

MIDDLE SCHOOL ALIGNMENT

INTRODUCTION

Data show that “fewer than two in ten eighth graders are on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate from high school” (American College Test [ACT], 2008). These statistics speak to the great need to improve the number of students who enter high school fully prepared to succeed in their coursework. This problem — ensuring that middle school students are on target for rigorous high school courses — has been referred to as the “forgotten middle” and the “weak link” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2003). This weak link is commonly referred to as transition into high school, and it is one of the most critical issues of alignment between middle grades and high school. Ensuring students’ successful transition into high school academic and career and technical courses is fundamental to the successful implementation of multiple pathways.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSITION

Issues related to alignment between middle and high schools are embodied in the problems associated with students transitioning from ninth grade into high school. For students with inadequate academic preparation for high school, these transformations can represent the beginning of academic problems and a real struggle to stay in school (Neild, 2009). Supporting a smooth transition to high school is a critical part of strengthening the link between middle and high school and should include allowing struggling students opportunities to catch up (Herlihy, 2007).

The National High School Center (NHSC) has developed a checklist of research-based strategies that can help states support districts and schools in improving student transitions into high school (Herlihy, 2007):

- Identify readiness indicators for high school coursework.
- Require districts and schools to report annually the percentage of students completing algebra and freshman English by the end of freshman year.
- Track whether schools are offering more rigorous courses to more ninth graders each year.
- Communicate to families what ninth graders are expected to know and be able to do to succeed in high school.
- Require one-on-one planning sessions for all students and their parents.
- Require high schools to inform middle-grades feeder schools of the percentage of students who completed two years of college-prep English, mathematics, and science by the end of tenth grade.
- Provide guidelines on how middle and high schools can work together to prepare students for high school.
- Require and fund high schools to identify eighth graders who are not ready to take

college-prep English and mathematics in ninth grade and provide summer school programs in these areas.

- Provide guidance on how to offer double-doses of catch-up courses, when necessary — courses that are designed to help students meet the demands of more rigorous high school work, specifically algebra and English — in the first semester of high school and enroll them in high school work by the second semester.
- Require districts to report on the outcomes of their transition programs.

In addition, the NHSC developed another checklist to assist states in implementing a comprehensive approach to leverage system change for high school improvement (National High School Center, 2007). These checklists may be helpful for California as it considers multiple pathways implementation in the context of improving high school students' outcomes.

Transition Courses

In recognition of the challenge presented by transition, some districts and schools offer students transition courses. Transition classes are specifically designed to ensure that middle grades students can successfully undertake rigorous high school courses. The Freshman Transition Initiative (FTI) addresses the critical need for a classroom-based, comprehensive guidance effort, in either the eighth or ninth grade, to prepare students for success in college and career exploration. The FTI Course Standards outline a rigorous, research-based transition course for all eighth or ninth grade students. These standards, endorsed by the National Association for Secondary School Principals, provide a resource for administrators and teachers to use in designing courses to help students make academic and career exploration choices that will help them to successfully navigate the transition into postsecondary education, training, or careers (FTI, 2004).

Specifically, the FTI standards state that transition courses focusing on educational achievement must:

- Facilitate students' recognition of the value of education and internal motivation to succeed in school.
- Motivate learners to challenge themselves and strive for higher achievement.
- Help students understand how education, training, and career choice impact their personal lifestyles.
- Motivate students to apply themselves; once they understand how core subjects and skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and computing, impact their future success, their academic achievement will improve. (FTI, 2004)

According to ACT's report, "Making sure that all eighth grade students have attained the knowledge and skills that put them on target to becoming ready for college and career is the single most important step that can be taken to improve their college and career readiness" (ACT, 2008). The ACT's recommendations to improve this situation include:

- Focus K-8 standards on the knowledge and skills that are essential for college and career readiness, and make these nonnegotiable for all students.

- Monitor student progress in becoming ready for college and career, and intervene with students who are not on track to becoming ready, beginning in upper elementary school and continuing through middle school.
- Improve student academic behaviors.
- Increase federal and state support for schools to implement intervention programs that help all students become ready for college and careers (ACT, 2008).

The CDE's 12 Recommendations to Middle Grades Success states that "continuous progress monitoring helps middle grades teachers see when students are not on track to meet high school standards. Early, accelerated interventions help ensure that struggling students have a chance to catch up, increasing their chances of staying in school through ninth grade and beyond. Currently, a large and disproportionately poor and minority group of students tend to drop out in ninth grade. Early, intensive preparation of those students may help to close the achievement gap (<http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tcsii/>).

