

Student Supports: Introduction

Center on Instruction

Today's students are extraordinarily diverse, representing a wide range of experiences, cultures, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities, and perspectives. These students all differ in their instructional and support needs, but all are expected to be successful. Districts and schools must organize themselves to ensure that every student has a pathway to success and is supported through a wide variety of programs and instructional approaches. This chapter will focus on supports for struggling and at-risk students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students transitioning from middle to high school. Support can come from school-based personnel, community partners and volunteers, parents, and families and should include a wide range of research-based strategies designed with flexibility in mind.

Often the first step in serving diverse students is identifying those in need of support and intervention. Screening for deficits in academics and behavioral functions (for example, self-management and relationship skills) and monitoring progress at regular intervals are effective ways of identifying students needing support or intervention. Districts will often play a critical role in assisting schools with the selection of appropriate measures to accurately assess these needs.

After assessing needs, schools frequently need guidance on instructional methods appropriate for each student. For instance, students with disabilities must receive high-quality, research-based instruction within the least restrictive environment. English language learners require effective instruction to build academic language proficiency and guided instruction to build vocabulary. These students, along with other students identified as at risk, may also require supplemental services provided outside the general classroom.

These could take the form of one-on-one or small-group tutoring in one or more academic skill areas, specific interventions targeting social-emotional needs (such as social and emotional learning), or targeted language interventions.

Students transitioning from middle school to high school often need targeted support. This period in a student's life is sometimes characterized by disengagement and a decline in grades, motivation, and attendance. Furthermore, many students enter ninth grade unprepared to manage the increased academic and social expectations. Research supports the implementation of transition programs and suggests that these interventions are linked to positive student outcomes.

Community partners and students' families can be great resources to schools in need of improvement. Many schools have developed partnerships with various community entities (e.g., businesses, universities, and faith-based and non-profit organizations) and receive support in the form of volunteers for tutoring, donations of school supplies, assistance with after-school programs, and support for educational employment opportunities. Furthermore, engaging parents in their children's academic progress has shown to improve students' learning. These interventions should occur in a positive school climate where students feel safe, where the academic and behavioral competencies of all students are supported, and where instruction responds to student needs. A positive school climate is associated with good achievement gains and a reduction in behavior problems, achievement gaps, and dropout rates.

Addressing Middle to High School Transitions

National High School Center

The transition from middle to high school is a critical point in a student’s academic career. Research indicates that this time is often characterized by increased disengagement and a decline in grades, motivation, and attendance. Furthermore, many students enter ninth grade lacking the preparation to successfully navigate the new academic and social demands of high school. Failure to meet these challenges is linked to school failure and highlights the fact that students’ experiences during their first year of high school have significant implications for their success throughout high school. Specifically, unsuccessful transition to high school is associated with higher dropout rates, delayed graduation rates, and low achievement (Herlihy, 2007). It is also important to note that these challenges are more prevalent in urban, high-poverty schools and among African American and Latino students and students with disabilities (NHSC, 2007a; 2007b). To help address this issue, educators need to provide students with the necessary academic and socio-emotional supports to make a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Research supports the implementation of transition programs and suggests that these interventions are linked to positive student outcomes such as higher student engagement and lower dropout rates (NHSC, 2007a; 2007b).

Efforts to help ease students’ transition to high school can begin during the summer months before the start of ninth grade. Summer programs provide opportunities to prepare at-risk students by offering academic and social supports. Educators can also continue to support students’ transition to high school by the following actions (more information on these actions can be found in other sections of this *Handbook*):

- Establishing a data and monitoring system that will both diagnose why students are struggling and serve as an accountability measure for districts and schools;
- Addressing the instructional needs of struggling students who enter high school unprepared for rigorous, college-preparatory coursework by providing targeted instruction that gives them the opportunity to catch up while also ensuring that they are challenged and engaged in learning;
- Creating personalized learning environments to decrease students’ sense of anonymity and address individual needs;
- Building instructional and leadership capacity in low-achieving schools to address the diverse student needs and ensure that struggling students are taught by highly-qualified teachers; and
- Helping students to see the relevance of their coursework by engaging families and creating connections with the community, employers, and institutes of higher education.

Action Principles

For State

1. Create a longitudinal data monitoring system to gather and track information on the number of incoming ninth grade students who are and are not prepared to take college-preparatory English and mathematics courses.
2. Require districts to report the outcomes of their transition program and use this information as an accountability measure of student outcomes related to the transition to high school.
3. Identify and disseminate research-based readiness indicators and benchmarking guidelines and tools to help districts and schools identify students who need extra support in the ninth grade.
4. Provide guidelines on how to offer accelerated curricula to help boost the mathematics and reading skills of struggling students during the first semester of high school.

