



Redesigning the Ninth-Grade Experience

Reduce Failure, Improve Achievement and Increase High School Graduation Rates

by Gene Bottoms

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Introduction: Failure in the Ninth Grade

The ninth-grade year is a “make or break” time for many students. Students’ ninth-grade experiences can determine whether they will continue in high school studies with a plan that will prepare them for college and careers, or will become disengaged with school and fail to prepare for their future. Despite the importance of this year for students, the failure rate in grade nine remains higher than the rate in any other grade level. Students are failing to connect high school studies to their future goals; and states, districts and schools are failing to provide meaningful experiences to engage students in succeeding.

In a recent study, 45 percent of dropouts reported that they entered high school unprepared for rigorous studies.¹ **Students who are unprepared for high school and fail in the ninth grade are far less likely to graduate.** When students see that they will need to repeat ninth-grade courses, many simply do not return the following year; and many of those who do return do not graduate. Too many students find no reason to come to school, no excitement in learning, no goal for future work or studies, and no solid connection to an adult adviser or mentor. In such an environment, even students who enter high school on grade level can become disengaged.

Nationally, at least 25 percent of students fail to complete high school,² and the data are more concerning for specific student groups: In 2001, the graduation rate for black students was 50 percent (43 percent for males and 56 percent for female students); the rate for Hispanic students was 53 percent; and in the 26 states that report on low-income students, the graduation rate was seven percentage points below the overall average.³

Each high school dropout costs a state between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per year.⁴ Costs to these individuals who drop out are equally detrimental. After age 25, dropouts lose \$10,000 (2005 dollars) each year in income. In fact, dropouts have earned about one-third less than high school graduates for the last 25 years. These costs are too high to continue neglecting this crisis.

This report outlines various steps state, district and school leaders can take to redesign a more effective ninth-grade experience that will engage students in high school success. **Improving student achievement in the ninth grade can lead to improved graduation rates and improved readiness for college and careers.** The concepts and recommendations in this report do not just apply to high school administrators and teachers. District and middle grades leaders can proactively contribute to the redesign process, especially to reach at-risk seventh- and eighth-graders who are not yet prepared for high school. Such a collaborative redesign effort will result in more students entering the ninth grade prepared to succeed.

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Conditions for an Effective Ninth-Grade Design

Going through the redesign process in name only will not change student achievement. Rather, schools must commit time, resources and effort to improve the quality of instruction and provide the support students need to succeed. Regardless of the form and structure used in redesign, those schools that see better results adhere to a set of conditions to improve student achievement and graduation rates.

Early Orientation and Preparation in the Middle Grades

- Orient students to high school life, beginning in the middle grades and continuing into the early months of the ninth grade.
- Create an extra time program in grades seven and eight and a summer bridge program to bring at-risk students up to grade level before entering the ninth grade.

Ninth-Grade Academy

- Organize teachers into a ninth-grade academy with heterogeneous students. No ninth-grade academy should have only at-risk students. Every academy should have a full range of students.
- Appoint one instructional leader to assist the ninth-grade teams in practicing instructional planning, examining the level of teacher assignments and student work, and getting common agreements on end-of-grading-period exams and rubrics.
- Provide teachers with planning time at least weekly so they can work together to plan lessons and identify the unique needs of students.
- Ensure the student-to-teacher ratio in the ninth grade is no higher (and preferably lower) than any other grade level in high school.
- Encourage the best teachers to teach ninth-grade courses and become teacher leaders in planning a positive learning experience for students.

Specialized Ninth-Grade Courses

- Create a standards-based curriculum designed particularly to get more students to grade-level standards in English and mathematics.
- Develop career exploratory courses that engage students in authentic projects and expose them to a variety of career and educational opportunities.
- Schedule students into educational and career guidance groups so teachers can regularly follow up on students' progress.
- Design classroom activities to help students work together to complete challenging assignments.
- Give students choices to excel in meaningful learning activities.

Guidance, Advisement and Support

- Provide adult mentors and advisers for incoming ninth-graders.
- Involve parents in seeing firsthand what their children are achieving in school and in helping their children formulate career and educational goals and a plan for achieving those goals.
- Remind students that all teachers and administrators believe they are ready to take on the challenge of high school studies and are willing to help them meet that challenge.
- Maintain the focus on high standards and provide the extra help in and out of class to help students achieve grade-level standards.

No-Zero Policy

- Require students to redo substandard work to meet grade-level standards.

