

Final Report on the Study of Promising Ninth Grade  
Transition Strategies:  
A Study of Six High Schools

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Purpose of the Study</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>The Smaller Learning Communities Program</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Limitations of this Study</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>The Importance of Ninth Grade</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>What Research Says About Ninth Grade Transition Strategies</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>A Conceptual Framework for Supporting the Transition into High School</b>   | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Supporting the Ninth Grade Transition: An Analysis of Six High Schools' Efforts to Facilitate the Entry into High School.</b> | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Implementation Study Findings</b>   | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Advance or early preparation for entry into high school</b>   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Improving ninth grade for all students</b>  | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Providing targeted supports for high-need students</b>  | <b>25</b> |
| <b>A Final Word About School Leadership</b>  | <b>26</b> |
| <b>District-Level Practices</b>  | <b>27</b> |
| <b>Conclusions</b>   | <b>29</b> |
| <b>References Cited</b>  | <b>30</b> |
| <b>Appendix A: Matrix of Key elements in Promising Ninth Grade Transition Strategies</b>   | <b>33</b> |
| <b>Appendix B: Site Selection</b>  | <b>41</b> |
| <b>Appendix C: Site Profiles</b>   | <b>43</b> |
| <b>Appendix D: Placement of the Six Study Schools on the Matrix of Key Elements</b>  | <b>56</b> |

## **Deliverable 4.12**

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

#### **EXECUTIVE 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<sup>1</sup> studied the ninth grade strategies and practices of six high schools.

The schools in our study were all former recipients of the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities Program (SLCP). This funding stream provides financial resources to local education agencies to implement smaller learning communities (SLCs) in high schools with high enrollments (1,000 or more students). For our study, we selected six schools in three districts that had received SLC funding, served sizeable disadvantaged populations, and who reported having multiple elements of strong SLC implementation related to supporting the transition into ninth grade.

After schools were selected for our sample, 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.

Upon analyzing the data collected, significant patterns concerning school and district efforts to support the transition to ninth grade began to emerge. Despite recent research that documents the need to significantly strengthen the ninth grade transition, the majority of schools we studied (four out of six) had not implemented a comprehensive systematic response to the challenge of helping students move into high school successfully. For example, two schools used data to identify ninth grade students who were in need of additional academic

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, the assets and programs of the Academy for Educational Development were acquired by FHI 360.

support. However, these schools were reactive, making supports available to students only after they had encountered difficulty and failing to use data to identify areas where instruction needed to be improved in order to reduce the need for recuperative strategies. Similarly, two other schools were composed of staff that genuinely cared for students and were concerned about whether or not they performed well academically. However, these schools were largely passive in the face of student difficulties. They lacked common planning time for teachers, a formal mechanism staff uses to meet with one another, share professional expertise, discuss student progress, and devise strategies for helping struggling students.

Only two of the six schools we studied exhibited a comprehensive and proactive approach to supporting the ninth grade transition. These schools were firmly 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 students' strengths and weaknesses, as well as to inform and strengthen teacher practice.

Overall, our 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. Districts can help with the transition by providing timely data that allow high schools to identify struggling students before they enter ninth grade, and by facilitating the use of these data through ongoing professional development and procedures that make accessing data easy. At the school level, administrators can help by providing common planning time, instructional leadership, and summer bridge programs for incoming students. Administrators must also help to drive a culture that promotes using student data efficiently and effectively, including using data to tailor instruction and to identify student weaknesses.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study, contracted by the U.S. Department of Education, has been conducted to identify the key elements of promising approaches to facilitating the successful transition and completion of the ninth grade. Through analyzing the practices of six high schools that have received federal Smaller Learning Communities Program (SLCP) grants, the study attempts to provide a descriptive conceptual framework and matrix to help practitioners better understand the constellation of practices that schools and districts can implement to help ninth graders make a successful transition into high school.

As high schools in the United States set their sights on preparing all students for success at the postsecondary level—whether college or technical career training—a successful entry into high school has become more important than ever. Recent research has identified the ninth grade as a critical point of vulnerability on the pathway to high school graduation and postsecondary success. Those who complete high school “on track to graduation” are more than three times as likely to complete high school as those who have failed courses or have missed significant amounts of school time in ninth grade.<sup>2</sup> Even more sobering, research on the academic trajectories of high school dropouts showed that many students arrive in high school with academic and behavioral problems that significantly compromise their chances of success.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, this new research suggests that it is possible for high schools and districts to plan in advance how to address the needs of students who are more likely to stumble in fall in their first year in high school.

At a minimum, high schools need to set the conditions for 9th grade success by making sure that the curriculum and associated supports help fill gaps in mathematics and reading comprehension. Our work with schools in low-income areas across the United States indicates that the majority of students in these schools are two to three years below grade level when they start 9th grade. They need an age-appropriate curriculum that enables them to catch up on the intermediate skills that high school courses assume that students have.<sup>4</sup>

Since the emergence of these findings, high schools across the country have redoubled their efforts to address the transition into ninth grade. The practitioner literature is beginning to reflect these efforts in articles that suggest practical approaches to improving the transition,

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<sup>2</sup> E. M. Allensworth, and J.Q. Easton (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Neild and R. Balfanz (2006). *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia’s Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005*, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Neild, R. Balfanz, and L. Herzog (2007). “An Early Warning System,” *Educational Leadership*, Volume 65, Number 2.

but there has been no systematic inquiry into actual efforts to reduce the loss of students in their first year in high school.

### **The Smaller Learning Communities Program**

First launched by the U.S. Department of Education in 2001, the Smaller Learning Communities program (SLCP) awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies (LEAs). These grants support the implementation of small learning communities (SLCs) and a broad range of activities to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. SLCs include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or other themes, “houses” in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, and autonomous schools-within-a-school. Grant funds also are used to support additional personalization strategies, such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs. In addition to these structural changes, SLC funding also supports strategies to improve student achievement, including intensive interventions in reading arts and mathematics, tutoring and other academic supports, enhanced guidance and academic advisement, and opportunities to earn postsecondary credit while still in high school.

In 2004, regulatory language for the SLCP first referred to the problems of students entering ninth grade with inadequate skills. It called for a “coherent set of strategies and interventions that are designed to ensure that all students who enter high school with reading/language arts or mathematics skills that are significantly below grade level ‘catch up’ quickly.”<sup>5</sup> In 2005, the regulations incorporated strategies designed to increase the percentage of students who make a timely transition from the ninth to the tenth grade as an element in judging the quality of the project design.

### **Limitations of this study**

We believe the findings of this study help illuminate the ways high schools can better support the transition into high school; however, the study has been limited in two important ways. First, in order to observe how patterns in student outcomes changed over time, we selected high schools that received Smaller Learning Communities grants prior to the 2005 change in regulatory language calling for ninth grade interventions. Because these schools received SLC grants in 2003 and 2004, the funding for these schools has elapsed, and some of the activities implemented under the funding have been discontinued. In some cases, budgetary constraints

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<sup>5</sup> Office of Vocational and Adult Education; Overview Information; Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Program; Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year (FY) 2003—Second Competition, *Federal Register* / Vol. 69, No. 130 / Thursday, July 8, 2004 / Notices, p. 41238.

were the reason for change, but in others, transitions in school leadership and the imposition of state and district mandates also have led the six schools to alter or abandon practices or to initiate new ones.

Indeed, the six selected schools have continued to change their structures and activities, in one case implementing SLCs far more faithfully after the grant ended than when their grant was active. Because these schools have repeatedly changed strategies, it is difficult to isolate the factors to which one can attribute the desired student outcome of successfully completing ninth grade.

Second, because the study was conducted within a time frame too limited to secure OMB approval of the research instruments, the requirements of the Paperwork Reduction Act have constrained the collection of data. To limit the use of data collection instruments, high schools for the study were selected based on already existing materials that provided limited insight into the nature and quality of the interventions launched by each school to facilitate successful transitions into ninth grade. More important, the constraints on data collection limited the depth of qualitative data collection at each of the six high schools to a very small sample of interview subjects and eliminated the use of focus groups and surveys. These instruments would have enabled a far deeper inquiry into the practices of each school. As a result, the study is more an informed snapshot of the practices of six representative high schools than a richly detailed portrait of exemplary practices in six high schools.

### **The importance of ninth grade**

High schools are on the front lines of education reform as the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century begins. The ninth grade—where most students enter high school—both reflects and reinforces the values that shaped the modern American high school. The effort to reshape the ninth grade, as part of a larger effort to transform secondary education, thus challenges deeply held assumptions about what high schools are supposed to do as well as how they function.

The modern American high school has its roots at the beginning of the last century, when the number of students completing a high school education grew six-fold in the space of three decades between 1890 and 1920.<sup>6</sup> The high schools' differentiated curriculum was influenced both by the needs of the labor market for students with some vocational training to work in the factories, and by the rapidly exploding school population as immigration expanded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Expectations for student outcomes mirrored the racial and economic biases of

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<sup>6</sup> C. Goldin and L.F. Katz (2001). "The Legacy of U.S. Education Leadership: Notes on Distribution and Economic Growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, cited by M. Roderick (2005) in *Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform, A Commentary from Chicago*, paper prepared for the MDRC High School Reform Conference.

the larger society about which young people were the most likely and deserving beneficiaries of vocational rather than academic preparation in secondary school.

High schools grew rapidly again between 1950 and 1980, when “the percent of native-born young adults aged 20 to 24 with a high school diploma or its equivalency increased from 54 percent to 86 percent for whites and from 22 percent to 73 percent for African-Americans.”<sup>7</sup> Alongside the rapid increase in high school enrollment came expanded and differentiated expectations for American high schools. The National Defense Education Act, passed in 1958 in response to the Soviet achievements in space exploration, required states to develop programs that tested students for aptitude and ability and the creation of guidance programs to “advise students of courses of study best suited to their aptitude, abilities and skills.”<sup>8</sup>

Concern that graduation rates were leveling off led to a reconsideration of educational priorities, most notably articulated in the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*. This concern was followed by the adoption of state standards and the emergence of accountability and testing. In most of today’s high schools, students must demonstrate academic proficiency to move through the educational pipeline.

The primary bottleneck has been visible at ninth grade, which traditionally served to filter out students who are seen as unable or unwilling to meet the demands of a high school education. This ninth grade “bulge” has sharply increased since the 1980s. In 1985-86, only New York State had 20% more students enrolled in ninth grade than in eighth grade the previous year, and seven states had a bulge of 10-13%. By 2000-01, more than half the states had 10% more students enrolled in ninth grade than in eighth grade the year before, and seven states had bulges of 20% or more.<sup>9</sup> Recent research shows that only a small minority of the students who do not make it through ninth grade successfully will complete high school on time.<sup>10</sup>

Given the complexity of modern society and the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century labor market, the reality is that *all* students must be able to achieve at higher levels than those that permitted the rapid expansion of high school graduation rates in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. There is a growing gap between the value of a high school diploma and a postsecondary credential. Even those students who enter directly into the labor market will need much higher levels of literacy and numeracy to secure employment with some level of security and advancement options.

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<sup>7</sup> S. Dorn (1996). *Creating the Dropout: An Institutional and Social History of School Failure*.

<sup>8</sup> D. Gamson, “From Progressivism to Federalism: The pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunity, 1915-1965.” Paper presented at the Advanced Studies Fellowship Conference, June 2005, pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> W. Haney, G. Madaus, L. Abrams, A., Wheelock, J. Miao, and I. Gruia (2004). *The Education Pipeline in the United States, 1970-2000.*, National Board on Education Testing and Public Policy, pp. 17.

<sup>10</sup>E. M. Allensworth, and J.Q. Easton (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Indeed, the ninth grade in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century high school has a pivotal mission. It can no longer function as the filter that separates the candidates for higher learning from those who will go directly into the labor market. Instead, it must provide a solid foundation for all students—with their varying levels of prior achievement—to travel the pathway to postsecondary success.

### **What Research Says About Ninth Grade Transition Strategies**

The rising concern about the ninth grade bulge has spawned a body of research about the different strategies being implemented to increase student success in ninth grade, including a substantial number of recommendations calling for better preparation in middle schools.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of rigorous large-scale studies on the factors associated with a successful ninth grade transition, high school level guidance has a weaker research base.

Most recommendations hinge on the need to increase ninth graders' sense of belonging and comfort in their new schools and to put in place structure and strategies to address their academic needs. Orientation and "summer bridge" programs that seek to reach all entering students even before they enter ninth grade also have shown some merit, particularly when they involve collaboration between eighth and ninth grade personnel and targeted supports for students identified as at risk of early academic failure in high school.<sup>12</sup>

Summer programs for students at high risk of academic failure also have shown promise. One example of a summer bridge program is the Step Up Program. There, the Open Meadow Alternative School, in partnership with the Portland (OR) Public Schools, operates a summer leadership camp and academic skills program for students who are farthest behind academically entering high school. This non-credit bearing summer program is coupled with extended day tutoring and parent support during their freshman year. Initially implemented in one high school in 2003, the program has now been implemented at three additional high schools, with 100% of the 2008-2009 participants still in school at the end of the school year.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, the structure and environment of high schools has been the focus of significant public and private investment, both to increase personalized support for students and to create better conditions for teaching and learning. These include ninth grade academies and small schools, as well as less extensive structural changes such as advisory periods and "looping,"

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, R. Balfanz (2009). *Putting middle grades students on the graduation path: A policy and practice brief*. The National Middle Schools Association.

