



# Policy Brief

## High School

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### Ensuring Successful Student Transitions from the Middle Grades to High School

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*The ninth grade is a 'make it or break it' time for students. High schools need to identify eighth-graders who are not ready for college preparatory-level courses and provide rich summer or school-year experiences to bring them up to speed.<sup>1</sup>*

-Southern Regional Education Board

#### Background

The 9th grade year is critical to students' success in high school: The influence of a broader number of peers (both positive and negative); the potential of developing a bad habit such as skipping class; and entry into a larger, sometimes seemingly less caring, environment can all impact how students react.

#### What does the research say?

##### Predictors of failure in high school:

- Each course failed in 8th grade increases the odds of non-promotion from 9th to 10th grade by 16%.<sup>2</sup>
- Students who are 15 years or older when they enter high school are at a greater risk of non-promotion, even controlling for previous academic achievement and attendance.<sup>3</sup>
- Although 8th-grade test scores are good predictors of students' likelihood to do well in high school courses, **course attendance is eight times more predictive** of course failure in the freshman year.<sup>4</sup>

##### Predictors of success in high school:

- Each additional percentage point increase in attendance decreases the odds of repeating 9th grade by 5%.<sup>5</sup>
- Higher-achieving students are considerably less likely to experience non-promotion in 9th grade.<sup>6</sup>
- The higher the number of credits a student attempts in 9th grade, the lower the odds of not being promoted to 10th grade.<sup>7</sup>
- Students attend class more often when they have strong relationships with their teachers, and when they see school and their coursework as relevant and important to their future.<sup>8</sup>

#### Students' Worries and Fears:

The increased number of students on a large high school campus can create:

- Fear and trepidation
- Feelings of being lost and not being connected
- A strong sense of anxiety, resulting from newfound anonymity.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that worries and fears can differ by gender with girls' concerns focused on academic adjustments, while boys' concerns more social/safety oriented.

### **The Importance of a Systemic Policy Approach to 9th Grade Transition:**

*Programmatic approaches to addressing dropping out are popular because they are easier to implement than systemic reforms, and they target students who clearly need support. But besides being impractical in schools where most students go off-track, they rarely are found to be effective. A 'second chance' or 'skimming off' strategy does little for students at risk for future failure, and it does not address problems of average and high-performing students performing below their potential. Too many disconnected programs can also decrease coherence in the instructional program of the school. Flexibility and tailored programs for a few students should not substitute for critical evaluation of schools' instructional programming, and all programs should be developed to align coherently with the general instructional plan of the school. [emphasis added]<sup>10</sup>*

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### **Expert Recommendations**

Robert Cooper and Suzanne Markoe-Hayes of the University of California Los Angeles have been engaged in an ongoing study dedicated to developing and evaluating a transition model that creates a college-going culture among 9th grade students.<sup>11</sup> In a 2005 report, they offer four policy recommendations to facilitate effective and successful transitions from middle school to high school and ultimately lead to high school graduation:

1. Allocate resources to support and oversee the 9th-grade transition
2. Fund programs that create intentional opportunities for positive peer network development
3. Educate families about the importance of the 9th-grade transition
4. Urban schools must place an explicit focus on “over-determining” success.