Identifying the Need for Redesign

Many schools may assume that their ninth-grade program is fine the way it is. Before making this judgment, school leaders should ask themselves:

- Is the percentage of any ninth-grade student group performing below grade-level standards less than 10 percent?
- Do a high percentage of ninth-graders practice good study skills, read and comprehend text, and know how to make the effort needed to complete challenging work?
- Are all ninth-grade students linked to an adult mentor in school? Have all ninth-graders set post high school goals and planned with their parents or guardians a program of study for achieving those goals?
- Do more than 90 percent of students complete college-preparatory English and Algebra I by the end of ninth grade?
- Do students have an opportunity to explore career and educational options in the ninth grade?
- Do ninth-grade students participate in authentic, project-based learning activities that require them to apply academic knowledge and skills?
- Are at least 90 percent of ninth-graders enrolled as 12th-graders three years later?
- Do less than 10 percent of high school graduates place into developmental or remedial courses upon entering college?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” school leadership needs to address problems in the ninth grade to improve student achievement and graduation rates.

The Basis for Redesign: Effort and Engagement Lead to Success

In an era of rising workplace requirements, a high school education is more important than ever before. Yet, too many students do not graduate from high school, and many who do graduate lack preparation for further study or a career. *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* is based on the belief that if students put forth the necessary effort, they can achieve at higher levels and succeed in high school and beyond.

Students cannot be forced to exert the effort to succeed; they must be inspired to do so. Inspiration may come from a personal ambition, but for a rising number of students, this inspiration must come from the school. Schools have an obligation to help students improve their study habits and to allow students to explore multiple areas of interest for their own goals. Students can improve their achievement when the desired performance is clearly outlined, the supportive materials and training have been provided, and a connection to their future has been established. The school’s actions can inspire students to put forth the effort to succeed.

- Expand opportunities to learn a rigorous academic core taught in ways that enable students to see the usefulness of what they have been asked to learn.
- Create supportive relationships between incoming students and adults that provide students with the extra help needed to meet challenging course standards and help students make the transition from middle grades to high school.
- Provide designated space and faculty for ninth-graders.
- Involve teacher-advisers and parents in helping students to set postsecondary goals and take the right combination of academic and career/technical courses to prepare for further study and a career.

- Support teachers' emphasis on what and how they teach by providing common planning time and professional development to increase student motivation. Involve teacher-advisers and parents in helping students set postsecondary goals and take the right combination of academic and career/technical courses to prepare for further study and a career.
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Students will be inspired to make the effort to succeed when they have:

- goals and purposes for their education.
- personal ambition developed through exploring career and educational options.
- personal responsibility or a sense of their own value from the relationships developed with adults at their school through the teacher-adviser program.
- clearly defined standards for high-quality work and adequate support to achieve these standards.
- excitement in the learning process and an understanding of the relevance of curricular content and skills to their future.

Goals for a Redesigned Ninth-Grade Experience

The twin goals of ninth-grade redesign are to decrease ninth-grade failure rates to less than 5 percent and increase the percentage of students graduating on time to 90 percent. To do this, schools must arrange experiences so, by the end of grade nine, most students:

- complete college-preparatory English and Algebra I.
- declare a goal beyond high school that they can visualize and commit to achieve.
- establish a connection with an adult who will assist and support them throughout high school.
- develop effective study, relationship and time management skills and other habits of success.
- develop an understanding that, through smart effort, they can improve their achievement.

Components of an Effective Ninth-Grade Experience

The components discussed in this report will help schools create conditions that lead to lower failure rates and higher graduation rates. Surveys of teachers in schools with similar student demographics have found several differences in practices between high-graduation and low-graduation schools. Teachers from high schools with higher graduation rates are more likely to report implementing these components:

- Work with middle grades schools to orient students to high school life.
- Provide a summer bridge program for students.
- Establish a ninth-grade academy in which at-risk students take double periods of English and mathematics.
- Enroll students in career exploratory courses.
- Participate in a teacher-adviser program to help students receive extra help and set career and educational goals.

The components described in this report have made a difference at many *HSTW* schools and can be adapted to fit a wide range of schools and students. They should be viewed as a system of improvement rather than a menu from which schools can choose one or two strategies.

Early Orientation and Preparation in the Middle Grades

An orientation program for middle grades students, parents, teachers and leaders can familiarize them with high school expectations so they know how to prepare for the ninth grade. This orientation should begin with meetings between high school and middle grades teachers at least yearly to discuss necessary study skills and to define what students should know and be able to do upon entering high school.

Aligning the middle grades core academic curriculum, classroom assignments and assessments to high school readiness standards will result in more students being prepared for challenging college-preparatory courses. High school teachers can work with middle grades teachers to define the quality and level of work expected of students meeting grade-level standards. Middle grades faculty can provide the extra time and support some students will need to meet high school readiness standards. Completing true grade-level assignments can lead to a sense of competence, which impacts students' willingness to try hard and persist to solve complex, complicated problems. This sense of competence is an essential quality for high school success and can be developed by middle grades teachers who offer support and encouragement to students and refuse to accept low-quality work.

