

## Making the Critical Year Count: A Review of the Literature on the Ninth Grade High School Experience

**Pamela L. Gray, EdD**

Assistant Professor

Educational Leadership and Administration

New Mexico State University

United States

### Abstract

*One challenge facing today's high schools is how best to prepare and support students in the transition from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. As eighth graders move from a structured and guided experience in middle school, they are often unprepared for the responsibility and independence necessary to succeed in high school. How well prepared a middle school student is for the transition to high school has much to do with whether he or she ultimately graduates. The purpose of this literature review was to synthesize research and best practices on the ninth grade experience. The author conducted a review of ninth grade transition literature including over 25 academic research articles on the topic. A focus on the community of care for freshmen, structures and programs, development of academic skills, relationships with peers and campus staff and family engagement were found to be essential components in a successful transition to high school.*

**Keywords:** community of care, ninth grade transition, smaller learning communities

### 1.0 Introduction

As eighth graders move from a structured and guided experience in middle school, they are often unprepared for the responsibility and independence necessary to succeed in high school. How well prepared a middle school student is for the transition to high school has much to do with whether he or she ultimately graduates.

Many high schools are struggling with students who enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade unprepared for the academic expectations and individual responsibility to “navigate” the world of high school. More and more students are dropping out of school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade which is leading to an increase in youth encountering the juvenile court system, gang activity, teen pregnancy, violence and poverty. Almost all students, even those who end up graduating high school and entering college, experience drops in grades and attendance in ninth grade. As students enter high school, they often feel disconnected, lose a sense of school attachment and belonging, feel alienated and intimidated by the size of the high school (in large urban settings). Students also feel that it is harder to bond with high school teachers. For students of color, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is an extremely critical year. Ninth grade failure rates are as high as 40% in many lower-performing, high poverty schools (2014). Nationwide, approximately 25% of high school freshmen fail to graduate on time (Attendance Counts, 2015).

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2005) identified that among children 12 to 17 years old, 10% had repeated a grade at some time during their academic lives. For those living below the poverty level, students are twice as likely to have repeated a grade. The dropout rate for lower income families (the bottom 20<sup>th</sup> percentile) is double the rate of students from middle class families and more than six times the rate for children from upper class families (Grossman, 2009). The growing income disadvantage for high school dropouts particularly affect students from poor families. Dropping out of high school is one of the factors driving intergenerational cycles of poverty. The Pew Hispanic Center study entitled “Hispanics, High School Dropouts and the GED” revealed just one-in-ten Hispanic high school drop-outs has a GED (Fry, 2011). This low percentage of GED attainment among Hispanic high school drop-outs is especially troubling because Hispanics have a much higher high school drop-out rate than other races. While the high school graduation rates for students of color are dismal, the college persistence rates are even more depressing. Saenz (2009) found that the ratio of Latino men in prison beds to those in college dorm beds is 3:1. Sixty-eight percent of Black males who enter college do not persist to graduation within six years (Palmer, Davis, Maramba, 2010).

Research on the ninth-grade transition is necessary and crucial in order to impact the negative educational dip that is evident across the United States. Most low-income students of color enter school at a deficit – below level in vocabulary and cognitive skills. As these students progress through school, they consistently struggle to achieve in the areas of mathematics and reading. Once these students, especially African American and Latino males, experience several years of failure in school, they become discouraged and disinterested in persisting to high school

graduation and beyond. Unresponsive and insensitive district and campus policies have been found to contribute to the decrease in student achievement for students of color.

The high school experience has changed greatly especially in recent years as the needs of adolescents turns to a strong need for relationships and skills development post COVID-19. This review of the literature on the transition to high school provides insight into the ways schools can best serve students from an academic and social/emotional learning perspective.

## **2.0 Literature Review Themes**

Being prepared to serve and support incoming freshmen is essential for high school leaders, teachers and support staff. Students' experiences in the freshmen year often determine their success throughout high school and set the direction for their career and college choices. This literature review will address six factors that impact a positive transition to high school: 1) a community of care for freshmen; 2) structures and programs; 3) development of academic skills; 4) relationships with peers and campus staff; 5) student perceptions; and 6) family engagement.