### **Recommendations from the report are quoted below:**

1. ***Allocate resources to support and oversee the 9th-grade transition.***  
Within many urban communities, resource allocation disadvantages incoming 9th grade students. The focus and priority of many schools is placed on juniors and seniors as they prepare for graduation.
2. ***Fund programs that create intentional opportunities for positive peer network development.***  
Students in the Cooper/Markoe-Hayes study report that in high school peer group association is far more influential than the family or the school. While a student's behavior is constrained by school and family rules and regulations, his/her attitudes, ideas and options are not. However, the cumulative influences of family and school are not negated by the strong influence of peer networks; rather, they exist in constant competition. Students in the study who were more successful in negotiating a balance between the competing spheres of influence were those students who reported early success in their academic pursuits. The challenge of negotiating these multiple influences is heightened for many urban students because of their doubly marginalized status of being both poor and of color.
3. ***Educate families about the importance of the 9th grade transition.***  
When parents have not had formal or positive educational experiences, it is difficult for them to properly guide their child in the process. The importance of a smooth transition from 8th grade to 9th grade cannot be emphasized enough, as this transition will determine a student's success in high school as well as decisions about their post-secondary school life. Therefore, there must be an effort made to inform parents of the importance of this transition, especially those who have no formal educational training at this level.
4. ***Urban schools must place an explicit focus on “over-determining” success.***  
Over-determining success is an idea that, while many evidence-based activities and programs can stand alone and lead to enhanced outcomes, when placed together they can have a multiplied effect on student success. Over-determining success involves creating (and in the case of many 9th graders, exposing them to) opportunities to participate in multiple, evidenced-based activities and programs that enhance academic success and college awareness. Such activities would include cultural and social skill-enrichment, mentoring and access to technology. Schools must be able to demonstrate to students the importance, advantages and realities of postsecondary education by

providing an explicit focus on "over-determining" success. Over-determining success consists of providing students with the resources and information necessary to pursue postsecondary education in amounts that exceed those usually considered to be adequate to accomplish such a goal. Students must be encouraged and prepared to move beyond the educational levels of their families and reconcile both their fears of failure and fears of success. Urban schools must work in partnerships with families to build supportive and nurturing, yet challenging learning environments that help students transition into high school, college and beyond with ease.

### ***Building on these recommendations:***

#### ***What might supportive approaches and policies look like?***

##### **1. Allocate resources to support and oversee the 9th-grade transition.**

Dollars might be targeted toward summer "catch-up" programs or other interventions for students who have not achieved at grade level. States might choose to provide incentives for schools that put their best teachers in 9th grade or that provide double doses of math and reading. Examples of these and other approaches are described below.

**Washington State's *Project Graduation*** includes:

- A "Gear Up" program to identify 7th- and 8th-grade students needing help
- Four- to six-week summer program for identified incoming high school students
- Extra help to students by providing double doses of math and reading/literacy
- Monitoring through meaningful advisory programs such as an "Advocate" for every family
- A goal of an annual increase in the number of students taking Algebra I in 8th grade
- Lower teacher student ratio in 9th grade — and the best teachers in 9th Grade
- 9th grade teachers with common planning time
- Transition classes for English and mathematics using a block schedule structure
- Career and technical education courses in 9th grade using a block schedule structure.

**Hawaii's** 2006-10 P-20 strategic plan includes a recommendation to "ensure that 9th-grade students receive the instructional and support services necessary for successful completion of high school." Suggested means of doing so include utilizing smaller "learning communities," increasing access to tutoring and academic summer camps, and creating a Web site to provide "one-stop" access to information about postsecondary institutions.

**Rhode Island** policy targets districts with a dropout rate over 15%. Such districts are subject to state department suggestions for specific methods of targeted interventions for students who fail Algebra I or any 9th-grade math class and have insufficient credits to be promoted.

**South Carolina** recently authorized middle schools to give the high-school-level end-of-course tests to middle schoolers who enroll in, say, Algebra I. Doing so should help reinforce the importance of students' academic efforts, as end-of-course results count toward graduation.

According to a **Vermont** 2002 department of education publication on high school reform, "students learn best when they are in a physically, emotionally and intellectually safe and respectful environment." One of the recommendations of the report is to develop freshman academies and transition programs to assist entering 9th graders.

**Oklahoma's** H.B. 2367 (enacted in 2006) allows districts to adopt an extended-day schedule for grades 9-12. A meaningful piece of this policy requires revocation of authorization for a program if student achievement is not documented.

##### **2. Fund programs that create intentional opportunities for positive peer network development.**

Fiscal incentives, for example, could be targeted to schools that address attendance issues head on and

that create freshman academies where 9th graders study and work as a common group — where students can be exposed to high-level curriculum but are provided with necessary support to succeed.