Orientation to high school continues with regular messages to and meetings with parents and students. Parents need to understand the vital role the ninth-grade year plays in preparing students for postsecondary studies and careers. The quantity and quality of work necessary and the number and names of courses to be taken should be delineated for parents through several communications.

Middle grades students need orientation to high school to correct misinformation they've received and alleviate their fear of high school. They benefit from interactions with current students who can serve as role models and show them how to succeed in high school. Many high schools send ninth-grade students to speak to eighth-graders about what to expect in high school. Some schools arrange for each eighth-grader to shadow a high school student for all or part of a day.

Summer Bridge Program

A summer bridge program differs from an orientation in that it addresses specific academic deficits rather than providing a general orientation to high school. It is usually a four- to six-week experience that may be mandatory for low-achieving eighth-graders identified by statewide testing, course grades or behaviors predictive of dropping out (e.g., absenteeism). The intent of the summer bridge program is to address academic deficits, particularly in language arts, reading and mathematics; assist students in acquiring the coping, study, relationship and time management skills necessary for success in high school; and introduce them to the important role of high school in achieving their goals.

The best eighth- and ninth-grade English/language arts/reading and mathematics teachers — those who have brought low-achieving, at-risk students up to standards — should be utilized in the summer bridge program. These teachers will need time to plan standards-based units and activities using research-based instructional strategies, cooperative learning, literacy strategies, study skills, real-world problems, technology and meaningful assignments to help students master standards at the level necessary to succeed in high school. Planning begins with an analysis of students' specific skills deficits. The curriculum and instruction are then designed to address mathematics and reading deficits, study skills and career exploration. Teachers new to the school can attend planning and delivery of lessons as an introduction to the school and its students.

Henry W. Grady High School: Attitudes Toward Learning

Henry W. Grady High School in Georgia, long involved with *HSTW* reforms, provides a summer program for entering ninth-graders who are identified by parents, teachers or counselors as needing extra help. The program, Attitudes Toward Learning (ATL), reviews English and mathematics academic skills, strengthens study skills and provides team-building activities. Approximately 100 students participate in the week-long program each summer.

<http://www.gradyhighschool.org>

A Model Schedule

One schedule for a six-hour instructional day includes one hour of reading and writing instruction followed by a 45-minute lab, and one hour of mathematics followed by a 45-minute mathematics lab. On Mondays through Thursdays, the remaining two and one-half hours are divided into three segments: 45 minutes for developing study skills; 45 minutes in the computer lab, where students complete assignments that extend their reading and mathematics course work while learning to use a variety of software that will enhance their overall high school studies; and 45 minutes in a guidance and career advisement program. On Fridays, students participate in field trips and other experiences to see how academic knowledge and skills are used in careers. Study skills and team work are integrated as strategies into all classes.

POLYTECH High School: Summer School Success

For more than 10 years, POLYTECH High School in Delaware has run a four- to five-week summer program to help students meet standards for college-preparatory English and Algebra I. Although no longer state-mandated, the program is strongly recommended to special needs students and any other eighth-grade students who score 1 (“well below standards”) or 2 (“below standards”) in reading or mathematics on the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP). Most of the 30 to 50 students who attend have special needs.

The instructional approach is integrated. Career/technical teachers teach the mathematics class with more hands-on, real-world problems to provide “a completely different approach for students to learn mathematics,” according to the principal. The remedial classes in English/reading and mathematics are offered in two-hour blocks and transportation is provided. At the end of the program, students retake the DSTP. Generally, at least 50 percent of students achieve a passing score. In 2006, 90 percent of participants passed the reading test. Those who do not pass enroll in a semester-long catch-up course their freshman year.

<http://www.polytech.k12.de.us/hs>

Ninth-Grade Academy

A ninth-grade academy places students in small learning communities where they can adjust to the challenges of high school. Schools should allocate resources in the form of quality teachers and separate facilities to ensure the success of the academy. In such academies, teams of academic and career/technical teachers work together with about 150 students. **The student-to-teacher ratio should be no higher than in other grade levels. Each team's leader should be one of the best teachers in the school** — an enthusiastic, exemplary teacher with a history of getting at-risk students to achieve at high levels and a style and reputation that other teachers will model.

Strong leadership in the freshman academy is vital to keeping students in school and helping them acquire the skills needed for postsecondary studies and a career. A single administrator must serve as an instructional leader and be able to arrange a schedule so that students take the courses they need and teachers have time for cross-disciplinary planning. The administrator must also implement extra help programs designed with the teams' input.

