

SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITIONS



K-12 EDUCATION



Hanover Research highlights best practices for supporting students before, during, and after high school to improve graduation rates and academic outcomes.

INTRODUCTION	2
I. MIDDLE SCHOOL STRATEGIES	3
II. SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS	6
III. HIGH SCHOOL STRATEGIES.....	7
IV. CHECKLIST: CREATING A SYSTEM OF TRANSITION SUPPORTS.....	9

INTRODUCTION

Ninth grade is typically one of the most challenging years in a student’s educational career. Students who fail even a single freshman year course are significantly less likely to graduate than their peers who pass all of their freshman year courses. National data reveal an enrollment decrease between ninth grade and tenth grade, attributed partially to students dropping out of high school altogether in, or after, ninth grade. Over 10% of enrolled ninth graders nationally repeat the year entirely.

There are many reasons why ninth grade can be a “make-or-break” year for students. Compared to middle school, high school can be an isolating environment with more challenging academic standards, less personalized learning environments, and limited social-emotional supports. High school students are also expected to assume greater responsibility over their learning, while often experiencing greater social pressures from peers.

The importance of ninth grade to high school and post-secondary success means it is imperative for districts to employ a comprehensive system of student supports. To improve graduation rates and academic outcomes for all students, districts should implement a multi-grade system of high school transition supports that extends from middle school through grade nine and beyond.

This research brief discusses best practices in developing a comprehensive system of student supports, focusing on middle school strategies, summer bridge programs, and high school strategies.

I. MIDDLE SCHOOL STRATEGIES

Supporting students in the transition to high school should begin in middle school. Districts should provide universal supports to prepare all students for high school, as well as targeted supports for more at-risk students. This process consists of the following steps:



STEP 1: IDENTIFY AT-RISK STUDENTS EARLY

Effectively identifying and supporting at-risk students in the high school transition requires two initial steps: **(1)** creating an early warning system and **(2)** assigning targeted interventions to students identified as being at-risk.

CREATING AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

District- and school-level administrators should analyze academic and behavioral data to identify middle school students at-risk of high school failure. The most predictive indicators of high school success fall within the categories of attendance, behavior, and course performance – often referred to as the “ABC” indicators. Multiple research studies validate and identify thresholds for these “ABC” indicators. Schools and districts should consider this information in conjunction with state and local policies to effectively identify at-risk students early and support student success.

“ABC” INDICATORS AND THRESHOLDS PREDICTING HIGH SCHOOL FAILURE

A

ATTENDANCE

Missing 20 days or being absent 10% of school days;

B

BEHAVIOR

Two or more mild or more serious behavior infractions; and

C



COURSE PERFORMANCE

Failure in English or math in sixth through ninth grade and/or a GPA of less than 2.0.

ASSIGNING TARGETED INTERVENTIONS TO STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS BEING AT-RISK

Students who approach or surpass the above thresholds should receive targeted supports to help students get back on track.

TARGETED SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

	A TTENDANCE	B EHAVIOR	COURSE PERFORMANCE
 <p>Targeted Intervention (15% - 20% of students)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 or more unexcused absences in a month brings brief daily check by an adult • Attendance Team investigates and problem-solves to identify the causes behind poor attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 or more office referrals brings involvement of Behavior Team • Simple behavior checklist brought from class to class checked each day by an adult • Mentor assigned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 elective replacement extra-help courses tightly linked to core curriculum, preview upcoming lessons, fill in knowledge gaps • Targeted, reduced class size for students whose failure is rooted in social-emotional issues
 <p>Intensive Intervention (5 - 10% of students)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained one-on-one attention and problem solving • Bring in appropriate social service or community supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth behavioral assessment to identify why the student is misbehaving • Behavior contracts with family involvement • Bring in appropriate social service or community supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one tutoring

Source: Educational Psychologist.

To ensure that at-risk students receive targeted support in high school, middle schools should transfer data about incoming grade nine students to high schools as early as possible. High school counseling and teaching staff should receive incoming student data before the end of the prior school year so that teachers can use the data during their summer planning. In addition, grade nine teachers should have the opportunity to speak regularly with grade eight teachers to learn about at-risk students, their needs, and the success of interventions and supports provided to the student to date.



