IMPLEMENTING NINTH GRADE ACADEMIES

in Broward County, Florida

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June 2013

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

Implementing Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County, Florida

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Overview

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University partnered with Florida's Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in 2009 to launch an independent evaluation of the district's initiative to implement Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) in every district high school. An NGA is a self-contained learning community for ninth-graders that operates as a school within a school. With its own administrative leadership, space, faculty, and teacher teams, it is designed to offer ninth-graders a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment. The willingness of BCPS leaders to partner with researchers on this study offered a unique opportunity to learn more about NGAs and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide policy and practice.

The study found strong district leadership at the outset and widespread uptake of core NGA components across the 18 high schools in the sample. The investigation also uncovered substantial variation in the overall quality and duration of NGA implementation across schools, however, with strong and sustained implementation of multiple components occurring in just three schools, even though many more had access to models of strong NGAs nearby. These implementation experiences in BCPS suggest that many schools will need more specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, secure resources, and tools to guide practice and facilitate scheduling if they are to implement fully fledged, continuously improving, and self-sustaining NGAs.

Key Findings

- District leadership for the initiative was strong at the outset, but not sustained as district priorities changed.
- While schools received some support through a cross-school professional learning community for NGA administrators, they did not receive any other technical or financial support for program implementation.
- The district's definition of NGAs focused on structural components in each school — ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Improving ninth-grade curriculum, instruction, and student supports were not a direct focus of the initiative. In fact, other reforms in these areas aimed at improving student outcomes competed with NGA implementation.
- It was more feasible for schools to implement and sustain the administrative leadership and space components of NGAs than the dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teaming components.
- Only three high schools achieved strong implementation. Ten achieved a threshold level of implementation, and five fell below threshold. Most schools did not improve from the first to the second or third year.

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Preface

Every year nearly a million children in the United States fail to graduate high school with their peers. Though graduation rates have improved in recent years, more than 20 percent of all students, 30 percent of Hispanic students, and one-third of African-American students still do not graduate from high school.

Many of these students stray off the graduation path when they first get to high school. Going to high school for the first time is a big change. New freshmen must find their way around an unfamiliar and typically much larger school than they are used to, adjust to more demanding coursework, develop relationships with new teachers and peers, and respond to unprecedented academic expectations and social pressures. Research makes it clear that this is a pivotal time. Students who navigate the transition into high school successfully are far more likely to stay in school and graduate than those who struggle. Poor attendance or failing even just one core academic course in ninth grade can put a young person off track and make it much more likely he or she will drop out.

For nearly two decades, MDRC has studied how to keep high school freshmen engaged in school and on track to graduate. This report on implementing Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) extends those efforts to build knowledge and guide policy. NGAs are self-contained learning communities for ninth-graders that operate as small schools within larger high schools, with their own administrative leaders, faculty, space, and team organization. They offer high school freshmen a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment. Research suggests that NGAs might improve students' attendance, behavior, and course performance, but there isn't yet enough rigorous empirical evidence about them to say for sure.

Starting in the mid-2000s, the school district in Broward County, Florida began trying to institute NGAs in all of its public high schools, which gave MDRC and Johns Hopkins University researchers a unique opportunity to study how they might work on a large scale. This report doesn't yet answer the question of how much of an effect this reform had; it first seeks to describe how well this large, urban school district succeeded at getting such a complicated reform into place.

It turns out that it was quite difficult. Of the 18 high schools in the district that tried to implement NGAs, only 3 did so consistently well. The results outlined here suggest that if a district wants to adopt NGAs, it will need to give its schools more backup than Broward County Public Schools was able to provide: specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, tools, and secure resources. With that in mind, the MDRC/Johns Hopkins research team is now partnering with Broward County on an NGA Enhancement Development Project, testing new ways to help schools make their NGAs all they can be.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This study was made possible by the vision, support, and full engagement of many individuals and organizations. It was funded through a unique Institute for Education Sciences (IES) program designed to promote evaluation of state and local programs and policies. We are indebted to Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) leaders Dr. Katherine Blasik, Dr. Joanne Harrison, and Dr. Elisa Calibrese for their courage in initiating Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) districtwide and in partnering with MDRC and Johns Hopkins researchers on the evaluation. We also thank our IES program officers David Sweet, Hiromi Ono, and James Benson for their encouragement and support.

To conduct the research in Broward County, we relied on invaluable partnership and collaboration with Dr. Gerene Starratt and BCPS staff members Ann Evans and Diego DeRose. Dr. Starratt worked closely with MDRC to conceptualize and launch the evaluation, and both she and Ms. Evans reviewed drafts of this report and have continued to play central roles in the NGA Enhancement Development Project.

From the study's inception to publication of this report, numerous MDRC senior researchers and staff played an important role. We thank Corinne Herlihy, Robert Ivry, James Kemple, and Alison Black for developing the original proposal and for serving as initial principal investigators, and Ivonne Garcia, Zeest Haider, Catherine Armstrong, Cathy Corbin, and Nicole Clabaugh for their skilled data collection, analysis, and technical and report production support. We are also extremely grateful to MDRC's William Corrin, Fred Doolittle, John Hutchins, Janet Quint, and Pei Zhu for reviewing drafts of the report. The final product benefited greatly from their insights and advice on how to sharpen the presentation of the findings.

We conclude with deepest thanks to the BCPS district leaders, high school principals, administrators, and teachers who shared their experiences of implementing NGAs during our site visits and interviews. We greatly appreciate their openness, generosity, and demonstrated commitment to advancing understanding of the best ways to support students' successful transition into high school. This report is dedicated to them and to ninth-graders everywhere.

The Authors

Executive Summary

The transition into high school is a volatile time for adolescents and a precarious point in students' educational progression. Ninth-graders who successfully navigate this transition are far more likely to graduate from high school with their peers and attend college than those who experience failure their freshmen year. Growing awareness of the importance of the first year of high school for future success has prompted schools and districts across the country to develop supports and interventions designed specifically for ninth-graders.

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University partnered with Florida's Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in 2009 to launch an independent evaluation of the district's initiative to implement Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) in every district high school. An NGA is a self-contained learning community for ninth-graders that operates as a school within a school. With its own administrators, space, faculty, and teacher teams, an NGA is designed to offer ninth-graders a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment.

Current research offers a mixed assessment of NGAs. Some practitioners report very positive experiences, while others have abandoned the NGA concept because they found it too costly and difficult. The most rigorous empirical study of NGAs was published by MDRC in 2005. It investigated the impact of NGAs as a core component of Talent Development High Schools, a comprehensive, whole-school reform model. Talent Development was implemented in five high schools, with each receiving intensive, on-site support from facilitators at Johns Hopkins University, where the model was developed. The study found that the model produced significant and substantial gains during students' first year of high school in attendance, academic course credits earned, and promotion rates. The improvements in credits earned and promotion rates for ninth-graders were sustained as students moved through high school. Though promising, these findings do not address whether it is actually feasible to implement NGAs on a large scale, in the absence of a whole-school reform approach and without external support—as was the case in Broward County.

The willingness of BCPS leaders to partner with researchers on this study offered a unique opportunity to learn more about NGAs and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide policy and practice. This report presents findings from the research team's study of how NGAs were implemented in BCPS. It represents the first large-scale examination of NGA implementation using multiple data sources and systematic qualitative methods. By providing an in-depth analysis of the BCPS initiative, the study provides practitioners and policymakers with a detailed picture of NGAs and the challenges to implementing them without external support across a large urban school district.

Research Setting and Approach

Located in southern Florida just north of Miami, BCPS is the nation's sixth-largest public school system, with more than 250,000 students. It serves the city of Fort Lauderdale and a number of its surrounding suburbs. When the research team entered the field in fall 2009, the district's 31 regular high schools had an average total enrollment of 2,224 students, average ninth-grade enrollment of 594 students, and a majority of students from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. BCPS leaders became interested in NGAs primarily as a way to personalize and improve learning for the diverse population of ninth-graders in these large high schools.

To study NGA implementation in Broward County, the research team first examined how the district launched the initiative, how NGAs were defined by BCPS and understood by principals, and the supports provided for implementation. The team analyzed relevant district documents and Web sites, and conducted semistructured interviews with BCPS district administrators and principals who had been involved at the district level in planning and launching the NGA initiative. The research team then examined the extent to which NGAs were implemented in 18 BCPS high schools. During site visits researchers observed NGA operations and interviewed over 200 principals, NGA administrators, counselors, teachers, and staff members. The research team used these data to assess the extent to which core NGA components were implemented in each school, how implementation varied across schools, the extent to which implementation was sustained over time, and factors that supported or inhibited implementation.

To rate NGA implementation in the 18 high schools, the research team focused on the four components schools were called on to implement, as clearly and consistently outlined in BCPS documents and district administrator interviews:

- A school administrator or administrative leadership team dedicated to the NGA
- A separate space for the NGA, such as separate hallways or a separate building
- Faculty dedicated specifically to the ninth grade
- Interdisciplinary teams of ninth-grade teachers

The research team developed a rubric for each component to measure the depth and quality of its implementation in each school for each of the first three years of NGA operation.[1]

[1]The research team examined implementation over each NGA's first three years in order to understand both NGA start-up and sustainability. See the full report and appendixes for further detail on the larger (continued)

Key Findings

- **District leadership for the NGA initiative was strong at the outset, but not sustained as district priorities changed.**

High school reform in BCPS began during the 2005-2006 school year, when district leaders established a High School Reform office staffed by a dedicated "principal on task assignment" (who was released from other administrative duties) and a full-time program coordinator. The High School Reform office also received strong leadership and support from the area (subdistrict) superintendent at that time responsible for overseeing all high schools.

In 2005, High School Reform office staff surveyed school principals and analyzed student data, finding that many ninth-graders were struggling with attendance, behavior, and academic performance. They also conducted a review of national high school reform literature and a scan of local strategies that were showing promise. The scan revealed that several BCPS high schools had begun implementing NGAs during an earlier wave of reforms. Observations, testimonials, and data from these local efforts and national accounts moved the district to make NGAs the centerpiece of the district's high school reform action plan, launched in fall 2007.

Despite its strong start, BCPS did not sustain its focus on NGAs. By the time the study team entered the field in fall 2009, the superintendent had been replaced, the area superintendent who led the NGA initiative had moved to a different position in the central office, and the High School Reform office had disbanded. The district's focus shifted to other strategies for improving high school students' performance. Thus this analysis of NGA implementation covers both an initial period of strong district leadership and later years when schools were largely operating NGAs on their own.

- **While schools received some support through a cross-school professional learning community for NGA administrators, they did not receive any other technical or financial support for NGA implementation.**

The primary vehicle for supporting and loosely holding schools accountable for NGA implementation came in the form of "Leading in Ninth Grade as One" (LINGO), a professional learning community for NGA administrators that met monthly. These meetings gave NGA administrators opportunities to share and receive feedback on their NGA practice and were well received by those administrators. LINGO started in fall 2007 and ran for three years, ending in spring 2010.

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evaluation, how the 18 schools were selected for the study sample, and the rubrics used to assess implementation of the four components.

Outside of LINGO meetings, school-based administrators and teachers were largely on their own as they worked through the technical and human challenges of establishing an NGA and fostering its growth. Further, no other district- or school-based support or accountability mechanisms were installed, and no sanctions were imposed on schools that did not implement NGAs.

- **The district's definition of NGAs focused on structural components in each school — NGA administrative leadership, dedicated NGA space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Improving ninth-grade curriculum, instruction, and student supports were not a direct focus of the initiative. In fact, other reforms in these areas aimed at improving student outcomes competed with NGA implementation.**

The district's effort to adopt NGAs on a large scale focused on four structural components designed to achieve smaller, more personalized learning environments — NGA administrative leadership, dedicated NGA space, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Following the guidance of the research literature available at the time on the benefits of smaller learning communities, district leaders and principals envisioned that the focus, proximity, and collaborative routines created by these components would help adults get to know students well, nurture a positive climate where expectations were consistent, and allow teachers and administrators to intervene on students' behalf when they encountered academic and social barriers to learning. A self-assessment provided to NGA administrators highlighted interdisciplinary teams as a key way to enact personalized instruction and academic and social supports for ninth-graders (such as tutoring, credit recovery, counseling, mentoring, and social services). Schools received very few specifics and no on-site support to help them determine how to schedule and implement teams, however. At the same time, BCPS was exploring other reform approaches focused on instructional improvement and data-driven progress monitoring. Though not inconsistent with NGA practice, these reforms were not integrated into the NGA initiative but conducted independently of it. They directly competed with fledgling NGAs in ways that multiplied priorities for school-based administrators and faculty, and made staffing and scheduling NGAs even more challenging.

- **It was more feasible for schools to implement and sustain the administrative leadership and space components of NGAs than the dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teaming components.**

Nearly every school in the sample was able to assign an assistant principal to oversee the ninth grade and designate a separate space to house the NGA, though implementation quality varied across schools. A principal could feasibly implement these components through

relatively independent and straightforward decisions about how the resources at his or her school would be allocated. Schools that achieved strong implementation of the administrative leadership component were aided by attentive and sustained support for the NGA from the principal, and either low turnover among NGA administrators or intentional strategies for mitigating the potentially disruptive impact of changes in leadership staff. Implementation of the dedicated space component was largely dependent both on the principal's willingness to make a priority of separate ninth-grade space and on available resources, including a school's physical layout and new construction opportunities.

It was more complicated to implement the dedicated faculty and interdisciplinary teacher team components well. Executing these components involved a high degree of leadership skill, scheduling knowledge, and technical capability — characteristics that were not evenly distributed across schools. A school was most likely to implement the dedicated ninth-grade faculty component if it had a school principal (or another NGA champion in an authoritative position, such as a veteran assistant principal) who made a priority of NGA staffing and was willing to expend political capital to handpick faculty for the NGA. Even the most committed principals and NGA administrators, however, struggled to implement and sustain dedicated faculty for the NGA in the face of pressures to expand advanced placement and honors classes and in the face of staffing cuts brought on by a districtwide financial crisis.

Implementing interdisciplinary teams presented the greatest challenge. It was a major technical hurdle to arrange teams' schedules so that they could have a common planning period, especially in schools operating on a four-by-four block schedule.[2] While some schools were fortunate enough to have skilled and experienced administrators or schedulers who could design daily timetables conducive to teacher teams, schools without these resources — the majority — did not receive additional support to help them do so. Further, schools did not receive any site-specific guidance about how interdisciplinary teaming might help support students, or how teachers could use common planning time effectively. Since working in interdisciplinary teams is unfamiliar territory for most high-school educators, the lack of concrete guidance and support in this area was a major barrier.

- **Only three high schools achieved strong implementation. Ten achieved a threshold level of implementation, and five fell below threshold. Most schools did not improve from the first to the second or third year.**

[2]Under a block schedule, students take four 90-minute classes each day. Some schools offer a four-by-four block schedule in which students take eight courses: four courses the first semester and four different courses the second semester.

While the district's initiative to implement NGAs districtwide was bold in many respects, many schools struggled to implement this complex and multifaceted reform. Although every high school in the study sample attempted to implement NGA structures and practices, the research team discovered strong and sustained NGA implementation in only three schools.

In each of the first three years of their NGAs, all three of these schools achieved strong implementation of three core components — dedicated administrator, space, and faculty — and threshold or strong implementation of the interdisciplinary teaming component. These schools were characterized by committed and creative leaders, skilled schedulers, and low or well-managed turnover in key positions.

Just over half of the schools in the sample achieved at least threshold, but less than strong, implementation levels. Interdisciplinary teaming was the clear weak link in these schools. Nearly all schools in this group had some or strong implementation of the administrator, space, and faculty components, but four never implemented teacher teams and two abandoned their teaming effort by their NGA's third year.

Nearly one-third of the schools were found to have overall weak implementation, indicating that they were missing some major NGA components and only nominally implementing others during the first three years of their academies. These NGAs were hindered by leadership turnover, faculty resistance to being organized as a ninth-grade team, weak scheduling support, and competing priorities, among other challenges. Many of these schools essentially gave up on their NGAs. Even among those that did not abandon their NGAs, most had no concrete plans to pursue deeper implementation.

Further analysis of NGA implementation trajectories shows that the majority of schools (11 out of 18) in the sample did not improve their implementation over their first three years of operation. Of those that did show improvement, only two moved into the "strong" category by their third year.

Conclusion

This study examined implementation of NGAs in BCPS over multiple years, finding an initial period of strong district leadership that was followed by a period of changing district priorities, when schools were left largely on their own to implement NGAs. The research team found widespread uptake of core NGA components among the 18 high schools in the sample, but also

uncovered substantial variation in the overall quality and duration of NGA implementation across schools. Most schools implemented NGAs at only a threshold level, with strong and sustained implementation of multiple NGA components occurring in just three schools, even though all had access to models of strong NGAs nearby. These findings suggest that many schools will need more specific guidelines, on-site support, training for teachers, secure resources, and tools to guide NGA practice and facilitate scheduling if they are to implement fully fledged, continuously improving, and self-sustaining NGAs.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The transition into high school is a volatile time for adolescents and a precarious point in students' educational advancement. Ninth-graders who successfully navigate this transition are far more likely to graduate from high school with their peers and attend college than those who experience failure their freshman year. Growing awareness of the importance of the first year of high school for future success has prompted schools and districts across the country to develop supports and interventions designed specifically for ninth-graders.

Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) have attracted national attention as a particularly intensive and promising approach to supporting a successful transition for high school freshmen. An NGA is a self-contained learning community for ninth-graders that operates as a school within a school. With its own administrators, space, faculty, and teacher teams, an NGA is designed to offer ninth-graders a more personalized, engaging, and responsive learning environment. But the lack of rigorous empirical evidence on NGAs has led to continued debate about the wisdom of separating ninth-graders from upper-grade students and about the overall feasibility and impact of the NGA model.

Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University partnered with Florida's Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in 2009 to launch an independent evaluation of the district's initiative to implement NGAs in all of its high schools. The purpose of the study was to assess the implementation of NGAs in Broward County and their impact on student achievement and educational attainment. The willingness of BCPS leaders to partner with researchers on this study offered a unique opportunity to learn more about NGAs and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide policy and practice.

This report offers an in-depth picture of how NGAs were implemented in Broward County high schools. It examines the context of the initiative, the extent to which NGAs were implemented, and the conditions associated with strong and weak implementation. As discussed in Chapter 6, the report also lays groundwork for considering whether NGAs were given a "fair test" in Broward County; that is, whether the level of NGA implementation observed here could be expected to produce substantially improved outcomes for students in a rigorous quasi-experimental study, which will be explored in the evaluation's subsequent impact report.[1]

[1]Bloom (2010).

The remainder of this chapter discusses the theory of action behind NGAs, reviews current issues and research evidence, describes potential contributions of this report and its place in the larger evaluation project, and offers a brief overview of the following chapters.

What Is a Ninth Grade Academy?

NGAs emerged in the mid-1990s as a strategy for high schools to improve student outcomes by addressing the academic and social needs of ninth-grade students. Nationally, many students fail to complete enough requirements to successfully transition from ninth to tenth grade, and ninth grade is also a year during which many students drop out of school. Research in urban districts suggests that as many as 40 percent of students fail to get promoted from ninth to tenth grade on time, and fewer than 20 percent of those students recover from failure and go on to graduate.[2] Nationwide analyses show a sharp increase in the proportion of students enrolled in ninth grade over the last 30 years, indicating an increasing number of students who fail to move on. The rate at which students appear to drop out between ninth and tenth grade has tripled over the same period.[3]

An NGA is a self-contained, small learning community in which a group of administrators and teachers works exclusively with ninth-graders to create a personalized school within a school that is responsive to their academic and social needs. The core components of NGAs include a ninth-grade administrator or administrative team that oversees the academy, designated space in a separate part of the high school, faculty assigned to teach ninth-grade students, and teachers organized into interdisciplinary teams that share students and plan together. In addition to these structural components, exemplary NGAs also often incorporate other practices aimed at promoting success for ninth-grade students. These can include:

- "Summer bridge" programs for incoming freshmen
- Interdisciplinary curricula with instructional practices coordinated across ninth-grade classes
- Flexible block scheduling with extended class periods
- Gap-closing curricula and extra help in core academic subjects
- Curricula focused on career and college awareness
- Data-driven progress monitoring

[2]Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005); Allensworth and Easton (2005); Neild and Balfanz (2007).
[3]Haney et al. (2004).

- Positive behavior incentive systems[4]

The theory behind NGAs, represented in Figure 1.1, is that their core components should reinforce one another and help faculty and administrators develop and implement more personalized learning experiences and supports for students. Giving NGAs their own space, faculty, and leadership while using teacher teams should foster closer relationships between teachers and students, decrease students' anonymity, and increase students' sense of community. Students should have a consistent group of teachers accountable for their success, and teachers should be able to coordinate their coursework and their instructional and behavior management practices to meet the needs of their students. Ideally these "mediating outcomes" — more personalized learning environments, more positive school climate, improvements in teacher and student engagement, and improvements in students' attitudes and sense of efficacy — should lead to improvements in student performance, help students progress through high school, and prepare them to transition to college or the workplace.

Ninth Grade Academies in Practice: Issues and Evidence

NGAs and related reforms aimed at easing the transition into high school have received increasing attention since the mid-1990s as promising, high-impact ways to help poorly performing high schools. NGAs are a core reform element in at least one comprehensive high school reform model (Talent Development High Schools) and similar supports for ninth-graders are found in other high school reform initiatives.[5] Proponents argue that NGAs represent a systematic and comprehensive strategy that can help students successfully navigate the transition into high school. Accounts of national and local initiatives describe a growing number of schools and districts experimenting with NGAs, with mixed results.[6]

Reports from the field. On balance, reviews and anecdotal reports come down in favor of NGAs. They find improvements in student attendance and achievement, and declines in grade retention, discipline problems, and suspensions.[7] They also point to factors that promote NGA success and sustainability, such as carefully handpicking teachers to serve on the NGA faculty, and beginning with a planning year to build awareness and gain buy-in among teachers, parents, and district stakeholders. Recruiting and selecting teachers to teach ninth-graders is

[4]Southern Regional Education Board (2002); Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008).

