

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

Cross-Site Report
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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,

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.

