Core Function: High School/Opportunity to Learn

Effective Practice → **Assist students with transitions**

Overview: Supporting students as they transition into high school, and again as they exit into college and/or career, is a critical function of a high school. Smaller, personalized environments, such as those found within 9th grade academies, may afford academically struggling students the chance to catch up with their peers and can reduce their sense of isolation and anonymity. Data tracking systems can ensure early identification of these students in order to target initiatives; schools must also strive to build their capacity to ensure that 9th grade students have experienced and effective teachers. As they transition out of high school, high-needs students in particular are likely to need mentoring/advising, and in many cases financial assistance, to ensure they are well-informed and prepared to pay for postsecondary education. High schools also need to track what happens to their graduates and share that information with stakeholders so that programming can be evaluated and improved upon for future cohorts.

Evaluate Your Practice: What type of strategies does your school use to provide a supportive entry process for all students new to your setting? What outreach has your school done to build connections with feeder schools to support incoming students? How do you build staff capacity to assist students with the transition process? How are students supported as they get ready to exit your school in terms of assistance with planning for college and/or career? How does your school help students without significant social capital (e.g., first generation college students) navigate the college-going experience? How will students be tracked to determine postsecondary outcomes, and who is responsible for collecting and reviewing data to determine what the school does well and where improvements are needed? How are data shared with key education stakeholders?

Introduction

While high school graduation and college-going rates have increased over the past 10 years, significant gaps still exist between minority and majority students and between students living in lower versus higher income communities (Strauss, 2016). Students may struggle when moving to ninth grade as they encounter increasing academic expectations and increasing anonymity within a larger student population. High schools must provide supportive programs and structures to ensure that students are capable of both successfully transitioning from middle school to the high school setting and effectively moving on into college and/or a productive career after graduation. 9th grade transition programs and initiatives that help encourage and provide resources for students to pursue postsecondary education or careers are particularly essential in high-poverty communities where many students lack these resources and connections. Stakeholders must be informed about the success of schools' transition programs through effective tracking of college and career placements and graduates' experiences within these settings. Relevant literature is summarized to capture best practices within each of these areas.

Transitioning from Middle School to High School. Student success in the first year of high school often determines later success, and more students fail ninth grade than any other grade (Williams & Richman, 2007). Many students are held back in ninth grade (the ninth grade "bulge") and drop out by the 10th grade (Nield, 2009; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). As many as 40% of students fail to get promoted from 9th to 10th grade on time, and fewer than 20% of those students recover from failure and go on to graduate (Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005). Below are recommended practices to impact learners in the 9th grade (see Herlihy, 2007 for additional details):

1. Establish a data and monitoring system that will both diagnose why students are struggling and be used to hold schools and districts accountable. These systems should be implemented early in students' high school careers

or should identify those whose performance in middle school indicates high risk for school dropout.

2. Address the instructional needs of students who enter high school unprepared for rigorous, college preparatory work. Nationally, only around one-third of eighth-graders scored proficient on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics and reading tests (The Nation's Report Card, 2015). High schools must ensure that 9th graders attain grade level performance in math and reading.

3. Personalize the learning environment to lower the sense of anonymity and address individual needs. High schools tend to be larger than middle schools, leading to depersonalization (Lee & Smith, 2001). Bridgeland, DiLulio, and Morrison (2006) report that nearly half of young people who left high school without graduating reported being bored or disengaged. A surprising 38% believed that they had "too much freedom" and not enough rules. To help ninth graders avoid getting "lost in the shuffle," interventions designed to personalize instruction and the environment should be explored.

4. Build capacity within the faculty and school leadership in low-performing schools to address diverse student needs. Studies have found that students of color in low-income schools are 3 to 10 times more likely to have unqualified teachers than students in predominantly White schools (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2011). There is also evidence that ninth-graders, particularly in low-performing high schools, are more likely to have less experienced and less qualified teachers in their core academic courses than students in upper grades (Neild, 2009). States should consider incentives, such as equalizing pay scales across the state, strengthening teacher education and evaluation standards, offering subsidies for preparation to talented individuals, developing mentoring systems, and establishing strong professional development programs to help alleviate this disparity (see Adamson et al., 2011).

5. Create connections to the community, employers, and institutes of higher education to better engage students and help them see the relevance of their coursework. Many high schools are isolated from other community institutions and have limited contact with students' families. More effort should be made to give students meaningful learning opportunities in the community, including internships and work-study programs.

Research shows that most students at risk of falling off track could graduate if they were provided with the appropriate supports early enough and those supports were sustained (Bruce et al., 2011). Common support structures designed to address recommended practices include summer "bridge" programs, which provide students with remedial or preparatory coursework, experience navigating the school, and a chance to make friends with new peers (Nield, 2009). Ninth grade academies, which physically separate ninth graders from the rest of the student body and provide intensive, engaging transition supports, have been shown to be effective through school models such as those used for Talent Development High Schools (Kemple et al., 2005). These high schools are designed to reduce student isolation and anonymity by providing smaller learning communities with interdisciplinary teams of teachers, mentoring and tutoring, curricula leading to advanced English and mathematics coursework, and parent/community involvement in activities that promote students' college and career readiness (Kemple et al., 2005).

