportions of Dreamers and their cohort whose scores show proficiency in Language Arts in Grade 4 ( $\chi^2 = .21$ ,  $p = 0.6463$ ). In contrast, a two-sample test for equality of proportions showed that the Dreamers had statistically significant lower Mathematics scores than their cohorts in Grade 4 ( $\chi^2 = 14.199$ ,  $p = 0.0002$ ).

A chi-square goodness of fit test indicated no statistically significant differences between the proportions of Dreamers and their cohort whose scores show proficiency in Language Arts in Grade 8 ( $\chi^2 = .29$ ,  $p = 0.70$ ). By eighth grade, Dreamers had also reduced the gap in Mathematics scores with their cohort. The differences in percentage of Dreamers and cohort students with scores indicating Mathematics proficiency were no longer statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 0$ ,  $p = 0.5$ ).

A chi-squared goodness of fit test to assess the equality of proportions for two samples indicated no statistically significant differences between the proportions of Dreamers and their cohort whose scores show proficiency in Grade 11 in Language Arts ( $\chi^2 = 0.003$ ,  $p = 0.52$ ) or in Mathematics ( $\chi^2 = .1045$ ,  $p = 0.37$ ).

### **Differences in Scores for Language Arts and Mathematics From Grade 4 to Grade 11**

Change in average scores from Grade 4 to Grade 11 (no average scores were available for the Grade 8 cohort). Note that the y-axis range is reduced to include the scores in the sample only.



*Figure 3.* Change in average Language Arts and Mathematics scores from Grade 4 to Grade 11

The proficiency ratings of all the 11th grade Dreamers were also compared to all the 11th grade students in the District during the 2010-2011, 2009-2010, and 2008-2009 school years. All groups included students who were exempt or in special education. Such students were included in the Dreamer group for these analyses, as the Dreamers were being compared to district groups that included all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the reported totals. Through this inclusion, it was hypothesized that the Dreamer and district groups were more comparable and consequently would yield more accurate and reliable results. These comparisons produced the following findings.



**High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) Comparison of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Students Enrolled in the ‘I Have a Dream’ Program with 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Students in the School District’s General Population**

The rates of proficiency in Language Arts (LA) and Mathematics (Mathematics) scores for students enrolled in the ‘I Have a Dream’ program (Dreamers) were compared to all eleventh grade students within their school district. Special Education students, students exempt from passing, and students with limited English proficiency were included in this analysis. For Grade 11 Dreamers, including special education and exempt students, 26 Language Arts and Mathematics scores were obtained. [Note: these figures are different from the other comparison of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade Dreamers with the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students from the same year presented in the previous document because that comparison did not include exempt students, students in special education, or students with limited English proficiency.]

Twenty of 26 eleventh grade Dreamers (77%) were rated as proficient in Language Arts. These scores included two students with scores below the 200-point criterion for proficiency who were rated as exempt. Nine of 26 eleventh grade Dreamers (35%) were rated as proficient in Mathematics. These scores included three students with scores below the 200-point criterion for proficiency who were rated as exempt. Plots of the scores for each measure showed that each set of scores was normally distributed, meeting the assumptions for using parametric tests. No outliers were evident in the data sets.

	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade Dreamers (2010-2011 only)		11 <sup>th</sup> Grade – All District Students					
	<i>n</i>	% proficient	2010-2011		2009-2010		2008-2009	
			<i>n</i>	% proficient	<i>n</i>	% proficient	<i>n</i>	% proficient
Language Arts	26	77 %	324	63.9 %	364	75.2%	387	69.2 %
Mathematics	26	35 %	323	27.5 %	364	63.9 %	387	51.9 %

*Table 3: Rate of proficiency in Language Arts and Mathematics*

### **Comparison of Dreamers with All District 11<sup>th</sup> Graders in 2010-2011**

When examining the Language Arts and Mathematics scores for cohort peers and Dreamers, a pattern is revealed in which both groups perform better in Language Arts than in Mathematics. A chi-squared goodness of fit test to assess the equality of proportions for two samples indicated no statistically significant differences in the proportion of 11<sup>th</sup> grade Dreamers who achieved proficiency in Language Arts and their peers in the district ( $\chi^2 = 1.2677$ ,  $p = 0.87$ ).

