



From the Middle Level to High School:

A Big Step Toward Success

Teachers and administrators must make the transition from eighth grade to high school as easy as possible to ensure that students can thrive after graduation.

BY **SONDRA S. COONEY AND GENE BOTTOMS**

Where does the pathway to success in postsecondary education and a career begin? Some might argue that it begins with early childhood education and readiness for formal education in kindergarten. Most certainly, readiness for postsecondary education and a career is measured toward the end of high school by such tests as the SAT, the ACT, and employers' exams. What are often overlooked along this path, however, are milestones between kindergarten and high school. For example, what constitutes readiness for middle level students' transition to challenging high school studies?

For the past 15 years, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), through its High Schools That Work (HSTW) effort, has focused on improving student performance and readiness for further education and the workplace. The knowledge and skills needed for success include the ability to retrieve and organize information; respond orally and in writing to a variety of demands; use algebra, geometry, and statistics to solve problems; and understand and use technology efficiently and effectively. It is clear that high schools cannot be solely responsible for postsecondary prepa-

ration, and SREB's focus has broadened to include the middle level and students' transition to high school.

Why the shift in focus? Evidence from SREB's partner states shows that retention rates in grade 9 average three to five times higher than in the previous grades, and those failure rates lead to higher dropout rates in high school. All of SREB's partner states have raised graduation requirements. For example, all 16 states have raised their standards since 1988 and now require Algebra I and three years of science and mathematics and 10 require geometry for graduation. However, in 1998, about one-third of HSTW graduates reported that they were not prepared for challenging high school mathematics and science when they entered high school.

Ready for High School?

In 1997, SREB analyzed the performance of eighth-grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in its partner states and found that many students in those states scored below the basic national achievement level, and few were deemed proficient when compared with

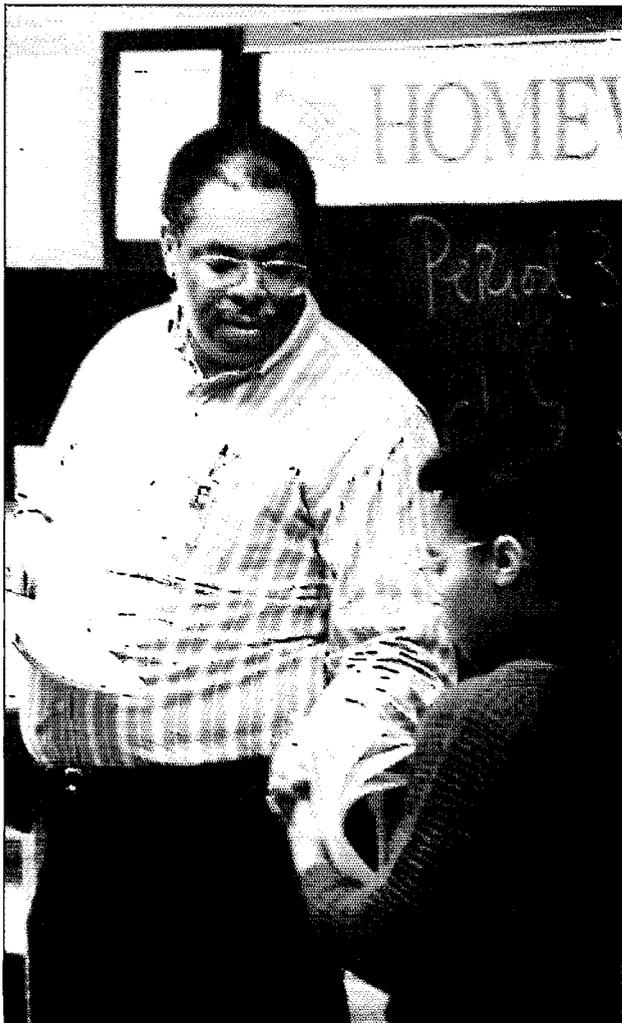


PHOTO BY DAVID HATHCOCK

national averages. As a result of the achievement gaps revealed by data; focus group discussions with teachers, administrators, students, and families; and classroom observations, SREB developed a framework for comprehensive improvement in middle level schools that emphasizes accelerated academic studies.

The mission of SREB's middle level initiative, Making Middle Grades Work, is to ensure that *all* students leave grade 8 with the knowledge and the skills to be successful—without the need for remediation—in a college-preparatory curriculum in grades 9 and 10. In addition, all eighth-grade students and their parents should be informed about which high school courses will prepare students for future education and a career. To measure progress toward the mission, 60 schools administered SREB's Middle Grades Assessment to almost 5,000 middle level students and 2,000 middle level teachers in spring 2000. The assessment included student, teacher, and principal surveys and NAEP-like tests in reading, mathematics, and science.

The Middle Grades Assessment, coupled with the

HSTW Assessment, provided a base of information from which indicators of readiness for challenging high school work could be identified. The following readiness indicators are linked to higher achievement in high school:

- Completion of Algebra I or pre-algebra with acceptable performance and a proficiency test
- Use of laboratory and technology experiences in physical, life, and earth sciences to design, conduct, analyze, and describe investigations
- Ability to read and interpret grade-level materials by synthesizing, analyzing, and formulating opinions through reading widely—at least 25 books a year across the curriculum
- Completion of short writing assignments at least weekly
- Development of study skills and organizational- and time-management habits.

