



## Supporting Student Transition From Middle to High School

### Introduction

Jay Hertzog and Lena Morgan titled their 1999 publication *Transition: A Process Not an Event*. This sentiment is echoed by Nancy Mizelle (2005), who stated that transition to high school “is an extended process that involves middle and high school administrators, teachers, parents, and students.” In addition to factors such as a larger environment, increased academic demands, and reduced personal support (Smith, 2007), students also face social challenges—both real and perceived—as they move to high school, including harassment or teasing by older students, reestablishing popularity, and difficulty in making new friends (Mizelle, 2005; Langenkamp, 2009). Factor in that many students are academically unprepared for high school, especially in large urban districts (Horwitz, 2008; Neild, 2009), and it is easy to see why the transition process is challenging for many students.

Williams and Richman (2007) speak for many researchers when they state that more students fail ninth grade than any other grade, resulting in a “ninth grade bulge.” They also cite research indicating that the drop-out rate for ninth graders in urban, high-poverty schools is as high as 40%. On a more positive note, researchers (Smith, 1997; Morgan & Hertzog, 1998) have reported dramatic lowering of the drop-out rate and ninth-grade retention in schools implementing programs using multiple transition strategies. Dedmond (2006) and Mizelle (2005) are among researchers who stress that successful transition programs are varied and multi-dimensional.

Although little empirical research exists on the transition to high school or on the effectiveness of strategies implemented to ease the transition, there have been many reports of promising practices. (Appendix B is a bibliography on high school transition and it contains reports discussing numerous suggested strategies.) A recurring theme in the reports is the use of a data, not only to track students who are at risk of leaving school or being retained but also to evaluate the effectiveness of the practices being implemented (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Smith, 2006).

For several years, the state of Texas has focused attention on keeping students in school and promoting college and career readiness. In May, 2007, the 80th Texas Legislature established the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council. Their goal is to “identify strategic priorities for and make recommendations to improve the effectiveness, coordination, and alignment of high school completion and college/workforce readiness efforts” (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a).

To achieve this goal, the 2008–2010 Texas Ninth Grade Transition and Intervention (TNGTI) program was developed. This program is designed to transition students effectively from the eighth grade into high school and to increase the number of students

### QUESTION:

**What strategies can be implemented to aid students and their parents in the transition from eighth grade into high school?**

### Summary

The transition from eighth grade to high school results in a higher drop-out rate and more grade retentions than any other grade. However, when districts and schools develop and implement a sound transition program, the outcomes for ninth graders are improved.

### Key Points

- Organize a transition team
- Develop a counseling team.
- Create special programs and initiatives to prepare students and their families for the transition to high school.



moving from ninth to tenth grade on time. The TNGTI includes a summer transition program for students transitioning from eighth grade to high school, an early warning system, and interventions for students falling behind in the ninth grade (Texas Education Agency, n.d.b).

## Developing a Plan to Support Transitions

The practices presented in this paper were originally gathered in response to a request for the Texas Comprehensive Center to identify best or promising practices that could be used in a ninth-grade transition program. Some activities might take place prior to high school and others at the beginning of the ninth-grade year. Still others would take place throughout the ninth-grade year and beyond to build resilience and to provide support for students during all the years of high school.

Not only do many students struggle more in the ninth grade than in any other grade, but family involvement often changes at this stage as well. Mizelle (2005) cited research that found parent involvement drops considerably by the eighth grade. She suggested monitoring activities, evaluating academic experiences, and being involved in the school as strategies parents may employ to increase their role in their children's education. Furthermore, by communicating expectations and providing tools and resources to understand the needs and challenges of adolescent children, educators can play a significant role in encouraging parents and families to share responsibility for students' success in high school.

In order for schools to develop strategies that prepare students for high school and build student resilience, staff, families, and the community need to be prepared to support this work. The following three initial actions are suggested.