Teacher-leaders should engage their teams in getting students to grade-level standards. They need to help faculty realize what grade-level assignments, student work and exams look like. They need to understand effective instructional practices that get students engaged in authentic work so they see a connection between what they are asked to do in class and what they will do in life beyond school.

Catch-Up Courses

Many students who begin high school below grade level in reading and mathematics can still graduate college- and career-ready in four years, through the implementation of carefully planned catch-up courses. These courses should be taught by enthusiastic educators with a passion for and record of bringing students up to standards. After one semester in a catch-up course, student should be prepared to succeed in the ninth-grade college-preparatory English or Algebra I course or its equivalent.

English/Language Arts Catch-Up Course

The most effective English/language arts catch-up course is an intensive, one-semester block course for entering ninth-graders who have been identified as unprepared for college-preparatory English. The goal is to help these students catch up and complete college-preparatory English 9 with continued extra help and support through the second semester of their freshman year. A school with a traditional schedule can arrange double periods for both semesters, giving students an elective credit for the catch-up course in the fall and an English credit in the spring. The instructional design should include:

- multi-day units designed around essential standards and literacy strategies to master grade-level reading and writing skills.
- high-interest and grade-level reading content that students must master to succeed in college-preparatory English and other core academic classes.
- opportunities to apply communication skills to real-life problems that connect reading and writing to success in high school, further study and a career.
- written and performance assessments to help teachers monitor students' achievement on the essential English/language arts reading and writing readiness standards.
- intentional teaching of the reading and writing strategies students can use to succeed in all classes.
- engaging reading and writing assignments that use a variety of materials and media typical of those students will experience in different high school classes.
- opportunities for group learning, study teams and projects resulting in individual and group grades.

- homework assignments to practice and deepen unfamiliar concepts learned in class.
- use of technology and software applications to advance students' reading, writing, comprehension, analytical and study skills.
- completion of:
 - a daily learning log;
 - a portfolio containing the best examples of students' writing, evidence of reading a variety of materials, from adolescent novels to expository text, and evidence of using technology to communicate;
 - nine papers; and
 - two short speeches.
- requirements that students revise work until it meets clearly understood scoring guides and rubrics set to grade-level standards.
- use of reteaching strategies with extra time for students not achieving at the expected level or failing end-of-unit assessments.
- intentional teaching of the habits and skills used consistently by independent learners.

SREB developed a guide, *Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors English*, which defines thirteen content and five process indicators for high school readiness. These indicators, supplemented by state standards for reading and writing, help students build skills in six broad areas:

- **vocabulary and language use** — decoding and applying appropriate language
- **reading comprehension** — making inferences, comparisons, summaries and connections
- **writing** — pre-writing, writing and revising
- **research** — locating, analyzing and evaluating information
- **speaking** — formal and informal presentations
- **listening** — organizing information and responding to oral communication

Selected Descriptors of Proficient-Level Performance on Readiness Indicators

- Paraphrase an author's quote to make the same point. *(Reading)*
- Analyze how authors appeal to specific audiences through detail selection. *(Reading)*
- Relate information from an article to a real-life purpose. *(Reading)*
- Recognize irrelevant information in compositions. *(Reading)*
- Use a logical organization (e.g., time, importance) to convey the desired message. *(Writing)*
- Analyze and address a specific audience. *(Writing)*
- Develop a thesis statement with supporting evidence or points. *(Writing)*
- Write a research paper on a topic of choice with appropriate documentation. *(Writing)*
- Design a research plan that uses main ideas and supporting questions. *(Research)*
- Use a structured method (e.g., two-column notes) to organize information from presentations into main and supporting ideas. *(Listening)*

The catch-up course can also help students acquire the study and listening skills that characterize independent learners. After a semester of this course, students take college-preparatory English 9, preferably with the same teacher.

Gloucester City Junior-Senior High School: Power English

New Jersey's Gloucester City High School began offering a "Power English" course for students who had scored below grade level on the eighth-grade state assessments. Because some of these students had special or second language learning needs, all sections of the course were co-taught by a special educator and a certified content area teacher.

Forty-four students took Power English. By offering this course in a double-blocked period, keeping the classes and teachers together, and enrolling students in English 9 in the spring, the school was able to award credit for an English elective and for English 9 to 43 students. During the fall, 80 percent of students improved their reading level by at least one grade level and 63 percent met grade-level standards. Twenty-seven percent improved their scores on writing from a prompt. "I read faster now and understand what I am reading," said one student.

