

Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Driven Decisions

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Just the Facts

- Eighth and ninth grade is a defining period for teenagers, and researchers have noted adjustment problems during this transition period (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).
- Research indicates that students who participate in transitions that actively involve students, parents, and staff members are less likely to drop out of high school even when demographic and other information is held constant (Smith, 1997; Hertzog and Morgan, 1999).
- The Freshman Transition Initiative... is based on a 10-year plan that takes the students through high school, on to postsecondary education and training, and into the workforce and helps them understand what it takes to become financially responsible adults.
- A clear plan assesses students' needs and identifies courses and additional learning opportunities (Joftus, 2002).
- Students armed with the insight and information provided by [a comprehensive transition] course...realize that high school is not a way station but a launching pad for their futures.

About the Author

Rebecca Dedmond (rdedmond@gwu.edu) is the director of the School Counseling Program and the Freshman Transition Initiative at the George Washington University Alexandria Center. **R. D. Brown**, a counselor in Fairfax County Public Schools, and **Jean M. LaFauci**, a doctoral student in counseling at the George Washington University, contributed to this article.

Freshman Transition Programs: Long-Term and Comprehensive

Nature of the Problem

One of the most daunting challenges facing educators today is to prepare students for success beyond the classroom. Of grave concern is a steadily growing dropout rate. Nearly one of every three eighth-grade students in the United States does not graduate from high school, and half of Black and Latino students do not make it to graduation day (Orfield, 2004). But even graduation does not guarantee success. According to the National Association of College and Employers (2005), many of those students who do graduate lack basic abilities such as good communication skills. In addition, fewer entry-level livable-wage jobs are available to new workers who lack these basic skills (Feller, 2003).

States and districts nationwide struggle to redesign U.S. high schools so all young people can receive the education they need to be successful. However, thinking that increasing academic rigor alone will somehow right the wrongs in our school systems is naïve at best and could be disastrous for too many students. All students need comprehensive long-term transition programs to help them succeed in high school and beyond. According to McIver, "more students fail 9th grade than any other grade level," but when middle level students experience a variety of programs such as social support, orientation to the next school, peer interaction and curriculum information as well as academic support, fewer students are retained in ninth grade (1990, p.259).

Without willing and motivated learners, all the best efforts of educators will be wasted. But getting the average 14-year-old student to think about and cultivate the attitudes and ambitions needed to be a successful adult is an uphill battle.

There are few resources and no comprehensive standards in place for classes and programs that seek to meet the personal, social, educational, and career and life-skills goals of students. As a result, principals and teachers have become caught up in well-intended, but largely unsuccessful strategies as they have tried to develop curricula with little

support and direction from districts and only vague notions of what is required to motivate the least motivated students. It is no wonder that teachers—as well as administrators, students, parents, communities, and policymakers—continue to be frustrated.

Do Students in Your Freshman Course:

- Learn to project into the future and understand the consequences of their actions and choices they make today?
- Analyze the effect of personal interests and aptitudes upon educational and career planning?
- Develop meaningful 10-year career-inclusive educational plans?
- Understand the impact their commitment to education has on their future lifestyle and life satisfaction?
- Recognize the impact of career choice on personal lifestyle?
- Demonstrate the skills to locate, analyze, and apply career information?
- Know the process for career planning and educational preparation?
- Know how to apply the skill sets required to succeed?
- Demonstrate the importance of productive work habits and attitudes?
- Complete formal assessments and surveys to help them establish and consolidate their identity?
- Know the process used to locate and secure entry-level employment?
- Know how societal change impacts career opportunities?
- Know how many skills are common to a variety of careers and that these skills can be transferred from one career opportunity to another?

Redefining Transition

In an effort to provide educators with the guidance they need to implement strong transition programs, the George Washington University developed freshman course standards as part of its Freshman Transition Initiative program (for more information go to <http://gshed.gwu.edu/ghsehd/FTI>). The initiative is based on a 10-year plan that takes students through high school, on to postsecondary education and training, and into the workforce and helps them understand what it takes to become financially responsible adults.

