

### The Critical 9th Grade Year: More On Student Success

#### In A Nutshell

Most educators agree that the 9th grade is critical for student success and eventual high school graduation. Recent statistics show that it is the year in which most dropouts actually occur — either officially or unofficially. It is certainly the year in which both academic and behavioral problems begin to show themselves in ways that ultimately effect high school success and post-secondary access. Three key factors contribute to success: attendance, academic performance, and engagement with the school. Numerous programs exist and have produced good results in some very challenging settings by focusing on these variables. This brief shows how to reproduce these successful interventions in local schools.

Most educators know, intuitively, that the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is a critical year for students. It is a time that calls for rapid adjustment to new social and academic demands, orientation to an increasingly bureaucratic environment, and, for many students, even travel to a school location that might be far removed from their familiar neighborhood. Complicating matters even further, all of this occurs in the context of increased freedom and the need to choose from an unprecedented array of options affecting academics, social engagement, and school behavior. It's no wonder so many students struggle during the Freshman year.

What may be less obvious to practicing educators are the grim statistics that underscore the depth and complexity of this struggle. The National High School Center (NHSC, March, 2007) reports the following:

- Students in ninth grade comprise the highest percentage of the overall high school population because students in disproportionate numbers are failing to be promoted out of ninth grade. Promotion rates between ninth and tenth grade are much lower than rates between other grades.
- Nationwide, enrollment between ninth and tenth grades drops almost 11%, reflecting both the large number of students not promoted to tenth grade as well as those students that drop out after ninth grade and before tenth grade.
- In the last 30 years, partly as a result of more demanding promotion standards, the bulge of students in grade nine has more than tripled, from approximately 4% to 13% of the total school population.
- 40% of ninth graders in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only about 10% of those repeaters go on to graduate.
- Ninth grade attrition is far more pronounced in urban, high-poverty schools: 40% of dropouts in low-income high schools left after ninth grade, compared to 27% in low-poverty districts.
- Attrition between grades nine and ten hovers around 20% for African American students; for their white peers, attrition between grades nine and ten is stable at around 7%.
- Most high school dropouts fail at least 25% of their ninth grade courses, while only 8% of high school completers do so.



This is a revised edition of a Research Brief originally prepared in 2011 by Howard Johnston and Ronald Williamson.

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In fact, researchers (NHSC, 2007) are able to pinpoint fairly specific indicators that a student is likely to drop out from two simple calculations about 9<sup>th</sup> graders' performance. 'More than one semester "F" in core subjects and fewer than five full course credits by the end of freshman year are key indicators that a student is not on track to graduate. Low attendance during the first 30 days of the ninth grade year is a stronger indicator that a student will drop out than any other eighth grade predictor, including test scores, other academic achievement, and age.' (p. 1)

### The High Cost of Grade Retention

Beyond the statistics reported above, a longitudinal study of Philadelphia high school students (Sadowski, 2004) found that a history of retention was a very strong predictor of dropping out. Three key findings from this study include:

- Among students who dropped out, 46 percent were in ninth grade and 33 percent in 10th grade. Although almost half the students who dropped out were ninth graders, it was not their first year in high school. The largest number of dropouts left during their third year, without ever having accumulated enough credits to make it into 10th grade.
- When students get past ninth grade, they are far less likely to drop out. Just 11 percent of students who made it to 10th grade were listed as dropouts and 20 percent as possible dropouts. Most students who reached 11th grade graduated from high school.
- High-school transition programs may be essential for at-risk ninth-grade students. Such programs include summer bridge programs to help prepare rising ninth graders for the demands of high school. Within a regular high school, a self-contained program that has its own space and faculty and intensive coaching for students who fall behind can help at-risk students succeed.

In a major study in a large urban district by Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008), the pattern described in earlier research played out in very concrete terms: "60% of those who dropped out within 6 years of starting high school had not been promoted after their 1st year, compared to just 8% of those who graduated. Among those who spent more than 1 year as ninth graders, only 20% completed high school in 6 years." (p. 543)



In short, retaining a student in the ninth grade is a virtual guarantee that he or she will become a dropout.

