Dropouts and the 9th Grade Bulge

Evidence is growing that students who fall off track during the freshman year have very low odds of earning a high school diploma. Indeed, analysis of the progression of students through high school suggests that approximately one-third of the nation's recent high school dropouts never were promoted beyond ninth grade.

Ruth Curran Neild (2009)

Over the past two decades, a great deal of concern has been expressed over the number of students who do not make a successful transition to high school. The consensus is that such students are particularly at risk for dropping out.

Available data suggest that more than half a million young people drop out of high school each year and the rate has remained fairly constant for many years. As Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights project has stressed:

> There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure. ... Only half of our nation's minority students graduate from high school along with their peers. For many groups – Latino, black, or Native American males-graduation rates are even lower. ... this [is an] educational and civil rights crisis.

In terms of economics, social programs, and public health, Russell Rumberger has pointed out that the U.S.A. loses over $192 billion in income and tax revenues for each cohort of students who do not finish high school. Relatedly, Dynarski and colleagues emphasize:

> Dropouts contribute only about half as much in taxes.... They draw larger government subsidies in the form of food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare payments. They have a dramatically increased chance of landing in prison, and they have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies.

What is the 9th Grade Bulge?

The bulge, sometime referred to as the bottleneck, is the name education researchers give to the percentage increase in students in the 9th grade over the number who were enrolled in 8th grade.

Starting 9th grade is not just another grade transition; it is a major life change. Students who find the transition especially frustrating and discouraging pay an emotional toll, and this exacerbates behavior and learning problems. Unsuccessful 9th grade transitions are correlated with repeating the grade, disconnecting from school, and dropping out.

Approximately 22% of students repeat ninth grade (more than any other grade). In a 2012 report National High School Center indicates data showing that "In 1982, ninth grade enrollment was 4% higher than eighth grade enrollment. In 2011, this bulge had grown to a 12% increase in enrollment in the ninth grade."

Just surviving 9th grade, of course, isn't sufficient. Students must get there on a track that enables eventual graduation (i.e., with passing grades, appropriate course credits).

What Interferes with Making a Successful Transition?

Many factors have been identified as related to school transition and adjustment problems. The risk literature points to experiences stemming from neighborhood, family, school, peer, and personal conditions.

Problems in 9th grade often are carry-overs from middle school (and even earlier). The transition to middle school also is a challenging life change for many students. The situation calls for increasing independence, taking on more responsibilities, and finding a satisfying place among one's peers. By the time some students reach 8th grade, it is evident that they are not performing well academically, socially, or both. It is likely their move to 9th grade will not go well.

Students whose 8th grade functioning does not raise alarms still may be vulnerable. As Neild (2009) notes in addition to past experiences and performance:
- ninth grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental supervision and increased peer influence
- in moving to a new school, students must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers
- organization of some high schools is itself a major source of students' difficulty.

Students making unsuccessful transitions and adjustments to any grade have lower GPAs, more failing grades, and tend to have more absences and misbehavior referrals. They may experience significant shifts in self-perceptions, expectations, and values. Major changes in interpersonal relationships, roles, and status are common; some youngsters become isolated and alienated.

What's Being Done About It?

There are, of course, a variety of 9th grade transition-oriented efforts. And when students do not made a successful transition into 9th grade, some efforts usually are made to enhance their school adjustment and provide academic remediation. Prior to 9th grade, the focus is on transition and prevention programs. In 8th grade, prevention programs target and provide various types of interventions to students seen as at-risk. Dropout prevention programs overlap such programs.

Transition-oriented efforts. These include summer and 9th grade introductory programs, special supports for targeted incoming 9th graders, and a variety of specialized academies. And usually embedded in such efforts are strategies to mobilize home involvement and engagement.

