Texas Study of Students at Risk: Case Studies of Initiatives Supporting Ninth Graders' Success

Cross-Site Report
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CASE STUDIES OF INITIATIVES SUPPORTING NINTH GRADERS' SUCCESS

Researchers conducted case studies of Ninth Grade Success Initiative (NGSI) grants to gain a greater understanding of issues facing large numbers of at-risk students, many of whom, despite potentially receiving services as early as kindergarten, still reach ninth grade unprepared to succeed academically in high school. Case studies focused on NGSI projects and the broader high school contexts in which they operated. Studies involved 11 of 226 districts that received NGSI funding between 1999-2000 and 2002-03. In addition to NGSI funds, districts also benefited from Optional Extended Year program (OEYP) formula-based allocations, Texas After School Initiative (TASI) grants, or both.

NGSI PROGRAM

understanding the basics. Limited access to supplemental instruction in computer labs and uneven program implementation, however, diminish the potential impact on student achievement.

Extended-day programs. A few districts funded extended-day programs with tutorials or credit recovery opportunities for ninth graders. Students who took advantage of extended-day tutorials apparently benefited, but student participation was a major obstacle. Most students at risk are unlikely to attend extended-day tutorials voluntarily. Examples of successful programs were rare, but better participation was associated with programs that were well organized and scheduled, obtained parent consent and support, used alternative instructional approaches (e.g., computer-assisted learning), and provided transportation.

Extended-year programs (summer school). Nearly all districts used NGSI funds to provide credit recovery opportunities for ninth graders through summer programs. Summer programs varied by duration, daily schedule, earnable credits, course delivery method, and core-subject availability. Summer programs reportedly allowed some students to recover credits, avoid retention, and remain with their peers in tenth grade. Districts face challenges in getting ninth graders to attend summer school, ensuring regular attendance, setting high expectations for student work and behavior, and helping students prepare for subsequent coursework. The voluntary nature of summer programs narrows the population of students who attend and benefit.

Whole-school improvement. Districts seldom used NGSI grants to transform their high schools' approach to serving students at risk. However, a few undertook organizational restructuring by creating a *school-within-a-school*. A limited number of districts invested in core-subject course improvement or teacher professional development.

● *School-within-a-school.* Two districts used schools-within-a school to create smaller and more supportive environments in high schools. Ninth-grade teams reportedly strengthened student and teacher support, improved parent communication, increased focus on student progress, and reduced retention. Some educators believe ninth graders are carrying forward organizational habits and responsible behaviors developed in the school-within-a-school.

● *Enhancement of core-subject courses and professional development.* Core-subject course enhancement occurred infrequently through NGSI grants. Educators in two districts that used computer-assisted instruction to enhance Algebra I coursework for ninth graders, however, believed the initiatives improved instruction and learning. Similarly, professional development was used in only a few districts as a means to improve teaching and learning in core-subject area classrooms.

EFFECT OF GRANT RESOURCES ON TARGETED STUDENTS

Research design and confounding factors make causal inferences about NGSI effects on the case-study districts impossible; however, data trends across the grant period reveal some increases in student attendance, decreases in retention rates, and improved algebra performance.

Despite improvements, student attendance rates are generally less than 95% (*No Child Left Behind* test-participation standard), nearly one-fifth of ninth graders are not promoted, and fewer than half of ninth graders typically passed end-of-course algebra exams.

SCHOOL CONTEXT AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Structure and organization. Although most high schools retain the traditional grades 9-12 structure, some have created smaller, more supportive units within the high school. Scheduling approaches vary widely, but high schools appear to be shifting from block schedules (90-minute periods) to traditional, single-period schedules (50-minute periods). A few high schools modified their schedules to give extended learning time to ninth graders considered at risk of academic failure, primarily in algebra and English. Two districts created ninth-grade schools with students housed in a separate building near an affiliated senior high school. This configuration reportedly benefits ninth graders by easing crowding (about 800-900 students per school), reducing discipline problems, and creating an environment that allows maximum attention to students' academic and emotional needs

Teaming and collaboration. Teachers believe high schools have clear goals and priorities, much cooperative effort, and a strong focus on student achievement, but they are less positive about their involvement in decision making and the enforcement of rules for student behavior. In many high schools where departments are organized by subject area, teachers report few interdisciplinary meetings or meetings with peers for instructional planning. Smaller high school units (school-within-a-school, ninth-grade center) seemed to promote better teacher collaboration.

Extra academic assistance. All high schools visited offer extra academic assistance to students considered at risk, but some take a more structured approach. Academic assistance frequently helps students prepare for the state assessment (TAKS), complete assignments, or make-up assignments or excessive absences. Although educators and student participants believe tutorials are helpful, most at-risk students do not attend unless they are required. Barriers to participation in tutorials include transportation issues, lack of motivation, scheduling difficulties, after-school conflicts, and perceived benefits.

Guidance and counseling. Guidance and counseling services for students in at-risk situations are limited in many high schools by counselor-to-student ratios that exceed recommended standards. Contacts between at-risk ninth graders' and counselors are limited primarily to the selection of courses or programs; older students are more likely to receive information about jobs and careers, or how to improve academic work. Ninth graders' interactions with counselors on high school plans occur most often in groups rather than individually. Most students at risk report limited contact with counselors regarding higher education and career options, but access varies across districts and schools.

