

## February 2011 Research Brief: Challenges of the Ninth Grade Transition

“The importance of a smooth transition from 8th grade to 9th grade cannot be emphasized enough, as this transition will determine a student’s success in high school as well as decisions about their post-secondary school life.” – Cooper, R. & Markoe-Hayes, S., *Improving the Educational Possibilities of Urban High School Students as They Transition from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Grade*

### How concerned should we be about students’ transition to ninth grade?

The transition from eighth to ninth grade is one of the most pivotal moments in a student’s education, and one of the most treacherous. Research shows that ninth grade retention rates and failure rates are higher than any other grade.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a ninth grade student is three to five times more likely to fail a class than students in any other grade.<sup>2</sup> Students with inadequate academic preparation face the greatest risk of course failure, but even those students who we might think are immune to failure based on their prior achievement can face challenges during the during the ninth grade year.<sup>3</sup> In a study of 115,000 Chicago Public School high school students, researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that “almost one quarter of students in the top quartile of their eighth grade class were off track by the end of the ninth grade.”<sup>4</sup> Students in this study were considered “off-track” if they were taking less than a full course load and had more than one semester “F” in a core subject (i.e., English, math, science, or social science). High-achieving students who are low-income tend to fare worse in high school than high-achieving high-income students. Analyses of three nationally representative longitudinal data sets showed that once students enter high school, 28% of high-achieving low-income students fall out of the top achievement quartile in math (this is twice the rate of high-achieving high-income students) and twice as many high-achieving low-income students fail to graduate on time as compared to high-achieving high-income students.<sup>5</sup>

#### FAST FACT:

Students are 3-5 times more likely to fail a class in the ninth grade than students in any other grade.<sup>2</sup>

Failure to graduate high school is strongly associated with ninth grade course failure. Research shows that between 70 and 80 percent of students who fail in the first year will not graduate from high school.<sup>6</sup> Even just getting one “F” in ninth grade has a negative impact on students’ future academic success. Students in the

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, J. S. (2006). Research summary: Transition from Middle School to High School.

<sup>2</sup> Southern Regional Educational Board (2002)., *Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School*

<sup>3</sup> Nelid, R. (2009). *Falling Off Track During the Transition to High School: What We Know and What Can Be Done*. The Future of Children. Vol 19. No 1. Spring 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Allensworth, E. and Easton, J.Q. (2005). *The On Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation*. Chicago, IL: The Consortium on Chicago School Research

<sup>5</sup> Wyner et al (2007). *Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students From Lower-Income Families*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Chicago study who had no “F’s” in ninth grade had a high school graduation rate of 83%, whereas students who had just one “F” in ninth grade had a graduation rate of 60%. When students do well in middle school, we may assume that: 1) it is unlikely they will fail classes in ninth grade and 2) even if they do fail a class, they will be resilient and smart enough to bounce back. However, research does not support these hypotheses. A full 37% of students in the Chicago study who were previously high achieving in eighth grade, but not on-track in ninth grade did not graduate high school.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, research shows that although students who are under-prepared academically are most likely to fail one or more courses and ultimately drop out, even students who are well-prepared academically and previously high-achieving can face considerable hurdles when they enter high school.

### CHALLENGES IN THE NINTH GRADE:

- Increased academic demands
- Larger, more anonymous & bureaucratic school environments
- Socially challenging school cultures
- Students’ limited knowledge about courses & skills they will need in HS

### Why is the transition to ninth grade so challenging for students?

The beginning of high school marks a significant shift in the academic demands placed on students. High school students face more rigorous academic expectations than they experienced in middle school. According to researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, “as students move to high school, particularly in urban school systems, they experience dramatic changes in their classroom and school environments. The number

of their classes and teachers increases, as does the size of their school and peer group. The content and skill demands of courses increase significantly, while at the same time, students are experiencing more independence and declines in academic support.”<sup>8</sup>