Types of Activity Schools Offer for 9th Grade Transition

- *Engaging summer programs* to help stem summer learning loss, enable students to catch up, enhance understanding of the new school, and provide bridging activity.
- *Ninth grade introductory activities* designed to familiarize students with campus facilities and opportunities and provide welcoming and caring social supports (e.g., summer bridging, first day transition program, buddy systems, counseling and mentoring by staff, monthly newcomer engagement programs)
- *Special supports for students identified as at-risk*. These are illustrated by dropout prevention programs (see examples below). Many students need personalized mentoring, counseling, and tutoring help with academics throughout the year. Personalizing the interventions means providing a good match to each student's motivation and capabilities.
- *Ninth grade academies* include opportunities for intensive, engaging transition supports.
- *Home involvement and engagement* to aid transition to 9th grade. Embedded into any of the above can be a focus on helping parents and other caretakers in the home deal with transition concerns, including learning ways to support the student's transition. Properly addressed, the focus on the home hopefully generalizes to ongoing home support for the school (e.g., volunteering and other forms of participation).

Methodologically sound research and program evaluations on transition and dropout programs are sparse. The limited findings mean that references such as the *What Works Clearinghouse* cite a relatively few programs. For example, only eight dropout prevention programs warranted inclusion, all of which report *potentially* positive effects for progressing in school (but no robust findings about school completion).

Dropout Prevention. These efforts mostly focus on identifying and providing interventions to students who have fallen off the track to graduation. Identification involves use of "early warning systems" (e.g., students receiving poor grades in or failing core subjects, low attendance, grade retention, and disengagement from instruction). Students of color from low-income families and communities are disproportionately represented. Research on early warning systems suggests that future dropouts can be identified as early as sixth grade and that responding quickly to indicators of disengagement can prevent academic and behavior problems.

Here are three examples of programs cited in the *What Works Clearinghouse*:

>*Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success* (ALAS): This intervention program is designed to reduce dropout among middle school at-risk Latino middle school students. It aims at improving the connection and coordination between home and school. Counselors provide students and parents with support. Parents are informed about attendance and provided direct instruction and modeling for addressing the student's academic and social challenges. Counselors personally invest in the student's success, follow up with teachers, and provide group bonding experiences and positive reinforcements. The What Works Clearinghouse's analysis indicates that the program has demonstrated potentially positive effects in keeping students in school and making progress. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED493773.pdf

>*Check & Connect.* This program is designed to enhance student engagement at school and with learning for marginalized, disengaged students in grades K-12. The focus is on relationship building, problem solving and capacity building, and persistence. It aims at fostering completion of schooling with academic and social competence. Processes use a trained mentor whose primary goal is to keep education a salient issue for disengaged students and their teachers and family members. The mentor works with a caseload of students and families over time – following students from program to program and school to school; monitoring for truancy, behavior referrals, and academic performance; meeting with students weekly; and keeping families updated. The program has demonstrated a positive effect on keeping students in school and a potentially positive effect on progress. http://www.checkandconnect.umn.edu/

>*Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program* (VYP). This was created by the Intercultural Development Research Association as a dropout prevention program. It identifies at-risk middle and high school students and enlists them as cross-age tutors for elementary school youngsters who are also struggling in school. By giving the "Valued Youth" tutors personal and academic responsibility, the intent is for them to learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem and for schools to enhance their valuing of students considered at-risk. A quasi-experimental study found a 1% dropout rate for the tutors, whereas the rate for a comparison group was 12%. http://www.idra.org/Coca-Cola_Valued_Youth_Program.html/#sthash.0yQT7xNO.dpuf

In contrast to the above, some programs aim at structural and transformative school changes. For example:

Talent Development High Schools. The approach is to establish small learning communities, where students are supported by a team of teachers throughout the year. Teachers have common planning time to address the needs of students and to take advantage of assets and approaches from cross-disciplinary perspectives. Uses an "acceleration" curricula designed to be both challenging while simultaneously building basic skills to catch students up to their on-grade-level

peers as quickly as possible. A key component is creation of a 9th grade academy to create a "school within a school" for a subgroup. Block scheduling is used to teach in-depth lessons and enable students the opportunity to catch up and finish freshman English and Algebra I by the end of the year. Students take a seminar designed to prepare them for high school's rigorous academic demands. The academy also aims to reduce feelings isolation and anonymity. The What Works Clearinghouse rates the approach as providing potentially positive effects for progressing in school. http://www.tdschools.org/about/

What's Missing?