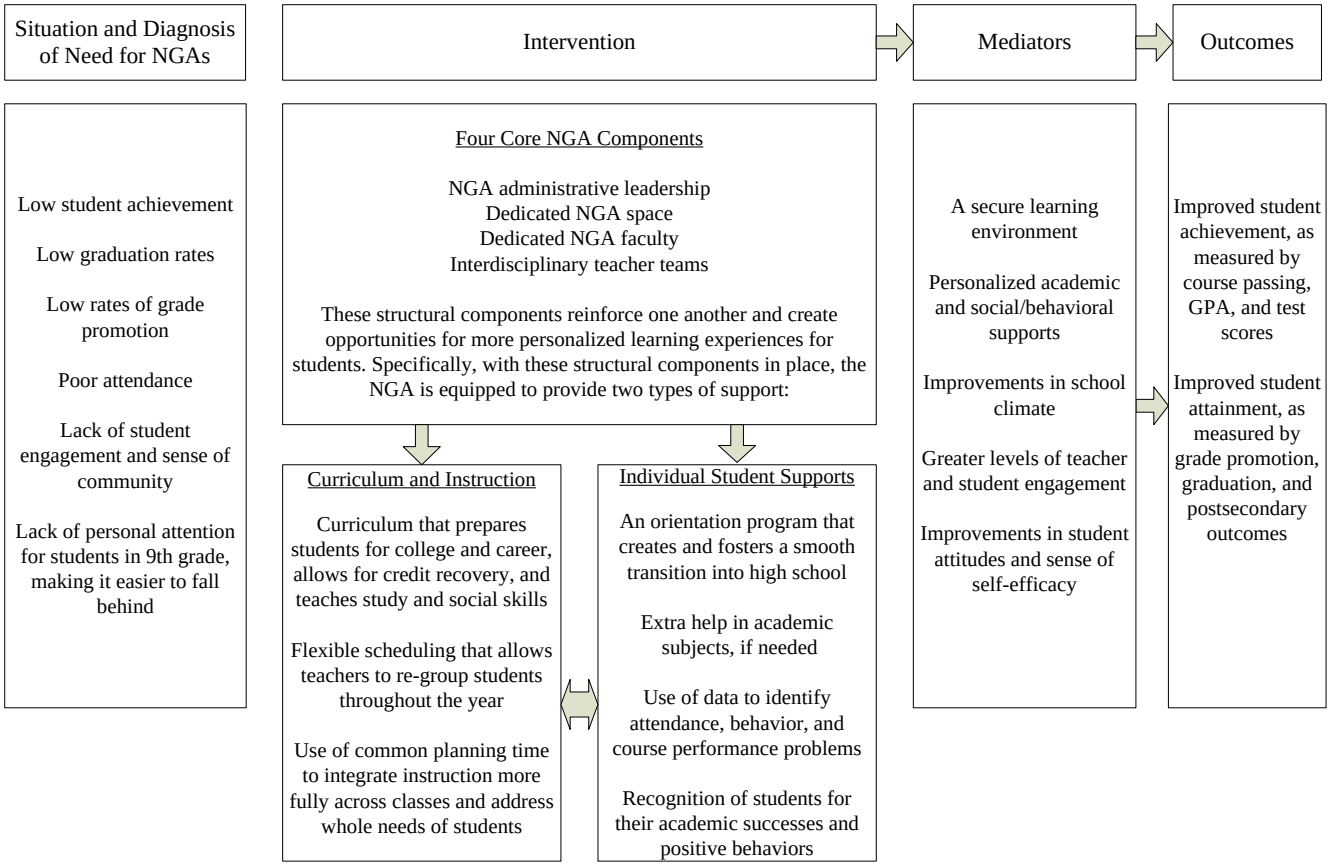
[5]Talent Development High Schools is a school reform model for restructuring large high schools with persistent attendance and discipline problems, poor student achievement, and high dropout rates. The model calls for schools to reorganize into small "learning communities" — including NGAs for first-year students — to reduce student isolation and anonymity. It also emphasizes high academic standards and provides all students with a college-preparatory academic sequence. For more information, see What Works Clearinghouse (2007).

[6]Kennelly and Monrad (2007); Chmelynski (2004); Kilanski, Smerdon, Legters, and Evan (2012).

[7]Southern Regional Education Board (2002).

Figure 1.1

Theory of Action for Ninth Grade Academies



considered important because it counters the traditional high school practice of placing ninth-graders with the least experienced and credentialed teachers, while more experienced and highly qualified teachers are "rewarded" with upper-grade assignments.[8] Reviews and reports also note the importance of a skilled scheduler who can ensure that the NGA is one of the top priorities when building the school's master schedule.[9]

While these reports of NGA experiences are generally positive, news articles, blogs, and online interviews also indicate that the approach has sparked controversy and criticism in some places. A leading concern is that NGAs isolate ninth-graders and delay their full entry into high school. High schools in Sarasota, Florida, for example, discontinued their NGA initiative in part because administrators and parents perceived that ninth-graders were being forced to navigate two difficult transitions, one into the NGA and then a second into tenth grade.[10] A related issue is that, depending on how strictly the students are separated from upperclassmen, NGAs can limit the electives available to ninth-graders and keep them from participating in schoolwide activities such as band and sports. NGAs also have been called a drain on resources available to the rest of the school, leading to resentment and "turf wars" waged by upper-grade faculty who feel their departments have been diminished and divided by NGA demands.[11] Reports are virtually silent on the actual costs of operating an NGA, however.

Empirical studies. The systematic studies related to NGAs are few and limited in scope, but there are several that lay important groundwork for the current study. Project Transition, for example, was a research and demonstration program in two schools that evaluated a set of school structures and supports designed to aid ninth-graders in their transition to high school. By implementing student-teacher teams across four core subjects (English, math, science, and social studies), daily teacher team meetings, and professional development for teachers, Project Transition created a more supportive environment for both teachers and students. Using a cohort comparison design, MDRC found that the school that implemented Project Transition with more fidelity had modest but positive effects on student achievement.[12]

Kerr and Legters conducted multivariate analyses of cross-sectional survey and school-level outcome data of ninth-grade transition supports in Maryland high schools.[13] They found that the use of small learning communities and interdisciplinary teaching teams for ninth-graders, either independently or together, was significantly associated with lower schoolwide

[8]Neild and Farley (2007); Viadero (2008).
[9]Chmelynski (2004); Hall (2006); Habeeb (2009).
[10]Scott (2006).
[11]Habeeb (2009).
[12]Quint, Miller, Pastor, and Cytron (1999).
[13]Kerr and Legters (2004).

dropout rates, even after controlling for student background characteristics, prior achievement, and school-level factors. The study did not examine how, or how well, these transition supports were implemented, nor whether schools were able to sustain them over time.

MDRC published a rigorous empirical study involving NGAs in 2005. That study used a quasi-experimental design to assess the impact of the comprehensive Talent Development High Schools reform model on student engagement, achievement, and attainment in five Philadelphia high schools.[14] The study found that the model, which includes NGAs as a central component, produced significant and substantial gains during students' first year of high school in attendance, academic course credits earned, and promotion rates. The improvements in credits earned and promotion rates for ninth-graders were sustained as students moved through high school. The authors argued that this impact on student academic outcomes could be attributed to strong implementation of the school-within-a-school structure for ninth-graders, the specialized curriculum designed to close skill gaps in reading and mathematics, and the on-site coaching for teachers provided by the Talent Development program. Nonetheless, the study did not link specific components to particular outcomes. That is important because it examined NGAs in the context of the broader Talent Development comprehensive high school reform effort, which received a high level of support from an external reform partner. This leaves open the question of the feasibility of NGAs in districts, such as BCPS, that move to implement NGAs on a large scale without external support.

Overall, the extant literature does not yet provide a conclusive body of evidence to help policymakers and practitioners make informed decisions about whether NGAs are the right approach for their schools and districts. Empirical studies find promising outcomes related to ninth-grade transition practices, but do not offer the depth and breadth needed to fully understand whether NGAs are the feasible and potentially high-impact reform that proponents claim. Too little is known about the essential components of NGAs and how schools can or should work to implement these components. Further, research has yet to systematically investigate and document schools' experiences with creating NGAs, or the conditions and occurrences that put schools on the path to strengthening and sustaining their NGAs or abandoning them. One of the primary contributions of this study is to address this gap in the literature.

Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County, Florida

Located in southern Florida just north of Miami, BCPS is the nation's sixth-largest public school system, with more than 250,000 students. It serves the city of Fort Lauderdale and a number of its surrounding suburbs. The district has 31 high schools, 42 middle schools, and 138

[14]Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005).

elementary schools, and the majority of its students are from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[15] In the 2009-2010 school year, Broward County's 78 percent graduation rate was similar to the average for the state of Florida (79 percent), as measured by the National Governors Association cohort formula.[16] Approximately 69 percent of the district's African-American students graduated from high school, up from 57 percent in 2005.

When the research team entered the field in fall 2009, the 18 BCPS high schools included in this study had an average total enrollment of 2,256, with an average of 594 ninth-grade students. Nearly all schools in the sample were regular, nonselective high schools, though some had magnet or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, and one was a selective magnet school. Concentrations of minority students varied substantially across schools, as four schools had a majority of white students, eight schools had a majority of African American students, and no single racial or ethnic group comprised a majority in six schools. There was also wide variation in the number of low-income students schools served, with an average of 53 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, but a range from 15 to 80 percent. Chapter 2 includes additional details regarding the demographic characteristics of the high schools in the sample compared to all regular and vocational high schools in BCPS.

BCPS leaders became interested in NGAs primarily as a way to personalize and improve learning for the diverse population of ninth-graders in these large high schools. The district set up a High School Reform office that in 2005 conducted initial surveys of its schools and analyses of student data. It found that many ninth-graders were struggling with attendance, behavior, and academic performance. The office also conducted a review of national high school reform literature and a scan of local strategies that were showing promise, and learned that several BCPS high schools had begun implementing NGAs during an earlier wave of reforms. Observations, testimonials, and data from these local efforts and national accounts moved the High School Reform office to make NGAs the centerpiece of the district's high school reform action plan.

As described in greater detail in Chapter 3, the district's effort to adopt NGAs on a large scale focused mainly on the four structural support components designed to achieve smaller, more personalized learning environments. BCPS was less specific in its guidance about other components of the NGA theory of action described above: curriculum, instructional practice, and student supports. It left goals for these areas unspecified and their implementation largely unsupported. In addition, while monthly meetings gave NGA administrators opportunities to

[15]According to state data, BCPS has 71 high schools, 31 of which are classified as regular, comprehensive high schools. The others are vocational/technical schools, alternative schools, and other alternative education centers. The graduation rates presented for both BCPS and the state include all schools regardless of classification. Florida Department of Education (2010a).

[16]Florida Department of Education (2010a).

share and receive feedback on their NGA practices, there was no school-based support for implementation, and schools were not held accountable by district leaders for improving particular ninth-grade outcomes. While BCPS' initiative to implement NGAs districtwide was bold in many respects, many schools struggled to secure strong and sustained implementation of this complex and multifaceted reform.

Contributions and Contents of This Report

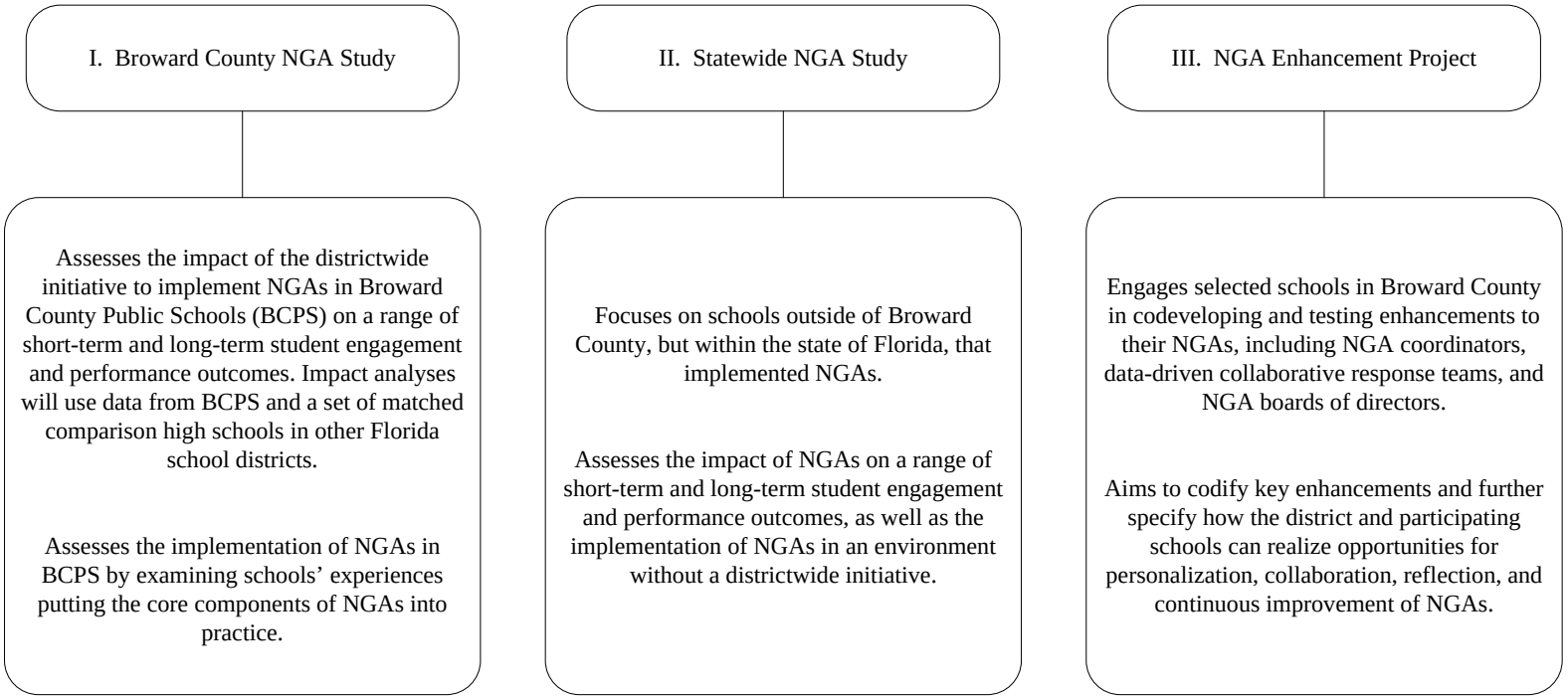
This report delves into how NGAs were implemented in 18 BCPS high schools. As such, it represents the first large-scale examination of NGAs using multiple data sources and systematic qualitative methods. Drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research team addresses a number of the gaps outlined above in the current understanding of NGAs, particularly those related to issues of feasibility and sustainability.

This report offers a more fully developed picture of NGAs and what it takes to implement them. Specific research questions guiding the investigation and an overview of the study's methods and data sources are presented in the next chapter. Chapter 3 presents findings from the study team's inquiry into the context and trajectory of the BCPS initiative to implement NGAs in every high school. It lays out additional details about how the focus on NGAs emerged in Broward County, how NGAs were defined and understood by district and school leaders, the supports for implementation the schools received, and the extent to which those supports were sustained. Chapters 4 and 5 then describe the extent to which NGAs were implemented and how implementation varied across 18 of Broward County's high schools. They take a close look at the constituent components of NGAs in Broward County and the relative ease or difficulty schools had in implementing and sustaining them. In Chapter 6, the authors summarize the study's findings and draw lessons from the district initiative and individual schools' efforts to implement NGAs. They also consider whether the overall level of NGA implementation achieved in BCPS could be expected to produce substantially improved outcomes for students in the forthcoming rigorous quasi-experimental study.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the BCPS implementation study presented in this report is part of a larger evaluation project that also includes a comparative interrupted time-series impact study of BCPS NGAs, a statewide comparative interrupted time-series study of NGAs in Florida outside of Broward County, and an NGA enhancement project, which is designed to help seven schools in the district enhance specific aspects of their NGAs (see Figure 1.2 for additional details). Overall, the purpose of the entire project is to inform and deepen the national conversation about how best to support students' transition into high school. The description and insights offered in this report are intended to advance the field's understanding of what it takes to implement NGAs, and provide a firmer base of knowledge to guide future policy and practice.

Figure 1.2

Three Components of the Evaluation of Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County, Florida



Chapter 2

Research Approach

Education researchers increasingly acknowledge that evaluating the effectiveness of complex social interventions such as Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) requires an assessment of the extent to which they are implemented and the depth and quality of that implementation.[1] Measures of implementation have been cited as essential, but often neglected, sources of evidence in studies and meta-analyses of school reform efforts.[2] Studying implementation produces greater clarity about a reform or an intervention, its constituent components, and the conditions that appear to promote or inhibit it. When linked with an impact evaluation, implementation studies also lay the groundwork for assessing that an intervention was given a "fair test" — that is, that the intervention was implemented with adequate fidelity in treatment sites and that key components were not implemented in comparison sites.[3] Finally, implementation analyses are essential to bridging the gap between knowing and doing. An impact evaluation can indicate whether an intervention appears to work, but implementation data are needed to provide insight into why and how and under what conditions it works — important for disseminating lessons learned and equipping the field to replicate promising practices.

Research Questions

The implementation study of NGAs in Broward County began in July 2009. To guide the investigation, the study team posed the following research questions:

- How did the district launch the NGA initiative? What supports, if any, did schools receive to facilitate NGA implementation? To what extent were supports sustained?
- What were the defining components of NGAs in Broward County?
- To what extent did high schools in Broward County implement core NGA components with fidelity? How did implementation of the components vary across schools?
- Did overall NGA implementation vary across schools? How?

[1]Fixsen et al. (2005); Vernez, Karam, Mariano, and DeMartini (2006).

[2]Borman, Hewes, Overnan, and Brown (2005); Datnow, Borman, and Stringfield (2000); Desimone (2002); Fullan (1991); McLaughlin and Phillips (1991); Stringfield, Millsap, and Herman (1997).

[3]Bloom (2010).

- To what extent was NGA implementation sustained over time?
- What factors contributed to strong and sustained implementation of NGAs in Broward County? What factors inhibited it?

Sample

The research team studied NGA implementation in 18 of Broward County's 31 regular public high schools. These are the same 18 schools included in the Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) impact study. Further detail on how schools were selected for the study sample is provided in Appendix A. Two schools were excluded from the core sample because not enough pre-NGA data could be collected for the comparative interrupted time-series analysis. These two were the first schools in the district to establish NGAs, and served as models for others. They are not included in the implementation study sample.

A comparison of school characteristics and student academic performance found that the study sample was similar to all BCPS regular high schools in terms of size, demographics, graduation rates, school grades, and student achievement, as shown in Table 2.1. On average, study school student populations were 47 percent African-American, 27 percent white, 23 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent other minorities. The proportion of students in study sample schools receiving free or reduced-price lunch was 52.7 percent. The only statistically significant difference between the study sample and the regular high school sample was in the proportion of Hispanic students: the study sample averaged 22.8 percent Hispanic students, compared with the BCPS overall average of 27.1 percent. The average graduation rate of 87.7 percent for the 18 schools in the study sample was about the same as the BCPS overall high school average of 88.6 percent.[4] The distribution of letter grades given to each school (based primarily on students' proficiency on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test [FCAT]) was also similar.

Data Sources and Methods

The research team analyzed data from three sources: BCPS district-created documents, interviews with district officials, and school site visits.

[4]National Governors' Association graduation rate. Note that this reported rate varies from the BCPS graduation rate reported in Chapter 1 because this rate includes only regular high schools (that is, it excludes alternative learning centers, charter schools, adult learning centers, etc.). Florida Department of Education (2010a).

Ninth Grade Academies

Table 2.1

Mean Background Characteristics for Study Sample Schools, All BCPS Schools (2009-2010 School Year)

Characteristic	Study Sample	BCPS
Ninth grade enrollment	594.1	593.7
Total school enrollment	2,255.9	2,244.7
Graduation rate	87.7	88.6
Free and reduced-price lunch (% of students)	52.7	49.0
Racial composition (% of students)		
African-American	46.9	39.8
Hispanic	22.8	27.1 *
White	26.8	29.2
Other	3.5	3.9
Letter grade (% of schools)		
A	27.8	29.0
B	38.9	41.9
C	33.3	29.0
D	0.0	0.0
Number of schools	18	31

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education Common Core of Data (2009) and Florida Department of Education School Accountability Report (2009).

NOTES: *Indicates a statistically significant difference (p-value = 0.05) between the study sample and all BCPS schools for a given characteristic. A two-tailed t-test was applied to each comparison.

The reported letter grade in this report is an average from the 2007-2008 school year, 2008-2009 school year, and 2009-2010 school year. These years represent the first three years of the NGA initiative in Broward County. For the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years, the letter grade was awarded based solely upon Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores and the percentage of students tested. In 2009-2010, the formula changed such that FCAT factors only counted for 50 percent of a school's grade, with the other 50 percent coming from graduation rate, graduation rate for at-risk students, availability of accelerated coursework, SAT and ACT performance, annual growth on these measurements, and a demonstration of adequate yearly progress for low-performing students. By averaging the grades for these three years, the table takes into account both grading systems.

BCPS = Broward County Public Schools.

District and School Documents

To better understand the context and background of the BCPS NGA initiative and how BCPS defined and supported NGAs, researchers reviewed relevant documents, including:

- The BCPS High School Reform Blueprint, which identified NGAs as a centerpiece reform strategy
- Two evaluation reports of BCPS's federally funded Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) initiative
- Agendas and self-assessments for Leading in Ninth Grade as One (LINGO), the district's professional learning community for NGA administrators

District-Level Interviews

In the first months of the study, researchers interviewed five BCPS administrators who had been involved at the district level in planning and launching the NGA initiative. Using a semistructured protocol, researchers inquired into the conditions (for example, leadership and resources) that supported the initiative, the planning process, how the initiative was communicated to the schools, and professional development and other implementation supports. The interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using computer-aided qualitative data analysis (specifically, using NVivo) and multiple-researcher review and discussion.

