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INFORMATION CAPSULE

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NINTH GRADE CENTERS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

At A Glance

Researchers have identified ninth grade as one of the most critical periods of time for intervention to prevent the loss of motivation, failing grades, and dropping out of school. This Information Capsule is concerned with the efficacy of ninth-grade centers or academies which isolate ninth-grade students into separate school buildings or in wings of existing schools to remedy the high retention and dropout rates frequently observed with students in this particular age group.

The most important change in grade configuration in the last 30 years has been the significant decline in the number of junior high schools (grades 7-9). Nationally, there were 4,711 public junior high schools in 1970 and only 632 in 2001 which constitutes a decline of 87 percent (McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins, 2003). The widespread consensus has been the K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 grade configuration constitutes the best plan. In fact, 62 percent of the principals surveyed nationally by Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, and Petzko (2004), yielded this exact grade configuration as the ideal model.

However, the middle school grades have continued to be an issue. For example, over the past five years (2001-02 to 2005-06), public schools in Florida have retained annually an average of approximately 46,000 ninth-grade students. Similarly in Miami-Dade County, the largest group of students retained from 1999-00 to 2001-02 or approximately one-third were enrolled in ninth grade. This proportion declined to 24% (2002-03), 25% (2003-04), 14% (2004-05), and to 15% (2005-06). This was in part because there were a larger number of students retained at the elementary level which coincided with implementation of new state laws requiring mandatory retention of third grade students who were not reading at grade level. In addition to grade retention, dropout rates also tend to be higher in ninth grade. Approximately, one-third of the M-DCPS students who drop out in grades 9 to 12 do so while enrolled in ninth grade.

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Reents (2002) concluded, “. . . the best way to address this need is by creating ninth-grade academies or centers and schools within schools.” Data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics indicated there were 148 ninth-grade-only schools operating during the 2004-05 school year, only two of which were located in Florida.

Impact/Effectiveness of Ninth-Grade Centers

Reents (2002) provided anecdotal data from several sources in support of ninth-grade centers. The Superintendent of the 53,000-student Aldine Independent School District in Houston, Texas stated the following regarding the impact of opening a ninth-grade center in the district.

“Our research found that we have more 9th graders drop out of school because they get lost in a large high school setting and have less attention paid to them as individuals. Our dropout rate at the 9th grade level (*currently*) has decreased dramatically and our attendance rate has increased. More students are earning credit and are classified as 10th graders when they go to the high school. Our test scores have risen and behavior is improved.”

Other researchers such as Hertzog and Morgan (1999) have recommended developing ninth-grade centers to ease the stress of transition from middle school to high school. “Our belief is that this approach will provide 9th grade students with ‘touchstones’ to help them acclimate to their new surroundings and a faculty that are transitional in nature and dedicated to teaching 9th-grade students.”

While some school districts chose to isolate different grade levels, Hertzog and Morgan indicated it is most crucial to isolate 9th graders since students experiencing some form of planned transition activities going from 8th to 9th grade had a significantly lower dropout rate (8%) versus students who had no such transition experiences (24%). Similarly, schools that had transition experiences in place had fewer students retained in grade.

The ninth-grade center concept seems to be catching on in Florida as evidenced by Dunn (2007) who reported on June 13, 2007, that The Polk County School Board voted 6 to 1 to hire architectural firms to begin planning the prototype for construction of ninth-grade centers. Polk County currently has three ninth-grade centers operating at three area high schools and the district wants to open more for 2008-09. The new centers are envisioned to be an “encapsulated brick-and-mortar wing” for freshman at some high schools. The budget for the project was set at \$100 million in capital outlay and \$4 million in operating expenses for the centers to be constructed around the county. One Board Member supporting the measure indicated, “The data for ninth graders at Haines City High School shows that the percentage of students scoring (grade level) or above on the FCAT reading (test) has more than doubled over the last three years since the ninth-grade center was established. Board Chairwoman Margaret Lofton was also in favor of building more ninth-grade centers since her 25 years of experience working with ninth-grade students afforded her, as she stated, the opportunity to know that the centers are needed, would be effective, and that the district can’t move fast enough to build them.

In Polk County, Haines City High School maintains its own ninth-grade center across the street from the main campus. The center is housed in portable classrooms at the present time and has their own administrator and guidance counselor. Ninth-grade students eat lunch at a different time than students in grades 10 to 12 but share the media center, computer labs, and some classrooms. The school is said to be very happy with the ninth-grade center since it was established three years ago. The district feels it represents a small learning community which has yielded significant improvements in behavior, attendance, and relationships with parents. Parents are said to “love it” since they “feel like it’s a very safe environment for their children.”

