

Challenges to Freshman Year Interventions in Philadelphia

The transition to high school is a critically important factor in determining whether a student drops out or graduates from high school. Recognizing this, Philadelphia has been at the forefront of the high school reform movement, pioneering a number of high school reform initiatives over the past several decades intended to improve its lowest-performing high schools in particular. The most well known of these, the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative in the 1990s and Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development High School Model from 1999-2005, were aimed at the whole school, and included focused interventions to assist ninth graders in the transition to high school.

Yet, over the past 20 years, what was once a coherent, multi-pronged high school reform strategy has eroded into a set of fragmented, weakly monitored individual interventions due to changes in District leadership—each with its own reform agenda—coupled with limited resources. Individual interventions frequently associated with these past reform initiatives (see **Table 1**) are still used across all types of District-managed high schools (referred to in this brief as District high schools), and many have also been adopted by charter high schools.¹ But their adoption has been uneven, with the weakest implementation typically found in large, nonselective neighborhood high schools.²

This policy brief draws on Research for Action’s (RFA) report, *Transition to High School: School “Choice” and Freshman Year in Philadelphia*, and focuses specifically

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Table 1

Five Interventions for Philadelphia Ninth Graders	
Intervention	Primary Purpose
Student orientations	Establish a single school culture
Ninth grade academies and ninth grade teacher teams	Build personalization and teacher collaboration
Double dosing of math and English	Accelerate learning/catch students up to grade level
Use of individual student data	Monitor academic progress and provide tutoring
Strategically assigning teachers to ninth grade	Improve instruction in ninth grade

¹ Charter schools are also District schools, but are not District-managed.

² In this policy brief, we refer to any high school with over 700 students as “large.” We use the term “nonselective” to refer to Philadelphia’s neighborhood high schools, and “selective” to refer to both special admission and citywide admission high schools. Charter schools, which admit students by lottery, are in an admission category of their own.

on the challenges in implementing freshman year interventions, especially in the neighborhood high schools that enroll a disproportionate share of students at risk of dropping out.³ Data collection occurred in 2007-08, and included interviews with central and regional District staff, and with school staff from 11 District schools and 4 charter schools; observations of freshman year orientations and regional principal meetings; and analysis of select questions on the District-wide teacher and student surveys.

Philadelphia’s Ninth Grade Interventions

Our research reveals that due to systemic inequities, large neighborhood high schools face particular challenges in ensuring that these interventions are effective. Below, we identify the barriers to effectiveness for each category of intervention, and provide recommendations for improving them.

A. Freshman Year Orientation—College Expectations Lower in Neighborhood High Schools

Building college awareness early is important for creating and sustaining high expectations, and freshmen orientations are an opportunity to do that. Yet college-going expectations varied by type of high school. At selective high schools, staff communicated an expectation that their students will graduate and go on to college. Charter schools were similar. Four of the five charter school orientations we observed also communicated optimistic and/or inspirational messages about high school graduation and college-going.⁴ In contrast, staff at most neighborhood high schools communicated more pessimistic messages to students about their chances of graduating from high school and going on to college. At one neighborhood high school, an administrator told all ninth graders at the student orientation assembly, “College is not for everyone.” Moreover, at some neighborhood high schools, students were given the message that their graduation from high school was not necessarily expected. Large high schools of all admissions types were also more likely to hold assembly-style orientations with the entire ninth grade class in one room, rather than the more interactive, small-group orientations in individual classrooms that we observed at most of the selective and charter high schools—although one neighborhood high school combined the two models.

B. The Ninth Grade Academies—Little Fidelity to the Model

By definition, a ninth grade academy has three basic components: a physically separate space in a school for ninth graders; a team of teachers who teach only ninth graders; and a ninth grade academy leader who also teaches ninth graders. This intervention was designed to improve personalization and foster teachers’ collective responsibility for student success in large, under-performing high schools. Research has shown that sustained imple-

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³ *Transition to High School: School “Choice” and Freshman Year in Philadelphia* is a comprehensive report by Research for Action detailing the results of a two-year study of District policies and practices relating to high school transition and 9th grade. For more about school types, admission categories, high school selection, and ninth grade interventions, please refer to the full report.

