

# Paving the Way for Success in High School and Beyond:

## The Importance of Preparing Middle School Students for the Transition to Ninth Grade

Jean Baldwin Grossman and Siobhan M. Cooney

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High school graduation has always been a critical milestone for students. With an increasingly competitive job market and growing difficulties for families working to attain economic stability, a solid education is more important than ever.

Since the 1980s, it has been clear that high school graduates earn substantially more than individuals who do not graduate, both annually and over their lifetimes (Goldin and Katz 2007; Levin et al. 2007). They have more marketable skills and greater odds of finding employment. They also enjoy better health and have lower mortality rates (Levin et al. 2007). In addition, the gains for society are substantial: It is estimated that each high school graduate produces a benefit to the public totaling \$209,100 (Levin et al. 2007). People who graduate high school pay more in taxes over their lifetimes and are less likely to require welfare, food stamps, housing assistance, Medicaid and other social services (Levin et al. 2007). High school graduates are also less likely than others to commit crimes, including violent offenses, and less likely to be incarcerated (Page et al. 2007).

While earning a high school diploma is essential, it may not be enough to ensure success in the 21st century labor market. In 1980, college graduates earned 1.5 times more than high school graduates; by 2005, college graduates were earning twice as much as high school graduates (Kaufman, Chapman 2004; Alliance for Excellent Education 2007). More and more emphasis is being placed on earning a postsecondary degree—that is, a credential beyond a high school diploma—as a route out of poverty. This has magnified the importance of completing high school, whether it is seen as a stepping stone to further educational opportunities or an end in itself.

Unfortunately, the growing income disadvantage for high school dropouts particularly affects students from poor families. While the likelihood of dropping out has decreased from 16 to 11 percent since 1980 for students from lower-income families (the bottom 20th percentile), it is still double the rate of students from middle class families (in the 21st to 80th percentile) and more than six times the rate for children from upper class families (Kaufman, Chapman 2004). Thus, dropping out of high school is one of the factors driving intergenerational cycles of poverty.

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Students' decisions to drop out are not based simply on their experiences in high school; instead, the pathway to dropping out appears to start much earlier (Reyes et al. 2000; Roderick 1995). Indeed, how well prepared a middle school student is for the transition to high school has much to do with whether he or she ultimately graduates. How smoothly students make this transition is strongly related to not only the likelihood of finishing high school but also the odds of staying in college until graduation.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, more school systems are trying

to prepare youth for this critical juncture—the switch from middle school to high school, typically occurring in ninth grade.

This research brief provides an overview of issues pertaining to the ninth grade transition. We present answers to four questions:

- Why is it important to focus on students' transitions to ninth grade?
- Why is the transition to ninth grade difficult for many students?
- What traits in middle school youth appear to be related to a successful transition?
- What can middle schools do to ease the transition to high school?

## Why Is It Important to Focus on Students' Transitions to Ninth Grade?

Many students in this country struggle when they leave middle school for high school. Students beginning high school commonly experience increased stress and behavior problems alongside declines in grades, attendance, interest in school, participation in extracurricular activities and perceptions of academic competence and self-esteem (Alvidrez, Weinstein 1993; Barone et al. 1991; Blyth et al. 1983; Gillock, Reyes 1996; Graber, Brooks-Gunn 1996; Isakson, Jarvis 1999; Reyes et al. 2000). Almost all students, even those who end up graduating high school and entering college, experience drops in grades and attendance in ninth grade. However, research indicates that relative to students who graduate high school, those who leave school prematurely have experienced steeper ninth-grade declines (Reyes et al. 2000; Roderick 1995). Students who drop out of high school typically

have not been able to recover from the decline in grades seen in ninth grade. Instead, their problems with academics very early in high school translate into “permanent shifts in their academic status,” eventually leading to withdrawal from school (Roderick 1995, 145).

## Why Is the Transition to Ninth Grade Difficult for Many Students?

The literature on the high school transition cites several related factors believed to be responsible for difficulties in the ninth grade. For one, when students enter high school the educational environment changes dramatically: the physical space is new and usually much larger, and many of the people, rules and routines are unfamiliar. Ninth graders, most of whom were quite familiar with their middle school environments, may feel disconnected from their new institution. They may

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lose a sense of school attachment and belonging, at least temporarily. This dip in school connectedness is important because when students feel connected to their schools they fare much better on a broad range of outcomes,

including lower rates of substance abuse and violence, delay in engaging in sexual activity, and better emotional health (Resnick et al. 1997). In contrast, feelings of alienation from school are strongly associated with dropping out (Lan, Lanthier 2003).

One key feature of high schools that research has linked to ninth grade performance is their size: High schools tend to be much larger than middle schools. This sudden shift to a larger and more complex social environment can be incredibly stressful for ninth graders, typically 14 or 15 years old, for whom “fitting in” with peers is of paramount importance. As they try to find their social grounding, ninth graders can be seriously distracted from their studies (Newman et al. 2000). Additionally, large schools tend to be more diverse than smaller schools, further complicating students’ social lives. Ninth graders may need to make some adjustments to their attitudes, behaviors and appearance if they are going to get along with people who aren’t much like them (Elias et al. 1986).