Career Guidance and Exploration in Middle School

Career guidance for middle grades students is critical to high-quality multiple pathways implementation, particularly if the pathways are organized to begin in the ninth grade. Generally, four types of career exposure and exploration activities are appropriate for middle grades students, including 1) in-class projects that integrate curriculum with the kinds of problems that students might find outside the classroom or that are set in the context of the world outside of school; 2) in-class career exploration curriculum games or activities, such as The Real Game California™, that allow students to explore options; 3) exposure to careers first-hand through speakers, field trips, and job shadowing; and 4) reflection, guidance, and the beginnings of planning, facilitated by a guidance professional, resulting in educational and career plans that are revised over time.

Even if pathway enrollment does not begin until tenth grade, middle grades students should be engaged in career exploration activities, since the choice of a high school may limit their pathway selection. Working with teachers, middle school counselors play an important role in career exploration.

Middle grades students should be engaged in open-ended exploration and hands-on activities. It is also important to document the student's career exploration experiences, the options explored by the student, and the student's preliminary interests; and to make this information available to both middle grades and high school counselors to ensure continuity from one level to the next.

Districts should consider requiring a career development plan for their students starting in the seventh grade. Parent involvement in this exploration and "planning" process is a critical component for multiple pathways. In addition, successful transition of middle grades students depends in part on how effective counselors are with engaging parents of these students.

In Long Beach, all eighth grade students take the ACT Explore Test, which gives them a profile their career interests. Students in the Woodland Joint Unified School District have access to The Real Game California™, and the California Career Zone, an online career exploration tool.

Middle schools can provide students with orientations about the options available in high school. In Porterville, for example, two-week student projects in middle grades introduce pathways to students. In addition, a summer camp further introduces students to high school programs. High school mentors can also introduce middle grades students to options in their high schools.

CHALLENGES

Challenges for Middle Grades Transition

States, districts, and schools need to address several key challenges to support ninth grade transitions between middle and high school. According to the NHSC, these challenges include the lack of data and monitoring systems to determine why students are struggling and how to hold districts and schools accountable; addressing the needs of students ill-prepared for high school; personalizing the learning environment; building the capacity of district and school staff in low-performing schools; and creating connections among schools and communities, industry and business, and postsecondary institutions. Some state initiatives hold promise for addressing these challenges (Herlihy & Kennelly, 2007):

- The Data Quality Campaign, a national collaborative, developed guidelines for states that will help create systems to provide data to diagnose transition problems and hold schools and districts accountable for student outcomes related to transition to high school from middle grades.
- Virginia's Algebra Readiness Initiative provides an example of how states can address the diverse instructional needs of students coming into high school.
- Georgia has implemented an initiative to put a graduation coach in every public high school to work with students in grades eight through twelve who are at risk of dropping out.
- California's Assumption Program of Loans for Education is an example of a state response to building capacity in low-performing schools.
- The Career Guidance Model from South Carolina builds stronger connections between schools, business and industry, communities, and postsecondary institutions. The program assists students, parents, school districts, and communities to engage in career awareness at the elementary level, and career exploration in middle school and high school.

Challenges to Middle School Career Exploration and Transition

Middle grades counselors and teachers are challenged to maintain a delicate balance of helping students understand what career options exist and where their interests lie, without asking them to make decisions about specific careers too early. For this reason, helping students understand the transferability of skills is important.

This challenge is exacerbated because career exploration opportunities may be limited for middle grades students who face academic challenges. The focus on high-stakes testing and remediation takes time away from students' schedules, limiting opportunities for participation in career-

related courses or activities (CDE & CCCCO, 2008; WestEd, 2007). This challenge is particularly true for students of color, English learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, since they are disproportionately in schools with low test scores and are subsequently enrolled in extra periods of reading and math. Although providing middle and high school students with instruction that emphasizes the basic skills within a career-related context is more effective, it is a challenge for administrators to champion this type of instruction.

CONCLUSION

Improving middle grades education is central to effective implementation of multiple pathways at the high school level and requires vertical alignment between high schools and middle grades in both academic and career technical education. It is especially important to start career exploration activities in the middle grades to help students understand their future options and make wise selections of pathways. This is particularly important in a multiple pathways environment where pathways may begin as early as ninth grade. Middle grades counselors can play an important role in career exploration by promoting career-related activities in middle school classes and after-school programs.

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