

# Transformative High School Experiences Start With Ninth Grade

From our work with schools and districts across the country, we've developed a vision for transformative high school experiences.

## ERS' Vision for High School

"The path to and through high school is a critical transition for every young person. But for far too many, our high schools have not been preparing them well for life after graduation. The pandemic simply doubled down on these challenges, resulting in higher course failure and far lower attendance rates, particularly among our most vulnerable high school students. Many struggled to access everything from [the internet](#) to [healthy meals](#) and [stable housing](#). [Mental health needs](#) spiked, and [postsecondary matriculation](#) dropped. And some students had or now have [other significant obligations outside of school](#), such as working to support themselves and their families or caring for a younger sibling or child.

These intensified needs require a new high school experience—something different than what was offered in most communities before COVID and something more robust than the limited combination of tutoring and credit recovery options available now. High schools can engage students in empowering, standards-aligned work that is connected to what young people care about and what's next for them, at times that work for them, and with teachers who have the energy and support they need to build strong relationships with students, affirming their interests and identities along the way. Students should have varied opportunities to earn credits, targeted structures to meet their individual learning needs, deeper support for navigating their own wellness, and connections to relevant and timely postsecondary opportunities. All of this is as true for ninth and 10th graders who entered the high school building for the very first time this fall as it is for 11th and 12th graders working against the clock to complete graduation requirements."

*Learn more about our full vision at [District Administration magazine](#).*

We know that if students don't experience the structures needed to create this vision until they reach 11th and 12th grade, it's often too late. To change the high school experience, school and system leaders must start with ninth grade.

## NINTH GRADE

# A Critical—but Under-Resourced—Year

Research has shown that ninth grade is uniquely important for student success, yet despite increased investments, leaders aren't always equipped to meet ninth graders' distinct needs.

The transition from middle to high school is both critical and complex, as students encounter significant changes during this time, including taking on more advanced content and more responsibility for their own learning. For students who may be struggling, these changes can contribute to increased academic or behavioral concerns. Nationwide, ninth graders tend to have more missed classes, lower grade-point averages, more failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than students at any other high school grade level.<sup>1</sup> And these indicators matter: In the Everyone Graduates Center's foundational study of Philadelphia Public Schools, researchers found that "ABCs" (absenteeism, behavior referrals, and course failure) are highly predictive early warning indicators of students dropping out.<sup>2</sup>

Students who don't master foundational skills in ninth grade are also less likely to continue to have access to—and be successful in—rigorous college and career experiences in high school that prepare them for postsecondary success. While typical credit recovery programs have been shown to increase credit attainment,<sup>3</sup> they seldom impact learning. In other words, students who fail often continue to progress through high school. Because they need to recover learning they missed in previous courses, these students are then less likely to access advanced college and career coursework—and less likely to be successful when they do. Further, many schools use course periods that could help students progress toward their post-graduation steps with credit recovery courses.

Given the importance of this critical year, we'd hope to see an increased investment in ninth grade. In our work with states and districts, however, we often see that high school students and teachers aren't receiving the resources and supports they need, with comparative under-resourcing in key areas of ninth grade support, including around teacher experiences and student experiences.



1. Kyle Megan McCallumore and Ervin F. Sparapani, "The Importance of the Ninth Grade on High School Graduation Rates and Student Success," *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review* 76, 2 (2010): 60-64. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ903523>.
2. Robert Balfanz, Donette Hall, Paul Verstraete, Felicia Walker, Monica Hancock, Johann Liljengren, Maria Waltmeyer, Linda Muskauskis, and Tara Madden, "Indicators & Interventions: A Practical Manual for Early Warning Systems," Johns Hopkins School of Education, 2019. [https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20190918\\_EGC\\_EWSManual\\_Final2.pdf](https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20190918_EGC_EWSManual_Final2.pdf).
3. Malkus, Nat. American Enterprise Institute. "Second Chance or Second Track?" American Enterprise Institute. September 2018. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Second-Chance-or-Second-Track.pdf?x91208>.



## TEACHER EXPERIENCES

**Teacher loads.** Across the districts we’ve worked with, high school teacher loads range significantly, with some as high as 164 students.<sup>4</sup> Ninth grade teachers tend to experience loads as high—if not slightly higher—than teachers in upper grades. An average 57% of ninth grade English language arts (ELA) teachers, for example, have a load of more than 110 students, and 54% of ninth grade math teachers have a load of more than 125 students.<sup>5</sup>

**Teacher collaboration and professional development time.** Teachers in the districts we worked with spend only 2% of their time—or about 45 minutes per week<sup>6</sup>—planning collaboratively. Similarly, only 5% of the principals at districts we’ve surveyed have what we consider sufficient shared-content and/or grade-level collaborative time.<sup>7</sup>

**Teacher assignments.** It’s common for leaders to disproportionately place novice teachers in ninth grade classes and more experienced teachers in advanced, higher-level coursework. This results in ninth graders being more likely to attend classes with newer teachers who are still learning their trade. In some districts we’ve worked with, ninth graders spend more than 40% of their scheduled time with a first- or second-year teacher.<sup>8</sup> In one sample district, ninth graders spend 16% of their class time with novice teachers, compared to 6% for 12th graders in that same district,<sup>9</sup> a trend that’s common to other schools and districts across the country.

