

HIGH SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGIES

A Summary of Research and Implications

Freshman (Ninth grade) transition programs

- **Why (research supporting need)**
- **What are effective ninth grade transition practices and programs**
- **Examples and results**

Why? Research on middle school to high school transition

[The Pivotal Year](#), Black, Susan, American School Board Journal, February 2004: Vol. 191, No. 02. Excerpts from research review:

NASSP study nearly 20 years ago by middle school experts John Lounsbury and J. Howard Johnston. Extensive study of ninth grades in 48 states and the District of Columbia. Shadowing ninth-graders and observing their daily school experiences, Lounsbury and Johnston found:

- disconcerting mismatch between school policies and practices and 14-year-olds' developmental needs
- Most instruction teacher centered, with teachers lecturing and students taking notes and completing assignments
- Ability grouping and tracking were common
- 40- to 50-minute class schedule
- most high schools offered little or no guidance to help ninth-graders adjust academically and socially
- many fell by the wayside, feeling that school was "pointless and endless."
- even in well-managed high schools that appeared to be running smoothly, the researchers said, "something was missing" -- especially in the "flat and narrow" teacher-student interactions
- predicted the ninth grade would "continue to drift" and "mirror the worst of outmoded high school practices that do little to foster positive learning for all students."

Anne Wheelock's 1993 study of high school reform

- 9th grade "a minefield for the most vulnerable students," especially those who become disengaged and discouraged and who fail to develop strong bonds with teachers and their school.
- tedious lessons, overcrowded classrooms, and indifferent teachers were among the factors Wheelock found that diminished students' already fragile attachment to school.
- when students feel their teachers and schools are uncaring and inhospitable, the attachment is easily broken.

1998 study of 450 high schools and their feeder middle schools by Jay Hertzog, Slippery Rock University, PA and Lena Morgan, State University of West Georgia.

- failing ninth grade spells doom for about 25 percent of ninth-graders nationwide.
- But some schools far exceed this average -- failing up to 45 percent of their ninth-grade class.
- "Ninth grade," says Hertzog, "has become the holding tank for high schools."

Study by Walt Haney, Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy, Boston College, presented at a conference sponsored by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project and Northeastern University's Institute on Race and Justice

- "grade nine is a key valve in the education pipeline and is closing for many students, especially minority students."
- African-American ninth-grade boys fare the worst
- Those who fail to graduate are "far more likely to end up in prison."
- high schools are increasingly "squeezing students out of the education pipeline" by flunking more students and forcing them to repeat ninth grade
- in some states, actively pushing students out of school to improve test scores.
- During the 1970s, attrition of students between grades nine and 10 was 5 percent or less
- In the mid-1980s, the attrition rate between these grades began a steady increase, reaching 10 percent by the mid-1990s. 400,000 students nationwide each year
- Haney's research in Texas and other states, conducted in 2000 and 2001, show that 70 to 80 percent of students who fail to pass ninth grade will not graduate from high school

"Transition from Middle School into High School", Mizelle, Nancy, and Judith Irvin. Westerville, Ohio: National Middle School Association.

- As they make the transition into high school, many young adolescents experience a larger, more impersonal, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment than they experienced in middle school (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984).
- They experience a greater diversity of teachers and peers, and they have more choices to make in their curricular and extracurricular activities.
- many young adolescents' grades drop, and they do not attend school as regularly as they did (Barone et al., 1991; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994).
- They also develop a more negative view of themselves and feel an increased need for peer friendships (Hertzog et al., 1996)
- once young adolescents make the transition into high school... concerned about how difficult the classes were and how to manage their time when they got involved in extracurricular activities. How to study and how to manage their time were major concerns once these young adolescents made the transition into high school.

- School seemed a lot more difficult and demanding than it had in middle school.

Research Summary on Grade Level Configurations: Grade Level Configurations and Student Achievement: What Does the Research Say?, National School Boards Association

- **Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and high school**, Alspaugh, John W., *The Journal of Educational Research*, v 92 n 1, Sept/Oct 1998, p. 20-25. Reports significant decreases in student achievement in transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school.
- **The effect of transition grade to high school, gender, and grade level upon dropout rates**, Alspaugh, John W., *American Secondary Education*, v 29 n 1, Fall 2000, p. 2-9. Study to compare dropout rates for boys versus girls in high schools with grade spans of 7-12, 9-12, and 10-12.
 - For all three high school grade spans, boys had higher dropout rates than girls.
 - The highest dropout rates were in the short grade span 10-12 high schools, where students make the transition to high school when they are approximately 16 years of age.
 - The lowest dropout rates were in school districts without intermediate level schools, in which students make only one transition from elementary to secondary school at the seventh grade level.

Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout, Neild, Ruth Curran, Scott Stoner-Eby and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. , Harvard Civil Rights Project

- despite an extensive set of pre-high school controls for family, achievement, aspirations, school engagement, and peer relationships, ninth grade outcomes add substantially to our ability to predict dropout.
- The importance of the ninth grade year suggests that reducing the enormous dropout rates in large cities will require attention to the transition to high school.

ADOLESCENCE, SCHOOL TRANSITIONS, AND PREVENTION A Research-Based Primer, March 1993, by Beth Ann Berliner, Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities, Far West Laboratory, March 1993 Describes combination of developmental and transitions stresses on adolescents, and components of recommended preventative intervention programs

What are effective ninth grade transition practices and programs?

"Transition from Middle School into High School." Mizelle, Nancy, and Judith Irvin. Westerville, Ohio: National Middle School Association. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education Champaign IL.

- Mac Iver (1990) found that fewer students were retained in the transition grade when middle school students experienced a high school transition program with several, diverse articulation activities.
- in a study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools, Hertzog and Morgan (1999) found that schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided students few articulation activities.
- like Mac Iver, Hertzog and Morgan concluded that the best transition programs were those that included a variety of activities-in particular, counseling, school visits, and special summer courses to help students understand their new school.
- critical importance of middle school practices to assist students in transition to 9th grade:

"the average middle level school used only three to four articulation practices (significantly fewer than they used with incoming students) to bridge their students' transition into high school. Furthermore, many young adolescent students still do not experience a smooth and successful transition into high school, even though there is compelling research about appropriate articulation practice...Educators need to understand that articulating young adolescents' transition into high school involves the total middle school program as well as specific articulation practices at the time of the transition."

Helping Middle School Students Make The Transition Into High School

ERIC Digest. ERIC Identifier: ED432411 Publication Date: 1999-08-00 Author: Mizelle, Nancy B. Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education Champaign IL. Recommends that a high school transition program include a variety of activities that

- provide students and parents with information about the new school
- provide students with social support during the transition
- bring middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements.

Examples and results

Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School (High Schools that Work website)

Examples of effective middle school to high school transition strategies

“Many students find the journey from the middle grades to high school difficult. They lack the knowledge and skills necessary for doing high-school-level work, and they do not have the study skills needed to meet higher standards in ninth grade and beyond. Middle schools and high schools increasingly are creating “safety nets” - special programs to help students make the transition to grade nine. This publication contains 15 examples of transition programs that work in raising achievement and keeping students in school. The strategies include summer schools for incoming ninth-graders; multi-year programs in the middle grades to accelerate achievement; double doses of English and mathematics in grade nine; programs that provide extra help and extra time; academies and small learning communities of students within a school; a special school to prepare ninth-graders for high school; and assignment of the best teachers to plan and lead the transition initiative.”

Components of an effective transition system

- ✦ **Continuous planning with teacher involvement.** Many schools use study teams of teachers and school leaders to plan and revise their transition initiatives. The teams focus on using data to understand students’ deficiencies and on employing proven practices to close achievement gaps. They study what other schools have done to develop effective transition programs. When schools have an organized approach to transition, teachers will support helping students to learn essential academic concepts. Most schools look at student achievement to measure progress in order to make needed changes in their initiatives.
- ✦ **Working together to bridge communication gaps.** Transition initiatives involve middle grades and high school leaders and teachers paying attention to instruction and working together to bridge communication gaps from one school to another. The teachers focus on:
 - ✦ helping middle grades students, parents and teachers understand the rising expectations of high school;
 - ✦ communicating clearly what students need to know and be able to do in English language arts, mathematics and science to do challenging high school work; and
 - ✦ following up on the course failure rates of ninth-graders to determine what the middle grades and the high school can do to increase success.
- ✦ **High expectations for students who are performing below grade level.** Successful schools set high standards, upgrade the curriculum and expect all students to do at least grade-level work. **These schools have found that struggling students will never meet grade-level standards unless they are taught to those standards, given challenging assignments and expected to perform at that level.** Successful schools help students do higher-level work and require them to redo work, stay after school to complete unfinished homework, and get extra help if they are not meeting grade-level standards.
- ✦ **Beyond drill sheets — engaging students in challenging and meaningful assignments.** Successful schools have learned that students’ assignments must be challenging, meaningful and engaging. Such assignments require more teacher planning and greater use of realworld problems and lessons that teach academic knowledge and skills.
- ✦ **Extra help and extra time to meet high standards.** Teachers at effective schools make it known that they believe students can do high-level work; students at these schools believe

their teachers will be available to help them meet high standards. **Many schools have discovered that extra-time and extra-help programs work best when teachers assist students in mastering the content and standards formerly reserved for the “best” students.** This help often occurs in out-of-school time.

