

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

- Cooney, S., & Bottoms, G. (2003). *Middle grades to high school: Mending a weak link*. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.
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