

NINTH GRADE COUNTS



Strengthening the Transition into High School

A THREE-PART GUIDE

1 Systemic Transition Strategies
English Language Learners
Summer Bridge Programs

Ninth Grade Counts

Strengthening the Transition into High School

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INTRODUCTION

Why We Created this Guide

Ninth grade is a potential minefield for many young adolescents. During the freshman year, incoming students encounter new emotions, new social situations, and new intellectual challenges. And they also begin creating an enduring academic record that will either open up a world of exciting opportunities upon graduation or prematurely foreclose on their collegiate and career prospects. We know that more students fail ninth grade than any other grade, creating what has been called the “ninth-grade bump”—struggling, off-track students are held back by negative self-beliefs, a lack of credits, and an inability to recover from past failures, and the freshman class swells to become the largest in the high school. We also know that many students enter high school performing two or even three years below grade level, and that these students are most at risk of continued failure or dropping out. At the same time, we also know that early warning signs—such as irregular attendance, persistent behavioral issues, and poor grades in middle and elementary school—are often predictive of high school underperformance or a failure to graduate. If educators monitor early warning signs, and if they take proactive steps to strengthen the ninth-grade transition, fewer students will fail and more will graduate prepared for college and the modern workplace.

This guide was created to help schools diagnose weaknesses in their ninth-grade programs, and then develop a purposeful, proactive plan to strengthen this critical educational transition. Focusing on a selection of effective strategies and practices, the guide will equip districts and schools with a comprehensive, step-by-step process they can use to build a high-impact ninth-grade action plan. Specifically, the guide will help districts and schools:

- Engage their faculties in self-reflective discussions about ninth-grade success—what it takes to make sure all students are on track academically and on target to graduate prepared for college by the end of tenth grade.
- Isolate both strengths and weaknesses in their ninth-grade programs.
- Identify high-impact instructional and support strategies likely to increase the achievement and attainment of ninth-grade students.
- Determine action-plan priorities that will help schools achieve their distinct goals for ninth-grade success.

How to Use the Guide

Ninth Grade Counts was developed to help districts and schools strengthen the programs and practices they use to support students entering ninth grade. The tool includes three main components:

- 1 A self-assessment protocol and activity that will help schools engage in small- and large-group discussions about existing ninth-grade programs.
- 2 Four brief vignettes of real high schools that have adopted innovative practices to strengthen their ninth-grade transitions.
- 3 A series of three “planning roadmaps” that will help schools identify best practices, leadership strategies, and action-plan priorities.

Planning Roadmaps

The three roadmaps are organized into the following subsections, each of which features a selection of high-impact practices and recommendations:

DISTRICT + SCHOOL CONDITIONS

- Culture + Expectations
- Professional Development
- Leadership + Resources
- Policies + Accountability

PLANNING + INDUCTION PROGRAMS

- Middle School Collaboration
- Grouping + Support Planning
- Orientation Programs
- Summer Bridge Programs

INSTRUCTION + INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

- Learning Environment
- Personalized Instruction
- Academic Support
- Social + Emotional Support

INTRODUCTION

Instructions

STEP 1

Begin by reviewing and discussing the selection of best practices in teams. Compare the strategies with existing practices in your district or school, and begin to identify where the practices align or diverge. The accompanying vignettes will help you to consider the strategies in context.

STEP 2

Review the column entitled *What Leaders Can Do*, a selection of guidance and recommendations for school leaders overseeing the implementation of ninth-grade improvement work. This step is intended to get administrators, project directors, and teacher-leaders thinking about and discussing the leadership and coordination strategies needed to successfully implement an action plan focused on the ninth-grade transition.

STEP 3

Each of the planning roadmaps includes workspace to record what's working and what's not, and to begin mapping out ninth-grade improvement priorities. In the *What's Working* and *What's Not Working* columns, you should only record existing strategies and practices, not plans that have yet to be implemented.