<sup>12</sup> A. Horwitz and J. Snipes (2006). *Supporting Successful Transitions to High School*, Council of Great City Schools, p.4, citing J.S. Smith, (2006) *Research summary: Transition from Middle School to High School*, National Middle School Association.

<sup>13</sup> The Step Up Program was recognized in 2007 by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change; see [http://www.learningtofinish.org/doku.php?id=open\\_meadow\\_step\\_up\\_program----read more](http://www.learningtofinish.org/doku.php?id=open_meadow_step_up_program----read_more).

where teachers follow students for multiple years. These structures are intended to support closer relationships between teachers and students that have been linked to higher attendance and levels of course passing.<sup>14</sup> However, the evidence is that these reforms, without the addition of curricular and instructional strategies, do not produce significant gains in students' academic outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

In North Carolina, those concerned that students feel “overwhelmed, confused and alone” advocated efforts to create “more personalized and responsive high school learning environments” by implementing ninth grade academies, defined as “a year long, uniquely designed school program that provides ninth graders with the resources and support they need.” A study of 82 schools in North Carolina that implemented these academies found that non-promotion rates were significantly lower than the state average for North Carolina schools that implemented ninth grade academies.<sup>16</sup> However, the same research found no statistically significant growth in proficiency between eighth grade reading and ninth grade English scores.

Another stream of interventions has involved curricular changes, particularly with regard to the development of higher level literacy skills that students need to succeed in high school and beyond. Some approaches address the literacy issue with all incoming ninth graders (as in WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative), others focus on those students with significant academic gaps. These literacy-focused reforms have yielded promising results, particularly when implemented as part of a larger set of strategies that change the structure of high schools and provide professional development for teachers.<sup>17</sup>

The development of academic behaviors associated with educational success has received less explicit attention. These behaviors include self-management skills that enable adolescents to manage their academic workload and understand the demands of different disciplines. Support for the development of these academic behaviors is included in both Talent Development's and AVID's (Advancement Via Individual Determination) strategies for helping students learn skills

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<sup>14</sup> E. M. Allensworth and J.Q.Easton, (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year*. Consortium on Chicago School Reform.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, American Institutes for Research (2006) *Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants Initiative: 2001-2005. Final Report*, J. Kemple and J. Snipes (2000), *Career Academies: Impact on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School*, MDRC., and J. Kemple, J. Connell, A. Klem, N. Letgers, and J. Eccles (2005) *Making the Move: how freshman academies and thematic small learning communities can support successful transitions to and through high schools*, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, USDOE.

<sup>16</sup> C. Cook, H. Fowler, T. Harris (2008). *Ninth Grade Academies: Easing the Transition to High School*, Public School of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>17</sup> J. Kemple, C. Herlihy, and T. Smith (2005). *Making Progress Toward Graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School Model*, MDRC.

for note-taking and test taking, time management, effective textbook reading, and library research.

A more recent addition to efforts to improve high school instruction is the approach called RTI or Response to Intervention. RTI has its roots in regulations from the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It is most frequently thought of as a tiered intervention model where the bottom tier includes instructional services designed for all students, while the second and third tiers include increasing levels of intervention and support for students who are having difficulty mastering the work. Unlike earlier efforts to sort students by IQ, the RTI approach calls for continual progress monitoring and adjustment of approaches and supports.<sup>18</sup> Although studied at the elementary level, there is not yet a body of research about the outcomes of implementing RTI at the high school level.

A 2007 study by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform looked at thirteen New York City high schools that achieved success with low-performing ninth graders. The authors found four critical strategies in these “Beating the Odds” schools that appeared to help these students successfully complete high school:

- **Academic rigor** and high standards for student work across the disciplines
- **Networks of timely supports** for students that included advisories and monitoring of student progress and provision of timely interventions to address areas of need
- **College expectations** that articulated for entering ninth graders a vision of high school education as a pathway to postsecondary education and training and **access to postsecondary planning resources** that helped students gain access to postsecondary institutions
- **Effective use of data** to track student progress, identify areas of need, and provide feedback on interventions<sup>19</sup>

Beyond school-level approaches, some newer strategies involve the district and state levels in efforts to improve ninth grade outcomes. Several school districts, including Chicago, IL, and Hamilton County, TN, now include ninth grade performance in their accountability measures. In 2006 the Indiana legislature passed a bill (HB1347) requiring all high schools to report annually the number of freshman not earning enough credits to become sophomores.<sup>20</sup> Others districts, such as Philadelphia, are developing early warning systems to identify students at risk

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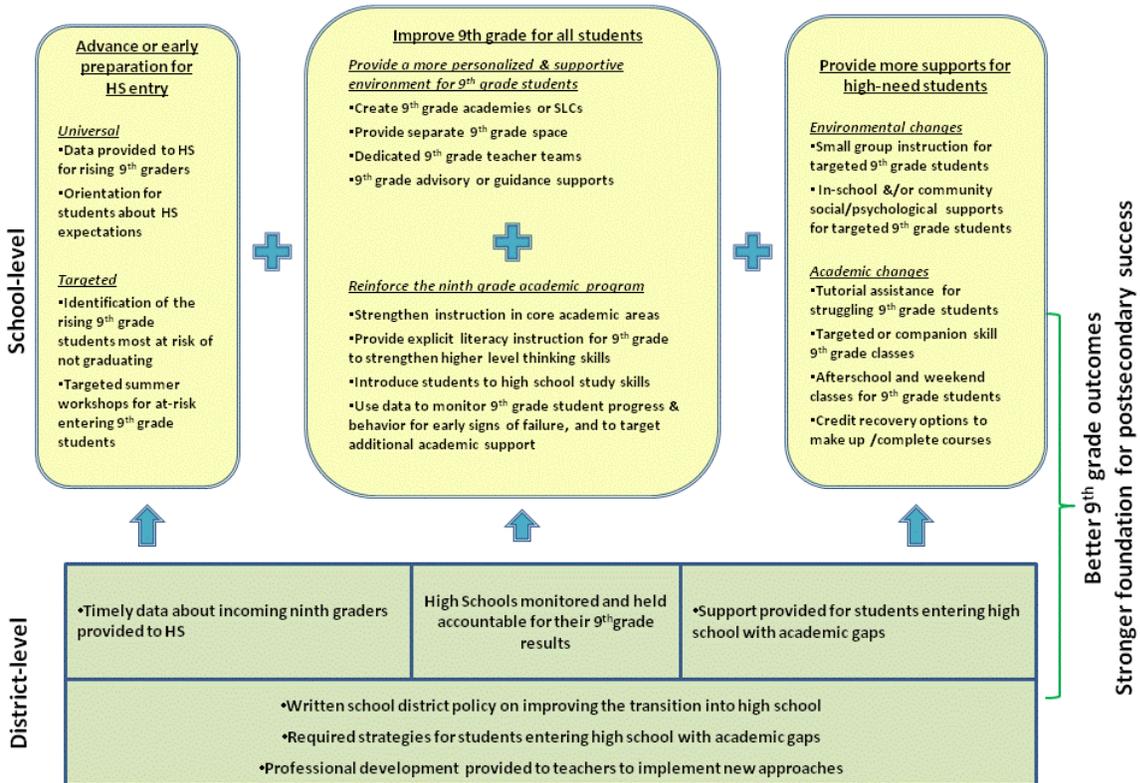
<sup>18</sup> C.A. Samuels (2009). “High Schools Try Out RTI,” *Education Week*

<sup>19</sup> C. Ascher and C. McGuire (2007). *Beating the odds: How thirteen NYC schools bring low-performing ninth graders to timely graduation and college enrollment*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

<sup>20</sup> L. Kennelly and M. Monrad, (2007). *Easing the Transition to High School: Research and Best Practices Designed to Support High School Learning*. Available at [NHSC Transitions Report.pdf](#)

of academic failure before they reach high school.<sup>21</sup> These data then inform additional efforts to provide support to the most vulnerable students, while still attending to the need to monitor and smooth the transition for students who arrive without predictive signs of vulnerability.

### A Conceptual Framework for Supporting the Transition into High School.



The graphic above posits a framework for building a coherent set of supports designed to facilitate students’ transition into high school, based on the recommendations from these studies. In this framework, efforts to support the transition begin well before students arrive in high school with the provision of student data that help high schools plan in advance, and include data that identify students at particularly high risk of early difficulty. (This may require students’ high school choice decisions to happen earlier in the school year—and at the district level.) These early efforts also include advance orientation sessions for students to help ease the shock of going from relatively small and uncomplicated schools to large schools with many more students and competing demands for their attention. For students with significant academic difficulties, early efforts also include summer bridge programs that seek to build student skills and increase their sense of belonging.

<sup>21</sup> L. Pinkus, (2008). *Using Early-Warning Data to Improve Graduation Rates: Closing the Cracks in the Education System*, Alliance for Excellent Education.

Once students enter high school, transition support efforts seek to change the experience of ninth grade for all incoming students. These efforts combine environmental changes to make the school more welcoming and responsive with academic changes to improve the quality of instruction and increase students' academic achievement. These can include structural changes, including creating ninth grade academies and small learning communities, the providing separate space for ninth grade classes within the school building or campus, scheduling of teachers to work in teams that share the ninth grade students, and regular advisory periods. These environmental changes are accompanied by those designed to strengthen the ninth grade instructional program, including strategies to strengthen high-level literacy skills, introduce students to high school study skills, and use data to monitor ninth grade student progress and behavior for early signs of failure.

School-wide strategies to improve the transition into high school are reinforced by additional targeted academic support for students who enter at high risk of failure or who fall off track early in ninth grade. These include smaller classes with additional academic support for struggling students and additional counseling support to help these students resolve personal issues that impede their academic progress. Additional tutoring for struggling ninth grade students, targeted or companion "intervention" classes, afterschool and weekend classes, and credit recovery options offer additional supports to struggling students to help them get back on track academically.

The composite model also includes district support to drive and support school-level efforts. Practical supports, such as the timely provision of data about incoming ninth graders, also help individual high schools plan professional development on effective interventions that can strengthen school-level capacity to implement new approaches. The district can stimulate and strengthen school-based efforts with explicit district policies that target the ninth grade transition and hold high schools accountable for ninth grade results, hold high expectations for students entering high school with academic gaps, and require schools to provide additional support to at-risk students.

### **Supporting the Ninth Grade Transition: An Analysis of Six High Schools' Efforts to Facilitate the Entry into High School.**

***Sample selection and data collection and analysis.*** Schools for the current study were selected based on data from the SLCP grantee database, grantee annual performance reports, and external evaluation reports. These data were submitted by SLCP grantees to the Department of Education and subsequently shared with the study's authors. Three conceptual criteria were used to choose schools participating in the current study. First, the research team identified

schools serving a sizeable disadvantaged population in order to understand how the SLC model operates in challenging contexts. In addition, disadvantaged students are a targeted population for the Department of Education’s SLC Program. Second, the research team sought to identify schools reporting multiple elements of strong SLC implementation. From these criteria, 21 schools were identified, and 6 schools in three districts agreed to participate in the study.

The six high schools are shown in the table below (the names have been changed), showing their approximate size and demographic composition.

| <b>District</b>                  | <b>A</b>             |                 |                  | <b>B</b>       |                 | <b>C</b>        |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>School</b>                    | <b>Valley Stream</b> | <b>Fillmore</b> | <b>Hawthorne</b> | <b>McMahon</b> | <b>Cheshire</b> | <b>Lakewood</b> |
| Students                         | 1,200                | 1,400           | 2,400            | 3,500          | 3,500 *         | 1,900           |
| White                            | 15%                  | <1%             | 2%               | 3%             | <1%             | 21%             |
| Non-white                        | 85%                  | 99%             | 98%              | 97%            | 99%             | 79%             |
| Limited English                  | 24%                  | 38%             | 27%              | 9%             | 30%             | 12%             |
| <i>Hispanic (included above)</i> | <i>58%</i>           | <i>95%</i>      | <i>96%</i>       | <i>46%</i>     | <i>99%</i>      | <i>53%</i>      |
| FRP or low income                | 54%                  | 87%             | 71%              | 47%            | 87%             | 48%             |

\* Estimated; population dropped in 2010-2011 because a new high school opened to relieve overcrowding

After securing the approval of institutional review boards at AED, the U.S. Department of Education, and each of the school districts, visits were made to each high school to conduct interviews and collect documentation about the school’s programs. Telephone interviews were conducted with district personnel. The district-level interviews included the director of secondary education, director of secondary guidance, and the district SLC project director or director of school improvement. At the school level, the interviews included the 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. Not all individuals were available in every site. During the visit, the two-person study team requested a student-led tour of the school and conducted informal observations of the school environment and of interactions between students and teachers.

Based on the collected interview data and materials, the study team identified patterns in the implementation of practices intended to facilitate the transition into high school, comparing these patterns to the conceptual framework described above. In reporting the findings, we identify general patterns and provide specific examples that illustrate those patterns. In some cases, themes emerged from the data that had not been specifically explored on our protocols and thus were not collected from each school. The project timeline did not allow us to return to the schools to ask systematically about these patterns. We were not able to determine the extent to which such practices or themes were present or true for every school in our study; we report them here if they are relevant to our research questions.