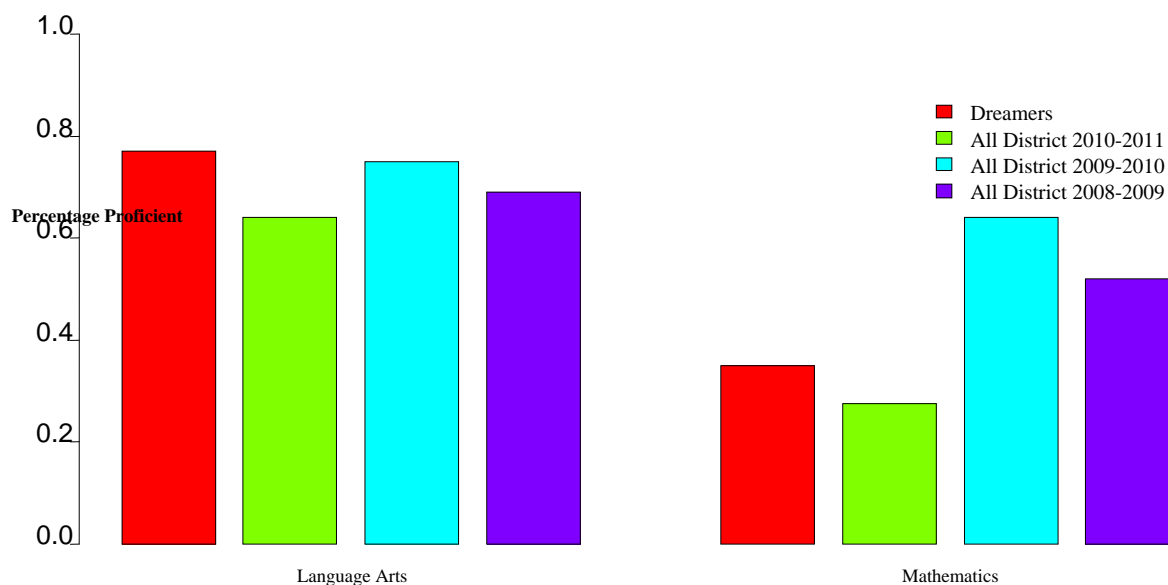
A two-sample test for equality of proportions showed that the Dreamers and their peers in the district were not statistically significant different in Mathematics proficiency ( $\chi^2=0.2959$ ,  $p = 0.71$ ).

### **Comparison of Dreamers with All District 11<sup>th</sup> Graders in 2009-2010**

The rates of proficiency for the 2010-2011 Dreamers in Language Arts and Mathematics were also compared to all district students who were 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the 2009-2010 school year. The proportion of 2010-2011 11<sup>th</sup> grade Dreamers who achieved proficiency in Language Arts was not statistically significant different from all district 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2009-2010 school year ( $\chi^2= 0.0$ ,  $p = 0.5$ ). However, the Mathematics proficiency of the Dreamers was statistically significant and considerably lower than the proficiency of the district 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2009-2010 ( $\chi^2= 3.80$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ).

### **Comparison of Dreamers with All District 11<sup>th</sup> Graders in 2008-2009**

An additional comparison was made between the 11<sup>th</sup> grade Dreamers in 2010-2011 and the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the district in the 2008-2009 school year. The proportion of 2010-2011 11<sup>th</sup> grade Dreamers who achieved proficiency in Language Arts was not statistically significantly different from all district 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2008-2009 school year ( $\chi^2= 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.73$ ). No statistically significant differences were found for the Mathematics proficiency of the Dreamers and the district 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2008-2009 ( $\chi^2= .62$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ).