- ✦ **Telling students and the community the truth.** Many schools tell parents the truth about the level of effort the school and the students will have to make to get students to meet at least grade-level standards. It is important to emphasize with parents the necessity for students to be better prepared to meet higher standards in high school. Successful schools help parents understand their role in getting students to meet higher standards. Parents must be willing for their children to spend additional time at school as needed to catch up.

- ✦ **Flexible scheduling.** Some students may need longer blocks of time to master rigorous content. Successful schools see a flexible schedule as a resource and take steps to give students more quality learning time.

Strategies for an effective transition system

- ✦ **Using an interdisciplinary approach to accelerate low-performing middle grades students.**

George Fox Middle School in Pasadena, Maryland, uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines academic studies to make learning more meaningful for students. Northwest Rankin Middle School in Brandon, Mississippi, has had success with a two-year interdisciplinary program for students in grades seven and eight. Teacher teams at Pickens Middle School in Pickens, South Carolina, teach small groups of seventh-graders.

- ✦ **Summer schools for middle grades students.** Summer sessions prevent loss of learning for at-risk students and give them a head start on the coming school year. A program for low performing seventh- and eighth-graders at Margaret Brent Middle School in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, provides extra help and time, a different type of instruction and a way to help close the gap between their achievement and state standards.

- ✦ **Summer programs for incoming ninth-graders who are below grade-level standards.**

POLYTECH High School in Woodside, Delaware, requires all incoming ninth-graders who have scored well below state standards on the eighth-grade assessment to attend a special summer program that emphasizes mathematics and reading. Tri-County Regional Vocational Technical School in Franklin, Massachusetts, organized a summer academy to help incoming freshmen raise their academic skills and adjust to the expectations of high school.

- ✦ **Jump-start programs for ninth-graders.** Freshmen at South Grand Prairie High School in Texas take a special 12-week course to get off to a good start in the first semester of high school. Taught by the school’s best teachers, this course is reducing the number of freshmen who are retained.

- ✦ **Teacher support teams.** Rockcastle County High School and Rockcastle County Middle School in Kentucky work together on a year-long support program for eighth-graders considered to be at risk of failure or dropping out. The support class for at-risk students at Lemon Bay High School in Englewood, Florida, is showing results in terms of retention and achievement.

- ✦ **Academies and small learning communities.** Small groups of students are organized into academies or schools-within-schools taught by teachers who are qualified and motivated to help students succeed at a higher level. Bok High School in Philadelphia organizes urban students into small learning communities where they receive intensive instruction in English and mathematics. The freshman academy at Henry County High School in Kentucky focuses on English, mathematics and science.

- ✦ **Double doses of English and mathematics.** Ninth-graders at Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School in South Carolina take double doses of English I and Algebra I.

✦ **Special schools to prepare students for high school and beyond.** Separate buildings or spaces for ninth-graders allow freshmen to focus on their academic studies in the first year of high school. The Scott County Ninth Grade School in Georgetown, Kentucky, has its own administrators, teachers and counselors to build students' academic and personal skills in the critical first year of high school. Memorial High School in Texas is a school for ninth- and 10th-graders.

Salem High School, Salem Virginia: Freshman Transition Teams:

- Implemented over last 13 years through [High Schools That Work](#) (HSTW) involvement
- Extensive planning for one year and summer
- Good example of professional development community and highly responsive team using continuous data to monitor and make adjustments to improve student success
- [Freshman Transition Conference March 27 and April 24](#), Greenfield Conference Center just north of Roanoke, VA. by Dr. Alan Seibert, Scott Habeeb, and Ray Moore (chair of 9th grade program and one of original founders), all of whom formed a consulting business last year after years of sharing experience with schools wishing to implement programs to help freshmen. Conference last spring drew 220 participants from several states, and the reviews were excellent. During the last year, presentations to Durham, NC, North Carolina Best Practices Institute, High Schools That Work Conference in Ohio, fourth and fifth times at The University of Virginia's "The Ninth Grade - The Make It or Break It Year" Conference. Helped high schools in Pittsylvania County, VA, Chattanooga, TN and Roanoke, VA set up freshmen transition programs.