⁴ Principals were interviewed at four charter schools. Orientations were observed at five charter schools.

mentation of the ninth grade academy structure in a large urban high school (three years or longer) correlates with improved student outcomes, including better attendance and tenth grade promotion rates as well as reduced dropout rates.⁵ Yet there is little fidelity to this model in the high schools we studied, due primarily to three major issues:

Issue 1: Variation in Commitment to Model Among Principals.

District principals have been free to experiment with this model, and all the large high schools (both neighborhood and citywide admission) in our study have done so in some form,⁶ experimenting for a period of time with either a ninth grade academy model, small learning communities, or a combination of both. However, with the exception of one neighborhood high school which continued to operate the ninth grade academy model it began under Talent Development, principals discontinued the ninth grade academy model or did not implement it fully. For example, one school had a ninth grade teacher team, but did not have a separate ninth grade academy space, nor an academy leader. At another school where the principal claimed to have a ninth grade academy, the ninth grade academy coordinator did not teach any ninth grade students. This lack of consistent implementation may also be due in part to disagreement among school administrators about whether ninth grade academies help or hinder students' success.

Issue 2. Instability in Ninth Grade Teacher Assignments in Neighborhood Schools Hamper Academy Model

Schools that are implementing ninth grade academies report that teachers assigned to them are better able to identify struggling students—and to intervene before a “cycle of failure” develops—if they meet regularly in ninth grade teacher teams led by a ninth grade academy coordinator. Yet in neighborhood high schools, ninth grade teacher assignments often shift during the first several months of school due to fluctuating enrollments, making it difficult for neighborhood high schools in particular to establish effective ninth grade teaching teams.⁷ As a result, increasing the level of personalization between teachers and students in these schools—a critical goal of the academy model—is difficult to achieve.

Issue 3. Small Learning Communities: Difficulties Assigning Students to Areas of Interest

While a number of administrators rejected the concept of a ninth grade academy, some embraced a variation of this model: small learning communities (SLCs). A small learning community is a “school-within-a-school” with a theme and its own teacher team. Allowing students to choose a theme of

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⁵ Kemple, J. J., Herlihy, C. M. & Smith, T. J. (2005). *Making progress toward graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High school Model*. New York: MDRC; Kerr, K. A. & Legters, N. E. (2004). Preventing dropout: Use and impact of organizational reforms designed to ease the transition to high school. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*, (pp. 221-242). Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

⁶ We are not aware of any special admission high schools adopting a ninth grade academy model, as this intervention was designed specifically for high schools with significant numbers of struggling students. Although citywide high schools are more selective than neighborhood high schools, citywide high schools also serve significant numbers of students who are performing below grade level.

⁷ Please refer to Research for Action's companion Policy Brief, Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia (January 2010) for more on this topic.

interest may indeed increase students' sense of agency in their schooling. However, staff at citywide and neighborhood schools with themed SLCs reported that they were often forced to assign students to particular themed academies based upon available space rather than student preferences. Thus, while themed SLCs are intended to build student engagement, they sometimes increase student frustration by assigning students to topic areas of little interest to them. Moving the completion of the high school selection process from May to March of every year might help to ameliorate this problem by enabling all schools to better place students in SLCs that meet one of their interests.

C. Double Dosing of Math and English—In Need of Assessment

Teachers assigned to the double-dosed classes were not given professional development in how to effectively use the 80-90 minute block of time.

Given that the typical Philadelphia ninth grader enters high school with math and English skills below grade level, the School District of Philadelphia implemented double-dosed ninth grade math and English classes for students who were below grade level in these subjects. Double-dose classes are regular ninth grade courses in math or English, coupled with a remedial-level class in the same subject. The intended goal of double dosing is to accelerate learning—to increase course passage rates in English I and Algebra I and thereby help students “catch up” to ninth grade reading and math levels. In this intervention model, every ninth grader assigned to a double dose of math and/or English takes both the grade-level course and the remedial-level course, back-to-back throughout the school year.

