

## **Eight Steps to Implement a Comprehensive Ninth Grade Transition Program**

Norma Ginther and Susan Yingling

### **I. Introduction**

It's days before the start of the school year, and the gymnasiums at Hilliard Davidson High School (Hilliard, Ohio), Northeast High School (Clarksville, Tennessee) and Fairborn High School (Fairborn, Ohio) are jammed with freshmen excited about their new start in a new place. They're leading each other in cheers. They're competing to see who can sing the loudest. They're proud to be the class of 2014! And they should be. Because it's not just the beginning of high school – it's the beginning of a major change in their lives. A change that is made a little easier with the help of a comprehensive ninth grade transition program in place at these schools to give freshmen extra attention before the school year even begins, and then, continue this support until the end of their ninth grade year.

The transition from eighth grade to ninth grade is beginning to get some attention. And, indeed, it should. Parents don't send their kindergartner off to school without much fret, visits to the school, and conversations with the teacher. Even colleges and universities are known for their orientation programs and freshman seminars – programs designed to ease students into college life.

But, what about the high school? All too often, the "high school orientation" is nothing more than a quick tour in the spring of the eighth grade year and, if a student is lucky, a "schedule pick-up day" a few days prior to the start of school. And then it's off to the races. Freshmen are on their own to navigate through big hallways, new classes, different teachers, and all the other challenges that come with high school life. But, it doesn't have to be this way.

## II. Easing the Transition

At Hilliard Davidson High School, Northeast High School and Fairborn High School, they call them the four "L's" – the four things freshmen are most concerned about before that first day of high school – Looks, Locker, Lunch, and Lost. Freshmen want to know how to dress. They want to make sure they can get to their locker and open it. They want to know how the lunch lines work and where they can eat. They want to be reassured they won't get lost and get to their classes on time. And, if we take care of these "L's" before school starts, we have a better chance with freshmen – but we can't stop there. We have to be realistic about the importance of the ninth grade year of high school and the implications it has for future high school success.

To tackle these four "L's" and continue the important conversations once the school year begins, the high schools use a ninth grade transition model called *Freshman Focus*, created in 2002 by the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio, a non-profit organization specializing in child welfare and adolescent psychology.

Dr. Ronald Hughes is the co-founder and co-director of the Institute for Human Services and is a leading expert in child welfare and child psychology. Hughes says, "Perhaps the most important social task of early adolescents is to have the opportunity and the resources needed to engage essential social systems in a way that supports rather than hinders their future development. This is the reason comprehensive ninth grade transition programs are so important."

The key component of *Freshman Focus* is mentorship. Ninth grade students have the opportunity to learn from and model the behavior of respected teachers and upperclassmen students. A group of four student leaders and one teacher mentor is assigned to every twenty freshmen in the ninth grade class. The

teacher mentor and student leaders then work together to provide important information to freshmen and lead them in lively discussions centered around topics crucial to high school success.

"Peer relationships are the primary social dynamic of adolescents. Any way a school system can use this natural phenomena to enhance education opportunity and success is a positive move. Ninth grade transition programs do this in spades," Hughes said.

### **III. The Modules**

There are freshmen entering our high schools who don't know what to wear or how to dress for school.

Some freshmen don't know how to carry their books and use a locker. There are ninth graders entering our buildings who have no friends and don't know how to make friends. Some freshmen don't understand that grades matter in high school and that the grade point average never goes away until graduation.

And to truly be successful, educators must address these issues, and this is not something that can be done in a few, erratic meetings and tours. It actually needs to begin before the school year begins. And it does at Hilliard Davidson, Northeast, and Fairborn. At these schools, a week or two before the first bell rings, you'll find upperclassmen and teachers interacting with incoming freshmen at *Freshman Focus* orientation camp. Camp hosts teach ninth graders their class song, lead students in the creation of team cheers and show the importance of school spirit. Ninth graders go on a scavenger hunt to explore their new school building, and there are many opportunities to talk about fears and anxieties gearing up for the first day of school.