### 1. Organize a transition team.

Before beginning this work, a transition team should be organized. The most effective teams include representation from the following stakeholder groups: teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, counselors, parents, students, government-funded support program staff, and local service organizations. When selecting school personnel to participate as members of the team, it is important to include both middle and high school teachers.

The team should delineate its purpose in guiding the transition work and create a detailed transition plan that includes an evaluation process informed by data. The transition team is fundamental to a school's efforts to ensure that every student receives the support needed to flourish in high school.

It is important to stress that the transition process starts during the eighth-grade year, and it continues throughout the entire ninth-grade year. The multi-level transition team should consider this entire time period while planning supports and interventions. For this reason it is important for the transition team, composed of representatives from the middle and high school levels, to identify and share the academic, social, and organizational attributes unique to each school, such as course grading, rigor, discipline policies, schedules and extra-curricular activities. This will allow for coordinated efforts to help students understand and bridge those differences.

### 2. Develop a counseling team.

To support individual students and their families in the transition process it is also recommended that a counseling team be created. In most high schools, the number of students assigned to a counselor often limits the time any one counselor can work with an individual student. The purpose of developing a counseling team is to increase the amount of individual time each student receives. Although each school will need to develop criteria for selecting transition counselors and the roles that might be appropriate, counselors could include student peers, teachers, and other district and school staff, as well as parents and community volunteers.

### 3. Create special programs and initiatives to prepare students and their families for the transition to high school.

Ongoing, specially designed programs offer greater support for sustained intervention; however, there is also value in providing single events. The key to the success of these programs is to develop an organized approach to provide information that supports students academically and builds relationships among all stakeholders—among students, between students and educators, between students and their families, and between students and their community.



## Implementing a Transition Plan

Review of the literature provides the following suggestions on the types of activities that a transition team might consider as they develop their transition plan. A more complete list of these ideas, which fall under the following subcategories, is included in *Appendix A: Suggested Activities to Include in a Transition Plan*.

**Involve parents and families in the transition process.** The importance of including parents in the transition process and communicating expectations of how parents can support their ninth grade students cannot be stressed enough. To ensure that parents and families are equipped to support students, the transition plan will need to consider and include parents and families in many of the activities throughout the transition. In doing so it will be important to consider the assets that parents bring to the experience and honor the diversity that a variety of parent voices and perspectives can bring to the process. Although a few representative parents may be part of the transition team, the team will want to plan activities that ensure that all parents will be informed and encouraged to be involved in the student transition process.

**Promote collaboration among middle and high school staff to support the transition process.** It is the shared responsibility of middle school and high school personnel to guide students through the transition. Activities should be designed to promote collaboration between staffs at the two grade levels. The middle and high school staffs will need to plan ways in which they can work together to prepare students and families for a successful transition.

**Increase awareness of academic programs offered at the high school level.** Eighth-grade students and their families should prepare for the academic opportunities that will be offered in high school, as well as the academic and career pathways that will be available to them when they graduate. The transition team should design activities that demonstrate the realities of the high school experience so students know what to expect and can begin to think about and plan their academic future.

**Increase comfort and reduce anxiety through orientation activities.** To ease the anxiety that students or families may feel, it is important for the transition team to plan activities intended to help set the climate for a positive experience. The team should offer activities that are fun and engaging as well as accepting of all students. The activities can also provide an opportunity for students to begin to view their peers as leaders and help them identify others to go to for support.

Some activities may be one-time orientation events that are planned for a particular audience or with a specific goal in mind. If planning an event with parent participation, transition teams may want to consider that the event might be a family's only opportunity to receive this information. To make the experience meaningful for the parents and students, the time of day, as well as the languages and delivery methods are factors the transition team should consider.

**Provide resources designed to make the transition easier.** Making any major transition requires tools that can be depended upon for help. For an adolescent, a life transition such as this requires support to help students feel confident and comfortable in their new environment. This can be provided through activities and resources to guide students during the transition. Items such as a school handbook or a map of the high school are useful resources. Also, high school newspapers or newsletters may help acquaint students with the culture of the new school.

