

NINTH GRADE COUNTS



Using Summer Bridge Programs to
Strengthen the High School Transition

A THREE-PART GUIDE

3

Systemic Transition Strategies
English Language Learners
Summer Bridge Programs

Ninth Grade Counts

Using Summer Bridge Programs to Strengthen the High School Transition

Stephen E. Abbott and Kenneth Templeton
Great Schools Partnership
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Hanif Fazal, director, Step Up Program, Portland Public Schools, Oregon
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INTRODUCTION

Why We Created this Guide

During the transition into high school, incoming ninth-grade students encounter a bewildering array of new emotions, faces, responsibilities, distractions, social situations, and intellectual challenges. And for those students who enter high school unprepared academically, emotionally, or socially, the stakes are incredibly high: for every full-year course that ninth-grade students fail, their chance of graduating in four years decreases by 30 percent. (Neild, 2009)

Many schools and districts throughout the country are creating summer bridge programs to accelerate academic achievement, mitigate summer learning loss, and strengthen preparation for high school. While summer bridge programs have grown more common in recent years, they can vary widely in design and purpose from district to district or school to school. For example, some programs only offer one- or two-day orientations to high school, while others enroll students in a rigorous, multi-week academic program. Some districts specifically target students who are more likely to struggle in high school, while others have open-enrollment policies and serve students with diverse academic backgrounds. In many cases, districts fund and operate summer bridge programs, but others may be funded by grants and or operated in partnership with community organizations. While summer bridge programs come in many forms, this guide is specifically concerned with programs that are intended to eliminate skill gaps, accelerate learning, and enhance preparation for students at greater risk of failing or dropping out during ninth grade.

How to Use the Guide

Ninth Grade Counts is a three-part guide designed to help districts and schools strengthen programs and practices for students entering ninth grade. *Ninth Grade Counts: Using Summer Bridge Programs to Strengthen the High School Transition* is the third installment of the guide, and it will equip school leaders, educators, guidance counselors, and community partners with insights and research-based strategies they can use to develop or improve a summer bridge program.

The guide includes three main components:

- 1 A self-assessment protocol and reading activity that will help schools engage in small- and large-group discussions about existing or proposed summer bridge programs.
- 2 Three brief profiles of real districts and schools with innovative summer bridge programs that are getting results.
- 3 A series of three “planning roadmaps” that will help schools identify best practices, leadership strategies, and action-plan priorities.

The three planning roadmaps (pages 5–10) are organized into the following subsections, each of which features a selection of best practices and recommendations:

DISTRICT + SCHOOL CONDITIONS

- Culture + Expectations
- Professional Development
- Partnerships + Resources
- Policies + Accountability

PLANNING + ORIENTATION

- Data Collection + Analysis
- School Collaboration
- Student + Family Orientation
- Postsecondary Planning

INSTRUCTION + INTERVENTION

- Academic Preparedness
- Student Engagement + Enrichment
- Social + Emotional Development

Instructions

STEP 1

Begin with the self-assessment activity, which is designed to help high school faculties or program staff engage in a focused discussion about their existing or proposed summer bridge experiences. The purpose of the activity is to stimulate thoughtful self-reflection and begin identifying areas in need of attention, planning, or improvement.

STEP 2

In teams, review and discuss the selection of best practices listed on the planning roadmaps. Compare the strategies with an existing or proposed program in your district, and identify where practices or plans align or diverge. The accompanying profiles will help you to consider the strategies in context.

STEP 3

Review the column entitled *What Leaders Can Do*, a selection of guidance and recommendations for school leaders who are designing or administering a summer bridge program. This step is intended to get administrators, program directors, and teacher-leaders thinking about the leadership and coordination strategies needed to successfully implement a summer bridge program that is intensively focused on academic acceleration and ninth-grade preparation.

STEP 4

Each of the planning roadmaps includes workspace for recording effective and ineffective strategies, which will help educators begin to map out program needs and priorities. In the *What's Working* and *What's Not Working* columns, educators should record existing strategies and practices if the district or school already has a summer bridge program. If a program is still in the planning stages, record the conditions likely to support or hinder the development of a new summer bridge program.

