

Investing in Freshmen: Providing Preventive Support to 9th Graders

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Abstract – chapter

Freshman year has been identified as a very important year in high school. It has been shown more than any other year to determine whether a student will complete high school or drop out. Schools who examine grade-level data on a regular basis often find that freshmen students receive the most office discipline referrals and most failing grades, and also struggle with attendance.

This chapter will discuss three key areas within the PBIS framework that, when amplified for 9th graders, provide the additional support needed during this transition year: increased teaching of school wide expectations, increased use of acknowledgement systems, and increased consistency of classroom systems. The implementation of additional practices are also described, including: developing freshmen-specific leadership and data based decision making systems, identifying and teaching a specific set of needed knowledge and skills for 9th graders, and utilizing upperclassmen for universal supports.

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Setting the Stage: Why Freshmen?

Freshmen year has been identified as one of the most important years in high school. Research has shown that freshman year, more than any other, determines whether a student will move on or drop out. The act of dropping out of school has major personal and economic impacts for high school students and for society as a whole. Data from the U.S. Department of Labor reflected an average joblessness rate in June of 2014 of 8.2% for young high school dropouts, compared to 5.6% for high school graduates ([Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). Ultimately, over their working lives, “the average high school dropout will cost taxpayers over \$292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and imposed incarceration costs”, while the average high school graduate will make a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of \$287,000 (Sum et al., 2009; 2011). <https://www.pbis.org/evaluation/evaluation-briefs/economic-costs>

When PBIS Leadership teams disaggregate their data, they often find that freshmen students have the most Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), most failing grades, and attendance rates that drop dramatically in the second half of 9th grade, and continue to deteriorate for those students who end 9th grade with poor attendance patterns. In fact, more students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Fortunately, School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers schools a way to address these 9th grade challenges. In our work implementing PBIS in over 3400 high schools, we have learned that the PBIS framework integrating data, systems and practices (Sugai, et al., 2017) can be emphasized at the 9th grade level and that there are some key practices that are particularly relevant for improving this critical 9th grade year for all students.

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Allensworth & Easton
2005

Emphasize PBIS in the 9th Grade

Schoolwide PBIS is centered on the concept that strong preventive efforts at the universal level will result in a reduction in the number of students needing more intensive support

(Lewis, T.J., et al, 2017; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). This logic extends to investing in elevated support for all freshmen. Building effective prevention-focused systems and practices that are aimed at *all* freshmen will equip students with the basic skills to be more successful in their school setting, and will reduce the level of need as students progress through high school.

Ensuring that students entering high school are provided an experience that is as consistent and predictable as possible will increase the likelihood that they will learn to navigate their new environment more quickly and effectively.

The first step in ensuring strong preventive support for 9th graders is to *increase consistent implementation of schoolwide supports at the freshmen level*. The goal of PBIS is to provide a consistent, predictable, positive, and safe environment so that students can focus on learning and participate successfully in school. In high schools, students typically have many different teachers each day, navigate confusing bell schedules, and juggle varying social interactions with teachers and peers. Ensuring that students entering high school are provided an experience that is as consistent and predictable as possible will increase the likelihood that they will learn to navigate their new environment more quickly and effectively. In this way, it is especially important that teachers of freshmen understand and utilize the key PBIS systems and practices developed through the building PBIS Leadership Team. In a sense, this is a scaffolding of PBIS supports, with the highest level of structure being provided to the youngest, newest students in the building. Upperclassmen will require less structure and can even be utilized in creative ways to support the 9th graders themselves. Within the PBIS framework, there are three key areas that make up this increased structure recommended for 9th grade students: increased teaching of schoolwide expectations, increased level of acknowledgement, and increased consistency of classroom systems.

