

Ninth-Grade Transition Support Programs

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Research suggests that ninth grade is a critical year for setting the course to high school graduation. "Ninth-grade performance is a better predictor of who eventually graduates from high school than either eighth-grade test scores or background characteristics such as gender, race, and economic status."¹ The transition to high school is a period of special threat to the academic achievement of many students.² On average, students' grades, attendance, and attitudes toward school decline, while their behavioral troubles increase. Urban students and students of color are especially vulnerable and experience more course failure and absenteeism than their peers.³ Research indicates, therefore, that ninth grade can be accompanied by a confluence of mutually reinforcing, negative indicators.

Transition support programs aim to disrupt this downward trajectory or prevent it outright. Research generally shows that a cluster of interventions, rather than a single intervention, most effectively moves the dial toward high school graduation. Although the research base on particular interventions is not large, several studies evaluate three approaches to this type of transition support: Peer Group Connect, Ninth-Grade Academies, and On-Track.

Peer Group Connect

Peer Group Connect (PGC) is a high school transition program that recruits twelfth-grade students to create a more supportive environment for incoming ninth graders. A randomized control trial studied 268 urban Mid-Atlantic high school students from low-income families from 2005 until their graduation in 2009.⁴ The ninety-four students who were assigned randomly to participate in PGC were more likely to graduate from high school than those in the control group; 77 percent of the PGC students graduated from high school compared to 68 percent of the control group students. The difference in high school graduation rates was driven by male students; 81 percent of the male students who participated in PGC graduated from high school while only 63 percent of males in the control group graduated. The program appeared especially effective with the specific group of male students who showed a low probability of graduating from high school.⁵ Among these students, 60 percent of the males who participated in PGC graduated from high school compared to only 30 percent of the control group. There were only forty-two

male students in this subgroup, so the finding is based on a small sample size.⁶

A related evaluation of 426 students from two Mid-Atlantic urban high schools also finds positive program effects. Although this study does not focus on traditionally underserved students, it finds that students who participated in PGC had higher graduation rates. Among the PGC participants, 90 percent of the students who researchers deemed "high probability of graduating from high school" ultimately graduated compared to 75 percent of the control group. The PGC students also exhibited other positive outcomes, including fewer disciplinary referrals, increased attachment to school, and stronger decisionmaking skills.⁷

Ninth-Grade Academies

Ninth-Grade Academies (NGA) does not refer to a specific program but rather describes a comprehensive approach to support the transition to ninth grade. The approach includes four components: (1) a designated separate space for ninth graders; (2) a ninth-grade administrator who oversees the academy; (3) faculty exclusively dedicated to ninth graders; and (4) an interdisciplinary faculty structure that fosters collaboration between subjects and between middle and high schools.

One case study of an NGA in Ohio finds positive results, including fewer course failures, fewer expulsions, and increased attendance rates for ninth graders. That program's features include a freshman school wing, transition meetings with students, study halls for struggling students, and collaborative planning between faculty. The Ohio NGA also incorporates Project Achieve, an intervention that pairs a licensed social worker with at-risk⁸ students and families before the students enter high school. This case study has distinct limitations, though; the researchers did not, for instance, indicate whether the positive results were statistically significant, nor did they account for selection bias in their results.⁹

A recent quasi-experimental study of twenty-seven high schools in Florida finds that NGAs did not improve students' academic

or behavioral outcomes, but this may have resulted from implementation issues. The researchers note that three years after inception, only half of the schools in the study provided all four components of the NGA.¹⁰

On-Track

On-Track is a tool used in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) that determines whether ninth-grade students are making adequate progress toward high school graduation based on credit completion and core-course failures. On-Track enables administrators and educators to monitor student performance via real-time data reports that identify students who are falling “off track.”^{11,12} Schools then can respond with appropriate interventions. As such, the On-Track initiative is a hybrid model; it provides actionable analytics that schools need to design and employ tiered interventions to support student needs.¹³

A recent post-test analysis¹⁴ of the long-term outcomes of On-Track finds a positive relationship between initial increases in ninth-grade on-track rates and improved student outcomes:¹⁵

- From 2007–13, CPS increased the number of students on track toward high school graduation from 57 percent to 82 percent (25 percentage points). That means approximately 6,900 additional students moved from ninth to tenth grade with sufficient credits and without significant course failure.
- African American males had the greatest gains in improved on-track rates, increasing 28.3 percentage points from 2005–13, followed by Latino males (25.3 percentage points) and African American females (21.1 percentage points).
- By 2013, nearly 90 percent of all high schools using the On-Track model had on-track rates of 70 percent or higher, up from 25 percent of high schools with that rate in 2005.

CPS gives schools latitude in choosing the appropriate interventions to respond to On-Track data. The most commonly used intervention is the Network for College Success (NCS).¹⁶ NCS is in place in seventeen high schools, which serve approximately 20 percent of CPS's high school student population. NCS offers four programs designed to strengthen schools' capacity to respond to at-risk students:

- **Instructional improvement.** NCS coaches establish instructional leadership teams that respond to student performance data and develop schoolwide instructional goals.
- **Language, literacy, and leadership.** The NCS coaches help teachers address gaps in adolescent literacy. The goal is for students to hone their reading and writing skills and engage in deeper classroom discussion.
- **On-Track to graduation and college readiness.** The NCS coaches help partner schools develop On-Track teams to assess student grades, attendance, and behavior.

- **College enrollment and success.** NCS works with school counselors to overcome common barriers that keep students from considering, applying to, and enrolling in college.