More recently, the Diplomas Now school model has been developed through a partnership with Talent Development High Schools, Communities in Schools, and City Year programs to address the dropout problem within many high-poverty urban communities. This model, implemented nationally, is a data-driven, tiered intervention that is intended to transform middle and high school students' academic experience and provide more targeted intervention of students with "early warning indicators" that place them at risk for dropping out (Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, & Shane, 2016). This model includes the supports described within Talent Development High Schools, along with instructional/curricular innovations and teacher and administrator coaching and support. Preliminary results suggest positive impacts in terms of reducing the percentages of students with early warning indicators, with stronger impacts seen for middle school students (Corrin et al., 2016).

Transitioning from High School to College/Career.
Students need supportive and informative networks as they plan their transition out of high school. There is a

significant "social capital gap" between students who have access to critical information and support on how to prepare and effectively participate in college/career decision-making and those who do not (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). The Education Commission of the States (2014) has identified seven key policy strategies to support successful transitions for graduating high school students who move to post-secondary education and/or careers. They include:

1. Uniform, statewide college- and career-ready definitions make it easier to align what is taught in K-12 with what is expected at the postsecondary level. A common definition allows shared expectations between educators, parents, and students and clarifies the performances that high school students must be able to demonstrate, independently, in order to be successful upon entering college.

2. Consistent, predictable admission and remedial procedures create greater transparency about college readiness expectations. These policies help students find the most appropriate institution to fit their skills and goals.

3. Early college programs, which typically serve high-needs populations, allow students to pursue college credit during high school, usually at no cost to their families. Some research has shown that early college students outperform their peers in high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment rates (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014).

4. College advising and mentoring, when provided in a straightforward and timely way, is critical for students to learn to navigate the K-12 college transition. However, dues to staff shortages, most graduating seniors receive limited college advising (National College Advising Corps, 2014). Programs that increase access to college advising have been shown to increase college matriculation and receipt of scholarships (Bettinger et al., 2010). In addition, mentoring/advising programs such as Talent Search that provide close-age peer advisors have been shown to positively affect graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment (Cahanlan et al., 2004).

5. Predictive analytics systems that determine college readiness using student information (such as course

rigor and academic performance) enable teachers to develop early interventions that target specific student needs.

6. Competency-based admissions policies require students to demonstrate mastery or proficiency of subject matter in context. The idea behind "Credit by Demonstrated Mastery" is that students do not earn course credit based on seat time, but rather on proficiency. The proficiency standard remains constant, and the seat time will vary by student, depending on how long it takes them to demonstrate proficiency.

7. Enhanced student profiles with performance data are useful to provide academic and non-academic information about students seeking postsecondary enrollment. Providing diagnostic and descriptive information to colleges enables them to better support their students and increase their likelihood for success.

Financial support programs, in the form of early commitment financial aid programs, have also been used to motivate and engage students as early as elementary school by guaranteeing them financial aid if they complete certain requirements (e.g., keeping a minimum GPA, completing rigorous college prep courses, etc.) throughout their school careers (Blacno, 2005). Recent "college promise" programs that connect high-poverty schools with local community colleges also encourage children to strive towards postsecondary education by providing financial incentives ranging from savings accounts to free two-year tuition to deserving students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Tracking College and Career Experiences. P-16 systems connect the data of P–12 institutions with those from higher education, providing benefits to educators and policymakers at both ends of the educational spectrum. These systems allow educators to not only keep track of students who graduate from their schools, but also to connect their students' postsecondary outcomes with the preparation they received in their K–12 schools. This type of feedback can help schools and districts adjust their practices in order to better prepare their current student cohorts, and higher education benefits from subsequently better-prepared future students (L'Orange & Ewell, 2006). With shared information, there can also be increased collaboration between the higher education and K–12 educational sectors (Bloom & Kissane, 2011).

The National College Access Network (NCAN) suggests that school data points include demographics like race, gender, and first-generation college student status, information on the nature and intensity of services received, and outcome data like postsecondary attendance and/or completion. While some data collection systems are outside the purview of individual schools, there are organizations and vendors that have created systems for schools to use in tracking their own students (Bloom et al., 2011). Many high schools use Student-Tracker reports from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to measure how many of their graduates go on to college, where they attend college, and how many persist through to graduation. Naviance, which partners with NSC, allows schools to track their students' college applications and progress and continue tracking students to see where they enroll, how far they have progressed, and what degrees they have earned. Schools can then share this information with stakeholders in their communities and use it to determine which interventions are working to prepare students for college/career and to set goals for future student cohorts (Spackey, 2013).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The school provides freshman students with formal supports as they make the transistion to high school (e.g., summer bridge programs, freshman academies).
The school provides senior students with formal supports as they make the transition out of high school (e.g., college and career planning, job fairs).
The school tracks the postsecondary school placements and experiences of their graduates and reports the results to the school board, faculty, and school community.

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