Increase Teaching: The first key way in which freshmen can be provided with an especially supportive universal level of PBIS is by increasing the frequency of teaching of the schoolwide expectations. Data in most high schools indicate that 9th graders have the highest rates of problem behavior. By investing time and effort in these newer, younger students through increased teaching of expectations, more problem behaviors can be prevented. Schoolwide expectations can be taught early in the school year, but boosters are also done more frequently with freshmen than with students in the upper grades. Ninth grade data often points to behaviors that freshmen are struggling with more than their older peers, so additional boosters can be developed and delivered to address such 9th grade needs. For example, the schoolwide expectations may be taught or reviewed at the beginning of the year and after the winter break to all students. It would be beneficial to teach them to 9th graders at least twice during the first quarter, then once per quarter after that. Boosters still need to occur as data (high levels of tardy or disrespect) or special events (homecoming, finals, etc.) in the school year indicate. Many schools have also added academic and academic support skills to the content that is taught to freshmen. In addition to learning about the schoolwide expectations, for example, they participate in lessons that build the self-management skills students need to be successful,

such as showing up on time, keeping track of work, what resources are available in the school, or how to understand academic credits and the high school transcript. This is discussed in further detail below.

Increase Acknowledgements: Another way to address the 9th grade need is to increase the rate of acknowledging students for exhibiting behaviors that demonstrate the schoolwide expectations. Increasing the rates of acknowledgement will help students recognize the types of behavior that are expected, and will encourage them to keep up the desired behaviors. The delivery of an acknowledgement is also an opportunity to remind other students of the schoolwide expectations by seeing others be acknowledged. Utilizing the schoolwide acknowledgement system and simply ensuring that there is an increased rate of delivery to 9th graders is the simplest way to accomplish this. Utilize your schoolwide data systems that track acknowledgements to verify whether 9th graders are being acknowledged more than students in upper grades. In the Schoolwide leadership team, review data around rates of delivery of acknowledgements to ensure 9th graders are receiving high numbers of them. You might also implement additional 9th grade celebrations tied to specific goals (reduction in tardies over a one month period) or times of year (mid-term exams). For example, one school had a specific goal to reduce tardies in the 9th grade, so they did a specific lesson around on-time behavior, they clarified and consistently enforced the consequence system related to tardy behavior, and they increased the use of acknowledgements for on time behavior. This school saw a 40% reduction in the rate of tardy behaviors in 9th graders across a 6 week period.

Increase Consistency of PBIS Classroom Systems: The third way to utilize existing PBIS systems to better support 9th graders to emphasize the elements of effective classroom management (see [PBIS in Classroom](#)). Classroom systems within PBIS include practices such as greeting students by name as they enter the room, using pre-corrections at the start of class, maintaining a ratio of 4 positive: 1 corrective feedback, maintaining clear and consistent classroom expectations, utilizing attention-getting signals and having established routines for classroom activities (transitions, group work, pair work, late assignments, etc.). In essence, these are the telltale signs of good classroom management and strong teaching. Working with faculty and staff who teach the majority of freshmen to ensure that there is commitment and consensus to establish and maintain these practices at a high level is an important element in providing universal, preventive support to all 9th graders. Building this level of “buy in” around consistency is a process that requires time and communication. All teachers will not completely agree, but begin with those who will and build momentum over time. By providing this basic, across-the-board level of clarity, the guesswork is eliminated and students are able to begin their high school experience with structure and stability. Then, as students demonstrate proficiency with classroom expectations, structure can be slowly removed to increase independence and prepare them for the upper grades. While these strategies are important and effective in building a strong schoolwide climate across all grades, building stronger stability across the 9th grade will support all students entering high school and will assist them

in establishing positive social and academic behaviors. For example, to enhance 9th grade consistency, teachers may agree to have an umbrella policy around late work that is taught to students as “during the first semester, late work will be accepted for partial credit” or “during the first semester, late work will be accepted for partial credit up to 1 week late.” Teachers can still set their own rules around how much credit (10% reduction, 50% reduction, etc.) but each teacher’s individual policy will fit beneath the broader umbrella phrase around “partial credit”. Then, as students learn the expectations and build fluency, the support is faded (i.e. at second semester) in order to increase independence, so teachers have the option to adjust their individual policies at that time and this is explicitly taught and discussed with students so they are aware of any changes.