**Design activities for the first weeks of ninth grade.** There should be an overlap in orientation activities among those that could take place near the end of eighth grade, over the summer, and at the very beginning of ninth grade. It is important to plan for a continuous stream of activities and initiatives throughout the transition. Labeling hallways and classrooms with room numbers and teachers' names can help students find classrooms more readily. To ease social anxieties, the school could develop freshmen-only activities, such as a pep rally to learn cheers, a picnic, and a "don't wear this to school" fashion show.

**Continue the use of counseling teams to maintain support throughout the ninth grade year.** Transition programs that continually ask students to reflect upon their experiences may have a greater impact than isolated information sessions. The key to these types of activities is their ongoing nature. By implementing a series of routine support activities, students can receive the types of support needed to build self-efficacy as well as knowledge of where they can go should they need help.

**Develop special interventions to support ninth graders who may be struggling academically or socially.** In addition to special orientation programs, the transition team should plan some intervention programs to support students that begin to experience difficulties with academics, social situations, peer dynamics, or other unexpected situations. A more personalized learning environment to facilitate friendships, belonging, motivation, and academic success can be fostered through such strategies as small classes, interdisciplinary clusters, cooperative learning, or team teaching. An early warning system that tracks student attendance and academic performance can alert educators to students that need additional targeted support.



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## Appendix A: Suggested Activities to Include in a Transition Plan

The following strategies were compiled from numerous reports and journal articles. The resources listed in the bibliography in Appendix B contain these as well as additional activities and practices that may be implemented in a transition program.

### Involve parents and families in the transition process.

- Make communication and involvement with parents a priority. Encourage parents to engage in small group or family conversations and also communicate in other ways with families who may not be able to come to the school physically.
- Send notices and newsletters and also promote two-way communication such as phone calls and e-mails. Ensure that supports are in place for families that do not speak English including translation services and having information available in the native language when possible. Consider a system for alerting parents when students are absent or other concerns arise.
- Ensure that parents feel comfortable coming to school and confident that their involvement makes a difference in their child's academic success. Include parents in social activities, such as a morning coffee or a luncheon, as well as for academic and high school preparatory activities. Ensure that the front office is welcoming and that school personnel know the importance of creating and maintaining a "family friendly" environment.
- Involve parents in conversations with their child and ninth-grade teachers and/or counselors and to discuss expectations for high school. Set personal and academic goals for high school while in the eighth grade. If available, review eighth-grade student data and portfolios to help set high school goals.
- Consider holding workshops or parent education programs on different topics of interest, such as guiding students in choosing electives, helping with homework, living with adolescents, monitoring risky behaviors, and other areas of interest or need.
- Invite parents of ninth-grade students (groups of 15–20) to a coffee or a tea hosted by high school administrators (held weekly throughout the ninth-grade year) to discuss high school policies and procedures as well as to offer ideas for supporting students academically.
- Invite parents to spend a day at the high school to experience student life.
- Hold parent and community meetings, retreats, or other gatherings to discuss academic progress at the school level in relation to school goals and state and district academic reports.
- Ask parents of high school students to call other families and invite them to the high school for meetings, events or celebrations.
- Create opportunities for connections and/or service learning opportunities for students, families, and the community (employers, businesses, and institutes of higher education).
- Provide academic supports and tools for communicating students' academic progress to parents, e.g., end of term conferences or more frequent progress reports.

### Promote collaboration among middle and high school staff to support the transition process.

- Once eighth-grade students have been assigned to counseling teams, the transition teachers and/or counselors will act as a point of contact for support and information for individual students and their families. Encourage teachers/counselors to continue the support throughout the summer by contacting students over the summer by phone, e-mail, or postcard.
- Encourage opportunities for professional conversation among school personnel from the middle and high schools in planning transition initiatives.
- Ensure the alignment of academic standards and benchmarks with curriculum and assessments to provide consistency between schools and programs.