“Double dosed” courses were scaled up District-wide in 2007-08. In addition, three of the four charter high schools in our sample were providing double dosing in math and English to their ninth graders, and one charter provided it to eleventh graders as well. Because the non-selective neighborhood high schools enroll the most low-performing students, the burden of offering these classes lies disproportionately on these schools. Yet many District administrators, as well as principals and teachers, gave negative reviews of double dosing. A variety of limitations in the implementation of this intervention contribute to these views. Specifically:

- Teachers assigned to the double-dosed classes were not given professional development in how to effectively use the 80-90 minute block of time.
- In some cases, students were mismatched with the courses they really needed for merely logistical reasons.
- Large class size was a hindrance. One central office staff person commented, “We didn’t roster kids properly, we rostered full class sizes. Really, the program can only handle 18-20 kids, so it’s a cost issue.”
- The District did not collect, analyze, and make public any data to show whether this intervention was improving ninth grade academic outcomes.

Notably, charter school administrators were less negative about the efficacy of double dosing. This may be because they had the autonomy to choose this model; there is also some evidence that they were able to better plan and execute double dosing.

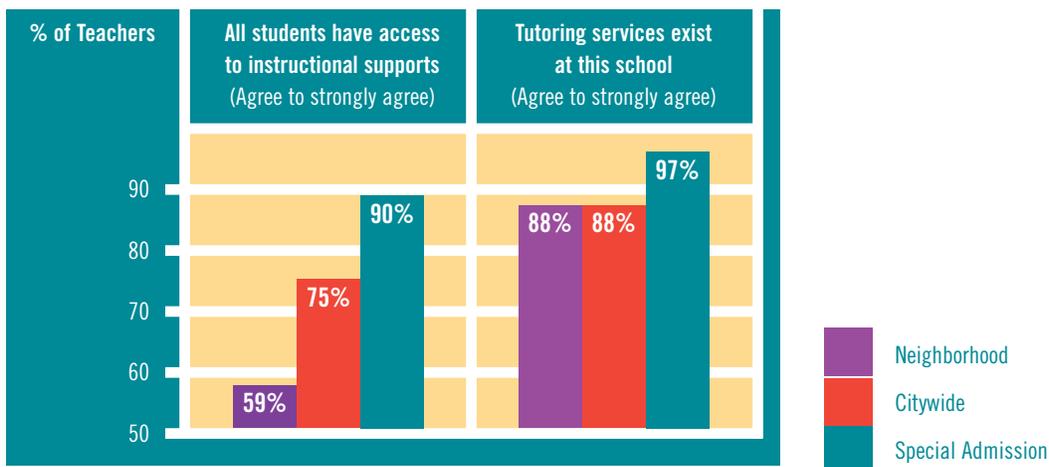
D. A Disconnect between Student Data and Supports

Across the schools in our sample, administrators recognized the value of using student performance data as a tool to: (1) place students in appropriate courses, and (2) provide extra supports to ninth grade students who are struggling. Yet schools' capacity to use data effectively varied by category for a number of reasons. First, selective admission high schools required applicants to provide data in the application process, and similarly, most charter schools collected data well before the beginning of the school year. This meant that these schools were able to prepare for their entering freshman classes, which was a challenge for neighborhood high schools because they often did not know who would be coming through their door in September until late into the summer, or even the fall.