5. Provide guidelines on how middle and high schools can work together to prepare more students for high school.

For District

1. Integrate “on-track” indicators into accountability systems. Include other indicators based on local context, as appropriate.
2. Provide guidelines on how schools can intervene to assist students with the transition.
3. Engage with community agencies to plan and coordinate appropriate social supports.
4. Provide professional development to train teachers on working with struggling students.
5. Provide adequate resources and support for schools that choose to implement structural changes (e.g., creating smaller learning communities), specialized curricula, and summer transition programs.
6. Develop strategies to attract, retain, and assign highly-qualified teachers.
7. Provide state with report of progress and challenges of transition programs as well as plans to improve program effectiveness.

For School

1. Use data from early warning systems to identify students in need of extra assistance and to inform instructional approaches and interventions.
2. Implement a curriculum or intervention designed to support students who enter high school unprepared to succeed in rigorous coursework (e.g., accelerated instruction—see more information on this topic elsewhere in this *Handbook*).
3. Engage and create partnerships with the community, employers, institutes of higher education, and families in support of student academic and social needs.
4. Communicate to families what ninth graders are expected to know and be able to do to succeed in high school.
5. Increase opportunities for positive adult and student interactions.
6. Align instruction with career and other postsecondary opportunities.

References and Resources

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Strategies that Build Relationships

National High School Center

Common features of the American comprehensive high school are depersonalization and a lack of a sense of community (Lee & Smith, 2001). Yet research strongly suggests that establishing a climate of social, emotional, and academic supports for students is central to improving conditions for learning and thriving in high school. Two practices generally associated with successful reform in low-performing high schools are personalized learning environments and establishing mechanisms that assist students in developing social networks and instrumental relationships (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Quint, 2006). Strategies for building relationships between students as well as between students and school faculty include:

- Smaller learning communities (SLC) which structure larger school populations into smaller groups of students and teachers. These structures are designed to foster school environments in which healthy, trusting, interpersonal relationships between students and faculty can thrive (Cohen, 2001; Jerald, 2006). Academies are a popular form of smaller learning communities that are typically organized by career aspiration such as a program designed to prepare students for engineering coursework in college. Academies are also commonly organized by grade-level, such as ninth-grade academies designed to ease the transition from middle to high school (Herlihy, 2007a). (For more information, see Chapter 4 in this *Handbook*.)
- Guidance and mentoring programs, such as student advisories which reserve time for students to meet one-on-one and/or in small groups with trained faculty advisors to create a sense of community (Herlihy, 2007b).
- A system of tiered interventions designed to prevent and remediate documented concerns led by teams of teachers, specialists, and administrators that offer targeted support and monitoring for the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students school-wide, specific student groups (e.g., ninth graders, learning disabled, English language learners) and individual students according to their risk factors (e.g., failing grades, poor attendance, suspensions) (National High School Center, 2007). (For more information, see Chapter 7 on “Using Response to Intervention” in this *Handbook*.)
- Student leadership development programs designed to engage and enlist students in needs assessment exercises and the school improvement planning process.

Action Principles

For State

1. Develop student-level and school environment assessment tools to be used by schools that can guide decision-making about what interventions to put into place in response to students at risk for school failure due to academic, social, and/or behavioral issues.
2. Gather and report indicators on key student risk factors such as readiness for high school-level coursework in the form of reports, guidelines, and checklists that districts and schools can use to determine which students need extra support.

For District

1. Determine district-wide strategies for increasing personalization (e.g., smaller learning communities, academies, etc.).
2. Refine and provide technical support for school data collection and retrieval systems to provide the infrastructure to identify and implement targeted interventions for students who are disengaged from school.

For School

1. Partner with parents and community stakeholders to foster awareness of and support for building and sustaining effective relationships.

2. Consider ninth grade academies and summer transition programs to facilitate student transition into high school.
3. Offer programming such as student advisories to set a foundation for positive discipline school-wide and to connect all students to the school environment.
4. Use a data-driven process to prevent problem behavior. One example is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a data-driven decision-making framework that directs the selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices and systems for improving important outcomes for all students.
5. Institutionalize opportunities for students to participate in the process of improving the school climate, safety, and learning.
6. Identify and train teachers, specialists, and administrators to serve on tiered intervention teams that develop and lead school-wide, targeted, and individual student support programs.

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