STEP 4

The *Priorities + Next Steps* column is where you can begin to record action-plan activities designed to strengthen the ninth-grade transition. Once your district or school has completed the process, you should have a clear set of strategies and action steps that can be incorporated into a systemic district or school action plan.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

- 1 The self-assessment and planning process outlined in *Ninth Grade Counts* is not a perfect measure of school performance, but simply a useful action-planning framework that educators can use to help make the complexities of school improvement more manageable.
- 2 The planning roadmaps give school leaders a logical structure and process to follow when addressing critical aspects of ninth-grade success—but they are not the only important features to consider when developing effective transition programs. Real schools are not neatly organized into clear-cut categories, education research cannot take every factor into account, and systemic school improvement rarely unfolds according to a perfectly charted step-by-step process. Schools are complex, interdependent learning environments with unique qualities and characteristics, which means that no tool or process—no matter how well devised—will be able to anticipate or address every need.
- 3 The three approaches in the self-assessment activity—*Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*—give schools general profiles of ninth-grade transition programs at distinct stages of development. These descriptions are merely brief, representative illustrations, and schools will likely recognize elements of their organization or culture in all three approaches. Users should avoid attempts to perfectly match their district or school to a specific approach—the purpose of the activity is to encourage faculties to engage in the kind of frank, constructive, forward-looking discussions that move them from where they are to where they want to be.

SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY



LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPECIAL-NEEDS INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Long Beach Unified School District, which educates 83,000 students in 84 public schools, has numerous student support and intervention programs in place, but project director Nader Twal says that a comprehensive review of performance data revealed that the district was not reaching the neediest population in their schools: students with disabilities. The district discovered that, upon entering high school, these students could not fully participate in the smaller learning communities and related SLC activities offered in its schools. To address the situation, the district created a task force to tackle barriers to full SLC participation for students with disabilities based on their individual preferences. The district is also working to systemically increase elective participation for all students with disabilities and is currently piloting other authentic inclusion opportunities. The work is being guided by a tiered support system that allows full integration of students with disabilities into SLCs when they enter in the ninth grade. Student career-interest data and support from the IEP team is being utilized in the SLC integration process, with additional flexibility that allows the students to participate in learning-pathway activities and performance assessments. Whenever possible, students with disabilities in the district are mainstreamed into SLC classes.

According to Twal, the district's support and inclusion strategies have helped schools take full advantage of their Response to Instruction and Intervention program, which is designed to provide "consistent and sustained support to ensure that all students achieve their maximum potential."

Self-Assessment Protocol

The following protocol provides an opportunity for districts and schools to engage in a self-reflective conversation about freshman success and ninth-grade transition strategies. The goal of the activity is to examine your district or school in terms of three different approaches to ninth-grade instruction and student support: *Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*. When it comes to successful transitions, proactive strategies are essential—a school community that strategically plans and prepares can ensure all students succeed as they transition into high school. Working in small groups, the protocol will help school leaders, educators, and staff assess where they are and determine where they would like to be—an essential first step in the action-planning process.

Purpose

To identify strengths and weaknesses in existing ninth-grade programs and strategies as a first step toward building a more effective transition for incoming students.

Structure

Divide into groups of four and assign the roles of facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper.

Time

Between 60-90 minutes.

Protocol [Adapted from the School Reform Initiative's *Save the Last Word for ME* protocol]

- 1 Individually, read the three descriptions—*Reactive*, *Passive*, and *Proactive*—on the following page. Keep in mind that these descriptions are merely concise, illustrative profiles that are based upon a synthesis of observations, research studies, and reports from schools. Your district or school may closely resemble one of the descriptions or it may reflect elements of all three. The goal is to provoke thoughtful, self-reflective discussions about how your school is structured for ninth-grade success. While reading, participants should identify the specific features they believe accurately describe their school or district, and then select two or three passages they consider particularly important.
- 2 When the group is ready, a volunteer reads one passage that he or she has found to be the most significant. NOTE: The volunteer should not reveal why the passage is significant at this time.
- 3 After pausing briefly to reflect upon what has been said, the other three participants will have one minute to respond to the selected passage and express what it made them think about and what questions it raised.
- 4 After the three have spoken, the first participant has three minutes to explain why he or she selected the passage.
- 5 The group conducts four rounds of seven minutes each. The same process is followed until all members have had a turn.
- 6 Participants share their opinions and thoughts about the district or school's general approach, making sure to base their comments on concrete evidence, observations, and hard data as much as possible.
- 7 Each group makes a collective determination about where their district or school falls on the passive-reactive-proactive continuum and cites three specific supporting examples that came up during the session. One group member should be the recorder for this exercise. The group may use a flip chart or computer to record the examples.
- 8 The groups reconvene and share their results with the larger group.
- 9 The large-group facilitator collects the results and examples for future planning, making sure that all participants receive copies.