School Site Visits, Observations, and Interviews

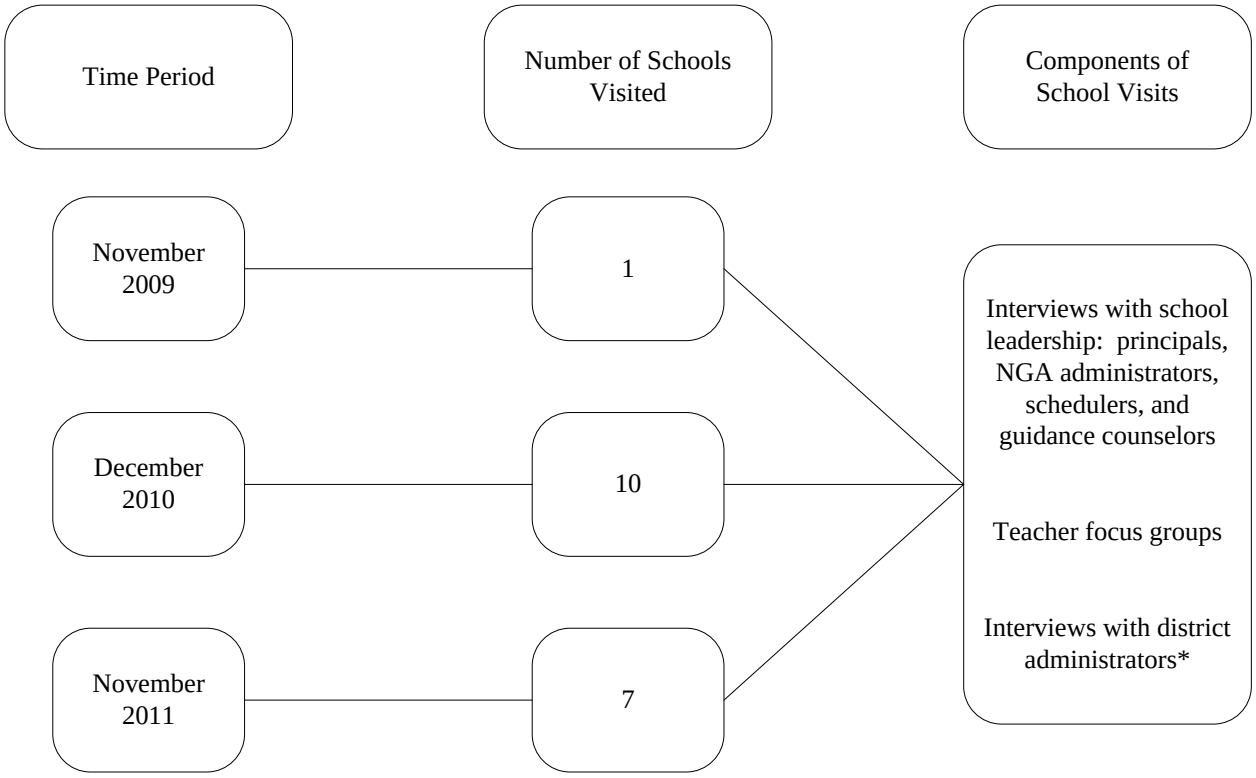
The primary data sources for this study are interviews and observations conducted during site visits to 18 Broward County high schools. Using semistructured protocols, research teams spent a day in each school to observe the NGA operation and interview the principal, the ninth-grade administrator or administration team, the NGA teacher leader/coordinator (if there was one), the scheduler, and a group of teachers. Interviews ranged from 30 to 75 minutes in length. Figure 2.1 shows when site visits were conducted.

The principal interview addressed the principal's involvement in the NGA, start-up and initial years, NGA resources and support, students' experiences in ninth grade, the use of data in the NGA, and the principal's perception of the NGA's effect on student and staff engagement. The ninth-grade administrator protocol addressed similar content and also delved more deeply into different aspects of the NGA, as interviewers asked about the role of the NGA administrator, NGA structure and operations, the use of space, curriculum and instruction, NGA staffing, academy culture, and student supports (such as tutoring, credit recovery, counseling, mentoring,

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 2.1

Components of School Site Visits



SOURCE: Site visit data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: In total, the research team visited 23 schools in Broward County and interviewed 24 school principals, 67 NGA administrators and staff members, 5 district administrators, and 202 teachers. Data are only included here for the 18 schools that will be participating in the impact study.

*No district administrator interviews were conducted in the final site visit because the study team determined sufficient data had been collected from these sources on the prior visits.

health services, and social services). The scheduler interview gathered information on scheduling, and how or whether it changed over time for the NGA. Interviewers particularly focused on whether the NGA had student teams, teacher teams, or common planning time. The teacher group interview focused on NGA implementation, scheduling, teacher collaboration, and

whether and how the teachers were organized into interdisciplinary or subject-area teams. All respondents were asked to focus on the first three years of implementation, to help researchers understand both start-up and sustainability.

The research team spent several days in the district conducting site visits in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011. Each of the 18 high schools was visited once by a team of two or three researchers. Immediately following the school visit, one member of each team used a common template to develop a site report. Teams then reviewed and discussed those reports before they were finalized. Digital recordings of all interviews were transcribed and data were stored securely and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

The research team analyzed all interview and observation data using a consensual qualitative research method.[5] The team developed a common codebook that mapped dimensions of NGAs identified from an initial review of BCPS documents and prior research literature. These dimensions included "NGA administrative leadership," "dedicated NGA space," "dedicated ninth-grade faculty," "interdisciplinary teacher teams," and others designed to support an analysis of NGA curriculum, instruction, and student support practices. Interview transcripts were coded, indexed, and analyzed using computer-aided qualitative data analysis. For each dimension, or "node," a pair of research team members coded multiple interview transcripts together and discussed how they were scoring them, to make sure the analysis was reliable and had descriptive and interpretive validity. They then divided up the remaining transcripts.

To rate NGA implementation in the 18 high schools, the research team focused on the four NGA components schools were called on to implement, as clearly and consistently outlined in BCPS documents and district administrator interviews:

- School administrator or administrative leadership team dedicated to the NGA
- A separate space for the NGA, such as separate hallways or a separate building
- Faculty dedicated specifically to the ninth grade
- Interdisciplinary teams of ninth-grade teachers

[5]Consensual qualitative research is a research method designed to derive meaning from qualitative data while minimizing inevitable researcher biases. To arrive at judgments about the meaning of the data, the method uses open-ended questions, multiple judges throughout the data analysis, and an audited consensus process. See Fielding and Lee (1998); Miles and Huberman (1994); Wolcott (1994); Hill et al. (2005).

The research team developed a rubric for each component to measure the depth and quality of its implementation in each school (see Appendix B for rubrics). Using the data captured in the first round of coding, pairs of researchers used the rubric to rate implementation fidelity for each of the four NGA components, in all 18 schools, for each of the first three years of NGA operation. Researchers rated each component on a three-point scale on which "one" indicated weak or no implementation; "two" indicated threshold, or moderate, implementation; and "three" indicated strong implementation of the specific component. Each component was rated independently for each school by two analysts, who discussed and resolved any discrepancies by reevaluating the evidence. Researchers then calculated an overall implementation score between 4 and 12 for each school by summing the ratings for the four components within each year and averaging those results across the three years covered by the study.

Challenges and Limitations

Retrospective data collection posed a challenge to this study. The majority of schools in the study began their NGAs at least two years before the research team entered the field and five years before the team completed its final site visits.[6] Because the team was collecting data on the first three years of each school's NGA implementation, administrators and teachers were asked to recall events that occurred in the past. Some had difficulty doing so. In some schools, the staff members who started the NGA were no longer there, leaving few who could tell the story. The questionable reliability of present-day respondents' memories of past practices imposed some limitations on the research team's ability to develop a complete picture of NGA implementation year by year in each school.

To mitigate these issues, the research team tracked down as many key informants as possible, including two former NGA administrators who had been promoted to other schools. Multiple interviews and data sources also helped address some of the challenges posed by imperfect memories and staff turnover. Across all 18 schools, administrator and teacher responses enabled the team to establish with a reasonable degree of confidence when and to what degree the four components of NGAs were implemented.

[6]The actual "start year" for NGAs varied by school, ranging from 2003-2004 to 2007-2008.

Chapter 3

Context and Supports for Implementing Ninth Grade Academies on a Large Scale in Broward County Public Schools

This chapter examines the Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) effort to institute Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) districtwide. It draws on district documents and on interviews with district and school administrators to delineate how the NGA initiative started, and examines district-level factors that promoted NGA implementation or interfered with it. It begins with the district's venture into high school reform, which led to the push for NGAs. It then describes how NGAs were defined by district leaders, how high school administrators understood the call to implement them, and how supports for implementation changed over time.

The chapter traces the arc of the BCPS NGA initiative, which began with strong district-level leadership and a collaborative learning and planning process that resulted in widespread buy-in among high school principals. The district's focus then shifted away from NGAs, however, as certain leaders moved into different positions and other priorities aimed at improving student outcomes came to dominate the central-office agenda, leaving schools largely on their own to navigate the implementation of NGAs.

High School Reform in BCPS

In the early 2000s, a national movement to reform poorly performing high schools was gaining momentum, spurred by major public and private investment. High school reform in BCPS accelerated during the 2005-2006 school year, when the district received an $8 million, five-year grant from the federal Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program. That same year, district administrators established a district-level High School Reform office staffed by a dedicated "principal on task assignment" (who was released from other administrative duties) and the SLC grant program coordinator. The High School Reform office also received strong leadership and support from the area superintendent responsible at that time for overseeing all high schools.[1]

[1]Before the large district structure was changed in July 2012, BCPS was divided into four subdistricts, or areas. Each area had its own superintendent who oversaw school operations in that area. Each area superintendent also had other districtwide responsibilities. In this case, this area superintendent administered school operations in her area and also oversaw high school principals across the entire district.

Damage and disruption from major hurricanes in 2005 slowed progress in the first year, but in 2006-2007 the High School Reform office negotiated with the union for additional professional study days to support school-based planning, facilitated a collective examination of high school data to determine areas of need, and launched a collaborative study of leading high school reform strategies. The study involved a review of national high school reform literature and a scan of local strategies that were showing promise. One district administrator explained this process:

> [We]had an opportunity to do a great deal of research on these different programs and models that worked.... As we progressed we had a chance to go to the Council of Great City Schools — I got to meet with some of the leading researchers and did a lot of listening, not much talking.... We had an opportunity to speak to some people from Chicago and Houston and Miami, and in Chicago they had 122 in that [high school redesign] department and I had a department of one — and [the SLC program coordinator]. So, working with [the area superintendent] and spending time with the high school principals' organization, we sent out an assessment — just where we were, because we had to get basic data.

The scan revealed that NGAs already were operating in several Broward County high schools. One school, described as "way ahead of the curve" by one administrator, had started an NGA in 1999 as part of a schoolwide restructuring supported by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation. This school served as a lighthouse for others. Fledgling NGAs were evident in at least six other schools, several of which had either received an SLC grant in 2005 or had unsuccessfully applied for the grant and decided to start an NGA without funding.

The High School Reform office took note of these initiatives and also visited a school in a neighboring county that had a fully established and high-functioning NGA. Observations, testimonials, and data from these local efforts and national studies moved the BCPS High School Reform office to make NGAs a centerpiece of the district's high school reform action plan. The plan was published as the BCPS Blueprint for High School Redesign, which was presented to and accepted by the BCPS School Board in winter 2007.

The Call for NGAs in BCPS

The area superintendent in charge of high schools played a leading role in communicating the expectation that NGAs would be implemented in every high school, according to interviews with High School Reform office staff and several high school principals. Several principals emphasized her dedication to and enthusiasm for NGAs. For example, one principal shared, "[The area superintendent] was really the force. You know, you have to have the power to say this is where — the direction we are going, based on the data that we gathered."

This expectation was communicated during monthly meetings with high school principals in spring 2007 and throughout the following school year. A district administrator explained the district's messaging:

> High school principals would meet and talk on a regular basis of how they were working with secondary school redesign and what were the expectations. And, I mean, she [the area superintendent] was clear about those. As we got into it, we found some weren't doing it, but — there was a community there that was — there was a very clear transition of what was the expectation of where we were going.

Although principals and other school-based administrators were clear in interviews that they viewed NGAs as a reform they were expected by the district to implement, that understanding was not communicated with resentment or resistance, and none of the principals indicated that NGAs were an undesirable mandate. When asked why an NGA was implemented at his school, just one principal attributed the effort solely to the district initiative: "Well, that was an expectation that in the district that we all had a Ninth Grade Academy and what's it going to look like." The far more typical response included some version of "we knew the district was moving towards Ninth Grade Academies" but also referred to a combination of principals' beliefs in the NGA concept, their prior experience with small learning communities or other NGA components, and their own research on the potential benefits of NGAs.

Several schools also included the SLC grant as an impetus for NGA startup, as one principal shared:

> There were three factors that had an impact: number one, yes, the district was moving that way towards Ninth Grade Academies; number two, the data was showing us that there was something that wasn't working in the retention of our incoming ninth-graders, and that critical year, as a school, the data was showing we were losing so many of them to a variety of different options that aren't necessarily positive; and then, number three, the Smaller Learning Communities grant was also at this school, and that played a role in helping to provide resources to implement the academy.

This widely shared belief in the need for NGAs did not necessarily mean that administrators were skilled at implementing them. It does, however, speak to the groundwork laid by the High School Reform office staff, the way NGAs were presented as a sensible response to student needs, and the success that several district high schools had already had with NGAs.

How BCPS Defined NGAs

In both public documents and in interviews, district staff and school-based administrators described Ninth Grade Academies in ways that emphasized the structural components identified earlier in this report. According to the "High School Redesign" page of the BCPS Web site:

> Ninth Grade Academies are self-contained units located in a designated area of the school. The academy is staffed with its own dedicated teaching faculty, guidance staff, and social services, to create an intact community for this transition year. These Ninth Grade Academies are organized around interdisciplinary teacher teams that have students and planning times in common.[2]

These components were reinforced in an annual self-assessment that NGA administrators and leaders were expected to complete as part of their participation in "Leading in Ninth Grade as One" (LINGO), a professional learning community focused on NGA implementation (described below in more detail). The self-assessment, created and administered by district leaders in spring 2008, 2009, and 2010, invited NGA administrators to indicate the extent to which they had implemented a separate physical location for their NGA, counseling staff dedicated to the NGA, and interdisciplinary teams. The assessment emphasized interdisciplinary teaming as the key to gaining all the other benefits of the NGA (for example, student academic engagement, personalization, and collaboration with parents and community).

In interviews, principals and NGA administrators frequently mentioned the self-contained, school-within-a-school concept when characterizing their NGAs. One administrator shared the following description of her school's NGA:

> The ninth-graders are located in a building that's exclusive to ninth-graders. Their teachers are housed together with the guidance counselor, administrator, and so what that provides is the opportunity to have a school within a school, and to some extent we are our own entity, while we're still a part of the bigger body at [this school]. I think when we look at the Ninth Grade Academy, it's really a transitional house because they're transitioning from the middle school to high school curriculum. The difference in the layout of the particular campus and having that support infrastructure in place is really necessary. I think we've worked a lot at making sure that we've put the right people in place to service those students, and from a curriculum standpoint, we've also made sure that we have all the components there to help them with that shift in thinking and learning.

Notably absent from most administrators' characterizations of NGAs, however, was a teacher teaming component. In talking about NGAs administrators rarely led with descriptions

[2]Broward County Public Schools, as of August 2009. As of March 7, 2013, however, the page no longer contained this text.

of teacher teaming, especially interdisciplinary teaming, despite the prominence given to teaming in the NGA administrator self-assessment.

Accountability and Support for NGA Implementation

As part of the effort to implement NGAs districtwide, every high school in Broward County was expected to identify a ninth-grade administrator. The district's primary way to hold schools accountable and support NGA implementation was "Leading in Ninth Grade as One" (LINGO), a professional learning community for NGA administrators that met monthly. Eight schools also had direct five-year grants through the SLC initiative to support NGA development and other reforms. The following describes how these supports were enacted, and their benefits and limitations.

LINGO

According to interviews with principals and NGA administrators, LINGO served as the sole source of training and professional development for NGA implementation. LINGO was overseen by a principal knowledgeable about NGAs and the SLC grant project coordinator. Participants were typically the assistant principals that schools had designated as their NGA administrators. In its first year (2007-2008), the group met monthly for two hours after school. Though attendance for NGA administrators was considered mandatory, school-based after-school activities often interfered and there were no serious consequences for failing to attend LINGO meetings. In the second year, to boost attendance and attention, a time was established during the school day for the monthly meetings and the group became more formalized; members who met attendance and participation criteria were able to earn 30 in-service points. Participation criteria included the completion of the self-assessments and a final project. During the 2009-2010 school year, the in-service protocol continued and the group convened each month at a different school so that administrators could showcase their NGAs and demonstrate innovative practices to their peers.

In interviews, district- and school-based administrators referred to LINGO, and the NGA administrator position, as a training ground for assistant principals who aspired to become principals or otherwise advance in educational administration. Virtually all NGA administrators spoke in positive terms about their experiences in LINGO, expressing appreciation for the opportunity to observe and share NGA practices with their peers across schools. One former NGA administrator shared, "[LINGO] was fantastic and the books that we chose to study, I mean they were just phenomenal, focused on ninth grade and really between that, the camaraderie, the learning how other schools do [NGAs] and all of that. It was really great." Despite participants' positive initial experiences with LINGO, however, a few NGA administrators

(those with stronger NGAs) began to pull away by the third year because they felt they had learned as much as they could from the group.

In contrast to "bureaucratic accountability," where system actors are evaluated according to a predetermined standard and rewarded or sanctioned based on their performance, LINGO represented a mechanism of loose "professional accountability" for school-based administrators. Their sense of accountability for implementing NGAs was developed and loosely reinforced by their LINGO attendance and collaboration, and by a sense of collective responsibility for improving their schools and student achievement.[3] The learning community met just once per month, however, and did not provide any in-school support for NGA implementation. Outside of the meetings, administrators and teachers were largely on their own as they worked through the technical and human challenges of establishing an NGA and fostering its growth. Apart from LINGO, no other districtwide accountability or support mechanisms were installed, and no sanctions were imposed on schools that did not implement NGAs. Implementing NGA components was never a part of administrators' or teachers' performance evaluations, nor was progress on ninth-grade student outcomes that NGAs have shown potential to improve, such as attendance, behavior, or course performance.

Funding and Other Resources for Implementing NGAs

According to district administrators, the five-year, $8 million federal SLC grant BCPS received in 2005 provided a major impetus for the high school reform initiative which, by 2007, focused primarily on NGAs. In terms of actual funding for NGA implementation, however, the reach of the grant was limited. It supported a full-time, district-level SLC project coordinator who also oversaw LINGO from fall 2007 through spring 2010. The remainder of the funds went to the eight high schools that had been part of the original application. Five of those high schools were among the 18 included in this study. Grants to those schools ranged from $150,000 to $175,000 per year over the five years. High schools received no other major grants during this period.

School-based administrators in schools with SLC grants indicated that they used grant funds to support NGA implementation to some extent. The grant funded an SLC coordinator position and supplements for teachers, counselors, or behavioral specialists to provide more personalized attention to struggling students. Yet because SLC grants were intended to support schoolwide improvement (following plans that had been developed prior to the district's call for NGAs in every high school), these additional staff members were not always dedicated exclusively to the ninth grade. In some years they were, in other years they were not. SLC funds were also used for small training and travel stipends, supplements for team leaders, curriculum

[3]Gold, Simon, and Brown (2003).

materials, supplies, and some technology, but these benefits too were distributed schoolwide. NGA teachers in SLC grantee schools generally reported no additional training or professional development focused on teaching ninth-graders or implementing NGAs, and administrators also reported none other than LINGO.

Most schools in the study (13 of 18) did not receive SLC funding and had no major or dedicated source of additional funds to provide supplemental training for their own staff to implement their NGA or to retain assistance from external organizations that support reform. Principals generally reported that they funded NGA implementation by redistributing existing resources. In nearly every case, this meant assigning an assistant principal to oversee the ninth grade, designating a separate space to house the NGA, and assigning faculty to teach in the academy. These resources were directly controlled by principals, already in their budgets, and cost only social and political capital to persuade school leadership teams and teachers to change administrator assignments and some classrooms. Some principals reported that the district's expectation that all high schools implement NGAs gave them leverage to institute the changes, though many had already begun moving in the direction of implementing an NGA prior to the district's formal announcement.

When discussing the resources needed to implement NGAs, however, nearly all principals focused on the structural components of NGAs (administrative leadership, space, dedicated faculty, and teacher teams), which was understandable given the district's emphasis on structural components in its definition of NGAs. Few principals spoke about what it might potentially cost to implement other parts of the NGA theory of action outlined in Chapter 1, such as changes in curriculum and instruction, or tutoring, counseling, health services, or social services for ninth-graders. They rarely addressed the additional resources that might be needed to provide training, time, and support for interdisciplinary instruction and curriculum development, for example. With just a few exceptions, when principals talked about data systems and staff to monitor progress, for example, or about targeted and intensive tutoring and counseling, they described these as schoolwide investments, unrelated to NGA implementation. Principals' statements that they were able to cover the costs of their NGAs by redistributing existing resources therefore appear to account only for the costs of implementing NGA *structures*.

Waning District Support for NGAs

By the time the study team entered the field in 2009, the momentum of high school reform and NGAs had waned considerably in Broward County.

The High School Reform office was initially absorbed into a new Differentiated Accountability office and then disbanded. LINGO meetings ended at the close of the 2009-2010 school year because the SLC grant ended and the project coordinator responsible for organizing

the group was moved to a different division and reassigned to another project. In interviews, many NGA administrators expressed their disappointment about that and their hope that LINGO would be reactivated. New NGA administrators who had never participated in LINGO (interviewed in the falls of 2010 and 2011) indicated they had no training for their positions and expressed a desire for professional support.

During this same period, the superintendent was replaced, the school board was challenged by legal disputes, and the district faced a financial crisis. Even the schools most committed to implementing strong NGAs reported that budget cuts were gradually encroaching on their ability to staff them fully, and in particular on their ability to organize NGA staff into teams with time to plan in common. A new statewide policy to reduce class sizes also required schools to hire additional teachers quickly in the late summer and fall of 2010, majorly disrupting many NGAs' fragile efforts to organize teams and find time for common planning. One principal shared that although he would have preferred to maintain a ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teams, his school was "starting to get hammered budget-wise" and he explained, "I couldn't do common planning because class size was coming in ... and we still tried hard to schedule those kids, but it was back to the beginning stages where we were like 50 percent, 60 percent [teamed]. And then the year after that I couldn't even attempt to do it because I had teachers all over the place." Without support from the district, or clarity about whether NGAs were still a district priority, schools were left to set their own agendas and adjust as best they could with the expertise and resources they had at hand.

