Ninth-grade academies come in many shapes, sizes

Ken Lerner is finishing his sixth year in ninth grade. It is success, not failure, that has kept him there. “It works, it absolutely works,” Lerner said of the Ninth-Grade Success Academy he leads at Edison High School in Philadelphia. “I think the ninth-grade academy makes a major difference. We’re a little bit like a boot camp; we’re strict; we really work hard.”

Lerner, the ninth-grade administrator, said he bought into Talent Development early, and has seen significant results—in attendance rates, promotions and in the responses of 10th-grade teachers to better-prepared students.

Edison High’s program is one of the oldest ninth-grade academies, and one that has followed the Talent Development model strictly, Lerner said. One of the newest is Baltimore Talent Development High School, opened in September, where the whole school is a ninth-grade academy. There the model comes with add-ons that allow students to dabble in the arts. In Chicago, the Talent Development schools serve “transitional” ninth-graders—those who repeated eighth grade but did not pass the required state assessment for high school.

These are three of the many ninth-grade programs in the Talent Development network. While all adhere to the model and include its basics, each has its own style, designed to meet individual school and student needs.

One of the most powerful elements of TDHS at Edison is the daily common planning time for teachers on each team, Lerner said. It enables the teachers not only to coordinate instruction but also to get to know students and their needs and behaviors. Edison’s nearly 600 ninth-graders are divided into four teams—three have six classes each and the fourth has three. Lerner has maintained this structure, through administrative changes, curriculum modifications and teacher turnover. “I dug my heels in. The ninth-grade organization is still the same as the day we started.”

The ninth-grade academy is so successful that Edison created a 10th-grade academy with a similar structure—teams of students and teachers, designated space and common planning time.

Along with increasing attendance, promotion and graduation rates, Talent Development improved the school climate by “a thousand percent,” he added. Achievement is up, too, but more gradually than some of the other success measures. The ninth-grade academy has also enjoyed a stable staff. Only two teachers left ninth grade because they were dissatisfied, and until another retired this year, “we had the same four team leaders,” Lerner said.

“The strength of TD is in its organization. I don’t know how we would ever function without it,” he said.

In Baltimore, the organization of Talent Development’s new innovation high school allows for a fifth period every day—four double periods for academics and another of 50 minutes, called Arts and Expression. Students choose from courses such as photography, pottery, dance, theater, chorus and “circus arts.” Taught three days a week by adjunct instructors, these offerings change every eight weeks.

“The kids really get into it; they are having so much fun,” said organizational facilitator Matt Werndorfer. During this last period of
Talent Development sets the standard for ninth-grade success

Details make the difference

The Talent Development High School (TDHS) model was born with a major emphasis on ninth-graders. The very first Talent Development High School had a strong Ninth-Grade Success Academy, and every subsequent partnership school has been attracted to TDHS by the support offered to students who are making the challenging transition to high school.

Nagging and Nurturing
The separate self-contained Talent Development (TD) academy for ninth-graders is often called the Ninth-Grade Success Academy to indicate that success is expected of every freshman. To be successful, students need to come to school every day and work hard to earn all their course credits so they are promoted on time. The academy teachers and administrators often think about the need for “nagging and nurturing” their students to succeed; they find ways to reiterate their high expectations for each student, while appreciating and supporting each individual’s positive behaviors. All young persons in a Success Academy are urged to realize it’s time to grow up and assume the serious responsibilities of high school students. At the same time, they are reminded that their teachers and administrators are there to help them adjust to these new demands.

Operational Details
Depending on how it is operated, a ninth-grade academy can be either a superficial organizational appendage or a powerful force for helping new high school students succeed. We have learned that a ninth-grade academy will achieve its important goals only if several major operational details are firmly in place.

1. The ninth-grade academy must be a self-contained unit, separated by walls and doors from the rest of the high school building, preferably with ubiquitous signs defining its presence and a private main entrance where faculty and administrators greet students each morning. The academy will have its own principal, dedicated teaching faculty, guidance staff and janitorial workers to create an intact community for the transition year.

2. Teacher teams sharing the same students and planning time are essential for personalizing the learning environment and solving individual student problems. Depending on the size of the ninth grade, the academy will have several teams of four to six teachers each, including the English, mathematics, science and history instructors. Their classrooms should be in proximity so their students can move between classes in a restricted area. It is ideal when each team has a teacher-team leader who has an extra free period to work on team goals. The schedule must include a common planning period each day for each team to work on student issues while their students are in an elective class.

