The Council of the Great City Schools
ResearchBrief
SPRING 2008

Supporting Successful Transitions to High School

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A research brief published by the Council of the Great City Schools, representing 66 of the nation's largest urban public school districts.

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Supporting Successful Transitions to High School

In recent years, high schools have become the focus of intensive debate and reform. At a time when economic security is determined by academic skills and educational attainment, the overwhelming number of students who drop out of high school or leave the education system without the skills they need is nothing less than a national crisis. Every year, an estimated one out of three public high school students drops out of school,[1] creating an economic underclass of youth ill-prepared for an increasingly skill-driven economy. Students in large urban school districts face even greater odds. In the 35 largest central cities in the US, researchers estimate that between 40 and 50 percent of high schools graduate less than half of their ninth grade class in four years.[2] These rates are even lower among poor and minority students. For example, while the high school graduation rate is around 75 percent for white students, black and Latino students have little more than a fifty-fifty chance of finishing high school with a diploma.[3] The net result is a widening of existing achievement and attainment gaps that is likely to sustain or even exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

The patterns of academic failure in high school clearly indicate that the transition between middle and high school is a defining moment for students. A majority of the students who eventually fail to graduate fall through the cracks during this transition period. More students fail the ninth grade than any other grade — particularly in high poverty school districts, where on average more than 40 percent of overall student loss occurs in the ninth grade (compared with 27 percent in low poverty districts).[4] Furthermore, few students ever recover from these early missteps. Studies tracking student academic progress have found that between 70 and 80 percent of students who fail in the first year will not graduate from high school.[5] Clearly, a student's ability to deal with the core challenges of this transition determines their success throughout the rest of their academic careers.

"A majority of the students who eventually fail to graduate fall through the cracks during the transition between middle school and high school."

The transition period therefore provides educators with a critical window of opportunity to intervene and support incoming students. This brief attempts to synthesize the existing research and provide a set of recommendations for how schools and school systems can organize themselves to meet these challenges and help students make successful transitions to high school.

Diagnosing the Challenge: Why do kids fail in the ninth grade?

- **Poor academic preparation plays a major role in students' failure to make successful transitions to high school.**
- **Weak academic literacy is often at the heart of these academic challenges, undermining students' ability to access high school level content.**
- **In combination with academic obstacles, the formidable social and environmental challenges faced by incoming high school students often lead to student disengagement from school.**

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Under the *No Child Left Behind Act,* accountability for low student achievement at the high school level and failure to graduate lies squarely on the shoulders of the nation's high schools. Clearly students are failing because high schools are failing—failing to provide access to high quality teachers and instruction, failing to intervene and support high risk students, and failing to equip even those students who arrive at their doorsteps academically prepared for high school with the skills they need to succeed in college and in the work force.

Yet while academic strain and failure may be more pronounced at the high school level, high school often serves as the culmination of years of poor academic training. One of the most obvious reasons students struggle in high school is that they arrive academically unprepared. This is particularly true for students in large urban districts. In the 2005-2006 school year, only 42 percent of eighth graders in urban districts scored at or above proficient on state tests of reading, and only 46 percent of eighth graders scored at or above proficient on state tests of math.[6] A study of one large central city district suggested that as few as *23 percent* of ninth graders entered high school with test scores at or above grade level in reading, and only *17 percent* entered high school with test scores at or above grade level in math.[7] Similarly, the 2007 National Assessment of Education Progress reports that seventy eight percent of students in large central cities fail to demonstrate proficiency in math and eighty percent fail to demonstrate proficiency in reading in the spring of their eighth grade year.[8]

These limitations in math and literacy skills are a major source of course failure, high school dropout, and poor performance in postsecondary education.[9] Studies tracking student success and failure rates clearly show that this lack of preparation has severe negative consequences for academic achievement in high school. Though they place their emphasis on what happens to students after matriculation to high school, researchers in Chicago have revealed patterns that reinforce not only the importance of succeeding in the 9th grade, but the critical role played by prior academic preparation. In particular, they found that eighth grade test scores are strong predictors of whether or not students will stay "on track" through the ninth grade, which in turn is a strong predictor of whether or not they will graduate from high school. Only 42 percent of students in the lowest quartile of their eighth grade class were on track by the end of the ninth grade, compared with 78 percent of the students in the highest quartile.[10] Another study that tracked students' performance on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) found similar patterns. Students whose reading and math scores on the ITBS were two years below grade level in the eighth grade faced a 50-50 chance of failing at least one core course in the first semester of high school, compared to a failure rate of only around 35 percent among students who were on grade level.[11]

Even those students who *appear* to be academically prepared for high school face considerable challenges during the 9th grade transition. While the Chicago study found that middle school reading and math achievement was positively correlated with high school achievement, the analysis also revealed that almost one quarter of students in the top quartile of their eighth grade class were off track by the end of the ninth grade.[12] This suggests that, even among students who are on grade level in terms of measured prior achievement, many lack the essential learning skills, attitudes, and orientation necessary to succeed in high school, which tends to demand both more academic independence and more personal initiative.