Develop Additional 9th Grade Practices

Once you have strengthened and amplified PBIS for the 9th grade, your team may consider the implementation of additional practices. In our experience, three are particularly worth noting: developing freshmen-specific leadership and data based decision making systems, identifying and teaching a specific set of needed knowledge and skills for 9th graders, and utilizing upperclassmen to support 9th graders. Some schools have selected one to focus on, while others have combined two or even all three to create a strong system of freshmen supports. Your team will need to consider the context of your building and what will fit best with other efforts being implemented in your building. We advise that if you are just starting out, focus first on installing a freshmen leadership and data based decision making systems, then build from these based on the needs in your building. Before implementing additional efforts at the 9th grade level, the PBIS Leadership Team and the Administrative Team will need to share information (e.g. why important, impact on outcomes, school data) with all faculty and staff in order for them to buy-in to the special attention on freshmen and assist with establishment of a common vision and consistent use of practices.

Install 9th Grade Leadership and Data Based Decision Making Systems.

A key system in the PBIS framework is the use of leadership teams. These teams monitor the implementation and fidelity of PBIS systems and practices as well as outcomes for students. Fully implementing PBIS schools have a universal team as well as one or more advanced tier teams (Tier 2 and Tier 3). The universal team is focused on implementation of the systems, practices and data for all students. For your freshmen work, it is recommended that you set up a targeted leadership group that is exclusively focused on universal freshmen supports. This will allow the school to develop strategies to address specific challenges for freshmen such as attendance, course failure or inappropriate behaviors, and can monitor the implementation of specific 9th grade practices (teaching selected content, providing peer support, etc.) without taking time away from the overall schoolwide efforts. It is important to have overlapping membership on both of these teams (schoolwide PBIS team and freshmen-specific team) so that they are working in conjunction with one another.

Similar to your PBIS Leadership Team, this **Freshmen Leadership Team** will need to hold meetings regularly. Meetings should have a standard agenda and be driven by outcome and fidelity data. Teams need to identify action steps, who is responsible and monitor progress for each of the items identified. Keep the group manageable to ensure ease of scheduling and then reach out for input and support as needed. We recommend keeping the group at 5-7 people, including teachers & staff who work with freshmen (counselor, Dean of Students, attendance committee representative, etc.), one administrator and at least one of the individuals serving on the Schoolwide Leadership Team to ensure communication. As noted previously, since both the PBIS Leadership Team and the Freshmen Leadership Team will be planning activities and distributing communications with administrators, students, teachers and other staff, and families, it will be important to coordinate, communicate and work together so as to not overwhelm these stakeholders. The Freshmen Leadership Team will also periodically need to provide relevant information to all faculty so that, when appropriate, they can be involved in and informed about implementation.

The driver for the activities of the Freshmen Leadership Team is the use of **data based decision making**. We recommend high schools examine three primary areas of student outcome data, often referred to as the ABCs: Attendance, Behavior and Course Performance. It should also be noted that we recommend that these data areas be monitored across all grades by the PBIS Leadership Team, and that the information here can apply to any grade level. We will discuss them within the context of this chapter as they relate to freshmen because, as identified in the chapter introduction and overview, 9th grade is a particularly critical year where many students can fall behind in these areas.

We recommend high schools examine three primary areas of student outcome data, often referred to as the ABCs: Attendance, Behavior and Course Performance.

It is helpful for the team to set specific goals, or annual benchmarks, for the 9th grade in each of these areas (attendance, behavior, course performance). When setting goals, the team will need to determine the current status and set goals accordingly. For example, one school set a goal that 90% of their 9th graders would have no Fs, but that year they obtained 79%. The goal of 90% sounded good to the team, but they had not analyzed the data prior to setting the goal. The following year they adjusted and set a goal of 83%. While the goal was lower, it was more attainable and the team had more success in building momentum as the students progressed toward it.

The establishment of a common language around the data goals will help teachers and others communicate quickly and remind students and families of the relevance of the school goals. Schools have ended up coining some phrases that align with their on track benchmark goals, such as “fewer than 5, pass 6, maintain 2.5” for school goals related to absences, credit accrual, and GPA. One school placed a flyer in faculty and staff mailboxes quarterly containing both text and data graphics that displayed progress toward student benchmarks. Once goals are set and language around them developed and taught to staff and students, these data must be monitored throughout the year for decision making and progress monitoring.