3. Teacher teams should use their planning period well for addressing student problems of attendance, discipline and performance, and for coordinating classroom activities around “the learning skill-of-the-week” or other common themes. Rather than referring student problems to specialists, such as attendance officers, tutors or discipline deans, these team members do much of their own outreach: they make phone calls to absent students, devise student contracts to turn around bad behavior and conduct individual student report card conferences, where they outline strategies for avoiding failure, if necessary.

4. Through Freshman Seminar, students learn socialization so they can develop the adult behaviors they need to thrive in an orderly and serious learning environment. Social and study skills learned in this course are reinforced across the team and through one-on-one interactions with teachers who shape mature interactions.

Depending on how it is operated, a ninth-grade academy can be either a superficial organizational appendage or a powerful force for helping new high school students succeed.”

On the summer schedule

American Youth Policy Forum on TDHS—June 17
Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C., 11:45 a.m. to 2 p.m. Findings from a third-party evaluation of TDHS over five years. Information: Nettie Legters, 410-516-8874, nlegters@csos.jhu.edu

Coaches Conference—June 20–23
Inn at The Colonnade, Baltimore. English Language Arts, Math and Freshman Seminar coaches. Theme is VIP—Very Important People, the coaches, of course. More information: Bada Hebron, 410-516-4339, bhebron@csos.jhu.edu.

U.S. History Conference—Aug. 4–5
Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys, Baltimore. Middle Grades social studies educators. Emphasis on teaching guides and resource materials correlated with the third edition of A History of US, by Joy Hakim, who will be the keynote speaker. Optional field trip, Aug. 3 to Gettysburg, Pa. Information: Greg Murrain, 410-516-6880, gmurrain@csos.jhu.edu.
5. The TD ninth-grade instructional program is aimed at narrowing skill gaps so all students can meet high standards. It extends class time for English and math and offers acceleration courses during the first term as preparation for required courses in the second term. These courses use high interest/low frustration materials to motivate students and challenge their thinking skills. The focus on fluency and comprehension strategies in reading and on reasoning and problem solving in mathematics shows respect for students' talents, and encourages them to improve their higher order competencies and understandings.

6. Students will develop an awareness of their personal career interests and strengths and appreciate their special talents so they can choose an upper-grade Career Academy relevant to these personal factors.

7. The goal of the Success Academy is to move all students to 10th grade. If some students do not earn the necessary credits and must be held back, TDHS provides special team programs that work to promote students midway through the next year. This enables students to recover lost time and catch up with their peers as they work toward graduation.

8. There are many celebrations of student success—for good attendance, course completion and individual achievements, as well as for individual and class improvement. Students can regularly experience rewards and pride in their ninth-grade success.

Overall, we have learned that an effective ninth-grade Success Academy depends on dedicated educators, who implement these operational details as they “nag and nurture” their first-year students. By strongly emphasizing these points in our planning processes and technical support, Talent Development High Schools aim to set the standards for effective transition programs in American high schools.

— James McPartland

In The Next Newsletter: Frequently Asked Questions about the pros and cons of ninth-grade academies.

Network News

Waianae High School in Waianae, Hawaii, has just the sort of problem organizational facilitators dream of—an unusually large number of students registered for Algebra II. Because so many students in the TD ninth-grade cohort successfully completed Algebra I, there will be 12 sections of Algebra II next year—with about 30 students per section . . . . Also at Waianae, nearly 95 percent of the sophomores took the Hawaii State Assessment—definitely a first, says implementation manager Linda Muskauskis. Students who pass these assessments will receive special cords at graduation—one for math and another for English . . . . Baptist Hill High School in South Carolina recently received its accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: “This was a monumental step for us,” says Principal Raymond Davis. Because the rural high school had unsatisfactory ratings for four years, the accrediting team “came in with a microscope . . . and felt we were headed in the right direction,” he added . . . . Math curriculum manager Danny Jones is undertaking a major revision of Algebra II Foundations, putting greater emphasis on Algebra I concepts that students will need to build on in the 11th grade course . . . .

