# REGIONAL *EDUCATIONAL* LABORATORY
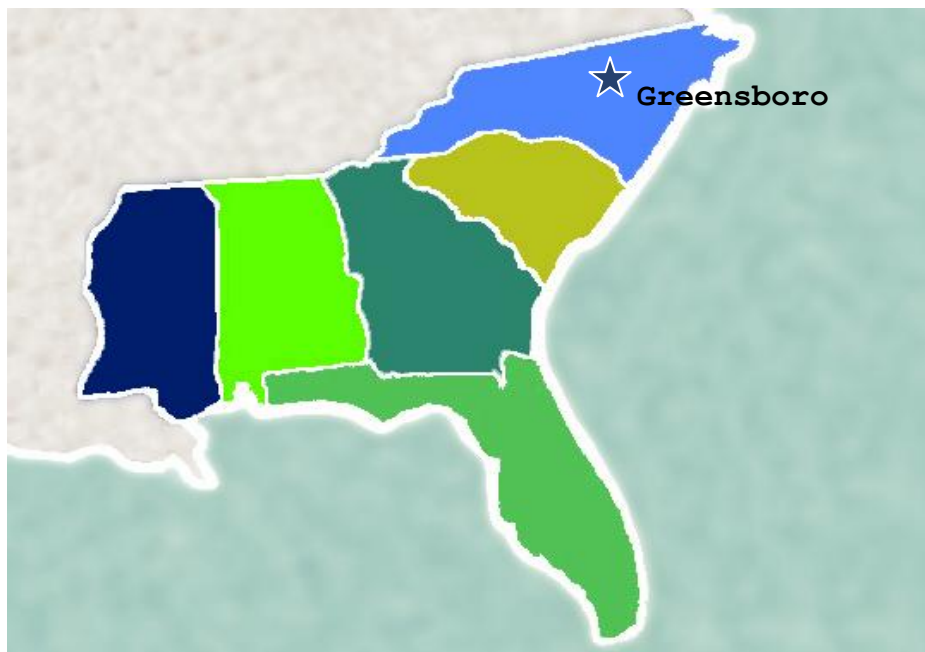## SOUTHEAST ~ SERVECenter

## EVIDENCE BASED EDUCATION REQUEST DESK

### OUR GOAL
To assist educators and policymakers in their efforts to apply the evidence base to decisions about policies, programs, and practices they encounter.

Greensboro

## REQUEST:

- Please provide some examples of 9th grade transition programs (preferably "exemplary" programs).

## RESPONSE

Student transitions from junior high to high school and later middle to high school have been recognized as crucial turning points for students since well before New York City Board of Education first instituted a College Bound summer program in partnership with The College Bound Corporation in 1967 (Hillson, 1967). Since these early efforts, programs designed to ensure student matriculation beyond ninth grade have both evolved a great deal--as in Freshman Transition courses designed to meet new state course standards and stayed much the same--as in traditional summer school offerings. The variety of programs and models available can be overwhelming. In an effort to discern which interventions or programs have shown impact, it is necessary to consider a wide range of research findings.

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Regional Educational Laboratory

**What Works Clearinghouse**

As attention to ninth grade transitions has grown, so has the need to carefully gauge the impacts of efforts to improve student outcomes. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), supported by the Institute for Education Sciences at the US Department of Education, sorts interventions based on the quality and the outcomes of the scientifically based research designed to evaluate interventions. The WWC offers interventions organized by topic, in this case "Dropout Prevention." Interventions are then sorted into improvement outcomes, as relevant here: "Staying in School" and "Progressing in School." The table below includes eight interventions that have been the subject of *at least* one scientifically-based research study. All information contained in the table has been pulled from the WWC's intervention ratings and profiles. Interventions have been included only if they target students preparing for or going through eighth to ninth grade transitions.