Attendance data is frequently summarized in an overall percentage. A more accurate way to view attendance data is to look at the percentage of students who are meeting an identified attendance rate goal. One school, for example, set an attendance rate goal of 90% for all students, in accordance with research that indicates that students who miss more than 10% of students are considered to be at risk of dropout (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Rather than calculate an average across all students, or even all students by grade level, this school learned that calculating the percentage of 9th graders who were meeting this goal was a more accurate depiction student attendance, and it also helped them quickly identify students in need of additional supports.

Behavior data in high schools typically points to attendance related behaviors (skip and tardy), so we recommend Freshmen Leadership Teams pay special attention to this data each month, as well. Monitoring these data will allow the team to identify issues and design interventions to address them. As with other behavior data monitoring, it is important to summarize rates instead of looking at a number of events, and to disaggregate the behavior data by key variables such as time of day.

Course performance is the third data element for teams to use. This might include course passing rates, credit accrual, GPA, or other metrics. Choose the best single variable that aligns with your school's context and culture. Due to varied online grading systems and agreements around when grades are updated, it is important to come up with a schedule for your school that provides the team with accurate, updated data. In other words, looking at course performance data monthly only makes sense if all teachers in the 9th grade update their grades each month before the data is pulled for analysis. One school attempted to use this data monthly, but decided to only do it quarterly because grade data was not accurate enough on a monthly basis to be useful. Some schools use additional data such as an assessment of freshmen student learning on the identified set of engagement-related knowledge and skills taught to freshmen (see below) or an overall climate survey for the school. Finally, to maintain communication and buy-in to the work, it is important that progress toward all data goal areas be shared throughout the year with faculty, staff, students and families.

Identify and Teach Specific Knowledge and Skills Needed for Success.

A second practice to consider for universal 9th grade support is built on what we know to be effective in PBIS: explicitly teaching expected behaviors. In keeping with this, a central feature to meaningful support for 9th graders is to identify and teach explicitly the knowledge and skills we want 9th graders to have. These must align with broader school goals and be designed to prevent the most common areas of difficulty for students. Many schools refer to this content simply as **"how to do school"** (See chapter 5). The Freshmen Leadership Team needs to identify a set of knowledge and skills for their building, and undergo a process of vetting these with staff, students (upperclassmen), and families as the content is clarified and finalized. Some schools have found it helpful to survey upperclassmen and 10th grade teachers to gather input on what's most important for freshmen to know. Schools will want to consider a variety of skill areas, but be sure to pay special attention to the areas of getting work done (e.g.,

using planner, study plans, prioritizing), getting to graduation (on-track, reading transcripts), getting connected (e.g., productive coping, getting involved, teacher allies). In identifying content to teach to all 9th graders, it is easy for the list of needs to become very long. It is helpful for teams to think about what information or skills will have the most far-reaching impact. In other words, ask “What is the smallest change that will yield the biggest impact?”. It is not likely that we can devote a great deal of instructional time to these topics, so it is critical to identify which are the most essential. We encourage teams to consider content that will support students academically and socially, and that is focused on building self-advocacy skills so that students can develop into self-directed learners. Table 1 identifies a sample set of recommended topics for teams to consider.

Table 1. Sample knowledge and skills taught to 9th graders

“How to Do School” Knowledge and Skills
Credit Requirements
How to Know When Help is Needed & Where to Get It
How to read a Transcript
Productive Coping Strategies for Stress
Study Strategies
Using a Planner
Effective Prioritization
Communicating with Teachers effectively