This period also saw a shift in professional development priorities in the district and in high schools that reflected a national shift: away from interdisciplinary small learning communities and teams, and toward new performance evaluation procedures, curriculum-based professional learning communities (PLCs), and data-driven response-to-intervention (RtI) systems.[4] These new priorities were reinforced by new funding sources (for example, Race to the Top and the High School Graduation Initiative). While none of these priorities were directly antithetical to the NGA concept, and all had the common goal of improving student outcomes,

[4]Professional learning communities, or PLCs, have gained currency in education as ways to improve practice by engaging educators in "recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students." See DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010); Hord (1997). Professional development for PLCs has become increasingly widespread since the early 2000s. See DuFour (2004). In BCPS high schools, PLCs typically involved teachers from the same subject area meeting to improve curriculum and instruction for that subject. "Lesson study," a PLC practice that engages teachers in collaboratively preparing, testing, and debriefing the results of lessons, is required in schools that received an "F" under Florida's Differentiated Accountability rating system. See Haithcock (2010). RtI is a data-driven process to identify students who need academic or social-emotional supports, implement evidence-based interventions for them, and measure their progress frequently to determine whether the interventions are effective. RtI typically involves educators collaborating with counselors and others (such as tutors, social workers, or social service providers) to provide multiple and progressive supports. See Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005).

they competed for the time and attention of school-based administrators and teachers. At the school level, this tension was especially evident when it came to the question of scheduling common planning time for interdisciplinary teams or subject-area PLCs. While some schools attempted both, for most this proved too challenging. Many schools opted in favor of the PLCs, for which the district provided substantial training, and which reinforced the traditional identities of high school teachers as subject-area specialists.

District leaders refocused their attention on NGAs in response to a first-year report the MDRC/JHU study team submitted to the district executive leadership team in fall 2010. The leadership team hoped to revive LINGO and reaffirm its support of NGAs and high school reform. By early 2013, however, the arrival of another new superintendent, an unprecedented fiscal crisis, and a major reorganization of the central and area offices had put these plans on hold. With funding from the same grant supporting the implementation and impact studies, a group of seven high schools is receiving support to deepen their NGA efforts, an effort called the NGA Enhancement Development Project (see Chapter 6 for additional details). The future of NGAs in Broward County remains uncertain, however, as new leadership in BCPS assesses their progress and develops its vision for high schools.

In summary, the story of the BCPS effort to institute NGAs in nearly every high school offers a window into the promise and pitfalls of such an ambitious initiative. By all accounts, the district's NGA initiative started strong, but was soon disrupted by changing leadership, distracting legal and budget challenges, and shifting reform priorities. As a result, the district's call for NGAs was not accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms or supports for implementation. The support provided via LINGO was neither institutionalized nor sustained, and fell short of supplying schools with the on-site technical assistance many appeared to need. Schools were left largely on their own, producing widespread variation in how NGAs were implemented. The following chapters detail the different levels of degree and quality with which schools implemented core NGA components.

Chapter 4

Implementing Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County Public Schools — NGA Administrative Leadership and Dedicated NGA Space

Chapters 4 and 5 report on the extent to which high schools in Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) implemented the four core components of Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs). Drawing on analyses of site-visit data, these chapters consider each core NGA component in turn. Chapter 4 focuses on NGA administrative leadership and dedicated NGA space and Chapter 5 addresses dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Overall, schools were able to assign administrative leadership and at least some dedicated space to their NGAs with relative ease. Implementing dedicated ninth-grade faculty and interdisciplinary teaming posed more significant challenges for the schools in the study, however.

In these chapters, each component section includes descriptions of the component in its ideal form; the research team's scoring rubric; the extent, quality, and sustainability of implementation across study schools; and the conditions that supported and hindered implementation. To further illustrate how implementation of core NGA components varied across schools in the district, each component section also includes short case studies highlighting schools that were more and less successful at implementing a given component.[1]

To assess the implementation of NGA components, the research team used a rubric to analyze observation and interview data collected during daylong site visits to the 18 study schools, as described in Chapter 2 (see Appendix B for rubrics). For every school, each NGA component was rated on a three-point scale on which "one" indicated very weak or no implementation; "two" indicated threshold, or moderate, implementation; and "three" indicated strong implementation. The four components were rated for each of the first three years of NGA operation for all 18 schools to evaluate the extent to which their implementation strengthened or weakened over time.

NGA Administrative Leadership

In addition to district-level leadership, implementing a complex school improvement initiative such as an NGA requires the support and attention of skilled leaders at each school who

[1]The case studies are based on the experiences of actual schools, but use pseudonyms rather than school names.

understand the reform's vision. The purpose of having an administrator or a team of leaders whose time is dedicated to the NGA is to have at least one school leader able to focus specifically on the needs of ninth-grade students and teachers, and organize resources to implement and sustain the academy. By leading NGA implementation, attending and guiding teacher meetings, and providing behavior and discipline interventions for the students, the ideal NGA administrator can help give each student a personalized learning experience and a smooth transition into high school. In some schools, NGAs are guided by leadership teams that include the NGA administrator along with a teacher leader/NGA coordinator (a teacher with some time specifically dedicated to NGA administration), reading and math coaches, or other NGA staff.

Implementing NGA Administrative Leadership in BCPS

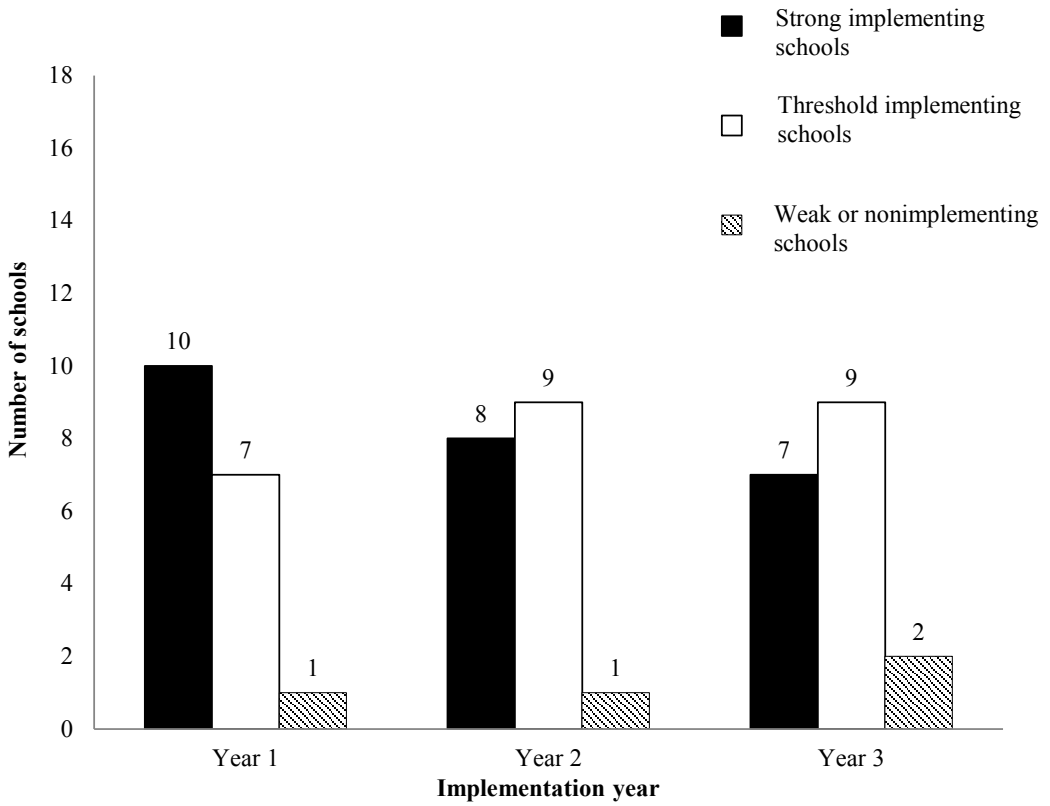
Study schools were considered to have achieved at least a "threshold" level of implementation for the NGA administrative leadership component if they had a school administrator or leadership team assigned specifically to the ninth grade at least part time. "Strong" implementing schools had an administrator who was knowledgeable about the NGA, engaged almost exclusively with ninth-grade students and faculty, and committed to making the NGA his or her top priority. Administrators in schools that implemented this component strongly were often vocal champions for the NGA, as they believed NGAs were a critical path to student success. Schools received threshold implementation scores when they had an NGA administrator who had other major responsibilities in addition to the NGA, and when there was evidence that while the administrator had basic knowledge about NGAs and may have put some NGA ideas into action, he or she was not strongly dedicated to implementing NGA components. Finally, schools received the lowest implementation score if they lacked an administrator altogether or had an administrator with no knowledge of NGAs or plans to implement their components.

NGA administrative leadership was a widely implemented component. Nearly every school in the study sample (17 of 18) had an NGA administrator during its NGA's first year of operation, as shown in Figure 4.1. An assistant principal filled this position at each of these schools. Ten schools exhibited strong implementation, while seven had threshold implementation. Most schools sustained the NGA administrator component at some level for all three start-up years, as eight schools in Year 2 and seven schools in Year 3 received the highest implementation scores and nine schools received threshold scores in Years 2 and 3. Only one school did not implement the NGA administrator component in Year 1 or 2, while two schools had no implementation in Year 3.

Figure 4.2 displays each school's implementation rating for the administrative leadership component by year. The analysis showed most schools were able to maintain the NGA administrator position over their NGA's start-up years. Six of the 10 schools that had strong

Figure 4.1

Implementation Rating by Implementation Year: NGA Administrative Leadership



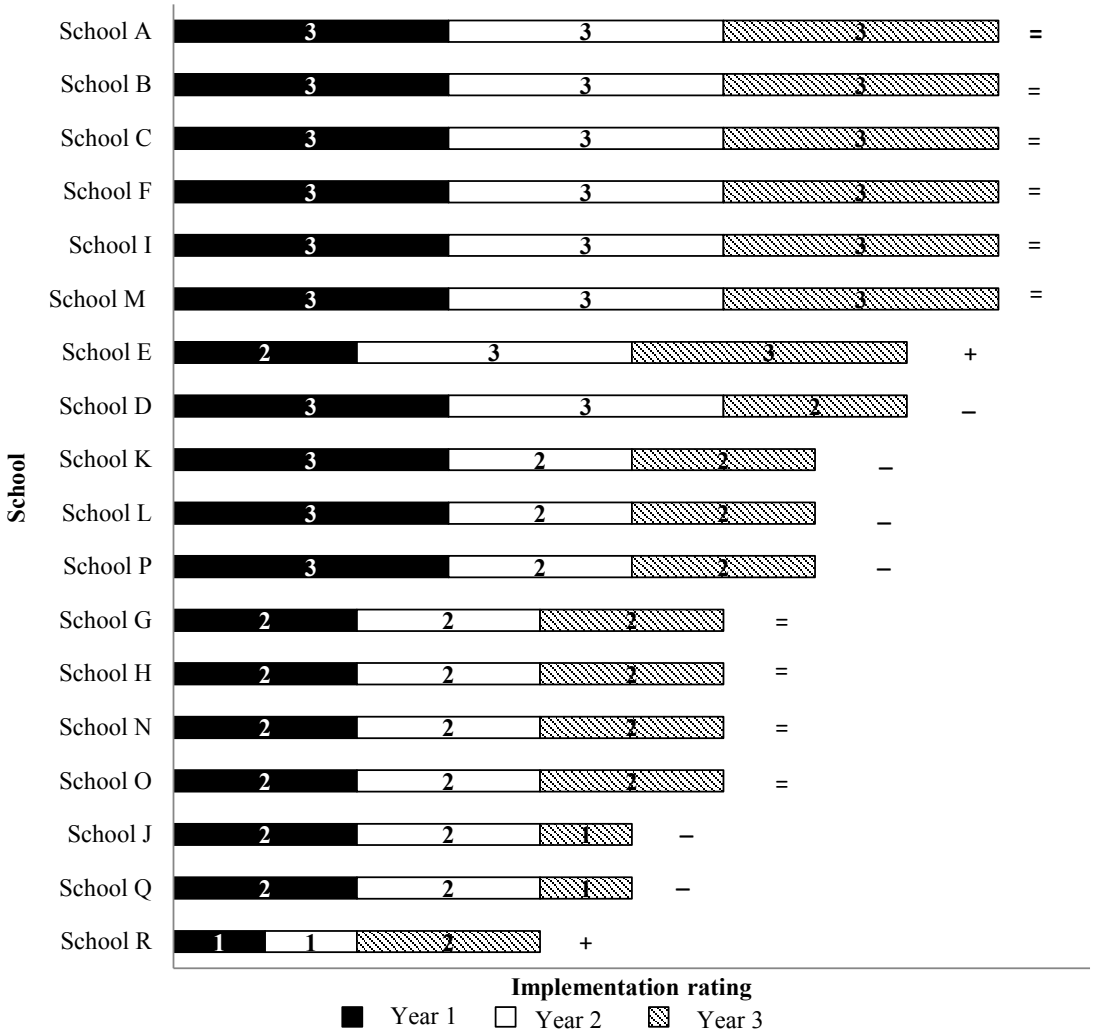
SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 4.2

The Variation in Implementation Over the First Three Years: NGA Administrative Leadership



SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

A "+" at the end of a row indicates that implementation strengthened at that school over the start-up years. A "–" at the end of a row indicates that implementation weakened at that school over the start-up years. A "=" at the end of a row indicates that implementation remained consistent at that school over the start-up years.

implementation of this component in the first year sustained strong implementation over the next two years, while administrative leadership weakened in the four remaining schools. Of the seven that began with threshold implementation, only one school strengthened implementation, while four maintained the status quo and two abandoned the NGA administrator position by the third year. The one school that struggled to put an NGA administrator in place in their first two years managed to establish the position by Year 3, albeit just at the threshold level.

When asked about the NGA administrator position, principals at strongly implementing schools stressed the importance of selecting leaders who could operate independently and motivate the ninth-grade team. One NGA administrator shared the following:

> [The principal] gave me some direction and said she would work with me as much as I would like her to, but basically, this was going to be my baby and so we really worked well together. The first step was getting the buy-in from the teachers, and we used a lot of the statistics that were out there in regards to the performance in reading and language arts classes, math classes, and graduation and attendance rates.

While the NGA administrators in strongly implementing schools were dedicated to working with ninth-graders and supporting their NGAs, several also acknowledged not everyone was cut out for the position. For example, one NGA administrator echoed the importance of having a good relationship with ninth-grade teachers and noted a potential challenge of the position:

> I think having someone the teachers can lean on and I can lean on them when I need something, too, is important. And that goes back to having the right people in the right positions. But I guarantee if you polled the other administrators at the school, no one would want to do ninth grade because it's — ... It's a lot of energy.

As these remarks suggest, schools with enthusiastic administrators who were skilled at building relationships with ninth-grade teachers were well positioned to take advantage of the NGA administrative role. Box 4.1 describes the experiences of one school that implemented this component strongly and one that faced greater challenges doing so.

Enabling Conditions

The six schools that had strong, sustained NGA administrative leadership shared two characteristics that distinguished them from other schools and helped enable implementation of this component: attentive and sustained support for the NGA from the principal, and either low turnover among NGA administrators or intentional strategies for mitigating the potentially disruptive impact of changes in leadership staff.

Box 4.1

Ninth-Grade Administrative Leadership Case Studies

Successful School

Birch High School earned the highest possible marks for the administrative leadership component for all three start-up years. This school had the same NGA administrator throughout this time, with the support of a counselor and a behavioral specialist, both dedicated to the ninth grade only. Before they started the NGA, the principal and NGA administrator worked together to research NGAs and learn how to implement one in their school. They continued as partners, with the principal providing the space, staff, and funds that the NGA administrator needed to maintain a leadership team and faculty dedicated entirely to the ninth grade. Teachers at Birch were excited to be assigned to the ninth grade; they explained that teaching ninth grade was more demanding than upper grades, but they felt fully supported and inspired by their NGA administrator. His charisma and hands-on involvement engaged both adults and students, creating a positive school climate. He used specific protocols designed to guide meetings and follow-up action, provided leadership during regular meetings with teachers and supported the ninth-grade team by gathering student discipline, attendance, and course performance data for them to discuss. His dedication to the staff fostered teacher buy-in and helped the NGA succeed.

Challenged School

Juniper High School had an NGA administrator for the first two years of NGA implementation. The administrator was supported by a behavior specialist and guidance counselor, but lacked knowledge about and enthusiasm for the NGA. In implementation Year 3, the NGA administrator left the school and the principal chose not to hire another assistant principal dedicated to just the ninth grade. Unlike at Birch, where the principal demonstrated commitment to the NGA through resource allocation and staffing, the principal at Juniper did not make a priority of having a dedicated administrator for the program. The NGA administrator's lackluster performance did little to convince the principal of the value of the position, and budget constraints contributed to his decision. Without an administrator or lead teacher to champion the academy and foster its growth, other NGA components like teacher teaming and common planning were not implemented and productive collaboration between teachers and administrators failed to take root.

In nearly every school with a strong NGA administrator and leadership team, the principal articulated a belief that NGAs both were important for fostering student success and played an active role in supporting the academy. Several had experience with small learning communities and interdisciplinary teams in prior roles as teachers or administrators in middle schools or other high schools. These principals handpicked the NGA administrator and other staff, gave the NGA administrator autonomy and protected his or her time from non-NGA duties, provided funds for attendance outreach and incentives for positive behavior, and added

behavior specialists or guidance counselors for the ninth grade when funds allowed — all of which aided the administrator. Principals in schools that implemented this component strongly also took other actions that communicated the NGA was a priority. For example, while in some schools NGA administrators reported that the state-mandated class-size reduction policy disrupted carefully crafted teacher teams and scheduling for common planning time, in others they reported facing less disruption because their principals made a priority of the schedule's integrity and helped the NGA administrator to maintain NGA implementation.

While principals in other schools engaged in some of these activities (for example, they handpicked NGA administrators they believed would be suitable), in the high-implementing schools principals' support was intense and consistent. It is notable that these six principals tended to be established and respected leaders, having served for many years in the same school as principal or in another capacity, which contributed to their ability to start and support their fledgling NGAs. In contrast, NGAs started under less established principals often struggled, especially once the attention of district leaders turned to other policies and programs. For example, in one school a new principal moved quickly to institute an NGA, but was met with resistance from staff, including both teachers and assistant principals, for attempting "too much change at once."

In addition to principal support, schools with strong NGA administrative leadership components also had either consistency in that leadership or a plan for transition in the event of a change. In half of these schools, the same ninth-grade administrator served as the NGA leader for multiple years. This enabled the NGA administrator to build his or her program from year to year, adding components and supports and making adjustments as needed when faced with changes in budget or staffing.

Not every NGA administrator wanted to or could stay in the position for many years. For example, in a small number of schools, the NGA leadership structure was designed such that assistant principals were assigned to "loop" with an incoming class of ninth-graders.[2] In these cases, the schools that were able to maintain strong NGA leadership were those that enacted intentional strategies to mitigate the potentially destabilizing impact of turnover in the NGA administrator position. Two schools in the sample continued to exhibit strong implementation of the NGA administrative leadership component during planned transitions by keeping other members of the NGA leadership team in place (NGA coordinators or teacher leaders, reading and math coaches, etc.). These teams helped maintain the organizational routines that made their NGAs successful and, with the backing of the principal, they sup-

[2]"Looping" is a term used in schools to describe when a teacher or administrator remains with the same group of students for more than one year. In this case, school administrators moved up with an incoming class of freshmen until graduation four years later.

ported new NGA administrators each year. One team member referred to this as "breaking in the new [assistant principal]."

A few schools also navigated a leadership change by planning for substantial overlap between old and new NGA administrators. In one school with a strong leadership rating, the new ninth-grade administrator was brought into the school before taking over the NGA leadership role. He explained, "I had a year just observing what they were doing, so I wasn't just someone fresh off the street coming in trying to run our ninth-grade program. I kind of observed it, saw what was going on, and then I had some really good mentors ... and really strong teachers, too. So they kind of pulled me into the culture of the ninth grade very quickly." These schools demonstrated that strong leadership teams and careful transitions could help protect against the negative consequences of administrative turnover.

Challenging Conditions

Though some schools were able to successfully navigate leadership change, most schools had trouble maintaining the NGA administrative leadership component when there was turnover in the NGA administrator or principal position. A change in school leadership nearly always corresponded to a decline in the quality of NGA leadership. With only a few exceptions, turnover in the NGA administrator position was disruptive and weakened the NGA operation. In some schools, this was exacerbated when a change in the NGA administrator coincided with a change in the principal, leaving no school administrators who continued to champion the NGA. In schools facing this challenge, changes in the principal and NGA administrator positions created an environment in which no one in a position of authority could support NGA implementation and in which the staff that remained in the NGA reported feeling uncertain about school priorities. In one such school, one teacher expressed the staff's frustrations by explaining that the NGA was "always, like an afterthought ... because we had so many different principals in a short time span."

A final challenge to successful implementation of the NGA administrator component was a lack of on-site support and training. As noted above, implementing an NGA requires the focused attention of skilled leaders who understand the need for change and the vision of the undertaking. While most school principals and NGA administrators understood the components of NGAs and expressed belief in the concept, not all schools had administrators with the level of will and skill needed to put the components into place. For those NGAs lacking skilled or experienced leaders, the absence of on-site support made successful implementation difficult. While a few school leadership teams reported attending professional development sessions prior to implementing the NGA, and LINGO provided general support to NGA administrators for three years, there was no detailed or specific support available to help them with the complexities of developing their schools' NGAs.

Dedicated NGA Space

In an ideal NGA, a dedicated ninth-grade space gives the NGA the physical sense of a school within a school. Ninth-grade students spend most of their day in a smaller area surrounded by their fellow ninth-graders and their teachers, separate from the upperclassmen. In this setting, the faculty members' physical proximity to each other facilitates frequent communication among them and helps them keep an eye on students throughout the day. Ideally, the NGA space also includes office space for the ninth-grade administrator and other staff (for example, the guidance counselor, behavioral specialist, secretary, etc.) to give ninth-graders convenient access to support.

Implementing Dedicated NGA Space in BCPS

Schools were considered to have demonstrated at least a "threshold" level for this component if they had at least some space specifically designated for ninth-grade students and teachers. Schools that received the highest implementation rating had space where all ninth-graders spent the majority of their day that was self-contained, housed classrooms of virtually all teachers teaching ninth-grade classes, had offices for administrative and support staff, had a visible identity as an NGA (for example, an area dedicated to posting ninth-grade work, goals, accomplishments, or announcements). Schools receiving the threshold implementation score did not have space as clearly delineated as the strong implementers, but had all or most ninth-grade students taking at least two or three classes in a dedicated hallway or building. These spaces housed some teachers teaching ninth-grade classes, and some had an office for administrative and support staff. Some also had an indication that the hallway or building was an NGA space. A school received the lowest implementation rating if it did not have a dedicated building or hallway for ninth-grade classes, had teachers of ninth-graders spread out across campus, and had nothing that visibly indicated a space that housed ninth-graders.