Because individuals will respond differently to these fairly dramatic social changes, existing peer relationships may be strained. Friends close in middle school can drift apart in high school, and individuals can feel left behind. One must also consider that in the eighth grade, while students are the oldest in the building, they enjoy positions at the top of the social hierarchy. Upon entering ninth grade, however, they suddenly descend to the bottom of that hierarchy. This consideration may be especially relevant to students who had positive roles in middle school, perhaps as student leaders or star athletes. In larger high schools, they find many more competitors vying for the same roles, and ninth graders experience the additional disadvantage of being less physically and

cognitively mature than the others. Students who lose these roles can have problems adjusting to the change in social status and identity (Newman et al. 2000). Given these changes in the social environment, it comes as no surprise that high school students cite the social aspect of the ninth grade transition as one of the most difficult (Akos, Galassi 2004).

Compared with middle school teachers, many high school teachers find it much more difficult to form strong supportive relationships with their students ... Unfortunately, having poor relationships with teachers is a primary precursor to school dropout.

Beyond students’ changing relationships with their peers, they also face more impersonal interactions with teachers. Compared with middle school teachers, many high school teachers find it much more difficult to form strong supportive relationships with their students. Because they interact with hundreds of students a day, they may be less responsive to individual needs (Holcomb-McCoy 2007). They may also employ teaching styles that involve more lecturing and less discussion of students’ ideas (Eccles et al. 1993; Phelan et al. 1994). As a result, students generally receive less social support from their high school teachers than from their middle school teachers (Reyes et al. 2000). High school students report feeling that teachers and administrators just do not care about them and their well being or how well they do in school (Newman et al. 2000; Phelan et al. 1994; Reyes et al. 2000). Students who struggle in high school

cite conflict with teachers as one of the more difficult problems they encounter (Newman et al. 2000). Unfortunately, having poor relationships with teachers is a primary precursor to school dropout (Lan, Lanthier 2003).

At the transition to high school, another major change occurs in how students are disciplined. In smaller schools, including many elementary and middle schools, order is often maintained through informal codes of conduct, rather than set-down rules and punishments (WestEd 2001). In contrast, discipline and order tend to be emphasized in high schools, especially larger ones (Eccles, Midgley 1990). Teachers have greater authority, and because they are generally less familiar with individual students and their personal lives, they are typically stricter with students (Holcomb-McCoy 2007). Unfortunately, these structural changes mandating students to follow more rules come at a time when youth have increasing needs for independence and autonomy (Eccles et al. 1993). A teenager's need to develop an indi-

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vidual identity can come into direct conflict with the desires of school staff to have everyone follow rules and conform to certain standards of behavior and dress. This conflict often contributes to students' sense that they are not supported by teachers.

Finally, students must contend with a heavier workload in high school. Youth transitioning to high school often find that in order to achieve the same grades they earned in middle school, they have to devote more time and effort to their studies (Eccles et al. 1993). Research with high school students and their parents suggests that both groups view the increasing workload and pressure to do well as the most difficult part of the high school transition (Akos, Galassi 2004; Newman et al. 2000).

### **What Traits in Middle School Youth Appear to Be Related to a Successful Transition?**

As noted, the severity of declines in grades and attendance in ninth grade is predictive of the odds of graduating high school and, thus, potentially going on to college. However, this information alone paints an incomplete picture of high school dropouts. Students who graduate high school and those who drop out tend to show differences even before the high school transition. A review of the literature indicates several factors that help middle school students transition into high school more easily, including having:

- Strong academic achievement, school attendance and sense of scholastic competence;
- Strong time-management, planning, problem-solving and study skills;
- Healthy strategies for coping with problems;
- Accurate expectations about high school and what is needed to succeed there; and
- Effective strategies for achieving a balanced academic and social life.

Students who finish high school tend to have slightly higher grade point averages (GPA) and better attendance in middle school than those

who drop out (Reyes et al. 2000; Roderick 1995). These pre-transition differences are important when considering that, on average, students' GPAs drop a full letter grade between eighth and ninth grades (Reyes et al. 2000). Talented students who experience this decline in GPA are by no means doomed to failure, especially if they live in neighborhoods where they can access services that might help them. However, for students who are already

For students who are already struggling to some extent and lack access to help (a common scenario in low-income neighborhoods), a decline in grades during this transition makes it even harder to get on track toward graduation.

struggling to some extent and lack access to help (a common scenario in low-income neighborhoods), a decline in grades during this transition makes it even harder to get on track toward graduation (Reyes et al. 2000; Roderick 1995). As one scholar has noted, a decline in grades immediately following the high school transition is “essentially sealing the fate of the below-average student” (Reyes et al. 2000, 538). Students who stay in school and graduate also have more positive perceptions of their own academic abilities (Reyes et al. 2000). In other words, although youth are likely to encounter more rigorous coursework in high school, those with the belief that they can overcome academic challenges appear to do the best overall (Reyes et al. 2000).