Eighth and ninth grade is a defining period for teenagers, and researchers have noted adjustment problems during this transition period that include decreases in grade point average, attendance, feelings of connectedness, and cocurricular participation and increases in anxiety concerning school procedures and older students, social difficulties, and changes in relationships with parents (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Research indicates that students who participate in transition programs that actively involve students, parents, and staff members are less likely to drop out of high school even when demographic and other information is held constant (Smith, 1997; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999).

Until now, transition programs have varied widely within schools, and designs range from a one-day overview of a new school to a full school year of career-focused curriculum. Although the scope of research varies as much as the programs themselves, several important aspects have been emphasized, and it is apparent that longer-term comprehensive transition programming can be beneficial.

For example, the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 identified the most common reasons for dropping out of high school as attitude towards school, poor school performance, and relationship with teachers (as cited in Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Lan & Lanthier also found that dropouts had lower academic performance, decreased motivation, and an increased sense of alienation from the school environment.

Research also showed that high school students often view the social organizational changes and academic work as the most difficult aspects of transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This is important given that academic success is strongly related to students' social competence and adaptability to various

environments (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999, as cited in Holland & Mazzoli, 2001). In addition, research noted little connection between the courses and occupational pursuits students choose and existing job openings and business needs (Career Institute for Education and Workforce Development, 2002, as cited in Feller, 2003). Because of the variability in program and research content, it is important to look at what has been tried in the past and what appears to be effective now.

Many teachers, parents, and administrators think of transition as a one-day "orientation" or school tour to locate locker rooms and gym facilities, even though studies, such as those mentioned earlier, show that students' needs are long-term and comprehensive. Programs that consist of minimal activities, building tours, and assistance in registration reported the highest drop-out and retention rates (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999, n.d.). On the other hand, students enrolled in the most extensive and comprehensive programs were able to maintain their grade-level placement in high school and thus had the lowest drop-out rates (n.d.).

Successful Programs

Although the concept of freshman transition has been around for quite some time, programs that incorporate the minimum of a year-long course and an application of skills to students' future careers are scarce. Successful programs are multi-dimensional. They have blended youth development approaches with contextual and authentic learning to include caring relationships, cognitive challenges, a culture of support, community, and connection to learning and career opportunities (Feller, 2003). When this type of course continues throughout high school, it is extremely beneficial and would increase the chance of improving outcomes.

Additionally, it is apparent that students need more mentoring, life skills, and information about why school and learning are important (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001). This provides a meaningful and comprehensive context for learning. It connects the student not only to their school-work, but makes the crucial connection between school-work and its impact on life following graduation.

The following programs are good examples of how the essential elements of freshman transition have been incorporated in schools. Flanagan High School in Pembroke Pines, FL, uses the Pathways Curriculum (Rogers, 1996). The goal is to make learning as authentic as possible and to combine interests with potential career choices. Technology is used to bring the real world of work into the classroom. The traits and interests that are identified in the Pathway course are then used by the school's guidance counselor to

direct students into a three-year program that includes a two-year mentor/intern relationship and culminates in a comprehensive senior presentation.

The Career and Technology Students (CTS) program used in Alberta, Canada (DeWijk, 1996) applies an integrated curriculum for students in grades 7 through 12 by using business, home economics, industrial education, vocational education, and core subjects. This program promotes links between all levels of school and the workplace. The concept of career in this program includes occupational aspirations as well as personal and community life.

The basic competencies are self management and social interaction. The key points followed within this program are competency-based learning, flexible time, organization by level, school-based decision making, encouragement of resource-based classrooms, curriculum development by teachers with input from postsecondary schools, and career exploration. Some of the methods include assigning projects where students must form connections with other students, combining two subjects for one project, and reinforcing concepts of one subject in another (e.g., linking issues of economy, environment, and human rights).