"I was exhausted at the end of each class period," said one teacher, "but I would never go back to teaching any other way. Teaching collaboratively with another teacher helped us serve the needs of all of our students, even the most challenged." That collaboration began with eight days of professional development led by *HSTW* literacy consultants and was supported by five coaching visits before and during the course. The training included strategies to address study and literacy skills and participants developed multiple-day instructional units based on a *HSTW* guide.

<http://www.gcsd.k12.nj.us/ghs>

Mathematics Catch-Up Course

The mathematics catch-up course should also be taught in a one-semester, 90-minute course and followed in the second semester by Algebra I or its equivalent, during which extra help and support continue. Key elements of the instructional design for this catch-up course include:

- multi-day standards-based units designed around essential knowledge and skills students must master to be ready for Algebra I.
- opportunities to apply algebra and pre-algebra skills to solve real-world problems that provide a reason for learning the mathematics content and processes needed for Algebra I.
- opportunities for group learning, study teams and projects resulting in individual and group grades.
- exposure to reading and writing strategies appropriate for the mathematics classroom, with opportunities to explain orally and in writing solutions to problems representing various levels of complexity.
- use of technology, including hand-held devices and software, to solve applied problems.
- homework assignments to practice what was learned in class and deepen understanding of mathematical concepts by applying knowledge in unfamiliar situations.
- policies of revising work until it meets clearly understood scoring guides and rubrics for earning grades.
- varied classroom assignments coupled with both written and performance assessments to help teachers monitor students' mastery of the essential mathematics readiness indicators.
- intentional teaching of the habits and skills used consistently by independent learners.
- use of reteaching strategies with extra time for students failing to achieve at the expected level.

Catch-up mathematics course content should be based upon the 12 content and five process readiness indicators contained in the SREB guide, *Getting Students Ready for Algebra I*, and supplemented by state standards where gaps are identified. The readiness indicators address reasoning, understanding and procedural skills needed to be successful in rigorous high school mathematics studies. The course includes four major content strands (numbers and operations, geometry and measurement, algebra, and data analysis and probability) and five major process standards (problem solving, reading and communicating, estimating and verifying answers and solutions, logical reasoning, and using technology).

Parkview Arts and Science Magnet High School: Catch-Up Mathematics Course

Parkview, a tri-district magnet school in Arkansas, serves 1200 students and maintains a demographic ratio of 50 percent black students and 50 percent white and other minority students. Thirty-one percent participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program. Despite its magnet school status, more than one-half of the ninth-grade class had scored below grade-level expectations on the eighth-grade state mathematics test. The school enrolled 144 of the 299 ninth-graders in the mathematics catch-up course in the fall term and then in Algebra I in the spring. One of the six sections included 18 special education students, co-taught with an inclusion specialist. These students' scores ranged from "Below Basic" to "Advanced" on the state mathematics ratings.

Overall, the failure rate in Algebra I decreased by more than 25 percent as a result of the catch-up course. The gap between the number of white and black students meeting proficiency on the state end-of-course Algebra I test decreased from 26 percentage points to less than four points. Achievement for both groups improved significantly: The percentage of students scoring at or above proficient on the end-of-course exam increased by 7 points for white students and by almost 30 percentage points for black students. The instructor says the course is successful because it builds students' sense of self-efficacy.

<http://lrsdorg.nexpoint.net/secondary/parkview/parkview.html>

Southeast High School: Ninth-Grade Catch-Up Courses

Oklahoma's Southeast High School is an urban school with a student population almost equally divided among black, Hispanic and white students and with two-thirds participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program. The school decided to offer both the language arts and mathematics catch-up courses in the ninth grade. Highly skilled and enthusiastic teachers worked with *HSTW* trainers to develop standards-based units for these courses. The mathematics teacher, who had asked to be reassigned from advanced mathematics, said, "I saw a chance to break the mold. Then I could move back to advanced mathematics and I would have some prepared students."

All 86 students in the fall term English catch-up course passed the course and 84 went on to pass college-preparatory English 9 in the spring term, a 98 percent pass rate. Those students were part of the cohort that raised the pass rate on the state's 10th-grade English end-of-course test by nine percentage points the following year.

Twenty-three students took the mathematics catch-up course, and all passed the course. The 22 who then chose to enroll in Algebra I during the second semester passed with an average of 70 percent or above.