## **Implementation Study Findings**

***Understanding the ninth grade problem.*** We began our inquiry by asking all school and district personnel we interviewed what they saw as the most challenging aspect of the ninth grade transition. In most of the schools we visited, the teachers and administrators were keenly aware of the importance of the ninth grade transition. Several individuals cited the findings of the Consortium for Chicago School Research that show that students with irregular attendance and failing freshman year course work are unlikely to recover their lost credits and are far less likely than other students in their class to graduate on time.<sup>22</sup> Teachers and administrators stressed the importance of success in ninth grade and a timely transition into tenth grade. In most cases, they had thought about the different causes of ninth grade failure as part of both individual and collective efforts to improve students' chances for success. In one school, however, the teachers we interviewed appeared to be at a loss to explain why so many students had difficulty in ninth grade, simply ascribing their failure to "getting lost" in the larger social organization of the high school.

As might be expected, the most illuminating responses came from those teachers who worked directly with ninth graders. These individuals had a range of teaching experience, including some who were relatively new to high school teaching. However, many of the teachers we interviewed had taught ninth graders for more than five years. Even while listing a series of challenges for ninth graders and those who teach them, most of the more experienced teachers hastened to add their appreciation of the openness and vitality of these newcomers to the high school scene, and their sense that they could make a real difference for these students. They saw them as curious, with a holistic sense of themselves as students—they had not yet become jaded nor labeled themselves as "good at math" or "bad at history."

The responses of these teachers painted a picture of a transition to ninth grade that is marked by the convergence of developmental and contextual changes. Adolescents enter high school in a period of change along multiple dimensions—physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and hormonal. These changes do not always unfold on a consistent timetable. At the same time that students are experiencing and trying to adjust to these changes, they are encountering an organizational, social, and intellectual context that differs in significant ways from the schools they have attended up until this point. The convergence of students' individual developmental changes with the dramatic differences in the organizational context and intellectual demands between middle school and high school is potentially challenging for all students. This challenge may be even greater for students coming from the kinds of middle schools that serve the students who attend SLC grantee high schools—low-performing large middle schools that

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<sup>22</sup> E. M. Allensworth, and J.Q. Easton (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

serve predominantly low-income students, where the academic preparation and personalized support for adolescent development often are inadequate.

In analyzing teachers' responses about the challenges of ninth grade, three different transitions emerged that incoming students need to make as part of a successful high school transition—in the midst of dramatic and often distracting changes in their school context. These include the development of self-regulation and self-management capacities, the development of a personal identity as a member of their peer group and the larger society, and the development of academic behaviors and intellectual capacity.

The first transition revealed in the teachers' comments involves the ***development of self-regulation and self-management capacities*** that enable teenagers to set goals and pursue them, to judge consequences and act accordingly and to manage the demands of their academic lives. According to experts on adolescent development, this period, which begins with physical and biological changes, “encompasses the transition from the social status of a child (who requires adult monitoring) to that of an adult (who is him- or herself responsible for behavior).”<sup>23</sup> These ninth grade teachers reported having to explain their expectations and students' responsibilities repeatedly.

Almost every ninth grade teacher we interviewed worried that it took too long for new high school students to realize that “everything they are doing in ninth grade counts” and that the consequences of not buckling down can be catastrophic. They described students as unable to handle their new independence and being ill-equipped to change classes six times a day, all the while balancing the divergent expectations and requirements of different teachers. They complained that students were disorganized, forgetful, and lacked focus and work habits; “they don't do homework and don't know how to study.” Few high school teachers, even among the ninth grade faculty, view addressing these problems as part of their job, usually expecting students to have learned these skills in middle school. Like most high school teachers, they viewed their primary role as teaching disciplinary (or sometimes interdisciplinary) content.

The challenge of this transition to effective self-regulation is compounded by the shift in organizational demands and accountability between middle schools that seek to be “developmentally responsive” to young adolescents and high schools that expect students to be autonomous and self-managed. In every school we visited, teachers complained that middle schools pass students along to the high schools regardless of their academic readiness, leaving students shocked to learn that there is no longer social promotion and that they have to work hard to earn passing grades. In addition, as one teacher pointed out, this also happens at a

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<sup>23</sup> R. E. Dahl (2004). “Adolescent Brain Development: A Period of Vulnerabilities and Opportunities.” *Annals of the NY Academy of Sciences*, Volume 102:1, pp 1-22, p. 9.

time when parental support and academic surveillance often declines so that teachers can no longer count on parents to hold students accountable for getting their work done.

The second transition involves the **development of a personal identity** as adolescents move from defining themselves in relation to their families (as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters) to defining who they are in relation to their peers and who they want to be in the context of the larger society. Given school feeder patterns in the districts we studied, many ninth graders have been with the same students throughout elementary and middle elementary and school. High school brings a whole world of new social experiences and new peers; “it’s like Disneyland for them,” said one ninth grade teacher, describing the powerful distractions from academic work. Even when students understand the need to focus on their school work, social issues can at times overshadow the academic issues. Experts on adolescence agree that cognitive competence competes with emotional demands in determining behavior. “In real-life situations, adolescents do not simply rationally weigh the relative risks and consequences of their behavior—their actions are largely influenced by feelings and social influences.”<sup>24</sup>

The third transition involves the **development of academic behaviors and intellectual capacity**. Adolescents’ intellectual abilities are developing as they enter high school, moving from simple concrete reasoning to more abstract and analytic thought and to the ability to function in several different disciplines, each with its own intellectual structures and practices. Little of their middle school work prepares them for the strong disciplinary focus of high school work, the need to understand the demands of different disciplines for learning and presenting the results of that learning, or the kinds of skills that enable more experienced students to complete their work with far less explanatory support.<sup>25</sup> Teachers described the challenge for students who are used to the limited academic demands of middle schools—knowing and summarizing content—when confronted with the focus in high school on analyzing, evaluating, thinking critically, and reflecting on one’s learning.

These demands are even more difficult for the large proportion of students who entered the high schools we visited with significant academic gaps. One math teacher spoke of the noticeable difference between students who arrive with confidence in their basic skills and ability to catch on to the new materials and those students who are still trying to put together knowledge that should already have been in place. In general, algebra was the class that was mentioned most frequently by the teachers we interviewed as the course that derailed ninth

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<sup>24</sup> L. Steinberg. “Cognitive and affective development in adolescence,” *Trends in Cognitive Science*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (February 2005) p. 72

<sup>25</sup> C. L. Greenleaf, R. Schoenbach, C. Cziko, F. L. Mueller. “Apprenticing Adolescent Readers to Academic Literacy,” *Harvard Education Review*, Volume 71, No. 1, (Spring 2001).

grade students, though English teachers also commented on the proportion of students needing extra support to master higher level literacy skills.

**Three approaches to the transition challenge.** High schools face important choices in how they work to facilitate successful transitions. In analyzing the work of these six schools as a whole, it appeared that there were three levels of response—proactive, reactive, and passive—to the needs of incoming students. These levels of response are not discrete models, and can be thought of as points along a continuum. In addition, schools that were largely passive had promising elements of practice, while we noted some important missed opportunities in those schools that were proactive.

Valley Stream and McMahon High Schools were largely **passive** in their approach to the ninth grade transition, where the organizational response seemed insufficiently cognizant of adolescents’ developmental changes and the way they were manifest in the transition into high school. It was not that teachers did not care about the students, but their personal concern for students did not translate into professional curiosity about the causes of ninth grade failure or strategies for addressing it. The implicit message conveyed was, “Welcome to our high school. Here’s the ninth grade curriculum—we assume you’re ready for it.”

In Hawthorne and Lakewood High Schools, the response was **reactive**—school personnel anticipated that problems would occur when students’ incomplete maturation or gaps in academic preparation caused them to stumble, and responded to these problems with an assortment of services like mentoring and tutoring. Teachers reviewed grade student performance in ninth grade to determine which students needed these services. The implicit message conveyed here was, “Here’s the ninth grade curriculum, and here’s how we’ll help you if and when you fail.”

In Fillmore and Cheshire High Schools, administrators and teachers had worked to shape a **proactive** response, meeting students where they entered high school with a clear vision of what they needed to achieve before graduation. By working to understand and anticipate the students’ academic and developmental issues, staff in these schools were able to scaffold the transition into high school and, in so doing, try to create a stronger foundation for future educational success. This involved both strengthening the overall instructional program based on incoming students’ needs and putting in place additional supports that could be quickly mobilized when students needed more help.

In the following sections, we discuss the school-level practices that have potential to support the transition into high school. Our analysis is divided into three sections, consistent with our conceptual framework: *advance or early preparation for high school entry*, *improving ninth grade for all students*, and *providing targeted supports for high-need students*. As we describe

each of these practices based on what we learned at the six sample schools, we highlight the more proactive ways of implementing structures and practices to facilitate the ninth grade transition process. We also take note of missed opportunities, where the potential for greater support existed but was not used.

### **Advance or early preparation for entry into high school**

The transition process can be substantially strengthened when high schools *receive early data about the academic needs of the students* about to enter, whether from the central office or through the exchange of information between middle schools and high schools. We found more missed opportunities than proactive practices when we asked teachers, counselors, and administrators when they received data about incoming students. No school in our sample appeared to get data on all its incoming students from the central office before the end of the school year before the students arrived. In most, the counselors described visiting feeder middle schools in the spring before ninth grade to introduce the high school options to students, and collect data on the new students only once school selections were made, which occurred so late in the school year that data were not available before summer.

In turn, these counselors make these data available to teachers, but sometimes only if requested. Teachers reported receiving data on incoming students too late for it to be used in summer planning. Ironically, all the teachers we interviewed told us that they had ready access to individual student-level data through their district's data system, as well as professional development on how to gain access to these data. However, it appeared that it was up to them individually to decide whether to consult these data, and it was unclear whether any of them had done so. They reported little support on how to use the data to identify patterns of student needs and to plan accordingly. (The one exception was in a school where teachers made extensive use of data later in high school as part of efforts to improve students' performance on the state examination, given in tenth grade. However, these same teachers reported that looking at individual student data for incoming ninth graders was a matter of individual initiative.)

In some cases, schools did receive information about students considered at high risk of failure, usually as the result of district policies focused on improving ninth grade performance. For example, because the district requires an academic intervention plan for students who score at very low levels on the state tests in middle school, the ninth grade coordinators at Hawthorne High School collect the intervention plans and talk regularly with teachers about how these students are doing, making sure that these students' needs are addressed.

*Orientations and summer bridge programs.* Many high schools provide some form of *pre-entry activities* to ease the transition into high school, recognizing that adolescents will need to adjust

to a dramatic change in their social and academic context and learn to meet new demands and expectations. Most of the schools we visited, however, offered limited orientations for most incoming students. Students and their parents were invited by mail to attend an orientation session, which lasted just a few hours, during which students and their parents were given a tour of the building, introduced to the school's rules as well as to their teachers and administrators, and, in some cases, to the community partners that work with the schools. Only Hawthorne and Valley Stream High Schools reported that their orientations lasted as long as two days. Attendance at these orientations was generally voluntary, with schools reporting a wide range of participation (from 25% to 90%).

More proactive support was provided over the summer preceding high school to students who were seen as needing more assistance. District A mandated a two-week orientation program for at-risk students based on middle school scores on the state tests that included work in science, math, and literacy through engaging hands-on activities and early relationship building with teachers. (In a missed opportunity, we learned that the teachers in the summer program were not necessarily the same ones teaching these students once they entered high school.)

Cheshire High School reported that it held its first summer bridge program the prior summer, with mandatory attendance for students who had scored in the two lowest quintiles on the state tests in middle school. The four-week program included half-days of math and literacy instruction. In Lakewood High School, teachers and counselors described an earlier two-week summer orientation program where students worked on study skills, math, and literacy. But there, as in the other schools, after the SLC funding ended, budget constraints were cited as the reason for very limited efforts to prepare incoming students before the school year started.

### **Improving ninth grade for all students**

***Provide a personalized and supportive environment.*** Among SLCP grantees, the most common approach for facilitating the transition into high schools is the *creation of freshman academies or small learning communities (SLCs)*. A team of teachers shares students and uses common time to work together in these learning environments. These structural approaches are intended to respond to students' need to identify with a social unit smaller than the whole school and enable teachers to more closely monitor students' academic progress and improve instruction accordingly.

In all but one of the schools we visited, the structural approaches taken by the schools had changed recently. In some cases, this was the result of budget constraints, but in other schools, new leadership saw little utility in structures created by earlier leaders. In some cases, this was the result of lackluster results. However, in one school, a new principal who arrived after

strategies had produced strong positive gains in ninth grade success did not see fit to try to sustain those structural supports when new district policies on discipline-based professional learning communities were announced that ran counter to the grade-level focus.

Two high schools we visited were proactive in their use of SLCs as a way to support ninth graders. In Fillmore High School, despite cutbacks, the ninth grade teachers continue to share roughly half the same students and ninth grade classrooms are still located in the ninth grade wing, enabling informal conversations about student progress among teachers. In addition to district-mandated use of common planning time for discipline-based meetings, the ninth grade teachers continued the SLC practice of collaborating in interdisciplinary teams, using their physical proximity to keep tabs on their students. And after years of overcrowding that limited SLC implementation was relieved by the opening of a new school, Cheshire High School just implemented small learning communities that include all four grades, striving for purity. The overwhelming majority of both students and teachers spend their time with members of their own SLC. Each SLC is staffed with a full team of core content teachers, two counselors, two special education teachers, a resource specialist to provide inclusion services for special education students in regular classrooms, and an RTI (Response to Intervention) coordinator.

