

POLICY BRIEF

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Summer Bridge Programs

Across the nation, school policymakers are grappling with what to do about the increasing numbers of students who do not advance beyond ninth grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). National estimates put the student attrition rate before tenth grade at between 11 and 33 percent (Dedmond, 2008; Education Week, 2007). Only about 70 percent of ninth graders make it to graduation four years later (Education Week, 2007; Gossage, 2007).

More students fail ninth grade than any other grade (Williams & Richman, 2007). Increasing the numbers of students held back in ninth grade has not proven effective, as many of these students—some estimates are as high as 80 percent—later drop out (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz & Letgers, 2004; Haney, Madaus, Abrams, Wheelock, Miao, & Gruia, 2004; Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005). However, intervening with these students *before* they fail may lead to increased graduation rates (Herlihy, 2007a; Williams & Richman, 2007; Quint, 2006; Smith, 1997; Williams & Richman, 2007).

This policy brief focuses on one type of activity that is designed to help eighth-grade students make a successful transition to high school—eighth-grade summer bridge programs. These programs are similar in concept to their counterparts for aspiring college bound students who may benefit from extra support

(Kezar, 2000; Munoz, 2000). Students are identified and recruited into a summer program that offers academic remediation, social support, and orientation activities that are designed to enhance their ability to succeed during their freshman year. As part of a comprehensive transition approach, summer bridge programs can be a promising practice for school administrators and policymakers to consider (Gossage, 2007).

Why Consider Eighth-Grade Transition Programs

Emerging evidence suggests that students who succeed in high school have, among other things, made a successful transition from middle school to ninth grade (Herlihy, 2007b; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006; Reents, 2002). To this end, many school districts offer transition programs that are aimed at addressing the unique needs of eighth-grade students (Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci, 2006; Kerr, 2002; Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). In addition to improved pass rates from ninth to tenth grade, benefits of transition programs may include increased enthusiasm and motivation for learning, improved academic skills, enhanced self-esteem, and fewer discipline problems (Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci, 2006).

Transition programs typically include a combination of activities to help students understand and succeed in their new school, such as:

- Orientation activities during eighth grade—and sometimes earlier—that help students and their families acclimate themselves to the high school environment, curriculum, and requirements
- Summer programs that prepare students for the transition

- Ninth-grade interventions—such as organizational structures (e.g., ninth-grade academies, schools within schools), curriculum supports (e.g., extended block scheduling, catch-up curriculum classes), and/or individual supports (e.g., pairing ninth graders with mentors, counseling)—that provide ongoing academic and social support for students

[See the text box, “Features of Typical Ninth-Grade Transition Programs,” for more information.]

Features of Typical Ninth-Grade Transition Programs

Strategies are in place to:

- Identify struggling students prior to ninth grade.
- Monitor student progress (e.g., track and evaluate data, including achievement results, disciplinary events, etc.).
- Recruit students and their families to transition programs that require potential participants to complete applications.
- Address instructional needs of students (e.g., catch-up classes, tutoring, extended block scheduling, double dose of core academic courses).
- Address social and emotional needs of students (e.g., provide counseling and social service support, provide opportunities for eighth-grade students to socialize with high school students).
- Emphasize career planning.
- Personalize the learning environment (e.g., provide smaller classes and small learning communities).
- Build capacity within school faculty for addressing student needs (e.g., professional development, coaching, regular teacher team meetings, interdisciplinary teams).
- Arrange for middle school and high school teachers to collaborate (e.g., share information and expertise).
- Communicate with families regularly (e.g., via in-person opportunities to participate, through Web-based communications, etc.) about high school academic and behavioral expectations, their child’s progress, and what they can do to support success.
- Develop partnerships with the greater community (e.g., business, higher education, mentors).

Sources: Calderon, Klein, Fitzgerald, & Berger, 2005; Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci, 2006; Herlihy, 2007a, b; Kerr, 2002; Klump, 2008; Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle, 1998; Smith, 2006, 2007; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002; Williams & Richman, 2007.