For example, incoming high school students—including those students who score at or above grade level on reading or English language arts tests—often lack the foundational knowledge and *academic literacy* necessary to access higher level subject matter.

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Specifically, the literature suggests that while many adolescent students have mastered "basic" skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics, and they can call words accurately, they often still cannot construct the meaning of the academic texts. Their difficulties stem from a lack of vocabulary and comprehension skills necessary to engage secondary school level texts and content.[13]

> *"Incoming high school students often lack the foundational knowledge and academic literacy necessary to access higher level subject matter."*

At the same time, the fact that high schools are failing not only with their struggling students but with students in all categories of prior achievement highlights the need to address what happens inside urban high schools. A key part of the challenge of transition is that high schools are failing to provide even academically prepared 9th graders with the academic and personal support they need to succeed. This charge is bolstered by the finding that, even among students with the same degree of academic preparation, schools vary substantially in the extent to which their students make a successful transition to high school and are "on track" at the end of their freshman year.[14]

Compounding these academic obstacles incoming students face are the social challenges posed by a new, more demanding school environment—challenges that lead to student disengagement.[15] High schools are often larger and more bureaucratic than elementary and middle schools, leading to depersonalization and a weaker support network of teachers and administrators. Both teachers and students also report that the high school environment is more socially comparative and competitive in orientation.[16] Along with the growing social pressures of adolescence and peer acceptance, these challenges often create feelings of frustration and discouragement that lead students to emotionally withdraw from their teachers, their schoolwork, and school itself. An analysis based on a nationwide sample of students indicates that, in addition to lower academic performance, decreased motivation and a sense of alienation from the local school environment are key predictors of dropping out. [17]

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This conception of the challenge, along with the available evidence regarding the effects of interventions designed to improve high school outcomes, suggests several important strategies for improving students' transitions to high school.

Better Academic Preparation for High School

- **A sustained focus on explicit literacy instruction throughout elementary and middle school is a critical strategy for improving student success in high school.**

Given that poor academic skills play a major role in student failure in high school, one of the first places school systems must focus on in order to improve student outcomes is poor preparation in elementary and middle schools. Many students are already so far behind academically by the time they reach the ninth grade that there is little that can be done to intervene in the short time before they leave the education system altogether. Reform strategies must therefore include system-wide efforts to improve the quality of elementary and middle school education, with particular attention paid to increasing instructional and curricular alignment across different levels of schooling throughout the system. In other words, elementary and middle schools must be designed to teach students the specific skills they need to succeed in high school. Moreover, school systems must identify when students are not developing these skills and target the appropriate supports to students while they are still in elementary and middle

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school. Finally, high schools' instructional strategies must be designed to take into account both the level of skill and the specific strengths and weaknesses with which students arrive at high school.

Explicit literacy instruction—i.e., direct instruction in vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies—should be a key component of this system-wide approach. As mentioned earlier, the available evidence suggests that struggling adolescent readers often share several common difficulties. While they have mastered basic "word-level" reading skills, they lack either the academic vocabulary or the reading comprehension skills necessary to construct the meaning of academic texts.[18] At the same time, there is overwhelming evidence that explicit literacy instruction improves reading outcomes.[19] For example, the available evidence shows that direct vocabulary instruction significantly boosts both word knowledge and reading comprehension.[20] Therefore, explicit instruction in areas where students tend to struggle, particularly with respect to literacy, and particularly for low achieving students, should be a core component of both primary and secondary school instructional strategies.

