

Middle to High School Transition

Tiers 1, 2 & 3

Strategy Brief, October, 2013.

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The transition between middle school and high school is difficult for a variety of reasons and often leads to students dropping out. Recent research shows that a smooth transition to ninth grade contributes to students' success in high school and beyond (Oakes & Waite, 2009). As there are a variety of reasons for student dropout relating to this transition, there are also a multiplicity of solutions and programs to combat this issue. Transition planning is the school's effort to ease this transition by preparing students for the academic, social and structural change of a new level of school.

What is Transition Planning?

Transition planning involves providing 8th grade students (and sometimes their parents) preparations which make for a smooth transition into their high school as 9th graders. These may include psychological, academic, social and experiential preparation which is designed to make the transition smooth and successful. Transition planning can be helpful for all students, but may be especially important for students with disabilities or other students who are at risk, academically or socially and thus at a higher risk of dropping out.

What Do We Know About Transition Planning?

Although dropping out of high school is a risk for students throughout their high school career, the dropout crisis is particularly severe during a student's freshman year of high school. More students fail ninth grade than any other, often remaining at that grade for multiple years. In fact, up to 40% of students in low-income schools drop out after ninth grade. Additionally, these freshmen experience higher rates of course failure, declining test scores, and increased behavior problems (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

The phrase "falling off track" is often used in reference to high school transition planning. This can simplistically be defined as a student not earning the adequate course credits necessary for a four-year graduation date. Approximately one-third of the nation's recent dropouts had not advanced past the ninth grade, showing that students who fall off track during ninth grade have a low probability of graduating. This crisis has continued to increase over the past thirty years with the ninth grade becoming a "bottleneck" grade. Between 1970 and 2000, there were between 3-11 percent fewer tenth graders than ninth graders as a result of students dropping out (Neild, 2009).

Why Do Freshmen Get Off Track?

There are several reasons why students fall off track during their first year in high school:

- 1) The social and developmental adjustment;
- 2) Structural and organizational change;
- 3) Increased academic rigor and failure.

Social and developmental adjustment.

Incoming freshmen face many developmental challenges, in addition to increased academic expectations, as they seek to transition to high school. These challenges include physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, as well as an increased desire for independence from parents (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Students' social life and peer relationships often surpass academic concerns during their first year of high school (Oakes & Waite, 2009). During this time of transition, students may develop lower self-esteem and fears about new social circumstances, often resulting in anxiety and negative behaviors. This transition, which can be alienating and overwhelming, breaks the bonds that students have formed with their peers and teachers in middle school. Students demonstrate diminished engagement and attendance by the end of their freshman year (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Due to behavior problems, suspensions and expulsions are higher in ninth grade than any other high school grade level and are a significant setback for students (Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008). Lost instructional time as a result of suspension and expulsions also contributes to academic failure.

Structural and organizational change.

The structure and organization of high school and middle school are similar in that students have multiple teachers and a variety of academic tracks. However, middle school students typically share similar course work paths and are not moved as hurriedly through the halls from one class to another. In addition, high schools are much larger, more competitive, and less personal (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). In a traditional high school, teachers tend to be more concerned with their subject matter, leaving students feeling anonymous. Often these

changes and increased anonymity lead students to feel disconnected, making dropping out more likely.

Academic rigor and failure. Studies have shown that many students experience a decline in academic achievement after the transition from middle to high school. As a result, failure and dropout rates in ninth grade exceed those in any other grade (Smith, 2006). Contributing factors to the decline in achievement and high drop-out rate are: inadequate preparation for high school, increased academic rigor, and lack of interest and relativity.

Even students who received respectable grades in middle school may fail in high school as a result of not being properly challenged and poor academic preparation. Students who have struggled in middle school find it even more challenging in high school. This compounded with inadequate preparation will often lead to decreased effort and dropout. These ninth graders who have academic deficiencies need to make catch-up gains in mathematics and reading (Neild, 2009).

Due to increased academic rigor in high school, and increased expectations for independent work, such as homework, some students experience a loss of achievement in both their



GPA and on standardized achievement tests. In middle school, challenging course work and early intervention programs targeted at academic achievement are essential for a successful high school transition. Programs like this help prepare students for the increased expectations and rigor of high school, and boost students' confidence about learning. Summer courses for extra support and enrichment also lead to lower failure and dropout rates (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

In a survey of high school dropouts, almost 50% claimed that they dropped out primarily because their classes were not interesting. Almost 70% of dropouts stated that they were not motivated to work hard with two thirds claiming they would have worked harder if more was demanded of them. More than 80% of the students said if classes were more interesting with more real-world opportunities to apply what they learned, their chances of staying in school would have increased (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). This shows that not only academic preparation and rigor are crucial for high school completion, as well as expectations, interest, and relevance as well.