STEP 5

The *Priorities + Next Steps* column is where educators can record relevant action-plan priorities. Once your district or school has completed the process, you should have a clear set of prioritized summer bridge strategies and action steps that can be incorporated into a district or school action plan.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

- 1 The self-assessment and planning process outlined in *Ninth Grade Counts* is not designed to evaluate school performance—it's simply a useful action-planning framework that can help make the complexities of school improvement more manageable for school leaders and educators.
- 2 The three columns in the self-assessment activity—*Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*—give schools general profiles of summer bridge programs at distinct stages of development. These descriptions are merely brief, representative illustrations, and schools will likely recognize elements of their program in all three approaches. Users should avoid attempts to perfectly match their program to a specific stage—the purpose of the activity is to encourage faculties to engage in the kind of frank, constructive, forward-looking discussions that move them from where they are to where they want to be.
- 3 The three planning roadmaps give school leaders a logical structure and process to follow when addressing critical aspects of ninth-grade transition—but they are not the only important features to consider when developing an effective summer bridge program. Real schools are not neatly organized into clear-cut categories, education research cannot take every factor into account, and new programs rarely unfold according to a perfectly charted step-by-step process. Districts and schools are complex, interdependent learning environments with unique qualities and characteristics, which means that no tool or process—no matter how well devised—will be able to anticipate or address every need.
- 4 Developing effective and appropriate programs for special-needs students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, as well as for their families, requires the kind of deep, specialized expertise that is beyond the scope of this guide. For this reason, the authors strongly encourage schools and faculties to investigate the research on effective instruction, support, and interventions for their specific student populations.

HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

While summer bridge programs reflect a wide variety of operational configurations, instructional philosophies, and learning goals, the most effective and high-impact programs—those designed to eliminate skill gaps, accelerate learning, and prepare all participating students for success in high school—share a few common characteristics identified by research:

- 1 Student-performance data are used to identify students who are at greater risk of failing, dropping out, or struggling emotionally, socially, and academically in high school, and identified students are proactively targeted for participation in the program.
- 2 Student data are provided to teachers before the program begins, and teachers personalize instruction and support to address identified learning gaps.
- 3 There is an intensive academic focus on the foundational reading, writing, math, and academic skills that are critical to success in high school and in all content areas.
- 4 Courses and learning experiences are taught by experienced, skilled, and qualified teachers—ideally, the same teachers who will instruct program students when they enter ninth grade.
- 5 The curriculum is based on clear learning goals and expectations that have been aligned with ninth-grade courses and learning standards.
- 6 Teachers, counselors, and advisors embed social and emotional development into all learning experiences, and they help students prepare for the challenges they are likely to encounter in ninth grade.
- 7 The curriculum also includes orientation activities for both students and families, assistance with study skills and organizational habits, and proactive postsecondary-planning guidance.
- 8 Educators and support specialists intentionally build relationships between students and adults—specifically, between students and the teachers, counselors, advisors, and mentors who will instruct and support students in ninth grade.

Self-Assessment Protocol

The following protocol will help district and school teams engage in a self-reflective conversation about summer bridge programs and ninth-grade transition strategies, particularly for students who are at greater risk of struggling academically, failing, or dropping out of high school. The goal of the activity is to examine your district or school in terms of three different approaches to summer bridge programs: *Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*. When it comes to successful transitions, proactive strategies are essential—a district or high school that strategically plans and prepares can help all students successfully transition into ninth grade and graduate on time prepared for college, careers, and civic life. We strongly encourage school leaders to include students, families, and local cultural leaders in the self-assessment activity.

Purpose

To identify strengths and weaknesses in existing or proposed summer bridge programs.

Structure

Break up into groups of four and assign the roles of facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper.

Time

Between 60–90 minutes.

