

The First Year of High School: A Quick Stats Fact Sheet

Students' experiences in their first year of high school often determine their success throughout high school and beyond. However, more students fail ninth grade than any other high school grade.

Students who are promoted to tenth grade, but who are off track—as indicated by failed grades, a lack of course credits or a lack of attendance during their ninth-grade gateway year—may have already missed the opportunity to get on a graduation track.

Statistics

The following statistics highlight a noticeable trend in the lack of progress of many students throughout freshman year. Many students are held back in ninth grade—creating what is known as the *ninth grade bulge*—and drop out by tenth grade—contributing to the *tenth grade dip*.

- Students in ninth grade comprise the highest percentage of the overall high school population because students in disproportionate numbers are failing to be promoted out of ninth grade. Promotion rates between ninth and tenth grade are much lower than rates between other grades (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Student Enrollment by Grade and Percentage of Total Enrollment, 2004–2005					
8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	Total
3,824,670	4,281,345	3,750,491	3,369,339	3,094,349	18,320,194
20.9%	23.4%	20.5%	18.4%	16.9%	100.0%

(Gray, Sable, & Sietsema, 2006)

- The ninth grade bulge is illustrated by the following numbers: enrollment figures show 4.19 million students enrolled in grade nine during the 2003–2004 school year, while figures for the following school year, 2004–2005, show enrollment numbers for tenth grade at around 3.75 million—a loss of 10.5% (NCES, 2005). The dip in the number of students in tenth grade reflects both the large number of students not promoted to tenth grade as well as those students that drop out after ninth grade and before tenth grade.
- In the last 30 years, the bulge of students in grade nine has more than tripled, from approximately 4% to 13% (Haney et al., 2004).
- Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only 10–15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004).
- Ninth grade attrition is far more pronounced in urban, high-poverty schools: 40% of dropouts in low-income high schools left after ninth grade, compared to 27% in low-poverty districts (EPE Research Center, 2006).

- Racial disparities highlight the ninth grade bulge and tenth grade dip—these figures are the most pronounced for African American and Latino students. For example, grade-nine enrollment is 23–27% higher than grade eight, and attrition between grades nine and ten hovers around 20% for African American students; for their white peers, grade nine enrollment is 6–8% higher than grade eight, while attrition between grades nine and ten is stable around 7% (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).
- Twenty-nine of 51 states see their greatest “leakage” in the “education pipeline” occur during the ninth grade (EPE Research Center, 2006). Some states have as high as a 20% decrease in enrollment between ninth and tenth grades (Wheelock and Miao, 2005).
- Most high school dropouts fail at least 25% of their ninth grade courses, while 8% of high school completers experienced the same difficulty (Letgers & Kerr, 2001).
- More than one semester “F” in core subjects and fewer than five full course credits by the end of freshman year are key indicators that a student is not on track to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Low attendance during the first 30 days of the ninth grade year is a stronger indicator that a student will drop out than any other eighth grade predictor, including test scores, other academic achievement, and age. (Jerald, 2006).

Strategies

Because the research is clear that the first year of high school is pivotal, but the transition into high school is often characterized as a time when students experience a decline in grades and attendance (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991), school systems must support first-year high school students to improve their chances of success.

- One strategy to address the challenges facing freshmen is the creation of ninth grade academies that are apart from the rest of the high school or the creation of separate stand-alone schools. (Reents, 2002) One hundred fifty-four ninth-grade-only schools were operating during the 2004-2005 school year. (NCES, Common Core of Data).¹
- In schools in which transition programs are fully operational, researchers saw a dropout rate of 8%, while schools without transition programs averaged 24% (Reents, 2002).
- Student self-reports indicate that more transition support that would ease their transition to high school could help. Compared to their perceptions reported the previous year, ninth graders perceive less support and monitoring from teachers and principals and generally like school less than they did in middle school. On average, ninth graders report being less involved in school activities and perceive the need for more school organization. They also indicate lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression than middle school students (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

¹ This statistic reflects the total number of public schools operating in the United States that offered only the ninth grade, but is not necessarily reflective of the total number of ‘ninth grade academies.’

Many research-based practices and policies are available to states, districts, and schools committed to supporting and guiding smooth transitions into high school. Resources and strategies include aligned standards and curriculum, team teaching, catch-up coursework in the first semester using the double block schedule, student advisories, at-risk benchmarks, academic benchmarks, and adolescent literacy initiatives. Additional information – including research briefs, a case study, and examples of relevant state initiatives on easing the transition to high school – are forthcoming from the National High School Center at <http://www.betterhighschools.org>

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