



# Summer Transitions

BRIDGES TO HIGH SCHOOL, CONNECTIONS FOR LIFE



## Summer Strategies for Successful Transitions from Middle to High School

**Gene Bottoms has been studying what works, as well as what doesn't, in the nation's high schools for more than 20 years.**

As director of the High Schools That Work initiative at the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Bottoms has been involved in efforts at more than 1,000 secondary schools in 30 states to improve programs for college and career-bound students. The highly-regarded SREB initiative is guided by the notion that most students can master rigorous academic and career/technical studies if school leaders and teachers create an environment that motivates students to make the effort to succeed.

The following best practices have grown out of more than 10 years work looking at how to improve transitions from middle grades to high school. Observations are based on a range of school and district efforts to use the summer to get more students ready for challenging high school studies in grade nine, and have resulted in the identification of several critical actions necessary for success.



### Invest in the Planning Process

Invest in the planning process by having the best teachers from the sending middle grades schools and the receiving high schools, along with district leaders, parents, and school principals, plan different types of summer learning experiences that can prepare students who have deficits, particularly in reading and mathematics, to succeed in grade nine. Too often, too little planning is done before launching a non-traditional summer school learning experience for students. Schools and districts that do it well have the planning team study effective practices that others have used. They work on planning learning experiences beyond the test-prep, drill-sheet approach to instruction. They spend considerable time planning learning experiences that will engage students in understanding their own interests, goals, and aspirations and learning activities that will motivate students to make the effort to prepare for high school studies. Some of the most successful programs provide learning experiences that engage students in advancing their reading, writing, and speaking skills through authentic problems and projects. Taking time to review the literature, study

successful programs, and plan learning experiences that differ from what students had during their last year in middle grades schools can make a difference in preparing students for high school.



## Provide an Accelerated Curriculum

Provide an accelerated curriculum, not a remedial curriculum and instructional approach. The most successful summer experiences make a commitment to teach fewer standards, but to teach these standards more deeply and to grade level. They use multiple instructional strategies to enable students to master the reading, writing, and mathematics standards that will prepare them to succeed in ninth-grade English and Algebra I. These schools schedule students for an hour of intensive reading and writing instruction strategies for learning in all subjects and emphasize the skills needed to read and interpret textbook materials and other types of materials effectively in all high school courses.

An effective summer program combines direct mathematics instruction with real-world problems and hands-on enabling learning activities, all aimed at advancing students' reasoning skills, procedural skills, and understanding of mathematics. Such instruction also builds students' confidence in their ability to learn mathematics. Effective programs provide at least one hour of engaging mathematics instruction each day, making use of hands-on learning activities, technology and group-learning experiences, the language of mathematics, and a range of authentic problems and projects. They do this in a more engaging, competitive atmosphere.



## Enable Educators to Engage Youth in 4 Ways

When planning summer learning experiences, make a purposeful effort to assist those who are going to teach in the program to engage students in at least four ways: intellectually, emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. There must be a strong effort to engage students intellectually in completing challenging assignments. Teachers should convey to students that they have confidence in the student and believe they can master more complex assignments. Effective programs often use tools such as Webb's Depth of Knowledge to plan assignments that are intellectually demanding.

The program also needs to engage students emotionally by providing assignments that relate to students' lives, goals, interests and special talents. Reading, mathematics and writing assignments should seek to connect the students' learning to their goals and interests as a way to get students to be passionate about learning and to motivate them to make the extra effort. The intent is to help students see the importance of high school to their future and build their confidence that, with smart effort, they too can succeed.

Successful summer school programs also engage students behaviorally in using the habits of successful students—study skills, time management, effective literacy strategies, note-taking skills and completing work on time and of quality. All of this is aimed at helping students acquire and apply the tools needed to become more successful learners. Many of the students who have fallen behind in middle grades schools never acquired effective study skills or core habits of successful students.

Summer learning experiences also should be designed to engage students socially in learning by building peer connections and teaching students how to support and learn from each other. The intent is to use peer pressure to help students master the materials and to learn how to help each other.

Schools need to help summer school teachers understand that all students—including students who struggled in the middle grades—can in fact complete intellectually demanding assignments when we are willing to work with them to help them acquire the underlying skills and concepts, and connect learning to students' interests. The opportunity to complete challenging work builds students' confidence and belief that they can succeed.



### **Engage a Cross-disciplinary Team that Includes Career and Technical Teachers**

Engage a cross-disciplinary team of teachers in planning and facilitating the learning. The team will include mathematics teachers and language arts/reading teachers. But some of the most successful summer programs that we have seen include career/technical teachers who can assist in linking the reading and mathematics content to authentic, hands-on projects. Career/technical teachers can engage students in using technology to process information and to collect, organize and analyze data. Many high-needs middle grades students simply have not had enough opportunities to apply and understand technology.



### **Teach the Habits of Success**

Take time to teach students the habits of success—study skills, time management, relationship skills, goal setting, literacy, and mathematics skills. Create assignments that require students to use the habits of success in completing quality work.

Four days per week, at least 45 minutes should be devoted to teaching the core habits of success. This time also can be used to allow students to meet with their advisers to learn about the core habits of success and to set career and educational goals. Students should complete an interest survey and receive assistance to interpret the results. Schools also should give students aptitude tests and learning style tests so that they can

gain some insight into their unique talents and how they best learn. Take the time to help students understand the language they can use to think about their special talents and abilities.