Second, neighborhood, and to some extent citywide admission high schools, also encountered more difficulty in monitoring academic and attendance data, and providing robust tutoring services. **Table 2** shows, for example, that teachers in these high schools perceive far less accessibility to instructional and tutoring supports for struggling students than do their colleagues in special admission schools. Two factors were responsible for this. To begin, a high student-to-counselor ratio hampered the ability of neighborhood and citywide admission high schools to closely monitor student data and to respond in a timely fashion with appropriate interventions when freshmen were excessively absent or falling behind. This is especially alarming for neighborhood high schools, where according to District data, over half of first-time ninth graders miss 20 or more days of school. And then, despite the availability of tutoring services in most schools, rarely were they mandatory or provided by a teacher or trained tutor whose services were

Schools' capacity to use data effectively varied by category.

Table 2 Teacher Perceptions of Academic Supports for Students



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Teacher Survey
 N=1,886 high school teachers for first item
 N=1,753 high school teachers for second item

closely coordinated with the classroom teacher.⁸ Although this was also true at selective schools, it worked to the particular disadvantage of students in neighborhood high schools, because they serve students with the greatest academic needs. Only one school in our sample—a charter school—implemented both practices by mandating tutoring after school, taught by the classroom teacher, for all students not performing at grade level.

E. Assigning, Training, and Retaining Strong Ninth Grade Teachers: The Challenges

The academic and social challenges that students face in the transition to high school makes teaching effectiveness a particularly salient ninth grade issue.

Although all students at every grade level need access to high-quality instruction, the academic and social challenges that students face in the transition to high school makes teaching effectiveness a particularly salient ninth grade issue. In Philadelphia, high schools of all types have struggled to ensure that strong teachers are placed and retained in ninth grade, although nonselective neighborhood high schools face the most difficulties. Specific challenges include:

- **Teacher placement is typically determined by seniority and teacher preference.**
Unless administrators deviate from this tradition, it can be difficult to place strong teachers in ninth grade regardless of school type. Ninth grade is often considered a particularly undesirable assignment because typically one-third of ninth graders are repeating the grade. The highest rate of ninth grade retention occurs in the District’s neighborhood high schools, where the average ninth grader enters high school with academic skills several years below grade level.⁹ Not surprisingly, data from the 2007-08 District teacher survey reveal that neighborhood high schools have the least experienced teachers, with lower percentages of teachers with at least four years teaching experience than at all other types of schools.¹⁰
- **Less experienced teachers are more likely to be assigned to ninth grade—and are more likely to leave.**
As one leader at a neighborhood high school pointed out, “We have a lot of turnover because [the teachers] are not prepared and leave. So the ninth graders have a lot of subs.”
- **Competing District priorities.**
Because statewide assessment tests are administered in eleventh grade, the District and its high schools are under pressure to assign the most effective teachers to this grade, rather than to ninth grade. As one central office staff member observed, “When push came to shove, if schools needed teachers in what they saw as key academic positions where kids are tested, then teachers who signed up for ninth were moved to eleventh.”

⁸ See Robinson, S., Stempel, A., & Mcee, I. (2005). *Gaining traction, gaining ground: How some high schools accelerate learning for struggling students*. Washington, DC: Education Trust. For the importance of tutoring being mandated and provided by a teacher or trained tutor, see: Wasik, B. A. (2008). Using volunteers as reading tutors: Guidelines for successful practices. *Reading Teacher*, 51, 562-570.

⁹ Neild, R. C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). An extreme degree of difficulty: The educational demographics of urban neighborhood high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11(2), 123-141.

¹⁰ For more on these data, see RFA’s companion Policy Brief: *Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia* (2010), p.6.

Recommendations

Philadelphia made an early investment in high school reforms designed to address the challenges of large neighborhood high schools. These reforms included a comprehensive range of interventions designed to support ninth grade students. Despite this early commitment to ease the transition to high school, well over a decade later we found that freshman year interventions were frequently not implemented in ways that maximized their effectiveness. While this was somewhat true across all types of schools, it was especially true in neighborhood high schools.