Cheshire High School's structure is accompanied by an investment in time for several different types of teacher collaboration, all focused on improving instruction.<sup>26</sup> Each SLC has a weekly hour-long cross-disciplinary meeting, focused on better addressing students' academic needs across the curriculum in addition to instructional improvement conversations that take place in weekly 90-minute meetings of professional learning communities comprising teachers of the same courses (e.g., algebra) and monthly department meetings that address vertical articulation of the curriculum across grade levels.

Lakewood High School provides a 30-minute weekly meeting of the ninth grade's four core academic teachers to discuss students' home or discipline issues and to share information about what they are teaching across their courses. These teachers reported that these meetings make it easier to discuss how to support individual students or to bring in parents for meetings. However, their use of this time seemed constrained in relation to the challenges facing the students, and according to teachers, little of the half-hour is spent discussing specific efforts designed to improve ninth grade instruction; most is spent talking about individual students.

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<sup>26</sup> The school improvement plan notes that all the school's categorical funding will be used to provide the classroom personnel, materials, and training to support the intervention-friendly curriculum and schedule. This includes the new RTI Coordinators in each of the SLCs, as well as the additional staff needed to permit the school to schedule common planning time.

Common planning time for teachers was not provided in the SLCs or ninth grade structures in McMahon and Valley Stream Schools. McMahon has eight SLCs and has made an effort to keep its ninth grade English classes “pure” but the school has not allocated resources for teacher teaming. (Only one of eight SLCs chose to allocate some of its grant resources to include common planning time. Even though the principal commented that it had been useful to the SLC, he and the other SLCs have not replicated common planning time in their SLCs.) In Valley Stream High School, where the SLCs were recently dismantled, teachers who had appreciated how common planning time offered them the opportunity to discuss students’ needs now mourned the absence of shared time, but appeared to make no effort to convince leadership to find ways to replace it.

Another strategy for personalizing the high school environment to help students make good choices and intervene when they run into problems is an *advisory class*. In three schools we visited, we encountered proactive uses of advisory periods. Two of these schools used advisory curricula developed by their own teachers, with different activities for each grade level. Cheshire High School had an advisory period that met weekly within each SLC with classes divided by grade levels. This school’s ninth grade advisory curriculum stresses topics such as organization and time management, as well as learning what is required to graduate and go on to postsecondary education. In Fillmore High School, the advisory period met twice weekly for the first six weeks of ninth grade and weekly thereafter, covering all four grades and using a curriculum developed by teachers with different activities at each grade level. During the advisory period, the adult advocate works with individual students on scheduling, reviewing grades, and planning for the future. At Valley Stream High School, ninth grade advisory classes also provided an opportunity for students to work with counselors to look at their transcripts and review their progress against a four-year plan.

In the other schools we visited, despite frequent teacher, counselor, and administrator references to the importance of students being well-known to teachers, no specific advisory structures existed, and one school lacked both advisory and homeroom periods. Teachers at McMahon High School reportedly resisted implementing an advisory program because it would require an additional prep period.

All six schools had *guidance supports* but allocated counselors differently. At Cheshire High School, each SLC could determine how the two counselors divided the students; some did it by grade level while other SLCs divided their students alphabetically. In addition to the traditional course scheduling duties, one counselor in this school noted that “a good ninth grade counselor is someone who is comfortable handling a high volume of referrals, especially for behavioral

issues that affect academics.” She noted that part of the counselor’s role was to make sure ninth grade teachers modeled how to stay organized on a day-to-day basis.

The largest portion of the counselors’ work generally involved scheduling classes for students, but some played proactive roles working with students to be sure that they had a four-year plan to prepare for postsecondary education. In Lakewood High School, students were required by the state to complete a career and education planning course in middle school and arrived in ninth grade with electronic plans for their high school years. The principal and counselors used the plans with students to review what they needed to do to graduate on time. In McMahan High School, where counselors described their work as “a mix of proactive and reactive counseling,” they met individually with ninth grade students to discuss “where you want to go and how to get there.” They tried to meet formally with each student twice a year, noting, “if we make a connection early, the students are more likely to come back when they need help.”

***Reinforce the ninth grade academic program.*** For students to succeed in high school and beyond, the social supports provided through personalization, advisories, and counseling need to be accompanied by a *strong instructional program* that helps students develop academic behaviors and cognitive skills they will need to master significant bodies of academic knowledge in high school and beyond. Two of the six schools we visited had proactive strategies for strengthening the instruction offered to incoming students. Both schools invested in common planning time to plan the ninth grade classes and review multiple sources of data on student progress and make needed changes. Both also allocated personnel resources to have an assistant principal for instruction who oversees and guides the work. Both schools tried hard to keep excellent teachers at the ninth grade level and were quite matter-of-fact about confronting the students’ pressing academic needs without blaming students, their parents, or the middle schools for students’ weaknesses.

Cheshire High School implemented a full-school RTI approach, which it launched at the beginning of this school year after a successful pilot of the approach last year.<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of the school year, students are placed in mathematics and literacy classes based on their eighth grade state test scores; additional diagnostic testing is done during the first week of school. On a modified block schedule with mostly double periods, students spend the first ten weeks of the year (the equivalent of a semester on a traditional schedule) taking classes based

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<sup>27</sup> RTI involves identifying students at risk for poor learning outcomes, carefully monitoring student progress, providing evidence-based interventions, and adjusting the intensity and nature of those interventions, depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identifying students with learning disabilities or other disabilities, according to the National Center on Response to Intervention. See also C. Samuels, “High Schools Try Out RTI,” *Education Week*, January 28, 2009.

on nationally validated curricula (e.g., Read 180 in English). The purpose is to review the core skills and knowledge students need in math and literacy to build a firm foundation for more challenging high school work.

Consistent with the three-tiered RTI approach, students who need some additional support have an additional single-period “intervention” class to reinforce what they are learning in the double period class, while students who need intensive support are placed in small classes with a resource specialist in addition to the teacher. Leadership estimated that at least 40% of the roughly 3,000 students are assigned to one or more intervention support classes. (The block schedule also meant that teachers worked with fewer students during each term than on a traditional schedule, and students saw no more than four teachers on a single day.)

Formative assessments at Cheshire High School are administered at the five- and ten-week points. Students whose performance indicates they need more support are moved to different classes and offered additional supports at these check points. Those students needing less support also are moved to different classes. Each SLC’s full-time RTI coordinator plays a key role in guiding these placement decisions. Teachers of the same course also meet weekly to review student progress and to refine their instruction and assessment, supported by school-based coaches in mathematics, literacy, and specially designed academic instruction in English (for students learning English).

Fillmore High School has adopted a double dosing strategy that offers students additional instruction in subject areas where they need extra help. For example, a student struggling in algebra will be enrolled in a regular algebra class as well as a “local credit” algebra class, which offers scaffolding in the skills required to be successful in algebra. The school has an intensive focus on literacy and students who need more support in developing higher order reading skills take a regular English class as well as a class focused on developing these reading and writing skills. Fillmore also places an emphasis on socializing students into an academic culture while building academic skills. The leadership and staff value social-emotional developmental learning and support as well as academic remediation and acceleration. Despite a mandate to use special dedicated district fiscal resources for discipline-based common planning time, the principal also allows this time to be used for cross-disciplinary conversations when the data show a need for them, consistent with a distributed leadership model in which teachers are given the authority to design practices that respond to the needs of their students.

Fillmore’s teachers and administrators regularly review trends in student progress. They are using data in proactive rather than reactive ways. Teachers analyze data within content area teams, instructional teams, and as a full staff in order to inform their own practice and improve

student performance. At the same time, ninth grade teachers point to the need to teach study habits (e.g., note taking) and organizational skills along with the academics and to actively connect students to needed supports. The school's Homework Academy is available for all students after school from 4–6 p.m. daily where a failed assignment can be redone within a single day. This just-in-time strategy reflects a school culture of student academic accountability and is designed to minimize problems that arise when students fall far behind in classes.

Rather than choosing from between discipline-based or interdisciplinary, grade-based or SLC-based teacher collaboration, Cheshire and Fillmore High Schools have opted to use common planning time in multiple ways. Even though the district office provided additional resources for discipline-based use of common planning time and mandated that it be used for professional learning communities within the disciplines, the principal at Fillmore High School understood that some time was needed for teachers at each grade level to discuss how to coordinate their discipline-based strategies across classes. He thus permitted some district-supported time to be used this way. Cheshire High School has implemented a turnaround plan using a variety of resources to support an intensive effort to improve instruction through teacher collaboration. This includes both small course-alike professional learning communities within the disciplines, and regularly structured small learning community meetings at each grade level. SLC-wide and department meetings that cross all grade levels supplement these smaller meetings. In both schools, school leadership sets clear goals for the use of teacher collaboration time.

The other schools we visited appeared to lack a coherent approach to strengthening their academic programs. At McMahan High School, the principal noted some promising work on common expectations in one SLC, and talked about the need for sharing instructional strategies across the SLCs without indicating any mechanism for this sharing to occur. At Lakewood High School, the administrators and teachers expressed a desire for time to work with students on both academic and organizational skills but felt they did not have room in the schedule to do so. This school made considerable use of data to improve instruction, but appeared to focus that work primarily on improving performance on the tenth grade state test. The school's leadership coach described efforts to get teachers to scaffold and differentiate instruction to address the needs of students with different skill levels, but the teachers did not refer to these efforts and appeared to be doing their own individual approaches.

***Closely monitor student performance for signs of failure and provide additional support.***

Close monitoring of student progress is an essential component for ninth grade success to prevent students from falling behind, particularly when it is coupled with just-in-time supports

to help students catch up quickly. Two schools we visited reported systematically monitoring student performance at five-week intervals to check for patterns and problems. Cheshire High School was most proactive in assigning students having difficulty to additional support classes based on their five-week performance data, or assigning them to mandatory tutoring that is provided both during and after the school day. At Valley Stream and McMahon High Schools, it was up to individual teachers to reach out to students to recommend that they come in for additional tutoring.

At Fillmore High School, as described in the section above, monitoring student progress is an ongoing practice and students who fail individual lessons are required to attend the school's Homework Academy from 4–6 p.m. to make up their work before they can fall behind. In Hawthorne High School, teachers regularly review benchmark tests based on the state examination to see what areas of the curriculum need to be reinforced with additional lessons in addition to monitoring individual student progress. Students having difficulty in reading on these assessments were assigned to a literacy lab that used a computer-based program to help them catch up. Teachers also were required to have “intervention packets” in each course for students to make up for failed work.

The remaining two schools appeared to monitor student performance on a less regular schedule. Teachers in Lakewood High School were required to notify parents when students scored a D or F, but this notification did not appear to occur at frequent intervals and was not clearly linked to supports. The school also uses instructional technology (Education 2020) for ninth grade students who failed a class during the first nine weeks of school to enable them to make up work.<sup>28</sup> At Valley Stream High School, the assistant principal responsible for the ninth grade, who notified teachers and parents when students appeared to be at risk of failing, monitored students' grades. (These meetings appeared to be more about holding teachers and parents accountable for student performance than linking these students to additional academic supports.)

### **Providing targeted supports for high-need students**

Even with a revised curriculum and close monitoring of student performance, some students need more intensive supports to succeed, and the six schools varied widely in their approaches to meeting the needs of these students. Cheshire High School's RTI approach is proactive and integrates support for high-need students into the overall instructional plan, providing smaller classes with specialized curricula and additional support staff for students whose test scores

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<sup>28</sup> Education 2020 provides a wide range of online courses at the middle school and high school levels, some designed to meet state-specific requirements, which can be used for credit recovery and accelerated learning.

signaled significant learning gaps. In addition, the RTI coordinator in each SLC works closely with teachers to identify which students need additional support. The school's referral system includes a coordination team made up of a counselor, teachers, the dean, and the RTI specialist.

In Fillmore High School, students whose scores indicate a need for additional help are assigned a support class to help them succeed in the regular course work without waiting for them to fail. Students also are not allowed to fall behind in their classes; those not completing their homework must stay after school to do so in tutoring sessions staffed by teachers and NCLB-funded tutors. A credit recovery program is also available through instructional technology, supported by two teachers. (Some students also use the program for enrichment and acceleration purposes, reducing the stigma of using this program.)

Hawthorne High School offers a variety of reactive supports for students who encounter academic difficulty. Enrichment classes are offered to buttress students who are struggling on the benchmark assessments aligned to the state test. These extra classes are designed at regular intervals based on the areas where students score poorly on the assessments. Teachers in this school also are required to offer an Intervention Packet for students who have failed a portion of a class or have failed the entire class. Students must make up all missed assignments and teachers offer tutoring, as do outside NCLB-funded tutors. (Teachers prefer that students not work with the NCLB tutors because these tutors do not know the content well, but students are attracted to the outside tutoring services because of incentives—pizza and computers after 20 hours or 40 sessions). However, teachers in this school reported that ninth grade students are promoted to tenth grade even if they fail classes, where they will stay until they have sufficient credits to be promoted to eleventh grade.<sup>29</sup>

The remaining three schools offer limited support for high-need students. At Valley Stream High School, students who have been identified as academically at risk are required to attend tutoring one day a week. The attendance coordinator described efforts to get students involved in activities so they feel connected to the school. However, teachers voiced concern that the most at-risk students do not use the tutoring services and that the school's failure rate has increased since the SLC structures were dismantled.

