



## SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROGRAM FALL 2011 PROJECT DIRECTORS MEETING

### *Final Report on the Study of Promising Ninth Grade Transition Strategies*

#### SUMMARY

Researchers have identified the transition to high school as a vulnerable point in the educational pipeline where students are more likely to struggle academically and fall off-track, greatly reducing the likelihood they will graduate from high school. In an effort to bring more information to the education community about promising approaches to supporting students during this pivotal time period, the Academy for Educational Development studied the ninth grade strategies and practices of six high schools.

The schools in the study were all former recipients of the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities Program (SLCP). For our study, we selected six schools that had received SLC funding, served sizeable disadvantaged populations, and reported having multiple elements of strong SLC implementation related to supporting the transition into ninth grade.

Researchers conducted interviews with school and district personnel. School-level interviewees included the school's principal, the director of guidance, the SLC site coordinator or freshman coordinator, one ninth grade English teacher, one ninth grade mathematics teacher, and one non-core academic teacher or SLC lead teacher. At the district level, researchers spoke with the director of secondary education, the director of secondary guidance, and the district SLC project director or director of school improvement, or their equivalents. In addition to interviews, the team reviewed documents and conducted informal observations of the school environment, including interactions between students and teachers.

Despite recent research documenting the need to strengthen the ninth grade transition, only two of the schools we studied exhibited a comprehensive and proactive approach to supporting the ninth grade transition. These schools were committed to meeting students wherever they were when they entered high school and undertaking whatever tasks were necessary to get them fully prepared for postsecondary success. Both of these schools valued and encouraged collaborative work among teachers by setting aside structured common planning time, offering professional development, and providing administrative supervision and support. In addition, these schools systematically used data to learn more about where students' strengths and weaknesses lie, as well as to inform and strengthen teacher practice. Of the remaining four schools, two had reactive responses, waiting for students to exhibit signs of failure before providing support, and two were largely passive, focusing more on social than academic issues.

Overall, these findings suggest that if schools are to ratchet up their efforts to properly support students as they enter high school, they must invest in strategies that are multi-pronged and that complement one another. Such efforts require backing at both the school and district level.

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