<http://www.okcps.org/hs/Southeast>

Career Exploratory Courses

Career/technical studies can add value and relevance to high school studies and should be introduced as early as grade nine for students at-risk of not graduating from high school. **Career exploratory courses built around mini, lab-based, authentic projects can introduce ninth-graders to a wide array of occupational specialties. Such courses allow students to apply their literacy and mathematics skills to solve authentic problems found in broad career fields.** Hands-on activities and project-based learning engage students and deepen their understanding of academic content. Career exploratory classes can pique students' interest and help them see how their classroom studies link to life after high school, motivating them to stay in school. They can help ninth-graders understand that the way to a good job is through quality, rigorous education.

Schools can develop year-long lab- and project-based career exploratory courses that introduce a new project every four to six weeks. To maximize students' exposure to important academic and career skills and introduce a variety of career fields, these courses should:

- utilize technology.
- blend rigorous academics in reading, writing, mathematics and science with career content.
- require students to apply academic learning to authentic projects typical of the career field.
- develop the skills that employers desire of new employees.
- provide opportunities to participate in job shadowing, tour local businesses and interview leaders in the career field.

Several options exist for introducing ninth-graders to career exploratory programs. Schools can design their own program or apply one of these designs:

Implement the Gateway to Technology course from Project Lead The Way.[®] This project-based course includes several units, taught in conjunction with a rigorous academic curriculum, to introduce ninth-graders to technology-related careers. The unit design challenges and engages the exploratory minds of ninth-graders with hands-on problems that require creativity and innovative thinking. One unit focuses on design and modeling to introduce students to the engineering design process. As students learn standard engineering sketching techniques and create computer-generated models, they develop problem-solving skills and apply geometry and measurements to the project. Students also draw on their literacy skills to read, summarize, paraphrase and present information. Other units introduce students to the science involved in technological design and development, automation and robotics, structures and computer control systems, and aerospace engineering.

Redesign existing ninth-grade career introductory courses to incorporate a series of mini-projects throughout the year. Introductory courses for broad career fields can be redesigned around challenging, authentic projects related to the career field. The career/technical teacher and academic English, mathematics and science teachers collaborate to develop courses rich in mathematics, science and literacy content. They use authentic projects in the career/technical courses as a means for students to apply and demonstrate mastery of grade-level academic skills. Schools can offer one or more courses of this nature to provide students choices. For example, a school might redesign the ninth-grade courses for agriculture, family and consumer sciences, and business and marketing to incorporate a series of projects typical of the career fields and aligned to essential reading, writing and mathematics standards taught in students' academic classes.

Create a series of four- to six-week mini-courses. Mini-courses can be built into existing career/technical courses around projects with strong literacy and mathematic components that provide a foundation for pursuing a program of study in the career field. Using projects authentic to the field, schools can design from existing career/technical courses a set of mini-courses aligned to local economy. Courses should require students to demonstrate mastery of grade-level mathematics, science and literacy skills. Students identify the career pathways that stem from the cluster and develop a plan of sequenced academic and career/technical courses linking high school to a postsecondary credential. The mini-courses can incorporate opportunities for job shadowing, local business tours, guest lectures and interviews with local leaders in the career fields, and communication with professional career and trade associations.

Proposed Schedule for Grade Nine

To provide career exploratory and catch-up courses, schools should consider using a four-by-four block schedule. In the fall term, students take catch-up reading and mathematics courses and a college-preparatory science or social studies course. In the spring, students who were enrolled in the catch-up courses would take college-preparatory English 9 and Algebra I, preferably with their same fall teachers, and either science or social studies. Those not needing the catch-up courses could take college-preparatory English 9 and Algebra I in either term and schedule physical education and other elective courses during the year.

Fall Term	Spring Term
Catch-Up English*	College-Prep English
Catch-Up Mathematics*	Algebra I
Science/Social Studies	Science/Social Studies
Lab and Project-Based Career Exploratory Course	

* Students not needing the catch-up course take another elective or a college-prep course.

Guidance, Advisement and Support

Dropping out of school often comes at the end of a gradual disengagement.⁵ Students do not complete satisfactory work, are often absent, do not get credit for one or more courses, see that they will not graduate on time and finally, stop attending school. Many dropouts report that there was no adult in the school to whom they could turn for help with academic or personal problems. The following advisement and support options can connect students to an adult to help them stay on track in high school.

Teacher-Advisers and Mentors

Advisers and mentors are the first line of defense against the disengagement that leads to dropping out. They call parents and guardians when students are absent; they ensure their advisees’ work is meeting course standards; they connect students to extra help and, if necessary, to trained counselors for emotional, behavioral or social problems. With an established relationship, students have one specific person to contact as problems arise.

High schools can assign an adult adviser to work with 12 to 15 students to help them adjust to the demands of high school, both academic and personal. By meeting at least weekly, advisers can help students get the support they need to succeed and work with students and their parents or guardians to establish a career and educational focus and develop a program of study. This program serves a dual purpose: The adviser and students become a supportive unit, and the students begin to form a vision of their adult life and understand how current studies will play a part in that vision.