NCS's partner schools reported an average on-track rate of 86 percent, which is not very different from the district's on-track rate of 84 percent. These figures have not been controlled for student, teacher, or school-level factors. NCS may indeed be efficacious; however, it is difficult to tell from the data.

To test the replicability of the On-Track model, researchers at the Institute of Education Sciences¹⁷ implemented On-Track in five school districts across Texas to measure the tool's ability to predict which students will graduate from high school on time. The study finds that On-Track demonstrates predictive value in identifying ninth-grade students who are on track to graduate from high school, with on-track rates ranging from 61 percent to 86 percent across the five Texas districts. This study implies that On-Track data is or could be actionable. Its findings are limited, however, because the districts were not selected randomly and are not representative of all Texas districts.

The research above demonstrates On-Track's positive effects as a predictive tool for identifying academically at-risk youth. However, it is not clear which interventions are the most effective in response to On-Track data. “What is clear is that no matter how a school increases on-track rates in ninth grade, [high school] graduation rates improve three years later.”¹⁸

Guiding Questions

School policymakers face a multitude of education reforms that purport to raise academic results and high school graduation rates. Consequently, they need to evaluate whether research around positive outcomes of ninth-grade transition support programs justify the costs of implementation. Policymakers also need to balance short-term costs, such as those associated with program implementation, against potential long-term costs of forgoing the program, such as students repeating grades, because had a transition program been in place, these students might have managed without such repetition. More specifically, districts should ask and answer the following questions:

- Will school leaders cede instructional time in the school day to train peer mentors?
- What are the implementation costs, if any, to state and local school districts?
- Does faculty and staff capacity exist to implement a transition support program effectively?
- Can the district leverage resources from outside organizations to implement ninth-grade transition programs?

Endnotes

- ¹ T. Rosenkranz et al., *Free to Fail or On-Track to College: Why Grades Drop When Students Enter High School and What Adults Can Do About It* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014), <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/FoF%20Why%20Grades%20Drop.pdf>.
- ² V. Roybal, B. Thornton, and J. Usinger, "Effective Ninth-Grade Transition Programs Can Promote Student Success," *Education* 134, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 475–87.
- ³ C. C. Weiss and P. S. Bearman, "Fresh Starts: Reinvestigating the Effects of the Transition to High School on Student Outcomes," *American Journal of Education* 113, no. 3 (2007): 395–421; E. M. Allensworth et al., *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2015), <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Middle%20Grades%20Report.pdf>.
- ⁴ V. L. Johnson, P. Simon, and E. Mun, "A Peer-Led High School Transition Program Increases Graduation Rates Among Latino Males," *Journal of Educational Research* 107, no. 3 (May 2014): 186–96.
- ⁵ The study defines this group as students having a less than or equal to estimated 60 percent chance of graduating from high school. To determine a student's chance of graduating from high school, researchers developed a propensity-to-graduate score (PGS) that estimates the probability of high school graduation for each participant in both the treatment and control groups. The score is based on baseline characteristics of the participant survey responses and the binary outcome of the logistic regression analysis of high school graduation status. The range (.05–.98) determines probability of graduation, lowest to highest.
- ⁶ Johnson, Simon, and Mun, "A Peer-Led High School Transition Program."
- ⁷ R. J. Pandina, V. L. Johnson, and S. L. Barr, "Peer Group Connection: A Peer-Led Program Targeting the Transition into High School" (Princeton, N.J.: Center for Supportive Schools, 2015).
- ⁸ In this instance, "at-risk" refers to both those students academically at risk of not graduating from high school (i.e., chronically absent, not meeting grade-specific proficiency measures on assessments, prone to suspension) and those students who are traditionally underserved.
- ⁹ J. McIntosh and S. H. White, "Building for Freshman Success: High Schools Working as Professional Learning Communities," *American Secondary Education* 34, no. 2 (2006): 40–49.
- ¹⁰ M. Somers, I. Garcia, and J. Quint, *Helping Students Make the Transition into High School: The Effect of Ninth Grade Academies on Students' Academic and Behavioral Outcomes* (MDRC, 2016), http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Helping_Students_Make_the_Transition_into_High_School_FR.pdf.
- ¹¹ CPS considers students "on track" if they have accumulated five full course credits (the number needed for promotion to tenth grade per CPS policy) and have no more than one F (i.e., one-half of a full credit) in the core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies in a given semester. E. M. Allensworth and J. Q. Easton, *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* (University of Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005), <http://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/track-indicator-predictor-high-school-graduation>.
- ¹² Rosenkranz et al., *Free to Fail or On-Track to College*.
- ¹³ The Response to Intervention multi-tier approach serves as the basic framework for interventions. Within this framework, students receive many academic and/or behavioral supports at increasing levels of intensity, described as Tier 1, 2, or 3, provided by a variety of personnel, including general and special education teachers and subject specialists. For additional information, see National Center for Learning Disabilities, "What Is RTI?," <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti> (accessed August 31, 2017).
- ¹⁴ M. Roderick et al., *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, April 2014), <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/On-Track%20Validation%20RS.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ This study is a descriptive analysis of On-Track post-implementation. Since On-Track is systemwide and the study does not use a control group, outcome data should be treated as correlational with—rather than causally linked to—the tool and subsequent interventions.
- ¹⁶ University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, "Network for College Success," <https://ncs.uchicago.edu/> (accessed August 31, 2017).
- ¹⁷ J. Hartman et al., *Applying an On-Track Indicator for High School Graduation: Adapting the Consortium on Chicago School Research Indicator for Five Texas Districts* (REL 2011–No. 100) (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2011), <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=264>.
- ¹⁸ Roderick et al., *Preventable Failure*, p. 8.

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