Strawberry Mansion High School made the “most improved” list of Philadelphia area schools showing gains in their 2004 SAT scores. Of the 171 schools in the Philadelphia metropolitan area counted in an analysis of SAT scores by The Philadelphia Inquirer, Strawberry Mansion was the 12th “most improved,” raising its combined math and verbal scores by 36 points, from 646 to 682, between 2001 and last year. Although that average remains far below the national average of 1,026, the Pennsylvania average of 1,003 and the New Jersey average of 1,015, the scores are on the rise,” said Laura Schultz, organizational facilitator . . . . More than 250 students from Brainerd High School in Chattanooga, Tenn., participated in internships, job-shadowing activities and work-based learning opportunities provided by more than 20 businesses and organizations, including the local utility company and cable provider. This “very successful” effort to build partnerships and offer students a look at the work world was a first for Brainerd, said organizational facilitator Erdeen Britt . . . . Freshman Seminar is popular; this year about 15 schools in the TDHS network use only that course, which focuses on study skills, goal setting and peer relationships. Next year, more schools will concentrate on Freshman Seminar, illustrating the need for ninth-grade interventions in many different kinds of schools.

Ninth-graders from Brainerd High School in Chattanooga, Tenn., participate in a lesson conducted by employees of the Electric Power Board, the local utility company, during a career exploration outing.
Spanish TV program takes dropout message nationwide

Maria Walttemeyer recently had an hour of fame—or una hora de la fama.

Answering a request for a Spanish-speaking dropout expert, Walttemeyer “appeared” on Diálogo de Costa a Costa, a live TV call-in show produced by the Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network in New York City and broadcast daily in 50 states, Puerto Rico and Canada on HITN-TV.

“It went really well,” says Walttemeyer, who was only heard by telephone from her TDHS office and not seen on the May 2 show. “The neat part of it was it wasn’t just in one city.”

During the hour-long segment, “When Teenagers Don’t Want to Study: High School larger issue, in Spanish. The multilingual Walttemeyer volunteered.

Billing itself as the first format in Hispanic television to meet the growing demand for programs stressing relevant issues for the Hispanic community, Diálogo de Costa a Costa frequently focuses on education, as well as health, politics and finance. While introducing the show on dropouts, host Malin Falu referred to the “drop-out factories” detailed in the Balfanz and Legters report, Walttemeyer said. One caller had read the study. Others had heard about it but could not read it. “The parents appreciated the fact that the show had taken the time to explain the study,” she said.

Delegate Miro stressed the importance of parents and family in keeping students in school, Walttemeyer said. She presented a broader view, emphasizing “that it is everyone’s responsibility—not just parents and kids—to find the answers” to dropping out. She said she also talked about Talent Development and about the philosophy that underpins it—relevance, flexibility, identity, respect, community—as keys to programs that keep kids in school.

HITN-TV is a public educational network serving 12.5 million Spanish-speaking households. It broadcasts via satellite through Direct TV and Dish Network and on Time-Warner Cable.

IT IS EVERYONE’S RESPONSIBILITY
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Dropouts,” she fielded calls from California, Colorado, North Carolina, Puerto Rico and North Carolina, as well as from New York and New Jersey. Many were from parents, concerned about their children’s education—especially when the adults couldn’t communicate well with the schools. One parent said she was even afraid to go to the school office because she didn’t speak English well.

Walttemeyer, the TDHS director of technical assistance, shared the guest spot with Joseph Miro, a state representative from Delaware and a retired teacher.

How she got to the Hispanic network show was serendipitous. The daily show’s producer was researching dropouts on the Internet, where he found the recent study by Bob Balfanz and Nettie Legters. “Locating the Dropout Crisis.” He called CSOS asking for someone to talk about the report, and the

Going forward...continued from page 1)

even gain the solid 10th-grade academic skills that economists say are essential for success in jobs that offer adequate pay, good working conditions and benefits.

Given the high rates and deleterious consequences of ninth-grade failure, it is not surprising that high schools are experimenting with ways to achieve greater success with their freshmen. For that reason, we have decided to focus this first newsletter on the transition into high school. As illustrated on these pages and in schools across the country, we are learning much about the interventions needed to ease this transition and create more success for students who might otherwise fail and fail until they drop out, dramatically diminishing their life chances and robbing society of their potential.

To serve these students, and ensure that they too benefit from the momentum around the current high school reform movement, we must begin at the beginning.

TDHS recently received a substantial capacity building grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, allowing us to deepen the work in our partner schools, develop new partnerships, and broadly disseminate results and lessons learned. We are committed to transforming low-performing high schools into respectful, caring and motivating communities that challenge all students and adults to develop their unique talents and realize their highest academic and human potential. This newsletter serving our partner schools, as well as our extended research and development family, is a primary vehicle for moving forward together.

