

Supporting Successful Transition to Ninth Grade

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/transitionsninthgrade.pdf>)

Starting ninth grade is not just another grade transition. For most students it is a major life change. Some don't even survive the transition and become early "push outs." For too many others, the emotional toll is high, and this exacerbates behavior and learning problems.

Besides the obvious changes related to school setting and instructional content, processes, and outcome standards, the move to ninth grade usually is accompanied by notable changes in role and status and interpersonal relationships. These yield significant shifts in self-perceptions and expectations and in what is valued by the youngster.

Thus, from a developmental and motivational perspective, eighth and ninth grades are critical times for transition supports designed to assure *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Such interventions must encompass programs to

- C promote and maintain positive attitudes during the transition
- C anticipate and prevent problems
- C provide special assistance to those whose problems make it highly likely that the transition will be difficult to negotiate
- C monitor transitions in order to respond at the first indications a student is having transition problems

Successful ninth grade transition programs are built on the foundation of good schooling through the eighth grade. Eighth grade provides the opportunity for a variety of specific activities aimed at enhancing positive motivation about and capabilities for making the ninth grade transition. This obviously includes 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 focus on supporting the transition encompasses much more.

With full appreciation of what the ninth grade transition experience entails, support for transition also includes programs designed to deepen students' knowledge and skills, increase social and emotional problem solving capabilities, and enhance student feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness with supportive others.

Examples

Special course and use of natural opportunities: Offering a transition course in eighth grade and using natural opportunities throughout the school day to enhance specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the transition.

Peer buddies: Connecting eighth graders to ninth grade peer buddies during the last month before the transition or at least from day one in ninth grade. Such buddies would be trained to participate in orienting and welcoming, provide social support for the period of transition, and introduce the newcomer to peers and into activities during the first few weeks of transition.

Personalized programs for those already identified as likely to have difficulty with the transition: Such programs need to be designed no later than the middle of eighth grade. They should be designed to develop an individual transition plan, with specific objectives related to both motivational and capability concerns.

Special assistance for those who don't transition successfully: Ninth grade teachers usually are painfully aware of students who are not making a successful transition. The school's learning supports' component should include a system for responding as soon as a teacher identifies such a student. Such a system should be prepared to develop personalized transition supports and specialized assistance as needed.

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 how differences are manifested in terms of motivation, developmental capability, and actions.

Environments also should be redesigned to maximize opportunities to enhance competence, self-determination, and connectedness to valued others and to minimize threats to such feelings. Particular attention needs to be paid to enhancing opportunities for social support, counseling, and advocacy by designated school staff (e.g., a homeroom teacher, a member of the school's support staff) and to strategies for eliminating victimization.

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.

The Center's Quick Find Online Clearinghouse has material on Transitions that provides helpful resources:

Go to http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp/p2101_01.htm

Among the sources you can link to from the Quick Find is the Center's intro packet entitled:

Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support

and a training tutorial entitled:

Support for Transitions to Address Barriers to Learning

One School's Approach

Wheaton High School – <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/wheatonhs/academy/ninth.html>

The Ninth Grade Academy (designed as a small learning community) is a school-within-a-school organized around interdisciplinary teams of English, math, science, and social studies who share a specific area of the school building. Freshmen are assigned to a house of 80-100 students. (A house is an organizational arrangement that assigns students and teachers to teams in a set of rooms). Mainstreamed students, supported by special education instructors, are assigned to a house with the same team expectations.

It is a mission of the Ninth Grade Academy to ensure incoming freshman make a smooth transition. The overall goal is to provide programs and supports addressing the unique needs of entering freshman resulting in increased achievement. Incoming freshmen are connected to a select team of caring Academy staff to personalize the transition and address specific students' needs. The freshman orientation course "Connections" focuses on developing and honing the personal and academic skills of these students, while connecting them to the academic and career pathways that will define their secondary school experiences.

Specific measurable objectives include:

- Objective 1: The passing rate of students from grade 9 to grade 10 will increase by 5%.
- Objective 2: The percentage of students losing credit and/or failing one or more courses during the freshman year will decline by 5% for each sub-group of the population.
- Objective 3: The average GPA of freshman will increase by .25 for each sub group of the population.
- Objective 4: The percentage of freshmen who pass the countywide end of course exam and/or the High School Assessment in English, Algebra 1, Biology, and NSL will increase by 5% for each sub-group of the population.
- Objective 5: The percentage of freshman who are eligible to participate in extracurricular activities will increase by 5% for each sub group of the population, and the participation levels in these activities will increase at the same level.

Benefits to Be Accrued by Students

- C increased academic achievement and reductions in the achievement gap
- C increased student attendance, attitudes and behavior
- C reduced isolation that often seeds alienation and violence
- C promotion of positive feelings about self and others
- C increased numbers of students matriculating to 10th grade
- C lower student drop out rate
- C increased extracurricular participation rate
- C enhanced student awareness of academic/career options
- C stronger student-teacher relationships
- C enhanced student ability to apply academic content and skills for success in real world settings
- C involvement of each student along with his/her parent/guardian in a guidance and advisory system.