Protocol [Adapted from the School Reform Initiative's Save the Last Word for ME protocol]

- 1 Individually, read the three descriptions—*Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*—on the following page. Keep in mind that these descriptions are merely concise, illustrative profiles that are based upon a synthesis of observations, research studies, and reports from schools. Your district or school may closely resemble one of the descriptions or it may reflect elements of all three. The goal is to provoke thoughtful, self-reflective discussions about how your school is addressing student success in ninth grade. While reading, participants should identify the specific features they believe accurately describe their school, district, or summer bridge program, and then select two or three passages they consider particularly important.
- 2 When the group is ready, a volunteer reads one passage that he or she has found to be the most significant. [NOTE: The volunteer should not reveal at this time why the passage is significant.]
- 3 After pausing briefly to reflect upon what has been said, the other three participants will have one minute to respond to the selected passage and express what the text made them think about and what questions it raised.
- 4 After the three have spoken, the first participant has three minutes to explain why he or she selected the passage.
- 5 The group conducts four rounds of seven minutes each. The same process is followed until all members have had a turn.
- 6 Participants share their opinions and thoughts about the district or school's general approach to ninth-grade student success, making sure to base their comments on concrete evidence, observations, and hard data as much as possible.
- 7 Each group makes a collective determination about where the district or school falls on the passive-reactive-proactive continuum and cites three specific supporting examples that came up during the session. One group member should be the recorder for this exercise. The group may use a flip chart or computer to record the examples.
- 8 The groups reconvene and share their results with the larger group.
- 9 The large-group facilitator collects the results and examples for future planning, making sure that all participants receive copies.

Passive

- The program is elective and open to all students, and recruitment efforts do not target specific high-need students or student subgroups. Some middle schools only recommend the program to high-achieving students, since it is largely perceived as an optional summer-enrichment opportunity.
- The summer-bridge program relies solely on unreliable, short-term funding streams—such as year-to-year allocations, grants, or donations—that do not lead to sustainable programming.
- The program has experienced high turnover rates among teachers and staff, many of whom are not experienced or certified, and there is little alignment between academic-year and summer bridge teaching responsibilities.
- Guidance counselors and support staff have little or no formal role in the summer bridge program, and contact with students and families during the summer is negligible.
- Teachers are given instructional materials and general guidelines, but the program does not have a clearly articulated curriculum or explicit learning goals. Individual teachers are largely left to teach on their own with little oversight, collaboration, or accountability.
- Advisory time is built into the program, but there is little direction about the purpose of advisories, how the time should be used, or what skills and knowledge students should gain from the experience.
- Achievement data on summer-bridge students are rarely provided to teachers, complicating efforts to personalize instruction and support. Program leaders have not established clear progress indicators or monitoring procedures, and ninth-grade teachers rarely receive data on summer-bridge students before the academic year begins.
- The summer bridge program is rarely mentioned in descriptions or discussions of ongoing school-improvement work, and the summer-bridge staff does not believe that school or district leaders value the program or understand how it can benefit students.
- A majority of the staff, students, and parents in the district are unaware of or uninformed about the program, and communication, marketing, and recruitment efforts tend to be halfhearted, inconsistent, and poorly executed.

Reactive

- The district and school have identified the student populations that would benefit most from the program, but there is often little correlation between program goals and the students who enroll in the program.
- The summer bridge program is primarily funded by the district, but it is largely seen as an optional expense; consequently, the program is continually in danger of losing funding during budget negotiations.
- While there is some degree of continuity among summer-bridge faculty from year to year, fully staffing the program is an ongoing challenge, and program leaders are often forced to hire less qualified staff members.
- Guidance counselors and support staff are introduced to students during the summer, but they are given few opportunities to build relationships with students or provide guidance on the transition into high school.
- Teachers use a collaboratively developed curriculum that emphasizes the foundational literacy and mathematical skills that will be assessed in ninth grade, but the curriculum tends to promote whole-class instruction, leaving little time for the kind of personalized instruction and support that can accelerate learning growth and close learning gaps.
- Advisory time is largely used to teach study skills and organizational habits that will help students succeed in high school, but social-emotional issues and long-term college-and-career planning are rarely addressed.
- Summer-bridge teachers receive student data at the beginning of the program, and the faculty meets informally with ninth-grade teachers before the academic year to discuss high-need students. Teachers typically track student learning progress on their own, but no formal performance-monitoring systems, policies, or expectations are in place.
- District and school leaders meet with both summer bridge staff and students, and the program is routinely discussed or profiled in district meetings, events, and communications materials.
- Program leaders attend parent information nights at sending middle schools, during which they distribute materials and answer questions. Middle school teachers remain largely uninformed about the program, however, and they do not actively encourage students or families to consider it.