Ninth grade students who adjust well to high school life have other strengths as well. In particular, research has identified the importance of students' skills in time management, study habits, problem-solving and planning ahead (Akos, Galassi 2004; Desmond et al. 2006; Holcomb-McCoy 2007; Isakson, Jarvis 1999). Given the more rigorous coursework students face in high school, it comes as no surprise that research has identified these as critical skills for success.

In addition, the manner in which students respond to stressful events or situations is important for succeeding in high school. Research indicates that the use of more “approach” strategies and fewer “avoidance” strategies predicts both students' adjustment to a new school and self-perceptions that they handle stressful events well (Causey, Dubow 1993). Approach strategies include seeking out new information and asking others for help in solving a problem, while avoidance strategies include ignoring the problem and its impacts. As an example, a high school student who has an argument with a teacher over a paper grade may positively cope with this situation by asking a parent or another teacher to help mend the relationship. In contrast, another student might avoid the situation altogether by ignoring the teacher's request to rewrite the paper or by skipping class.

Because many of the changes experienced at the ninth grade transition are social in nature, students' interpersonal skills are also very important. Social problem-solving skills may help students in high school's complex social environment where they have to get along with a wider variety of people (Elias et al. 1986). In addition, the ability to have a balanced school and social life is probably essential for adjustment after the transition (Akos, Galassi 2004).

## What Can Middle Schools Do to Ease the Transition to High School?

The experiences youth have when they move from middle school to high school set them on paths that will affect their whole lives—whether they graduate high school and how likely they are to earn a postsecondary degree. This transition experience does not predestine the future, but strong patterns exist: The easier the transition, the greater likelihood that students will succeed. By shoring up students' personal resources before the high school transition, middle schools can make a substantial impact on future academic performance, graduation rates and overall well being.<sup>2</sup>

Research indicates that middle school students who participate in high-quality, school-based after-school programs come to school more, have a greater sense that they can do well academically and try harder in school.

**Strengthening academic performance, behaviors and attitudes.** While easier said than done, improving middle school students' confidence in their scholastic abilities, which in turn improves their effort in school, grades and attendance, will increase the likelihood they will have a smoother transition through ninth grade. For example, research indicates that middle school students who participate in high-quality, school-based after-school programs come to school more, have a greater sense that they can do well academically and try harder in school. Thus, one way to improve these outcomes could be to offer high-quality after-school programming (Walker, Arbretton 2004).

### Improving life skills.

- Providing middle school students with experiences that improve time-management, planning, problem-solving and study skills will help them succeed in high school and beyond. Such experiences can be provided in school, by assigning long-term projects and guiding the students through them, or out of school, by allowing youth to plan and prepare events.
- Providing middle school students with opportunities to learn more productive coping strategies through coaching or discussion, for example, can be useful in helping them succeed.
- Programs that strengthen youth's social skills in middle school can help prepare students for the transition. Again, participation in after-school and extracurricular programming often improves youth's social skills (Durlak, Weissberg 2007).

**Providing information.** Students often approach the transition to high school with feelings of both worry and excitement (Akos, Galassi 2004). Students' anxieties about high school are diverse and may range from safety concerns, such as bullying by older students, to worries about navigating the logistics, such as getting lost and failing to get to class on time (Newman et al. 2000). High school students reflecting on their transition indicate that they would have been helped by tours of the school building, discussion of the "truths" and "myths" of high school, and opportunities to talk to high school students while they were still attending middle school (Akos, Galassi 2004). Research supports relaying such valuable information to students before the transition: Those who thrive in ninth grade have "greater notions of what [is] needed" and accurate expectations about high school and how to succeed there (Newman



et al. 2000). Thus, increasing the flow of information between the high school and middle school should aid in easing the transition for the younger students.

## Conclusion

Transitions are an unavoidable part of life, and youth will do best when they learn how to adjust productively. Thus, experiencing change can be seen as an opportunity to learn. Students experiencing moderate levels of change as a result of the transition to high school can use this opportunity to practice adaptive strategies and grow in new areas. However, for students ill-equipped to handle the transition, the change can set them on a path toward disengaging from school. Disengagement at this critical juncture—approximately two years before most youth are legally allowed to drop out—can have devastating consequences: As detailed in the introduction to this brief, a rocky transition to high school may result not only in school dropout, but in a lifetime of unstable, low-paying jobs, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty for far too many youth.

The middle school years bring many chances to ensure that youth are properly prepared for this important transition. Middle school students are particularly open at this stage in their development to the influence of non-parental adults, such as teachers and staff at youth programs, who can capitalize on “teachable moments.” Thus, if we seek to better prepare young people for success, middle school presents a critical opportunity. Ensuring that students have strong academic behaviors and attitudes, life skills and adaptive strategies as they enter ninth grade will provide an invaluable foundation for their futures.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Among students who go to college, a significant decline in grades at the transition to high school is associated with the likelihood of leaving college before graduation (Smith 2006).
- 2 This section focuses on how best to prepare middle school students for the transition to high school. There are many aspects of the high school structure, such as having “schools within schools,” that can also ease the transition. However, these high school-based strategies are not discussed in this brief.

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**Public/Private Ventures**

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