Passive

- Ninth-grade teachers are provided with some data on incoming students, but there is no formal process for using data to inform ninth-grade practices and little collaboration or communication with feeder middle schools.
- Students who are entering below grade level or who have failed multiple middle school courses may be encouraged to pursue summer-school courses or tutoring at their own expense, but the high school does not provide a summer bridge program.
- All incoming students are given printed orientation materials—the student handbook, a course-selection guide—but actual orientation programs tend to be short, cursory, and sporadically offered; parents may or may not have easy access to these materials.
- There is little contact and communication between teachers and parents, and the default expectation is that it is the parents' responsibility to request calls or conferences with teachers, counselors, or the support staff.
- There are few or no policies governing ninth-grade support systems, interdisciplinary learning, or team planning.
- Ninth-grade teachers develop their own curriculum and largely work in isolation, and their classrooms are distributed throughout the building. Leveled course placements are made based on past performance, test scores, and teacher recommendations, and learning expectations may vary widely from course to course.
- Teachers and counselors provide a range of support opportunities to students, but the programs are largely elective; even though many parents are not well informed about the options, they are still expected to request these services.
- Students who are in danger of failing, losing credit, or dropping out are referred to counselors or support specialists, who tend to work in isolation from teachers.
- The district and school apply the same general practices, policies, and procedures to the ninth grade that they do to other grade levels.
- Problems with ninth-grade programs and students are rarely discussed during staff meetings.
- Advisory opportunities are scheduled, but they tend to be disorganized, which results in squandered time; when advisories do meet, little time is devoted to interventions or postsecondary planning.

Reactive

- Ninth-grade teams request data and guidance from sending middle schools only after specific students have been identified as at-risk and off-track by high school staff.
- Summer bridge programs are provided only to a limited number of students who have failed courses in middle school or otherwise been identified as being at higher risk of ninth-grade failure.
- Optional summer orientation programs introduce students and families to the high school's learning opportunities and academic expectations, but attendance is often low and few efforts are made to advertise the programs or engage the parents of at-risk students.
- Teachers, counselors, and the support staff are encouraged to reach out to the parents of at-risk students, but there are no formal policies or monitoring procedures to ensure that communication takes place.
- Ninth-grade teams have been created, but team members are not given common planning time during the school day, they teach other grade levels, and their classrooms are spread throughout the school.
- Students are placed into course levels based upon their prior academic record, and many lower-track courses offer less demanding content taught at a slower pace.
- Staff members may identify high achievers and provide supplemental learning opportunities to ensure they are challenged.
- Intervention strategies are based on standardized expectations for student performance at a particular course level, not on identified student needs.
- When problems arise, teachers typically provide support to students on their own, not as an extension of team collaboration or an established intervention protocol.
- Teachers refer students to counselors who meet with students only as needed.
- The district and school recognize that ninth-grade course failures, achievement gaps, and dropout rates are a significant problem, but the response consists of quick-fix strategies and attempts to minimize, rationalize, or excuse the problem.
- Advisory time is used to teach "freshman success" skills, but students may not be paired with team teachers.

Proactive

- Every year, ninth-grade teachers and counselors meet with middle school educators in the spring to review data and identify students at risk of failure, dropping out, or entering high school below grade level.
- The school's four-to-six-week summer bridge program is offered to all transitioning students at no cost.
- A comprehensive orientation program addresses not only academic preparation, but also strategies and support related to study habits, attendance, and other social, emotional, and personal factors that can adversely impact learning and achievement.
- As an extension of ninth-grade policy, teachers and counselors reach out to the parents of incoming ninth graders during the middle school years and over the summer, ensuring that all students and parents are well informed about school programs.
- Ninth-grade teams are given dedicated space in the school facility to encourage a collective sense of responsibility for the success of every student.
- Ninth-grade support teams thoughtfully create balanced, heterogeneous student teams and plan curriculum, instruction, and support collaboratively during professional development time that has been incorporated into the school day.
- Teachers use middle-level data to design appropriate supplemental-instruction opportunities and classroom-embedded interventions.
- The ninth-grade core curriculum engages students in authentic learning experiences that connect content to real-world problems, student interests, and community issues.
- Literacy strategies and interventions are embedded in all ninth-grade classes.
- Students exhibiting early warning signs, whether behavioral or academic, are provided with a range of appropriate support strategies that are intensively focused on learning acceleration.
- When standards are not met, all students are given multiple opportunities to revise work, retake assessments, and accelerate their learning.
- Advisory groups meet regularly with team teachers to review learning progress, discuss social issues, and develop a personal learning plan focused on college and career preparation.



OAKLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DISTRICT-WIDE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

Oakland Public Schools, an urban district serving approximately 10,000 high school students in northern California, created a comprehensive early warning system that identifies incoming ninth graders in danger of failure or dropping out and helps teachers plan appropriate interventions well before the students enter ninth grade. Summer Bridge Academies help students on the early warning list successfully transition from middle school to high school. The four-week programs provide intensive interventions in reading, writing, and algebra; teach practical life and study skills necessary for success in high school; and strategically build college knowledge and postsecondary aspirations. Once the school year begins, freshman houses—the teaming structures used to group all freshman students—use the early warning data to identify incoming at-risk freshman. Many of these students are enrolled in learning-acceleration courses, first in literacy and then in math, and teacher teams closely monitor progress and learning growth. All high schools in the district have a literacy specialist who works with between 60-80 freshmen throughout the year and coaches teachers on how to incorporate academic literacy strategies into their instruction. While all schools use the same early warning indicators, the interventions look different across schools and houses.

The emphasis on identifying specific student learning needs and building responsive, personalized interventions has been instrumental in reducing student attrition in the SLC schools. According to Cleo Protopapas, the SLC project director, focusing improvement strategies, staffing, and funding on the ninth grade is a long-term investment that will pay dividends for the schools—and most importantly, the students—for years to come.

Culture + Expectations

- The administration, faculty, and support staff share a collective commitment to preparing all students for postsecondary success, while embracing a no-excuses approach to helping all students succeed regardless of their background, past performance, or perceived ability.
- School structures and practices—for example, an untracked core curriculum and standards-based approaches to instruction, assessment, and reporting—reinforce the school's commitment to high standards and equitable outcomes.
- The faculty embraces change, and practices are regularly modified or abandoned if they fail to produce equitable learning outcomes for all students.
- All staff members clearly and consistently communicate learning expectations to students, parents, and community members, and all students know that failing to meet standards is not an option.
- From the moment they enter the school, the school's educators and support staff keep students focused on the end goal: graduating prepared for college and careers.

Professional Development

- All ninth-grade teaching teams participate in structured professional learning groups and use planning time to develop and refine common, classroom-embedded interventions in all courses.
- Professional development addresses the ongoing collection and use of data in curriculum planning, interventions, and formative assessments.
- All teachers receive training in learning-acceleration strategies for English language learners, special-needs students, and other subgroups.
- Ninth-grade teachers are afforded multiple opportunities to engage in structured dialogue and collaborative planning every week, and teachers regularly observe one another's practice, review student work, offer constructive feedback, and work collaboratively to expand instructional repertoires.
- A mentoring program helps accelerate the acquisition of strong instructional practices for new ninth-grade teachers.

Leadership + Resources

- Student achievement and faculty learning needs are regularly reviewed, and all teachers are given professional development that targets instructional weaknesses.
- Leaders embrace change with a sense of urgency, but they remain mindful of the need for transparency, strong communication, faculty buy-in, community support, and long-term sustainability.
- A shared-governance model promotes teacher leadership, self-accountability, and the autonomy needed to deliver just-in-time interventions.
- Resources are allocated to create the necessary preconditions for equity and student success—for example, math and literacy support programs are adequately funded and staffed to accelerate learning and close achievement gaps.
- Staffing assignments incorporate companion classes that supplement the regular curriculum and provide additional instructional time for academically struggling students.
- School schedules incorporate flexibility so that the faculty and support staff can provide timely, responsive interventions to students.
- The district partners with local nonprofits and businesses to multiply learning experiences and support opportunities for students, including tutoring, mentoring, internship, and career-exploration programs.
- District and school leaders have reviewed resource streams and committed necessary funding and staffing to achieve ninth-grade transition goals.