### Good News and Not-so-good News

The good news is that a lot of the forces that contribute to ninth grade failure and dropping out are school-based and can be modified. The bad news is that a lot of the forces are school based and haven't been changed in many years.

Neild and her colleagues say that "The high rates of course failure among urban freshmen are the consequence of a mismatch between students' academic and social skills, on the one hand, and, on the other, the organization, practices, and demands of many of the large high schools they attend." (p. 543). After reviewing the literature, they list some of those mismatches in very clear terms:

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- The majority of ninth graders at nonselective urban high schools enter with academic skills several years below grade level. Their secondary-certified teachers are ill-prepared to teach basic literacy and numeracy—having been trained to teach algebra and literature—and many lack the materials, inclination, or both to work with ninth graders on basic skills.
- Because teacher status systems within schools work to relegate the least desirable teaching assignments to the newest faculty, ninth-grade teachers are more likely to be uncertified, new to teaching, and/or new to the school than those teaching upper-grades students.
- Freshmen often do not understand that they must earn credits for promotion, and by the time they do learn about graduation requirements, opportunities to pass their courses may have been long gone.
- The turbulence that often characterizes the beginning of the school year in urban high schools—overcrowded classrooms, insufficient textbooks, incomplete rosters, schedule changes, and a revolving door of teachers -- increases the likelihood that ninth graders will fail courses. The school disorganization at the beginning of the year may contribute to the high rate of absenteeism in the first few weeks of school.
- High schools typically allow students greater independence than middle schools, but this freedom sometimes works to the detriment of freshman academic success. Large high schools provide abundant opportunities for skipping class to roam school hallways and hang out with friends. There are strong pressures on students to find their place in a new social system, particularly when a number of schools “feed” into a single high school.



Based on their analysis of hundreds of students over several years, Neild and her colleagues conclude that the first year of high school is absolutely critical for success – contributing as much to the decision to drop out of school as the other issues and background problems kids bring to the high school *combined*. Their key findings are presented below:

- The academic difficulty that students experience in ninth grade is not simply a reflection of what students bring with them when they enter high school. Rather, the experience of the ninth-grade year contributes substantially to the probability of dropping out, even when the researchers controlled for demographic and family background characteristics, previous school performance, and pre–high school attitudes and ambitions.
- Although dropping out indeed may be the culmination of a process with roots in students’ earliest educational experiences, there are specific points in students’ educational careers where degree completion hangs in the balance and educational trajectories are reshaped. Difficulty in navigating these treacherous waters, substantially increases the probability of leaving high school without ever finishing.
- Decreasing the dropout rate, at least among urban students, will require paying attention to the critical high school transition year. Put more strongly, the inner-city dropout epidemic cannot be ameliorated unless high schools organize themselves to help students through the transition to high school.

Despite evidence that specific practices can bring about incremental improvements in 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduation rates, their overall recommendation is very sobering:

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[T]urning around ninth-grade student outcomes to even a moderate extent is an enormous undertaking. A dropout prevention class here, a mentor there, a new math curriculum, rewards for attendance or good grades, a new discipline policy—none of these piecemeal solutions are likely to have an appreciable impact on educational outcomes for urban students who are vulnerable to academic failure. The issue is too complex, the problems of traditional high school organization too interlinked.

Instead, we will need to think of quite radical solutions. In fact, substantially affecting ninth-grade failure, and the associated dropout rate, may require doing away with the high school transition entirely or else allowing students to make a transition to a high school that is much smaller than the typical urban neighborhood high school. In this era of increased interest in experimenting with nontraditional school structures, perhaps students should have more options to remain in the same school from K-12 or to attend small, flexibly operated schools where “being known” is taken for granted.

### What Can Be Done?

It’s not enough to admonish schools to create “a personalized environment” and engage students in a “rigorous, authentic curriculum” in a “collaborative climate that supports learning for everyone.” Principals get it. They have to change things in their schools. The question is “how.”