In order to remedy this situation, **we recommend that the District build and sustain a strategic focus on Freshman Year Interventions that commits to providing the resources, incentives, and professional development needed to consistently support effective practices—particularly in neighborhood high schools.**

Specifically, the District needs to:

1. Set and Communicate High Expectations for All Ninth Graders.

All entering high school students should receive a clear and consistent message that they are expected to stay in high school, be successful, graduate, and go to college. Ninth grade orientations are an opportunity for adults to provide inspiration and communicate these messages—messages that should be reinforced throughout the high school experience. Principals should set the tone of high expectations, and all adults in high schools, including those who conduct ninth grade orientations, should be provided with the professional development needed to ensure they communicate these messages effectively and consistently. At least a portion of ninth grade orientation should be conducted in small groups so that students will feel more comfortable asking questions and so students can begin to get to know their classmates and teachers. In orientation, students should be told specifically what courses they must successfully complete in order to pass ninth grade.

2. Ensure that All Students Receive the Academic Supports Needed to Fulfill High Expectations.

Right now, Philadelphia high schools vary widely in the degree to which they deliver academic supports, and students who need them the most—those in neighborhood high schools—receive the least consistent and effective supports. If students are to meet high expectations, a consistent, District-wide strategy of delivering academic supports should be adopted to ensure that neighborhood high schools in particular provide their students with the tools they need to succeed.

3. Commit to Evidence-Driven Decisions on Intervention Strategies.

The recent history of the School District of Philadelphia is marked with frequent changes in its approach to addressing the challenges inherent in the ninth grade transition to high school. As a result, we know little about which interventions work best with which students, in which schools, under which conditions. To assess the value of interventions, they must be sustained long enough to (a) recognize and correct implementation issues, and (b) assess them for effectiveness. School staff, along with regional and central office administrators, need to be able to analyze their experience with the interventions and data about their effect on student outcomes in order to make improvements to them and ultimately ascertain their value. The District could further support these efforts by developing guidelines for “best practices” on how to implement particular interventions to maximize student success.

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4. Strengthen and Support Ninth Grade Teachers.

Efforts to improve the ninth grade need to include incentives to attract and retain effective teachers in the critical ninth grade year. In addition, these teachers need to receive high-quality professional development and support to ensure that they are equipped to implement ninth grade interventions effectively. These supports should also include timely access to data and assessments of incoming ninth grade students in key academic subjects.

Meeting the Challenges

The District is well-positioned to take action to address these challenges. It has a deep and rich history of high school reform to draw on, including experience in efforts to improve the critical freshman year transition to high school. It has many school reform partners with whom it can work to support the process of change. The District also has unprecedented resources from several federal grants to plan and implement reforms at neighborhood schools. Meeting these challenges will go a long way to making a difference in the critical transition to high school, particularly in neighborhood high schools. Yet focusing on individual school capacity alone is not sufficient to bring about the level of change desired. The kind of school-level change recommended in this policy brief must be accompanied by systemic changes as well—changes that address the disadvantages that nonselective neighborhood schools experience within Philadelphia’s tiered high school system.¹² It is time for Philadelphia to reclaim its leadership in developing and implementing reforms to improve its neighborhood high schools, including the critical freshman year transition. Other cities have taken bold steps to do so, and Philadelphia must as well.

¹² See RFA’s Policy Brief, *Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia*, for more on the consequences of Philadelphia’s tiered system of high schools.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief draws on a larger RFA study, *The Transition to High School: School “Choice” and Freshman Year in Philadelphia*. The final report is available for free on the RFA website—www.researchforaction.org—or in hard copy, \$5 per copy shipping and handling. It is part of a series of studies conducted by RFA on high school reform in Philadelphia. This brief and *Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia* are available for free on the RFA website.

We want to thank all the central office, regional and school leaders who allowed us to interview them and observe their schools. We also want to express our appreciation to the School District of Philadelphia’s accountability and research offices for providing us with District data sets important to this study. This research was made possible through a grant from the William Penn Foundation.

Three anonymous external reviewers contributed significantly to refining and clarifying the findings in the full report. The authors alone, however, are responsible for any shortcomings in either publication.