Along with increased academic rigor, ninth grade students face changes in the school culture that can cause feelings of anonymity and isolation, including larger, more diverse student populations; less individual support and connections between students and teachers; more tracking by academic ability; increased competition and downgrading of students’ social status.<sup>9</sup> Even the way courses are taught (e.g., increased departmentalization) can be somewhat alienating for students. “When moving from middle grades to high school there is often a shift from focusing on teaching and nurturing the whole child to focusing—in a more limited way—on instructing students to learn the content of academic subjects.”<sup>10</sup>

With higher expectations for academic performance and less hand-holding from teachers, high school students are called upon to be more proactive and in charge of their own learning. It is difficult, however, to be proactive about your own learning if you do not have a clear, comprehensive picture of what courses you should be taking and when you should be taking them. According to one 2006 survey of students in sixteen states, almost one-fifth of middle school students reported that they never received information about the courses, content and skills they would need to know in ninth grade and only about half of the middle school students surveyed left middle

<sup>7</sup> Roderick, M. (2006) Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform. Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>8</sup> Roderick, M. (2006) Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform. CCSR.

<sup>9</sup> Kerr, K. (2002). An Examination of Approaches to Promote Ninth-Grade Success in Maryland Public High Schools. Educational Research Service. <http://www.ers.org/spectrum/sum02a.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Herlihy, C. (2007). Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition into High School. National High School Center

school with a written plan that outlined the courses they should take in high school.<sup>11</sup> Another survey of more than 1,800 middle school students revealed similar results, showing that while almost all students surveyed (92%) reported that they intend to go to college, only 32% said they had a “great deal” or “quite a bit” of information about selecting high school classes that would prepare them for college.<sup>12</sup> Too many students enter high school without knowing the basics of what lies ahead for them (including what college-prep courses to take) and are left to their own devices to navigate the pitfalls of ninth grade. Fortunately, Breakthrough programs are well -positioned to provide the support that will enable students to succeed in ninth grade and beyond.

### **FAST FACT:**

1/5 of surveyed middle school students reported that they did not receive any information about the courses, content and skills they would need to know in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>11</sup>

## **What can be done to support students to overcome the challenges of ninth grade and beyond?**

Research suggests that there are five strategies Breakthrough programs can use, in addition to ensuring that students are academically prepared for rigorous college-prep high school programs, to set students up for success in high school: 1) ensure students understand what a college-prep curriculum entails and help students navigate that curriculum; 2) monitor students’ academic progress and make sure students get the support they need; 3) educate students about what the high school environment will be like; 4) teach students the skills and habits they will need to thrive in an academically rigorous high school environment; and 5) create and maintain trusting relationships with students throughout high school. Each of these strategies is important, but if you have limited capacity to carry out all of the strategies, priority should be given to the first two.

### **1. ENSURE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND WHAT A COLLEGE-PREP CURRICULUM ENTAILS AND HELP STUDENTS NAVIGATE THAT CURRICULUM**

Research shows that many middle school students don’t know what courses they need to graduate from high school, let alone be prepared for college.<sup>13</sup> This is an information gap that Breakthrough programs can fill. As part of the high school options counseling process, program staff should work with students to clearly communicate expectations about what college-prep courses they should take and, if students are not getting this support at their middle schools, Breakthrough staff should help students develop a four-year course plan that will prepare them for a four-year college. For more information on what a rigorous college-prep curriculum entails and how to help students navigate their way through a rigorous college-prep curriculum, see Breakthrough’s 2009 Research Brief - *Reality Check: Making Sure Your High School Students are Adequately Prepared for College* (which can be found on the [Breakthrough Collaborative website](#) or in the “Breakthrough National Research Briefs” workspace on Salesforce.)

<sup>11</sup> Bottoms, G. & Timberlake, A. (2007). Giving Students a Chance to Achieve: Getting Off to a Fast and Successful Start in Grade Nine. Southern Regional Education Board.

<sup>12</sup> National Association of Secondary School Principals, A Voice from the Middle: Highlights of the 2007 NASSP/PDK Middle School Student Poll, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Bottoms, G. & Timberlake, A. (2007) Giving Students a Chance to Achieve: Getting Off to a Fast & Successful Start in Grade Nine. Southern Regional Education Board and Azuza et al. (2008) Survey of College Knowledge.