Policies + Accountability

- District policies provide clear and explicit guidelines on how middle schools and high schools will address the needs of all incoming students, including the collection and exchange of student data.
- The district has an early warning protocol that ensures all students receive timely interventions and social services.
- District policies are regularly audited to remove roadblocks to success, whether they are found in the grading system, attendance policies, behavioral codes, or grade-promotion policies.
- District policies support formative assessment, standards-based instruction, and other strategies that measure the attainment of specific learning standards and that equip teachers with timely, detailed data on the learning progress of individual students.
- Practices are abandoned if they create obstacles to knowledge acquisition, learning acceleration, and equity.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Articulate a bold, coherent vision of high expectations for every student, and ensure that all policies, resources, programs, practices, and leadership decisions are consistent with the vision.
- ✓ Develop an integrated K-12 data system that uses unique student identifiers to flag early warning signs such as inconsistent attendance, behavioral concerns, and underperformance to equip teachers with the information they need to customize interventions.
- ✓ Use tools, policies, and resources that are known to work, such as established response to intervention practices or the early warning protocol developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- ✓ Give team-based professional learning groups a clear set of directives: e.g., all groups will (1) identify and monitor student learning needs, (2) engage in constructive peer observation and feedback, (3) co-develop and refine lessons and instructional practices, (4) improve support systems, and (5) ensure that every student receives a personalized learning experience in the classroom.
- ✓ Know your research and statistics—and use them to inform your ninth-grade transition strategy. For example, 80% of students who repeat their ninth-grade year do not graduate. If higher graduation rates are the goal, invest in learning acceleration and move away from grade repetition.
- ✓ Audit policies to identify and remove roadblocks to ninth-grade student success. For example, policies that require suspension for unexcused absences, automatic course failures for missed days, or grading systems that make it harder for students to build confidence and overcome early failures can inadvertently undermine ninth-grade transition strategies.
- ✓ Consider the realities of adolescent social, emotional, and cognitive development when developing transition strategies. If a strategy is not developmentally appropriate, it's less likely to work.
- ✓ Utilize data systems and student surveys to track the success of specific interventions—whether it is tutoring, online credit recovery, companion courses, or advisories—as a way to ensure the efficient and effective use of resources.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM

Prince George's County Public Schools, the second largest district in Maryland serving more than 123,000 students in grades K-12, created a unique program to help students transition academically and socially into high school. Called Jumpstart to Graduation, the program is designed to get students focused on graduation and postsecondary planning before they even begin high school. Students attend the program for five hours a day, four days a week, for one month during the summer before ninth grade. The program utilizes a project-based-learning curriculum and also includes advisory periods, college visits, team-building exercises, and a variety of activities intended to boost confidence and preparation for high school. Participating students also meet with high school staff and take classes with many of the same teachers they will have in the ninth grade. The program also provides a preview of the curriculum and instruction that students will experience in their core academic subjects. Unlike the district's remedial summer-bridge programs, Jumpstart to Graduation is open to all rising ninth-grade students.

Jumpstart to Graduation is starting to show promising results. Yet even with its proven success, the program remains a work in progress. According to Darlene Bruton, the SLC project director for the district, support programs such as Jumpstart must be continually evaluated and modified to ensure that they are meeting the needs of participating students and achieving the desired results. Bruton also emphasizes the need to ensure that support programs are fully integrated into district-wide improvement work.

Middle School Collaboration

- All sending middle schools in the district track and analyze detailed data on student performance, and the data is shared with the high school to identify off-track or at-risk students prior to entering ninth grade.
- The district and school leadership provide multiple opportunities for middle-level and ninth-grade teachers to meet throughout the spring and summer to review student data, ask questions, plan interventions, and build teams.
- The high school's early warning system is informed by middle and elementary school data to create an integrated system of interventions.
- Middle and high school teachers meet regularly—at least two times a year or at the end of each semester or trimester—to ensure a seamless, coherent grade 6-12 curriculum, especially in math and English language arts.

Orientation Programs

- The school has a multifaceted orientation program that begins well before students enter ninth grade—for example, it could begin with casual meet-and-greet sessions at the middle school, include home visits during the summer, and conclude with comprehensive, multiday orientation to high school work and life for all students and parents.
- Efforts to engage the parents of at-risk and off-track ninth-grade students are proactive and ongoing throughout the school year.
- Parent and family engagement begins in middle school and continues throughout the ninth-grade year.
- Advisory groups are assigned in the preceding spring, and advisors reach out to students and parents well in advance of the school year.
- Orientation materials and resources are not only made available in print, but they are distributed electronically and through a dedicated page on the school's website.

