Proven Strategies for Personalizing America's High Schools

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America's high schools face the challenge of improving student learning in an ever-changing global world (Marx, 2006). Fueling the need for reform is the urgency of graduating more highly skilled citizens and the demands from federal and state government. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state legislation make today's high schools more accountable for student success than ever before (Ryan, 2004).

Some students are not successful in the traditional high school environment and need extra support (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Many high schools have responded to this need by implementing a variety of interventions for these students. This article will discuss those interventions and two that have a proven connection to improved graduation rates---looping and transition programs to adult life.

Cause for Alarm at the Ninth- Grade

No grade is more at-risk than the ninth-grade. Because of the importance of a successful transition from eighth to ninth-grade, many of the suggestions for high school reform focus on the ninth-grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The data about ninth-graders paints a grim portrait of America's high schools.

• Ninth-graders have lower attendance rates than students in other grade levels, and attendance is a predictor of academic performance.
• Ninth-graders have the highest number of discipline incidents because they often engage in risk-taking behavior, resulting in additional time out of class (detention, suspension).
• Ninth-graders have the highest retention rate of any grade, and only 10-15% of those who repeat the grade ever graduate.
• About 30% of students nationwide fail one or more classes in the ninth-grade.

These descriptors of the ninth-grade experience contribute to an even more disappointing trend---low high school graduation rates:

• Nationally, only 68% of students who enter the ninth-grade complete high school.
• In many large school districts, about half of the high schools graduate less than 50% of their ninth-grade class in four years.
• The number of students dropping out of high school between the ninth and tenth grade is increasing and higher than ever.
• Thirty percent of ninth-graders do not graduate with their high school class.

Importance of Graduation

High school graduation is critical for success. Students who do not graduate from high school stand little chance of sustaining themselves or a family in today's economy (Turner, 2007). The cost to our society is tremendous.

• Adults without a high school diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed.
• High school dropouts account for 70% of the US prison population.
• A dropout's life expectancy is almost 10 years lower than that of a high school graduate.
• Increasing the graduation rate by just 5% could lead to a savings of almost $280 million per state each year by reducing crime related costs.

The evidence is clear. A school's success with ninth-grade students is a predictor of high school completion (Roderick & Cameron, 1999). Success in the ninth-grade sets the stage for graduation from high school and, it could be argued, success in life (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

The Case for Ninth- Grade Interventions

Every human being goes through many stages of cognitive, moral, social, physical, and emotional development (Craig & Baucum, 2002; Wood, 2007). Many students have little difficulty with these changes and have few problems adjusting to the different levels of schooling (Craig & Baucum, 2002). However, other students struggle with the developmental process and need extra support.

Few other developmental periods are as significant as those that occur about the time of transition from middle school to high school (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Kellough & Kellough, 2008). The developmental changes impact students differently but are often characterized by:

• Tremendous physical growth
• Increased stress levels
• Heightened risk of maladjustment
• Lack of self-direction and the ability to think about the future
• Increased social pressure from peers and society

• Decreased self-esteem and an increase of negative views of themselves
• Emotional irresponsibility
• Cognitive immaturity
• Increased risk-taking behavior
• Overall academic decline

Ninth-grade students report concerns related to academic, organizational, and social issues during the transition to ninth-grade. Dealing with a larger, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment than the middle school contributes to the stress (Eccles et al., 1984). Ninth-graders also report feeling nervous and scared about beginning high school.

Overall, many ninth-graders have a difficulty adjusting to the rigidity of the traditional high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). All of this means that ninth-grade classrooms are often filled with students of the same chronological age but who possess very different levels of maturity (Eccles & Wigfield 1997). Many times this causes difficulty for both teachers and students.

Personalizing High School

Implementing strategies to personalize the high school so that ninth-graders can be more connected to school and have more positive relationships with teachers impacts student success (Dudley et al., 2002) and leads to increased graduation rates. Johnston (1992) found that adolescents who do not connect with school or do not find a common bond with a teacher or counselor are more likely to drop out of school. He also reported that how an adolescent feels about school could determine whether or not he or she will continue with their schooling.

There are several recommendations for improving the success of ninth-grade students. Breaking Ranks II (NASSP, 2004) offered a menu of fifteen strategies or specific interventions:

Interventions Recommended for Personalizing High School

Advisory - In advisories, teachers may meet with their students to discuss study skills, homework, grades, etc. Advisories may meet several times a year, once a week or more.

Student Led Conference - Students' facilitate conferences between their teacher and parent(s) to discuss their academic progress.

Ninth-Grade Orientation - Orientation programs are systematic programs that orientates the student to the new school, which may or may not include the following: freshman only first day of school, freshman only registration, eighth-grade night, etc.