At McMahon High School, a support program was created for students who had three or more failing grades after the first five weeks of school. After conducting focus groups and individual case meetings to understand what was producing these failures, the conclusion was reached that these students had difficulty talking with their teachers and asking for help, and believed

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<sup>29</sup> Ironically, this practice, reported by two different teachers, is an effort to circumvent a district requirement for careful documentation of teachers' outreach to and work with failing ninth grade students, which is one element of the district's ninth grade success initiative.

that these teachers did not care whether they succeeded or failed. This led to professional development to encourage teachers to reach out to students having difficulty and to a mentoring program where older students are assigned to work with younger students. No additional academic supports were provided. The principal reported that this intervention has had limited success and that it is likely to be discontinued.

At Lakewood High School, the state mandates double dosing for students whose state test scores reveal weak reading or math skills. Teachers were concerned that students enrolled in these classes were delayed in entering career pathway classes in their new academies.

### **A Final Word About School Leadership**

In reviewing the findings from these six schools, we cannot overstate the importance of school-level leadership in shaping and supporting the work described above. In the schools with a proactive response to the ninth grade transition challenge, the principals exhibited a clear commitment to seeing all students succeed and were able to navigate between the specifics of the school's needs and culture and the district's policies and practices. They also had a capacity to shape a school-wide vision for change and an ability and commitment to appropriately allocate organizational and fiscal resources to making the needed changes happen. In addition, in these two schools, leadership was distributed among teacher leaders and assistant principals—including those who were responsible for making sure that common planning time was effectively used to improve instruction. In one of these two schools, an assistant principal was responsible for overseeing the ninth grade strategies.

Conversely, in those schools with the passive response, despite occasional promising elements, the principals lacked a clear vision of the high school's core mission to educate all students and what that meant in practical terms, as well as a clear conception of their role in achieving the vision. They seemed besieged by changes in district policy and unable to see ways to focus their organizational and fiscal resources on building a successful school.

### **District-Level Practices**

District-level support can play a powerful role in driving and supporting school-level efforts to improve ninth grade outcomes. In addition to explicit district policies that target the ninth grade transition, practical supports such as the timely provision of data about incoming ninth graders and professional development to prepare teachers to use those data can help individual high schools plan appropriate strategies and professional development. At the same

time, some district policies and practices can make it more difficult for school-level staff to address the ninth grade transition. We highlight three important elements of district-level practice in the sections below.

***District-level ninth grade initiatives.*** Most of the districts we visited were aware of the Consortium for Chicago School Research's findings about the importance of ninth grade success in predicting future graduation.<sup>30</sup> Some also were aware of the 2006 Neild and Balfanz study that identified key early predictors of high school failure.<sup>31</sup> None had yet incorporated ninth grade progress as part of its school review and accountability processes, although it had been proposed in at least one district. The central office in one district we studied recently launched a ninth grade initiative because they had been losing so many ninth grade students. This included requiring eighth grade students who had failed to achieve proficiency on the middle school tests or had significant attendance problems to meet with a placement team to decide whether they were ready for ninth grade. These students were required to attend a two-week summer bridge program and an orientation program (the latter was offered to all students). Ninth grade student outcomes were tracked in all the district high schools using a local adaptation of the Consortium for Chicago School Research's on-track measure.<sup>32</sup> In addition, district leadership stressed guidance and goal setting with students every six weeks, although no special resources (e.g., professional development) were allocated to help make this happen.

However, while the district required a summer bridge program, it appeared to be agnostic about how it was carried out at the school level. Each school visited in this district had a two-week summer bridge program, but we also noted missed opportunities in the way these programs were designed. Students who attended the summer program were not matched to teachers they would have in the fall, missing the chance to build a personal connection that could help ease entry. And while the district leaders saw SLCs as a way to provide caring support for students, most district high schools had dismantled the ninth grade structures that had been part of the SLC program and replaced them with career-focused academies as part of a new district initiative.

***Data and their utilization.*** Teachers, counselors, and administrators in the schools we visited all told us they could find data on their individual student in their districts' data systems; we were surprised to find no clear examples of districts making data on the incoming ninth grade class available early as part of an intentionally designed planning process. In most of the

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<sup>30</sup> E. M. Allensworth, and J.Q. Easton (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>31</sup> R.C. Neild and R. Balfanz (2006). *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005*, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>32</sup> This measure looks at the number of credits students accumulate and the number of semester Fs students receive.

districts, teachers reported that they had received professional development on how to access individual student information from the data system. However, they felt they had insufficient preparation on how to use these data to inform decisions about improving instruction or tailoring supports to individual students. The one exception was a district where teachers received professional development on how to use the results from the state benchmark tests to identify areas of weakness and determine how best to address them.

In most schools we visited, some degree of individual teacher initiative was required to access data. In several cases, the timing in late spring and early summer of both students' choice of high schools and the availability of eighth grade test data made it difficult for the ninth grade teachers and administrators to have up-to-date information on incoming students in time to use it in planning. One district tracked how well schools worked with ninth grade students. However, that district did not appear to make these data available to the individual schools so they could reflect on what was or was not working and incorporate that into their planning for the coming year.

**Common planning time.** As noted in the discussion above, common planning time played an important role in the work of the two high schools with proactive approaches to the ninth grade transition. However, only one of the districts in which these schools were located provided support for common planning time; the other school had significant building-level resources because of its status as a failing school. In the district supporting common planning time, the central office mandated that it be used to create professional learning communities<sup>33</sup> exclusively for discipline-based discussions. The goal of these discussions was to improve instruction in the content areas by focusing on incorporating district standards and initiatives in the content areas and enabling more experienced teachers to mentor younger teachers. Substantial fiscal resources were allocated so that common planning time could be offered daily if the school was on a traditional schedule or several times a week if the school was using a block schedule. However, beyond the basic allocation of time and the mandated focus on the academic disciplines and incorporating the district's academic standards into the curriculum, schools in this district had some degree of latitude in how they structured the time. District-level supervisors observe and evaluate the school-level use of common planning.

In both schools, district policy notwithstanding, common planning time was used both within and across disciplines, and focused both on improving the quality of instruction provided to ninth grade students and conversations about individual student progress. Both schools also had assistant principals who guided and supervised the use of common planning time. All but one remaining school also had some form of common planning time for teachers, but the

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<sup>33</sup> R. DuFour. (2004). What is a "Professional Learning Community"? *Educational Leadership*, Volume 61:8.

purposes were less clearly articulated. There were examples of instructional work being done during these sessions, but individual student concerns tended to dominate the conversation.

## **Conclusions**

In spite of a series of recent reports documenting the importance of improving the ninth grade transition, two-thirds of the schools we visited had not yet formulated a systematic response to the challenge of helping adolescents negotiate the transition into high school. Only two of the six schools we visited were characterized by a school culture that reflected a commitment to meeting students where they were when they entered high school and doing whatever it took to get them ready for postsecondary success. These two schools systematically used data to know what their students needed and how they were progressing, as well as to inform teachers' efforts to improve the quality of instruction in ninth grade classes. They also invested in time for teachers to work together collaboratively and in supervision to guide and support collaborative teacher work and professional development. The result in both schools was a proactive approach that sought to prevent students from falling off track, but also provided systematic supports when students had problems.

Two of the remaining four schools worked hard to be responsive to the needs of students, creating systems of academic and social supports that could be quickly mobilized when students encountered difficulties. The use of data in these schools focused on identifying ninth grade students who were in need of additional support more than on identifying areas where instruction needed to be improved in ways that could reduce the need for recuperative strategies. The third pair of schools, while characterized by many caring adults and an assortment of efforts to keep students from falling through the cracks, lacked a systematic approach to meeting the needs of ninth grade students. A matrix illustrating the key elements of these approaches is provided in Appendix A.

In visiting these schools, we were struck by the tendency to see caring about students as individuals and instructional improvement as separate domains. Yet if today's high school students are going to be prepared for success beyond high school, teachers and other school and district staff who truly care about students' lives will need to find more ways to integrate approaches that increase individual student support with those that strengthen academic preparation.

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## APPENDIX A

### Matrix of Key Elements in Promising Ninth Grade Transition Strategies

The matrix on the following pages is based on (1) what we saw during our site visits or what we did not see but observed as missing elements; (2) the site visitors' experience in other high school reform efforts; and (3) the research on supporting the ninth grade transition. After discussing three overarching elements—school culture, the allocation of resources, and the use of common planning time—we follow the framework presented in the graphic on page 10 of this report.

The second set of elements concern advance planning for entering ninth graders, looking at the schools' practices with regard to examining data on their incoming students, providing orientation sessions and summer bridge programs. The third set of elements examines the extent to which schools have created personalized and supportive environments for ninth graders. This includes how the school houses the ninth grade in the physical setting of the school, whether there is a dedicated ninth grade teaching team, and the kind of advisory and guidance supports provided to the incoming students.

The fourth set of elements concerns efforts to strengthen the instructional program offered to all ninth grade students. After examining the school's approach to providing rigorous standards-based curricula, this section addresses the schools' focused efforts to strengthen adolescents' literacy skills and build successful academic behaviors, as well as the use of data to inform instructional improvement. The fifth set of elements concerns the way school staff monitors academic progress and link students to academic supports. The seventh set of elements examines the kinds of supplemental supports provided to high-needs students.

The eighth and final set of elements concerns the way the school district supports building-level efforts to improve the ninth grade transition. This includes the timely provision of data on rising ninth grader students, holding schools accountable for ninth grade performance, and the use of district resources to support summer bridge programs for high risk students. For each element discussed, we present examples of a proactive approach, a reactive approach, and a passive approach.

These are meant to be examples rather than an exhaustive list of all the possible strategies and activities one might find in a highly proactive approach to supporting students' transition into ninth grade. It bears repeating that the schools where we categorized the approach as largely passive had some activities that were more proactive and that the schools we categorized as proactive had missed some valuable opportunities to support students.

|                                 | Proactive   | Reactive   | Passive  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>1 - OVERARCHING ELEMENTS</b> |   |  |  |
| <b>1a. Culture</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff believes that all students can graduate on time prepared for college and careers. This belief is central to the school’s vision and is reinforced in staff interactions with students.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff identifies high achievers and pushes to provide them with extra supports to help scaffold their matriculation into postsecondary programs.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff believes that students’ postsecondary opportunities are determined by their earlier educational experiences.</li> </ul> |
|                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff meets students where they are at entry into high school and consistently does what it takes to get them where they need to go to achieve academic success.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff anticipates that some students will have difficulty with the standard curriculum,</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff operates on the assumption that students will arrive ready for high school.</li> </ul>                                  |
|                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a building-wide commitment to, systems in place for using data to know where students are academically from the time they enter, and to assess how they are progressing throughout the year.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When students have problems, staff can review performance data to see which students need help, and to inform appropriate decision making.</li> </ul>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student data are available and accessible by staff.</li> </ul>  |
|                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff all are committed to implementing an array of supportive and welcoming actions for ALL incoming ninth graders that last throughout the freshman year.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff identifies students who are struggling with the transition to ninth grade and reaches out to them with supports and other welcoming actions.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff tries to make the high school a supportive and welcoming place, but has no specific strategies in place.</li> </ul>     |
| <b>1b. Resource Allocation</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staffing pattern enables students and staff to spend all or almost all their time within one small learning community.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>N/A</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some staff and students are placed within small learning communities, while others are not.</li> </ul>                        |
|                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A system of student supports that is both integrated into the instructional program, and available afterschool, such as tutoring and credit recovery.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A system of student supports, such as tutoring and credit recovery, is available after school.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some student support services are available, such as afterschool tutoring and credit recovery options.</li> </ul>             |
|                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regularly scheduled professional development opportunities, are offered on an array of topics to improve instruction and student outcomes.</li> <li>Teachers have guaranteed common planning time that is supported and monitored by school leadership.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional development is scheduled in response to issues with instruction and/or student outcomes.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-determined, annually; revisited professional development to improve instruction and student outcomes.</li> </ul>          |

