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Snapshot

Managing the Transition to Ninth Grade in a Comprehensive Urban High School

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The transition into ninth grade is a critical phase in students' lives and academic careers. The move to a larger environment, the reduction in personal support, and the greater academic challenge posed by high school courses is too often problematic for rising ninth-grade students.

Difficult ninth-grade transitions can result in flagging academic performance, increased dropout rates, and reduced on-time graduation. In urban school districts — and particularly in the large, comprehensive high schools found there — these problems are particularly commonplace.

In Philadelphia, the nation's eighth-largest school district, high school reform has emerged as an urgent and visible priority. Uneven performances on statewide tests and recent public concern over school dropouts have added to the school district's desire to strengthen the performance of students throughout high school.

The School District of Philadelphia

210,000 students

More than 80 percent students of color

47,000 high school students

45 regular high schools

16 charter high schools

Some ninth-grade transition initiatives are being tried in the city's high schools. One high school in particular has, for the past seven years, been following a model program addressing many of the transition issues identified in the research.

The Ninth Grade Success Academy

Thomas A. Edison High School, a comprehensive high school serving a low-income, largely Hispanic population, uses the Ninth Grade Success Academy, a component of the Talent Development High School program, a reform strategy developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University. The full Talent Development model is currently being replicated in a number of cities nationwide.

The Success Academy, perhaps the most critical element of the Talent Development program, reflects a number of assumptions about how to make the ninth-grade transition successful:

- Many entering students have deficient basic skills, particularly in English and mathematics, which must be addressed using well-designed curricula and high-quality instruction.
- Students need added structure and extra personal support and attention as they make their way through ninth grade.
- Ninth-grade teaching staff need opportunities to collaborate, both on their teaching and their support for students.

The Success Academy is a school-within-a-school with a number of features specifically designed to help ninth-graders make a successful transition, and is described below.

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Personalized Learning Community

The Academy is physically separate from the rest of the school, in its own wing of its own floor. It has its own entrance and ninth-graders have few opportunities to interact with upper-class students. Teachers and staff greet students at the front door in the morning as they arrive. The aim is to make personal connections with the students, minimize distractions, promote a small but structured community environment, and enhance opportunities for students and teachers to interact. The students "know the rules will be enforced," explained the Success Academy principal (actually one of Edison's three assistant principals, whose sole responsibility is managing the Academy).

Teacher Teams and Team Leaders

The ninth-grade faculty is organized into four teams, each responsible for teaching and interacting with its own group of students throughout the school year. Each has a team leader (with a reduced teaching load) who handles team logistics, arranges meetings and parent conferences, and handles discipline problems. Special education students are grouped in one of the four teams, and that teaching team is supplemented with a special education teacher, who works across classes. Each team's schedule is arranged so that teachers have common planning times.

Teachers report that the team approach works and that, as one teacher put it, "the support is key. If you're having a problem, your team members can help. If a student is having a problem, all the team members know about it and can support one another and the student." Common planning time gives teachers the chance to compare notes, trade ideas, discuss student issues, meet as a group with parents when problems arise, and create projects or activities that span individual subjects.

Block Scheduling and Double-Dosing

Block scheduling and "double-dosing" intensify the learning experience. Ninth-graders take just four subjects per semester (each equivalent to a yearlong subject in traditional schedules), and their class periods are divided into 90-minute blocks. The extended classes are designed to permit teachers more opportunities to reinforce learning and explore topics in depth.

Fewer class changes also minimize hall time and cutting. "It's orderly … and that helps us maintain a learning environment," noted a ninth-grade teacher. All students at Edison are required to wear uniforms, and "the students know we'll enforce it very strictly," the Academy principal said.

Besides the block scheduling, English and math are "double-dosed," with students taking them for a full year, and receiving double credits for their work. Together, these innovations reinforce and build critical basic skills that incoming ninth-graders often lack upon arrival.

Specialized curricula created by Talent Development are one key to successful double-dosing. *Strategic Reading* and *Transition to Advanced Math* are offered in the fall semester as a bridge to prepare students for the school district's own standardized courses, English I and Algebra I.

Freshman Seminar Teaches Study Skills

By having an intensive, preparatory first semester, students can make up ground and strengthen academic skills, so more of them succeed in the District's own curriculum. In addition, all ninth-graders take a freshman seminar, a Talent Development course that helps students learn study skills, time management, note-taking and how to handle the challenges of dealing with other students in a high school environment.

A Clear Focus on Student Success

Other program features include: a) report card conferences in which each student, his or her parents or guardians, and teachers meet; b) a continuous and visible focus on attendance and grades (class attendance is posted in hallways, and regular ceremonies and prizes for perfect attendance and making honors); c) a summer orientation for incoming freshmen to familiarize them with the school; and d) a "Twilight Academy," where struggling students can work for missed or additional credit in an alternative setting.

Students respect the structured and personalized setting. "My teachers really try to help me understand" the coursework, one said, adding that "teachers in other schools wouldn't take the time."

"They're strict, and they know from one another if you've been working," a second student noted. "You really have the chance to learn, if you want to, and I want to."

Students who were interviewed recognized the benefits of the Academy setting, even if they chafed a bit at uniforms and the limited opportunities to interact with older students in the school. "We're in this separate place, but we can learn here and the teachers care about us," a student said. "I can live with that."

Leadership Support

Though the Success Academy is, in one sense, autonomous, it very much depends on support from the school's leadership. Edison's principal has been an emphatic supporter of the Academy idea since he first learned of it seven years ago. "I knew it was right for this school, and I did everything I could to bring it here." The principal has maintained his enthusiasm, even in the face of diminishing outside resources to support the Academy, the team structure and other components of which are an added expense in the budget. "I've had to find resources within my existing budget, but I do because this is important," he said.

Continuing Challenges at Edison

The Success Academy's present and future at Edison are far from trouble-free. The School District of Philadelphia's move to a standardized curriculum, with citywide pacing requirements and periodic benchmark tests, has forced instructional compromises in the Academy's "double-dosing" approach, with uncertain results. And funding and age restrictions have all but eliminated the Twilight Academy element of the Success Academy.

Overall academic progress has been modest. Although Edison met 18 of 25 state academic targets, it did not achieve Adequate Yearly Progress, as required by No Child Left Behind. But there are some promising signs: Edison reached its targets for reading proficiency for all students and for key

subgroups — economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, Hispanic students, and students with limited English proficiency (LEP). Graduation rates have risen in four of the past five years. The most consistent challenge has been in math, for which test scores for most subgroups have remained disappointingly low. And, overall, significant numbers of students fall below basic in both math and reading.

These results underscore the difficult challenge of serving a markedly low income student population, with large numbers of minority, special education and LEP students. Despite the promise of programs like the Success Academy, widespread improvement in academic performance is difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

The Success Academy stands as a thoughtfully designed strategy for increasing successful ninth-grade transitions. At Edison, it gets high grades from teachers and students, who believe its supportive structure measurably enhances the learning environment and eases the move into high school. Edison's administration has demonstrated its commitment in a special way: three years ago it created a Tenth Grade Academy, modeled on the Success Academy, to extend and reinforce the benefits and momentum of the ninth-grade model.

Resources

Thomas A. Edison High School, Philadelphia, PA:
http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/edison/index.html

School District of Philadelphia: http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/

A policy brief authored by Corinne Herlihy of MDRC and the National High School Center: ***State and District Level Support for Successful Transitions into High School***

An issue brief authored by Corinne Herlihy of MDRC and the National High School Center: ***Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition Into High School***

A fact sheet authored by the National High School Center: ***The First Year of High School: A Quick Stats Fact Sheet***