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has identified several categories of intervention that help schools organize a comprehensive effort to improve school completion – especially among poor, minority and limited English proficient students. These are:

- Data systems identify struggling students who need early interventions.
- Learning environments are challenging and personalized for each student.
- Mentors are used for role models and advocates for students.
- Students who are behind in school receive academic support .

A full discussion of these strategies, with links to helpful resources for other schools, can be found on the TEA website listed in the Resources section of this brief.

Gene Bottoms (2008) summarizes the key features of programs that distinguish schools with high 9<sup>th</sup> grade success rates from those that have more failures and dropouts.

- Work with middle grades schools to orient students to high school life.
- Provide a summer bridge program for students.
- Establish a ninth-grade academy in which at-risk students take double periods of English and mathematics.
- Enroll students in career exploratory courses.
- Participate in a teacher-adviser program to help students receive extra help and set career and educational goals.

His very comprehensive, readable and succinct report can be accessed in the Resources section of this brief.

Despite calls for large-scale revolutionary change in the ways high schools operate, the process can be made much less daunting by revolutionizing the *experience of individual students* in order to promote their success. Corinne Herlihy

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summarizes a large body of literature on high school reform initiatives – and the Talent Development model in particular – to identify key variables associated with improved performance for 9<sup>th</sup> graders. She says that “supporting a smooth transition to high school requires allowing struggling students to catch up while also ensuring they are challenged and engaged in learning.” That’s a tall order, especially for kids who have a long history of school detachment and failure. But practices and structural changes are possible and can often be achieved through strong leadership. Herlihy’s work suggests:

- small learning communities for ninth graders, teamed students and teachers, and built in time for teachers to work together.
- ongoing coaching for teachers and peer-to-peer assistance.
- intense instructional focus built around a clearly delineated curriculum
- extended block schedule to allow for maximum instructional time
- catch-up” courses designed to help students meet the demands of more rigorous high school work, specifically algebra and English
- professional development focused on improving daily instruction in concrete and specific terms.
- double-doses of math and English

A very engaging study by Kathleen Cushman asks rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders what they think they need to be successful in making the transition to high school. Their answers are both straightforward and insightful – a helpful asset for school leaders. Among their recommendations are these:

- *Connect us up regularly with high school students.* Getting advice and help from adults is helpful, but it’s best when it comes from other kids who have had to make the adjustments.
- *Support us in developing skills and strategies for high school success.* These aren’t just academic skills, but include opportunities for leadership, organizing a task or activity, and doing something important.
- *Help us make strong and mutually respectful connections with adults.* When students and their concerns are treated respectfully, they are much more likely to reciprocate with adults and one another. An adult mentor/advocate in the school can be a huge asset.
- *Provide bridge experiences in the summer after 8th grade.* Things as simple as helping 9<sup>th</sup> graders walk through their schedules the day before school officially opens or engaging them in social activities with other high school kids will help ease a lot of their concerns.

They also recommend these specific practices and structures:

*Create smaller learning communities for us.*

*Group 9th graders together in one physical setting.*

*Start our year with a 9th grade orientation period.*

*Match us up with student mentors.*

*Build advisory groups into our schedule.*

*Design classroom activities to connect with us personally.*

*Lengthen class periods to give us more time to learn.*

*Establish fair classroom norms and enforce them consistently.*

*Give us extra help, both in and out of class.*

*Provide extra activities to help us succeed at things we care about.*

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### The Bottom Line

Engaging, personalized programs, and lots of adult support are the key ingredients for stemming the disturbing tide of 9th grade dropouts. Even with limited and ever-declining resources, many schools cited in this brief and described in the Resource section that follows have been able to achieve these critical conditions — not necessarily by adding new programs and operations, but by changing some of the things we have always done in schools.

### References and Resources

- ◆ Bottoms, G. (2008). Redesigning the Ninth Grade: Redesigning the Ninth-Grade Experience: Reduce Failure, Improve Achievement and Increase High School Graduation Rates. High Schools that Work. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved August 11, 2013 from [http://publications.sreb.org/2008/08V06\\_9th-grade\\_redesign.pdf](http://publications.sreb.org/2008/08V06_9th-grade_redesign.pdf)

If you are going to read only one publication on this topic, this is it. Gene Bottoms summarizes the research, uses it to make solid recommendations, and gives school-based examples of programs in practice. Comprehensive and succinct, this is perfect for starting the discussion of 9<sup>th</sup> grade interventions with the entire faculty and school community.