|  | <b>Proactive</b>   | <b>Reactive</b>   | <b>Passive</b>   |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>1c. Common Planning Time</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular and frequent collaborative planning time is scheduled for multiple uses: focusing on improving instruction, vertical articulation of content, monitoring student progress, and coordinating student supports.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative planning time is scheduled, as needed, to review student problems and link students to needed academic and social supports.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers are encouraged to meet with one another and discuss student needs.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>2 - ADVANCE PLANNING FOR ENTERING NINTH GRADERS</b> |  |   |  |
| <b>2a. Data on Rising Ninth Grade Students</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School leadership, guidance, and key ninth grade team members review data on all incoming students and plan course work and supports accordingly.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership, guidance, and key ninth grade team members review data on incoming students flagged as at-risk and plan course work and supports accordingly.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data are available for school leadership and guidance team members to review on incoming students.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers are given timely data about the students they will teach in advance of the start of the school year, receive professional development on how to use these data to inform instruction, and are held accountable for doing so.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers are expected to access student data, as needed, once the school year begins.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic forms of student data are available for teachers to access.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>2b. Orientation</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer orientation session is provided for students and parents that introduces students to behavioral and academic expectations of high school.</li> <li>Summer activities are conducted to help students get to know one another and the teachers they will have in ninth grade.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer orientation session is provided for students and parents that introduces students to the behavioral and academic expectations of high school.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orientation session is provided at the beginning of the school year that introduces students to the behavioral and academic expectations of high school.</li> </ul> |
| <b>2c. School-Based Summer Bridge Programs</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer bridge programs are available to all students and provide academic and social supports.</li> <li>Students at high risk of ninth grade failure are required to attend the summer bridge program.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer bridge programs provide academic and social support for students with academic or behavioral indicators of early failure.</li> <li>Students at high risk of ninth grade failure are invited to attend the summer bridge program.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No school summer bridge program is provided.</li> </ul>   |

|  | Proactive  | Reactive  | Passive   |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>3 - PERSONALIZED AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT</b> |  |   |   |
| <b>3a. Physical Setting</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate space or section of the building is provided to house all ninth grade classes in close proximity to one another.</li> <li>• Students in each small learning community have all or almost all their classes together.</li> <li>• Activities are run for ninth graders to create sense of belonging &amp; group identity.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninth grade classes are distributed across the building.</li> <li>• Students from different small learning communities are mixed together in classes.</li> </ul> |
| <b>3b. Dedicated Teaching Staff</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninth grade classes (both core academic and non-core) are taught by teachers who teach all or mostly ninth grade classes.</li> <li>• Special efforts made to place the strongest teachers in the ninth grade classrooms.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninth grade classes are assigned to teachers across the building.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninth grade teacher teams are committed to regularly monitoring student progress and to planning interdisciplinary activities.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ninth grade teacher teams meet, as needed, to discuss targeted student issues.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No ninth grade team is in place; teachers discuss student issues as needed.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>3c. Advisory</b>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular and frequent advisory time is provided for staff to work with ninth graders on developing self-management and academic accountability, and planning their postsecondary pathways.</li> <li>• Advisory uses a formal curriculum.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory time is provided for staff to work with ninth graders on developing self-management and academic accountability skills. Staff help students identify ways to catch up when they fall behind.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory time, if provided, does not have a formal curriculum.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every student is assigned to an adult who is responsible for monitoring and supporting that student's academic and personal progress.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are assigned to an adult on an as-needed basis when they show need for academic and/or personal monitoring of progress.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student and staff mentor relationships are developed on an at-will basis.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>3d. Guidance</b>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated team of guidance counselors are assigned to ninth graders, or to each SLC and seek out work with ninth graders.</li> <li>• Counselors' work is based on a curriculum that addresses: supporting the high school transition, developmental and academic supports, and postsecondary planning.</li> </ul>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance counselors' work is centered around providing of supports for the developmental and academic needs of students on an as-needed basis.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance counselors work with students who seek them out to address issues of developmental and academic support.</li> </ul>                                     |

|   | Proactive  | Reactive   | Passive  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <b>4 - INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM</b>              |  |  |  |
| <b>4a. Rigorous Standards-Based Curricula</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school meets students where they are and plans accordingly to provide a rigorous curriculum and the supports ALL students will need to successfully complete it.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school provides the standard ninth grade curriculum with built-in supports for students who fall behind.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The school provides the standard ninth grade curriculum.</li> </ul>   |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular teacher time and resources are provided for continuous instructional improvement; ongoing monitoring of results; and development of the adult capacities needed to ensure that all students achieve.</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher teams meet as needed to address gaps in instructional delivery, or student achievement.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Updates to the curriculum are made as they become available by curriculum providers.</li> </ul>   |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff reviews and revises student course placement at the outset of the school year and at intervals throughout the year, during and after regular marking periods.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff reviews and revises student course placement after regular grading intervals during the school year.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators are available to discuss student course placement.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>4b. Literacy</b>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy instruction is embedded across the content areas to help students develop higher level comprehension skills.</li> <li>Students who need extra help are regularly linked to extracurricular literacy tutoring.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students who need extra literacy support are referred to extracurricular tutoring as needed.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extracurricular tutoring is available for students in need of literacy supports.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>4c. Academic Behaviors</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers provide in-class instruction in note taking, homework organization, and the study skills needed to do well in high school across the content areas.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers provide class instruction in note taking, homework organization, and study skills needed to do well in high school in those classes where students are struggling the most.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials are available to enrich students' skills in note taking, homework organization, and study habits needed to do well in high school.</li> </ul> |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supervised study hours are provided to all students where they can get help with academic self-management skills.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are referred to supervised study hours where they can get help with academic self-management skills as the need arises.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supervised study hours are offered where students can get help with academic self-management skills if they choose to do so.</li> </ul>                 |

|  | <b>Proactive</b>  | <b>Reactive</b>  | <b>Passive</b>   |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>4d. Data-Driven Instruction</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership, teachers, counselors and academic support staff are regularly involved in reviewing data and determining how to improve instruction to achieve better student outcomes.</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership reviews data, as need arises, to see how to improve instruction to achieve better student outcomes.</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselors review data to categorize student ability levels.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>5 - MONITORING PROGRESS</b>         |   |  |  |
| <b>5a. Regular Progress Monitoring</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and counselors review student grades and behavior at frequent intervals during each marking period.</li> <li>Leadership asks teachers to notify them of uncharacteristic changes in student achievement.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and counselors review student grades and behavior at the end of each marking period.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student performance data are on file.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and counselors notify students and parents or guardians when students are at risk of falling behind in their classes.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and counselors notify students when they have fallen behind in their classes.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers post grades in classrooms for students to consult.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with Ds and Fs are required to make up work promptly to keep from falling behind.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with Ds and Fs are notified that they have work to make up.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with Ds and Fs are notified of their grades.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>5b. Links to Academic Supports</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An array of social and academic supports is incorporated into all classes to help students succeed.</li> <li>Students are regularly linked to community-based resources for additional support.</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An array of social and academic supports is available to help students when they run into difficulty.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff is available to help students find social and academic supports when they run into difficulty.</li> </ul>                                       |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff regularly reviews data about students' needs and progress in order to preemptively place those who need help in extra support classes or in small group instruction.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff reviews data about students' needs and progress to guide student placement in extra support classes or in small group instruction when needed.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data are available to guide student placement in extra support classes or in small group instruction if the student or parent requests it.</li> </ul> |

|   | <b>Proactive</b>  | <b>Reactive</b>   | <b>Passive</b>  |
|---|---|---|---|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Struggling students are required to attend extra classes and tutoring supports to get extra help in subjects in which they are having difficulty.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are required to get extra help in subjects that they failed.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extra help is available to help struggling students in subjects in which they are having difficulty.</li> </ul>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are required to complete school-day credit recovery options.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are provided with opportunities for credit recovery.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff distributes information about summer school opportunities or automatically reprograms students to repeat courses they failed.</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>6 - TARGETED SUPPORTS FOR HIGH-NEED STUDENTS</b> |   |   |   |
| <b>6a. Instructional Support Systems</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School provides intervention specialists to work in classes alongside content-area teachers to assist students who need extra support to stay on track.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School provides smaller classes to work with students once they demonstrate difficulty staying on track academically.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No additional classroom support is provided for struggling students.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>6b. Social Support Systems</b>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff actively links students with in-school and community-based resources to help with nonacademic problems that interfere with student progress or well-being and monitor student progress.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff refers students to in-school and community-based resources for assistance with nonacademic problems that interfere with student progress.</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff provides students with information about in-school and community-based resources for assistance with nonacademic problems that interfere with student progress.</li> </ul> |
| <b>7 - DISTRICT SUPPORTS</b>                        |   |   |   |
| <b>7a. Timely Matriculation Data</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school admission timeline is set early enough in spring so high schools can receive data about incoming students well before the end of the prior school year.</li> <li>District collects and provides data to high schools on incoming students in spring prior to entry.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District collects and provides data to high schools on incoming students in summer once students have registered.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data on incoming high school students are available through district data systems once the school year begins.</li> </ul>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District provides academic and behavioral data on incoming students and identifies those students at risk of failing ninth grade.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District provides academic and behavioral data on incoming students.</li> <li>Schools are required to review data and identify those students at risk of failing ninth grade.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District data system includes academic and behavioral data on incoming students.</li> </ul>  |

|  | <b>Proactive</b>  | <b>Reactive</b>  | <b>Passive</b>  |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual professional development is scheduled for building leaders and teachers on accessing and utilizing data on incoming ninth graders to plan effective instructional strategies, as well as to inform updates to the existing system.</li> </ul>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional development is available, if requested, for building leaders and teachers on accessing and utilizing data on incoming ninth graders.</li> </ul>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-packaged professional development (literature or PowerPoints) is distributed for building leaders and teachers on how to access data on incoming ninth graders.</li> </ul> |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District identifies eighth grade students who are at high risk of failure in ninth grade and notifies the schools that will receive these students.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District identifies eighth grade students who are at high risk of failure in ninth grade and provides information on these students to schools when school year begins.</li> </ul>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data on at-risk ninth grade students, if calculated, are made available in the data system.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>7b. 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Accountability</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District collects data to monitor on-track rates or timely completion of ninth grade for each high school and informs schools of their status throughout the school year.</li> <li>District includes ninth grade transition outcomes in school evaluation measures.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District collects data to calculate on-track rate or timely completion of ninth grade for each high school and informs school of its status at the end of the school year.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District collects data to monitor on-track rate or timely completion of ninth grade for each high school.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>7c District Supported Summer Bridge</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District provides resources to high schools to create summer bridge programs for all incoming ninth grade students.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District makes resources available for summer bridge programs for students at high risk of failing ninth grade.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District recommends that high schools create summer bridge programs for students at high risk of failing ninth grade.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District requires that students at high risk of failing ninth grade attend summer bridge programs prior to entering high school and provides opportunity for summer bridge teachers to share information with students' ninth grade teachers.</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District recommends that students at high risk of failing ninth grade attend summer bridge programs prior to entering high school.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No district supported summer bridge program.</li> </ul>  |

## APPENDIX B

### Site Selection

This appendix describes the site selection process for inclusion in the current study.

The six participating schools for this study were selected through a two-step process. The first step was to identify all schools that met the following criteria: 1) awarded a Small Learning Communities Grant from 2000-2009, 2) schools serving a sizeable population of “underrepresented,” “economically disadvantaged,” and English Language Learner students, 3) schools with sufficient quantitative data to describe pre- and post-implementation trends, and 4) schools reporting the implementation of the most “promising” practices with regards to SLCs. Each step is described in more detail below.

Schools were selected using information collected in the SLC grantee database, annual performance reports (APRs) submitted by school personnel, and external evaluation reports, all provided by the U.S. Department of Education. The SLC grantee database provides information on schools that received SLC grants from the 2000–2009 academic year, including grade span, locale, the year the grant was received, and SLC strategies and structures implemented in the school. The data were supplemented by school-level characteristics from the Common Core of Data, including the race/ethnicity distribution of the student population and the percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Several steps were taken to identify the final analytic sample for the analysis. First, the research team identified schools serving a sizeable disadvantaged population in order to understand how the SLC model operates in challenging contexts. In addition, disadvantaged students are a targeted population for the SLC reform model. For the purposes of this analysis, disadvantaged student populations included at least one-third minority students, one-third of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and one-third English language learners. Because information on English language learner status was not available in the data, schools whose student populations included at least 35% Hispanic students were identified. A total of 228 schools were flagged for inclusion.

Second, schools were required to have sufficient student-level data to conduct a pre- and post-implementation analysis.<sup>34</sup> In response to NCLB regulations, the quality of data collection in school districts across the nation improved considerably beginning in the 2002–03 academic year. Therefore, the research team selected schools that received grants from the 2003–04 to

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<sup>34</sup> The contract ended before this analysis could be conducted.

2005–06 academic year to increase the likelihood that data prior to and after implementation would be available. The sample was reduced to 98 schools based on these criteria.

Third, the research team sought to identify schools that exhibited evidence of strong SLC implementation. Twelve promising strategies and structures that were included in the U.S. Department of Education data base were identified as being related to ninth grade transition strategies. The number of promising practices reported was then tallied for each school, which ranged from zero to five promising practices across all schools. We then narrowed the prospective sample to 21 high schools that had implemented four to five promising practices.

The final step in the site selection process involved a review of external evaluation reports and annual performance reviews for the 21 high schools reporting the implementation of a high number of promising strategies or structures. Sites were evaluated for evidence of ninth grade success initiatives, supports for incoming freshman, supports for low performing freshman students, and academic progress monitoring among other factors. Three analysts independently reviewed the APRs and evaluation materials for each of the 21 schools and scored them according to a predetermined rubric. The sites were then ranked based on an average of the three scores.