As part of the core habits of success and career and educational planning class, the summer program should devote a half day each week to a field trip to a work setting, college or technical school to expose students to a variety of postsecondary options. Students should plan questions ahead of the trips to collect specific information from each field trip and then keep an electronic portfolio of information gained. At the end of the program, they can use this information to restate or adjust their own goals and the steps they will take to achieve those goals.



### **Focus on the Culture and Learning Environment**

Establish a culture of respect, fun and enthusiasm for learning. Make the summer learning experience different from traditional school. Effective programs provide an engaging and fun learning environment in which students are expected to complete quality work and teachers are expected to support them.

Include a reading lab and a mathematics lab in the schedule each day. One day, the reading lab may teach students how to read expository materials such as the materials they will find in their science class the coming year. Another day, the lab may deal with how to read mathematics problems and how to frame a solution verbally. It may involve students in reading technical materials to complete a project. Regardless of the specific topics covered, the lab needs to engage students in reading different kinds of expository materials for different classes they might have in high school and learning how to approach a variety of reading tasks. As a part of that lab, students will keep a portfolio of the skills they have acquired and insights they have gained about the materials they read.

Another 45-minute lab might involve students in using mathematics to complete authentic projects. Those who plan the summer experience should plan a series of engaging authentic projects that require students to use mathematics in real-world contexts. The lab should include short formative assessments that measure whether students have mastered the mathematics that was taught in the direct instruction class and the mathematics used in the lab. Results of these assessments will provide teachers with a starting point for the next day and how to plan relearning opportunities. This will help teachers maximize learning during the short summer program.



### **Seek Parents' Commitment and Support**

Involve parents by visiting and talking with the parents of every student who should enroll in summer school. Parents need to understand the benefits of participating in summer program and what they can do to support the effort. Help them understand that the program will differ from traditional classes and will address specific reading and mathematics skills that are crucial for success in high school. Gain their commitment to help the student succeed in the program and to support his or her participation. Provide an opportunity one evening during the summer program for parents to come and see the work that their son or daughter has completed.



### **Use Summer to Develop Lead Teachers and Aspiring Principals**

Use the summer program to provide staff development for promising teachers and aspiring school leaders. Choose teachers who are master teachers and pair them with a promising teacher to provide an opportunity to shadow or be mentored by a master teacher.

Assign a school leader, preferably a principal or assistant principal who is engaged in instruction, to work with the planning committee in planning the summer

experience, reviewing what happens each day, and identifying the instructional process and corrective actions that need to be taken. Pair that principal with aspiring principals who can use this as an opportunity to learn more about how to work with faculty in both planning and delivering quality, non-traditional learning experiences that can advance student achievement.



### **Integrate Technology into Teaching and Learning**

Plan at least a four-week, six-hour per day program that provides a variety of learning experiences. It should be viewed as fast paced and engaging. One of the elements should be a 45-minute learning experience with technology that is an extension of their mathematics and reading instruction. Offer students the opportunity to learn how to create charts and graphs with the computer, and prepare spreadsheets and perform other types of data analysis. It should also provide an opportunity for students to keep electronic portfolios on things they have read, to summarize in their own words what they have learned each day, and to note study skills they have acquired and practiced. It is a way for the students to document new insights they have gained about themselves, their interests, aptitudes, and goals, while experiencing new technology.



### **Use Summer Observations to Inform School Practices**

Assign an observation team composed of seventh-, eighth- and ninth-grade teachers and school leaders to study the lessons being learned. Use these lessons to improve school and classroom practices in grades seven, eight and nine so that more students leave grade eight ready for high school studies and fewer students fail the ninth grade. Districts and schools need to realize that a summer four-week experience is not going to solve the problem, but the effective practices that make the program successful can be incorporated into

## A Conversation with Gene Bottoms



*Gene Bottoms, senior vice president of SREB, provides leadership to the nation's largest reform effort to improve high schools, middle grades schools, and share-time technical centers. His work at SREB has focused on helping states, districts and schools understand the strategies needed to prepare more students for college and careers.*

*Gene's 40-plus years in education have focused on one theme: How can we improve students' educational experiences? He has served as a teacher, a school principal, and a leader in the Georgia Department of Education. As the executive director of the American Vocational Association (now ACTE), he worked with the U.S. Congress to better connect academics and career/technical education through the legislation now known as the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act.*

middle grades instruction so that fewer students need a summer program to prepare for high school. The summer school should be viewed as a lab experience to try out new ideas and to break away from the boring instruction that is currently being provided to too many students. It should lead to redesigning the learning experiences in grades seven and eight as well as a major redesign in the ninth-grade learning experience. It should help high schools gain new insights about how to assist students to plan a balanced program of study that connects their language arts/reading and mathematics classes to authentic problems and projects. The long-term objective is to reduce the number of students who reach the end of grade eight unprepared for high school and to reduce the number of students who fail in grade nine.

### **About the Summer Transitions Project**

*In late 2009, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Summer Learning Association launched a one-year initiative to study and report on quality summer learning programs that help students in high-poverty communities accelerate learning and successfully transition to high school. At the local level, this initiative supports three school—community partnerships in planning to enhance and expand innovative programs aligned to larger school reform efforts. At the national level, the initiative seeks to increase awareness about innovative models and effective practices in summer learning 8th/9th grade transition programs.*

### **About the National Summer Learning Association**

*Our mission is to connect and equip schools and community organizations to deliver quality summer learning programs to our nation's youth to help close the achievement gap and support healthy development. The organization serves as a network hub for thousands of summer learning program providers and stakeholders across the country, providing tools, resources, and expertise to improve program quality, generate support, and increase youth access and participation.*