Proactive

- The program is specifically designed to serve students who are at greater risk of failing, dropping out, or struggling academically in high school, and both district policies and program communications actively target these students for program participation.
- The program is jointly funded by the district and community partners, such as local businesses, foundations, and parent groups. The program has a long-term budget, a development director, and an active fundraising program.
- Administrators have recruited and assigned highly effective teachers to ninth-grade and summer bridge teaching positions, and teaching in the summer bridge program is built into teacher contracts.
- Students are connected throughout the summer with guidance counselors and support specialists, and they regularly meet in small groups or one-on-one sessions.
- The curriculum is based on explicit learning goals aligned with ninth-grade academic expectations and standards. Students receive intensive instruction in foundational academic skills and content, and personalized, project- and problem-based learning strategies enhance student engagement, skill acquisition, and relevance.
- Social-emotional development is integrated into advisories and instructional time. Advisors and teachers help students stay organized, plan ahead, set goals, practice communication skills, and build relationships with other students and adults.
- The program staff meets with eighth-grade teachers to discuss specific students, and detailed student-data reports are provided to all teachers. Program leaders have established progress benchmarks, and the entire summer bridge team meets weekly to discuss individual student progress and learning needs. A report on each student is prepared for ninth-grade teachers.
- District and school leaders are visible supporters of the program, and they actively contribute to its success by promoting the program to sending schools and communities, communicating results to the school board, and advocating for funding and resources.
- Several community partners actively promote the program and contribute staffing and resources—for example, by hosting field trips, pairing students with mentors, or providing experiential learning opportunities.



STEP UP PROGRAM

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Step Up Program in Portland Public Schools in Portland, Oregon, could be described as an “on ramp” to high school success. Through a partnership with Open Meadow Alternative Schools, the summer bridge program is a one-week leadership camp designed to teach strong habits of work, character traits such as persistence and resilience, and critical social-emotional strategies such as locus of control. The program is offered to “academic-priority” students entering three Portland high schools (academic priority is determined by course failures, low attendance rates, and below-grade-level scores on standardized tests in middle school). The weeklong camp represents an opportunity for students to make a developmental break from middle school and begin their high school journey with a series of positive, self-affirming learning experiences. Program support continues well into ninth and tenth grades, with a Step Up advocate providing after-school tutoring and social-emotional guidance to students. The advocate also works with ninth- and tenth-grade teachers during common planning time, attends classes when necessary, and helps students plan for future success or rebound from challenges. During the program, students identify the personal behaviors that help or impede their success, and then they regularly reference those specific behaviors with one another and with their advocates when discussing and reflecting on their education and future aspirations. Early performance data indicates that the Step Up program has been highly effective. In Portland Public Schools, 59 percent of ninth-grade students earn all required core-course credits. Yet despite the fact that Step Up serves students who are most at-risk of dropping out, more than 70 percent of Step Up students earn all required core-course credits in ninth grade and 98 percent make it to tenth grade.

Culture + Expectations

- A “growth mindset” philosophy informs every aspect of the program, including instruction, support, guidance, advising, and postsecondary planning. The program’s policies and culture actively promote an unwavering belief in every student’s ability to learn, grow, and succeed, and all messages, materials, and learning experiences reflect and reinforce this core belief.
- Program leaders intentionally strive to create an inviting atmosphere for students and their families by making personal calls, conducting home visits, hosting family orientation activities, inviting parents to participate in college tours, and making translated informational materials and interpreters available to English-language learners and non-English-speaking family members.
- Teachers clearly and repeatedly communicate to students the connection between success in ninth grade and overall success in high school, and parents know that multiple course failures, absences, and behavioral issues greatly increase the chances that their child will not graduate from high school.