Student Orientation Programs

- **Schools can ease the academic and social transition to high school through intensive orientation and new student support programs.**

Orientation programs offered to students either in the eighth grade or upon entering high school are also important steps districts can take to ease the shock of transition and encourage meaningful coordination between feeder elementary or middle schools and high schools. However, such programs currently vary widely in both quality and intensity, ranging from one-day seminars or high school building tours to comprehensive, year-long programs that provide extensive information, context and support for transitioning students. Evaluative studies of many such programs have found that more intensive orientation programs—those that include a range of approaches, involve collaboration between eighth and ninth grade school personnel, and target a combination of students, teachers, and parents—are more likely to be associated with improved academic performance and lower dropout rates.[21] For example, using longitudinal school and student data, one study found that, regardless of various demographic characteristics, students who had access to a high school orientation program that involved parents, students, and school staff showed a reduced tendency to drop out compared to those without access to a transition program or with access to a less comprehensive program.[22]

Structural Reforms

- **Structural reforms such as the establishment of small schools and ninth grade academies are well known and increasingly widespread strategies for addressing the academic and social challenges facing ninth graders.**

- **The best available evidence indicates that, while these efforts may affect student engagement, structural reforms by themselves are not sufficient to improve students' academic outcomes.**

Researchers have found that, other things being equal, the large size of many high schools is commonly associated with lower levels of student achievement and engagement,[23] particularly among poor and minority students.[24] In response, reforms aimed at breaking down the structure of large, comprehensive high schools in order to create smaller, more supportive learning communities have become widely popular in recent years. The specific structural changes prescribed by the small school movement take a variety of forms, including career academies organized around a curricular theme, 9th grade academies that separate new students from the rest of the student body, other school-within-school structures, and sometimes the creation of new, smaller stand-alone

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schools designed to replace their larger counterparts. The number of small learning communities that now exist across the country as a whole and in urban districts in particular has expanded dramatically, often with the help of funding from the federal government, corporations, and private philanthropy.

Yet at this point, there is not a great deal of rigorous evidence showing that these reforms have a substantial positive impact on academic achievement. While there is evidence of an association between participation in some small schools initiatives and better student outcomes, most of this evidence comes from small-scale studies that either don't provide comparison groups or that essentially compare students or families who *sought out* enrollment in small schools to students and families who did not. Such comparisons do not effectively isolate the impacts of small schools from other school or student level factors. Furthermore, the little experimental evidence that does exist indicates that school restructuring efforts that are not combined with curricular and instructional reforms do not significantly improve students' academic outcomes.[25]

Even to the extent that reformers believe that small schools represent a potentially effective strategy, there is little rigorous research on how small schools or classrooms need to get, the merits of different small school models, or how to ensure that there is a sufficient number of high quality teachers to staff these multiplying classrooms.

Altering the grade level configurations of schools is another secondary school reform approach that employs structural changes in an attempt to transform the learning environment. Again, while we know that the transition into high school negatively affects student achievement, the evidence on the impact of addressing this challenge through school reconfiguration is extremely limited and mixed. One study found that making fewer transitions between schools was associated with lower dropout rates.[26] Specifically, a comparison of high schools with grade spans of 7-12, 9-12, and 10-12 suggested that 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. The link between school transitions and decreased student achievement also figures largely in the rationale behind the growing K-8 schools movement. Supporters of this strategy contend that, through fewer transitions and a more supportive environment, K-8 schools do a better job of preparing students for the ninth grade and beyond than traditional 6-8 or 7-8 middle schools. However, there is very little quantitative evidence to support this position, at least on a national level.[27] Researchers generally agree that more rigorous evaluation of the impact of such structural policies is needed.

Comprehensive High School Reform

- **While structural reforms alone may be insufficient, the evidence indicates that combining structural reform with well-articulated curricular and instructional interventions may be an effective approach for supporting successful student transitions to high school.**

We define comprehensive high school reforms as those that combine structural reforms designed to build a more supportive environment with curricular and instructional components designed to address students' academic needs. Most commonly, these curricular and instructional strategies include catch up courses in areas of students' academic weakness, extended class

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periods, and specialized educational support services such as individualized tutoring. The available evidence suggests that strategies that offer personalized attention, supplemental academic instruction, and increased exposure to core courses, can improve the ninth grade transition and students' progress through high school, particularly for high needs students.[28]

"Structural reform strategies that employ curricular components such as personalized attention, supplemental academic instruction, and increased exposure to core courses can improve the ninth grade transition and student's progress through high school."