Once topics have been identified, the Team will need to **consider how and when to deliver the content**. It is important to assess available time, format and setting for teaching to take place as this will drive the lesson format and how many lessons can be delivered. We recommend that lessons be front-loaded and taught early in the school year (i.e. first 6-8 weeks) so that content is taught as part of “setting the stage” of high school. It is often helpful to utilize freshmen orientation if you have one, but not to limit delivery of this content only to orientation. To find class time, consider utilizing time from classes that are required for freshmen and distribute teaching opportunities equally across these classes (i.e. 25 minutes in Health in weeks 1 and 3, 25 minutes in English 9 in weeks 2 and 4, advisory). For example, one school implemented their freshmen lessons in English class by placing short duration lessons and activities at the beginning of class for the first 6 weeks of the year. Once they had identified a time slot, they could focus in on their top priority content to be delivered during that time. You may need to revise and prioritize your list of topics to match the time available. As for how to deliver this type of “how to do school” content, there are plenty of resources online, or starting with some activities from a specific curriculum is also a good way to start. Some schools have had staff members who were excited to develop their own small set of lessons and

interactive activities. Once delivered, this content can be periodically revisited in multiple classes and settings to ensure generalization and application to the whole school environment. Another school already had advisory periods so delivered their lessons and activities in that setting. It provided more time and allowed them to do additional planning and support work with 9th graders, in addition to the lessons around key knowledge and skills. A third school delivered the content in short weekly assemblies for the first 6 weeks of school. Whatever setting you choose, it is important to be sure the teachers are in full support, and that the time is well-utilized once it is set aside. The effort is sure to fall flat if students, staff, and families do not see it as a valuable use of time. In this way, the messaging and communication around this effort to teachers, families and students is critical.

The content taught to 9th graders will have more staying power if it has key language that is also used throughout the student's day in other classes and settings. Similar to PBIS, these areas of content and the language identified with them can serve as a platform on which to **build a common language and culture for the 9th grade**. The key with the lessons and the language associated with them is to have digestible take home messages that build a common language for the school around 9th grade knowledge and skills. As with designing and teaching lessons around the schoolwide expectations, it is important to take the time to provide sufficient support to help ensure a high level of fidelity among whoever is delivering the content. To achieve consistency, it is critical to build buy in, to provide sufficient training and ongoing support, and to provide opportunities for teachers to interact with the content and to practice delivery before they are expected to do so in the actual setting. Also, as part of the delivery, it is helpful to observe those delivering the content, while also giving them the opportunity to provide feedback on potential improvements or adjustments as you move forward. Finally, ensure some form of fidelity check that looks at both quantity (*Did you cover all the key parts of the lesson?*) and quality (*Did you deliver the lesson well?*).

Utilize Upperclassmen.

The third practice we recommend for consideration is the utilization of upperclassmen in providing a universal level of support to 9th graders. Research has shown that a positive relationship with older peers can enhance school engagement for freshmen (Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005). High school students are striving for autonomy, especially from adult influence, and ninth graders look up to their 11th and 12th grade peers. Successful upperclassmen have already figured how to navigate the high school environment, learned how to effectively use school resources, and generally have great information and successful strategies to share with freshmen. In keeping with language presented earlier, these upperclassmen serve as "how to do school" coaches. It is important

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to note that we are not describing a mentor relationship. A mentor is a close, 1:1 relationship between mentor and mentee. While there are clear benefits to the use of mentors, using older peers in this manner brings with it a variety of risks and logistical constraints (inappropriate interactions, deviance training, confidentiality, reporting requirements, etc.) that we have found require a lot of resources. Taking a more universal approach requires fewer resources, provides for safer, more structured interactions between groups of students, and still provides substantial benefits for everyone involved. For the purposes of this chapter, we will use the term “peer coach” to describe these upperclassmen, and we encourage you to come up with your own title to match your school context. If your school decides to use a “peer coaching” practice, it will require coordination for selection and recruitment; organizing and delivering trainings; providing support; troubleshooting problems; and overall communication. Consider identifying a staff person to coordinate this effort and act as the primary contact for students, teachers, and staff. To help guide you in considering the use of peer coaches, we will outline three key areas of implementation: developing roles and responsibilities, recruitment and training, and providing ongoing support.