Critical components:

- A team of teachers representing the core curriculum areas (English, math, science, and world history) meets daily during a common planning period to standardize expectations, develop possible cross-curriculum assignments, and - when necessary - conference with students and/or parents.
- Each student has the same four classes with the same four teachers, but not necessarily in the same order, ensuing that the student's peer interactions are varied from class to class.
- The team has administrative peers. When mutually agreed upon by the team, a student's schedule can be modified to enhance student performance or simply to change class personality.
- The team has established a common system of class rules, procedures, and expectations.
- The team works to identify common problems and to discuss solutions. Such problems include, but are not limited to, classroom discipline and meeting the special needs of individual students.
- General meetings of all teachers of ninth grade students have been held to help share ideas and strategies that could benefit all freshmen.

- The team strives for continuous improvement. Faculty members conduct research, participate in workshops, and visit other schools, bringing valuable insights and in-service to ninth grade faculty.
- Program Planning: one half hour session consisting of one student, his or her parents, a guidance counselor, a vocational teacher, and one freshman team teacher who has that student in class. During program planning conferences students have the opportunity to discuss their hobbies and interests as well as their goals for high school, post high school education and for a career. ([Click to view Program Planning Portfolio](#)) The student and parents are then given practical information on how the student can best meet their goals and fulfill their interests while at Salem High School.

Building success through the Keystone program, South Grand Prairie High School, Grand Prairie, TX, reported in [Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School](#), High Schools That Work

- The passage of students from the middle grades to high school is the most difficult transition point in education. The failure rate in grade nine is three to five times higher than that of any other grade.
- The faculty realized that the transition to ninth grade was a critical step for all students, not just at-risk students. The mantra became, “If you want to change your school, you had better begin with the freshmen.” The staff added two new courses at critical transition points: a “keystone” course for ninth-graders and a “capstone” course for juniors and seniors.
- Keystone enables the school to help at-risk ninth-graders without labeling them or separating them from other students. The course is a way to get every student off to the right start and to ensure that every student has the right attitudes and study skills.
- Keystone includes three weeks of orientation to the course, the school and the staff. Orientation also is a time for students to learn about clubs and activities and to take “field trips” on the school campus.
- During the next six weeks, students learn to communicate, manage time and set goals —skills that will help them in high school and beyond. They learn that “excellence is a habit.”
- During the last three weeks of Keystone, students explore career possibilities and set educational and career goals. They work on their programs of study, and teachers and guidance counselors encourage them to enroll in honors courses. Guidance counselors monitor and update students’ academic plans throughout high school and provide copies to parents when they attend student/parent/counselor meetings.
- The last days of Keystone are very busy. Seniors share with ninth-graders what they would do differently if they could do it all over again, and the freshmen visit a nearby college for Think College Early Day.

- Results: In 1997-1998 (the first year of Keystone), 75 percent of 10th graders passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) mathematics test. In 2000-2001, 89 percent of 10th-graders passed the test.
- In 1997-1998, 69 students took Advanced Placement exams; in 2000-2001, 346 students took those tests.
- Even though the emphasis on academics increased, attendance remained at 95 percent between 1997-1998 and 1999-2000.
- The Texas Education Agency recognized South Grand Prairie High School in 1999-2000 for the school's large one-year increase in the percentage of students who completed one of two higher-level graduation plans: the Recommended graduation plan and the Distinguished
- Advanced Placement (DAP) graduation plan. The school abandoned the state's lowest-level graduation plan and began to enroll students in more rigorous courses.
- In 2002, evolved into [separate 9th grade "school"](#) with own principal. The Ninth Grade Center was opened in 2002 and is located at the west end of the GPHS 10-12 campus. It has the capability of housing 1,000 students.