Teachers and teaching. Ninth-grade teachers are fairly experienced, but a substantial proportion (about 40%) comes to teaching through non-traditional certification. Educators raise concerns about the assignment of new and inexperienced teachers to ninth-grade courses.

● *Perceptions of effective Instruction.* Beliefs about teaching practices vary widely among high school teachers, with some advocating learner-centered approaches and others favoring traditional methods. Students who are at risk say *good teachers* provide clear explanations, encourage active and meaningful learning, make class interesting, establish personal relationships, use small-group activities, and offer individual help. Both teachers and students advocate active and meaningful learning experiences, varied (or interesting) instructional approaches, and positive interpersonal relationships.

● *Teachers' classroom practices.* Teachers expressed opinions on effective instruction, as cited above, differ from observed practice. High school classrooms are organized most often for whole-class instruction. Students seldom work collaboratively with peers. Teachers spend the greatest proportion of class time providing whole-group instruction and monitoring students as they work independently on assignments. Teachers seldom ask mentally challenging questions or questions that help at-risk students see the relevance of subject matter to their lives. Since teachers have little access to technology in classrooms, it is seldom used to support instruction and learning.

Students and learning. The problem with teacher-centered classrooms is the effect on students. Students considered at risk spend the greatest part of their time listening to teacher presentations or independently completing short-answer activities or worksheets. Most class discussions were teacher controlled question and answer exchanges. Overall, observed practices in high school classrooms raise

questions about teachers' understanding of students as learners, especially research-based conceptions (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2002).

● *Perceptions of students as learners.* Educators believe ninth graders' academic performance is affected by inadequate learning strategies and skills, immaturity and irresponsibility, lack of academic preparation, lack of motivation, and poor attendance.

● *Disengagement from high school and learning.* Evidence from various sources points to at-risk students' disengagement. Poor attendance, lack of motivation, disruptive behavior, irresponsibility regarding homework and grades are all symptoms of larger problems. Findings throughout this study point to such issues as: boring and repetitive instruction in core subject-area classrooms that fails to engage students intellectually; limited use of technology in core-content classrooms to support engaged learning; expectations to attend after-school or Saturday tutorials when in-school time is not used to the greatest advantage; repeated course failure, which narrows educational choices and opportunities for enriched learning experiences; and poor access to counseling and advisement to help students set goals and see how current investments in learning yield future benefits.

Transition from middle to high school.

Differences in school size and organization, grading systems, educational philosophy, teacher characteristics, and academic expectations reportedly make the transition from middle to high school difficult for ninth graders. Other student-related issues, such as inadequate academic preparation, increased freedom coupled with immaturity, home-life situations, and apathy are cited as factors that make high school challenging for many ninth graders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GRANT AWARDS AND MANAGEMENT

Grant recipients generally praised the TEA's facilitation of the NGSI grant process. Recommendations concerning grant management typically related to the timing of grant awards and funding. Many grantees appreciated efforts in later terms to streamline the evaluation process. Findings to follow relate to overall improvement of grant development, implementation and monitoring, and sustainability.

Grant development. Grant applications should put greater emphasis on identifying problems, determining the root causes, and articulating how the project will alleviate those problems. NGSI grant development primarily involved campus and district administrators. Future grant applications should be informed by the thinking of various stakeholders. Greater input from faculty, staff, and even parents and students can lead to a better-informed set of solutions and increased buy-in. Grant programs for students at risk should also be aligned with curricular and learning expectations in regular classrooms. The establishment of separate or dual curricula for at-risk students in several NGSI schools conflicts with research demonstrating the harmful effects of tracking low-performing students (Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992). Guidelines for grants should also lead districts and campuses to adopt research-based practices—thus, applicants should have access to research-based information on effective instruction and school improvement. Most importantly, grants aimed at improving learning and academic performance of at-risk students should include substantial investments in professional development, especially for classroom teachers.

Grant Implementation and monitoring. Grants should require or strongly encourage the addition of dedicated program leaders. Schools with dedicated program management at both the district and campus level appeared to have the greatest success implementing and continuing their grants. Major program changes made during the grant should also require TEA approval. Several schools made substantial changes to their initiatives during implementation. In some cases, entire components were dropped. Grant awardees should also have access to external technical support, assistance, and formative evaluation. Assistance providers can help schools implement effective, research-based strategies. While expertise often is available within schools and districts, technical assistance by external providers or agency staff broadens the pool of knowledge from which schools and districts can draw.

Grant sustainability. Districts should have a contingency plan to address changes in grant leadership. Staff and administrator turnover undermined consistent grant implementation and had a negative impact on the continuation of NGSI programs. When major grant staffing changes occur, districts should submit a revised plan to show how grant activities will be sustained under new project leaders. Broad-based input into grant planning and development was associated with successful grant implementation; thus, more widespread support for grant development and implementation will help to alleviate the void left when key project leaders leave a school or district.

Link to full text: http://www.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/HighSchoolCollege/txssar_cross_site.pdf