- ◆ Herlihy, C. (May, 2007). Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition Into High School. Issue Brief. National High School Center. Retrieved June 30, 2011 from [http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/NHSC\\_TowardEnsuring\\_051607.pdf](http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/NHSC_TowardEnsuring_051607.pdf)

A thorough investigation of research-based, practical strategies for creating smooth transitions to high school and reducing the risk of dropping out in the critical first year.

- ◆ Heppen, J. and Therriault, S.B. (2009). Developing Early Warning Systems to Identify Potential High School Dropouts. Washington, DC: National High School Resource Center. Retrieved August 11, 2013 from [http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/ews\\_guide.asp](http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/ews_guide.asp).

This excellent article lays out in detail how to create and manage an “early warning” system for dropout prevention. It includes easy-to-gather measures and indicators that are collected routinely by most schools as part of their normal data reporting requirements.

- ◆ Kennelly, L. and Monrad, M. (October, 2007). Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Early Interventions. Report from National High School Center. Retrieved August 12, 2013 from:

Very comprehensive report and detailed recommendations for detecting early warning signs of dropping out and designing effective strategies and interventions to interrupt the cycle of failure and dropping out of school.

- ◆ Martin, N. and Halperin, S. (2006). Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth. Washington, DC: National Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved August 12, 2013 from <http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>.

This comprehensive report describes actual practices in 12 communities that have been successful in reducing the dropout rate, re-engaging kids with “one foot out of the door,” and re-claiming kids who have already left school.

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- ◆ Neild, R. C., Stoner-Eby, S., and Furstenberg, F. (April, 2008). Connecting Entrance and Departure: The Transition to Ninth Grade and High School Dropout, *Education and Urban Society*, 40: 543. Retrieved June 23, 2011 from <http://eus.sagepub.com/content/40/5/543.full.pdf+html>.

An excellent research study on the links between school actions that support student entrance to the high school and reduced dropout behavior.

- ◆ O'Brien, A. (August 21, 2012). Middle Schools' Role in Dropout Prevention. Middle School Resources Blog. *Edutopia*. Retrieved August 12, 2013 from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/dropout-prevention-middle-school-resources-anne-obrien>.

Focused on what middle schools can do to prepare kids for high school and help prevent dropouts, this blog provides great resources for middle and high school collaboration designed to reduce failure and dropout behavior.

- ◆ Shore, R. and Shore, B. (July, 2009). Kids Count Indicator Brief: Reducing the High School Drop Out Rate. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved August 11, 2013 from <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/K/KIDSCOUNTIndicatorBriefReducingtheHighSchoolD/HighSchoolDropouts.pdf>

A discussion of early indicators for school failure that leads to dropping out that forms the basis for the Annie E. Casey Foundation youth services programs.

- ◆ Sadowski, M. (November/December, 2004). Getting to Tenth: Can Helping Your Students Through Ninth Grade Keep Many From Dropping Out? *Harvard Education Letter*, 20(6). Retrieved June 21, 2011 from <http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/277>.

An excellent article summarizing the research and recommendations for promoting success among 9th graders. It requires a subscription to the Harvard Education Letter, which is an outstanding publication for school leaders, or it may be accessed through a college or university library.

- ◆ Texas Education Agency (February, 2013). Proven Dropout Prevention and Recovery Strategies. Austin, TX: Author. Retrieved August 12, 2013 from [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2147483783&menu\\_id=2147483659](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index4.aspx?id=2147483783&menu_id=2147483659)

Texas provides a comprehensive 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade dropout prevention intervention program based on practical strategies and research-based best practices. This page links the reader to dozens of helpful resources about the key elements of this program.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Howard Johnston, Professor of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida and Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University. The brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools. August, 2013.

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