4. We determined this figure based on student and teacher data and subsequent analysis we conducted from one of our past district engagements between 2021 and 2023.

5. We determined this figure by analyzing data from dozens of districts that comprise ERS’ internal database.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. We determined this figure based on student and teacher data and subsequent analysis we conducted from one of our past district engagements between 2021 and 2023.

9. Ibid.





## STUDENT SUPPORTS

**Class sizes.** Ninth grade class sizes commonly comprise 2-3 students more than higher grades, and ninth graders often tend to spend less time in smaller classes. In one sample district, for example, ninth graders only spend about 5% of their time in a class of 18 students or fewer, while 12th graders spend 11% of time in these smaller classes,<sup>10</sup> allowing for more individualized attention from teachers. While those don't seem like large differences on the surface, they represent a notable investment in 11th and 12th grade that, if repurposed, could significantly impact the ninth grade experience.

**Academic supports.** Too often in high schools, student academic supports come too late. Research suggests the most effective way to address foundational skill gaps that students bring into high school is by embedding that focus into the first teach of a new grade-level concept. Some students may also need additional time and support alongside their grade-level curriculum to reinforce learning. Yet, additional supports aren't typically triggered until students have already failed a course. And, in some cases, even efforts to remediate failure can lag years, so students might not retake a freshman course until their senior year.

**Advising supports.** Ninth grade is an important year for setting up future high school success, and students need targeted support and guidance to help them explore their interests and connect them to course-taking and other experiences available at their high school. Across grades, however, students often report not knowing what's available to them or having too little choice in selecting coursework aligned to their interests. In most high schools, the job of helping students navigate high school falls to counselors, who typically have caseloads of 200-300 students. If we assumed that a counselor with a caseload of 250 students could spend half of their day meeting with individual students, each student would receive just 2.5 hours of support over the whole school year. Counselors also often need to direct their time away from earlier grades to focus on helping seniors accumulate the credits they need to graduate or apply to college, so the total time for ninth graders is often significantly lower.

10. We determined this figure based on student and teacher data and subsequent analysis we conducted from one of our past district engagements between 2021 and 2023.

# 4 Key Structures That Can Enable a Stronger Ninth Grade Experience

## What would deep investment in the ninth grade really look like?

Based on our work with schools and districts around the country, we think strategic investments touch four key areas, which are laid out below. These areas are informed by our years of research and practice around strategic resource use across all schools and grades, as well as our deeper look at schools that have made significant investments in ninth grade through partnerships with leading technical support organizations like the Grad Partnership, CORE, and the Center for High School Success.

While these structural areas do tend to be common, it’s critical to note that like any structure, they can be implemented well or poorly. The foundation of any successful ninth grade strategy is first investing in and organizing around a well-defined research-backed instructional model, including standards-aligned curricular and instructional materials; instructional practices that support students in accessing grade-level content; and explicit goals for supporting multi-lingual learners, students with disabilities, and other high-need students. Then, leaders should consider how investments in the areas below can help them organize resources to support their model.



STRUCTURE	WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE
<b>Data systems and structures</b> that enable the use of <b>actionable, timely data</b> by teacher teams to review and support student progress and test the effectiveness of structure implementation.	Building out new student dashboards or reports that pull from both student information and teacher gradebooks to promote access to real-time student data via more targeted use of Infinite Campus, Panorama, BrightBytes, and PowerSchool.
	Developing a specific composite metric for assessing and tracking ninth grade student success.
	Creating required collaboration meeting protocols that routinize teachers’ review of student grade, attendance, and behavioral data to assess both student progress and the effectiveness of new interventions and support structures.

**CORE districts in California** have done this to provide a more accurate understanding of how schools are supporting student growth.

The Grad Partnership has developed a **team reflection and action planning tool** to support student success teams in creating, operating, and continually improving their systems.

STRUCTURE	WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE
<b>Expert-led teaching teams</b> with deliberate roles and assignments and much more time to collaborate to understand student needs and plan engaging instruction and student supports.	Reviewing historical teacher and student data and assigning teachers with the strongest outcomes to teach ninth grade as part of shared teacher teams.
	Creating teams of ninth grade educators with three distinct purposes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having weekly collaboration structures to discuss shared students and review the efficacy of academic and social-emotional supports for those students.</li> <li>• Reviewing curriculum, preparing lessons, and analyzing student work.</li> <li>• Planning, testing, and assessing the success of new initiatives to support ninth grade.</li> </ul>
	Cohorting students and teachers to enhance relationship-building and enable teacher teams to collaborate more effectively.
	Lowering ninth grade teacher loads by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructuring upper-grade teachers' loads through different utilization techniques, including using hybrid coursework or partnerships with higher education institutions or industry groups.</li> <li>• Organizing interdisciplinary coursework, like <a href="#">Brooklyn Generation High School</a> has, so that core teachers teach just two blocks of one interdisciplinary course (either STEM or humanities) in addition to one elective course.</li> </ul>

**Garden Grove School District** has supported the principals at their high schools in strategically staffing their ninth grade teams based on review of student and teacher data.