- Arrange for ninth-grade counselors and counseling teams to visit the middle school to address eighth-grade students and families at a student assembly or as part of a panel discussion to explain registration procedures, the high school curriculum, scheduling, and extra-curricular activities. This activity can also take place in small groups that might help students and parents feel more comfortable in asking questions and verbalizing concerns.
- Organize a “Teacher Swap-Day” so a high school teacher can speak with eighth-grade students about high school and an eighth-grade teacher can reconnect with students from the previous year.
- Host a “Meet the Teachers” reception so that eighth graders and their parents can meet the ninth-grade teachers and counselors.
- Implement the high school discipline code for the second semester of the eighth grade so that students will know what to expect and how discipline may be different in high school.
- Consider a coping skills curriculum at both the middle and high school levels that includes developing and strengthening study skills, time management skills, and skills for reaching out and seeking information. Parents could also be invited to a meeting that outlines this information.

### **Increase awareness of academic programs offered at the high school level.**

- Communicate to families the expectations of the state academic standards that explain what students should know and be able to do to succeed in high school.
- Distribute academic progress reports (such as AYP reports) and the highlights of school or campus improvement plans to students and parents. Hold community meetings to explain the results and importance of required testing and share how parents and families can support students in preparing for success in school and in testing situations. Explain to parents the format and frequency expectations of school-level progress reports at this time, as well as providing information on how parents can contact the school with academic concerns.
- Make ninth-grade textbooks available for eighth-grade students and families to examine. A checkout system could be developed as part of the library’s loan program so that parents would also be able to access textbooks.
- Establish a curriculum fair where various high school departments set up booths designed to introduce the high school curriculum, club offerings, vocational courses, available electives, and magnet school offerings. Include older students in planning and facilitating the curriculum fair.
- Provide a series of workshops designed and taught by successful upperclassmen. For example, ask teams of honor society volunteers—serving as workshop leaders—to identify study skills they have found helpful in their classes.
- Offer an eighth-grade exploratory class that gives students an opportunity to look at the connections between academic subjects and careers.

### **Increase comfort and reduce anxiety through orientation activities.**

- Host an orientation program that includes discussions of curriculum, scheduling, discipline, and co-curricular activities; a scavenger hunt in place of a building tour; skits about life in high school; and cheers or other activities related to athletics and other extra-curricular programs.
- Host a spring or summer social event or open house at the new school, e.g., a celebration dance, a barbeque, or demonstrations of extra-curricular activities such as clubs, athletics, arts, and community service initiatives.
- Establish an eighth-grade and eleventh-grade student luncheon to provide incoming ninth-grade students with face and name recognition of rising seniors.
- Send letters to students and families from student council members or the administration during the summer to welcome them and invite them to school activities.
- Organize community service learning projects that pair middle and high school students in community programs or initiatives during the summer to encourage ongoing relationships among students themselves and with their community.



- Use student ambassadors from the high school to establish personal links, to act as mentors to younger students, and to provide presentations for middle school students and their families.
- Create e-mail pen pal programs between individual students or between middle and high school classes.
- Develop a visitor program in which students and/or parents can “shadow” a high school student for three periods or a day.
- During orientation days, plan an eighth-grade treasure hunt through the high school building in which students must locate various rooms and items.
- Practice the high school bell schedule in the eighth grade so that students can experience the length of passing time between classes.
- Work with teachers and students to develop and present an “Introduction to High School” program for students and parents, which can include video clips, chat groups with current high school students, and a handbook of typical concerns and coping skills.
- Host Freshman Day, in the summer between eighth and ninth grades, when rising freshmen are invited to spend a full day at the high school. Freshman Day can be hosted by teams of upperclassmen who escort small groups of prospective freshman around the school.
- Establish an orientation session that meets prior to the start of school in the fall and is designed as a half-credit course to prepare incoming students for their new experience.
- Provide a transition camp where students are assigned a counselor and go through activities with a team of students to build familiarity with expectations and to begin to build relationships with new peers.
- Conduct an open question-and-answer session at the high school with ninth-grade students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators or panels of students from the new school for dispelling myths and clarifying questions.