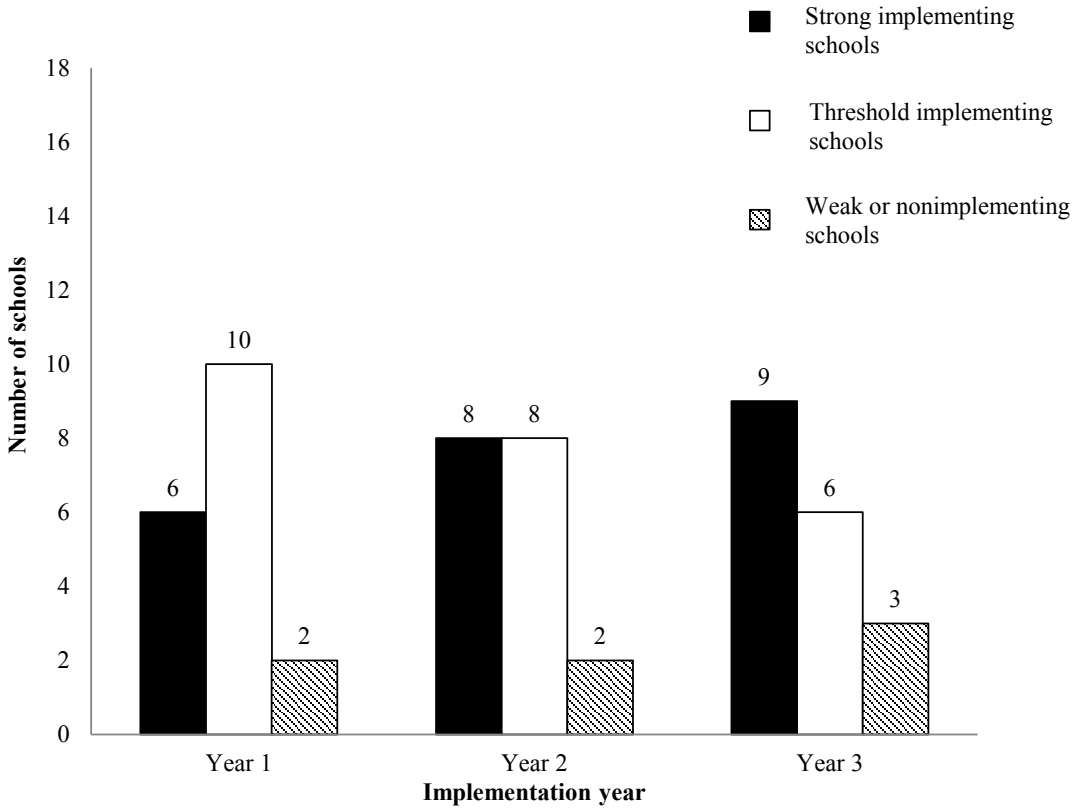
Nearly all schools in the study sample were able to dedicate at least some separate space to the NGA, as shown in Figure 4.3. Specifically, 16 schools had dedicated space for their NGAs during the first and second years of operation, and 15 schools maintained dedicated NGA space into the third year of operation. The number of schools that strongly implemented this component increased as schools gained more experience with their NGAs, as six schools exhibited strong implementation during their NGA's first year, eight during the NGA's second year, and nine during the NGA's third year.

Figure 4.4 displays each school's implementation of the space component during its NGA's first three years. All six of the schools that began with strong implementation of this component in the first year sustained it over the next two years. Two schools that started at threshold implementation and one school that did not start with dedicated space strengthened

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 4.3

Implementation Rating by Implementation Year: Dedicated NGA Space



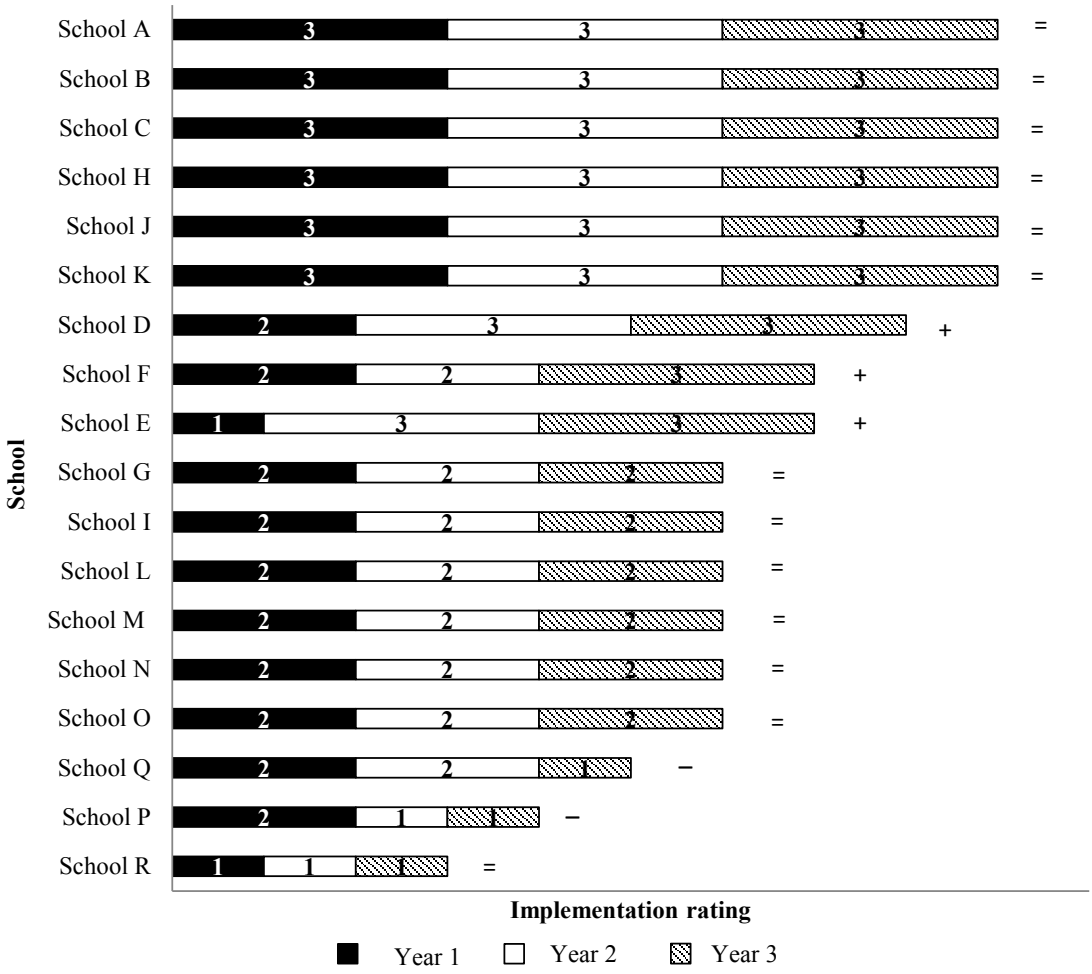
SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 4.4

The Variation in Implementation Over the First Three Years: Dedicated NGA Space



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A "+" at the end of a row indicates that implementation strengthened at that school over the start-up years. A "–" at the end of a row indicates that implementation weakened at that school over the start-up years. A "=" at the end of a row indicates that implementation remained consistent at that school over the start-up years.

this component, as school leaders worked to provide the NGA with a more self-contained space over time. Of the remaining schools that began with threshold implementation of the dedicated space component, six maintained this level of implementation, but two schools abandoned the component altogether.

The variation in how schools created distinctive spaces for their NGAs ranged from separate buildings to hallway corridors in a main high school building. Ten schools had a dedicated, separate building for their NGA at one point during the start-up years. Six schools' NGAs had one or more hallways in a main school building where the ninth-graders were housed. A few schools also made temporary use of portable classrooms to house their ninth-graders for one or two years during NGA start-up. The ninth-grade administrator's office was located in the ninth-grade space in 13 of the 16 implementing schools.

Many school leaders and teachers considered the presence of a single building to be a valuable asset for their NGA because it helped students and teachers to identify as a ninth-grade team. One teacher said that prior to her school's NGA, the ninth-grade students were "all over the place" and "getting lost." She explained the decision to reorganize the school's space upon forming its NGA:

> The Ninth Grade Academy gave us an opportunity to focus more on [the ninth-grade students] and to collect them so they could have that support and monitoring they need rather than just kind of being everywhere. Now you pretty much know where to find most of them and the teachers have an opportunity to interact.

As suggested by this teacher's account, respondents noted that having a dedicated NGA space helped the ninth-grade team to create more personalized learning environments for their students because teachers could both closely monitor students and frequently connect with their colleagues. Box 4.2 recounts the experiences of one school that dedicated a separate building to its NGA as well as one that struggled to keep its NGA space separate.

Enabling Conditions

Across the study schools, implementation of the dedicated space component was largely dependent on the principal's willingness to make a priority of separate ninth-grade space and on available resources, including a school's physical layout and new construction opportunities. At each of the schools with strong implementation, the principal expressed a belief in the importance of having the ninth-grade students separate from the upperclassmen. One principal stated, "No matter what, there's always been a geographic location difference for my ninth-graders," and stressed that this would continue to be the case during her tenure. Several principals explained that making this happen sometimes involved decisions that were unpopular with

Box 4.2

Dedicated NGA Space Case Studies

Successful School

Alder High School dedicated an entire separate building to its NGA. The NGA building was built the same year that Alder decided to start an NGA, enabling a smooth transition into the new space. This building housed the ninth-grade faculty, along with an office suite with its own secretary, the NGA administrator, and a conference room for staff meetings. Hallways featured bulletin boards highlighting student work and identifying it as coming from the NGA. Incoming freshmen were given a tour during their summer orientation so they could feel ownership of the space as soon as they arrived. The dedicated space was also beneficial for the teachers because it helped foster a sense of community with their colleagues and among their students. Their close proximity created regular opportunities for communication and collaboration. The principal reported, "I would say that the teachers have learned to work together beautifully and that they will tell you that they like it and it has strengthened what they do in the classroom absolutely. The whole professional conversation together about what you're doing and visiting each other's classes, that has changed drastically."

Challenged School

Unlike stronger implementing schools, Poplar High School did not have a separate building available to dedicate to the NGA. Instead, administrators attempted to house the ninth grade in a large wing made up of several hallways. The wing was not well separated from the rest of the school, however, and the line between the ninth-grade space and the rest of the school began to blur after the first year. The guidance counselor and dedicated administrator moved out of the ninth-grade hallway in Year 2 to be housed with the rest of the guidance, administrative, and office staff. Poplar's small student population further complicated its space problems; a smaller population meant fewer teachers, so teachers were more likely to have to teach their subject to mixed or multiple grade levels than was the case in larger schools. The lack of dedicated ninth-grade faculty made classroom scheduling difficult, as it meant that students from other grades would come to take their classes in the ninth-grade space and ninth-graders would go into other areas of the school for their classes. The NGA administrator explained, "Because of our small population it was more difficult for our school to maintain only servicing ninth-grade students." The rest of the school eventually encroached upon the ninth-grade hallway, compromising the purity of their previously dedicated space.

staff and students, especially when teachers had to move to accommodate space for the ninth grade. Nonetheless, principals who believed separate space helped support ninth-grade success were willing to make these decisions.

In six of the 10 schools that dedicated an entire building to their NGA, school leaders' desire to locate their NGA in a separate building coincided with previously scheduled renova-

tions or building additions for the school. This provided school leaders with greater flexibility in finding space specifically for the NGA. The principal of one school explained, "The first year we did it, we had just gotten a new building out back so that was prime opportunity to call it the ninth-grade center from day one, and that's what it's been from the first day. As much as possible all ninth-grade classes are in there." Like this principal, a number of other school leaders expressed a belief that being able to move the NGA into its own new or separate building fostered the NGA's development into a school within a school.

Challenging Conditions

The challenges schools faced implementing this component were related to their lack of resources (that is, space and teaching staff), competing priorities for space, and resistance from teachers and students. Some schools did not exhibit strong implementation of the dedicated space component because school leaders preferred to arrange their campus buildings and classroom spaces by subject area rather than grade level, which made it less likely that ninth-grade students would be contained in a single area throughout the school day.

Even in schools that did dedicate some separate space to their NGAs, school leaders said it was challenging to retain that space for ninth-graders alone. For some schools with growing student populations, the NGA was either moved a number of times during the start-up years or its space was cut back. Others struggled to reserve their NGA spaces for ninth-graders because many high school classes are offered by academic level rather than by grade, meaning that often courses could not be limited to freshmen, especially in schools with smaller populations and fewer teachers. In schools where ninth-grade teachers did not teach ninth-graders exclusively, upperclassmen would regularly enter the NGA.

Conversely, in addition to struggling to limit the NGA space to ninth-graders, many schools found they could not provide ninth-graders all the classes they needed within the NGA space. Advanced ninth-grade students often left to join upper-grade students for their classes and to take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes.[3] In some schools all the science labs were housed in a particular part of the building equipped with water and natural gas lines, so the majority of ninth-graders had to leave the NGA for their science classes.

Some administrators also felt pressure from teachers and students when it came to their decisions about whether to establish a dedicated space for the NGA. One principal shared that upperclassmen sometimes felt slighted by the preferential treatment received by the NGA: "That is our brand-new building, and a lot of people feel as if they deserve the right

[3]Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) are programs in which students can take classes at the college level. At the end of the school year, these students take AP or IB exams, and can earn college credits with a passing score. These are selective programs for small groups of clustered students.

to host their classes there and have that setup, especially seniors. Seniors still don't get it. They don't understand why *we* don't get the nicer facility and the newer facility and the smart classrooms and all those things." In addition to student resentment about the space, teachers at two other schools admitted feeling isolated, like they were placed on an "island" away from the rest of the school.

The administrative leadership and dedicated space components discussed above were core aspects of NGAs that nearly all schools in the study sample were able to implement at either strong or threshold levels. To implement these components, it was feasible for the principal to make largely independent and relatively straightforward decisions about how the resources at his or her school would be allocated. However, as addressed in the following chapter, it was harder to implement the dedicated faculty and interdisciplinary teacher team components well. Executing these components involved a high degree of leadership skill and technical capability — characteristics that were not evenly distributed across schools.

Chapter 5

Implementing Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County Public Schools — Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty and Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams

While assigning administrative leadership and at least some dedicated space to the Ninth Grade Academy (NGA) was a relatively "easy lift" for most schools, they faced greater challenges creating a dedicated ninth-grade faculty and the greatest challenges implementing interdisciplinary teaming. This chapter continues to draw on analyses of site-visit data to examine the extent, quality, and sustainability of implementation across study schools, and the conditions that supported and hindered implementation of these two core components.

Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty

A dedicated ninth-grade faculty is a group of teachers who teach only or primarily ninth-graders. The goal of this component is to promote a personalized learning environment in which teachers assume ownership for the success of "their" ninth-graders. Ideally, a dedicated group of NGA teachers can jointly assess how well their students are adapting to high school, and make collective decisions about student supports, curriculum and instruction design, and strategies to increase student engagement and address behavior issues.

Implementing Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty in Broward County Public Schools (BCPS)

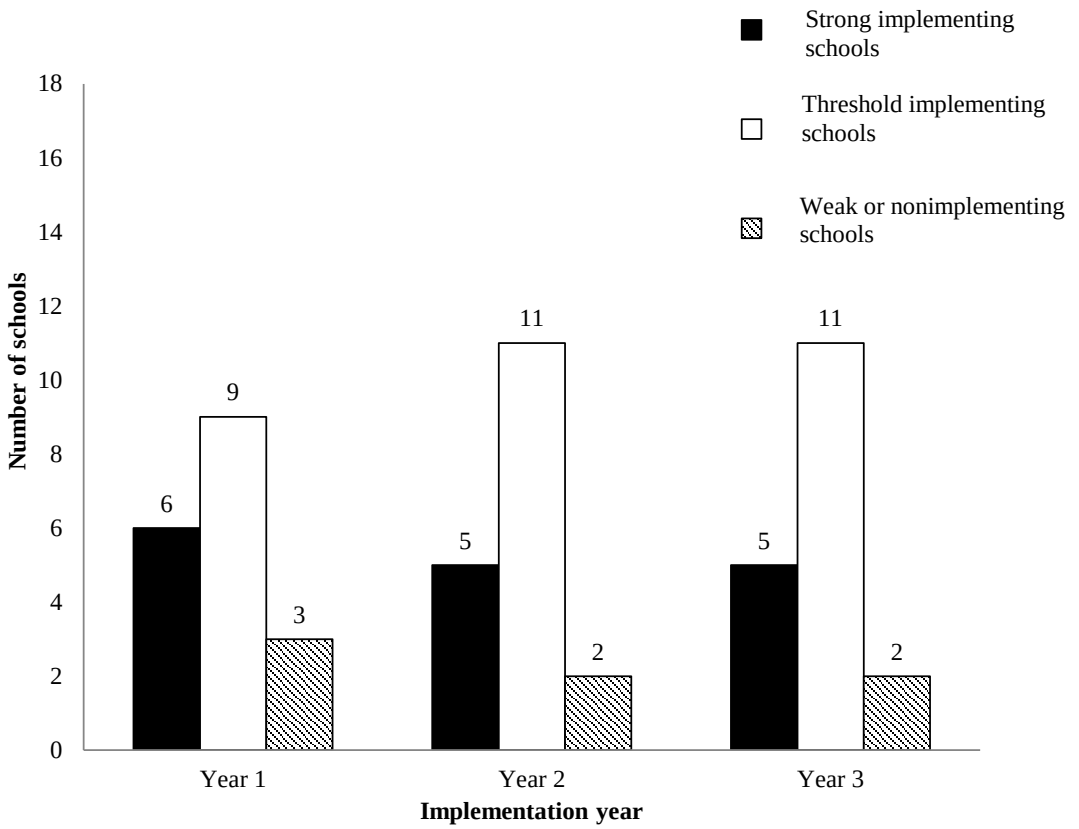
Study schools were considered to have implemented this component strongly if nearly all ninth-grade teachers taught exclusively ninth-graders; identified themselves as ninth-grade teachers, as opposed to identifying solely as subject-area teachers; and expressed belief in the NGA concept. Schools received threshold implementation scores if some teachers taught mainly ninth-graders but few taught ninth-graders exclusively, and if only some teachers expressed belief in the NGA concept and identified as teachers of ninth-graders. Schools received the lowest implementation rating for this component if they did not have a specific set of teachers who worked predominantly with ninth-grade students.

In Broward County, the dedicated faculty component was identifiable to some extent in nearly all schools in the study sample during their first three years of NGA implementation. Six of the schools began their NGAs with strong implementation of the dedicated faculty component and nine demonstrated threshold implementation. As shown in Figure 5.1, only three schools scored below threshold on this component in their NGA's first year and two schools

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 5.1

Implementation Rating by Implementation Year: Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty



SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

scored below threshold in their NGA's second and third years. Figure 5.2 details each school's implementation of the dedicated faculty component over the first three years of its NGA. Of the four NGA components, schools experienced the least amount of change in this area: more than three-quarters of the schools (14 of 18) maintained the same level of implementation of this component during their first three years. Of the six schools that strongly implemented the faculty component in their first year, all but one sustained strong implementation in the two subsequent years; none of the schools that started at the threshold implementation level improved over time. Two schools that did not initially implement this component added it during their NGA's second or third year, albeit only at the threshold level, and one threshold-implementing school abandoned the component in its NGA's third year.

The schools that implemented this component strongly were uniformly committed to having a ninth-grade faculty. Among the schools that were able to implement the dedicated faculty at the threshold level, there was variation in how this component looked on the ground. All of the schools receiving the threshold rating had a core group of teachers primarily responsible for teaching ninth-graders, but these teachers also taught upperclassmen. In several schools, this meant that ninth-grade teachers also taught tenth-graders for at least some of the day. In other schools, certain subject areas were specific to ninth grade (for example, science and English), but other subjects (for example, math, social studies, and electives) were not. Finally, some schools with honors classes or International Baccalaureate programs had teachers dedicated to these advanced courses rather than specific grade levels. Those teachers often taught mostly upper-grade courses with only a few ninth-grade classes on their schedules. Box 5.1 recounts the history of one school where teachers welcomed becoming part of a dedicated ninth-grade faculty, as well as one where the principal had difficulty selling teachers on the idea.

Enabling Conditions

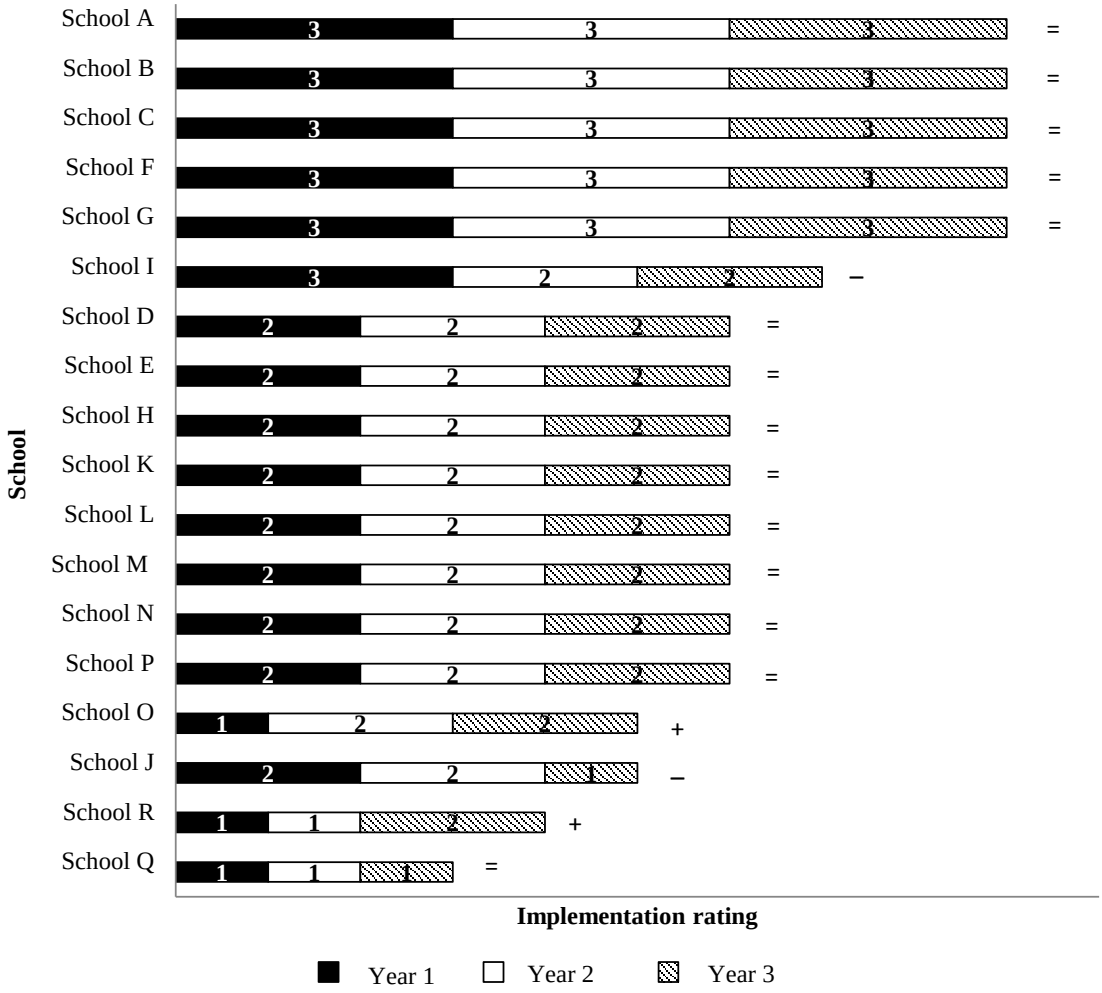
The main thing that allowed schools to implement the dedicated faculty component strongly was a school principal (or another NGA champion in an authoritative position, like a veteran assistant principal) who made a priority of NGA staffing. All of the strong implementers and some threshold implementers had teachers "handpicked" to teach ninth grade. School leaders who talked about selecting their ninth-grade teachers carefully also suggested that ninth-grade students had unique needs, and highlighted the importance of choosing teachers equipped to address those needs. As one principal said about her school's ninth-grade teachers:

> I think you have to have a special person that will make those connections with kids, so I think that's really a more important factor that you have the right people in the ninth grade that have more patience, have more understanding, are willing to work with them to go the extra mile, to tutor them, to develop that connection, to encourage them to want to do well.