### **2.1 Community of Care for Freshmen**

A community of care can be defined as "a school culture in which students and teachers care about and support each other, individual needs are satisfied within a group setting, and members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group (Ellerbrook & Kiefer 2014, pg. 3). It is the teachers' responsibility to not only create caring relationships with students, but also help students learn how to care. Community has been defined as "places where members care about and support one another"( Ellerbrook & Kiefer, 2-14, pg. 3). Caring during middle adolescence is crucial as students are experiencing many cognitive, social and psychological changes. Traditional high schools are often unresponsive high school students' needs which may lead to mistrust and detachment with teachers. One research study found that the design of the community of care for ninth graders consists of teacher buy-in to promote care, teacher-to-student relationships that promote care and program-to-student relationships which include a personalized learning curriculum (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010).

### **2.2 Development of Academic Skills**

Roderick and Camburn (2010) note that many urban freshmen are not ready to meet the academic, developmental and social challenges they encounter in high school. Many urban students enter high school with low academic skills especially in reading and mathematics. With low reading and mathematics skills prior to high school, these students lack the basic skills necessary to move on to more advanced material. Moreover, the low skill levels may indicate that low academic demands were placed on these students in elementary school. They do not approach school with a history of high expectations nor possess the effort required to learn. In addition, the researchers found that students are often less skillful in adjusting to changes in the instructional styles of high school teachers. Astone and McLanahan (1991) note that low educational aspirations are one indicator of early disengagement from school and low-grade point average is another indicator of weak attachment to school. Blyth and Simmons (1983) believe that fewer familial resources and less guidance and monitoring from their families leads to a tougher transition for many students. Handling the stress and academic requirements of high school require a support system. Student readiness to learn and coping abilities are shaped by the degree to which they receive support and monitoring from their parents. In addition to the lack of skills students bring to high school, Roderick and Camburn (2010) also found that the size of the high school is also associated with student outcomes. Larger high schools tend to have more variance in student performance, lower student engagement and achievement and higher dropout rates.

### **2.3 Structures and Programs**

A separate physical setting for incoming freshmen has been identified as an important factor in the transition process. The opportunity to have students working together in an area free from upper class students allow freshmen to feel safe and less overwhelmed in a large high school.

The ninth-grade wing and/or academy have a designated administrator, counselors and team of teachers focusing specifically on 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. Hertzog and Morgan (1999) suggest creating a "ninth grade house" that can help students acclimate to their new surroundings.

Having a ninth-grade house also benefits teachers who can specialize in working with freshmen. By having a specialized schedule and teacher teams, students are more likely to succeed. McIntosh and White (2006) provided insight into the development of a Freshman Wing. The foundation of the Freshman Wing concept included:

1. Core teacher classrooms, freshman lockers, principal and counselor located in the Freshman Wing;
2. A formation of teams of ninth grade core teachers (science, math, history and English) who share the same students;
3. A common preparation period for each core team to facilitate developing intervention strategies for at-risk students;

4. A freshman counselor working closely with middle school counselors to ensure proper placement of students into freshman courses; and
5. Increased and improved transition activities during the eighth grade year.

In addition, the authors found that collaborations with community social services agencies help to build positive relationships and connections for at-risk students.

Herlihy (2007) of MDRC described a successful structural support program called the Talent Development's Ninth Grade Success Academy. The Talent Development strategy for addressing ninth-grade issues have five main features: 1) a separate physical setting that is free from the distractions of upper-class students; 2) a team-teaching structure designed to divide students into smaller groups and identify students in need of early assistance; 3) supports and incentives for students to attend school regularly; 4) a curricular regimen built upon the extended block schedule which was designed to provide more time to address students' academic deficiencies;