Additionally, a collaborative program, REACH (Readiness Education for Achieving Career Heights) is a partnership between businesses, industries, local school systems, and Jacksonville State University (Friery & Nelson, n.d.). More than 6,000 students have participated in this workshop-based curriculum in three years. The project focuses on seniors, but has also included 8th- and 10th-grade students. University students visit businesses and then make presentations to high school students about local business opportunities and perspectives, how to explore the details of a prospective career, and how to balance personal and work life. The strength of this project is that material given to participants is focused on what is happening in their own community instead of general information about career and job opportunities.

Several Northern Virginia schools have partnered with George Mason University (GMU) to conduct the Early Identifi-

Although the concept of freshman transition has been around for quite some time, programs that incorporate the minimum of a year-long course and an application of skills to students' future careers are scarce.

fication Program (EIP) (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2003). EIP is a multiyear college-preparatory program for students who are not working up to their potential, mainly because of socioeconomic barriers. Students are identified in grade 8 and attend a summer academy prior to starting grade 9 and throughout their high school career. The main components of EIP are tutoring, a three-week summer academy, weekend events, math review sessions, and a “strengthening the family” workshop.

Halifax County in Virginia is creating a comprehensive transition program for all students at all grade levels... and has adopted the academy approach to provide students with a more specialized K–12 academic environment.

Tutoring is provided to help students improve their performance in academic subjects, and the summer academy is a preview of courses that the students will take in the upcoming year. The weekend events include field trips and workshops on such topics as time management and conflict resolution. The “strengthening the family” workshop is an all-day program that works on improving family communication and discussion of proper discipline techniques. The program takes place on the university’s

campuses where GMU students assist in tutoring, and various county school teachers are on staff. GMU also guarantees admission to graduates of the program. This program’s strength is in the area of preparation for college.

Halifax County in Virginia is creating a comprehensive transition program for all students at all grade levels (personal communication, April 24, 2006). The cornerstone to prepare students for the highly skilled and ever-changing workforce is a progressive education system that spans from pre-kindergarten through high school and is sustained by technical training and graduate education. This small, rural community has hardworking citizens with strong work ethics who are family-centered and community-minded and trained with minimum skills; fewer than 10% of whom have college degrees. The advent of the information-based global economy provides a great challenge to Halifax because of the diminishing economic base of tobacco farming, timber, textiles, and manufacturing.

To combat these challenges, Halifax has adopted the academy approach to provide students with a more specialized K–12 academic environment. Schools move beyond

minimum standards to more challenging academic rigor with career-based relevance and with the support from strong relationships with businesses, community colleges, and universities. It has created small learning communities that are supported by caring teachers and developed a comprehensive K–12 counseling and career development program that highlights career awareness, career exploration, and career preparation through seven academy programs.

The ninth-grade transition program prepares students for the transition to the academy and to smaller learning communities at the high school level. Ten-year plans and programs of study are created with input from local school, community college, and university counselors and provide solid direction to students’ career objectives. Partnerships with local businesses provide job shadowing, internships, and career exploration and preparation opportunities, and partnerships with universities, community colleges, and research institutions engage students in academic programs and research. All serve to encourage students to further academic goals.

In addition, a virtual academy option is available for students who require academic development outside of school. The three basic programs of study for each academy to meet the career goals of each student are the associate degree program, the university/career-prep program, and the technical/career-prep program. Each program has 8- to-10-year class guidelines to show parents and students the challenging academic expectations and options for further training beyond high school. Halifax also developed a continuous improvement academy to provide teachers, administrators, and all support staff members with quality longitudinal data and ongoing professional development to make appropriate curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions.

Important Program Factors

Future transition initiatives must focus on specific interventions to be successful. Because the primary function of adolescence is for teenagers to establish and consolidate their identity, self-exploration and identity variables related to career planning should be emphasized (Wallace-Brosious, Serafica, & Osipio, 1994). Career development is linked to self-esteem and self-esteem is linked to motivation for each student to reach his or her potential. Students who feel competent are more likely to engage in career planning and decision making. Identity achievement is also positively associated with career decidedness and planning (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). Transition should incorporate mechanisms that help increase students’ positive sense of self and formulate their personal identity. This

is a necessary developmental process for all adolescents and particularly for students who are at risk.