The WWC *Dropout Prevention Guide* (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, and Smink, 2008) makes the following recommendations:

1. Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.
2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.
3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.
4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.
5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.
6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school

| Intervention | Intervention Summary | Evidence of Impact | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Staying in School | | Progressing in School | |
| | | Rating | Imp. | Rating | Imp. |
| Accelerated Middle Schools (ACM) | Accelerated middle schools are self-contained academic programs designed to help students who are behind grade level catch up with their age peers. If these students begin high school with other students their age, the hope is that they will be more likely to stay in school and graduate. The programs serve students who are one to two years behind grade level and give them the opportunity to cover an additional year of curriculum during their one to two years in the program. Accelerated middle schools can be structured as separate schools or as schools within a traditional middle school. | + | 18 | + + | 35 |
| Achievement for Latinos Through Academic Success (ALAS) | ALAS is a middle school (or junior high school) intervention designed to address student, school, family, and community factors that affect dropping out. Each student is assigned a counselor who monitors attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. The counselor provides feedback and coordinates students, families, and teachers. Counselors also serve as advocates for students and intervene when problems are identified. Students are trained in problem-solving skills, and parents are trained in parent-child problem solving, how to participate in school activities, and how to contact teachers and school administrators to address issues. | + | 42 | + | 19 |
| Career Academies | Career Academies are school-within-school programs operating in high schools. They offer career-related curricula based on a career theme, academic coursework, and work experience through partnerships with local employers. | + | 13 | + | 13 |

| | | Evidence of Impact | | | |
| | | Staying in School | | Progressing in School | |
| Intervention | Intervention Summary | Rat-ing | Imp. | Rat-ing | Imp. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Check & Connect | Check & Connect is a dropout prevention strategy that relies on close monitoring of school performance, as well as mentoring, case management, and other supports. The program has two main components: "Check" and "Connect." The Check component is designed to continually assess student engagement through close monitoring of student performance and progress indicators. The Connect component involves program staff giving individualized attention to students, in partnership with school personnel, family members, and community service providers. Students enrolled in Check & Connect are assigned a "monitor" who regularly reviews their performance (in particular, whether students are having attendance, behavior, or academic problems) and intervenes when problems are identified. The monitor also advocates for students, coordinates services, provides ongoing feedback and encouragement, and emphasizes the importance of staying in school. | + + | 25 | + | 30 |
| Financial Incentives for Teen Parents to Stay in School | Financial incentives for teen parents are components of state welfare programs intended to encourage enrollment, attendance, and completion of high school as a means of increasing employment and earnings and reducing welfare dependence. The incentives take the form of bonuses and sanctions to the welfare grant related to school enrollment, performance, and completion. The programs typically provide case management and social services to supplement financial incentives. | + | 6 | * | 4 |
| High School Re-direction | High School Redirection is an alternative high school program for youth considered at risk of dropping out. The program emphasizes basic skills development (with a particular focus on reading skills) and offers limited extra-curricular activities. The schools operate in economically disadvantaged areas and serve students who have dropped out in the past, who are teen parents, who have poor test scores, or who are over-age for their grade. To foster a sense of community, the schools are small and teachers are encouraged to act as mentors as well as instructors. | * | 6 | + | 4 |

| | | Evidence of Impact | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Staying in School | | Progressing in School | |
| **Intervention** | **Intervention Summary** | **Rating** | **Imp.** | **Rating** | **Imp.** |
| Talent Development High Schools (TDHS) | Talent Development High Schools is a school reform model for restructuring large high schools with persistent attendance and discipline problems, poor student achievement, and high dropout rates. The model includes both structural and curriculum reforms. It calls for schools to reorganize into small "learning communities"—including ninth-grade academies for first-year students and career academies for students in upper grades—to reduce student isolation and anonymity. It also emphasizes high academic standards and provides all students with a college-preparatory academic sequence. | * | * | + | 7 |
| Twelve Together | Twelve Together is a one-year peer support and mentoring program for middle and early high school students that offers weekly after-school discussion groups led by trained volunteer adult facilitators. Each peer discussion group consists of about 12 participants, who are a mix of students at high risk of academic failure and others at lower academic risk. Group discussions are based on student interest, usually focusing on personal, family, and social issues. The program also offers homework assistance, trips to college campuses, and an annual weekend retreat. | + | 13 | * | * |

**Notes:**

➢ "Evidence ratings consider four factors: the quality of the research design [that measures the impact of the intervention], the statistical significance of the findings, the size of the difference between participants in the intervention and the comparison conditions, and the consistency of the findings across studies."