Grouping + Support Planning

- Student groupings across ninth-grade teams, content areas, courses, and programs are balanced, diverse, and heterogeneous.
- Teachers plan and design classroom-based interventions using data provided by and reviewed with middle-level teachers and staff.
- Teams are co-located in the school facility and given dedicated space to help foster teacher collaboration, interdisciplinary work, and stronger relationships.
- All ninth-grade students participate in structured, well-organized advisories that meet at least biweekly to address academic, social, and future-planning issues.
- The classroom is a primary delivery mechanism for interventions, and counselors and support staff reinforce the academic and social support provided by teachers.
- Learning standards are aligned across all core content-area courses and grade levels, particularly within each discipline, to strengthen curricular coherence, foster greater teacher collaboration, and support integrated interventions.
- English language learner programs are intensively focused on the acquisition of academic literacy.

Summer Bridge Programs

- Summer bridge programs are integral to the school's advance-planning work, and involve the ninth-grade faculty, advisors, and the support staff.
- The summer program addresses the three critical dimensions of ninth-grade success: (1) on-track readiness in English language arts and math, (2) orientation to high school life and academic expectations, and (3) confidence-building social, emotional, and academic support for at-risk students and their parents.
- Summer learning programs are tightly aligned with the ninth-grade curriculum and at least four full weeks in length.
- The curriculum connects authentic learning of academic content to community contexts and opportunities.
- To provide comprehensive preparation for rigorous academics, programs include research techniques, technological literacy, study habits, planning strategies, and the foundational skills necessary for high school success.
- To ensure equitable access for all students in need, there is no cost to participate in summer-bridge experiences and invitations are distributed to all students and families.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Create clear processes and guidelines that ensure academic support teams—teachers, advisors, counselors, and support staff—maintain ongoing communication and contact with students and parents throughout the transition process.
- ✓ Ensure that the faculty and support staff are on alert during the critical first 30 days of school so that early warning signs can be efficiently flagged and responded to as they manifest.
- ✓ Make that all personnel compiling and preparing data are well trained and follow clear protocols to ensure that all data is properly imputed and coded—the utility and effectiveness of an early warning system is only as good as the quality and accuracy of its data.
- ✓ Don't overbuild your monitoring and support systems—make sure staff can handle the monitoring requirements and focus the early warning system on the indicators that matter most, such as attendance, behavior, and performance in the core content areas.
- ✓ Establish clear performance expectations for all students in the core content areas, and especially in reading, writing, and math. Make sure all learning standards and academic expectations are clearly and repeatedly communicated to middle school teachers, parents, and incoming students to improve awareness and preparedness.
- ✓ Participate actively in planning time and professional learning groups as a way to stay connected to daily instruction and student needs, and make sure that this time is intensively focused on what matters most: personalizing interventions, developing authentic learning, and keeping students engaged and on track.
- ✓ Use learning materials to enhance parent awareness, understanding, and engagement. For example, rubrics and performance reports that clearly articulate learning standards and objectives can help parents understand instructional goals and better support student learning at home.
- ✓ Don't assume that some students are already prepared—build orientation and support programs on the belief that all students need help to succeed. Even the highest-performing students may need personalized attention, whether it's accelerated learning opportunities, college-planning guidance, or social and emotional interventions.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps



LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

NINTH-GRADE TEAMS

Lincoln High School, which enrolls more than 1,500 students in Lincoln, Nebraska, uses teaming and collaborative planning in the ninth grade to improve student outcomes. All ninth-grade English, science, and social studies teachers are on teams that meet three times a week. Team schedules are determined in advance of the rest of the school schedule to ensure that teaming time remains a top priority—not an afterthought or an add-on. Teams regularly discuss attendance, individual interventions, and curriculum and instructional strategies. Each team educates 60-100 students, and dedicated administrators meet regularly to review student data and ensure consistency across teams. Individual and aggregate student data is collected every four to five weeks and reviewed during team meetings. Teachers look at the numbers of students passing and failing each subject (including non-team classes), attendance rates, and other data to develop and refine student interventions.

The teacher-collaboration process was not always easy, but it improved significantly when the teams started to analyze concrete data. According to Jill Able, the site coordinator for Lincoln High School, “It is about building relationships among teachers and administrators and talking about the importance of what we need to do for students.” Focusing on data, says Able, keeps faculty conversations continually focused on “where we are” and “where we want to be.”

Learning Environment

- Core content-area courses are heterogeneously grouped and all courses offer honors options for accelerated students.
- The physical environment provides dedicated personal learning space to students.
- Ninth-grade class structures—teams, work groups, advisories, course designs, and support opportunities—balance academic personalization with school-wide opportunities and social inclusion.
- The design and application of instructional strategies are the foundation of academic personalization, with advisories, interventions, and support programs supplementing and reinforcing the instructional program.
- The schedule balances time for teacher planning and professional development, large- and small-group student work, and support opportunities, including advisories, companion classes, tutoring, and other strategies.