Perhaps the most promising evidence on combining structural reforms with strategies that address academic needs comes from research on the Talent Development program. Talent Development is a leading high school reform model that combines 9th grade academies—called Success Academies—with strong curricular components, including a freshman seminar, block scheduling, and specialized courses tailored to fit the academic needs and deficiencies of incoming 9th graders. A rigorous, quasi-experimental evaluation of the Talent Development program showed that, although the effects were modest, the program increases attendance, academic course credits earned, and promotion rates during students' first year of high school over and above the outcomes in non-Talent Development schools.[29] A comprehensive review that compared Talent Development to other leading high school reforms concluded that this joint structural and curricular approach was what enabled Talent Development to improve students' academic outcomes.[30]

However, the evidence suggests that Talent Development may benefit not only from the combination of structural and curricular components, but also from the specificity and clarity of these curricular components. While the Talent Development model prescribes well-defined curricular and instructional strategies specifically targeting incoming ninth graders, other programs such as First Things First and Project Transition offer only vague guidelines for addressing the instructional needs of these students. Perhaps as a result, evaluations of these programs have found little reliable evidence of any discernible impact on student achievement.[31]

Infusing Rigor Into the Curriculum

- **Although districts must attend to students' need for academic remediation, they should also find ways to infuse rigorous academic content into the high school curriculum.**

While academic remediation is sometimes a key part of comprehensive secondary school reforms, in recent years interventions that remove students from classrooms have increasingly come under fire. In particular, both researchers and practitioners have raised concerns that these interventions stigmatize those students who participate or block full access to a standardized curriculum, and interventions done outside of regular class time face the added challenge of ensuring sufficient participation among students who may be only marginally engaged in school to begin with. While targeted remediation can be useful for addressing students' academic needs, curricular tracking often leads to "dead-end" course-taking sequences, social stratification, and educational inequities.[32]

Furthermore, a growing body of literature on the benefits of high school rigor—i.e., access to and participation in courses with challenging academic content designed to prepare students for postsecondary education—runs counter to the policy of sorting students into lower-level curricular tracks based on measures of aptitude.[33] Clearly, increasing rigor without sufficient support can undermine student progress through high

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school and generate increased drop out rates. Yet research based on the examination of key policies and practices of consistently high performing high schools suggests that a more challenging curriculum, *when combined with a student support network,* was associated with better student outcomes. One study of 74 high schools across ten states reported that the most successful schools set explicit academic goals which often exceeded state standards, while at the same time working to create a support system for students.[34]

Though far from conclusive, the evidence suggests that, in addition to providing the necessary academic supports for addressing the skill deficits with which students often arrive at high school, urban districts should also support a more academically rigorous high school curriculum.

Using Data to Identify At-Risk Students and Guide Instruction

- **Early warning systems that track course taking and behavioral patterns reveal crucial information about at-risk students.**

- **Student data systems are important tools that should be used to diagnose student needs and target instruction, services, and interventions.**

Some districts are implementing more targeted approaches to supporting at-risk students by developing early warning systems. Early studies have shown that districts can unearth a wealth of information by examining the patterns of student failure. For example, researchers working in Philadelphia have found that they can identify 50 percent of eventual dropouts as early as the eighth grade and 80 percent by the ninth grade on the basis of four key educational indicators—attendance, classroom behavior, failing math, or failing English. [35] Meanwhile, researchers in Chicago have created an "on track" indicator that predicts with eighty-five percent accuracy which ninth graders will not make it to graduation.[36] By their definition, a student is on

track if he/she earns at least five full-year course credits and fails no more than one semester of a core course. This research confirms the overwhelming evidence supporting the importance of the 9th grade year, and suggests key indicators that can be used to identify students most at risk of failure, including credit earning and attendance outcomes. In fact, ninth grade absences have been found to be eight times more predictive of course failure in the freshman year and twenty times more predictive of eventual graduation than eighth grade test scores.[37] These findings suggest both which students might be selected for additional support and which behaviors these interventions might target.

"Key academic and behavioral indicators, such as credit earning patterns and attendance, can be used to identify students most at risk for failure."