[Westport High School, Westport, MA](#) Couples career academies with freshman transition team. Westport High School was singled out as one of five outstanding contributing schools at a National High Schools That Work Conference in Atlanta, GA this past summer, also the host for a recent regional conference on pacesetting schools

[Talent Development High Schools](#): high school reform program out of [Johns Hopkins](#) (building on Success for All). [Summary of model, research, costs and contacts](#) from the NW Regional Educational Laboratory and The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) Also see [AEL](#) (formerly the Appalachia Educational Laboratory) for summary & contacts

The Talent Development High School with Career Academies is a comprehensive multi-phased reform model for large high schools that have serious problems of student attendance, discipline, achievement scores, and dropout rates. The model is specific in the required school organization and curriculum changes, in contrast to other high school reform recommendations that emphasize general principles to be achieved or the reform process to be followed. Two critical components described below: Ninth Grade Success Academy and Twilight School

Critical components of Talent High School with Career Academies Model

- Ninth Grade Success Academy required of all freshman students
- Freshman Seminar and double-dose reading and math courses.
- Twilight School: alternative after-hours program
- Organization into 4-5 teacher team responsible for entire group of 150-180, common planning time very similar to middle school team model
- Additional support: separate academy principal and instructional leader in charge, team leader for each teacher team
- Additional structure: separate part of building, own tech and science labs

- Commitment to regular examination of data to set goals and monitor trends in student behavior

Ninth Grade Success Academy

A separate transitional program is provided for students in their first year of high school that places them with small interdisciplinary teams of 4 or 5 teachers who share the same 150 to 180 students and a block schedule with common planning time. This unit has its own part of the building with its own clearly labeled entrance, including the computer and science labs needed for ninth grade courses. A separate management team (the Academy Principal and Academy Instructional Leader) is in charge of the Ninth Grade Success Academy.

Major responsibility for finding solutions to individual student attendance, discipline, and learning problems rests with the teacher teams, where each has a Team Leader and uses regular data to set goals and monitor trends in student behavior. Good student attendance becomes a priority to set the foundation for serious student work to earn promotion on time to the next grade. Numerous activities are structured throughout the first term to prepare students to make a wise choice of program for their final three high school years, through extensive self-awareness opportunities concerning career goals and interests, and the provision of detailed information on high school choices and college alternatives. Students then select a Career Academy for the next 3 years.

Twilight School

An alternative after-hours program is conducted in the building for students who have serious attendance or discipline problems or who are coming to the school from prison or suspension from another school. Instruction is offered in small classes in the basic subjects, and extensive services are provided by guidance and support staff. The goal is for students to earn their way back to regular day school after a 4- or 5-week period by developing coping skills to be successful there.

Publications describing critical components:

OP-NGA01	<i>Creating a Ninth Grade Success Academy (Ed.)</i>	\$33.00
OP-TL01	<i>Guidebook for Team Leaders in TDHS</i>	\$25.00
OP-TS01	<i>Creating a Twilight School and a Twilight Academy</i>	\$25.00
OP-SCHE	<i>Scheduling the Talent Development High School</i>	\$25.00

OP-IMPL	<i>Implementation: Year 1 Guidebook</i>	\$25.00
OP-CA03	<i>Creating Career Academies with Teams in the TDHS</i>	\$25.00
OP-EXTEND	<i>A Guide to Using the Extended Class Period</i>	\$10.00

To order, or for other information concerning TDHS publications, please contact:

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Examples of results from Talent Development high schools:

Patterson High School, Baltimore, MD made greatest strides in increasing # of 9th grade students who earned promotion to 10th grade.

5 Philadelphia inner-city high schools:

- Schools implementing the model for two or more years have seen their 9th grade attendance improve by fifteen or more percentage points, while the number of students with 90% or more attendance has doubled.
- The number of students to reach the 11th grade in the first two schools to implement Talent Development has nearly doubled.
- Across all five schools, course pass rates are up while suspensions, fires, and arrests are down.
- A substantial number of students have begun to close achievement gaps in both reading and math. Nearly a third of the 9th graders, for example, have gained at least two years in math.

Chicago Public Schools: freshman academies in every high school starting 1997

Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI

- Professional Learning Community description, Freshman Success Academy and career academies
- place students into support teams with four academic teachers and operate on a block schedule.
- give academy teachers the opportunity to get to know their students and develop a mentor relationship with them
- Mentoring by academically successful upper class students is a key element in providing positive role models.
- Integrated into the entire yearlong experience are opportunities for students to explore the five career academies offered during their sophomore, junior, and senior years.

- Each student will make a career academy choice at the end of the freshman year.

[The Transition to Middle School](#). ERIC Digest ED422119, by Schumacher, Donna, 1998-06-00. Recommends guidelines for establishing a ninth-grade transition program and effective transition practices.

[Isolating 9th graders](#), Reents, Jennifer Newton, *School Administrator*, v 59 n 3, March 2002, p. 14-19. Discusses increasing popularity of separate school for 9th graders and examples