Chris Bowers, a professional motivational speaker, leads orientation camp at Hilliard Davidson, Northeast, Fairborn, and dozens of other high schools throughout the country. "My goal at orientation camp is to

erase every negative pre-conceived notion a ninth grader might have about high school. I make sure the students leave camp knowing it's fun to have school spirit and to be involved; and most importantly, they leave camp feeling like they belong."

After camp and once the school year begins, ninth graders work through ten modules for the rest of their freshman year. Each day of the entire-school-year is structured with specific objectives, lesson plans, and activities that every freshman in the high school will complete to increase the chances of social and academic success in high school.

- *Module #1: High School Survival Skills*

In every high school, there are basic skills that freshmen will need to know to get through the first couple weeks of school. They need to be able to navigate their way through the building and begin to understand the many differences between middle school and high school. Getting started on the right foot is important.

- *Module #2: Building Relationships & Getting Involved*

The high school experience is truly defined by relationships and involvement. Students must learn to navigate relationships with adults and other students in the building. And, often the best way to get to know these individuals is through involvement with school clubs, activities, and athletics.

- *Module #3: Making the Grade*

Academically, the ninth grade year often defines a student's entire high school experience.

Therefore, it is imperative that all freshmen get off to a great start with their academic work. This can be accomplished through teaching study skills, note taking skills, learning styles and an increased awareness of resources available to build academic success.

- *Module #4: Who Am I?*

It is important for ninth grade students to develop an understanding of themselves, what they believe in, and how they relate with everyone else in the school building. Understanding oneself is an important bridge to understanding others. Being able to answer the question, "Who Am I?" makes appreciating others' similarities and differences easier to accept.

- *Module #5: Exploration of Others*

Since having a great high school experience is really all about relationships, it is important for freshmen to explore the values and beliefs of other students – and how they're similar and different. There are dangers in not taking the time to truly understand the people we consider "different" from us – dangers that can have a lifetime of negative consequence.

- *Module #6: The Crunch*

It's crunch time for freshmen – this is usually their first experience with midterm exams! They need study skills, test preparation strategies, and time management. They also need real testimonials and advice on the do's and don'ts of studying, getting schoolwork done, taking grades seriously, and setting goals to create a positive high school experience.

- *Module #7: Don't be a Bully*

Bullies and how they bully come in all different shapes and sizes. Ninth graders need to understand and recognize bullying when they see it; they also need to understand the negative effects that result from this behavior. There are strategies to prevent bullying – they include developing a positive self esteem, healthy conflict resolution, and open communication.

- *Module #8: Leadership*

Defining oneself as a leader in the school starts early, and ninth graders need to understand this. There are identifying characteristics of effective leaders that can be learned and developed – but it

takes practice. It is important for freshmen to be aware of the opportunities to practice and fine tune their leadership skills in high school.

- *Module #9: Safe & Healthy Decisions*

High school is a time for making many, many decisions – many having nothing to do with academics! And the decisions freshmen make can have an impact on them for the rest of their lives. It is crucial that honest conversations take place with ninth graders about stress management, peer pressure, sexual decision making, drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and on-line behavior.

- *Module #10: The Future*

It is important for freshmen to think about and plan for life after the ninth grade year and even life after high school. This means knowing what course and academic program options are available at the high school. It also means knowing career and college interests because it is never too early to begin planning for the day after high school graduation.

#### **IV. Steps to Implementing a Program**

Creating a comprehensive ninth grade transition program doesn't happen overnight. Because of its complexity, implementation takes careful planning and plenty of time. The Institute for Human Services guided Hilliard Davidson, Northeast, and Fairborn High Schools through an eight-step implementation process to ensure the effectiveness of the program reached its fullest potential.

- **STEP #1: DEFINE TARGETS: Who do you want to benefit?**

Before beginning any project, it's important to identify its beneficiaries. Ask yourself questions like: Who are we doing this for? Who is going to benefit? Who needs information? Who needs to be

involved? Generally, the four targets in a ninth grade transition program are freshmen, upperclassmen student leaders, faculty advisors, and parents of freshmen.

- **STEP #2: CONSIDERATIONS: Implementation is complex**

Before jumping into planning and development of a comprehensive transition program, there are several things you should consider. Remember that this isn't just about adding a program. This is about changing the culture of the school. Are the conditions in your school ripe for change? Does the program have a chance of surviving? Don't waste your time and money if you can't answer "yes" to both of these questions.