Personalized Instruction

- Teachers combine a caring attitude—encouragement, attention, and positive reinforcement—with high expectations: they do not accept failure, let students give up, or water-down learning standards.
- Detailed data on the learning progress of individual students and student groups—from assessment scores to formative feedback to conversations with team teachers, the support staff, and parents—are used to modify and optimize classroom practice.
- Personal learning plans and portfolios are used to establish academic goals, incorporate future planning, and track learning progress and attainment.
- All academic reporting clearly articulates learning targets, progress made on the achievement of standards, and high-priority improvement areas in ways that students, parents, and guardians will readily understand.
- Students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate skill acquisition and the achievement of standards.

Academic Support

- Classroom instruction and academic support are intensively focused on learning acceleration—standards, instruction, and expectations are not watered down and essential-skill acquisition is not postponed.
- 21st-century skills—such as critical thinking, teamwork, technological literacy, and multicultural understanding—are embedded throughout the curriculum and in every class, every day.
- Time is allocated in all courses and support programs for lessons in academic skills such as research practices, study habits, organizational strategies, writing effectively, speaking persuasively, and using technology.
- The school’s early warning system includes on-track and off-track indicators that are used to inform interventions, and additional literacy and numeracy instruction is provided—both inside and outside the classroom—to ensure students stay on track with college-preparatory learning standards.
- In every course, teachers model and cultivate the executive-function skills—persistence, focus, self-control, planning, confidence—that are essential to success in learning and in adult life.
- The ninth-grade experience is characterized by both flexibility (in scheduling, instruction, and the use of space) and firmness (in consistency of support, instruction, and learning expectations).

Social + Emotional Support

- Teams of teachers, staff, counselors, and classmates work together as an extended support group for learning, and the monitoring of individual student well-being and progress is shared by multiple teachers and adults in the school.
- The school’s structures, practices, and professional development are designed to make sure that all ninth-grade students are well known, feel supported, and experience a sense of belonging in the school community.
- Affirming aspirations-building messages are delivered in every class, and college and career planning begins the moment students begin ninth grade.
- Each ninth-grade team has a dedicated counselor who works closely with teachers and the support staff, and students in need of social services are referred to appropriate specialists in an efficient and timely manner.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Make sure the school's early warning system focuses on the high-priority ABC warning signs—Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance—and make the review and analysis of these indicators a top priority for ninth-grade teams.
- ✓ Use small interventions that can make a big difference—for example, require teachers and support staff to check in with every ninth-grade student at least once a week about academic progress, future planning, social assimilation, and personal issues.
- ✓ Be disciplined and purposeful with interventions, and make sure that resources, staff, and time are devoted not only on those students who are furthest behind, but also those who have recently fallen off track.
- ✓ For ninth-grade courses, compliment teacher-directed instruction and practice with hands-on, project-based lessons that explore student interests and real-world issues.
- ✓ Don't assume you know what your students are thinking or feeling—ask them directly and use the feedback to inform instruction, interventions, and program design. Use multiple anonymous student surveys over the course of the ninth-grade year to get insights into the learning experience from the student perspective.
- ✓ Avoid placing students back in the same classroom environments, with the same instruction and curriculum, that didn't work the first time. Instead, diversify teaching and intervention strategies, and multiply opportunities for students to get extra help, complete missed work, demonstrate mastery of standards, and recover credit.
- ✓ Use your communications assets—websites, email lists, the student information system—to compliment and improve interventions. For example, some student information systems include automatic email notifications to parents when students fall off track.
- ✓ Move students on to tenth grade no matter what. Holding students back only increases their chances of dropping out or not graduating. Redouble and intensify efforts to accelerate learning instead of slowing learning down.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps

About the Smaller Learning Communities Program

The U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Program awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies to support the implementation of smaller learning communities and activities designed to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Smaller learning communities include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or themes, "houses" in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, autonomous schools-within-a-school, and personalization strategies such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.

In May 2007, the U.S. Department of Education established a new absolute priority for the program that focuses grant assistance on projects that are part of a larger, comprehensive effort to prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.

The Smaller Learning Communities program is authorized under Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (20 U.S.C. 7249), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

For more information

ed.gov/programs/slcp