The **Louisiana** legislature approved a 2008 measure requiring the state board to develop methods of targeted intervention or to identify other appropriate existing methods for districts with a four-year cohort graduation rate below 70%. This might include early intervention for students who are at risk of failing Algebra I or any 9th-grade math class, credit recovery or targeting students with attention from graduation coaches in high school. The bill also asks the state board to gather data such as the total number of students who have failed Algebra I or English I, the total number of students who are repeating the 9th grade and the total number of students required to repeat a 9th-grade course.

**Florida's** Middle School Reform Act (2004) includes provisions that emphasize the importance of planning in middle school; the importance of student accountability in 8th grade; and the importance of grades in 9th grade. The act also focuses on the importance of attendance and encourages the establishment of freshman academies.

**Nevada** state policy requires the board of trustees of each school district to develop policies to ensure that all high schools with 1,200 students or more provide small learning communities within the school. Such policies are supposed to require guidance counselors, at least one licensed school administrator and appropriate adult mentors to be assigned to 9th graders. The school must also:

- Designate a separate area within the high school for 9th graders to attend class.
- Collect and maintain information on 9th graders, including credits earned, attendance, truancy and other risk indicators.
- Identify special needs of 9th graders with respect to remediation and counseling.

### **3. Educate families about the importance of the 9th-grade transition.**

One way to educate families about the importance of the 9th-grade transition might be to require that students and their parents are given information on colleges' entrance expectations — minimum coursework requirements, GPA, etc. — preferably as early as the middle grades, if not earlier, but absolutely at the beginning of high school.

Since 2005, **Iowa** policy has required that school boards assist 8th-graders with developing a core curriculum plan, and has required boards to report annually to high school students and parents regarding student progress in meeting the goals of completing a core curriculum.

**Nevada** requires schools to develop methods to increase parental involvement in the education of their 9th grade students.

The **Louisiana** legislature recently addressed truancy. H.B. 1133 requires school staff to notify a parent in writing upon the student's third unexcused absence or unexcused tardiness (defined as leaving or checking out of school unexcused prior to the regularly scheduled dismissal time at the end of the school day). The principal must hold a conference with that parent and the parent is required to acknowledge in writing that he/she has been notified.

For many years, most states have had consequences for parents who do not enforce school attendance, but it is only in recent years that a growing number of them have begun to quantify the number of specific absences that trigger these consequences. For example, Louisiana H.B. 1133 makes the first offense of "habitual truancy" or "habitual absence" punishable by a parent fine of not more than \$50 or the performance of not less than 25 hours of community service.

### **4. Urban schools must focus on "over-determining" success.**

The Tennessee State Board of Education adopted rules in 2008 that encourage schools to use students' 8th-grade EXPLORE scores and other assessments to identify students unprepared for 9th grade and, if needed, to step in with assistance. Schools are encouraged to experiment with ways to provide additional support, such as:

- High school readiness programs during the summer prior to 9th grade

- Extended time to master challenging courses, with elective credit given for the additional units
- Tutoring by teachers, peers or community volunteers during, before and after school, and on weekends
- An accelerated program to bring 9th-grade students up to grade level
- Computer assisted programs.

The new policy asks schools to seek ways to personalize the high school experience, including the extension of middle school concepts and practices to the high school. Teachers working in teams, for example, will have the opportunity to get to know students better and meet their needs more appropriately. When the student is in the 8th grade, the student, parent/guardian(s), and faculty advisor or guidance counselor will jointly prepare an initial four-year plan of high school study. It asks high school and middle grades faculty to collaborate in planning curriculum and the transition between middle grades and high school.

**South Dakota** law requires that parents of students in grades 7-12 be informed every year about what courses their sons and daughters need to take to be prepared for postsecondary-level work.

Over-determining success could be interpreted to include not allowing students to fail. Strengthening insistence on effort is one means of ensuring that students do not fail. For adolescents, motivation is sometimes difficult, and it might be necessary to grasp onto carrots and sticks that — while not optimal — can help hold students' feet to the fire.