STEP 2: DISCUSS THE TRANSITION REGULARLY

Districts should provide repeated and consistent information to students about the academic and social expectations of high school. This can include a wide array of orientation activities ranging from in-class discussions about the transition to high school to pairing grade eight students with peer or adult mentors. Orientation programs may also include opportunities for incoming students to meet older students and other rising grade nine students from other schools.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS GRADE NINE TRANSITION PROGRAM



Countdown to High School, a grade nine transition program for students in **Boston Public Schools**, includes teacher-led discussions with students about the following topics:

- Goals for the transition
- High school academic expectations
- Transportation
- After-school time in high school
- Attendance
- High school processes for communicating with families

In addition to these discussions, the Countdown to High School program includes a variety of self-reflection activities. In their final term of grade eight, students create a “personalized portfolio” of work designed to help students graduate from middle school with a clear sense of “who they are and what they believe,” as well as how they plan to achieve their goals. The six-week “Pathway Project” project includes a “life map” of major events in the student’s life, a letter to self, a character self-sketch, and a series of reflective writing activities.”



STEP 3: CONNECT WITH FAMILIES

Including parents in the high school transition process can help ease student and parent anxiety about the transition and assist parents in reinforcing good decisions on the part of students.

Communication strategies to engage parents and students include:

- Invite parents to participate in a conference with their child and the high school counselor about course options and schedules.
- Make sure parents and students understand how academic success is defined in high school and what they will need to know and can do.
- Provide guidance on how and who to approach when questions and concerns arise in the new school.
- Ask parents to visit the high school with their children in the spring and again in the fall.
- Invite parents to spend an entire day at the high school to help them understand what their child’s life will be like.
- Involve parents in planning transition activities that will support students and parents during the transition. Include parents on the transition team.
- Connect middle school parents with parents of current high school students.

II. SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS

In addition to supporting students during middle school, districts can implement summer programs that “bridge” the gap between the end of eighth grade and start of ninth grade. Bridge programs can support at-risk students by mitigating summer learning loss, providing students an opportunity to catch up, and further preparing students for their high school transition. Effective summer bridge programs typically have the following characteristics:

- There is an intensive academic focus on the foundational reading, writing, math, and academic skills.
- Courses and learning experiences are taught by experienced, skilled, and qualified teachers—ideally, the same teachers who will instruct bridge program students when they enter grade nine.
- The curriculum is based on clear learning goals and expectations that align with grade nine courses and standards.
- Teachers, counselors, and advisors embed social and emotional development into all learning experiences, and they help students prepare for the challenges they are likely to encounter in grade nine.
- The curriculum includes orientation activities for both students and families, assistance with study skills and organizational habits, and proactive postsecondary-planning guidance.
- Educators and support specialists intentionally build relationships between students and adults—specifically, between students and the teachers, counselors, advisors, and mentors who will instruct and support students in grade nine.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS



The Portland Public Schools “Step Up” program—described by the Great Schools Partnership—as an “on ramp” to high school success—uses attendance and middle school course grades to identify “academic-priority” students who may benefit from the one-week leadership camp. Through a series of “positive and self-affirming experiences,” students learn social-emotional skills, identify personal behaviors that may affect their success in high school, and identify and reflect on their goals for the future. Teachers communicate regularly with students’ families, emphasizing that course failure, poor attendance, and behavior issues increase the chances that their child will not complete high school. Students continue to receive support, such as after-school tutoring and social-emotional guidance, from the Step Up advocate during grades nine and ten.

IMPACT:

Early results have been positive: **70%** of Step Up students earn all required core course credits in grade nine (compared to a district rate of **59%**) and **98%** move on to grade ten.

Source: Great Schools Partnership.

III. HIGH SCHOOL STRATEGIES

In high school, educators should continue to monitor students' academic and behavioral outcomes through early warning systems to identify students at-risk of dropping out and provide these students with targeted supports. High school leaders and educators can also support incoming students by providing advising, small learning communities, or catch-up courses to ensure that students are on-track for graduation.



ADVISING

Advisors who meet with individual or small groups of students on a regular basis can support ninth grade students' learning and increase their engagement in school. Advisory programs can support students in facing challenges related to:

- Academic and social issues;
- Academic goal-setting;
- College preparation and counseling;
- Study skills; and
- Adolescent development issues.

Advisory periods allow teachers and counselors to build strong relationships with a small group of students, review student performance, and provide one-on-one support to ninth grade students. The program may be more intensive during the first semester, for example, meeting twice per week during the first six weeks of grade nine, and then once per week for the remainder of the year.



SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Districts with large numbers of ninth grade students that require extra transition supports often create a small learning community for the students in that grade, often called a ninth grade "academy." Using a teaming system, a small group of grade nine students (e.g., approximately 100 students) shares the same group of teachers for core subjects. Teachers have common planning time to discuss individual student issues and share strategies to address those challenges. Students receive rigorous, personalized instruction and may receive additional academic and social supports such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and social services. These smaller learning communities can help to create a more engaging learning environment in which students receive instruction relevant to their needs and form positive relationships with their peers and teachers. However, they can be challenging to implement, as it requires significant resource investments.