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 5.2

The Variation in Implementation Over the First Three Years: Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty



SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

A "+" at the end of a row indicates that implementation strengthened at that school over the start-up years. A "–" at the end of a row indicates that implementation weakened at that school over the start-up years. A "=" at the end of a row indicates that implementation remained consistent at that school over the start-up years.

Box 5.1

Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty Case Studies

Successful School

Chestnut High School's ninth-grade faculty was handpicked by the NGA administrator to be a group of "dynamic, patient, energetic, and innovative" educators. This consistent staff created a community in which they communicated about students and teaching practices. Prior to starting the NGA, these teachers attended three days of training to learn about what it meant to teach in a program like this. There were also ongoing professional learning communities, which NGA faculty used to collaborate on teaching-related projects and improve their ability to serve ninth-graders. Being a part of the ninth-grade faculty provided a consistent professional community for the teachers and reinforced their commitment to the academy — the vast majority stayed with the NGA year after year. Their ongoing communication helped them to understand each ninth-grade class better, and to identify the strengths and needs of each cohort.

Challenged School

Sycamore High School never secured a dedicated ninth-grade faculty in the first three years of NGA implementation. Sycamore struggled in many regards when it came to creating an NGA, but the biggest barrier administrators cited was the lack of teacher buy-in. Sycamore had a new principal during Year 1 of NGA implementation. She attempted to institute all NGA components during her first year, but struggled to gain the trust and confidence of the teachers, who held strong allegiance to their subject-area departments. Teachers resisted the dedicated ninth-grade faculty concept because they felt it was unfair to saddle just a few teachers in their departments with all of the pressure of preparing ninth-graders for high-stakes state testing. Teachers also were accustomed to instructing diverse, multigrade classes and did not believe it was possible or preferable to be on a team purely devoted to the ninth grade.

Lacking strong relationships with teachers, the new principal was unable to establish an enthusiastic and cohesive ninth-grade faculty. In the absence of a dedicated ninth-grade faculty, students failed to develop a strong attachment to the NGA.

Teachers and leaders in schools that strongly implemented the dedicated faculty component consistently expressed the belief that teachers with certain characteristics should work with the ninth-graders at their schools to provide the best support for their unique needs. Specifically, respondents in 10 schools suggested ninth-grade teachers should be more "patient" or "nurturing" than other high school teachers. Three of the principals in these schools further explained that they selected their school's strongest teachers to teach ninth grade because they believed student success in ninth grade to be most critical for success in high school.

Principals in these schools also worked with their NGA administrators and master schedulers to create NGAs with as many dedicated faculty members as possible. By all accounts the district did not provide training or support to schools to help them schedule a single set of teachers for all or most ninth-grade students, leaving schools to rely on in-house expertise, which varied widely across the high schools in the study. While some teachers and leaders suggested ninth grade was viewed as an undesirable teaching assignment, the schools that did the best job of implementing the dedicated faculty component were also characterized by principals who worked to create school cultures that valued ninth-grade teachers. The teachers in those schools explained that their school leaders highly valued ninth-grade teachers and made them feel their work with ninth-grade students was a critical aspect of the school's success.

Challenging Conditions

While most schools were able to implement the dedicated faculty component to at least some extent, external and internal pressures made it difficult for many to achieve strong implementation of this component.

External pressures. Under Florida's accountability system, student performance on the state's standardized achievement tests (the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, or FCAT) is the major determinant of the annual grades high schools receive to rate their overall performance. Students also must pass the ninth- and tenth-grade FCATs in order to graduate. A few school leaders suggested that the FCAT factored into their staffing decisions. One explicitly stated a reluctance to place the burden of ninth-graders' FCAT scores on a small group of teachers teaching exclusively ninth-graders, particularly as the district prepared to roll out a new evaluation system that tied teacher performance directly to student achievement. In 2009, the accountability system for high schools expanded to include other measures, notably the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses and enrollment in them. In several schools, it was evident that significant changes in staffing and scheduling priorities had occurred following that change to increase the number of ninth-graders enrolled in AP and honors classes. This put pressure on principals to take teachers out of the NGA to teach those courses. In one school, a new principal who had originally intended to sustain the NGA initiated by her predecessor ultimately decided that the fastest way to turn around the school's low academic performance was to strengthen cross-grade subject-area departments and increase the number of advanced courses, making NGA staffing a low priority.

A districtwide financial crisis led to significant across-the-board cuts in staffing that also affected implementation of this component. Schools that organized their ninth grade around a four-by-four block schedule were especially challenged by these circumstances. In a block schedule, teachers teach fewer classes per term — typically three instead of six or seven as in schools with more traditional schedules. (Box 5.2 provides more detail on how this works.)

Box 5.2

Block Schedules: Benefits and Challenges for High Schools

Under a block schedule, students take four 90-minute classes each day. Some schools offer a four-by-four block schedule in which students take eight courses: four courses the first semester and four different courses the second semester. Other schools offer an A/B block schedule in which students take all eight courses throughout the year on alternating days.

Researchers cite educational advantages of block scheduling over the traditional school schedule in middle and high schools, in which students take seven 45-minute periods per day throughout the year.[*] The longer period allows more flexibility in how teachers use instructional time. They can use it to support struggling students or to do more projects and experiments. With eight classes rather than seven, students can take an additional elective or get extra help with their coursework. Block scheduling also increases flexibility for high school students by giving them 32 courses instead of 28 over four years, which means more chances to engage in early-college or work-based learning experiences. Teachers also benefit from having fewer students per day and a longer free period, which they can use to plan, collaborate with other teachers, or meet with students and parents as needed.

In spite of the longer free period, however, block scheduling can make it harder to schedule common planning time for teachers on interdisciplinary teams. Schedulers have fewer options for finding a common planning period for a team of three or four teachers in a four-period day than in a seven-period day.

Block scheduling is also more expensive than the traditional schedule, because teachers teach fewer students and fewer hours.[†] Teachers typically spend 75 percent of their time teaching in a block schedule (teaching three classes per day with one planning period), compared with 86 percent of a seven-period schedule (teaching six classes per day with one planning period). Schools have developed a variety of ways to avoid these added costs while still infusing the benefits of block scheduling into a seven-period day. For example, some schools provide teachers with an additional planning period so they teach just five of seven periods per day—but only some teachers, not all, or only on alternating days. Others use a "modified block schedule" that provides extended periods for some subjects, sometimes on alternating days. As budgets have become more constrained in recent years, however, districts have begun to pull back from any form of block scheduling, including in Broward County Public Schools.[‡]

[*]Canady and Rettig (1995).

[†]Rettig (2006); Rettig, Web site handout as of January 2013. As of March 7, 2013, however, the page no longer contained this handout.

[‡]Fitzpatrick (2012).

When students are grouped with a small number of teachers, as in a smaller learning community like an NGA, a scheduler's options to place students in the academic courses they need and elective courses they desire becomes limited. A traditional schoolwide master schedule offers more teachers and class periods in which to place a student for any given course. A school operating on a four-by-four block schedule with an NGA is likely to need additional teaching staff to accommodate students' course needs. One NGA administrator discussed this potentially costly challenge:

> When you dedicate a group of teachers only to teach ninth grade, you limit who can go in that class. So therefore, you're either going to have a class that's going to be too large or a class that's going to be small because you can't put any other students in there. So that cost ... and our ninth-grade center was a four-by-four-block, so because of the number, the way ours was structured, it cost more.

As this administrator explained, having classes dedicated solely to ninth-graders led to significant challenges regarding staffing. It became too costly for the school to continue to operate that way when it was faced with budget constraints. Another school's administrator reiterated this point, as he explained, "[Our] finances dictate that we have to use the teachers to their utmost and fill the classes as best we can."

Internal pressures. The study team uncovered other forces related to the political and cultural dynamics of individual schools that explained why NGA administrators did not assign faculty exclusively to the NGA.

In a few schools, teachers reported their grade assignments varied over the years; assignments to the NGA were flexible from one academic year — or even semester — to the next. A primary reason for changes in assignment was teachers' desire to "get a break" from ninth-graders and teach more academically challenging subject material to more mature upperclassmen. Some administrators accommodated these requests by giving teachers a mixed schedule that included some ninth-grade and some upper-grade classes, resulting in fewer teachers exclusively teaching ninth-graders. One principal who carefully selected teachers she believed would be strong in the ninth grade explained that while some teachers were willing to give it a try, teacher preferences sometimes prevented her from making the staffing changes she desired:

> We were able to get some to come out of their comfort zone and they went down [to ninth grade] and did some great things and are still there and love it and won't move now.... I also had some that wouldn't even entertain it, you know, that we thought would be pretty good at the ninth-grade level, but they respectfully said please don't do this to me.

Overall, this type of teacher resistance to having a full ninth-grade schedule was most prevalent in schools that had threshold implementation levels of the dedicated faculty component.

Differences of opinion among teachers about the value of the NGA for students also created tensions among faculty in some schools. In one school, administrators indicated that upper-grade faculty sometimes complained that NGA teachers were given special treatment and additional resources, to the detriment of other students. In another, upper-grade faculty complained that isolating the ninth-graders in the NGA kept students from adjusting to the larger high school environment. A school administrator explained:

> [Teachers] who received those ninth-graders in tenth grade, some of them feel, you know they may have done better if they had been just placed in the main [building] — that it isolated them so they did not understand what the rest of the school was doing and how to behave in the rest of the school.

This school, like several others in the study sample, struggled with the question of how to implement an NGA as a self-contained school within a school without depriving faculty and students of experiences that integrated them into the schoolwide community.

Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams

Interdisciplinary teaming is an organizational structure in which teachers from different subject areas teach a common group of students throughout the school year. For example, a group of 80 to 90 students (or more depending on the school schedule) may be taught by the same math, English, science, and social studies teachers. Interdisciplinary teaming represents a significant departure from the traditional high school practice of organizing teachers exclusively by subject area. It is considered a core component of NGAs, especially in large high schools, because in its ideal format it helps teachers create a more personalized and instructionally integrated experience for students. Sharing the same group of students can support personalization by providing teachers with opportunities to work collaboratively, especially when given the time to meet together as a team; to get to know students well; to assess their academic needs and their social or emotional barriers to learning; and to create solutions that encompass the entire school experience for students, as opposed to a single class. Students see their teachers working together and come to think of school as a place where they are known, supported, and held accountable. Model interdisciplinary teams also can enable teachers to coordinate curricula, engage students in relevant themes and projects that cut across subject areas, create coherent expectations for student work, and reinforce learning by teaching common concepts in different classes.

Implementing Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams in BCPS

The above description of interdisciplinary teams and the NGA theory of action discussed in Chapter 1 both highlight these two aspects of teaming — personalization and integrated interdisciplinary curricula. But initial interviews with BCPS officials and early site visits

made it clear that Broward County's NGA initiative emphasized personalization over interdisciplinary curricular coordination. Accordingly, the research team also focused its evaluation on this aspect of teacher teams.

In study schools that strongly implemented the teacher teams component, almost all of the ninth-grade students were taught by interdisciplinary teams. Teachers also strongly identified as being part of their teams and met regularly to identify and address student needs collectively. Teachers typically met during a common planning time built into the schedule, often used standard meeting protocols, and communicated with each other outside of scheduled meetings. In schools that received a threshold implementation score, teacher teams were not a major aspect of the NGA, but they were present in some way. Specifically, a school received a threshold implementation score if some ninth-grade students were taught by interdisciplinary teacher teams or if only a small number of subjects were teamed (for example, English and social studies). These teams met less often, typically on a monthly basis or a few times per year during designated professional development days, and team members did not regularly communicate outside of those times. A school received the lowest implementation rating if teachers were not in ninth-grade teams and if there was little or no evidence that teachers of ninth-grade students worked collaboratively to address student needs.

Of the four structural NGA components, teacher teaming was the most difficult to implement and was the least likely of the core components to be found in the study schools. Specifically, as Figure 5.3 shows, only two schools were able to implement the teaming component strongly in their NGA's first year, four implemented it strongly in their second year, and three implemented it strongly in their third start-up year. Six schools exhibited threshold implementation in their NGAs' first year, four in their second year, and four in their third year. There were at least 10 schools that did not implement this component during each of the first three start-up years.

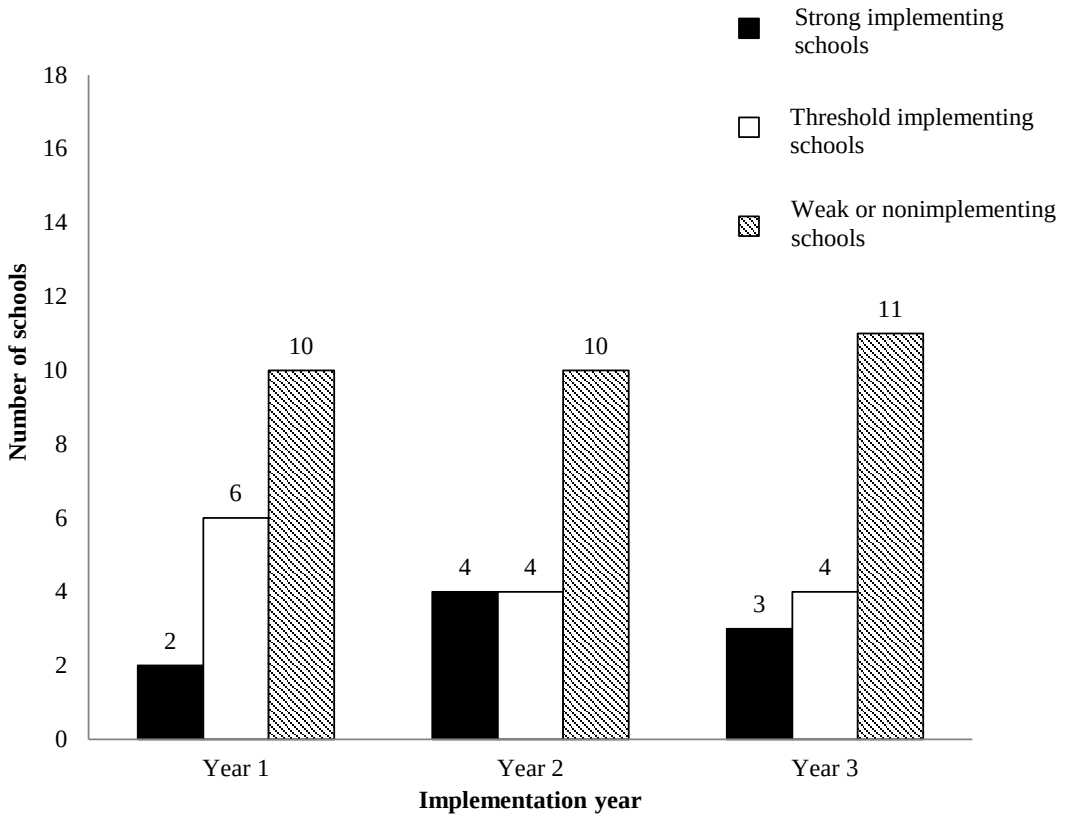
Figure 5.4 details each school's implementation of the teaming component for the first three years of its NGA. In total, only five schools were able to maintain at least threshold implementation across all three years, with no school demonstrating a high level of implementation over all three start-up years. Only two schools started with a high level of implementation, but each had to completely dismantle their teacher teaming in their NGA's third year. Finally, of the ten schools that began with no implementation of the teaming component, eight never implemented it in any form, while one reached threshold in the third year and the other strongly implemented the teaming component in the last two years.

In schools with robust teaming components, teachers expressed a strong belief in the interdisciplinary teaming concept. At one school, teachers explained that they met regularly to

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 5.3

Implementation Rating by Implementation Year: Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams



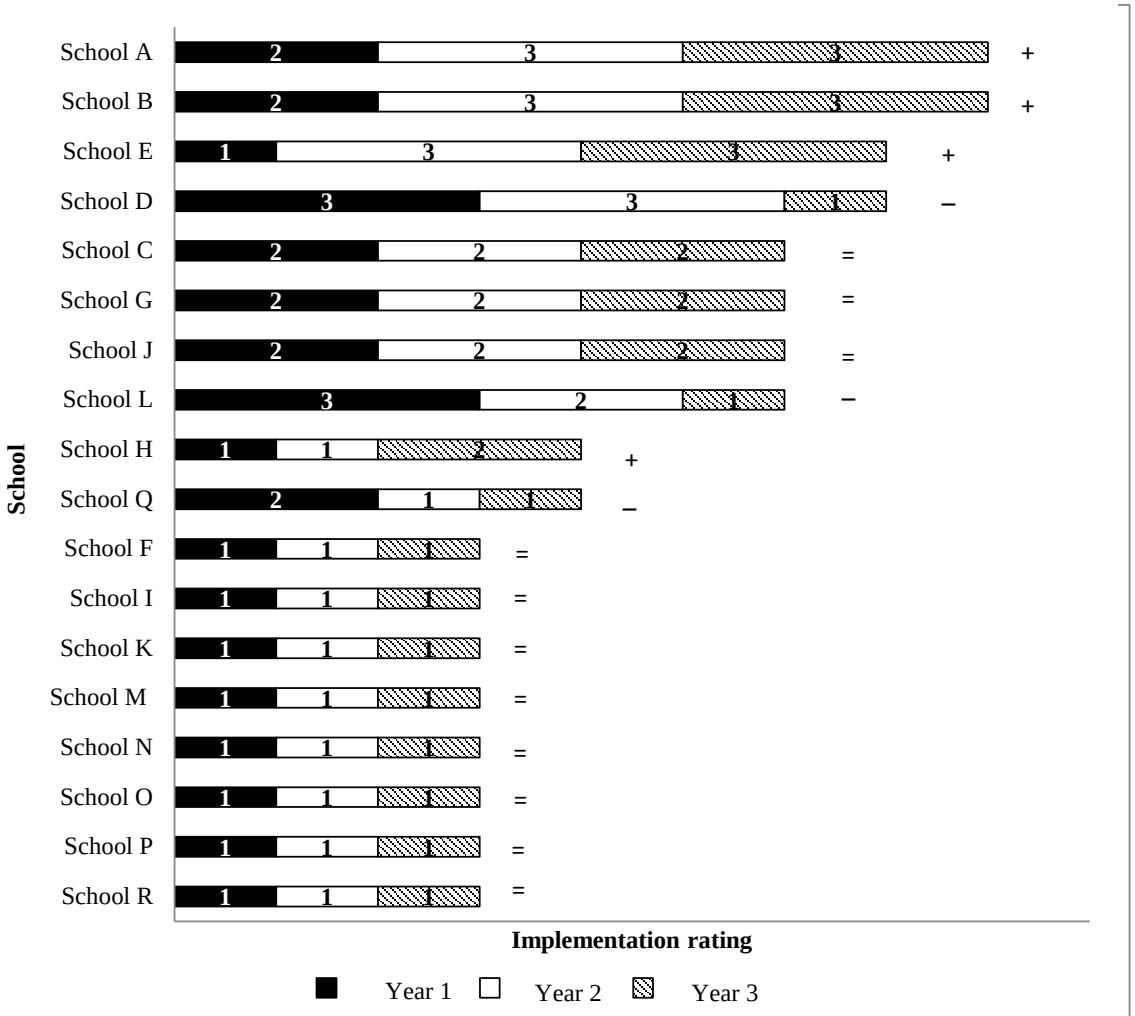
SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. Implementation years do not coincide with calendar years.

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 5.4

The Variation in Implementation Over the First Three Years: Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams



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A "+" at the end of a row indicates that implementation strengthened at that school over the start-up years. A "–" at the end of a row indicates that implementation weakened at that school over the start-up years. A "=" at the end of a row indicates that implementation remained consistent at that school over the start-up years.

discuss how specific students were performing in their classes, which helped their communication with parents. One teacher stated, "It made it great because when we had parent conferences we were all on the same page together prior to the conference." A teacher at the one school that moved from having no interdisciplinary teams to strong teams explained how being able to collaborate with her colleagues about specific students helped prevent student failure. She shared the following:

> Because we're teamed we have common students. And that helps a lot because I have a student [my colleague] has and ... if [she's] not performing for her, okay, then she'll ask me, is she performing for you? No.... Then it's a matter of is the student performing for the reading teacher? Then that's another issue.... So that way we can identify right away, what's the problem? What's the intervention? What can we do to save this kid, so to speak? Because one thing I can definitely say about the academy is before the academy a lot of the freshmen would fall through the cracks ... now I think we're so much more efficient in catching them before they fall. And that I think is one of the reasons why they're succeeding.