**Lincoln High School** in California has created structures that allow for their teams to collaborate in these ways, including by adjusting their master schedule so that their ninth grade teacher teams can meet weekly.

**Hillsdale High School in the San Francisco Bay Area** has divided their 300-400 ninth graders into houses of about 110 students each. Each house is assigned four core teachers who share collaboration time to review student progress, coordinate supports, and serve as advisors to about 28 students.

**New Heights Charter School in Brockton Public Schools** partners with community college professors to teach courses for students in their early college program.





STRUCTURE	WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE
Explicit investment in relationship supports to ensure <b>every student is known</b> and supported in creating and navigating an <b>individualized college and career plan</b> .	Investing in eighth-to-ninth-grade transition supports, such as orientation events that get students excited for school as soon as possible or dedicated time with incoming freshman to get to know them more deeply, including through the use of <a href="#">empathy interviews</a> .
	Helping students explore career interests and build needed skills by embedding coursework and experiences such as bridge support courses, study skills courses, vocational courses, or internships.
	Investing in advising and mentorship programs and structures (e.g., advisory) that allow adults to get to know students deeply and support them toward their future aspirations.
Instructional time and attention organized more flexibly to enable individualized learning and support.	<p>Assigning staff and designing schedules to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create dedicated structures that target time and attention to allow for accelerated academic catch-up, including flex blocks, intercession, make-up days, tutoring, and office hours.</li> <li>• Embed supports—such as additional time, smaller-group instruction, language support, co-teaching, push-in support, interdisciplinary coursework, and flipped classroom models—based on prioritized needs.</li> </ul>
	Promoting the use of grading practices and policies that allow for academic catch-up, promote credit accumulation, and accurately describe student proficiency, skills, and competencies.

At Cardozo High School, students rotate through pathway-aligned career exploration courses in ninth grade and **have one additional “learning lab” block** per week to focus on college and career supports.

**Springfield Renaissance School** in Springfield Public Schools has created an advisory structure in which groups of 12-15 students participate in a daily credit-bearing advisory class with a focus on social-emotional development, academic goal setting, and advisement.

**Pacifica High School in Garden Grove School District** has implemented a 33-minute flex block **four days per week**. Students and teachers discuss prioritized needs in homerooms on Mondays and strategically pair up for tutorial support on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

**Revere High School** has implemented such prioritized supports in their Freshman Academy, and Achieve the Core’s **Humanities Accelerator Course** offers embedded support in the form of an interdisciplinary coursework model that allows students to have access to grade-level content that meets their needs.

The ninth grade teams at **Tara High School** in East Baton Rouge Public Schools have implemented an “amnesty week” each marking period to allow students to retake tests and make up assignments.

Implemented holistically, these structures will allow ninth graders to have school experiences that interest them and support their specific needs in both the short-term and the future. These structures will also enable ninth grade teachers to develop, implement, and review student support approaches with their peers, leveraging the best of everyone’s thinking to create stronger outcomes for students.

# How School and System Leaders Can Support This Shift

To put these structures in place and change the ninth grade experience, school and system leaders must work together to reorganize resources.

First, leaders should assess their existing resource allocation and student outcomes data to determine the challenges and opportunities for further investing in ninth grade. As part of this current-state assessment, school and district leaders should also create opportunities to learn directly from their students and teachers about what's working and what isn't, be it through surveys, focus groups, observations, or other engagement techniques.

Once they have identified their specific schools' needs, leaders can support implementation of these new structures by:

- Expanding and/or restructuring teacher and student time to allow for teacher collaboration; new or additional student support structures; advisory and other mentoring; and new or additional college and career experiences.
- Investing in teacher supports related to professional learning, data use, instructional practices, and shared student teams to ensure teachers use time effectively.
- Building out data systems and structures that allow teachers and leaders to regularly share common student data and routinely test the efficacy of their new structures.

We've developed targeted resources to support schools in starting these actions:

- Review our [case studies](#) to understand how real schools have created these structures in support of ninth grade success.
- Explore our [Guidance for School Staffing, Spending, and Scheduling](#) for more information about how you can use resources to implement strong student success systems, create teacher collaboration structures, and develop effective academic intervention initiatives to support your high school teachers and students.
- Read our [Hybrid Learning Toolkit](#) to learn how school leaders, with support of their district leaders, can explore ways of restructuring the upper-grade experience by integrating partnerships, technology, and off-campus time to free resources to invest in the lower grades.

**Ninth grade is a critical year, and with the right structures in place, school and system leaders can set their students on a stronger trajectory.**