Making Transition Programs Work

Students who participate in transition programs adjust more successfully to high school. Likewise, dropout rates are considerably lower in districts that have specific high school transition programs (Smith, 2006). Successful programs address:

- Curriculum, facilities, safety, discipline, and structural organization (Smith, 2006, p. 2).
- Early academic intervention, rigorous courses in middle school, and a continuously supportive environment (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 4).
- Activities relating to registration, such as high school principal talks, peer panels, high school visits, and pairing with upperclassmen (Letrello & Miles, 2003, p. 1).
- Well-developed support programs including

ongoing planning to adapt these programs; frequent communication with students, parents, and schools; and assessment of program success (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 5).

- Student shadowing or visitation in high schools and interacting with older students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 5).
- Collaboration between eighth and ninth grade buildings and personnel; providing parents with curricular and logistic information, as well as resources for academic and social support (Smith et al., 2008, p. 10).

In addition to school programs for transition Oakes & Waite (2009, p.2) make recommendations to state and district leaders. These include:

- "Ensure that curriculum standards are aligned to prepare eighth-grade students for the challenge of high school work.
- Communicate the importance of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies through policy and funding initiatives.
- Prepare teachers for teaching challenging content in the middle grades.
- Provide structures to support middle school students with the extra help they need for success in high school.
- Ensure that middle school leaders are prepared to implement a program that prepares all students for the transition to college preparatory courses in high school.
- Provide technical assistance to turn around low-performing schools serving middle grades.
- Ensure that middle-grade students and parents receive guidance and advice to plan for high school, postsecondary learning, and careers"

Transition programs may also assist students in making a social or emotional tie to the new school by introducing them to one or two counselors or teachers who would be available for support at the new school. Having a supportive adult in that new environment can also increase confidence, provide support for problems or questions, and personalize the new environ-

ment. Some programs also assign specific high school students as transition coaches for 8th grade students, which also provides support and a social connection.

Providing a connection to the school mascot or logo, and providing symbols of their belonging to that school may be helpful, such as providing a t-shirt or button. Possibly attending sporting events or other high school activities, as well as being introduced to clubs and extra-curricular activities would be helpful.

Collaboration between Middle and High Schools

A successful transition program involves collaboration between the middle and high school buildings and personnel. They should communicate their distinctive social, academic, and organizational features to prepare the students for this transition (Smith, 2006).

Many successful programs involve high schools partnering with feeder middle schools. The programs range from one-time informational assemblies to comprehensive monthly meetings among teachers, counselors, and administrators at both schools. Other programs in-



clude parent meetings, course advising sessions, discussions, and student shadowing programs. Most schools implement a variety of these programs though few apply comprehensive ones that involve students, parents, and personnel from both schools. Schools that implement these inclusive programs have the most positive effects on graduation and student experiences. Conversely, programs that focus on only one aspect showed no independent effect on these results (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Parental Involvement

Parents play a significant role in helping their children become successful members of society. They are also integral in guiding their children through this time of transition. Studies have found that students whose parents monitored and positively intervened in their child's activities (e.g., schoolwork, peers, participation) were more likely to transition easily into high school. In addition, school contact with parents resulted in improved overall communication between families and schools (Smith, 2006).

When schools and teachers encourage parental participation, they have higher levels of involvement. Students whose parents are involved are usually more adjusted, have lower dropout rates, and higher achievement. Parents should be informed about all aspects of the transition, course decisions, and planning of activities. Transition programs that involve students, parents, and teachers have the strongest effect (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Using Data for Early Intervention

Several variables as described earlier are correlated with dropping out of school. As a result this correlational data can be used to identify students most impacted by the transition to high school. This data is used to calculate the relative risks of dropping out for individual students based on these variables. These are sometimes called "at-risk" or "on-track" calculators. Indicators may use data such as credit

accumulation, academic grades, state wide test scores in reading or math, attendance, referrals for behavior, poverty, and other variables to make these risk predictions for students. These data are useful for placing students in early intervention programs occurring before, during, and after the transition to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). See “Early Warning Systems” fact sheet about data systems.

Intervention to Make Transition Successful

Intervention programs can then attempt to make the transition to high school easier and more likely to engage high risk students. All students (Tier 1) would benefit from being provided an orientation to high school, including possibly a tour, information about sports and activities, and assistance in planning a schedule, etc. However, it would also be possible to supplement these orientation activities provided to

all students with additional support activities for specifically for students who are identified as being at a higher risk of dropping out (Students in Tiers 2 & 3). These targeted intervention programs would go beyond the transition program for all students, and might provide extra opportunities to familiarize these students with the facilities and procedures at the new school, and make personal connections which may lead to relationships with specific staff members such as counselors, or content teachers. They may also connect these students with activities in the new school, and provide older students as mentors or role models.

Conclusion

Providing all students, but particularly students at risk of dropping out, with a variety of supports for the transition from middle to high school is an intervention with both strong research support as well as practical logic.



Recommended Citation:

Erickson, J., Peterson, R. L. & Lembeck, P. (2013, May). *Middle to high school transition. Strategy brief*. Lincoln, NE: Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska. <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>.

Note: Several examples of secondary school programs which focus on transition from middle to high school can be found in the *Examples of Middle to High School Transition Programs, Program Description* document which is also available from the Student Engagement Project. <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>.

Middle to High School Transition References

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