These excerpts explain why teachers in NGAs with strong teacher teams believed that having students in common with other members of their team helped address students' needs and coordinated both the support offered to students and communication with students' parents. Box 5.3 recounts the experience of a school that came to embrace interdisciplinary teaming for ninth-grade teachers, as well as that of a school that resisted it.

Enabling Conditions

A school was most likely to implement the teaming component if it also managed to implement the other three NGA components. Schools with the highest overall scores for teaming strongly implemented the other three components for all three start-up years. The four schools with an overall teaming score above threshold strongly implemented the leadership and space components for at least two years and were at least at threshold for the faculty component. Without exception, every NGA that had strong implementation of teaming in a given year also had strong implementation in the leadership or space component if not both for the same year. The implementation of the other three core components was critical because in an NGA without a dedicated ninth-grade faculty and a committed leader, it was difficult either to sustain the complicated schedule of a teamed NGA, or to emphasize the NGA more than other programs and policies that would weaken it. It was also difficult to maintain teacher teams without a dedicated space for ninth-graders and their teachers, as proximity and consistent communication among the teacher team members helped them stay cohesive.

All four schools with strong implementation of teacher teams also had at least one NGA champion on staff. NGA champions could be principals, NGA administrators, or even teachers

Box 5.3

Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams Case Studies

Successful School

Elm High School struggled through its first year of teacher teaming, but learned from that experience and earned the highest possible score for Years 2 and 3 of NGA implementation. Under the guidance of a highly committed principal and NGA teacher leader, the scheduler was encouraged to make interdisciplinary teaming her utmost priority. Following weeks of trial and error, she mastered the process of scheduling interdisciplinary teams with common planning. She became so adept that she was able to add common planning by subject area as well as by interdisciplinary team for the ninth grade the following year. Teachers used their common planning time to discuss student data, develop interdisciplinary thematic units, and coordinate credit recovery and other academic supports for their students. Students benefited from the small community within the academy; they knew that there was a team of teachers working together towards their success. Teachers believed it became less likely for students to slip through the cracks.

Challenged School

While Oak High School implemented administrative leadership and dedicated space, it was never able to implement teacher teaming. The administration did not seem to think that creating teams was possible. With matters complicated by a four-by-four block schedule and the lack of a ninth-grade faculty, the administration did not attempt interdisciplinary teaming at any point during the start-up years. Instead, teacher identity continued to revolve around academic departments. As a result, there was little communication among teachers of the same students, so opportunities were missed to identify students' academic and behavior patterns and create a more personalized environment.

with at least some decision-making power or influence on school leaders' decisions. One principal stated:

> I feel as though [it's] teachers having the time to talk together, to work together, to strategize, and helping the students ... so the kids can get more from what you would ordinarily do. So I do think that the collaboration piece, those planning times and the professional learning communities where they're working together ... make it work for the students.

At this school, the principal reported losing common planning due to budget cuts, but expressed his intention to reinstate it. He said he believed that providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate in teaching the same students supported student success. At another school, the scheduler explained that her principal communicated that teaming was a priority:

> The schedule is always based on the vision of the school and the administrator ... I normally do is I meet with her and I see what the vision is and then we talk about the best route to take for scheduling our ninth-grade students.... My main responsibility as a scheduler is to make sure that the students' classes are aligned with what the needs are for the ninth grade, and part of that would be making sure that the students are teamed on the appropriate team, that the teachers are matched based on the needs of the students.

Although scheduling teacher teams was a challenge, she dedicated herself to making it work at her school in order to help realize the principal's vision.

Leaders in schools with strong teaming were thoughtful about and highly valued the NGA teaching staff. In three of the schools, these leaders carefully considered who would be the best fit for a ninth-grade team of teachers, and, as described in the dedicated ninth-grade faculty section, were personally involved in selecting them. They also made an effort to support and maintain these teachers. Teachers were given the opportunity to be leaders on their interdisciplinary teacher teams and within their NGAs, and empowered to be part of the decision-making process. In one school, the NGA coordinator was a teacher who had substantial amounts of time built into her schedule for working with each of the NGA's interdisciplinary teams. At another school, team leaders received stipends so that they would know their work was valued. Additionally, the NGA administrators at these schools showed their support and commitment to the teacher teams by being active participants during common planning and visible figures within their NGAs.

Challenging Conditions

The main challenge to implementing teacher teams was creating a schedule that allowed teachers to meet regularly and plan together. Of the nine schools that never implemented teacher teams, seven operated on a four-by-four block schedule. Administrators and schedulers at many of these schools specifically pointed to the schedule as the primary factor in their school's decision to forgo teaming. As one scheduler said, "On a four-by-four, a teacher can only have one planning [period]. So they teach three classes and one other period is a planning period." Several respondents explained that teachers who have only one planning period in a day are entitled to use this time for their own planning and they cannot be required to meet for a common planning period instead. In many cases, school staff members also reported that it was mutually beneficial, for the teacher and the school, for teachers to teach an extra class during their designated planning period. Teachers received additional income for teaching an extra class, and if classes could be taught by the teachers already in-house, schools saved money because they did not have to hire another teacher and provide benefits for the new hire. Yet this also precluded a common planning period. By contrast, all four schools that were strong implementers for at least

two of the first three years of implementation had a seven-period day that administrators explained was critical in scheduling common planning for interdisciplinary teams.

For many schools, students' different levels of ability across subjects also made it difficult to implement interdisciplinary teacher teams. Students who were all performing at one level in reading were not always performing at the same level in math and other subjects, thus making it very difficult to schedule large groups of students together. Some threshold implementing schools chose to overcome that hurdle by only teaming certain subjects or subgroups of the ninth grade. For example, one school had interdisciplinary teams that excluded math, another school had teams with only math and English/Language Arts, while another school had teams only for the lowest quartile of students.

Finally, while schools received little guidance on how to implement any of the four core NGA components, the lack of support in this area posed the most substantial challenge. While some schools were fortunate to have skilled and experienced administrators or schedulers who could design timetables that allowed for teacher teams, schools without these resources did not receive additional support to help them. Further, schools did not receive any site-specific guidance regarding the benefits interdisciplinary teaming might yield for students or how teachers could use common planning time effectively. Meanwhile the district was providing a great deal of training and support to schools to implement subject-area-focused professional learning communities.[1] This new professional development priority competed for teachers' time and focus and created more complications for scheduling.

[1]Schools receiving "F" grades under Florida's new Differentiated Accountability system (which assigns grades based on standardized test scores, graduation rates, and students' participation and performance in accelerated coursework) were required to implement Lesson Study with their teachers. Lesson Study is a type of professional learning community in which teachers focus deeply on the content and delivery of specific lessons. See Florida Department of Education (2010b).

Chapter 6

Summary and Discussion

This report provides an in-depth picture of how Ninth Grade Academies (NGAs) were implemented in Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) as part of a districtwide high school reform initiative. It examines supports for NGAs, variation in the extent to which core NGA components were implemented across 18 high schools, and conditions that promoted or challenged schools' implementation efforts. The primary purpose of the investigation was to assess the feasibility of implementing NGAs on a large scale in a large urban school district, and provide guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to decide whether and how to implement NGAs in their schools and districts.

Summary of Findings

Broward County's initiative to implement NGAs on a large scale emerged from a broader district focus on high school reform. Broward County district leaders engaged high school principals in a collective study and collaborative planning process that involved a scan of best practices and interaction with experts and districts outside of BCPS. They also drew on resources within the district, highlighting NGAs that had been established in several district high schools for a number of years. This enabled them to articulate the purpose and structural components of NGAs with a fair degree of specificity. The initiative had strong leadership support at the outset and was supported by a newly instituted office of High School Reform. The effort was prompted, in part, by a five-year, $8 million federal Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) grant BCPS received in 2005. The grant directly supported reform in eight high schools, was used to create a central support for NGA administrators, and prompted a sustained focus on the NGA reform effort, at least for a time. The central support was called LINGO (Leading in Ninth Grade as One), a professional learning community for NGA administrators that met monthly over a three-year period (from fall 2007 through spring 2010). Apart from LINGO, however, no direct support was provided for NGA implementation, leaving school leaders to rely on their own resources and in-house expertise.

District-level support for NGA implementation was not sustained over time, and Broward County's focus had shifted to other strategies for improving high school students' performance by the time the study team entered the field in fall 2009. The superintendent had been replaced, the area superintendent over high schools who led the NGA initiative had moved to a different position in the central office, and a looming financial crisis and budget cuts increasingly dominated the leadership agenda. The High School Reform office was disbanded

and LINGO, the sole source of loose accountability for NGA implementation, ended in spring 2010 with the SLC grant.

At the same time, forces outside of Broward County interfered with NGA implementation. In 2007, after five years of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schools were beginning to feel significant pressure to improve test scores under Florida's Differentiated Accountability system. Some administrators chose to respond in ways that were inconsistent with NGA components, reassigning staff to teach advanced courses or, in the case of one school, replacing the NGA with an honors academy serving ninth- through twelfth-graders. Unintended consequences of other state policies also played a role. In fall 2009, for example, Florida rolled out a class-size reduction policy that required schools to hire more teachers. Administrators described this as a major disruption to carefully crafted schedules that had organized teachers into interdisciplinary teams with common planning time. Only schools with highly committed leaders and skilled schedulers were able to preserve their teams.

Nationally, the high school reform movement shifted away from an emphasis on communal structures such as small learning communities and interdisciplinary teams and toward core curriculum standards, teacher quality, and data-driven response-to-intervention (RtI) strategies. This shift was evident in Broward County, where curriculum-focused professional learning communities and RtI systems competed with fledgling NGAs in ways that multiplied priorities for school-based administrators and faculty, and made staffing and scheduling NGAs even more difficult.

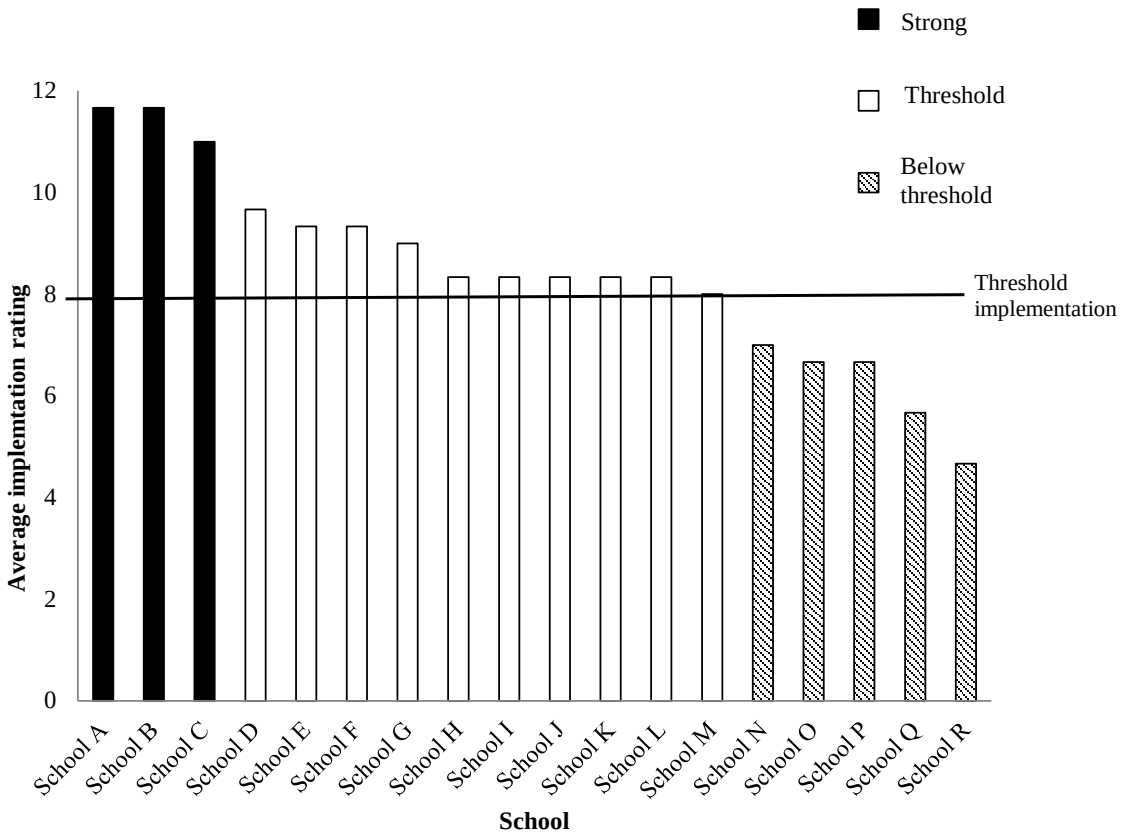
Figure 6.1 summarizes the quality of NGA implementation for all 18 high schools in the study by presenting an overall implementation rating that combines scores for each of the four components of NGAs detailed in Chapters 4 and 5 — administrative leadership, dedicated space for the NGA, a faculty that teaches primarily or exclusively ninth-graders, and interdisciplinary teacher teams. Scores from all four components were summed for each of the first three years of NGA operation, and then averaged across years to produce an overall implementation rating for each school. The highest possible rating was 12, reflecting strong implementation of the four components across all three years. The lowest possible was 4, which reflects no implementation across all four components. A rating of 8 was considered a threshold level of overall implementation because it indicated, on average, a threshold rating across the four components.

Among all the high schools, only three had scores above 10 and stood out as establishing strong NGAs in the first three years of implementation. Each of these schools achieved strong implementation of three core components — dedicated administrator, space, and faculty — and threshold to strong implementation of the interdisciplinary teaming component, in each

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 6.1

Average Implementation Rating During the First Three Years of Each Ninth Grade Academy



SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components in a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for each of the first three years of NGA implementation. The overall implementation score for each school was calculated by: 1) summing the ratings across the four components within each year; 2) summing the results for each year across years; and 3) dividing the cross-year sum by three to calculate the average overall score.

of the first three years of their academies. These schools were characterized by committed and creative leaders, skilled schedulers, and low or well-managed turnover in key positions.

Just over half of the schools in the sample scored between 8 and 10, indicating at least threshold, but less than strong, implementation levels. Interdisciplinary teaming was the clear weak link in these schools. Nearly all schools in this group had some or strong implementation of the administrator, space, and faculty components, but four never implemented teacher teams and two abandoned their teaming effort by their NGA's third year.

Nearly one-third of the schools were found to have overall weak implementation, or scores below 8, indicating that they were missing some major NGA components and only nominally implementing others. These schools faced many challenges, including leadership turnover, faculty resistance, weak scheduling support, and competing priorities. Many of these schools essentially gave up on their NGAs. Even among those that did not abandon their NGAs, most had no concrete plans to pursue deeper implementation.

Further analysis of NGA implementation trajectories showed that the majority of schools (11 of the 18) in the sample did not improve their implementation over their first three years of operation, as can be seen in Figure 6.2. Of those that did show improvement, only two moved into the strong category by their third year. These patterns indicate that just a handful of schools had the ability to achieve strong NGA implementation in the face of changing district priorities and a lack of on-site technical assistance.

Box 6.1 summarizes these findings.

Discussion

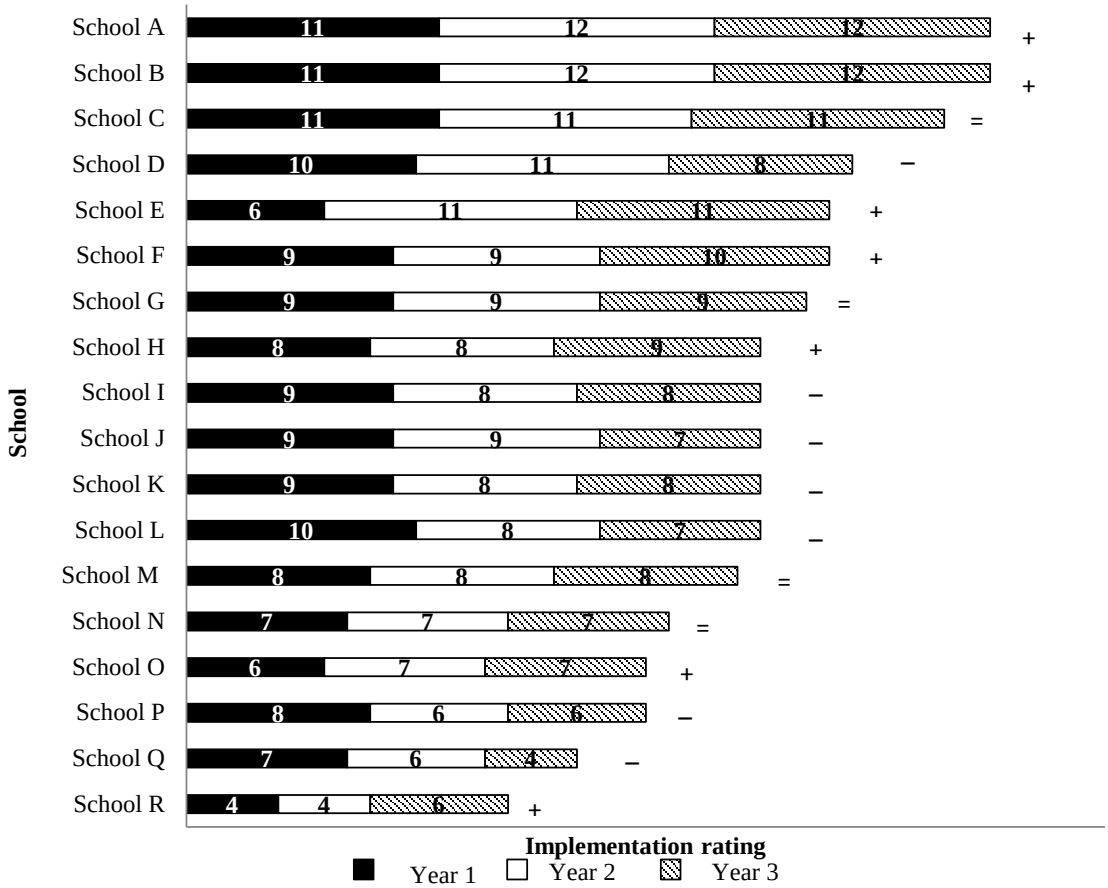
Broward County's initiative to implement NGAs districtwide was bold and ambitious. Early steps to introduce NGAs on a large scale in BCPS were informed and collaborative, and laid the groundwork for widespread adoption of core NGA components. As the initiative moved from the planning and start-up phase to school-based action, however, its success was influenced by a range of factors, many of which inhibited strong and sustained implementation. The following section discusses these factors and related lessons that may be drawn from the district's initiative. The factors also are summarized in Table 6.1.[1]

[1]This section adapts a framework offered by Fullan and others that identifies four areas of influence on the implementation of complex reforms like NGAs: 1) the characteristics of the school as a unit, 2) the characteristics of the school system, 3) factors external to the local school system, and 4) the attributes of the reform innovation itself. See Fullan (1991); Smerdon and Borman (2009, 2012).

Ninth Grade Academies

Figure 6.2

The Variation in Implementation Over the First Three Years: Overall Scores



SOURCE: Site visit interview data gathered from 18 schools during visits to Broward County in November 2009, December 2010, and November 2011.

NOTES: Ratings were determined for four components of a Ninth Grade Academy: ninth-grade administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade space, ninth-grade faculty, and teacher teams. Each component was given one of the following scores: 1 (little/no implementation), 2 (threshold implementation), or 3 (strong implementation) for the each of the first three years of NGA implementation. The overall implementation score for each school was calculated by: 1) summing the ratings across the four components within each year; 2) summing the results for each year across years; and 3) dividing the cross-year sum by three to calculate the average overall score.

A "+" at the end of a row indicates that implementation strengthened at that school over the start-up years. A "–" at the end of a row indicates that implementation weakened at that school over the start-up years. A "=" at the end of a row indicates that implementation remained consistent at that school over the start-up years.

Box 6.1

Summary of Overall NGA Implementation Across 18 High Schools

- A wide range of implementation across schools
- Strong implementation in only three schools
- Most schools (10) at a threshold level of implementation
- A substantial minority of schools (5) below threshold
- No improvement in NGA implementation during the first three years for most schools (12)

School-Level Factors

Leadership stood out as the primary school-level factor affecting NGA implementation. In the absence of on-site support from the district, schools had stronger implementation if they were lucky enough to have established, stable leaders who had worked with smaller learning communities and team-teaching structures before. The few schools in the study that implemented strong interdisciplinary teaming, for example, had leaders who not only made sure to set aside time in the school day for teams to plan together, but also joined team meetings regularly, specified routines for them, and set expectations for what should be accomplished at them. NGAs did better in schools where the principal and the NGA administrator were both committed to the endeavor, had a positive working relationship, and shared the same priorities.

Schools also fared better if they had skilled and experienced schedulers (or at least confident novice schedulers well motivated by their administrators) to create master schedules that accommodated a dedicated ninth-grade faculty and common planning time for ninth-grade interdisciplinary teams. In some schools this in-house scheduling expertise was in place at the outset, while in others it was developed over time. In one school where the principal and NGA leadership team were highly committed to the NGA concept, a novice scheduler actually developed enough skill to build in common planning time for both ninth-grade interdisciplinary teams and cross-grade, subject-area teams. This kind of expertise was a scarce and unevenly distributed resource in BCPS high schools, however.