5) the Twilight Academy, a program for repeat ninth graders; 6) ongoing coaching and professional development for teachers.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (CSRI), an organization created to assist schools and school districts contemplating or engaged in school reform and improvement, found that many current transition programs focus on providing 8<sup>th</sup> grade students with information on course selection and physical layout of the school, does not address affective concerns, such as anxieties students may experience when entering high school. Programs and structures they found successful include: teachers meeting in teams throughout the year to discuss and share instructional issues and student data Parent and student information sharing sessions in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade before the transition, roundtable discussions with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders to answer questions at 8<sup>th</sup> grade assemblies, summer bridge programs, a week of gender specific orientation. In addition, students, parents and guidance counselors should work collaboratively to plan ahead to create a high school course/career plan. Smith and Akos (2008) cites successful high school transition programs as an attempt to address the info gap between students' middle school experience and their expectations of what high school will be like. It is important that parents have accurate information in the areas of curricular, logistic, academic and social support. Transition activities should present multiple opportunities for students and families to discuss, explore, and experience the academic, social, and organization similarities and differences. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) notes that a strong orientation program contains the following key characteristics:

- Meet the teacher night for soon-to-be freshmen
- Ninth grade orientation for students and parents before school begins
- Use of student mentors
- Sending high school students to talk to middle school students
- High School 101 survival skills class
- Better tours

Hertzog & Morgan (1999) researched high schools in Georgia and Florida and found that schools that only conducted building tours and counselor meetings for registration had the highest dropout and retention rates in ninth grade. Both Schiller (1999) and Hertzog & Morgan (1999) assert that transition is a process not an event. It is not a solitary event but takes place over time.

Successful transition involves a comprehensive orientation process that addresses the instructional and social aspects of high school. Darling-Hammond, Aness and Ort (2002) identified several key factors in the success of "reform-oriented" school. These factors are:

- (1) small size;
- (2) structures that allow for personalization and strong relationships;
- (3) carefully constructed curriculum;
- (4) teachers' ability to adapt instruction to fit students' needs;
- (5) a schoolwide performance assessment system;
- (6) the creation of flexible supports to ensure student learning, and
- (7) strong teachers supported by collaboration in planning and problem solving.

#### **2.4 Relationships with Peers and Campus Staff**

Cohen and Smerdon (2009) emphasize the significance of adolescence in human development. This shift includes the development of larger social networks, social cliques, sexual and other social stresses. Students at this age are trying to develop their own identity while being expected to prepare themselves academically for the future. During this transition, Cohen and Smerdon note that students begin to exhibit lower self-esteem and fears about new social situations. Frustration and anxiety over change can cause negative or disruptive behaviors. Catterall (1998) conducted a study on students doing poorly or lacking confidence in finishing school as of the eighth grade that turn themselves around by the tenth grade. The results showed that family supports, school responsiveness to students, and student involvement in school and community activities stand out as predictors of recovery from low performance. Chen and Gregory (2009) cite that students whose parents had higher expectations about grades and

attainment had higher grade point averages and were rated as more academically engaged by their teachers. Students who reported that their parents were more academically encouraging experienced more care from their teachers. Results suggest certain types of parental involvement may be more effective than others in supporting low-achieving adolescents' school performance. Cooper and Liou (2007) studied how high school counselors serve as institutional agents.

Counselors shared that their interactions between ninth grade students centered primarily on class placements and requirements. Counselors attributed their limited interactions to the overwhelming amount of paperwork they are required to complete and non-student related tasks. In addition, counselors shared that they must spend a disproportionate amount of time with seniors, at the expense of incoming freshmen. Wong, Weist and Cusick (2002) cite the need to provide students with an environment in which their sense of competence is maintained and/or enhanced. Students who believe that they can achieve will often try harder to do well. The researchers believe that how teachers and parents respond to a child's performance affects the student's perceptions of competence. In addition, their findings report that the students' parent attachment was positively associated with the students' motivation to succeed. The importance of teachers was highlighted in the Croninger and Lee (2001) study. Researchers discovered that teacher-based forms of social capital operated to reduce dropout rates by half. The factors of student-faculty interaction and a supportive campus climate are critical when high schools develop a framework for effective educational practices (Gasman, Baez, Turner, 2008).