*Figure 4.* Percentage of students achieving proficiency in Language Arts and Mathematics in Grade 11

### **Graduation Rates, Current Enrollment, and School-Drop Outs**

Providing an accurate comparison of the graduation rates of the Dreamers and students enrolled in the district was not possible for several reasons. The graduation rates for total students enrolled in schools in New Jersey did not account for drop-outs, retentions, or transfers in and out of the district. For example, the number of enrolled students dropped from 645 to 324 from Grade 4 to Grade 11, but no explanation was provided regarding this decrease. Secondly, the method for calculating the graduation rate for students in the district was not described, and may have included only the students who were enrolled in September or transferred into the district during the 2008-

2009 and 2009-2010 school years, respectively. In future years, the New Jersey Department of Education will adopt a federal standard for calculating high school graduation rates for its students and will calculate graduation rates by following students through four years of high school (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/grate/>). This standard would allow for meaningful comparisons between the Dreamers and the total population of students enrolled in district, however, this system and data is not yet available.

Comparisons were further complicated because conflicting data were provided in different reports, particularly regarding retentions and numbers of students who were lost to follow-up. The most conservative report was used to calculate Dreamer graduation rates. This report indicated that 42 of the original 57 students enrolled in the I Have a Dream Program are graduating on time with their cohort. Of the remaining 15 original Dreamers, nine students were retained, but were continuously enrolled in school. Two Dreamers have obtained their GEDs prior to their anticipated graduation date, one student dropped out of school and 3 students were unknown. Thus, from the 54 Dreamers whose progress could be verified, 42 (77.8%) are graduating on time. In contrast, in the 333 of 362.5 students (91.9%) in the district graduated in 2009-2010 and 88.4% in 2008-2009. As stated above, however, it is not clear how long the students represented in the district report of graduation rates were followed. Given the announced change in the method for calculating graduation rates, it is likely that these data represent students enrolled in the graduating year only. Since these data would not provide an adequate comparison group

of district students enrolled from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade through the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, no further analysis can be made.

Over the course of the 2012 graduating class, a single Dreamer dropped out of school at an undetermined time point. In contrast, 4.2% of students in the general population dropped out in the 2008-2009 school year and an additional 4.9% dropped out in the 2009-2010 school year. Drop-out rates were difficult to complete, as the publically accessible data only included the drop-out data for students in the general population during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years. In order to obtain reliable drop-out rates comparisons between Dreamers and their district peers, all student-drop outs for the general student population would need to be obtained and accounted for from the onset of the IHAD program in the year 2000 up until 2012. Meaningful comparisons cannot be made as there is no knowledge of how many general students moved, earned GEDs, etc.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Building on prior research, this dissertation assessed the academic impact of the 'I Have a Dream' program for its student participants (Dreamers), as evidenced through their state standardized testing results at Grades 4, 8, and 11, current high school enrollment, high school drop-out rates, and projected high school graduation rates. These Dreamer variables were collected and compared to the aggregated student population of their home district. Two hypotheses were tested in this study: 1. There will be a significant and positive correlation between the IHAD program and its students' academic trajectories and 2. Students in the IHAD program will be statistically different from their peers in regards to their academic attainment and achievement, as evidenced through the aforementioned variables.

Statistical analyses assessed the proportions of Dreamers and their grade level peers who attained proficiency on the NJ ASK 4 Language Arts and Mathematics subject areas. Results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in Language Arts proficiency scores between the Dreamers and their cohort peers. However, a statistically significant difference in Mathematics proficiency scores was detected between the two student groups, in which Dreamers scored significantly lower in Mathematics scores than their cohort peers. This early Mathematics performance gap could potentially be attributed to the Dreamers' enrollment within the district's lowest

achieving elementary school, which is historically characterized by limited financial resources, high staff turn-over, and other risk factors.