The following table summarizes the site selection process and the number of schools identified at each step.

| <b>Step</b> | <b>Criteria</b>   | <b>Number of schools</b> |
|-------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1           | Schools that have been awarded an SLC grant from 2000-2009  | 1,358                    |
| 2           | Schools serving a sizeable disadvantaged student population   | 228                      |
| 3           | Schools with sufficient pre- and post-implementation data   | 98                       |
| 4           | Schools implementing "promising" practices  | 21                       |
| 5           | Schools implementing "promising" practices based on evaluation of evaluation reports and annual performance reviews | 6-9                      |

## APPENDIX C: SITE PROFILES

The following profiles provide a sketch of each of the high schools visited for this study. Given our promise to the schools that neither the schools nor the districts would be identified, the data provided for each profile has been rounded off to avoid revealing information that would enable deductive disclosure of any school's identity. In addition, the constraints on collecting data without seeking OMB approval meant that we were able to interview only a few select individuals in each school and were not able to conduct focus groups or field surveys. Thus the following sketches are simply meant to give a more holistic picture of each of the schools on which the cross-site analysis has been based.

### Valley Stream High School

**Demographics:** Located in a large metropolitan area, Valley Stream High School has approximately 1,200 students. Nearly three students in five (58%) are Hispanic and only 15% of the students are white. One quarter of the students are classified as having limited English proficiency, and more than half (54%) are from low income families.

**Context and history of the program:** After an initial planning year, Valley Stream High School implemented four "pure" ninth grade houses where teachers shared the same students and teachers had a common planning period daily to coordinate instruction and discuss individual students who needed support or acceleration. The program included an advisory class where students reviewed their transcripts and charted progress toward graduation. Teachers also worked together to plan interdisciplinary curriculum projects.

Just as the school was about to expand the house structure to the tenth grade, the school went through a leadership transition. The new principal decided to eliminate the house structure, arguing that it was too difficult to schedule and required more staff than the traditional high school structure. The role of the original SLC site coordinator, once visible and strong, was diminished as the grant came to an end. The district later chose to create career-focused pathways and to devote resources to content-based common planning time within the academic disciplines.

The teachers who were teaching when the SLC grant and the ninth grade houses were in place are nostalgic for the way things were done in the past and question why those practices were discontinued. They still collaborate informally, but struggle to find time in a traditional schedule to discuss students and their learning challenges. The school's leadership has changed again,

and while the current principal places a high value on students feeling a sense of belonging in the school, this does not translate into structural approaches. In addition, the focus on positive youth development is not linked to a focus on improving the instructional program for ninth grade students.

***Key elements of the school's ninth grade transition strategy:*** An assistant principal is charged with the responsibility to monitor the performance of ninth graders and is leading the school's freshman initiative. Ninth grade students are programmed into a traditional schedule. Teachers report that they can access student data on the district's data portal but the responsibility rests with individual teachers and there is no clear process for sharing data between the sending middle schools and the high school. However, using performance on the state tests, the district identifies students who are off-track in eighth grade and requires that these students attend a two-week summer transition program at the school, where they receive additional support in science, math, and literacy.

A new advisory class was implemented this year at all grade levels, but teachers and counselors were still unclear how the classes were supposed to operate. Guidance counselors make presentations in these classes about graduation requirements, how a transcript works, and what they need to do to be promoted to tenth grade. They also help students fill in a four-year plan for their course work. Successful twelfth grade students provide additional academic support and mentoring in these advisory classes.

The assistant principal with responsibility for the ninth grade initiative monitors student performance and notifies teachers and parents of students who are failing a course and at risk of failing ninth grade. Parent attendance is mandatory and the focus seems to be more about holding students and parents accountable than developing strategies to address the issues that are resulting in student failure.

Tutoring is available both before and after school where all ninth grade teachers are required to provide support to students who need help. Students whom the district has identified as at risk of failure are required to attend tutoring on Wednesday and transportation is provided to enable them to stay late. Tutoring also is provided under the supplemental educational services provision of NCLB. Teachers expressed concern that the most at-risk students do not come in for tutoring support, and no credit recovery options are available to students who have failed their courses.

## **Fillmore High School**

**Demographics:** Fillmore High School is located in a large metropolitan area and serves approximately 1,400 students. Almost all the students (995) are non-white and more than one-third (38%) are classified as having limited English proficiency. The overwhelming majority of the students (87%) are from low income families.

**Context and history of the program:** Fillmore High School initially applied for the SLC grant to help faculty get to know students and interrupt the drug culture that prevailed in the school at that time. During the years of the SLC grant, the school was able to eliminate the severe drug problem because it developed stronger relationships between teachers and students. In addition, through collaboration the teachers learned to better support individual students.

After an initial year of planning, ninth grade teachers were divided into four houses with interdisciplinary teams, each responsible for a group of students. The team members shared almost all the same students (an estimated 95%) and their classrooms were located in the same wing of the building, enabling easy communication on individual student problems. Over time, it became more complicated to schedule the houses to the same level of purity and now teachers estimate that they share only 50% of the students they teach. However, informal teacher collaboration on individual student issues has continued since the ninth grade classes still meet in the same wing of the building. An assistant principal with responsibility for the ninth grade has his office in that wing of the building, where he works to create a positive environment and culture for academic work.

Teachers continue to collaborate on instructional improvement, making use of the common planning resources and time provided by the district to focus on content-based issues such as discipline-specific strategies for working with English Learners and activities for developing higher level literacy skills. While common planning time is used primarily for discipline-based work in accordance with district policy, it also is sometimes used to address grade level issues when needed, with the principal running interference if needed to protect his staff from district disapproval of non-discipline specific uses of this time.

**Key elements of the school's ninth grade transition strategy:** In this school, a high percentage of students enter ninth grade off track. School leadership is aware of the importance of ninth grade as the foundation for high school success, and this information is shared with teachers. The administration maintains strong teachers at the ninth grade level. Teachers use common instructional strategies with ninth grade students such as Cornell note taking and keeping a vocabulary bank.

Before the new students arrive, counselors and assistant principals collect data from the middle schools and meet with incoming students. Ninth grade teachers also get student data from the district data portal and lead teachers in each discipline collect data on the incoming students and distribute it to other members of the ninth grade teams.

All students are invited to an orientation at the end of the summer, where they are introduced to school personnel and given a tour of the building. Off-track students, identified by the district using performance on the state tests, are required to attend a two-week summer transition program at the school, where they receive additional support in science, math, and literacy. Unfortunately, it appears that linkages are weak between summer teachers and school year teachers and there is no formal process to share information or sustain relationships.

Fillmore High School uses double dosing to address differences in student progress, with additional support classes for students who are struggling in their regular classes without segregating them into lower level classes. For example, the school has an intensive focus on literacy, so students struggling in English class will get an extra class on developing reading and writing skills. Student progress is monitored every six weeks and consistent ninth grade staffing and the physical proximity of ninth grade classrooms supports more frequent informal just-in-time conversations among staff about their students.

Advisory is held twice a week for the first six weeks of the school year and weekly thereafter. Every student has an adult advocate who works with them on scheduling and monitoring their academic progress. The principals provided resources for the advisory curriculum to be developed by the teachers; it includes specific activities at each grade level, including a focus on college preparation at the upper grades.

Fillmore High School's guidance staff, challenged by high numbers and limited time, focus mostly on behavior issues. Additional support for students is available after school at the Homework Academy, where students can get help and where students with failed assignments must go to do them over within a day. Incomplete homework also leads to required afterschool time to complete the work. These just-in-time responses are part of a school-wide culture for student accountability, and minimize problems when students fall behind fast. The school places a real emphasis on socializing students into an academic culture, giving students academic skills, and developing an ethos of academic accountability. Overall it seems that both leaders and staff at Fillmore High School value both social-emotional development and learning as well as academic remediation and acceleration.

## **Hawthorne High School**

**Demographics:** Hawthorne High School, located in a large metropolitan area and serving approximately 2,400 students, is bursting at its seams. Almost all the students are Hispanic (96%) and more than one student in four (27%) are classified as having limited English proficiency. More than two-thirds (71%) of the students are from low income families.

**Context and history of the program:** The Smaller Learning Community grant initially was seen as an important strategy for addressing the diverse needs of the student body. The school organized ninth grade houses that now occupy one wing of the school building, and have committed resources to maintaining the SLC team structures even after the funding ended. Under current district policy, teachers meet in professional learning communities within their academic disciplines. However, the principal is strongly committed to interdisciplinary teaming that was created under the SLC programs, and allocated resources from his annual budget to keep the teams in place so that students would not get lost in the large and overcrowded building. His focus appears to be on having teachers and staff know all ninth students personally and increasing students' feelings of belonging. Much less attention appears to have been given to what teachers can do to improve instruction by using these common planning structures.

**Key elements of the school's ninth grade transition strategy:** Both the ninth and tenth grade students are organized into houses with teachers working to support approximately 125 students. Ninth grade pods share space in the same wing of the building. The team structure is seen by teachers as a way to get more information about how best to support individual students.

In the spring before students enter high school, guidance counselors, the ninth grade SLC coordinator, and teachers visit the sending middle schools to provide information to eighth grade students about the high school. The ninth grade coordinator gets off-track students' academic intervention plans and regularly communicates with teachers about the academic performance of these students during the school year, arranging conferences with the students to discuss their progress. However, beyond learning about these at-risk students, teachers do not routinely get data on students at risk unless they seek it out from the district's data portal.

All incoming students are invited to a two-day orientation to the school during the summer. In addition, off track students, identified by the district using performance on the eighth grade state tests, are required to attend a two-week summer transition program at the school, where they receive additional support in science, math, and literacy.

It was not clear whether any individual has primary responsibility for the ninth grade. An assistant principal is accountable to principal for academic outcomes of the school as a whole and teachers are accountable for the performance of their individual students. Teachers' responses to ninth grade student problems were characterized by lots of caring but reflect few systemic solutions. In addition to the overcrowding, the school also suffers from high teacher turnover, which makes it more difficult for the school to establish systemic approaches to improving instruction.

However, the SLC structures have enabled teachers and students to develop strong relationships and have gotten many high school teachers to see beyond their traditional focus on content. Using the district resources for common planning, weekly meetings within each house are held for teachers in the same content areas. These meetings are used to discuss shared content, ways to support each others' instruction, and students' academic progress. The primary focus is on students and those who are struggling take center stage. In addition, these sessions often turn to students' home issues and discipline problems. Sometimes teachers have parents come in during this period.

While teachers work to provide student support in response to student difficulties, relatively little programming seems to be in place to prevent students from running into academic problems. The only exception is that the school offers an enrichment class for a full period daily. Students have four enrichment periods a week and the content of these supplementary sessions is based on teachers' analysis of benchmark tests, with classes designed to address the four weakest areas on the benchmark assessments.

Teachers in the AVID program work with their students to develop academic behaviors and skills (e.g., note taking and organization), and while other teachers expressed an interest in learning how to use these strategies with their students, there is minimal communication between the AVID teachers and other staff. Teachers provide tutoring and prefer that students come to them rather than using the NCLB-supported tutoring. However, students are attracted to the outside tutoring because of refreshments and incentives offered, although teachers reported that students who use these tutors do not gain as much because these tutors lack a strong background in the content students are learning.

When students fall behind in their course work, teachers are required to develop intervention packets to provide students the opportunity to catch up. These intervention packets also are used for credit recovery purposes. Teachers reported that some students are passed on to tenth grade even if they have failed ninth grade courses. They then remain in tenth grade until they pass these courses, as well as those required at the tenth grade level. However, teachers

reported that they are reluctant to fail students because the district requires extensive and onerous paperwork to document their outreach and support actions if more than 20% of students are failing.

### **McMahon High School**

**Demographics:** McMahon High School, located on the edge of a large urban area, has a stable population of roughly 3,500 students. The overwhelming majority of students (97%) are non-white, and nearly half (47%) the students are Hispanic. Only 9% of the students are categorized as having limited English proficiency, and nearly half (47%) are from low income families.

**Context and history of the program:** McMahon High School had two small learning communities already in place when the school received its SLC grant. These earlier SLCs were intended to make large high more personalized. One academy focused specifically on preparing students for more selective public and private universities while the other, which began in the upper grades, was built around an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum and only recently expanded to include all four grades. Under the SLC grant, the focus on career pathways increased, so this community now also includes a health and medical program. Four of the eight SLCs have received additional state funding for career and technical education. Two are struggling and the principal was considering a reorganization that would eliminate the two weakest communities. There was an advisory program in the past, but it was dropped because the majority of teachers opposed it because they saw it as requiring additional preparation.

**Key elements of the school's ninth grade transition strategy:** Until last year, the school had a ninth grade academy, but recently switched to four-year communities. While the reasons for this change were not clear to any of the teachers or administrators we interviewed, they appreciated working with a multi-age group and the ability to have older students serve as mentors and role models. The school has a ninth grade coordinator who is primarily focused on matching students to the right programs, and on working to see that students receive the academic and behavioral interventions they need. There is no intentional organization of ninth grade classes in proximity to one another, and teachers in only one of the small learning communities has common planning time.

The counselors visit the feeder middle schools in the spring to collect data on incoming students. This includes students' mid-term and final grades, which are used to determine which students take honors classes. Although teachers have access to the district data portal,

there is no formal system for teachers to receive data on students; it is up to the initiative of each SLC's lead teacher to get data from the counselors so they can pass it on to their teams. A brief orientation to the high school that lasts two hours is offered to students at the end of the summer. The first hour is conducted for the whole ninth grade, while the second hour is conducted within the small learning communities. Teachers and counselors estimated that roughly one student in four attends the orientation session. There was a summer bridge program that teachers said helped students be more confident and able to access the material they were studying, but it has been discontinued due to budget constraints.