## **2) MONITOR STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PROGRESS AND MAKE SURE STUDENTS GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED**

In many high schools, “there is little opportunity or incentive [for a teacher] to learn more about how the student is doing in other classes. As a result, the responsibility for shepherding the student to graduation falls to no one with firsthand knowledge of how she is doing in her classes.”<sup>14</sup> If a student’s academic performance does start to slip, there is often no coordinated effort to make sure that student gets the academic help that they need. Breakthrough program staff should make sure that their students are staying on track and should help students access academic support when they need it.

## **3. EDUCATE STUDENTS ABOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

When a student steps in the door of their new high school, they will have to contend with increased academic demands, as well as changes in the physical environment, the social environment and the way instruction is organized. Students will be better equipped to deal with these changes and challenges if they know ahead of time what the environment will be like and what is expected of them. According to the National Middle School Association, programs that help students successfully transition from middle school to high school provide “students and families with a wealth of information about the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school”<sup>15</sup> and they encourage programs to consider “expanding the number and duration of visits between schools; allowing students to spend a day with secondary school students; inviting secondary school students and teachers to speak at the feeder schools; providing mentoring to middle school students by secondary school students, etc.”<sup>16</sup>

## **4) TEACH STUDENTS THE SKILLS THEY WILL NEED FOR AN ACADEMICALLY RIGOROUS HIGH SCHOOL**

Acculturating students to the high school environment is a necessary step, but students also need to be explicitly taught the skills and behaviors that will help them navigate the unfamiliar and more demanding terrain of high school, including problem-solving skills, time management skills, organizational skills, self-advocacy, and understanding where and when to seek help. In order to be successful in high school, and later in college, “students must have strong norms for their work effort and achievement in class and effective coping and help-seeking techniques that allow them to persevere when facing difficulty. Students need to become “learners” rather than “attendees,” who can manage their own learning, assess their progress and status, and rely on a set of core strategies for success.”<sup>17</sup>

## **5) CREATE AND MAINTAIN TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS THROUGHOUT HIGH SCHOOL**

As noted earlier, high school can be a lonely and alienating place. However, if students have people to turn to when they need support, they are more likely to persevere and overcome challenges. Researchers have found

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<sup>14</sup> Nelid, R. (2009). Falling Off Track During the Transition to High School: What We Know and What Can Be Done. *The Future of Children*. Vol 19. No 1. Spring 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, J. S. (2006). Research summary: Transition from Middle School to High School. Retrieved December 2010 from <http://www.nmsa.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/TransitionfromMStoHS/tabid/1087/Default.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Roderick, M. (2006) Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap: Implications for High School Reform. CCSR.

that when there are high levels of trust between students and teachers and/or when teachers provided more personal attention to students and helped students with their problems, students failed fewer classes.<sup>18</sup> Although Breakthrough program staff do not have direct influence over student-teacher relationships, they can advise students on how to build those relationships with teachers and they can also provide an alternative source of support for students. An important aspect of building relationships with your high school students is asking high school students to “come back and give back,” which could include recruiting high school students to be summer or school year teachers or having students work in your program in non-teaching roles.

The core strategy of the Breakthrough middle school program is, as it should be, to ensure that students are academically prepared for rigorous college-prep high school programs. Research shows, however, that even high-performing academically prepared middle school students can stumble during the ninth grade transition. This brief has outlined five key areas for programs to focus on in order to help students succeed in high school. It should be noted that the degree to which Breakthrough programs will need to support students in these five areas will depend on the type of high school students are attending. Students attending Tier I high schools will likely need less support from Breakthrough staff because students in Tier I high schools are automatically placed in a college-prep curriculum and Tier I high schools are often proactive about providing academic support to their students. Students in Tier II or III high schools, however, may not be placed in college-prep courses and they might not get the kind of proactive academic support that they need. These students in particular could greatly benefit from the additional supports described in this brief.

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<sup>18</sup> Allensworth, E. and Easton, J. (2005) The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation. CCSR.

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