

**REINVENTING**  
**9<sup>TH</sup>**  
**GRADE**



**Academics  
Through  
Personalization**

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# How to Use this Resource Kit

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*Reinventing 9<sup>th</sup> Grade – Academics through Personalization* is a guidebook for high school leaders who are ready to make a significant commitment of resources to the academic success of *all* 9<sup>th</sup> graders. It is a toolbox of practical initiatives, strategies, and successful practices being used in high schools around the country to ensure the academic success of all 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.

The goal of *Reinventing 9<sup>th</sup> Grade* is to serve as a comprehensive resource for planning a 9<sup>th</sup> grade initiative. The chapters are designed for a “flow” in the decision-making process, beginning with the rationale for *why* high schools must change and why 9<sup>th</sup> grade success is the foundation for the greatness of any high school.

Next, the focus turns to *what* needs to be considered as a school progresses through the planning process. Among topics covered are:

- planning and goal setting
- personalization
- overview of small learning communities
- role of parents
- program structure decisions
- curriculum decisions
- rigor and relevance
- school civility and character development
- staff assignments
- pyramid of academic interventions
- critical relationship to grades 10 through 12

Finally, the resource kit concludes with the *how* to make it happen, by providing:

- professional development strategies
- program marketing suggestions
- case studies of five 9<sup>th</sup> grade success initiatives

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At the end of each chapter is a list of questions to consider in the planning process. The enclosed CD-ROM contains those lists and other forms and awareness handouts from the kit to reproduce for use by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade leadership team.

The DVD has a presentation from the 2005 Model Schools Conference, “The 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Year—Foundation for High School Success.” Many of the questions posed at the end of the chapters are discussed on the video.

Good luck. Enjoy the journey. The benefit will be a pure joy for your high school and community.

*Gary M. Fields, Ph.D.*  
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## Chapter 2 Rationale for the Focus on 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

### **Common Characteristics of Successful Programs**

The issue of 9<sup>th</sup> grade success is so significant that literally hundreds of school districts have reviewed the literature, conducted Internet searches, and accessed information from schools that have implemented strategies. A few school districts have done exhaustive studies of the research and practices over the past 35 years related to adolescent development and meeting the challenges of transitioning to and through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. All of this work has resulted in the identification of some common characteristics of successful 9<sup>th</sup> grade programs, which should be examined by any school interested in designing a comprehensive plan of action.

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Strategies to accomplish the five common characteristics noted below can be used in the decision-making process to develop the base of a structure for 9<sup>th</sup> grade success. This information is based in part on the work of the Greenville County Schools in South Carolina

1. Transition efforts should begin well before the start of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. A variety of strategies that go beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade course scheduling must be considered. To achieve a **seamless transition for students from grades 8 to 9**, students and parents need repeated exposures to high school expectations throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> grade year and during the summer before 9<sup>th</sup> grade begins. Sample strategies might include:

- Paring of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers who shadow each other in order to have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of the two grade levels.
- High school teachers serving as substitute teachers in 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes.
- Focus groups with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students conducted by 9<sup>th</sup> grade faculty.
- Teacher swaps of classes.
- Joint mini-curriculum projects, such as a writing assignment with students critiquing the work of the students in the partner classes.
- Small-group sessions for 8<sup>th</sup> graders with 9<sup>th</sup> grade counselors.
- High school tours.
- Passes and invitations to selected and supervised high school social events for 8<sup>th</sup> graders.
- Focus groups for 8<sup>th</sup> graders with outstanding high school role models.
- Assigning each 8<sup>th</sup> grade student a high school pen pal.
- Allowing adequate quality time for in-depth scheduling of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes.

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### 2. Development of a comprehensive communication/dialogue plan.