— Nettie Legters,
Associate Director TDHS
Focus on People

Gail Awakuni, principal of James Campbell High School in Ewa Beach, Hawaii, is the 2005 Met Life/National Association of Secondary School Principals National High School Principal of the Year. Her picture is on the cover of the January 2005 issue of Principal Leadership. Awakuni came to the 2,100-student high school in 2000 when it had the lowest graduation rate in the state and serious discipline problems. Since then, daily attendance has risen from 87 to 94 percent, retention rates have decreased and the number of honor roll students has increased. Under Awakuni’s leadership, Campbell also became a “breakthrough high school,” a distinction for high-minority, high-poverty schools that have high student achievement and high graduation and college admission rates. The National Association of Secondary School Principals named nine such schools for 2005. Awakuni presented her strategies for success, which include Talent Development, at the association’s convention in February. . . . Strawberry Mansion history teacher Patricia Whyatt is one of three teachers piloting a new course on African history in three Philadelphia high schools. She is able to devote a full semester to a topic that she previously spent about two weeks covering in her world history course. As part of the pilot course, Whyatt offered to pay for one student, chosen by lottery, to take a DNA-based genealogy test that would identify his or her African roots. The course will become mandatory in all 60 high schools in the fall.

Comings and Goings Clementine Carr is a new instructional facilitator for Freshman Seminar in Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina and Washington, D.C.; she is retired from the Baltimore City Public Schools, where she taught U.S. history, government and humanities . . . .

Greg Ekey joined, or rejoined, TDHS in December as organizational field manager in Chicago. Greg taught in the Success Academy at Baltimore’s Patterson High School in the early days of TD . . . Another returning face is that of Matt Wernsdorfer, who taught in the Success Academy at Patterson for two years; now, he’s organizational facilitator at the Baltimore Talent Development High School . . . New in curriculum is Vicki Hill, who is writing Career Academy Blended Mathematics lessons—algebra and geometry tasks that draw on the content of specific academies, such as health and fitness or arts. You might see Vicki, who has a PhD in math education, turning equations into mobiles or using x-rays to illustrate the relationship of light and distance . . . Cindy Berryman, an English/language arts coach in Kansas City, Mo., is leaving TDHS at the end of the school year. She’ll be back in a seventh-grade classroom in Independence, Mo., in the fall. The staffs at Southeast and Central high schools thank Cindy for the hard work and wish her well.

Research and Reports

Graduation Gap Web site
The Center for Social Organization of Schools and TDHS launched a new Web site for everyone interested in high school reform. The Graduation Gap Web site, at www.gradgap.org, provides user-friendly data sets, tables, charts and analyses—the best information available on the size, nature and location of the Graduation Gap. Researchers Bob Balfanz and Nettie Legters define that gap as the difference between existing high school graduation rates and skill levels and those needed to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century.

The first data tools on the site focus on “promoting power,” a concept that compares the number of freshmen enrolled in a high school to the number of seniors there four years later. These tools enable others to analyze how successful high schools are at graduating their students, how many high schools in each state have high graduation rates, and the number and characteristics of high schools that produce most of the dropouts in each state, and nationally.

Reports of interest

A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth, a report by the National High School Alliance, identifies six principles and recommends strategies for fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all high school students. Full report: www.hsalliance.org.
Baltimore enrollment up

As the Baltimore Talent Development High School plans for its second year, ninth-grade enrollment has topped expectations.

Aiming to attract 150 students, the school has enrolled 169 ninth-graders for the 2005-2006 school year. Located on two floors of a middle school on Baltimore’s west side, the school draws students from across the city—all of whom must choose to attend. The new ninth-graders will join about 140 tenth graders, the school’s first class.

There are also about 100 students on its ninth-grade waiting list, said principal Jeffrey Robinson.

The academies operate similarly, said organizational field manager Greg Ekey. Students do not have to retake the eighth grade assessment. Instead, the goal is for them to complete tenth grade in the academies and finish high school in a traditional school.

About 1,200 students finished ninth grade last year; 900 of them are still in school—more than 700 in the Achievement Academies and 200 in other schools, he said.

That is a victory to Ekey. “They all would have dropped out [without TD]. They are staying in school and that’s a big deal for this group.” They also are learning: For the first semester, 72 percent of the ninth-graders showed at least a half-year increase in math scores, and 69 percent showed gains in reading. Twenty percent made a one-and-a-half-year gain in math and 9 percent achieved that growth in reading.

Ekey also said the Achievement Academies are earning support from parents, students, and school and district administrators. They now look at the Achievement Academies as “a piece that’s working in the high schools.”

—Mary Maushard

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