Parents as Educational Partners

Through this program, full-time counselors and teacher-advisers involve and train parents and guardians of at-risk students in supporting their children's education. *HSTW* has found that parents and guardians from all educational backgrounds can understand why success in school is important for their children. They understand that just graduating from high school will not necessarily prepare students for further study. When it is explained to them that certain courses will give their children an edge — not only for a better job, but for enrolling in postsecondary courses without having to take remedial courses — most parents will encourage them to take more demanding courses. Parents can also understand that, if students work toward earning employee certification in a high-demand, high-wage field, they will have an advantage in getting a better job, earning an associate's degree from a community technical college, or passing an employee certificate exam that yields a license or specific qualification with workplace value.

Extra Help and Extra Time

The rigor of higher-level thinking and higher standards in high school courses may cause even some of the better students to falter. The provision of extra help and time — either during or outside the school day — is, therefore, not just for students who have always struggled. An extra help program may be built into the daily schedule as time between blocks or as the last period of the day. Some students will need time beyond the standard six-hour schedule to meet grade-level standards. Schools can offer or even require extra help after school or on Saturdays for students who are not meeting standards on course assignments, assessments or state-required exams. When requiring attendance, the school should address transportation logistics. Students and their parents must be reassured that the program is truly to help students, not to punish them.

HSTW has found that extra help is most effective when given by the teacher of the course or within a study group in which students take responsibility for ensuring they all understand the content and reach standards. Establishing peer study groups and training students to work together is an excellent investment of teacher time.

Credit Recovery

Despite the support they receive, a few students will still fail to receive credit for a course. For those students who get behind and believe they can not catch up to graduate with their peers, schools must go beyond the norm to help them stay on track and finish high school with their class. **Passing students who do not meet standards does little to help them, so *HSTW* promotes the use of credit recovery programs.** A student who fails a course may use online or regular instruction during a study period or an elective period, before or after school time, or on Saturdays to pass the course. The use of standards-based instruction allows teachers and students to know which areas have already been mastered and which must be addressed, so recovery time is maximized.

Henry W. Grady High School: "Let's Do It Again"

Students at Georgia's Henry W. Grady High School who fail a course with a state-mandated end-of-course exam may attend "Let's Do It Again," a credit recovery course. The course provides 90-minute sessions for nine Saturdays. Students who complete the course requirements receive academic course credit. Approximately 120 students participate in the course each year, with more than 90 percent passing and recovering credit.

<http://www.gradyhighschool.org>

Bellows Falls Union High School: Project PASS

Bellows Falls Union High School (Vermont) undertook an effort to keep freshmen from losing credit due to excessive absenteeism. Students in Project PASS (Plan for Achieving School Success) sign a contract to complete a minimum of 10 hours of school work after five absences, excused or unexcused, in order to receive credit for each class. Within one year, the number of days missed was halved and average grades rose by six points, from 70 to 76.

<http://www.bfuhs.org>

No-Zero Policy

Middle grades and high school teachers can adopt grading policies that require students to redo substandard work. One such policy, the Power of I, uses an “I” (incomplete) instead of a D, F or zero. This sends a clear message to students: All assigned work is important and progress depends upon completing work and meeting the standards. Homework is not assigned to find out what students know; it is assigned to move students from one level of knowledge and skill to another. If the student does not complete the assignment or does not meet the standards set for it, the teacher must assume the movement has not occurred. This makes removal of the “I” a joint responsibility of the student and teacher.

Using such processes effectively improves learning only if the assignments involved have real educational value. Good assignments are at or above grade level, align to Proficient standards as defined by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), reflect the connection between classroom learning and students’ goals, and engage students in the heavy lifting of serious learning. Valuable assignments are purposefully developed to advance learning. They are not found printed at the end of a textbook chapter or in an accompanying workbook; they do not spring full-blown into a teacher’s mind during the commute to work or a make-and-take workshop; they cannot be downloaded from a teacher Web site; and they cannot be justified by saying, “Someday, you’ll need this.”

Engaging students in the satisfactory completion of assignments to grade-level standards will prepare them for challenging high school assessments in subsequent years. Expect students to continue to redo work with teacher help until it is at least approaching grade-level standards (C-level work) or meets grade-level standards (B-level work). Using an “A, B, C, I” system in the middle grades and grade nine will result in more students meeting grade-level standards and becoming college- and career-ready. Urge middle grades and high school teachers to work collaboratively to define and understand equivalent grade-level standards and to apply them to student assignments.