Ninth grade teachers are mainly assigned to an SLC, with a strong focus on keeping English classes pure. However, the algebra classes are "all over the place" to accommodate the need to deal with multiple levels of student performance in math. Students' grades are monitored every five weeks; some teachers use an online grading system that enables both students and parents to see how the student is doing and which assignments are missing. The SLC lead teachers meet bi-monthly to share strategies and ninth grade progress is part of the conversation. However, there has been limited cross-fertilization.

Tutoring is available during the school day and at posted tutoring hours, and teachers are responsible for reaching out to students who need help. The high school offers a summer session and counselors automatically enroll all students who need to make up credits; the principal estimated that roughly 75% of those enrolled stay and complete summer school.

Last year, the school created a program to focus on ninth grade students who had failed three courses during the five-week marking period. The program was based on a set of focus groups that sought to get at the root of students' perceptions of their problems. Teachers and counselors who conducted these groups learned that these students were not comfortable going to teachers for help because they believed that teachers did not care about them. Ninth grade teachers were given additional professional development on how to make students feel welcome and the students were given additional an additional intervention class focusing on how to talk with teachers, to whom they should reach out when they had problems with their school work. In addition, a mentoring program was created, pairing upper class students with these struggling ninth graders. However, the data on progress made by the students showed no big payoff, so the principal is thinking about discontinuing the program in favor of building up the intervention classes in algebra and reinforcing instruction in academic literacy.

## **Cheshire High School**

**Demographics:** Cheshire High School is located in a large metropolitan area. Until recently, the school was so overcrowded that the multi-building campus housed between 4,000 and 5,000 students who attended on multiple shifts. The recent construction of a new school nearby has enabled the student population to be reduced to approximately 3,500. Of those students, almost all are Hispanic, with 30% categorized as having limited English proficiency. The overwhelming majority of the students (87%) are from low income families.

**Context and history of the program:** In the past, the need for multiple shifts to accommodate the overcrowding made it difficult for Cheshire High School to implement small learning communities with any significant degree of purity because neither teachers nor students could be consistently scheduled to spend most of their time within a single community. The earlier communities included grades ten through twelve and had contiguous classroom space but were primarily administrative structures that offered some specialized elective classes. Last year, when the school lost a significant number of students as a new school opened up in the area, the school was able to operate on a single unified schedule. Even though the federal Smaller Learning Communities grant had ended, the creation of pure SLCs became part of the school's turnaround strategy.

Cheshire now operates six small learning communities, each of which serves all four grades. One of these communities existed prior to the grant as an accelerated progress program for university-bound students but all students now have a "fair chance" to get into the SLC of their choice as grades or special status (e.g., ELL or special education) are not used to determine placement in the SLCs. All core-content teachers are assigned to and stay with an SLC; each community also has two special education teachers, one resource specialist and an RTI coordinator. (Some elective teachers may work across SLCs.) Each community reports to an assistant principal, but SLC lead teachers play a central role, meeting bi-weekly to share ideas and work together on school improvement under the guidance of the assistant principal for professional development and instructional improvement.

The school places a heavy emphasis on common planning time, and every teacher has a weekly conference period with other teachers in the same discipline to review student progress and to refine their instruction and assessment, supported by school-based coaches in mathematics, literacy, and specially designed academic instruction in English (for students learning English). There also are weekly SLC meetings; each SLC plans how to use its common planning time, but information is shared at bi-weekly SLC lead meetings described above and practices that appear to be useful often are replicated across the communities.

**Key elements of the school’s ninth grade transition strategy:** Before the reorganization of the school into pure four-year SLCs, the school had a ninth grade academy. However, it was not successful in improving either academic results or student behavioral and the ninth grade was referred to by one person as a “zoo.” The new approach supports ninth grade success with a combination of school-wide and SLC-specific strategies.

Guidance counselors usually receive incoming students’ grades from the first half of eighth grade, and sometimes a spring progress report, as well as students’ seventh grade state test scores in English and math. However, passing these data down to the teachers occurs only if the teacher comes to ask for it. A school-wide orientation is held at the end of the summer for all ninth grade students and families; it covers the high school syllabi, academic and behavioral expectations and goals, and introduced community partners. Part of the orientation involves a whole school presentation and part takes place within each SLC. According to teachers, this past summer had the highest attended orientation, with approximately 90% attendance. Cheshire High School also had Summer Bridge for students with gaps in mathematics and ELA that was supported by SIG funding. The half-day program lasted four weeks and it was mandatory for students who had scored “below basic” and “far below basic” in eighth grade.

Cheshire’s weekly advisory program uses a curriculum originally written by teachers in one of the SLCs that has since been adopted with some modifications by most of the other communities. The year-long ninth grade curriculum covers such topics as organization and study skills, as well as four-year planning. However, the heavy emphasis on postsecondary preparation comes in the higher grades. The school may move to a daily advisory period as district mandates have pushed health and life skills out of regular coursework and into advisory, leaving too little time in teachers’ view to cover the important work of building academic behaviors and skills.

Cheshire High School has adopted a school-wide Response to Instruction (RTI) approach to strengthen instruction at the ninth grade level after a successful pilot in one of the SLCs.<sup>35</sup> At the beginning of the ninth grade, students are placed in mathematics and literacy classes based on their eighth grade state test scores; additional diagnostic testing is done during the first week of school. The school operates on a modified block schedule with mostly double periods and students spend the first ten weeks of the year (the equivalent of a semester on a traditional schedule) taking classes based on national validated curricula (e.g., Read 180 in

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<sup>35</sup> RTI is most frequently thought of a “tiered instruction,” where the bottom tier includes the instructional services for all students, while the second and third tiers include increasing levels of intervention and support for students who are having difficulty mastering the work. Unlike earlier efforts to sort students by IQ, the RTI approach calls for continual progress monitoring and adjustment of approaches and supports.

English). These classes review the core skills and knowledge students need in math and literacy to build a firm foundation for more challenging high school work. Consistent with the three-tiered RTI approach, students who need some additional support have an additional single-period “intervention” class to reinforce what they are learning in the double period class, while students who need intensive support are placed in small classes with a resource specialist in addition to the teacher. (This modified block schedule also meant that teachers worked with fewer students during each term than on a traditional schedule, and students saw no more than four teachers on a single day.) Student progress is checked at regular intervals, with formative assessments administered at the five and ten week points. Students whose performance indicates they need more support are moved to different classes and offered additional supports at these check points. Those students needing less support also are moved to different classes.

Last year, the SLC that piloted the RTI approach showed gains on the state tests, but because this school-wide approach was launched this year, no results are available at this point to assess how successful it is in supporting the ninth grade transition as a whole. However, the assistant principal for professional development and instructional improvement reported that there had been no fights and no suspensions during the first half of the school year.

### **Lakewood High School**

***Demographics:*** Lakewood High School, located in a medium-sized city, serves a diverse population of approximately 1,900 students. One-fifth of the students are white and more than half the students (53%) are Hispanic, with 12% of all students categorized as having limited English proficiency. Nearly half the students (48%) are low income.

***Context and history of the program:*** When the SLC program started at Lakewood High School, the principals saw the program as a way to create more personalization and an emphasis on college preparation for all students. The original plan was to put all students in four-year vertical houses, but this was not fully implemented. Instead, the funds were spent to increase academic rigor within the school, to train more teachers to offer Advanced Placement classes, to expand the school’s International Baccalaureate program, to purchase a college readiness curriculum package, and to pay for more tutoring.

The houses were each located in separate buildings on the school campus, and although the administrators described them as enabling more student support and personalization, teachers did not see benefits (some even appeared unaware that the SLC program existed) and said that

students did not identify with their houses or receive additional supports in houses. The school recently has switched to assigning contiguous space to career-focused academies. In addition, according to the principal, new state class size mandates work against efforts to keep students in houses and academies because they have to keep classes below 25 students and cannot afford the teachers needed to maintain separate units.

From the teachers and administrators we interviewed, it appears that the school focuses on using data at all grade levels to identify students' needs and track students' outcomes, with considerable emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests, which are given in the tenth and eleventh grades. There also is a considerable emphasis on using data to improve instruction throughout the school by analyzing areas of weakness on the state tests and designing efforts to make sure the students understand the concepts in question.

***Key elements of the school's ninth grade transition strategy:*** Lakewood High School has not given any individual the responsibility for overseeing the ninth grade. The school also has few, if any, strategies that are specific to the ninth grade. However, the principal has attempted to put the strongest teachers in the ninth grade and also tried to put the neediest students with the strongest teachers. Teachers can find data on incoming students' prior performance and behavior in the district's data warehouse system, but it is a matter of individual initiative for them to do so.

While the SLC grant was in place, there was a two-week orientation program for ninth graders where students worked on study skills, literacy activities, math and English. Students were also given tours of the campus and were introduced to the dress code and school rules. The school eliminated this program when its funding ran out.

The school has not implemented advisories or other amplified guidance support structures. Instead, the principal and counselors meet with all ninth and tenth grade students to discuss their performance and to review the four-year graduation plans they filled out in eighth grade. Administrators and teachers expressed a desire for more time to work with students on building academic and organizational skills, but there is no time in the schedule given the number graduation requirements and required remedial courses.

Teachers are responsible for monitoring student progress, with an emphasis of looking at the individual students rather than class averages to see what students need to support them to pass their classes, do better on standardized tests, and to be on track for graduation. Teachers are required to call home when students receive Ds and Fs and the school has a special school team that convenes when serious issues with students arise. This is a multi-disciplinary team that may include counselors, teachers, and administrators.

The school day is structured so that teachers come into the building at 8:00 a.m. but students do not arrive until 8:50. Staff meets every morning during this period; these meetings include professional development, staff-wide or departmental and team meetings. During these morning meetings staff will look at data together. Some of the teachers expressed frustration about the extent to which data analysis and instruction are driven by data from standardized tests and the need to prepare students for multiple state and local assessments.

Double dosing is required in English and mathematics when students score well below proficiency, although teachers worried that this leaves no room in students' schedules to participate in career programs. The school also has an E 2020 credit lab where ninth grade students who have failed the first nine weeks can go to make up work. Teachers also offer afterschool tutoring and this year the school initiated a Saturday Success Academy to offer additional academic supports for at-risk students. (However, there is some confusion about whether the Saturday school is for students who need extra help or those who have behavior problems.) In the last year, the school went from 20% to 46% scoring proficient on the state examination, and the ninth grade students were outperforming the tenth graders.

**APPENDIX D: Placement of the Six Study Schools on the Matrix of Key Elements**

|  | <b>Valley Stream</b> | <b>Fillmore</b> | <b>Hawthorne</b> | <b>McMahon</b> | <b>Cheshire</b> | <b>Lakewood</b> |
|--|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>1a. Culture</b>                             | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>1b. Resource Allocation</b>                 | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>1c. Common Planning Time</b>                | Reactive             | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>2a. Data on Rising Ninth Graders</b>        | Passive              | Reactive        | Reactive         | Passive        | Passive         | Passive         |
| <b>2b. Orientation</b>                         | Reactive             | Reactive        | Reactive         | Reactive       | Reactive        | Reactive        |
| <b>2c. School-Based Summer Bridge Program</b>  | Reactive             | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Passive         |
| <b>3a. Physical Setting</b>                    | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Passive         |
| <b>3b. Dedicated Teaching Staff</b>            | Passive              | Reactive        | Reactive         | Reactive       | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>3c. Advisory</b>                            | Passive              | Proactive       | Passive          | Passive        | Proactive       | Passive         |
| <b>3d. Guidance</b>                            | Reactive             | Reactive        | Passive          | Passive        | Reactive        | Reactive        |
| <b>4a. Rigorous Standards-Based Curriculum</b> | Passive              | Proactive       | Passive          | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>4b. Literacy</b>                            | Passive              | Proactive       | Passive          | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>4c. Academic Behaviors</b>                  | Passive              | Proactive       | Passive          | Passive        | Proactive       | Passive         |
| <b>4d. Data Driven Instruction</b>             | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Proactive       |
| <b>5a. Regular Progress Monitoring</b>         | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Reactive       | Proactive       | Proactive       |
| <b>5b. Links to Academic Supports</b>          | Passive              | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>6a. Instructional Support Systems</b>       | Passive              | Reactive        | Reactive         | Passive        | Proactive       | Reactive        |
| <b>6b. Social Support Systems</b>              | Reactive             | Proactive       | Reactive         | Passive        | Reactive        | Reactive        |
| <b>7a. Timely Matriculation Data</b>           | Reactive             | Reactive        | Reactive         | Passive        | Passive         | Passive         |
| <b>7b. Ninth Grade Accountability</b>          | Reactive             | Reactive        | Reactive         | Passive        | Passive         | Passive         |
| <b>7c. District Supported Summer Bridge</b>    | Proactive            | Proactive       | Proactive        | Passive        | Passive         | Passive         |

| <b>KEY</b>               |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Proactive</b>         |  |
| <b>Reactive</b>          |  |
| <b>Passive</b>           |  |
| <b>Insufficient data</b> |  |