The first step in implementing peer coaches is to **develop roles and responsibilities** for them. As noted previously, the general role of the peer coach is to help 9th graders understand “how to do school”. Each school will vary in their priorities and in the specific types of activities that the peer coach is responsible for. Generally, the peer coach role can be divided into those that occur outside the classroom setting, and those that occur inside the classroom setting. Whatever the setting, it is critical that the peer coaches be set up for success with a strong and intentional introduction to the 9th grade students, including an orientation about the peer coach role and an opportunity for peer coaches to share information about themselves with the freshmen. Providing an introduction, and even some opportunities for ice breaker activities, between 9th graders and the peer coaches will help set the stage for this new coaching role.

There are a wide variety of ways for peer coaches to interact with 9th graders outside the classroom setting. Many schools utilize upperclassmen in their freshmen orientation activities. They can lead tours, facilitate discussion groups, play introductory games or lead activities designed to familiarize the incoming 9th graders with the school climate, culture, and expectations. As noted above, teachers need to introduce the peer coaches and clearly state their role. Create ways for them to tell a bit about themselves, their interests, and their school story to the 9th graders, and make them easily identifiable with a common t-shirt or other visual cue. It is important to keep this type of momentum going past the start of year by planning other positive, interactive activities. If your peer coaches have t-shirts or other identifiers, have them wear those every day for the first week of school, or every Friday for the first few months of school. This is a very low impact way they can be easily identified to help 9th graders open their lockers, find classes, get to know the school building, and help freshmen feel welcome and supported in their new school environment. Plan and calendar other activities at least quarterly, timed with key events in the school calendar. These may include having the peer coaches hand out cookies to 9th graders at lunch after mid-terms, or putting positive post it note messages on all freshmen lockers at a key time of year. Events like these increase the

visibility of the peer coaches and allow them to be seen as approachable, positive social role models in the school for all freshmen.

Other roles and responsibilities of the peer coach can occur within the classroom setting. If you have schoolwide expectations developed or have identified other “how to do school” content to deliver to 9th graders, older peers can support the teaching of these knowledge and skills by co-teaching lessons or facilitating activities when appropriate. In the classroom setting, peer coaches can also add their own experiences and examples to lessons and content. Because they are close in age and likely had some of the same teachers, they offer a unique perspective that the teacher doesn’t have. One high school decided to teach all freshmen effective communication strategies with teachers, and had the upperclassmen deliver the lesson. Another high school wanted to teach all ninth graders the importance of being on track to graduation and how credits work. There were two peer coaches in the class, and through the sharing of personal stories like how one student failed a class and had to retake it in 10th grade, ninth graders’ eyes were opened to the world of high school credit accrual and the importance of earning credits toward graduation in a powerful and effective way. As these examples illustrate, these messages for 9th graders can have more meaning coming from older peers than from an adult. The telling of personal experiences goes a long way to foster relationships between the upperclassmen and freshmen students. Peer coaches can also provide academic support in classes. This can be done with individual students or small groups who are struggling with a specific content area. High school teachers serve a large number of students; by utilizing upperclassmen to assist with homework, class assignments, and test prep, more students are able to get the help they need.

With clear roles and responsibilities identified, it is important to carefully plan for **recruitment and selection** of the peer coaches. Schools will need to be strategic about selecting the right students to serve in this leadership role. We recommend a complete application and selection process that includes at least one teacher recommendation as a requirement. Also consider grade and GPA minimums, but be careful not to set them too high. Students who have struggled themselves and have worked hard to overcome those challenges can have a great deal of lessons learned to impart to younger students. Many high schools have various leadership groups already in place, and can tap into those groups to generate interest. A major goal of installing peer coaches is for freshmen to identify with the older peers and see them as supportive and accessible, so be sure to recruit a diverse group of upperclassmen representative of the school’s population.

Training peer coaches for their new role is an essential activity when utilizing upperclassmen in these roles. This training must include introducing them to rules about confidentiality, what behaviors or information should be immediately reported to an adult, and expectations for handling students who are uncooperative or disrespectful. Consider the use of scenarios and role play in the training which give peer coaches the opportunity to think about possible situations and discuss solutions with a partner. In schools where peer coaches have been placed in classroom settings, it has proven essential to involve the teachers and peer coaches in training together, which allows them time to talk about expectations, and identify

common language and strategies for working well together in the classroom. When it comes to placing peer coaches, consider matching the upperclassmen with teachers they already connect with or ask them who they'd like to work with. They typically have relationships with teachers they have had previously, and this can facilitate a stronger classroom presence and facilitate better connections with the 9th graders.