### **Provide resources designed to make the transition easier.**

- Distribute a school handbook to each family with phone numbers; teachers identified by grade level, team, and subject area; calendar and bell schedules; lunch procedures; discipline plan; and safety information.
- Give students a map of the high school to study when they tour the school in the eighth grade.
- Develop packets of sample high school tests, homework assignments, student work, or topics of study for eighth-grade students to take home, examine, and discuss with their parents.
- Distribute high school newsletters to eighth-grade students and their parents.

### **Design activities for the first weeks of ninth grade.**

- Provide small-group orientation sessions hosted by counselors or counseling teams. Some of the activities from earlier orientation sessions can be repeated or expanded.
- Conduct meetings between high school administrators and ninth-grade students during the first week of school to discuss rules and regulations and to determine how students are acclimating to the new environment.
- Establish a jump-start program, freshman seminar, or opportunities for ninth grade students to “catch-up” on coursework during the first semester.
- Spend time in each homeroom class talking about schoolwide expectations, as well as the support that is available to students.
- Allow students to introduce themselves in small groups instead of to the whole class on the first day of school.
- Identify “safe” students at the high school to whom ninth-grade students can turn for assistance during the first few weeks of school.

**Continue the use of counseling teams to maintain support throughout the ninth-grade year.**

- Create separate sub-communities of learning for freshmen, such as school-within-a-school or a ninth grade academy, that provide small learning environments for students, as well as opportunities for professional interaction and discussion among ninth-grade teachers.
- Build capacity within the faculty and school leadership to address diverse student needs through sustained professional learning opportunities, and support teachers in the use of student-centered instructional practices.
- Offer double-doses of core academic classes using a double-block schedule to extend time in core subject areas.
- Institute extended class periods or extended day programs that offer academic tutoring or enrichment opportunities.
- Provide a mentoring program that matches ninth-grade students with other students, assigned staff, or counseling team members.
- Encourage continued and scheduled opportunities for professional planning, articulation, and coaching around schoolwide initiatives, transition challenges, students in need of extra services, and the developmental needs of young adolescents.
- Encourage ninth-grade subject area teachers and counseling teams to review and refine student goals with students and their parents each semester or each year.
- Provide graduation coaches or advisors to support students throughout their high school experience.
- Provide ongoing classroom guidance lessons for teachers and counseling teams that deal with communication skills, peer pressure, how to meet people, problem solving skills, and study skills, as well as preparation for life after high school.
- Develop a freshman awards program to offer incentives and celebrate accomplishments.
- Provide a peer mediation program to support students in working through conflicts.
- Identify students with behavioral needs and provide needed counseling or social support from peers and professionals.

**Develop special programs and initiatives to support ninth graders who may be struggling academically or socially.**

- Address the instructional needs of students who enter high school unprepared for rigorous, college preparatory work by offering peer support programs.
- Institute adolescent literacy initiatives that focus support on struggling readers or second language learners.
- Provide twilight academy or a Saturday school program for alternative or extended learning opportunities.
- Organize freshman awareness and/or support groups or a ninth-grade center where students discuss common academic and social problems.
- Assign weaker students to an experienced teacher or a student who can act as a mentor.
- Establish an early warning database to capture data regarding students' academic performance and attendance.
- Hire an intervention specialist to work on specific initiatives or to help address the needs of specific students.
- Provide additional support or tutoring and/or reduce the course load for struggling students.



## Appendix B: Resources on Middle to High School Transition

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