Facilitating transition is not an event, it is an ongoing process that is continued until a newcomer makes a good academic, social, and behavioral adjustment at the school. Successful transitions are marked by students who feel a sense of connectedness and belonging, who are engaged in classroom learning, and who are able to cope with daily stressors.

Facilitating successful 9th grade transition and preventing dropouts starts in elementary school and continues through 8th grade. Middle school provides many opportunities for specific activities aimed at enhancing positive motivation about and capabilities for learning and schooling. The 8th grade transition efforts usually include at least traditional broad-band orientation programs for students and their parents (e.g., packets, tours, and discussions clarifying basic info and dispelling myths). But a comprehensive approach to transition and dropout prevention calls for much more.

From a developmental and motivational perspective, interventions must encompass a focus on:

- promoting positive attitudes prior to and maintaining engaged learning during the transition
- ensuring social supports (e.g., peer buddies, mentors, home supports)
- anticipate and prevent problems
- provide personalized special assistance to those whose problems make it highly likely that the transition will be difficult to negotiate
- monitor transitions in order to respond at the first indications a student is having transition problems and to maintain supports until the student is effectively engaged in classroom instruction and making appropriate progress

As with all good interventions, transition support should aspire to creating a good "match" or "fit" with students. This means attending to diversity among students with particular respect to motivational and developmental differences. Environments should be redesigned to enhance intrinsic motivation for learning and positive behavior by maximizing opportunities to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to valued and supportive others and minimizing threats to such feelings. This includes the emphasis on deepening knowledge and skills and increasing social and emotional problem solving capabilities. Special attention needs to be paid to enhancing social supports and advocacy for students and countering victimization (e.g., connecting students to a designated school staff patron/mentor/advisor/counselor, such as a homeroom teacher or a member of the school's student support staff).

Finally, it is essential to face the reality that the number of students in many schools who need help far outpaces the help available and that many students are not in situations that enhance equity of opportunity. From this perspective, we advocate for embedding transition and dropout prevention efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Such a system involves a fundamental transformation of current student and learning supports. For details on what such a transformation entails, see the 2015 Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

Concluding Comments

As Slavin (2009) cautions: "Success in the early grades does not guarantee success in later schooling, but failure in the early grades virtually ensures failure in later schooling." The 9th grade bulge and dropping out are painful reminders that too many students are being left behind. Given the multitude of causal factors, it is not surprising that prevailing efforts to address the problem have not been highly successful. It is time to go beyond current approaches. At every grade, the problems experienced by students require a unified, comprehensive, and equitable focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Some Center Resources Related to this Resource

See the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds. In particular, see the Quick Finds on:

>*Transitions* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm
>*Dropout Prevention* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/dropout.html

Examples of documents (with links) included in the *Transitions* Quick Find are:

>*Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support*
>*Support for Transitions to Address Barriers to Learning*
>*Supporting successful transition to ninth grade*
>*Addressing Barriers to Successful Middle Transitioin.*
>*Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School*
>*Getting the School Year Off to a Good Start*

Examples of documents (with links) included in the *Dropout Prevention* Quick Find are:

>*Dropout Prevention*
>*Early High School Dropouts: What are their Characteristics?*
>*Concerns = Opportunities: Addressing Student Disengagement, Acting Out,*
> *and Dropouts by Moving in New Directions*
>*Re-Engaging Students in Learning at School*
>*School Dropout Prevention: A Civil Rights and Public Health Imperative*
>*School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in*
> *the Right Direction?*

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