It's also important to consider when this program is going to fit into your school day. There has to be regular, built-in time for freshmen to get the important information they need.

- **STEP #3: PLANNING: Start now, not later**

No good program is born without very careful planning. The worst thing you can do is implement a transition program without doing the necessary planning to ensure success. Try to plan for everything – you don't want surprises!

A steering committee is a must. Recruit teachers, administrators, students, and parents to serve on the steering committee for your school. This group of people will play a crucial role in program planning, development, and implementation. Remember – one person cannot implement a program alone. It's way too comprehensive!

- **STEP #4: CURRICULUM DECISIONS**

Generate a list of the topics your freshmen need. Every school is different. Ninth graders in your school may have different needs than ninth graders at another school. Hilliard Davidson, Northeast, and Fairborn use the ten *Freshman Focus* modules as a framework for their curriculum guided by high-paced lessons and activities that have been developed by the Institute for Human Services.

- **STEP #5: STAFFING: Student leaders & faculty advisors**

You can have the perfect program planned, but if you don't have the right people in place to implement it all, your planning will have been for naught.

When selecting teachers to be faculty advisors, consider the diversity of your school. Freshmen want role models who look like them and who may have even, in the past, acted like them! Never force a teacher to be a faculty advisor – it doesn't work!

Student leaders are the most crucial component of a ninth grade transition program. Like faculty advisors, you want diversity in your student leaders. Your top academic students aren't always the best student leaders. It's important that ninth graders are exposed to all types of student leaders – jocks, band members, drama students, etc.

- **STEP #6: DELIVERY**

Now that you've done all the planning, settled on a curriculum, and selected your staff, you'll want to make sure everything is in place for effective delivery. Have a central resource room. This is a

good place to keep supplies, prizes, books – all the things you need to keep the program running. Faculty advisors and student leaders can just stop by and get supplies for activities and lessons as needed.

Create teacher manuals for your teachers. Include daily lesson plans, activities, and discussion guides. Give your teachers all the resources they'll need to lead the class.

- **STEP #7: TRAINING: The powerful predictor of success or failure**

This is where a lot of schools go wrong. They go through all the work to develop and implement a program, but then they don't train their faculty advisors and student leaders. Don't make this mistake. Training is crucial to program success.

- **STEP #8: PROGRAM EVALUATION**

It is important that you continually evaluate the program. Conduct data reviews, use surveys, and hold focus groups to evaluate your program. The evaluation should check several things: Is the program accomplishing what you wanted it to? Is there a change in ninth grade attendance? Ninth grade retention? Ninth grade discipline? How impactful was the curriculum? Which lessons and activities are effective? Which ones flopped? What needs changed?

## **VI. A Different Culture**

Hilliard Davidson, Northeast and Fairborn have all seen positive results since implementing comprehensive ninth grade transition programs. "I can't even begin to describe the change in our school culture since we

began focusing more attention on our freshmen. It's been phenomenal!" said Belinda Banks, assistant principal at Fairborn High School.

But, the results aren't only qualitative. All three high schools have seen significant decreases in the ninth grade discipline issues. They have also seen improved attendance and more students successfully finishing the ninth grade year and moving on to the tenth grade.

At Hilliard Davidson High School, where ninth grade transition has been a focus since 2002, the impact is clearer and even more powerful. "Treating freshmen with respect and making them feel like part of our school community is just what we do now at Hilliard Davidson," said John Bandow, principal at Hilliard Davidson High School.

"I have parents, freshmen, and upperclassmen telling me that this is the best thing we could have ever done here," said Patrick Digby, assistant principal at Northeast High School. "Something really special happens when you take the time to show freshmen you care about them and want them to succeed."

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*Norma Ginther (norma@freshmanfocus.com) is a licensed social worker specializing in adolescence and adolescent development. She works for the Institute for Human Services as a consultant and trainer. Susan Yingling (syngling@ihs-trainet.com) is a research consultant at the Institute for Human Services. For more information about Freshman Focus, visit [www.freshmanfocus.com](http://www.freshmanfocus.com) or call 614.251.6000.*