Benefits/Advantages of the Ninth-Grade Center:

The following benefits of ninth-grade centers have been reported in the research literature.

- provide a more successful transition from middle school to senior high school since they represent more controlled environments that ease students into high school
- add a significant number of student stations at existing school sites
- allow teachers and administrators to get to know students better and to focus on those students who need special assistance
- negative peer pressure from older students is not present such that 9th graders may not learn inappropriate attitudes toward academic achievement
- parents are generally very positive as long as their children are afforded the same opportunities for participating in school activities (i.e., band, athletics, special classes, etc.)
- parents of female students feel more at ease given their daughters will not be attending classes with older male students
- students bond together, get to know each other better, and don't have to compete with upperclassmen for participation in after-school activities
- constitute small learning communities which represent a reform strategy recommended by the Florida Department of Education Task Force on High School Reform (February 2006)
- small centers are less efficient and less cost effective ways to spend taxpayer dollars
- the real issue is how to configure educational institutions not what grade span configuration is the best; concentrating on grade configuration prevents educators from addressing the real fundamental and underlying issue
- students may not mature as quickly since they are not exposed to older more mature students (mentioned both as an advantage and disadvantage)
- virtual schooling may eliminate the issue of grade configuration entirely since students across different ages may enroll in the same class
- progressive education should account for the fact that some students could finish a K-12 education in 10 years while other students may require 15 years; education should permit these individual differences and not punish students if they finish in fewer or in more years
- students should be assigned to grades based on skill level rather than chronological age

Implementation Strategies for the Ninth-Grade Center:

The following implementation strategies or helpful tips have been discussed in the literature.

Disadvantages of the Ninth-Grade Center:

The following disadvantages relating to ninth-grade centers have been mentioned in the literature.

- although research has not provided definitive answers to all the questions about grade span, the questions still remain; available research is not adequate to support the efficacy of ninth-grade centers
- every transition students make disrupts the learning process and the ninth-grade center adds another transition between middle and senior high school
- just establishing a ninth-grade center is not the answer, there must also be a comprehensive and well-planned series of transition experiences that account for the needs of the students
- districts must first sell the center concept to parents
- district administration must treat the ninth-grade center as an equal to the senior high school not as an extension project
- locate the ninth-grade center as close as possible to the senior high school site such as a self-contained portion of the same building

- housing the center in the high school building will provide: 1) common areas such as the cafeteria and library for 9th graders to mix with upperclassmen; 2) advanced students have the opportunity to take classes only offered on the main campus; and 3) shared personnel costs will hold expenses down
- hire staffs that want to work with ninth-grade students and who are trained in the unique developmental characteristics of students in this age group
- include a well-designed transition program based on the needs of the students, not the adults
- establish ninth-grade centers at high schools who need them and have room for them
- teachers in the ninth-grade center should coordinate the curriculum and collaborate with teachers of grades 10-12
- expose 9th graders to activities conducted at the high school (e.g., assemblies, extracurricular activities, etc.)
- integrate administrations at the ninth-grade center with those at the high school so goals, philosophy, policies, procedures, curriculum, and expectations are seamless
- advanced ninth graders should have the opportunity to complete one or more courses at the senior high school

On a Local Note

Although several charter schools have opened since 2004-05 with students enrolled in ninth grade only, they are not considered ninth-grade centers since in subsequent years additional grade levels were added. These schools comprised ninth-grade students exclusively only during the first year of operation. Therefore, M-DCPS does not have a substantial track record with ninth-grade centers that could be investigated or evaluated.

Summary

The efficacy of isolating ninth-grade students into their own school building or into a wing of an existing school building was reviewed in this Information Capsule. Advantages and disadvantages of such a decision were also discussed. The empirical research in this area is quite weak, and although generally positive, probably does not by itself justify spending large sums of money to establish ninth-grade centers districtwide. The anecdotal evidence reviewed here, as provided by educational administrators and board members who have had experience with such centers is quite promising. M-DCPS staff might want to contact staff from the Polk County School Board responsible for bringing the item to the School Board in June 2007. A sharing of information on the establishment of ninth-grade centers among districts within the state may prove valuable.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net> by selecting "Research Briefs" or "Information Capsules" under the "Current Publications" menu.

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Other Resources

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