Professional Development

- Work sessions and study groups for all program staff are held in the spring or early summer, during which they discuss relevant readings and research, plan how they are going to collaborate and team teach, and determine how they are going to monitor student learning growth and communicate identified learning needs to ninth-grade teachers.
- Weekly professional learning groups are held for all teachers, staff, and community volunteers. The sessions are used to work through professional dilemmas, discuss students who need additional support, and determine more effective ways to personalize instruction or accelerate learning for specific students.
- The program provides learning opportunities for new and developing teachers. Novice teachers are paired with experienced teachers to observe skillful instruction, conduct mini-lessons, work with small groups of students, and tutor under the guidance of veteran teachers.

Partnerships + Resources

- Local organizations—universities, businesses, social-welfare groups, and nonprofit organizations—have been enlisted as partners in the program. The organizations help underwrite program expenses, provide additional staffing, offer space in community facilities, pair students with adult mentors, and create new experiential learning opportunities for students. A core group of business and community leaders act as spokespersons for and champions of the program.
- The program has a community-coordinator position or role. The coordinator is responsible for developing and executing a community-engagement plan with specific action items, deadlines, and deliverables, including the organizations that will be contacted and the communications they will receive.
- The program has a diversified fundraising program, with ambitious but achievable fundraising goals, that is coordinated by a development director. The development plan identifies several specific funding sources and strategies: philanthropic foundations with aligned giving programs, individual and institutional donors, local businesses with charitable programs, or an “adopt a student” campaign, for example.

Policies + Accountability

- Qualified and experienced teachers are hired to instruct academic courses in the program, and volunteers, college students, and paraprofessionals are only used to supplement and enrich instruction and support.
- Program leaders have a comprehensive but feasible accountability process that ensures all students receive effective, high-quality instruction every day. The process includes classroom observations by program leaders and colleagues, regular evaluation meetings with faculty members, formal professional feedback, and continual progress monitoring with clear benchmarks for student-learning growth.
- To assure student safety, the program has a rigorous screening process and clear conduct policies for all community volunteers, advisors, and mentors. For example: students will not be supervised by less than two adults at any time, volunteers are not allowed to give students rides in their personal vehicles, and volunteers are not allowed to exchange contact information or schedule off-site meetings with students.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Be a visible and vocal advocate for summer bridge experiences and articulate a clear and compelling vision, mission, and theory of action for the program. Frame the summer bridge program as an integral extension of the high school program (not as an optional or add-on service) to enhance its perceived value and proactively safeguard the program from future budget cuts.
- ✓ Strive to make program more prestigious in the school and community. Consider developing a competitive staff-selection process, offering generous compensation for instructors, recruiting a highly skilled and motivated faculty, and creating well-designed marketing and communications materials.
- ✓ Create both staffing and instructional continuity between the summer bridge and ninth-grade programs. Build summer positions into teaching contracts, with appropriate compensation, and actively recruit ninth-grade teachers so they can begin building relationships with incoming students.
- ✓ Analyze the costs of drop outs to the district and community—including the investment already made in educating students through middle school, as well as the projected revenues and economic opportunities that may be lost in the future—and use these estimates to make a case for investing in summer-bridge experiences. Clearly connect educational attainment with overall community prosperity to build support for up-front investments that will lead to sustainable, long-term benefits.
- ✓ Use the program to pilot innovative instructional strategies, such as project-based learning, community-based learning, and service learning. Document the strategies—using videos, news stories, or public exhibitions of student work—to build greater understanding of and support for more innovative programs in the school, district, and community.
- ✓ Enlist former summer bridge students who can advocate for the program and communicate its importance with emotionally resonant stories of personal success. For example, publish interviews with former students, pitch stories to local news media, or include students in meetings with school board members, parents, business leaders, and community partners.
- ✓ Keep student-teacher ratios below 18-to-1 so that teachers can develop meaningful relationships with students, identify learning gaps, and effectively personalize instruction.
- ✓ Make the diversification of funding streams and the appointment of a development director top priorities. Begin to proactive steps immediately to guard against future budgetary curtailments, even if cutbacks are unlikely or unanticipated.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps



JUMPSTART TO GRADUATION

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Throughout their four-week summer experience, every student in Jumpstart to Graduation, a summer bridge program administered by Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland, learns about the importance of collegiate education and the need to begin postsecondary planning as early as possible. The program serves approximately 400 students at five different high school sites that all follow a common curriculum. Early in the summer session, students travel to the Challenge Course at the University of Maryland for a day of character-building experiences. Program students meet with college students who have been trained in facilitating team-building, goal-setting, and self-reflection activities—an experience that sets the tone for the summer bridge session. Later in the program, students are given a day of postsecondary exploration designed to demystify the college experience and challenge the perception that there is only one kind of college for certain kinds of students. Students visit a four-year private college, a four-year historically black college, and a two-year community college. Many participating students have subsequently reported that the college-exploration experiences helped them reflect on their aspirations and begin postsecondary planning early on in their high school career. By giving students a variety of first-hand experiences on college campuses, the Jumpstart program underscores the importance of matching learning goals to specific career aspirations. In addition, teachers and counselors accompany students on the college visits, where students begin to build relationships with the adults who will play a critical role educating and advising them in high school. Evidence suggests that the program is having a significant effect: the ninth-grade promotion rate was 82 percent for summer bridge students and 47 percent for other ninth graders. In tenth grade, the promotion rate was 91 percent for summer bridge students and 50 percent for other tenth graders.

Data Collection + Analysis

- Before the program begins, eighth-grade teachers and summer bridge faculty are brought together to review attendance, behavior, and academic-performance data on participating students. The faculties discuss specific student learning gaps and interventions that have worked or failed, and the information collected during these sessions informs both curriculum design and intervention strategies.
- A consistent set of data is collected during the program, and all data are distributed and shared among all program teachers using an online data system that allows staff members to quickly and easily access student data when needed.
- Common assessments are used to monitor student progress toward the achievement of expected learning standards, and all academic grading and reporting is based on clearly articulated standards aligned with ninth-grade learning expectations.

School Collaboration

- While the program is run by the high school, program leaders recognize that sending middle schools are better positioned to recruit prospective students. Program staff brief middle schools every year, providing talking points, marketing products, and other resources that help to simplify and improve communication with students and families.
- Middle school teachers and counselors are given opportunities to have personal experiences with the program. They are invited to participate in summer bridge activities and to encourage prospective students and families to consider the program. While informational materials are important and essential, program leaders recognize that personal experiences and relationships resonate emotionally.
- Middle and high school teachers collaboratively develop the summer bridge curriculum to address potential misalignments in academic expectations that require the insights and expertise of both middle-level and secondary educators.

Student + Family Orientation

- All program staff members prioritize positive and meaningful personal interactions with each student's family, and program leaders have established a clear goal for teachers: connect at least once with every student's family through a phone call, home visit, or event that celebrates their child's strengths, accomplishments, and contributions.
- The program begins with an off-campus experience—such as a field trip or outdoor-challenge course at a local camp—that builds a feeling of community and trust among students and teachers. The experience is focused on setting and attaining goals, developing resilience and persistence, reflecting on past behaviors, and improving self-advocacy and problem-solving skills.
- Program leaders recognize that some communication channels work better for some than for others, and they communicate with students, families, and community partners in multiple ways—through informational materials, personal outreach, off-site events, or online and social media, depending on the needs of the target audience. Non-English-speaking families have access to translations and interpreters to facilitate awareness, understanding, and participation.