Additional research-based interventions include creating a supportive atmosphere in school and classrooms, working to increase an internal locus of control, teaching study skills and time management, improving communication between teachers in middle and high schools and between parents and teachers, and building a sense of community within schools (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). The sense of community developed is extremely important because when youth are provided with a nurturing environment and have access to adults outside the immediate family, the effects on the educational process and personal growth are positive (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). A supportive environment enhances students' sense of belonging, ownership of learning, recognition of good choices and the ability to make good choices (NASSP, 2005).

Pediatrician and clinician Mel Levine's research focuses on what he considers the core issue for every developing child—who he or she is turning into and, more specifically, what he or she will be like when grown. Adolescents need time to study and pursue a wide range of things at the same time, to search for recurring themes and patterns that allow them to find their own cause and build their own skills and credential. Youth who are confused and anguished about their futures and who lack a clear sense of identity or direction are susceptible to long-term underachievement, underemployment, or unemployment that Levine calls "work life unreadiness" (2005). Recognizing their own strong sense of purpose and self-understanding as related to the present and future provides students with the framework to explore changing relationships as well as how to make a living, see relevance in hard work, and how to plan meaningful living activities (Joftus, 2002).

Future Directions

In support of Hertzog & Morgan's (1999) well-known assertion that transition is a process, not an event, a report from the Association for Career and Technical Education advised that successful transition is embedded in comprehensive guidance programs that must shift away from services to a program approach with a written plan that engages a large group of stakeholders—parents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, unions, educators, politicians, and the community at large (2003).

Greater emphasis is being placed on a comprehensive and developmental view of education and career planning. Career theory and recent long-term research support the idea that early planning is a systematic means for help-

ing students become engaged in school. This constitutes a formal means by which students become intentional in their educational and career development (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005).

Emerging assumptions discussed in the career development literature are congruent with the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes. These elements include identifying values, starting career development in elementary school, providing character development opportunities, ensuring that career choice has personal meaning, and instilling the idea of lifelong learning (Feller, 2003). It is equally important that success and fulfillment are individually defined within the standards and improvement in communication, math, computer technology, self-management,

Benefits of a Freshman Transition Course

- Creates enthusiasm and appreciation for the educational process
- Offers relevant themes for academic skill development
- Helps students discover their identity and builds self-esteem
- Supports guidance and counseling goals by helping students develop education and career plans
- Supports improved pass rates from 9th to 10th grade

Indicators of Effective Programs

- Decreased absentee rates
- Steady or increased GPA
- Steady or increased participation in cocurricular activities
- Decreased truancy
- Fewer discipline incidents
- Positive mental health
- Goal-oriented students
- Involved parents

problem-solving, and decision-making skills are emphasized. The standards were developed to improve student achievement and preparation. They are intended to be used as a structural framework to increase student participation in academically rigorous classes and to create higher expectations for all students.

Lynch believes that high school education should focus on career planning, a new form of career and technical education, and the K–14 model (as cited in Reese, 2002). According to Lynch, career planning should start in elementary school

to encourage lifelong learning and make connections between basic subjects and application to students' lives and future work; schools should be smaller and more focused, challenging, and interesting; academics should be integrated with business collaboration to enhance students' experiences; and additional connections and improved communication

between primary and secondary schools should be developed to make a K–14 model flow more smoothly. Lynch also suggests that high schools should emphasize majors, contextual learning, work-based learning, authentic assessment, career academies, and technical preparation.

Cassell (2000) believes individual-centered high school portfolios are an important tool in high school career development. Although high school portfolios or 10-year plans should be started in the freshman year, they should be modified throughout each student's education. Access to this portfolio should be given to students, parents, teachers, and guidance counselors to keep students working towards their goals. Important items to include in the portfolio are whether a student has been identified as on a college or noncollege track; a student's career activity interests; the student's aptitude areas; job or career plans; height and weight charts and any health interventions; drug- and substance-abuse prevention program completion; character education; and aspects of the student's educational development, such as course requirements, cocurricular activities, and work outside of school.