ECS has identified a few states that mandate parents be annually notified of whether their child is on track to graduate from high school. **Washington** and **Maryland** require high schools, at the beginning of each school year, to provide students and parents with a copy of the graduation requirements. Washington also requires schools to send parents their student's progress report at the end of each school year. If a student is not making normal progress toward completing the graduation requirements, the high school is required to notify the student and parents of alternative education experiences, including summer school in the area. In addition, **California, Georgia, Maryland, Nevada, North Carolina and South Carolina** all have clear policies requiring parents to be informed about the state's exit exam requirement.

State policy in **Ohio** requires school districts with a three-year average graduation rate of 75% or less (in addition to academic watch and academic emergency districts) to administer practice versions of the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT) to 9th-grade students.

In **Colorado**, school boards must provide the names and addresses of all 8th graders to the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE), which contacts the parents to provide information on postsecondary education: admission guidelines; a student's potential need for remediation; financial obligations that may fall to the student's parent; a statement that a student who fails a course listed in the admissions guidelines may enroll in a remedial course to satisfy those guidelines; information regarding financial assistance (including stipend amounts, tuition and other financial aid), the annual state stipend amount; the annual cost of in-state tuition; the student's share of tuition; and notification that the stipend amount and the amount of tuition may change annually.

### **Individual Graduation Plans**

Through individual graduation plans, more states have begun to assist students and their parents in early goal-setting and annual updates to such plans. According to [ECS' database of high school graduation requirements](#), 20 states either require or soon will require all students to develop a "learning plan" or "individual graduation plan." Such plans often are first established by the parent, student and school counselor when a student is in grade 8, defining the courses the student will take in grade 9 and successive years, culminating in a planned destination the student's first year after high school — the workforce, a two-year or four-year institution, the military or a certification program.

### **Alignment of high school graduation and college admission standards**

A handful of states have aligned their high school graduation and college admission requirements to ensure that young people and their families are aware of college preparation requirements, and to avoid de facto "tracking" of students. These states include Indiana (effective class of 2011), Oklahoma and South Dakota (both class of 2010). For additional information on these states' alignment of high school

graduation and college admission requirements, please see the April 2006 ECS *StateNote*, [Alignment of High School Graduation Requirements and State-Set College Admissions Requirements](#).

## **Conclusion**

Transitional years in a student's education have the potential to throw them off-course as they attempt to successfully continue their education, especially if they — or their parents — are not well prepared for the expectations that await them. The 9th-grade year can act as a stumbling block for students, especially if they've been struggling academically or have picked up bad habits like skipping class. To ensure success in high school, it is important for states to have policies in place that identify students who are likely to experience difficulty with the transition to 9th grade, and that these students are provided with adequate help.

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## ***Equipping Education Leaders, Advancing Ideas***

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<sup>1</sup> *Keeping Students Moving Forward on the Journey From the Middle Grades Into High School*, Southern Regional Education Board, October 2005 Url:

[http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/2005Pubs/05V66w\\_mgttohtransitionobjective6.pdf](http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/2005Pubs/05V66w_mgttohtransitionobjective6.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *An Extreme Degree of Difficulty: The Educational Demographics of Urban Neighborhood High Schools*, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 2006 Url:

[http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=gse\\_pubs](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=gse_pubs)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, July 2007 Url:

[http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/07\\_What\\_Matters\\_Final.pdf](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/07_What_Matters_Final.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *An Extreme Degree of Difficulty: The Educational Demographics of Urban Neighborhood High Schools*, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, July 2007

<sup>9</sup> Robert Cooper and Suzanne Markoe-Hayes, *Improving the Educational Possibilities of Urban High School Students as They Transition from 8th to 9th Grade*, University of California All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity, September 2005 Url:

<http://ucaccord.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/pubs/pb-013-0905.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, July 2007

<sup>11</sup> *Improving the Educational Possibilities of Urban High School Students as They Transition from 8th to 9th Grade*, University of California All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity, September 2005