Statistical analyses assessed the proportions of Dreamers and grade level peers who attained proficiency on the NJ ASK 8 Language Arts and Mathematics subject areas. Results once again indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in Language Arts proficiency scores between the Dreamers and their cohort peers. There was however, a collective drop in Language Arts proficiency from NJ ASK 4 for both the Dreamers and their cohort peers at this time point, which might be suggestive of students transitioning during their middle school years and negotiating their academic and social commitments. By the time of NJ ASK 8, Dreamers had reduced the proficiency gap in Mathematics scores with their cohort peers, indicating that Mathematics proficiency between the groups was no longer statistically significant. The increase in Mathematics proficiency for the Dreamers could potentially be explained through the IHAD supplemental scholastic services of tutoring and other enrichment opportunities.

Statistical analyses of the proportion of Dreamers and grade level peers who attained proficiency on the HSPA Language Arts and Mathematics subject areas indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between groups. These results collectively suggest that the Dreamers had made gains from Grade 4 to Grade 11 in Language Arts and Mathematics. It is important to note that while the Dreamers improved on both measures between Grade 4 to Grade 11, the comparison cohort steadily



declined in their Mathematics proficiency during this time period and reached a plateau with their Language Arts proficiency rates. A potential explanation for the discrepancy between the Dreamers' Language Arts and Mathematics proficiency rates, as well as for the comparison group's Mathematics proficiency decline, may be indicative of the district's curriculum and an emphasis on Language Arts related skills and activities. It is not clear from this study if the Dreamer group was 'reaching high' scholastically from Grade 4 to 12 or if the comparison groups were declining with their academic progress. The noted gains could also be attributed to the supplemental academic supports that Dreamers were provided with through IHAD program.

Additional statistical analyses assessed the HSPA Language Arts and Mathematics proficiency proportions of Dreamers and grade level peers from the 2010-2011, 2009-2010, and 2008-2009 academic years. For these statistical analyses, all Dreamers were included (Special education classifications and limited English Proficiency) and were compared to all eleventh grade students within their school district for the aforementioned academic years. The proportion of Dreamers who achieved proficiency scores in Language Arts was not statistically significant from all the district 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2010-2011, 2009-2010, and 2008-2009 school years. The proportion of Dreamers who achieved proficiency in Mathematics varied across the three school years. No significant differences were detected for the Mathematics proficiency between the Dreamers and the district 11<sup>th</sup> graders for the 2010-2011 and 2008-2009 academic years. There was a statistically significant difference between the proportions

of Dreamers and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the district who were proficient in Mathematics during the 2009-2010 academic year, in which Dreamers achieved proficiency at a considerably lower rate. These statistics reinforce the initial set of results, suggesting that Language Arts was an identified strength for the Dreamer group in which they consistently performed comparably to their grade level peers. Results indicate that after Grade 4, Dreamers were performing comparably to their grade level peers in Mathematics, though Mathematics scores for both groups were at lower proficiency rate than Language Arts.

Providing an accurate comparison of graduation rates between the Dreamers and grade level peers from the 2010-2011, 2009-2010, and 2008-2009 academic year was not possible. The absence of a standardized system to calculate graduation results, coupled with the lack of drop-out, retention, and transfer reportings, did not allow for meaningful comparisons between the Dreamers and the total population of students within the district. Similarly, meaningful comparisons could not be made regarding drop-out rates due to the limited publically accessible data.

### **Limitations**

It is pivotal to highlight some limitations that should be considered while interpreting the results. As the original Dreamer group was a small sample size (n=57), the results discussed above are limited in reliably supporting claims of program success or lack thereof. The small sample size challenges the external validity behind the results

and limits the ability to generalize the program results on a broader level and to other IHAD programs throughout the nation.

It is also vital to illuminate the substantial amount of data missing from the Dreamers from Grade 4 to Grade 11. The final data set includes missing values due to errors, students moving to other states and having no comparable tests, grade retention, school drop-outs, or lack of testing. The valid scores of the cohort decreased during this time period, which could be the result of a decrease in student population, lack of testing, students dropping out, or other causes. Consequently, the yielded results should be interpreted with caution, as there was not a robust data set collection from the onset of this research endeavor.