Research by Lessard (2009) found that divorce or a parent's new significant other made many parents less available to help these students during their stressful adolescent experiences. Students also described gambling, alcoholic or absent fathers who made them feel rejected and lonely. Most students found comfort at school – with teachers and friends – to become a surrogate family during the hard times. By focusing on their personal strengths and believing in themselves, students were able to “bounce back” during tough times and thinking positive.

Akos and Galassi (2004) conducted a study at a medium size southern high school to compare the perceptions of students, parents and teachers involved in middle and high school transitions. Results indicated that all three groups saw making new friends as one of the top attractions of the transition. High school students identified freedom, meeting new people/more people, lunch/extracurricular options, a bigger environment and sports/clubs as positive aspects of high school. Difficult aspects of high school were reported as homework, a variety of social and organizational changes, and grades.

## 2.5 Student Perceptions

Cohen and Smerdon (2009) emphasizes the significance of adolescence in human development. This shift includes the development of larger social networks, social cliques, sexual and other social stresses. Students at this age are trying to develop their own identity while being expected to prepare themselves academically for the future. During this transition, Cohen and Smerdon note that students begin to exhibit lower self-esteem and fears about new social situations. Frustration and anxiety over change can cause negative or disruptive behaviors.

Many of the research articles on high school transition, focus on the programs and processes without including the voices of those directly affected by the change. Akos and Galassi (2004) conducted research at a southern high school campus to identify incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders views on the transition processes. The researchers categorized the feedback as academic, procedural and social. Students reported that the amount of homework and getting lost were top concerns. Students were also concerned about getting to class on time. The top three anticipations reported by students were more freedom, making new friends and attending school events. The most difficult part of the transition centered on a variety of social and organizational changes. Riding the bus to school, getting around the school and not having friends in class were top stressors for incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders. In order to adjust to high school, students reported that they spent time with old and new friends, focused on completing school work and participated in clubs or sports. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) used surveys and open-ended questions to determine the factors perceived by students as having the greatest influence in their transition from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The subjects for this study were students who entered the 9<sup>th</sup> grade for the first time at a large Midwest high school with an enrollment of 2300 students. Survey results showed that students perceived the greatest factors to their successful transition were “interesting classes” and “going to class every day.” The students also indicated that they needed to know more about high school, the classes they would have to take, and directions to find their way around the campus.

Newman, Lohman, Newman, and Smith (2000) describe many of the same perceptions regarding new challenges due to new academic demands, a more complex environment, new social demands and new relationships with teachers. High performers in ninth grade attributed their success to three kinds of coping strategies: individual (be dedicated, stay focused), academic (study, keep up with homework), and social (hang with the right people). These coping categories are similar to the categories identified in the Akos and Galassi (2004) research (academic, procedural, social). Research by Langenkamp (2010) found that middle school social relationships are protective against low academic outcomes in the first year of high school but not for low-achieving middle school students.

## 2.6 Family Engagement in High School

Other researchers have focused on the importance of relationships in the transition process. Catterall (1998) conducted a study on students doing poorly or lacking confidence in finishing school as of the eighth grade that turn themselves around by the tenth grade. The results showed that family supports, school responsiveness to students, and student involvement in school and community activities stand out as predictors of recovery from low performance.

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## 3.0 Conclusions

Developing caring, supportive, and mutually respectful relationships with students in a large, comprehensive high school is not easy but it is crucial, especially for ninth graders. Schools must accept responsibility for making changes within their own structure or climate that can support student persistence and increase the likelihood that they will finish their education (Knesting, 2008). High schools that share a commitment to building community, increasing teacher effective and improving student learning share the components outlined in this literature review. By incorporating these characteristics, schools can unite and build a cohesive learning environment. Faculty and students can make the school a place not only where people spend time but where there is a connection and bond among people to improve their work and students' lives (Anness, 2003).

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