Finally, it is important to plan for the **ongoing support** of peer coaches. We recommend that a school dedicate a coordinator who is responsible for organization, support, troubleshooting, and overall communication. Provide regular opportunities for the peer coaches to connect with each other and the coordinator. For example, host a monthly lunch meeting for the peer coaches, facilitated by the coordinator. Other schools have run such peer supports through a peer leadership course, in which the upperclassmen are enrolled and earning credit, learning related skills, and receiving ongoing support in their roles as peer leaders. In addition to offering social connections, this time can be used to reteach skills or content related to their role, troubleshoot issues, celebrate successes, and gather their perspective on the experience to make improvements or adjustments in the overall peer coach implementation. One of the most frequently encountered challenges that peer coaches have identified in schools doing this work is that freshmen can be slow to connect with peer coaches. Strategies to facilitate an earlier connection between 9th graders and their peer coaches include a) take time to provide clear introductions and conduct multiple ice breaker activities early in the year, b) include multiple fun "social role model" activities, c) place multiple peer coaches per group of 9th graders to increase the diversity of perspectives and ensure good representation across different interests and subgroups. A second challenge cited by some schools is maintaining ongoing communication between the coordinator and the peer coaches. A number of schools have addressed this through the use of electronic forms of communication like auto-text alerts or google classroom to deliver messages about things such as lesson plan content, reminders for positive social events, and tips to keep in mind when helping students.

Case Example: Thurston High School, Springfield, Oregon

Thurston High School (THS) has an enrollment of 1,267 students with 329 freshmen. It is located in the mid-Willamette Valley of Oregon. The student population is approximately 684/583 males/females, 74% identify themselves as Caucasian, 14% identify as Hispanic and 2% identify as Asian, American Indian, Alaskan or African American and 10% identify as other or 2 or more races/ethnicities. Thirty-seven percent of the student population qualify for free and reduced lunch. Thurston High School employs 71 certified staff members and 43 support staff members; the student to teacher ratio is 23:1.

THS utilizes a freshmen teaming model, which divides their freshmen into 3 cohort groups. The school also enrolls every freshmen into a Freshmen Learning Teams class. Each cohort has the same set of teachers for English, Science and their Freshmen Learning Teams (FLT) class. This allows for the students to be in class with familiar students and teachers to be able to more closely watch student progress. In the Freshmen Learning Teams class, teachers are able to teach common skills (e.g., 15 min silent read, annotated vocabulary, school-wide

expectations) important to freshmen success. This is discussed in more detail below. During 2016-2017 the school worked to implement all the three practices mentioned in this chapter: Freshmen Leadership Team, Teaching of Expectations, Use of Peer Coaches.

Freshmen Leadership Team: An Assistant Principal and a teacher from each of the cohort teams had previously met each month to talk about logistics and planning for Freshmen Learning Teams (FLT (i.e. what lessons they would teach or activities planned). During 2016-2017 this group became a formal Freshmen Leadership Team whose defined purpose was to review and respond to freshmen data and implement specific practices, including teaching of expectations and using peer coaches. This team also learned skills related to effective meeting practices and communicating consistently with others in the school.

The Freshmen Leadership Team focus on data for decision making was assisted through the use of a process to establish a school goal for each of the three data areas: attendance, behavior, course performance. Their goals for that year were: 80% on-track (6+ credits), 80% regular attenders (90% Average Daily Attendance), and average GPA of 2.5. The team developed messaging and formal and informal signage (see Figure 1) to support the messages. In the Freshmen Learning Teams class, teachers committed to explicitly teaching the students about these goals, and integrating the language throughout their interactions with 9th grade students. The team also developed competitions and acknowledgement events related to these. Examples include Honor Roll Desserts, no missing assignment parties, 90% attendance celebrations, etc. The students became very familiar with the three goals (similar to the 3-5 PBIS school wide expectations set by the school Leadership Team in PBIS implementation), and in this way they became embedded into the culture of the 9th grade.