CATCH-UP COURSES

High schools should also offer catch-up courses that provide extra support and instructional time to students at-risk of failing a core course in ninth grade. Districts have had success offering transitional algebra and math catch-up courses to low-skill students before they begin an algebra course. Typically, low-achieving ninth grade students would enroll in a transitional algebra or math catch-up course in their first semester of high school and then transition to an algebra I course in their second semester. Transitional algebra and math catch-up courses should focus on foundational skills using interactive and relevant instructional strategies.

COMPONENTS OF A GRADE NINE MATHEMATICS CATCH-UP COURSE

- Multi-day standards-based units designed around essential knowledge and skills students must master to be ready for algebra I.
- Opportunities to apply algebra and pre-algebra skills to solve real-world problems that provide a reason for learning the mathematics content and processes needed for algebra I.
- Opportunities for group learning, study teams, and projects resulting in individual and group grades.
- Exposure to reading and writing strategies appropriate for the mathematics classroom, with opportunities to explain orally and in writing solutions to problems representing various levels of complexity.
- Use of technology, including hand-held devices and software, to solve applied problems.
- Homework assignments to practice what was learned in class and deepen understanding of mathematical concepts by applying knowledge in unfamiliar situations.
- Policies of revising work until it meets clearly understood scoring guides and rubrics for earning grades.
- Varied classroom assignments coupled with both written and performance assessments to help teachers monitor students' mastery of the essential mathematics readiness indicators.
- Intentional teaching of the habits and skills used consistently by independent learners.
- Use of re-teaching strategies with extra time for students failing to achieve at the expected level.

Source: Southern Regional Education Board.

IV. CHECKLIST: CREATING A SYSTEM OF TRANSITION SUPPORTS

Districts can use the Checklist to promote student success by taking an inventory of current supports for rising high school students. The Checklist can also help districts identify critical new programs or practices to implement.



CHECKLIST FOR CREATING A SYSTEM OF TRANSITION SUPPORTS

Circle One

YES	NO	Do middle and high schools use an early warning system to collect and analyze student attendance, behavior, and course failure data to identify students at-risk of high school failure and provide these students with tailored supports?
YES	NO	Do educators provide middle school students with repeated and consistent information about the academic and social expectations of high school?
YES	NO	Do middle and high schools involve families in the transition process (e.g., by inviting parents to participate in a conference with their child and a high school counselor about course options and schedules)?
YES	NO	Do high schools have intensive summer programs for incoming students identified as at-risk of struggling in grade nine?
YES	NO	Do existing summer bridge programs have an intensive academic focus on foundational reading, writing, math, and academic skills? Is the curriculum based on learning goals and expectations that are tied to ninth grade courses and standards?
YES	NO	Are summer bridge programs taught by experienced, skilled teachers who students are likely to have in the following year?
YES	NO	Do ninth grade students participate in advisory programs in which school staff meet with individual or small groups of students on a frequent basis (e.g., multiple times per week).
YES	NO	Are intensive supports like small learning communities (e.g., freshman or ninth grade “academies”) available for incoming students who need a more supportive and personalized environment in order to successfully transition to high school?
YES	NO	Are intensive “catch-up” courses available for students at-risk of failing a core course in grade nine (e.g., an algebra course with extended class time)?

Prioritize your high school transition efforts based on where you do not have a “Yes”.

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ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

THE HANOVER APPROACH TO SUCCESSFUL HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

Hanover Research offers an integrated and customized approach to evaluating high school transitions. The issue of high school transitions is unique to each K-12 organization, and Hanover’s team of experts will recommend a tailored approach best suited for the individual organization. Hanover’s unique year-long partnership model allows for each high-school transition project to build off of the previous one, producing more actionable results and more detailed insights.

HANOVER’S CORE CAPABILITIES



PRIMARY RESEARCH

Survey design, administration, and analysis; qualitative data coding; in-depth interviews; online and onsite focus groups; digital ethnography



SECONDARY RESEARCH

Literature review; best practices; environmental scan; benchmarking; demographic analysis



DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive and predictive analytics, including: student segmentation; linear regression; data mining; decision simulation; data visualization

HANOVER’S MODEL DIFFERENTIATORS



EXPERT

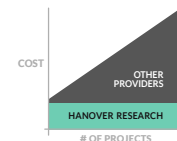
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