➢ Evidence Rating Key: ++ = "Positive Effects: strong evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence."
  + = "Potentially Positive Effects: evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence."
  * = Below the "Potentially Positive Effects" rating or greater than one improvement threshold.

➢ Improvement [as defined by the WWC]: "Difference between the percentile rank of the average student in the intervention group and the percentile rank of the average student in the comparison group. Can take on values between -50 and +50, with positive numbers denoting results favorable to the comparison group."

**MDRC**

In *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*, Dr. Janet Quint uses MDRC evaluations of three high school reform initiatives, Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development to identify "Five Critical Challenges":

- Challenge 1--Creating a Personalized and Orderly Learning Environment
- Challenge 2--Assisting Students Who Enter High School with Poor Academic Skills
- Challenge 3--Improving Instructional Content and Practice
- Challenge 4--Preparing Students for the World Beyond High School
- Challenge 5--Stimulating Change

Quint then offers this conclusion in the Executive Summary (ES-10), which emphasizes the strength of each model and how these strengths may need to be considered together to inform future initiatives:

> The larger lesson of this report may be that structural changes to improve personalization and instructional improvement are the twin pillars of high school reform. Small learning communities and faculty advisory systems can increase students' feelings of connectedness to their teachers. Especially in interaction with one another, extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high-quality curricula, training on these curricula, and efforts to create professional learning communities can improve student achievement. Furthermore, school-employer partnerships that involve career awareness activities and work internships can help students attain higher earnings after high school.
>
> A further message is that students who enter ninth grade facing substantial academic deficits can make good progress if initiatives single them out for special support. These supports include caring teachers and special courses designed to help entering ninth-graders acquire the content knowledge and learning skills that they missed out on in earlier grades.

**Council of Great City Schools**

In the research brief *Supporting Successful Transitions to High School* (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008), a wide range of the transition literature has been synthesized to arrive at a relevant list of research-based recommendations (pp. 8-9):

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

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

- 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.

- 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.

**Office of Vocational and Adult Education**

As part of its support for Smaller Learning Community (SLC) grantees, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) funded research into the intricacies of high school reform. *Making the Move To and Through High School* (Kemple, Connell, Legters, and Eccles, 2006) explores two SLC models being implemented in a wide range of high schools undergoing reform initiatives, Talent Development and First Things First. Through the exploration of these models, the authors offer two major findings that should be considered when seeking to address the ninth grade transition (pp. 40-41):

- Both Talent Development and First Things First recognize that <u>the transition into and through ninth grade marks only the first step in a successful high school career. Unless similar efforts are made throughout the high school, students could emerge from the ninth grade only to face another difficult transition into alienating and chaotic situations in the 10th grade</u>.

- <u>Ninth-graders face the unique combination of transitioning into new and often less supportive school environments and having new options regarding how they may legally use their time</u>. For example, many students with a history of failure come to high school rapidly approaching their 16th birthday. At age 16, students can legally leave school in many states with parent permission, permission that schools don't necessarily go out of their way to obtain. At 16, youth are also able to obtain driver's licenses in many states and to work more hours in more kinds of jobs under child labor laws. Students perceive these options as providing them with a level of independence and flexibility they haven't had previously. <u>When these options are weighed against what large, low-performing high schools have to offer, large numbers of students "choose" to leave school</u>.

