

The Importance of the Ninth Grade

on High School Graduation Rates and Student Success

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Researchers target 9th grade as the make or break year for completing high school. During the 9th-grade year, many students for the first time have to earn passing grades in core courses, and these core courses are typically some of the toughest and most rigorous academic classes a student must take in high school. Furthermore, the rising use of standardized tests to measure school performance, and exit exams required to earn a diploma add to the difficulty and importance of doing well in high school.

Statistics generated from freshman year are concerning. Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed

classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level. The 9th grade also has the highest enrollment rate in high schools, mainly due to the fact that approximately 22% of students repeat 9th-grade classes. This number can be even higher in large urban high schools. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that up to 40% of 9th-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the 9th grade, but only 10%-15% of those repeaters graduate from high school.

Increased Graduation Requirements

Some states feeling the pressure to compete globally have raised their graduation requirements. Michigan, for example, signed into law the Michigan Merit Curriculum

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in 2006. The new law requires all students to complete four credits in specific math and English language arts classes and three credits in science and social studies. Other non-core class credits must be earned in physical education and health, visual performing and applied arts, and a language other than English.

The Transition to 9th Grade

While the transition from middle school to high school can represent an important milestone, it can also be a time of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection for some students. This transition period is frequently marked by declining academic performance, increased absences, and increased behavior disturbances. These factors put freshmen more at risk than any other school-aged group.

The differences, both academically and socially, between middle school and high school make the transition difficult. High school is the first time students earn credit for graduation. Unfortunately, some 9th-graders do not realize the importance of passing core courses. When asked, students who fail one or more classes during 9th grade say they wish they better understood the importance of their freshman year on graduation. Had they known, they claim they would have worked harder to achieve higher grades.

More rigorous classes and fre-

quent homework assignments are only some of the problems freshmen face. Along with academics, social concerns also evolve during the transition period. These often include getting lost in school and being bullied by older students.

Solutions to Ease Transition

Some solutions are simple and affordable. It can be as easy as providing each 9th-grader with a bell schedule and a map to help them better understand where they need to go and when, or handing out sample packets of 9th-grade tests and homework assignments to help answer questions about the level of difficulty of high school classes.

Other solutions may include a meet-the-teacher night, an orientation for both 9th-grade students and their parents before school begins, student mentors, and providing information that debunks myths. These transition solutions should continue throughout most of students' 9th-grade year.

Other ideas and programs to help with freshman transition require more time and often money. For example, a high school in Georgia created a class called High School 101, where students learn high school survival skills such as time management, decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment. Other school districts

have implemented summer programs that provide after school homework and study help, seminar periods, and block scheduling.

Additionally, teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors can help by providing tours of the high school, engaging in more interaction between the middle school

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and high school, and developing a more rigorous middle school curriculum as well as summer enrichment programs.

Research shows that it is imperative that measures be put in place to smooth the transition. Schools with fully operational transition programs have an average dropout rate of only 8%, while schools without such programs have a dropout rate of 24%.

The Freshman Academy

Some schools provide a separate wing or building (a school-within-a-school) specifically for 9th graders to allow students an entire year of transition time before blending in with students from the upper grades.

Segregated 9th-graders become better acquainted with the rigors of the high school curriculum

and become more mature in the process. Freshman academies are structured to give each student more individualized attention.

Thus far, many freshman academies report great success. Positives include improvement in attendance, behavior, teacher morale, parental contact, a reduction in freshman class failures, and an increase in scores on standardized tests.

While all freshman academies include student success in their mission, each academy also strives to meet the individual needs of their particular freshman class.

One high school in Scott County, KY, realized they needed reforms after statistics showed that 45% of their incoming freshmen were likely to fail at least one 9th-grade class. To resolve the problem, freshman students were given their own space and more focused attention. The results have paid off. Student scores on the national Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills rose by six points—higher than the Kentucky average. Furthermore, attendance rates went up, freshman failures decreased, and disciplinary expulsions and referrals declined.