Figure 1

Teaching of Expectations: All 9th graders were enrolled in the Freshmen Learning Teams class. This was an elective credit course met for 90 minutes 2-3 days a week (A/B block schedule). The courses were taught by the teachers who taught content to the freshmen cohorts (e.g., English, math). The first 45 minutes was instructional time and the last 45 was student support time. Since they were in cohorts and all students in the cohort had this class at the same time, students could sign out of their Freshmen Learning Teams course to talk to one of their other teachers, or teachers arrange a conference with the student during the student support time. Prior to the 2016-17 school year, the content taught during the first half of Freshmen Learning Teams included transcript audits, prioritization, decision-making, goal setting, etc. During the 2016-2017 school year, the school had access to 12 additional lessons that focused on “how to do school”, as described above. Some of the new lessons included school-wide expectations, how to access teachers, grades checks, etc. The Freshmen Leadership

Team spent time developing a scope and sequence for the Freshmen Learning Teams class that included these new lessons. A few lead teachers also developed Google Slides presentations that could be accessed by all teachers to support consistency in delivery of this content.

Using Peer Coaches: The school had a standard teaching assistant program, where students could apply to be a teaching assistant. Their tasks included copying materials for a teacher, setting up a lab, tutoring in the tutoring center, etc. The school used this infrastructure to receive applications from the upperclassmen but also did direct recruiting. The assistant principal recruited students he thought would be a good fit for the new peer coach role due to their leadership, follow through and/or their ability to “turn around” their high school experience. The assistant principal also ensured that all groups were represented in the pool of recruited peer coaches. Teachers also recommended students whom they would like to have a peer coaches and encouraged the student to apply. Freshmen Learning Teams class was assigned 1-2 peer coaches. The peer coaches would assist the teacher during the lesson time and then during student support time would circulate among the 9th graders offering support or supporting specific students identified by the teacher. Though occasionally they might assist with academic support, in many instances they also talked with students about ‘how to do school’ and supporting skills needed to ‘do school’ such as staying organized, communicating with teachers, following up on tasks, or using a planner. For example they might a) help a student get into the school grading system to identify missing assignments and develop a plan to get them accomplished, b) help decipher a confusing or challenging assignment that they received, or c) nudge students to stay on top of studying when a big test was coming up.

After implementing these components, Thurston High School has seen positive impacts on their freshmen students. Students performed well on end of year assessments in the FLT class, and the attendance and freshmen on track metrics improved. The school continues to implement these practices.

Summary and Recommendations

It is widely documented that students struggle in the transition from middle school into high school, and it remains a persistent problem. A number of strategies that utilize multi-tiered systems of support can be implemented to address this issue. First and foremost, schools already implementing PBIS can enhance the use of this framework specifically in the 9th grade. Doing so will increase the structure and predictability for incoming students, and will build strong systems of support early. Another strategy is to implement the use of data-based decision making and planning focused on the 9th grade through a freshmen-specific leadership team. According to McIntosh, et al. (2014), “The single most efficient process for achieving a valued outcome in a complex system is to define, measure, and report progress toward achieving that outcome on a regular cycle.” This summarizes the central work of a freshmen-specific leadership team. Two other practices to better support 9th graders are to explicitly teach and reinforce a set of identified knowledge and skills and utilize the support of upperclassmen. Whether a school is able to implement one of these approaches or to layer

multiple together to freshmen support, it is important to keep in mind how these efforts will align with the implementation of other freshmen-specific or schoolwide work, as doing a few things well will be far more effective than doing many things poorly. Whatever the specific approach, a systematic approach to investing in 9th graders as they enter high school will go a long way to improve the experience and outcomes of students.

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Note: When the chapter is printed the URL links will not appear. Below are the resources from this chapter with the full links.

Bureau of Labor Statistics <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm>
PBIS in the Classroom <https://www.pbis.org/school/pbis-in-the-classroom>

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