Elements to Consider When Planning Summer Bridge Programs

Consider these examples:

- In a tri-county region in Massachusetts, students identified as at risk attend a summer bridge program to improve their academic skills and to help them adjust to the expectations of high school.
- In a large urban school district in California, all eighth-grade students are invited to attend a three-day summer bridge residential program designed to expose them to information, people, and high school related experiences.
- In a school district in Georgia, all entering ninth-grade students are invited to a week-long summer bridge program that provides academic and social support. [For an extended look at this program, see the text box, “A Look at Dekalb County’s Summer Bridge Program.”]

Summer bridge programs are stand-alone activities that span several days or weeks during the summer prior to ninth grade. They may differ in design (e.g., half day versus full day; extended learning blocks versus hourly classes), as well as location (e.g., high school campus, vocational center with field trips to the high school campus).

Although summer bridge programs typically incorporate academic support—the cornerstone of traditional summer school programs in which the emphasis is on remediating student learning deficits—such activities are only part of the program’s focus. In helping eighth-grade students prepare for high school, summer bridge programs typically emphasize the following goals:

- Enhancing student confidence, self-esteem, and motivation to learn

- Improving academic skills, including developing study skills (e.g., note taking, scheduling)
- Providing opportunities for students to meet high school teachers and build positive student-teacher relationships
- Ensuring that students and parents have adequate information about school programs, policies, procedures, courses, scheduling, etc.
- Encouraging social interactions with other eighth-grade students, as well as with high school students who serve as peer mentors

Policy Decisions Related to Establishing Summer Bridge Programs

As with any program, there will be generic issues of day-to-day management, funding (e.g., district funding, fees paid by students’ families), location, and scheduling. Office personnel may be needed for such tasks as answering questions about the program, registering students, preparing information packets, and maintaining records. Transportation and food services also should be considered.

In addition, there are key design and policy issues that are specific to planning summer bridge programs. Selected examples follow.

Determining the Student Population

Summer bridge programs are intended to ease the transition to high school, but for which students? Some programs open their doors to all students, while others limit participation to students who are at risk academically. In some cases, particularly when funding may be an issue, programs may be open to students who register on a first-come, first-served basis, or to students who meet certain qualifications (e.g., students



A Look at Dekalb County's Summer Bridge Program

In Georgia's Dekalb County school system, all eighth-grade students who will be attending Stephenson High School are invited to attend a week-long summer bridge program. Students arrive at 7:30 for breakfast, after which they participate in a series of classes that last until 3:30 p.m. (with a break for lunch). The results? Initial evaluation data show that:

- Ninety percent of summer bridge participants earned enough credits their freshman year to become sophomores.
- Summer bridge students outscored nonparticipants on end-of-course tests.
- Summer bridge students demonstrated an 80 percent pass rate in freshman biology courses; the average for nonparticipating students was 61 percent.
- Summer bridge students tended to take three advanced placement (AP) courses in their junior year in comparison to nonparticipating students who typically averaged one AP class.

According to Deneen McBean-Warner, who directs the summer bridge program, a major factor for the program's success is its instructional program and how it motivates students to learn. "We build a culture of high expectations that all students can learn and then provide them with engaging activities."

Interdisciplinary teams of teachers work with small groups (approximately 18 students) in preplanned, project-based, thematic units—linked to state standards—that incorporate the following types of activities:

- In language arts, students read a novel in which the main character discovers personal truths. Students respond by creating a scrapbook that answers the question, "Who am I?"
- In mathematics, students use mathematical concepts and tools (e.g., spreadsheets) to develop an entertainment facility.
- In science, students use the scientific method as they investigate a "crime scene."
- In social studies, students learn about elections first hand as they develop their own platform for ninth-grade student council representative.

Students also attend a class entitled "High School 101," where they learn study skills along with school scheduling, policies, and procedures. A guidance counselor participates in this class.

Students have opportunities to interact with upper class high school students who serve as class aides, mentors, and escorts. Most of these students also have attended the summer bridge program. They receive credit toward their community service graduation requirement. In 2008, the program was budgeted at \$15,000. Almost one-half of eligible eighth-grade students (180 of 400) participated.

from a middle school that did not meet the Adequate Yearly Progress requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act, students who qualify for free or reduced lunches, students who have been selected to attend a freshman academy program, etc.).

Programs usually require students to complete an application for participation. While application questions may vary, most require explicit family and student commitment (e.g., a promise to attend each day) as a prerequisite for participation.