Although a considerable amount of data were lost over time, it was consistent with the amount of missing data that is generally depicted in other longitudinal studies and the amount of remaining data was within limits and sufficient for analysis. In the future, it would be beneficial to create improved tracking systems for similar IHAD longitudinal research endeavors to allow for data collection of as many participants as possible and to maximize the reliability and the ability to generalize the study's results.

Another limitation of this research study involves the group comparisons between the Dreamers and the aggregated district data that included all grade level peers. The comparisons between the students are difficult to make, as the analyses did not include

true, homogenous groups. The Dreamers' lower rate of Mathematics proficiency in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade introduces a confounding factor and demonstrates the heterogeneity between the Dreamers and the cohort groups. Additionally, some of the analyses assessed the Dreamer group when extreme outliers and students with limited English proficiency and Special Education classifications were excluded. The aggregated data that was used for comparison purposes included all the district's student data in the figures and thus, impedes a genuine comparison. Additionally, the yielded results are based on the assumption that the Dreamers and their peers were comparable to one another prior to the implementation of the IHAD program. This aggregated data, however, was utilized as it was the only way to use and examine another student group for comparison purposes. It is speculated that by obtaining equal and randomized groups, there will be more strength in ascertaining if the IHAD participants were superior in their academic attainment when compared to grade level peers.

Another limitation is related to measurement issues, particularly with the publically reported graduation rates for comparison student groups within the identified district. A post on the New Jersey Department of Education website indicates that New Jersey is moving towards a federal standard for calculating high school graduation rates for its students, however, has not done so as of yet. The New Jersey Department of Education website reports that the current system of graduation rate calculations is reliant on the individual district's self-reported data. The website acknowledges that the graduation rates that are publicized may not be an accurate or reliable representation of

the actual number of graduates. Consequently, professionals anticipate that the new, standardized system of graduation rate calculations will lead to a decline in graduation rates, suggesting inflation of the publicized graduation totals (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/news/2011/0208rc.htm>).

As the interpretation of the reported graduation rates is dependent on which numbers and students are included in the analyses and there is no solid standard for measurement, the graduation comparison rates between Dreamers and other student groups should be interpreted with caution. It is difficult to conclude meaningful results or that the Dreamers' standardized assessment scores are comparable to the cohort results reported on the New Jersey Department of Education website, as the Dreamers' district of origin did not have clear reporting standards. Nevertheless, the publicized data was utilized as they provided the investigator and readers with a foundation for reporting figures.

### **Implications & Future Research**

As the statistical results obtained are somewhat comprised given the aforementioned limitations, the obtained data suggests that the Dreamers had made gains in their Language Arts and Mathematics Proficiency between Grades 4 and 11. These results also suggest that, ultimately, Dreamers fared comparably to peers with their academic attainment. It is plausible that their gains are attributable to the comprehensive and supplemental supports that are provided through the IHAD program. Sustained social

supports, such as personal and mentoring relationships with staff, may have been instrumental in buffering against the social adversities that the Dreamers encountered in their neighborhoods. Scholastic supports, including academic mentoring and enrichment programs, may have created and promoted motivation and opportunities for higher academic attainment amongst these disadvantaged students.

Despite limitations of the current study and the need for further research, the yielded results offer some support for the effectiveness of the IHAD program. General parallels can be seen between the results obtained from this dissertation and past IHAD research projects. The substantial proportions of Dreamers completing their high school education in a timely manner is highlighted by the Coons and Petrick (1991) and Arete Chicago (1991) studies and is further reinforced in this study. By including college admission and graduation rates, future research could allow for further comparisons amongst the different Dreamer groups and their respective academic attainment.

