

Implement transition programs for middle school and 9th grade

Transitioning into and out of middle school can be difficult for many students, and as a result, many students are retained, particularly in the 9th grade. Ninth grade retention strongly correlates with dropping out of high school. There are examples across the country of successful “transition” programs that help at-risk students move into and succeed in 9th grade. The Commonwealth would benefit from program funding and evaluation to improve support for students during critical transition years.

PSEA Recommendations

Enable Pennsylvania schools to implement strong transition programs for students moving from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school by:

- Funding evidence-based programs to support student transition to high school;
- Ensuring that schools gather and analyze data on school climate. These data should be gathered from students and school personnel; and
- Establishing a data and monitoring system to diagnose which students are likely to struggle during the transition to high school. Smaller districts also will need technical assistance and support to run the data, interpret the results, and build programs that target supports to individual students.

Lower dropout rates, improve academics, and reduce risk behaviors

Those moving from elementary to middle or from middle school to high school are at particular risk for declines in well-being and academic performance.¹ Student grades tend to decline during the first year of high school, attendance drops upon entry to high school, and student engagement in schooling decreases.² One study of youth in New Mexico found that between 8th and 10th grade, the prevalence of smoking among students increased by 50 percent, marijuana use increased by 58 percent, and alcohol use increased by 25 percent.³ Students who do not transition well – meaning that they develop behavior problems, do not do well in their classes, or tend to be absent more than average – are at a dramatically higher risk of dropping out or failing to graduate on time.⁴

Transitions into high school often are unnecessarily difficult for students. The good news, however, is that evidence-based strategies and programs have been able to reduce the negative impacts of transition and help more students succeed in 9th grade and beyond. These programs focus on supporting students' academic needs as they transition to a more complex school structure and are expected to work independently. These strategies and programs also build relationships between students and adults in the school, which is important because 9th graders who disengage from school often believe no one cares about their attendance, attitude and ultimate success.

Successful programs vary in structure, but they share certain criteria:

- Core content area teachers work in teams with one group of students assigned to them and utilize shared planning time to strategize about how to meet specific student needs;
- Many ninth grade transition programs physically segregate freshmen into their own building or wing of the high school, with their own principal and other staff;
- Scheduling is flexible, according to student needs;
- Highly-experienced teachers are assigned to teach 9th grade courses;
- Connections are made with the community, employers, and institutions of higher education;
- Teachers receive specific training and support to recognize and meet the specific needs of 9th grade students; and
- Extra help and time are provided to students who perform below grade level, and extra help is flexibly administered, as student needs emerge over the academic year.

(01/10)

¹ Weiss, C. & Bearman, P. (2004). Fresh Starts: School Form and Student Outcome. ISERP Working Paper 04-05. New York: Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy.

² Weiss, C. & Bearman, P. (2004). Fresh Starts: School Form and Student Outcome. ISERP Working Paper 04-05. New York: Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy.

³ Green, D. (2009). Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use by grade Level among Middle School and High School Students in the 2007 New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey. *New Mexico Epidemiology*, 5.

⁴ See, for example, Neild, R.C. (2009). *Falling Off Track during the Transition to High School: What We Know and What Can Be Done*. *Future of Children* 19:1 Spring; Balfanz, R. & Letgers, N. (2004). *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts, Where are the Located, and Who Attends Them?* Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), Johns Hopkins University.