**Nation High School Center**

The National High School Center (NHSC), funded by the US Department of Education, offers a valuable collection of resources that shed light on the transition into high school, *Easing the Transition to High School: Research and Best Practices Designed to Support High School Learning* (Kennelly & Monrad eds., 2007). The four included reports are:

- *Quick Stats Fact Sheet: The First Year of High School.*  A quick stats fact sheet on the ninth grade bulge, demonstrates that a disproportionate number of ninth graders are held back in the ninth grade, many of whom drop out by tenth grade (ii).
- *State and District-Level Support for Successful Transitions into High School.*  Examines how some states and districts are currently easing the transition into high school for students (ii).
- *Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition Into High School.*  Based on key research into high school transition strategies (ii).
- *Managing the Transition to Ninth Grade in a Comprehensive Urban High School.*  Illustrates how one school is managing to make a positive difference for ninth graders (ii).

The NHSC also offers timely information on funding for high school reform initiatives available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).  Both resources are available online:

- Summary table: http://betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC.ARRA.HS.Funding.Summary.pdf
- Detailed report: http://betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_ARRA_PolicyBrief.pdf

**References:**

Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., and Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide* (NCEE 2008–4025).  Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of  Education. Retrieved June 16, 2009 from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf.

Hillson, H. T. (1967). *Report on the Summer Session of the College Bound Program, July-August, 1967*.  New York City, NY: New York City Board of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED016728).

Horwitz, A. and Snipes, J. (2008). Supporting Successful Transitions to High School. Council of Great   City Schools. Retrieved June 16, 2009 from http://www.cgcs.org/publications/CGCS_SuccessfulTransitions.pdf

Kemple, J. J., Connell, J. P., Legters, N., and Eccles, J. (2006). *Making the Move To and Through High School: How Freshman Academies and Thematic Small Learning Communities Can Support Successful Transitions*. Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Retrieved June 9, 2009 from http://slcp.ed.gov/documents/issue_paper_6_making_the_move.pdf

Kennelly, L. and Monrad, M. eds. (2007). *Easing the Transition to High School: Research and Best Practices Designed to Support High School Learning*. National High School Center. Retrieved June 9, 2009 from
http://betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_TransitionsReport.pdf

Quint, J. (2006). *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*. MDRC. Retrieved June 9, 2009 from
http://www.mdrc.org/publications/428/full.pdf

What Works Clearinghouse. (2009). *Dropout Prevention*. Retrieved June 30, 2009 from:
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/topic.aspx?tid=06

**Additional Resources:**

Edmunds, J. (2005) *Learning From Failure: A Discussion Guide on High School Reform*. SERVE Center. Retrieved June 16, 2009 from
http://serve.org/_downloads/REL/LearningfromFailure.pdf

From the Executive Summary (p.4): This discussion guide is designed to provide information about what hasn't worked in the past and the lessons we have learned. It can be used by teams of practitioners, policymakers, and members of the community who are in the midst of school reform efforts at the high school level. Reading and working through this guide will help those teams engage in a dialogue about how to ensure success at their school. This document summarizes some existing literature and research on the reasons behind the failure of many school reforms. It also provides questions for people to consider as they develop or implement their own reform efforts.

The success of school reform efforts is dependent on the nature of the reform, as well as a variety of contextual factors, such as state and district policies and political forces, as well as school-level factors, including teachers and administrators. This discussion guide, which concentrates on the high school level, describes the factors affecting general efforts to implement reform, as well as some factors more specific to school-within-a-school restructuring efforts. It concludes with some questions to consider. Below is a summary of the main ideas discussed in this guide. Each idea is explored in more depth in the full guide.