Postsecondary Planning

- Proactive college and career planning has been intentionally integrated into every aspect of the program. Postsecondary-planning messages are delivered in every course and learning experience, and students are given opportunities—during advisory time and orientation activities—to consider their future goals and begin planning the practical steps they will need to take during high school to achieve those aspirations.
- All students participate in at least one college visit during the program, and all families—especially the families of first-generation students—are invited and encouraged to participate. Program leaders recognize that first-hand experiences can demystify college and make collegiate aspirations seem more tangible and achievable for students and their families.
- Students and families are given practical guidance on college preparation. College representatives and students are invited into the program to discuss long-term college planning, including the application process, financial-aid forms, course selection, extracurricular participation, and the work habits required to succeed in college. Program leaders also create opportunities for program students to talk informally with visiting college students.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Determine the specific types of high-need students and student populations that will be served by the summer bridge program—for example, students who are most likely to struggle academically, fail, or drop out in high school, and who are least likely to receive formal learning and academic support over the summer. Use these profiles to guide all operational decisions, recruitment efforts, marketing materials, and curriculum development.
- ✓ Consider “jump starting” the program during the spring session and recruit older students to participate as mentors. Invite prospective eighth-grade students to spend a morning in the high school shadowing an older student, and ask the younger visiting students to reflect on the similarities and differences between middle school and high school. Assign upper-class high school students to mentor younger students while they are in the program and during the fall semester after they begin high school.
- ✓ Give guidance counselors sufficient time to build relationships with their assigned students. During these sessions, ask the counselors to focus primarily on asking questions, getting to know their students, and establishing trusting relationships.
- ✓ Track and analyze summer bridge enrollment patterns. Disaggregate data to identify specific student populations that are not participating in the program, and to determine if variations in enrollment are due to opportunity gaps or access-related issues that can be addressed and overcome.
- ✓ Ensure that every program instructor and support specialist is provided with detailed data on every student in advance of the program, including academic-performance records, test scores, professional evaluations, or behavioral and attendance histories. Accurate and detailed student data are what separates the most successful programs from least successful programs.
- ✓ Compile and report on the results of summer bridge participation—including both quantitative evidence (student-performance data, behavioral incidences, attendance) and qualitative evidence (anecdotes and observations)—to ninth-grade teachers before the beginning of the academic year.
- ✓ Track and analyze family participation in summer bridge events and survey parents every year. Ask them how the program can improve outreach, communication, student support, and postsecondary planning, and use the feedback to strengthen program practices from year to year.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps



COLLEGE READINESS ACADEMY

ANTIOCH HIGH SCHOOL

Three years ago, 35 percent of the student population at Antioch High School in Antioch, California, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch—but today more than 70 percent qualify. Yet according to principal Louie Rocha, the school's summer bridge strategy has remained the same because "students and parents have the same aspiration: to go to college and be successful." The College Readiness Academy is a nine-week summer program that provides intensive instruction in the essential math and English skills students will need to succeed in high school. The program also helps students and their families both understand and begin taking the critical steps necessary for college matriculation and success. With additional support from two Los Medanos College student tutors per classroom, each academy teacher works with approximately 25 students, using pre-assessments to personalize instruction and monitor student learning growth over the summer. Participating students also go on three college visits with their families. "It's important to expose parents and families to the opportunities students will have in college," says Mr. Rocha. "By visiting the schools themselves, they can see firsthand the doors that will open for their children." Participating students can enroll in one of four career academies: Engineering; Environmental Studies; Media and Technology; and Leadership and Public Service. Historically, incoming students only had the opportunity to choose either the high school's general education courses or the Engineering Academy in ninth grade, but the program students who enrolled in Engineering Academy experienced such success on high school exit exams—97 percent proficient in English language arts and 98 percent in math—that Mr. Rocha expanded the career academy options available to participating students. In many ways, the program serves as an extended induction to Antioch High School.

Academic Preparedness

- Instruction is intensively focused on the foundational academic and metacognitive skills essential to success in high school, such as ninth-grade-level mathematics, reading and writing across the content areas, critical thinking and problem solving, and strong habits of work. Students have ample opportunities to practice skills and receive feedback from teachers.
- Discussions about study habits, planning strategies, and organizational skills are prioritized in both advisory periods and academic time. Students reflect on their work habits and attitudes about school, and instructors guide them to a greater understanding of how work habits, self-beliefs, and character traits will contribute to or inhibit their success in school.
- Program teachers and support specialists use all available middle-level assessment data, such as NWEA or state-assessment scores, to establish baseline student achievement in reading, writing, and math. When achievement data are unavailable, diagnostic assessments are administered during the spring semester of eighth grade or on the first day of the program.
- Summer bridge students are connected to appropriate support opportunities in ninth grade, including peer tutoring and mentoring, before-school and after-school programs, literacy and math labs, or counseling from social workers and school psychologists. The knowledge of students gained by the summer bridge staff is used to match students with support opportunities that will address their specific needs and increase their chances of success and persistence in high school.
- Prior to the beginning of the school year, all ninth grade students participate in a "ninth grade only" day at the high school, where they meet all of their teachers and experience each classroom setting. Teachers offer short lessons to introduce themselves and their learning expectations to students, and advisors meet with students to reflect on how high school differs from their middle school experience. Upper-class students formally welcome ninth graders to the school and discuss the school culture, academic expectations, and learning opportunities, including co-curricular and extracurricular programs.