Schools should plan communications and conversations involving all of the parties critical to 9<sup>th</sup> grade success – high school and middle school staff, students, and parents. Possible strategies include:

- Establishing a parent transition advisory council that meets several times with 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade staff leaders.
- Frequent parent meetings throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years.
- A special parent-teacher conference schedule just for 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Report card suppers — parents of 9<sup>th</sup> graders pick up report cards at school.
- Many regularly scheduled telephone calls to parents from 9<sup>th</sup> grade staff members.
- An 8<sup>th</sup> grade parent night at the high school.
- High school newsletters sent to parents during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.
- Special 9<sup>th</sup> grade newsletters.
- A volunteer parent buddy system whereby 9<sup>th</sup> grade parents are assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> grade parents to talk with them and alleviate concerns about high school.
- A regular schedule of subject area vertical teaming between grades 8 and 9.
- Frequent subject area planning sessions of 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers.
- 9<sup>th</sup> grade staff team meetings with students and/or parents.
- A “phone tree” technology network for brief telephone messages to parents.
- A 9<sup>th</sup> grade e-mail network.
- Implementation of student-led conferences with teachers and parents.

Every school should have a plan whereby there is an ongoing effort to personalize the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year for every student, even for those who appear unlikely to struggle.

3. Student anonymity is not an option. Every school should have a plan whereby there is an ongoing effort to **personalize the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year for every student**, even for those who appear unlikely to struggle. Strategies that can help to eliminate the anonymous student include:

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- A special orientation program to extracurricular opportunities for 9<sup>th</sup> graders. It is not enough to advertise the opportunities; 9<sup>th</sup> graders need to meet with the coaches and advisors and be invited to participate in at least one extracurricular activity.
  - A professional development activity for extracurricular advisors and coaches to establish that these activities are academic support programs first and “extras” second.
  - Frequent meetings/conferences with individual students.
  - Extra efforts by faculty members to attend extracurricular activities in which 9<sup>th</sup> graders participate.
  - Some type of advisory or homeroom with ongoing contact by a staff member.
  - Consistent and required use by students of agendas and weekly planners, with follow-up accountability by teachers.
  - Special quarterly awards assemblies just for 9<sup>th</sup> graders.
  - Team or class spirit and identity efforts.
  - Mini-sessions for 9<sup>th</sup> graders on such important topics as goal setting, time management, etc.
  - Lunch for 9<sup>th</sup> graders isolated from the rest of the school.
  - Upper-class role models as tutors or mentors for all 9<sup>th</sup> graders.
  - At least one positive teacher contact with the parents of every 9<sup>th</sup> grader each quarter.
  - Special awards for excellent attendance.
  - Easy access to intervention for any 9<sup>th</sup> grader who feels he or she is being bullied by another student.
4. **Early identification of students at risk of failure.** There should be a planned, targeted, prescriptive, and proactive approach to immediate intervention when students begin having academic or behavioral problems. Sample strategies include:

“Relationships are the real work of school improvement!”  
—Alan M. Blankstein,  
*Failure is Not an Option*  
(2004, p. 59)

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“How schools respond to the question, ‘What do we do when students don’t learn?’ tells more about the values of that school than anything else.”  
—Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option* (2004, p. 126)

- A clearly defined and consistent pyramid of interventions agreed to by every staff member of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade team.
  - Beginning in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, inform students and parents about the pyramid of interventions that will be implemented for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students when problems begin occurring.
  - Upper-class student mentors and special teacher or faculty mentors to support struggling students.
  - Tutoring programs involving upper-class students, retired teachers, parents, etc.
  - A special freshmen success or support class.
  - Individual meetings with teachers or teams of teachers.
  - Special “catch-up” classes.
  - Summer bridge programs for those identified in 8<sup>th</sup> grade as being deficient in prerequisite high school knowledge and skills.
  - Career exploration initiatives that connect academics to the work world.
  - Quarterly student improvement awards.
  - Academic progress reports mailed home to parents no later than the third week of the school year.
  - Red flagging 8<sup>th</sup> graders with attendance issues.
  - Meeting with the students and their parents the summer before the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year begins with a contract implemented clearly stating attendance and on-time expectations and consequences.
  - Student and parent academic deficiency contracts.
  - Summer success academies before the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year begins.
  - Intensive literacy and numeracy classes during the summer.
  - Creative scheduling to give failing students extra time.
  - Accountability for student use of agendas/weekly planners.
5. **Instructional and organizational strategies that focus on learning and keep students motivated.** Uncompromising high expectations for all students should be the norm. Sample instructional and organizational strategies might include:

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- 9<sup>th</sup> grade interdisciplinary teams of teachers, with all students assigned to a “house.”
- Common teacher planning times.
- Consistent procedures, rules, and expectations.
- A special freshmen seminar as a required class.
- Common writing rubrics used by all teachers.
- Development of a student portfolio system.
- Common files kept on students.
- Regular professional development sessions among teachers to discuss and share instructional strategies.
- Structured and ongoing reading and writing across the curriculum conducted by the teachers.
- Strategic use of data by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade staff.
- In service opportunities on appropriate instructional strategies.
- Implementation of programs that identify students with the potential to go to college as the first in their families (e.g., AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination)).
- Implementation of a model to frame curriculum and instruction toward higher levels of rigor and application (e.g., the Rigor/Relevance Framework).
- Use of the guiding principles of character for occasional thematic lessons.
- Teachers frequently tell students how they will use what they are being taught today.
- Designated counselor and administrator just for 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Above all, teachers who are passionate, enthusiastic, and committed to the success of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.

The transition from grade 8 to grade 9 is a process, not an event. A specific plan for the process is necessary, and there must be accountability and follow-up. Ideally, there are designated 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade coordinators who stay in frequent contact with each other.

“The research is clear, however, that relationships are a crucial element of student achievement and school success. They also support courageous leadership. The relationships we refer to are myriad and multifaceted. They include relationships among staff, between staff and students, among students, between the school personnel and the community – among everyone touched by the work of the school.”  
—Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option* (2004, p. 28)

The transition from grade 8 to grade 9 is a process, not an event.

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# Chapter 10

# Academic Intervention Strategies

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## Pyramid of Academic Intervention

Educators in the successful schools simply will not allow freshmen to fail.

“...whereas the mission statement reminds us of why we exist, a vision paints a picture of what we can become... A school’s vision offers a realistic alternative for a better future, it says, ‘this is what we want to be.’ The mission statement answers the question ‘Why do we exist?’ The vision explains where the school is headed.”

—Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option* (2004, p. 76)

**H**elping students avoid academic difficulties and developing a consistent strategy of interventions when the students encounter academic problems are the foundation of the extraordinary commitment to 9<sup>th</sup> grade success. Educators in the successful schools simply will not allow freshmen to fail.

As part of a focus on being professional learning communities, high schools across the country have established a pyramid of academic interventions to assist students when learning does not occur. One of the leaders of the pyramid concept, Adlai Stevenson High School, in Lincolnshire, Illinois, has provided direction to many schools. Numerous adaptations of the pyramid model are being used to meet student needs in committed high schools.

Traditionally, high schools that are less successful intervene with students experiencing academic difficulties after failure occurs. Often, intervention strategies do not begin until the second semester of 9<sup>th</sup> grade or even the beginning of sophomore year. For struggling students, this is too late.

It is common for schools to have a mission statement, or a core value/belief, that states: “All students can learn.” Some schools take it a step further and add: “With time and support, all students will learn.” A comprehensive program of academic support initiatives answers the question: “What will we as educators do when students are not learning?” by offering a pyramid of academic interventions.

The **Pyramid of Academic Intervention**, which is on the following page, is adapted from many sources by the International Center for Leadership in Education. It represents a comprehensive prevention and intervention model based on an extraordinary commitment to 9<sup>th</sup> grade success.

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## Pyramid of Academic Intervention

