

Ninth Grade: The Most Important Year in High School

Freshman year is essential in deciding whether a student drops out or stays in school.

By Michele Willens
NOVEMBER 1, 2013

Educators are increasingly focusing on the ninth grade as the year that determines whether a young person will move on or drop out of school. According to research published in the journal *Education*, ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high-school grade level. Ninth grade has increasingly become a “bottleneck” for students: A joint report from Princeton University and the Brookings Institution found “in 1970, there were 3 percent fewer tenth graders than ninth graders; by 2000, that share had risen to 11 percent.”

“More and more of us are realizing that it’s the make or break year for many 14- and 15-year-olds,” says Jon Zaff, director of the Center for Promise at Tufts University. “It’s a time when the cognitive, emotional, and physical are all coming together. The schools are likely new environments, and the students have more autonomy and more homework.”

Not only are youths entering the intimidating institution that is high school, they are experiencing the usual adolescent angst and depending on poor decision-making skills. “Students entering high school—just at the time brains are in flux—still have the propensity to be impulsive and are prone to making mistakes,” says Washington D.C. psychoanalyst Dr. Linda Stern. “They are therefore experimental and trying to separate and might try substances that interfere with the normal developmental process. Put all that together with raging hormones, the normal academic pressures, and meeting a whole new group to be judged by.”

When kids fall behind and have to repeat a grade, they can wind up in a vicious cycle of peer judgment and low self-esteem. “We are ending up with something now called the ninth-grade bulge,” explains Zaff, “which means a glut of students who have to repeat the grade. So they are stigmatized socially as well as academically, which can also lead to their finding it easier to just give up.”

While she doesn't deny that the ninth grade is a pivotal moment in a student's education, Diane Ravitch, author of *Reign of Error*, has her suspicions about the motivations behind schools' growing interest in ninth-grade performance. "Many schools allow students to advance ready or not, and when they reach the ninth the stakes are higher. The high-stakes testing starts in the tenth grade so kids are being held back not for their own sake but to protect their school's statistics. If the focus were really on the students, people would be thinking creatively about how to help them instead of thinking of them as data points."

Educators are honing in on three indicators—attendance, behavior, and course performance—that are believed to be the most accurate measurements of a student’s likelihood to either quit school or move on. A lengthy, detailed guide from the National High School Center states that “more students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out.” The guide describes telltale signs that can be detected as early as the first semester of the first year in high school: The biggest risk factor for failing ninth, for example, is the number of absences during the first 30 days. Missing more than 10 percent is cause for concern. In addition, first-year high-school students are classified as ‘on track’ if they earn at least five full year course credits, and have received no more than one F per semester. So to be ‘off track’? You do the math.

High schools are working to use this information to keep students in school past the ninth grade. The Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins School of Education recommends something called the Freshman Seminar for students in their first year of high school. The program offers learning materials and training specialists to aid students in study and social skills. Some students use it during homeroom or advisory periods, some during special enhancement periods.

“We try to build some relevance into their experience to go along with the regular curriculum,” says Mary Maushard, communications director for the Everyone Graduates Center. “So many of these ninth graders—particularly in high-poverty areas—just don’t see any reason to stay in school.”

There are signs that programs and administrators are getting through to high school freshmen. In Portland, Oregon, Self-Enhancement Inc.—which employs coordinators to oversee 30 high-risk students each, in 12 public schools—takes pride in a 98 percent high-school graduation rate for the students it works with. Goals are set for every student, and the aides are available 24/7 and serve as links between child and school, parent and school, and child and parent.

“A lot of what we do is to prepare the students for the ninth grade,” says Self-Enhancement project manager Lisa Manning. “We make sure they have cultural activities that engage them and that they attend a six week-summer program for the academics before even starting.”

New York City’s Flushing High School, one of the city’s so-called “dropout factories,” now hosts a program designed to keep at-risk students in school. Initiated by the Sports and Arts In Schools Foundation, a non-profit that works to improve low-performing schools in the city, and sponsored by AT&T, the program brings in a support staff to encourage students to participate in after-school activities in athletics and the arts and to work closely with low-performing students throughout the school day.

“Just by staying on top of the students who were considered to be in trouble academically, we’ve had tremendous success,” says Amir Sultan, a program manager for the Sports and Arts in Schools

Foundation. “Now, some 85 percent have moved on to the tenth grade. That’s not only double-digit improvement over previous numbers, but over the other students not in the program.”

The answers seem to be coming, however gradually, and at least the right questions are being asked. “The main one is what does each of these potential dropouts in the ninth grade need as they make this big transition?” says Zaff. “It’s a time of great upheaval and great opportunity.”

Michele Willens is a journalist, playwright, and the editor of *Face It: What Women Really Feel as Their Looks Change*.