The importance of leadership and technical expertise in scheduling was underscored by the impact that turnover in these positions had on NGA implementation. Even schools that had other enabling factors — such as a separate building or wing for the NGA — faltered when a key administrator who had championed the academy moved to another position or another

Table 6.1

Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Implementation of Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County Public Schools

Factor	Facilitated Implementation	Hindered Implementation
School factors The school's human, material, and social capital, or organizational capabilities; access to technical assistance; capacity for organizational learning	• Established administrators committed to the NGA concept • In-house scheduling expertise • Close relationship and aligned priorities between principal and NGA administrator • Resources to retain teaching staff, counselors, and behavior specialists	• Unplanned turnover in principal or NGA administrator positions • Competing reform priorities • No on-site technical assistance beyond examples from other schools • Lack of scheduling expertise
District factors District attributes that facilitate or hinder a school's efforts to implement reform	• Expectations clearly communicated by district leader with positional authority • Collaborative NGA study and planning process that involved high school principals • Local examples of NGA implementation • LINGO—cross-school professional learning community for NGA administrators • Federal grant that supported LINGO coordinator and district focus on high school reform • Involvement of research office and external evaluation partner	• Leadership churn and turnover • District-level NGA support tied to a short-term grant • Reliance on professional accountability mechanisms to track and secure implementation • Low alignment between district professional development priorities and NGAs
External factors The political, cultural, and structural contexts in which the reform is taking place	• Visible national movement to reform high schools • Published research on importance of ninth-grade transition • Pressure to improve school performance	• Pressure to improve school performance • Shift in national reform focus away from communal structures and toward curriculum, instructional quality, data • Unexpected policy changes (for example, class size reduction)
NGA design Attributes of the reform innovation itself (reformers' vision, strategy, and capabilities)	• Compelling theory of action • A plan addressed to a clear need and key transition for students	• Underdeveloped components, especially interdisciplinary teaming and common planning • Lack of strong evidence of impact on tested student achievement

school. Turnover in the NGA administrator position was not uncommon, since this position was viewed by many at the school and district levels as a stepping-stone to a principal position or advancement in the central office. Schools that were able to sustain implementation in spite of a change in the NGA administrator position typically had two protective factors — a principal who continued to be committed to the NGA, and a distributed leadership model wherein a lead teacher, a counselor, team leaders, or administrative staff rounded out a team approach to leading the NGA.

Even schools that retained champions for their NGAs struggled in the face of budget cuts. Principals generally agreed that, at the outset, they were able to implement the core components of their NGAs by redistributing existing resources with little or no additional funding. By fall 2009, however, budgets were beginning to be pulled back. In interviews, administrators cited the loss of counselors, behavior specialists, and teaching staff dedicated to the ninth grade as challenges to NGA implementation. One principal said he had gone from seven social-studies teachers to three. Another said "at some point, you can only be so creative" after reporting that he expected to lose over a dozen positions. This left him with fewer teachers to spread across grade and subject positions and severely constrained his ability to dedicate staff to the NGA despite his strong desire to do so. In schools with fragile NGAs struggling with leadership turnover and waning district support, these cuts contributed to the academies' marginalization and decline. Even in the handful of schools with committed leaders and strong NGAs, principals either retreated from interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time or indicated they would have to if the cuts went any deeper.[2]

District-Level Factors

Leadership "churn" has been found to be characteristic of large school systems and an obstacle to meaningful and sustained improvement, especially in districts dominated by politicized and conflicting agendas of school executives, school boards, and local leaders.[3] Such was the case in BCPS, where the turnover and internal reorganization at the district level described in Chapter 3 directly affected the NGA initiative. When the area superintendent in charge of high schools moved to a different position, the initiative lost its main champion. Though her successor understood the need to support freshmen, he believed that targeting supports to poorly performing subgroups of students across grades was a more effective path to success. The initiative also lost its visible, independent status when a reorganization moved the High School Reform office into the office of Differentiated Accountability, where managers were focused on compliance with testing and achievement mandates. Then the High School Reform office was

[2]Note that this discussion pertains to a time period — that in which budget cuts were becoming a factor — that came after the first three years of implementation for some of the schools in the study.

[3]Hess (1999); Hess and Leal (2005).

disbanded altogether and the SLC program coordinator moved to another division for the remainder of the grant period. According to the administrators interviewed for this study, high school reform and NGAs became a very low priority, as other pressing issues and varied strategies for raising student achievement came to dominate the leadership agenda.

These same administrators mused on what might have transpired had the district won a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which was making large investments in selected districts to improve high schools at the time Broward County started its NGA initiative. BCPS had been a finalist for the Broad Prize in Urban Education in both 2008 and 2009. As a finalist, the district won $250,000 in college scholarships for graduating seniors and recognition as one of few large urban school districts to demonstrate improvement in student achievement while reducing the achievement gaps between low-income and higher-income students, and between minority and white students. That visibility did not translate into significant additional funding from Gates or other external sources, however, leaving BCPS without an infusion of resources to establish a more sustainable, supportive "space" for high school reform. As it was, the only thread that ultimately tied district support for NGAs to school-based implementation was the SLC grant administrator who ran LINGO.

LINGO was a clear support for NGA implementation and, by all accounts, an exciting departure from the traditional, workshop-based professional development opportunities typical in BCPS and professional development practice generally.[4] The cross-school learning community for NGA administrators provided a unique environment for professionals to discuss innovation and continuous improvement. Participants learned from observing NGA practice in each other's schools, and reported implementing some ideas they learned this way in their own schools.

LINGO's role was limited and short-lived, however. Beyond this informal sharing, it did not provide any mechanism for codifying or more widely distributing the expertise, capabilities, and effective practices that were present in only some schools. BCPS might have achieved stronger NGA implementation across a larger number of its high schools if it had more formally gathered the expertise that existed in some schools and provided on-site technical assistance to the schools that were struggling. In the end, NGA administrators were expected only to attend LINGO meetings and, in the second and third years, complete a project of their choosing. They were not held accountable for implementing NGA components or improving ninth-grade outcomes. And, as is often the fate of supports that are tied to grant funding, LINGO was discontinued in 2010 when the SLC grant ended, with no internal discussion of which schools were still struggling to implement NGAs nor how they would fare in the future.

[4]Borko (2004).

It is possible that with the right help, LINGO could have been a stronger entity that made a case for sustained and institutionalized supports for NGA implementation. When asked what could have strengthened LINGO and the viability of the NGA initiative, leaders said that more data demonstrating the effectiveness of the NGA would have been valuable. Some envisioned a continuous feedback loop achieved by embedding into the LINGO community a research staff to track and communicate implementation and impact. Regular data collection and reporting could have alerted the central office when a school needed more support in areas such as scheduling and effective teaming. It could also have helped program staff keep the initiative on district leaders' agenda. But, as in most large districts, the functions of research and evaluation, accountability, and professional development are pursued through different departments that communicate and collaborate little with one another. Districts interested in developing reforms such as NGAs and implementing them on a large scale might consider more closely linking these functions to ensure that decisions about whether to sustain or discontinue an initiative are informed by an explicit theory of action, expectations for implementation and impact, and ongoing data and analysis.[5]

External Forces and Trends

In 2005, BCPS's embrace of NGAs was directly in line with a growing national movement to reform high schools and with published research on the importance of the ninth-grade transition. It also made sense in light of the increased pressure No Child Left Behind brought to improve high school performance, coupled with alarming research on the nation's dropout crisis. In that moment, NGAs represented a viable, research-based way to improve the achievement, advancement, and attainment of students who were falling through the cracks in the district's large, traditional high schools.[6]

As the NGA initiative got underway, however, the district began to focus its attention and resources on other strategies that promised a faster path to raising student achievement. Under Florida's Differentiated Accountability system, high schools received annual letter grades based on an index weighed heavily by test scores. If a school's grade dropped or remained low (that is, if it received a "C" or a "D"), area offices and schools were expected to institute measures to improve student achievement that would show results the following year. But NGAs are not designed to provide a "quick fix" to low student test scores. Studies indicate that it often takes three years or more for complex reforms like NGAs to establish the academic

[5]An external, independent evaluation cannot substitute for this kind of embedded research and evaluation function. Such evaluations are usually multiyear studies carried out by research organizations outside of the district. They do not produce the kind of immediate, continuous, and timely feedback needed to guide development and make midcourse corrections.

[6]Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005); Kerr and Legters (2004).

climate, collaborative organizational routines, curricula, instructional methods, and social and behavioral supports necessary to affect student test scores measurably.[7] Other student outcomes — such as attendance, behavior, or even grades and course passage rates — may improve more rapidly, as students respond positively to a more personalized and focused learning environment. One BCPS principal described a dynamic in which his NGA kept more students engaged and advancing in school but actually lowered the school's average test scores because more lower-performing students took the tests instead of dropping out or being held back.

Structural reforms like small learning communities and NGAs have been criticized for being too slow (and hence frequently abandoned), and for being insufficiently focused on teaching and learning to achieve dramatic improvements in student achievement in a high-standards curriculum. Not long after BCPS launched its NGA initiative, reform-minded districts began turning attention to other approaches to accelerate school improvement and raise student achievement. The two approaches most evident in Broward County high schools were professional learning communities and data-driven RtI systems, both exciting ways to help schools create more effective, consistent instruction and personalized learning experiences for students.[8] These reforms were implemented alongside NGAs and sometimes competed with NGAs and interdisciplinary teams for the time and attention of both administrators and teachers.

NGA Design: Weaknesses and Challenges

The theory of action laid out in the first chapter of this report describes NGAs as a complex reform made up of mutually reinforcing components that together create more personalized learning experiences and supports for students transitioning into high school. These components — dedicated administrative leadership, dedicated space, dedicated faculty, and interdisciplinary teams — are designed to create the focus, proximity, and collaborative routines that help adults get to know students well, nurture a positive climate where expectations are consistent, and allow teachers and administrators to intervene on students' behalf when they encounter academic and social barriers to learning. According to the theory of action, teachers and administrators are more likely to implement effective instruction and academic and social supports for ninth-graders when the core NGA components are in place. The resulting success with ninth-graders is supposed to reinforce the organizational structures and the collaborative dynamics they ostensibly foster.

Results from this study do not directly challenge the NGA theory of action, but they do point to areas where the NGA concept is underdeveloped not just in BCPS, but in the field in general. One notable weakness observed in BCPS high schools was a lack of specific

[7] Smerdon and Borman (2009).

[8] See footnote in Chapter 3 for an explanation of professional learning communities and RtIs.

information available to administrators and staff about what it took to activate the system of communication, collaboration, and personalization the theory envisions. Virtually all administrators and teachers interviewed for this study understood the rationale for NGAs and their basic structural features. Far fewer, however, understood how to enact NGAs on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Schools were left on their own to figure out how to build a schedule around teacher teams with common planning time, how to inspire productive collaboration, how to use data, how to integrate academic and social services like tutoring and counseling, and how to create a culture of success in their NGAs. When BCPS started its initiative, available information on the NGA model provided little concrete guidance in these areas. Even today, the field offers some examples but few details on what constitutes "best practice." In BCPS, this lack of specificity meant that some schools were able to develop organizational routines to translate the opportunities afforded by the NGA's structures into concrete advantages for ninth-graders, and others were not.[9]

The need for greater specificity was especially evident when it came to interdisciplinary teacher teams, the NGA component that BCPS high schools had the most trouble implementing. Working together, particularly on interdisciplinary teams, is unfamiliar territory for most high school educators, who spend most of their days working alone in their classrooms and whose primary source of leadership, identity, and professional community traditionally resides in their subject-area department or administrative niche. Researchers and practitioners agree that small, cross-functional units (like interdisciplinary teacher teams with common planning time) can help personalize the learning environment for students, particularly in large high schools like Broward County's. The district's own self-assessment for the NGA administrators participating in LINGO identified interdisciplinary teaming as a key practice. Yet the field has not yet provided standards of practice or clear guidance for interdisciplinary teaming and common planning, especially for high schools.[10] Education leaders who wish to implement NGAs in their districts should be aware that it may not be feasible to do so on a large scale without developing (and ideally testing and evaluating) both more specific guidance and in-school expertise in this area.

Ironically, the very approaches that appeared to be competing with NGA implementation in BCPS — subject-area professional learning communities and data-driven RtI systems — are not only consistent with the NGA's goal of personalization, they can offer much-needed specificity in areas that the NGA theory of action implies but fails to detail. These approaches offer specific guidance on critical social processes such as teacher teaming, data use, and

[9]See Spillane, Parise, and Sherer (2011) for more on emerging theory and research on the role of organizational routines in translating theory and policy into productive practice.

[10]Legters, Adams, and Williams (2010); Mertens, Anafara, Flowers, and Caskey (2009); National Staff Development Council (2001).

collaborative monitoring of students' progress. For example, the literature and training materials available to schools that want to develop professional learning communities offer tools to help them establish group norms and standard operating procedures, including discussion protocols, codified processes, and self-assessments.[11] Similarly, recent studies describe how poorly performing high schools are using RtI and interdisciplinary collaborative organizational routines to transform practice.[12]

District and school-based educators interested in implementing high-impact transition supports for ninth-graders should consider how these new approaches could be integrated into NGA structures. BCPS itself is moving in this direction through an NGA Enhancement Development Project described below.

Enhancing Ninth Grade Academies in BCPS

In December 2010, the district's Executive Leadership Team (ELT), made up of the directors of each of the major district departments, met to consider early findings of this study. Many on the ELT recognized the strong work underway in some NGAs and the possibilities for learning more and spreading best practices. Though subsequent change in the superintendent position and a major reorganization kept them from reactivating LINGO as intended, the ELT did support the start of an NGA Enhancement Development Project involving a group of seven high schools. Funding for the project was made available in early 2011 through the same U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences grant sponsoring the MDRC study of NGAs in Broward County and the state of Florida.

The NGA Enhancement Development Project is designed to help BCPS and the participating schools more fully realize the opportunities their NGAs are intended to provide for personalization, collaboration, reflection, and continuous improvement. It aims to do so by offering schools the chance to implement at least two of the following NGA enhancements:

- An NGA coordinator — a teacher leader who works in partnership with the NGA administrator to implement the mission and goals of the academy and carry out day-to-day operations
- A data-driven collaborative response team — an interdisciplinary team of NGA teachers, supported by counseling and administrative staff, that meets weekly to review student data, identify struggling students, and develop, im-

[11]Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2004); DuFour (2004); Learning Point Associates (2007); National School Reform Faculty (2010).

[12]National High School Center, National Center on Response to Intervention, and the Center on Instruction (2010); Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009); Legters, Adams, and Williams (2010).

plement, and monitor students' response to interventions like tutoring, credit recovery, counseling, and social services

- An NGA board of directors — a formal group of internal and external partners including community representatives, a parent representative, the NGA administrator, the NGA coordinator, a teacher leader, a student leader, and the ninth-grade counselor

These practices were selected for focus because well-developed working prototypes were observed in BCPS high schools during the research conducted for this implementation study and the larger study described in Chapter 1.[13] They are also supported by promising research on distributed leadership, professional collaboration, data-based progress monitoring, and school, family, and community partnerships. NGA coordinators extend NGAs' leadership capabilities, for example, by providing daily instructional support to teachers and aiding with curriculum development. They also ensure leadership continuity should the NGA administrator have to leave. The data-driven collaborative response team enhancement is adapting the district's award-winning Pinnacle student data system to give NGA teacher teams real-time access to electronic records and reports of past and current student performance. It will also give them an electronic system to track interventions and students' responses to those interventions. The NGA board of directors engages internal and external partners in monthly meetings to discuss academy operations, plan student supports such as tutoring and mentoring, organize fundraising, and plan career-awareness, college-awareness, and other enriching activities for ninth-graders. The board of directors also provides the NGA with a forum for continuous reflection and improvement, mutual accountability for academy success, and continuous input into the academy's mission and operations.

The Enhancement Development Project is housed in the district's Office of Talent Development, the department in charge of professional development.[14] The project is aligned with the new office director's vision of providing not only high-quality professional development to administrators and teachers, but support for innovation and program development as well. Project staff members have drawn together a "design team" made up of NGA leaders from each participating school, local university partners, and MDRC/Johns Hopkins University researchers, and charged it with guiding the development, specification, and codification of the new NGA enhancements; carrying out professional development, on-site coaching, and cross-school networking activities for school-based NGA staff; and informing the development process

[13]Two of the BCPS high schools that are primary sources of NGA enhancement prototypes are not among the 18 high schools included in the present study because they began their NGAs in the late 1990s, limiting the availability of adequate baseline data. See Appendix A for a description of the method used to create the 18-school sample.

[14]Formerly the Department of Human Resource Development.

through documentation, inquiry, and continuous feedback. With support from the ELT, the Office of Talent Development's director recently hired a full-time staff member to provide in-house research and evaluation services for all the department's programs and projects. This staff member has trained the NGA design team members to use data-collection tools and BCPS data systems to assess the implementation and impact of their enhancement activities. Enhancement project staff members have also connected central-office and school-based schedulers to help high schools develop more expertise in team-based scheduling.

The project is a promising model for developing innovative initiatives and the internal capabilities necessary to implement and evaluate them. As with LINGO, however, its lifespan is currently tied to a short-term grant. It remains to be seen whether the project will inspire a sustained and clearer path for further investment in ninth-grade transition supports, and other improvements, in BCPS high schools.

Conclusion

This study of NGAs in Broward County, Florida found widespread implementation of the reform's core components in a majority of BCPS high schools between 2000 and 2010. The overall quality and duration of NGA implementation varied substantially across the 18 schools in the study, however, and strong implementation of multiple NGA components was sustained over three years in only a few schools.

This report's mixed findings raise the question of whether there was enough implementation across schools to significantly affect ninth-grade student outcomes in a quasi-experimental study comparing BCPS high schools to schools outside of BCPS that did not implement NGAs. The findings of this report indicate that it might be difficult to attribute any districtwide gains in ninth-graders' tested achievement during this period to the NGA initiative. Prior studies have not found NGAs to have a strong impact on tested achievement, and the findings from this study do not indicate that NGAs were implemented with enough depth in BCPS to support contradictory evidence.

Yet some implementation occurred across many schools, and the schools that implemented NGAs strongly exhibited a significant departure from traditional practice for ninth-graders. All study schools also exhibited an awareness of the importance of supporting ninth-graders, and that may have translated into attention and supports for ninth-graders beyond what the study team was able to document. The forthcoming impact study will explore whether these efforts were sufficient to make a significant difference in more proximal ninth-grade outcomes such as attendance, grades, course performance, grade promotion, and dropout and graduation rates.

The findings from the present study indicate that some NGA components were more feasible for schools to implement than others. It was relatively easy for most schools to establish administrative leadership and a separate space for the NGA. But it proved more difficult for them to secure a dedicated teaching faculty for the NGA or create interdisciplinary teacher teams with common planning time. Most schools did not have the in-house expertise to meet the technical, human, and ultimately financial challenges of those two components, even though all had access to models of strong NGAs in nearby schools. The experiences of NGA implementation in BCPS suggest that many schools will need more specific guidelines, tools, on-site support, training for teachers, and secure resources to implement fully fledged, continuously improving, and self-sustaining NGAs. Broward County's NGA Enhancement Development Project offers a promising, though yet unproven, model of how district- and school-based staff might work together to design and test such supports, while building a system capable of ongoing innovation.

Appendix A

Sample Selection

The research team studied NGA implementation in 18 of Broward County's 31 regular public high schools. These 18 high schools were identified as the sample for the implementation study because they are the same 18 schools included in the BCPS impact study. The impact study uses a comparative interrupted time-series (CITS) analysis to compare changes in student achievement at these 18 high schools in Broward County with changes in achievement at a set of comparison schools from surrounding school districts that did not implement NGAs. For this study, a survey was administered to all BCPS high schools in spring 2010 and to comparison sites in spring 2011 to gather data on the presence of core NGA components. Its purpose was to determine the presence and start dates of NGAs in BCPS high schools and establish a service contrast with comparison schools. The response rate for BCPS high schools was 100 percent.

A school was determined to "have" an NGA if it reported the presence of at least two of the four core NGA components (NGA administrative leadership, dedicated ninth-grade faculty, space dedicated to the ninth grade, and ninth-grade teachers grouped into interdisciplinary teams), and if one of those components was either NGA administrative leadership or a dedicated space. Researchers reasoned that NGAs with either an active agent (that is, an administrator) or proximity (space) driving personalized supports for ninth-graders, along with at least one other core component, could represent a significant enough departure from traditional practice to potentially have an impact on student outcomes. Four of the original 31 BCPS high schools were excluded from the sample because administrator survey data indicated that they did not meet the minimum criteria for having an NGA.[1] An additional nine schools were excluded because survey responses indicated they either started their NGAs too early (before 2003) or too late (after 2008-2009) for there to be sufficient student outcome data available to carry out the CITS analysis. The impact study will require a minimum of four years of data from before the NGA was implemented and a minimum of two years of data from after.

[1]The research team also received confirmation from a BCPS district employee that these four schools did not have NGAs.

Appendix B

Scoring Rubrics for Core NGA Components

NGA Administrative Leadership:
3 = Administrator or leadership team is engaged almost exclusively with ninth-grade students and faculty, knowledgeable about NGAs, and committed to the NGA concept. There is evidence of NGA leader(s) putting NGA components into action.

2 = School has an administrator whose responsibilities include overseeing the NGA among other major responsibilities, who has basic knowledge about NGAs. There is evidence of some NGA ideas put into action, but leader does not demonstrate a strong dedication to implementing NGA components.

1 = School has no NGA administrator or leadership team, and no administrator with knowledge of NGAs or plans to implement NGA components.

Dedicated NGA Space:
3 = NGA space is self-contained, houses administrative and support staff (for example, the NGA administrator, guidance counselor, behavior specialist, or administrative assistant) and the classrooms of virtually all teachers teaching ninth-grade classes. All ninth-graders spend the majority of their day there. Space has visible identity as belonging to the NGA, with areas dedicated to post ninth-grade work, goals, accomplishments, or announcements.

2 = All or most ninth-grade students take at least two or three classes in a dedicated hallway or building. That space houses classrooms of some teachers teaching ninth-grade classes, and may have an office for administrative and support staff. There is some indication that the hallway or building is an NGA space.

1 = School has no dedicated hallways or building for ninth-grade classes. Teachers of ninth-graders are spread out across campus. No space is visibly identified with the NGA.

Dedicated Ninth-Grade Faculty:
3 = Nearly all ninth-grade teachers teach exclusively ninth-graders. Faculty members express belief in the NGA concept and strong identity as teachers of ninth-graders.

2 = Some faculty members teach mainly ninth-graders, but few teachers teach ninth-graders exclusively. Some faculty members express belief in the NGA concept and identify as teachers of ninth-graders.

1 = No identifiable set of teachers works predominantly with ninth-grade students.

Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams:
3 = Most ninth-graders are taught by interdisciplinary teacher teams.[1] Most teachers express strong identity with their interdisciplinary teacher team. Teams meet on a regular basis. Communication happens during and outside of scheduled meetings. Teams identify and address student needs collectively.

2 = Some ninth-grade students are taught by interdisciplinary teacher teams. Some teachers identify with a ninth-grade interdisciplinary or ninth-grade subject-area team. Interdisciplinary teams meet monthly, during designated professional development days, or at other times scheduled during the year. No particular protocol or agenda guides team time. Communication among teachers is infrequent outside of team time.

1 = Teachers are not in ninth grade teams. There is little evidence of a systematic expectation that teachers of ninth-grade students should seek each other out and address student needs collaboratively.

[1]Interdisciplinary teams require that teachers in at least two different subject areas be on the same team.

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