NAEP defines **Proficient** standards as “competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.” This is the definition used by *HSTW*, and differs from individual states’ definitions of the term, which often do not meet true grade-level standards.

Continuous Improvement

Making the ninth-grade experience work, getting more students to succeed, and revising curriculum and instruction must be a continuous effort. Each year, the school should gather data to determine progress and make necessary revisions. **Feedback from students, faculty and parents about what is working and what needs to be improved is invaluable.** Results of standardized tests indicate how students are improving and where more work is needed. Further data analyses may also provide keys to unlocking struggling students' motivation.

Getting Started: Actions to Take Now

Districts and schools can take steps now to begin — or to focus — the redesign process. The first step is to assess schools' current practices and policies for the ninth-grade. Using the conditions and questions listed on pages 2 and 3 of this report, districts and schools can analyze current practices to determine what is working and what can be improved. Districts and schools can take immediate action:

- Convene middle grades and high school leaders to assess schools' current practices and draw attention to areas needing improvement.
- Develop policies and methods to track ninth-grade failure rates and student achievement.
- Set target improvement goals for all middle grades and high schools in the district.
- Send teams of teachers to professional development workshops on developing and teaching standards-based units, designing ninth-grade catch-up courses, and providing students the extra help and advisement needed for success in high school.
- Provide resources to modernize career/technical labs and provide instructional materials for courses designed specifically to engage students in authentic projects and engaging assignments.
- Establish a block schedule for at least the ninth grade in all high schools in the district.
- Create incentives for teachers to teach ninth-grade courses.
- Encourage school and teacher leaders to visit high schools that have implemented an effective, successful ninth-grade experience and study their best practices.
- Urge teams of teachers from each school to meet and discuss their plans, their results and how they are changing their focus as they redesign the ninth-grade experience.
- Train teachers to serve as teacher-advisers who can help students set and achieve career and educational goals.

Schools and districts will get results if they are willing to redirect resources, expand instructional time, improve the quality of instruction, provide support systems and extra help, and connect each student to a caring adult and a goal beyond high school.

Success Is in the Results

The ultimate indicator the ninth-grade redesign's success is results — reduced failure rates, improved achievement and performance on exams, improved performance in the 10th grade, and ultimately, increased graduation rates. Grades, student attendance and disciplinary incidents, student and teacher satisfaction, and quality of work should all improve annually. After checking the progress each year, the school needs to involve all faculty in revising the program. See page 16 for indicators and desired results of an effective ninth-grade experience.

Schools will know they have an effective ninth-grade experience when:

- Students enter the ninth grade oriented to the expectations of high school and prepared for rigorous studies.
- Students identified in the eighth grade as at risk of failing are caught up through summer bridge programs before entering high school or through catch-up courses during the first semester of the ninth grade.
- A high percentage of students enrolling in grade nine have good study skills, can read and comprehend text, and know how to make the effort needed to complete challenging work.
- More than 90 percent of students complete college-preparatory English and Algebra I by the end of ninth grade.
- Ninth-grade students participate in authentic, project-based learning activities that require them to apply academic knowledge and skills.
- Ninth-grade students have opportunities to explore broad career fields through courses built around authentic mini-projects that introduce them to a wide array of occupational specialties.
- The best teachers teach ninth-grade courses, and a ninth-grade academy maintains low student-to-teacher ratios.
- All ninth-grade students are linked to an adult mentor in school, have set post high school goals, and have planned with their parents or guardians a program of study for achieving those goals.
- At least 90 percent of the students who enroll in the ninth grade are enrolled in the 12th grade three years later.
- Less than 10 percent of high school graduates have to take developmental or remedial courses upon entering college.

Other SREB Publications that Support Redesign of the Ninth-Grade Experience

- *Planning for Improved Student Achievement: A Guide to Writing Standards-Based Units and Lessons*
- *Getting Students Ready for Algebra I: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*
- *Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors English: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*
- *Getting Students Ready for College-Preparatory/Honors Science: What Middle Grades Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*

Publications are available at www.sreb.org. For more information about redesigning the ninth-grade experience, contact Gene Bottoms, Rhenida Rennie or Janie Smith at (404) 875-9211.

¹ Bridgeland, John M., Karen Burke Morison, and John J. Dilulio Jr. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises, 2006.

² National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data — <http://nces.ed.gov>.

³ Hall, Daria. *Graduation Matters: Improving Accountability for High School Graduation*. The Education Trust, 2007.

⁴ Gottlob, Brian J. *The High Cost of Failing to Reform Public Education in Texas*. The Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, 2007.

⁵ Bridgeland, John M., Karen Burke Morison, and John J. Dilulio Jr., op. cit.