Policy decisions related to identifying the appropriate student population have implications that extend to the entire program. The target audience will influence decisions regarding curriculum content, the activities that are provided, and the types of support staff who may be needed.

Creating the Curriculum

Program content is designed to identify and address issues that undermine successful transition (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). These might include, for example, adapting to high school academics, feeling safe, and understanding the structure of high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Summer bridge programs often build in a combination of the following components, which are designed to address students' transition needs:

- **Engaging curriculum.** Many summer bridge programs embrace the notion that students should have fun as they learn. Worksheets, lectures, and drills are replaced with motivating, inquiry-based activities and experiences in which students develop deeper understandings and an appreciation for the subject areas (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). Activities are provided that help students see the link between what they are learning and the outside world. For example,

students may spend one day per week participating in community-based field trips where they see the value of education in the work place (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d.).

- **Skill development.** Many summer bridge programs provide academic skill support, particularly in math and language arts instruction. Some also offer study skill instruction (e.g., note taking, scheduling, and test taking.) In some cases, guidance counselors work with students individually and in small groups to address social-emotional needs.
- **High school orientation.** Students participate in high school tours and visits. They also have opportunities to talk with high school students about expectations and how to survive high school life.
- **Social events.** Summer bridge programs often emphasize student bonding to ensure that ninth graders have support groups. This is particularly important when a middle school is a feeder school to different high schools, or when students from several middle schools attend the same high school. Students may get to know each other socially during meals, if provided, or during activities in which the focus is on building relationships.

Programs are bound by what can be accomplished within the time frame as well as the realities of available human and fiscal resources. Articulating specific program goals helps stakeholders (e.g., students, families, teaching faculty) hold realistic expectations about outcomes.

Staffing the Program

The nature of these programs calls for teachers who are comfortable with all facets of the curriculum—motivating activities, field trips, social activities, etc. Optimally, summer bridge programs are staffed by the ninth-

grade teachers who will eventually teach the participating students during the school year. This enables students to form relationships with teachers who they can turn to during the academic year. It also allows them to learn about teacher priorities and course requirements.

Summer bridge programs often utilize high school students as aides, mentors, and peer buddies. Typically, these students receive preparation for their responsibilities and roles. In some school districts where community service is required for graduation, high school students may receive credit for serving in summer bridge programs.

Some summer bridge programs provide support staff such as guidance counselors, career/technology specialists, special education teachers, reading specialists, etc. Their participation is integrated into the program and based on student needs.

Instituting a Code of Conduct

Many of the same issues that apply to summer school programs also apply to summer bridge programs. For example, discipline and attendance policies must be articulated to students in advance of participation, and dress codes for both classroom and field trip activities must be developed.

Assessing the Program

Comprehensive transition programs often are assessed using a combination of ninth-grade performance indicators, such as decreased absentee rates, steady or increased grade point averages, steady or increased participation in extracurricular activities, decreased truancy rates, fewer discipline issues, greater student orientation to goals,

and higher rates of parent involvement (Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci, 2006). However, caution is warranted in expecting too much from summer bridge programs. These programs alone may not result in significant gains during the school year (Roderick, Engel, & Nagaoka, 2003).

Many summer bridge program assessments are crafted to reflect particular goals and intended results. Consider these examples:

- Students are assessed on criterion-referenced pretests and posttests as part of the summer bridge program.
- Students and their families complete surveys regarding their satisfaction with the program.
- Students who participated in summer bridge programs and those who did not are compared on indicators throughout ninth grade.

Offering Special Incentives

To encourage and sustain participation, some summer bridge programs offer special incentives to students. Examples include T shirts with the high school logo, book bags, and school supplies. A few summer bridge programs offer course credit to participants.

Conclusion

Ninth grade is a critical year for students. Middle schools and high schools operate differently, which often poses challenges to students who are struggling. Without support in understanding and meeting high school expectations, many students may not succeed. Summer bridge programs can provide a promising activity as part of a total transition approach.

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This brief was written by Warger, Eavy & Associates.



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1100 17th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
P: 877-277-2744 < W: www.centerforcsri.org
P: 202-223-6690 > F: 202-223-8939