- The Nature of the Reform:
    - A focus on structural and not instructional changes.
    - Implementation of reforms without using data.
- School-level Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms:

- o Lack of support and buy-in from the school staff.
- o Lack of skills and knowledge among school staff.
- o A school culture that values acceptance and conformity.
- o Teacher and administrator exhaustion and burnout.
- o Teacher and administrator turnover.
- o Insufficient resources.
- • Contextual Factors Affecting Implementation of Reforms:
  - o The systemic nature of education.
  - o Lack of consensus on goals of schooling and how to achieve those goals.
  - o Multiple and incompatible reforms.
  - o "Iconic notions of high school."
  - o Lack of support and buy-in from the larger community.
- • Factors Specific to Schools-Within-Schools (SWS):
  - o Insufficient autonomy.
  - o Lack of continuity among different SWS.
  - o Friction and conflict between SWS and host schools.

Edmunds, J. A., & McColskey, W. (2007). *Levers for change: Southeast Region state initiatives to improve high schools*. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 024). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved June 30, 2009 from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2007024.pdf

Description (iii):
This descriptive report examines the strategies of the six Southeast Region states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina) to improve high school graduation rates and student achievement and to increase the number of students leaving high school with the skills and knowledge necessary for the twenty-first century. For ease of discussion, these state-level strategies are organized into six themes or "levers for change:"

1. Standards and assessments. States are working to align standards and assessments with expectations for post-secondary education and with twenty-first century skills.
2. Course requirements. States are revising their graduation requirements to include courses required for college and mandatory course sequences that make a stronger connection to work readiness.
3. Student support and access to courses. States are working to increase students' access to both the courses and the support they need through strategies such as

virtual schools, support for Advanced Placement courses, and mandated remediation.

4. Model schools and practices. States are supporting efforts on a continuum, from creating new model high schools, such as Early College High Schools, to redesigning existing schools, to implementing specific practices such as career academies.

5. Local capacity-building. States are building the capacity of local schools and districts to support reform by providing direct professional development or providing coaches or technical assistance teams at schools.

6. Partnerships and public involvement. States are establishing partnerships to support high school reform. State leaders are using their visibility to increase attention to high schools.

Neild, R. C. (2009). Falling Off Track During the Transition to High School: What We Know and What Can Be Done. *The Future of Children, 19, 1*, 53-76. Retrieved June 9, 2009 from http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/19_01_04.pdf

From the Article Summary (p.53):
Ninth grade marks a critical juncture in American schooling. Students who manage the academic demands of the transition to high school have a high probability of graduating four years later. But those who do not—who fail to earn as many credits as they should during ninth grade—face a substantially elevated risk of dropping out of high school.

Neild examines four theories about why ninth grade poses difficulties for some students. The first is that ninth grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental supervision and increased peer influence. The second is that in moving to a new school, students must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers. The third is that some students are inadequately prepared for high school. The final theory is that the organization of some high schools is itself a major source of students' difficulty. Each theory, says Neild, suggests a particular type of policy response.

The strongest evidence, observes Neild, points to inadequate preparation for high school and the organization of high schools. Reform efforts thus far have tended to address high school organization, with or without a focus on instructional quality or helping students to catch up on academic skills. Evaluations of these reforms, says Neild, suggest that both school organization and instructional improvement are necessary to keep ninth graders on track to graduation.

Neild notes that school districts and state departments of education also are addressing the problem. In addition to supporting comprehensive school reform with a focus on

ninth graders, districts have created accountability indicators of how well high schools are keeping ninth graders on track. States are helping districts to develop their capacity to maintain and analyze data on ninth-grade progress, including "early warning indicator systems" that identify students who are falling off track to graduation.

**Methodology**

The What Works Clearinghouse, MDRC, Council of Great City Schools, Ed.gov, The National High School Center, and SERVE Center websites were all consulted based on a priori knowledge of relevant resources contained therein. Additionally, ERIC, EBSCOPremier, and Google Scholar were searched using the following phrases in various forms: "9th grade transition," "ninth grade transition," and "student retention." Articles were sorted based on their relevance to the original request.

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    **Karla Lewis**
    **1.800.755.3277**
    **klewis@serve.org**