A similar success story played out at the freshman academy at Muhlenberg South, also in Kentucky. In the 2003–04 school year, students at the academy scored below average on the state's math computation skills test. The acad-

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emy made raising math scores one of their main goals. Final testing showed an increase in math scores by 19 percentage points.

Muhlenberg South Academy is slightly different than other freshman academies in that the 9th grade is not completely isolated from the upper grades. Since there are not enough students in the rural district to become a complete school-within-a-school, freshmen attend their four core courses isolated with other freshmen, in classrooms taught by the same teachers. Their other two classes are mixed with upperclassmen. This arrangement has worked well for more than six years.

While freshman academies boast many success stories, there are, of course, some negative aspects. These are mainly social concerns, such as the inability of 9th graders to participate in sports activities and school dances.

While the positives seem to outweigh the negative factors, 9th-grade-only schools will not be successful if all that is done is to move students into a separate building or wing. Successful freshman academies have a team of teachers dedicated to working solely with 9th-graders, and are focused on the freshman-center philosophy.

Communication Is Key

The transition problem is not isolated to only the 9th grade.

Many 8th graders enter high school with low reading comprehension skills and have a lot of catching up to do.

This lack of preparation may be due to the lack of communication between teachers in middle school and high school. It is important that both 8th- and 9th-grade teachers are on the same page with academic, social, and organizational school issues.

To smooth the transition, teachers and school leaders must bridge the communication gap between middle school and high school. This includes helping middle school level students, teachers, and parents understand the increased expectations and requirements of high school.

According to research done at more than 60 schools by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), over half of high school teachers surveyed never met with teachers from feeder middle schools to discuss students or curriculum. SREB research also finds that 51% of high school teachers report that they do not feel that incoming students have sufficient background knowledge before entering high school, and only 37% of middle school teachers surveyed believe it is extremely important to prepare 8th graders for the college prep classes they will take in high school.

It is important for middle school teachers to prepare students for

the rigors of high school. George Fox Middle School in Pasadena, MD, has implemented an interdisciplinary curriculum in which teachers work together to plan challenging lessons. The program was successful after its first year. Scores on the 8th-grade state test increased so much that the school was recognized for its improved performance. In addition, fewer suspensions and discipline referrals were issued in that first year.

Northwest Rankin Middle School in Mississippi does something similar by combining its 7th- and 8th-grade curriculum into a two-year interdisciplinary program. The school also witnessed higher test scores and achievement, especially in math and reading.

Along with upping the ante and making middle school requirements more rigorous, schools need to identify those students who, by the end of 8th grade, will not be adequately prepared for high school work. At-risk students should be identified and started on the road to high school success while in middle school. Often, students at risk of failure but still promoted through middle school are so far behind when they reach high school that it is nearly impossible to play catch up. Before it becomes too little too late, schools need to be aware and look for early warning signs.

At-risk of failure identifying characteristics include: a final

grade of F in math or English, attendance below 80% for the year, or at least one unsatisfactory behavior mark on their report card.

Studies in Philadelphia found that students who had even one failure characteristic by the end of 6th grade had a three in four chance of dropping out of school.

Instead of allowing students to fall between the cracks, one school in Norwich, CT, extended the freshman academy philosophy to 10th graders. Students who struggled in their freshman year were selected to attend a separate 10th-grade academy or unit. Similar to the district's 9th grade "house," the unit included its own orientation, increased parent communication, and frequent meetings between teachers.

Conclusion

Transition difficulties coupled with increased state graduation requirements are only a few of the hurdles 9th-grade students must overcome. Reform programs, such as freshman academies, have helped alleviate some concerns but the problems do not just involve 9th grade.

It is important to consider what can be done in middle school to better prepare students for new challenges and also important to not drop the ball on students after 9th grade, but to continue support during their remaining high school years. ■

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