These early warning systems mark a more concerted effort by school districts in general to collect and use data to guide instruction, target services, and create a more supportive environment tailored to the needs of students. Survey research indicates that one element shared by consistently higher performing schools is teacher interpretation and use of student achievement data to make decisions about instruction.[38] Equipping

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educators with information can also be crucial in lowering a student's chances of dropping out, as they play a crucial part in a student's life. For example, a review of the research on dropout prevention programs indicates that programs such as Check and Connect that use counselors as case managers who build sustained relationships with students, closely monitor each student's attendance and performance, and intervene rapidly at the first sign of trouble can reduce high school dropout rates among highly at-risk students.[39]

Recommendations

- **Districts should explicitly target initiatives and interventions at the ninth grade level, addressing both the academic and environmental challenges of transition.**

Research clearly shows that the transition to high school is a defining moment for both students and schools. Faced with new social and academic challenges, many students struggle to stay on track. The success with which they navigate these challenges often determines their achievement trajectory throughout the rest of high school, as well as their likelihood of graduating. Reforms aimed at improving student outcomes at the high school level should therefore focus on the ninth grade transition as a key window of opportunity for identifying and addressing the root of student failure.

- **Districts need to sustain a system-wide focus on explicit literacy instruction—particularly the development of content area reading comprehension and vocabulary—if they are to improve student outcomes in high school.**

While high schools bear the brunt of accountability for low student achievement and failure to graduate, the patterns of student failure reveal the critical role played by prior academic preparation. Given the short window of time between a student starting high school and falling off track academically, it is unrealistic to expect high schools to sufficiently address academic deficiencies built up over the entire course of a student's academic career. Therefore, high school reform strategies should include system-wide efforts to improve the quality of elementary and middle school education, with particular emphasis paid to the provision of explicit and sustained literacy instruction that enables students to access academic content.

- **Structural reforms alone are insufficient to improve student outcomes. In order to provide effective support to ninth grade students, districts should combine structural changes with meaningful curricular and instructional supports.**

Though they have garnered widespread popularity, the best evidence on the subject does not suggest that structural reforms alone can produce significant changes in student achievement. However, the available research does suggest that structural reforms, such as 9th grade academies, can improve the ninth grade transition and students' progress through high school *when bolstered by strong and well-defined instructional and curricular supports,* including catch up courses tailored to address students' academic weaknesses. Districts should therefore pursue a comprehensive approach to high school

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reform that takes into account the importance of combining structural and curricular reform initiatives.

- **While remediation of struggling students can be a useful tool, a challenging academic curriculum may help keep students engaged and yield achievement gains.**

Amidst charges that the nation's high schools are failing to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and the work force, academic rigor has become a battle cry among education reformers. In addition to improving post-secondary outcomes, a relevant and challenging curriculum may hold the key to keeping struggling students engaged in school.

- **Districts should develop student-level indicators/ tracking systems to help target support and identify at-risk students *before* they fall too far off track in the transition to high school.**

Research has shown that tracking systems yield a great deal of critical information about patterns of academic failure. Districts need to replicate these findings by developing their own tracking systems and using this data to target outreach, services, and interventions. While major strides have been made in identifying the ninth grade roots of academic failure, the critical next step is to identify at-risk students *before* they fall too far off track in the transition to high school.

- **The federal government and private philanthropy should invest in rigorous studies of how to use data and data systems to improve support and instruction, particularly for students making the transition to high school.**

Though phrases such as "data-driven instruction" are widely used throughout education, there is no consensus regarding what it means to implement such practices at the school or district level, and there is little rigorous evidence tying the use of such strategies to changes in teaching and learning and changes in student achievement. If these efforts are to represent more than a fad, then there must be an investment of resources targeted towards studying effective implementation of these efforts and rigorously assessing the relationship between these efforts and student outcomes.

Conclusion

Regardless of the inherent academic and social challenges faced by incoming ninth graders, schools can and do affect student outcomes. The available research on the subject suggests that, even among students with the same degree of academic preparation, schools vary substantially in the extent to which their students make a successful transition to high school and are "on track" at the end of their freshman year.[40] Understanding the constellation of academic and environmental challenges facing incoming ninth graders and addressing this period as a key bottleneck is an important first step to initiating high school reform. Districts need to pursue a system-wide approach to equipping students with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed at the high school level. Districts should also build on their ability to track student progress and transform teaching and learning in high schools through high quality curriculum and instruction, intensive orientation programs, and a combination of structural reforms and targeted curricular supports.

In all of these efforts, districts must go beyond quick-fix solutions that focus either solely on structure or simply implement "pre-packaged" sets of popular reforms with the vague notion that they will somehow provide a benefit. Districts must develop specific plans to address student needs and – along with partners in private philanthropy and the federal government – invest time in resources in understanding both what it takes to achieve thorough implementation of these reforms and the extent to which these reforms can bring about genuine improvements in student outcomes.

Notes and References

Notes

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