Emphasis is placed on long-range plans that are tangible and are motivators for student success. A clear plan assesses students' needs and identifies courses and additional learn-

ing opportunities (Joftus, 2002). Plans that students bring to high school from middle school become a solid base for more involved and specialized education and career plans.

Levine (2005) believes youth should have some sense of direction; a preview of what lies ahead. Such foresight and close and recurring examination of the directions in which their minds are taking them provides motivational practice, even if they end up in a different field. Practice in thinking about the future and where they fit in gives students the opportunity to look ahead, anticipate outcomes, and predict likely consequences of their choices. Whether adolescents have lofty aspirations or not, reflection on who they are and where they want to be in 10 years is an important part of taking the right roads in life (2005).

Supporting research confirms that having ongoing conversations with teachers, counselors, parents, and those who share significant, meaningful information is associated with students' academic achievements and a higher degree of knowledge needed to plan and prepare adequately for the future (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Moreover, Israel et al. (2001), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, found that attributes of family social capital were key factors affecting high school students' educational achievement. This means that individual relationships among youths and adults as well as demographics and resources—or lack thereof—affect students' motivation and abilities. Factors such as socioeconomic status, isolation, instability, and inequality within family systems and the larger community are important to keep in mind. Given this data, it is clear that policies are also needed to strengthen social capital in the family as well as the local community.

Despite the mounting problems, we must pay attention to research and data that elicits widespread agreement and optimism and focus on promising practices. It is also crucial to reach beyond the schools and engage the entire community given that students spend 86% of their time out of school. Schools need the support of a learning society to drive real change, contends Tom Vander Ark (2005), executive director of education for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The problem—and the solution—is larger than any single stakeholder group. Parents, politicians, businesses, nonprofit organizations, philanthropists, unions, educators, students, and the community at large must all recognize the scale of the problem and work together to address it.

Because freshman transition has taken myriad directions and because numerous variables are involved, it is evident that more research is needed. There is a lack of research on the effectiveness of comprehensive transition programs

Cassell (2000) believes individual-centered high school portfolios are an important tool in high school career development.

and long-range planning in terms of the actual differences they may make in students' success in and out of school. Longitudinal studies of programs are needed to collect data and clearly measure what works best for the future of our students.

Drawing on the small body of research, a common theme becomes evident: Successful education reform takes significant time. It's not acceptable for 7,000 students to drop out of school each day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005) and for large numbers to graduate unprepared for further education and training.

The right to a free education belongs to all students. They need comprehensive guidance on how to make long-range plans to support their aspirations as they prepare for their futures in today's information-based, highly skilled, and ever-changing global economy. Educators, business and community leaders, parents, and policymakers are challenged to take this collection of clinical research, coupled with insights into emerging best practices, as a stimulus to implement an obvious solution—a freshman transition class based on the Freshman Transition Standards, where students are encouraged to dream of what is possible and create their own dynamic 10-year plan of how to achieve their dreams.

This is a viable strategy for addressing the rising high school and college drop-out rates and increasing postsecondary learning. Students armed with the insight and information provided by this type of course will understand why their education is important and realize high school is not a way station but a launching pad for their futures. They will then be ready to sit in the classroom and tune-in to content that is “newly relevant.” Having developed a vision of a productive—and attainable—future, they will be motivated to master the rigorous academic coursework required to succeed in the 21st century. They will understand the benefits and the consequences to their life satisfaction and personal happiness. Their motivation will be intrinsic—the very best kind—and, therefore, they will become lifelong learners. PRR

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Resources

- **Academic Innovations—Career Curriculum Resources**
www.academicinnovations.com
- **COIN Educational Products, Inc.**
www.coin3.com
- **The George Washington University Freshman Transition Initiative**
<http://gsehd.gwu.edu/gsehd/FTI>
- **The Real Game**
www.realgame.org
- **American's Career Resource Network Association**
www.acrna.net

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