Student Engagement + Enrichment

- Teachers use a diverse repertoire of instructional practices to engage students, including flexible grouping strategies, one-on-one support sessions, and whole-class discussions, while direct instruction is limited to short intervals and appropriate lessons. Students are given a degree of choice over learning content, processes, and products, and culminating demonstrations of learning are used to ensure that students have achieved expected academic standards.
- Long-term investigative projects, service-learning opportunities, interdisciplinary teaching, and other innovative strategies combine rigorous academic standards with authentic learning experiences. Academic learning is intentionally and strategically connected to real-world contexts, issues, and events, and visiting experts and field trips to colleges, museums, or historical sites expose students to novel learning experiences.
- Community- and character-building experiences—such as ropes courses, outdoor challenges, and friendly academic competitions (debates or math contests, for example)—promote social-emotional development, cultivate leadership abilities, and develop teamwork, communication, and interpersonal skills.

Social + Emotional Development

- Social-emotional development is a foundational part of the curriculum, and students are routinely encouraged to advocate for themselves and take greater responsibility for their own education. Teachers embed self-advocacy messages and guidance, such as locus-of-control strategies (refocusing students on what they can change or do to fix a problem, for example), into all learning experiences, and student surveys and other evidence indicate that students consistently ask for extra help when they need it and request support services.
- Program leaders have sought out local experts on social-emotional development—psychologists, social workers, college professors—to review and strengthen the curriculum, train or program instructors, and provide direct support to students.
- Adult advisors are assigned to each summer bridge student to monitor both academic achievement and social-emotional wellbeing. Advisors receive both guidelines for and training in basic counseling strategies, including when they need to refer students to social services or counseling specialists.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Determine explicit learning goals and progress benchmarks for the program, and clearly communicate these expectations to all teachers, staff, students, and families. The goals and benchmarks should inform every dimension of the program, including instruction, support, and assessment strategies, and all staff, students, and families should be able to describe the program goals and why they matter.
- ✓ Establish clear professional expectations and guidelines for evidence-based instruction, proactive curriculum planning, formative assessment, and student learning growth. Provide a clear instructional mission and road map for all teachers and staff, and regularly review both teaching resources and results to ensure that students are receiving high-quality instruction and meeting growth benchmarks for academic performance.
- ✓ Monitor classroom instruction with brief walkthroughs. Collect evidence—formally or informally—on student-engagement levels, instructional practices, grouping strategies, the cognitive demand of lessons, and program-specific instructional goals, such as the use of specific literacy strategies, learning technologies, or specific messages (for example, evidence that teachers are actively promoting a “growth mindset” approach to learning). Review observation data regularly with the faculty to help them reflect on their instructional strategies and on how well they align with the program’s mission and objectives.
- ✓ Build a curriculum that intentionally celebrates local history and cultures, particularly in communities with larger populations of minorities, English language learners, and recently arrived immigrant students. Create experiential learning opportunities that both reflect and utilize local cultural assets and “funds of knowledge.”
- ✓ Meet with community-based organizations and cultural centers and ask them to display or share student work from the summer bridge program—particularly work from project-based, community-based, or service learning projects that reflect community values or needs.
- ✓ Host a culminating experience for summer bridge students to celebrate their matriculation into high school with the full support of staff, family, and community volunteers. Use student speakers to reflect on the importance of the summer program, and have students share their work, learning progress, and projects.

What's Working

What's Not Working

Priorities + Next Steps

Useful Research

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About the Smaller Learning Communities Program

The U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Program awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies to support the implementation of smaller learning communities and activities designed to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Smaller learning communities include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or themes, "houses" in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, autonomous schools-within-a-school, and personalization strategies such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.

In May 2007, the U.S. Department of Education established a new absolute priority for the program that focuses grant assistance on projects that are part of a larger, comprehensive effort to prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.

The Smaller Learning Communities program is authorized under Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (20 U.S.C. 7249), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

For more information

ed.gov/programs/slcp