Looping Teachers - remain with the same group of students two years in a row.

Ninth-Grade Academy - Academies are comprehensive programs that offer specific transition programs related to curriculum and social interventions.

Career Academy - Career academies teach students skills to obtain and keep a job in their field of choice.

Transition Program - Transition programs are systematic programs designed to help students attend college or chose a career.

Flexible Scheduling - A flexible schedule may include longer instructional blocks and opportunities for credit recovery.

Smaller Learning Communities - SLCs consist of teachers committed to working with the same group of students where they often meet to discuss curriculum and other school related topics.

Data Driven Decision-Making - Data regarding progress, discipline referrals, and attendance are all examples of what may be used to determine programs and inform decisions.

Peer Mentor - Upper class students may be assigned to a ninth-grade student to assist with school issues.

Adult Mentor - Adults can be systematically assigned to ninth-graders for the purpose of mentorship.

Ninth-Grade Only Counselor - One counselor is assigned to work solely with ninth-graders.

Remain with the Same Group of Peers - Similar to SLCs, students remain with the same group of students throughout the day.

Separate Wing, Hall, or Space - A separate space is provided for ninth-graders.

Which Interventions Impact Graduation?

The importance of personalizing high school for students is clear, especially in a time when there is a national urgency to improve the education of high school students. But given the number of interventions, which have the greatest impact on high school completion?

To answer that question a study was conducted to examine the relationship between specific ninth-grade interventions suggested by Breaking Ranks II (NASSP, 2004) and high school graduation. Data were collected from 99 four-year comprehensive high schools in three counties in southeastern Michigan about whether the school implements the ninth-grade

interventions and the year it began. Data about each school's graduation rates was drawn from data provided by the state Department of Education.

Recognizing that success in school is not the result of any single factor, the study, nevertheless identified two interventions that had the greatest impact on graduation – comprehensive transition programs into adult life and looping.

Transition Program into Adult Life

A transitional program into adult life is a systematic program designed to help high school students prepare to enter college or a career. Too often the assumption is that students will naturally make the connection, that they will be thoughtful in planning for their future. Unfortunately, that is often not the case. Providing a connection to the real world links students to school (Feller, 2003). Additionally, connecting students to their future by providing a transition program into adult life can increase graduation rates (Fashola & Slavin, 1998).

Research shows that transition programs into adult life are beneficial to students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Letgers & Kerr, 2001) because of the social connection these interventions can create between the school, the student, and the real world. When ninth-graders transition to the high school, new feelings of loneliness and isolation can occur that can adversely affect student achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). Transitional interventions help to prevent or at least lessen some of those feelings.

At Mandela High School in Oakland, California every student develops a plan during the ninth-grade for what they plan to do after high school. If students want to go to college they investigate the entrance requirements and develop a plan for completing the required courses. If they want to enter a career, they must identify the skills necessary to get employed and identify the courses they must take to develop those skills. Further, each quarter students must examine their grades and test scores to determine whether they are on track to meet their goal.

The plan begins in the ninth-grade where teachers work with students to connect to their future and begin to think about what they must accomplish in order to make their plan a reality.

Looping

Looping is the term used to characterize teachers remaining with the same group of students for more than one year. Fashola and Slavin (1998) found that providing a bond between student and teacher (as with looping) reduced dropout rates. In addition, teachers looping with their classes help to create a more personalized classroom in which students will have a greater chance to succeed (Clarke et al., 2003).

Clarke, Frazer, DiMartino, Fisher, & Smith (2003) suggest that educators should create a personalized classroom which can often be done by looping. Looping is recommended for ninth-grade students to create a sense of belonging and a more personalized environment (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McIntosh & White, 2006; Stevenson, 2002). Teachers work with their students for more than one year increasing the support and affirming relationships (Fraser & Wahlberg, 1991).

At Mandela High School in Oakland, CA students work closely with teachers in an advisory type setting to create a plan for their future success. Those groups remain together throughout the high school years. This builds long-term relationships between students and teachers and increases teacher commitment to the success of their students.

Conclusion

America's high schools are in the midst of transforming themselves for greater student success. While many of the reforms are driven by state and federal requirements, the commitment to creating a school where every student is well known and where they can visualize a successful future characterizes most schools.

Personalizing the high school is an element of every reform agenda. Responding to the unique needs of ninth-graders and recognizing the importance of a successful transition to high school is important. Adopting proven strategies like providing a transition program to adult life, and looping, can be powerful ways to connect ninth-graders to school. Providing a supportive and caring environment at school can only assist students in their academic success.

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