This dissertation is of significant value to current and prospective school psychologists, as the fundamental tenets and supports embedded in the IHAD program are potentially influential and linked to promoting higher education and achievement for disadvantaged, minority youth. Consequently, school psychologists who are invested in designing, implementing, and sustaining educational attainment in at-risk youth could replicate such a comprehensive educational model to incorporate the necessary supports to address at-risk needs. School psychologists' professional training could enhance the development, implementation, and evaluation of such future educational interventions;

their knowledge and experience in consultation, systems theory, and community intervention, could be employed to further refine and shape the program to accommodate the needs of identified students.

Although successful tenets to the IHAD program are outlined, it is imperative that school psychologists continue to investigate and understand the elements that are related to the program's success. Additionally, school psychologists must consider the various impediments that American youth encounter while residing in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. It is this understanding that will allow school psychologists to create a multifaceted intervention to comprehensively meet at-risk students' needs. Such consideration will also enable school psychologists to appreciate the daily obstacles that these youth encounter and surmount, which will lead to a global awareness to inform their programming efforts.

The IHAD program is well-documented intervention program that seeks to minimize and supplement the educational gaps for at-risk youth in urban locations. However, it is paramount for future school psychologists to continue researching and pursuing different avenues and interventions that would enable at risk-students to attain optimal scholastic performance and high school graduation. This dissertation imparts some knowledge of the academic benefits associated with the IHAD program and ultimately provides school psychologists with some alternatives to support our students' success in our schools, communities, and society.

In generating future intervention efforts, it is helpful for school psychologists to consider the impact of long standing historical and societal mechanisms that may be contributing to African American youth's academic merit and aspirations. Obgu (1978) posits that African American youth may identify with their marginalized standing society, ultimately shaping their internal beliefs about themselves and their academic attainment. Historical discrimination and segregation have limited African Americans from accessing higher educational opportunities and it is plausible that these social positions have been psychologically perpetuated and are currently impacting African American youth. These social barriers, coupled with lack of resources, larger class sizes, and less parental outreach may be potential factors in limited African American youth from attaining their highest academic potential. Such knowledge is imperative to consider, as these psychological and societal barriers may need to be addressed, navigated, and challenged to help develop and strengthen academic ambitions and success for African American students in prospective intervention efforts.

Although this dissertation assessed standardized tests as a marker of success, it is important to note that the program's effectiveness may have transcended the academic realm and its effects may be manifested in alternate ways. Several participants may demonstrate productivity as contributing citizens to society that may not be contingent on stellar academic records and it would be helpful to measure the IHAD program's ultimate impact. It would be helpful to examine what occupational roles Dreamers fulfill and how they used the IHAD program other than attending collegial institutions.



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Visited February 2012.

## APPENDIX A

**RUTGERS UNIVERSITY**  
**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**  
**ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus**  
**New Brunswick, NJ 08901**

January 17, 2012

**P.I. Name:** Diamantis  
**Protocol #:** E12-305

Olga Diamantis  
126 East Homestead Ave  
Palisades Park NJ 07650

Dear Olga Diamantis:

### Notice of Exemption from IRB Review

**Protocol Title:** "An Exploration of the 'I Have A Dream' Program and Its Impact Upon Urban Students' Academic Trajectory"

The project identified above has been approved for exemption under one of the six categories noted in 45 CFR 46, and as noted below:

**Exemption Date:** 11/21/2011                      **Exempt Category:** 4

This exemption is based on the following assumptions:

- **This Approval** - The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted.
- **Reporting** – ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- **Modifications** – Any proposed changes **MUST** be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- **Consent Form (s)** – Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;

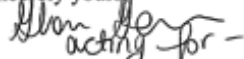
**Additional Condition:**     **Authorization from the following research site must be forwarded to the IRB prior to commencement of study procedures at the site(s): IHAD Project Coordinator & Plainfield, NJ Public School System**

**Additional Notes:**             **None**

**Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.**

The Federalwide Assurance (FWA) number for Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Sincerely yours,

  
acting for -

Sheryl Goldberg  
Director of Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
[gibel@grants.rutgers.edu](mailto:gibel@grants.rutgers.edu)

cc: Kenneth Schneider