In addition to these indicators of higher achievement, student learning experiences in the middle level grades were examined for their relationship to higher achievement. High-performing middle level students were much more likely to report that they had talked with counselors several times about which classes to take in high school and to report that they intended to complete college. In all racial and ethnic groups, low-performing students and their parents—who need the most advice and information in developing educational goals—were least likely to have received such help.

Surveys of middle level and high school teachers confirm the lack of a well-planned transition period between middle level and high school. Only 37% of middle level teachers felt that the most important goal of the school was to help students prepare for college-preparatory classes in high school. More than half of high school teachers (55%) indicated that they never meet with teachers from feeder middle level schools to discuss curriculum or performance expectations, and 51% of high school teachers reported that they believe students do not have sufficient background knowledge to learn what they teach.

Measuring Readiness

To further verify the importance of a well-planned transition from middle level to high school, 44 of the original 60 schools conducted a follow-up study in 2001 of those students who had been assessed in 2000 at the end of their eighth-grade year. Data were gathered from slightly more than 60% of the original students. The data indicate how middle level learning experiences relate to performance in the first year of high school.

Readiness for high school was measured by the percentage of ninth-grade students enrolled in college-preparatory courses, their success rates in those courses (grade C or higher), and the credits they earned. All schools were

compared with the 25% of schools that enrolled the most students in college-preparatory courses. The data showed that high schools that enroll larger percentages of students in college-preparatory courses have success rates remarkably similar to high schools that have a more restricted enrollment pattern. In other words, students in higher-level classes are just as likely to experience success as students in lower-level classes.

In ninth-grade English language and literature courses, only 25% of the students from all 44 middle level schools were enrolled in college-preparatory courses. Ninety-one percent of those students earned at least a C. The 25% of schools with the highest enrollment assigned 56% of ninth-grade students to college-preparatory English courses, and 86% of those students earned at least a C. The success rates of both groups of students were nearly the same, even though the largest schools enrolled more than twice the number of students in the higher-level course.

In mathematics, 51% of students in all high schools were enrolled in college-preparatory Algebra I or higher-level courses, and at least 75% of those students earned a C grade or higher. Schools that enrolled the most students in higher-level courses assigned 86% of incoming ninth-grade students to college-preparatory Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, or other advanced math courses, and at least 72% of these students earned a C or higher.

The story was similar in science. Only 9% of students in all schools were enrolled in a college-preparatory science course. In the high schools that encouraged more students to take higher-level courses, 38% of students were in college-preparatory science courses, and their success rates—at least a grade of C—were almost identical to those in all schools.

These data suggest that more middle level students could succeed in college-preparatory academic courses if high schools would only give them the opportunity to enroll in such courses. Many high schools continue to sort students into different class levels when many students could succeed in higher-level classes if they were allowed to take them with the best teachers and with the support they need. SREB's analysis of eighth-grade student achievement data indicates that many students who scored in the upper two quartiles in reading, mathematics, and science achievement tests are enrolled in lower-level ninth-grade classes that do not prepare them for postsecondary education. If high schools are going to err in assigning students to classes, they should err by enrolling too many students in college-preparatory classes rather than too few.

Three middle level experiences are associated with students taking and succeeding in higher-level courses in grade 9: studying algebra in the middle level; reading a great number of books in grade 8; and expecting to graduate from college.

Middle level schools committed to ensuring students are ready for college-preparatory work in high school will teach only pre-algebra or more advanced mathematics courses in grade 8, require students to read widely and think deeply about what they read, and encourage students to think about education beyond high school. These schools will smooth students' pathways to further education and the workplace.

Ninth-Grade Placement Practices

Wide variations exist in the practices used by high schools to place students into college-preparatory courses in English, math, and science or into lower-level classes. It appears that some schools push their students into courses with more challenging content, while other schools are satisfied to sort many more students into lower-level academic courses, knowing full well that those courses do not prepare students for postsecondary studies. Lower-enrollment schools continue to fit the curriculum to the perceived ability of students, while other schools recognize that all students need to complete a more challenging curriculum and therefore enroll students in college-preparatory courses.

Students who took the eighth-grade reading test and scored in the lowest two quartiles were about twice as likely to fail ninth-grade English if they were placed in a lower-level English course rather than a college-preparatory course. A similar pattern occurred in mathematics and science; only students with mathematics and science achievement in the lowest quartile had a slightly higher failure rate in grade 9 if they were enrolled in higher-level courses. The data clearly show that enrollment in more demanding courses does not result in more failures, and research has validated again and again that greater expectations result in greater achievement.

Every district should ask how school leaders, counselors, and teachers are placing students in grade 9 classes. It appears that such factors as attendance, background, and behavior may be determining placement, but these factors fail to account for students' potential. Students who can achieve but who may have other problems seem to be placed almost automatically in lower-level classes. Inappropriate placement may result in poor attendance and attitude and behavior problems.

Every high school should ask the following questions:

- Regardless of achievement, why do students have a lower failure rate in higher-level courses than in lower-level courses?
- Do lower-level courses expect so little of students that teachers stop believing that they can make a difference and students stop believing that school matters?
- Are teachers sorted so the best teachers—who are most experienced and knowledgeable—teach the “best stu-

dents,” and less-experienced and weaker teachers teach lower-level courses?

- Do schools that place more students in higher-level courses also provide them with extra help and support?
- Do low-achieving students assigned to higher-level courses perform at a higher level to match expectations or do they perceive themselves to be worthier because of their assigned class?
- Are materials and assignments used in college-preparatory courses more interesting?

Answers to these questions should reveal whether the school has a climate and culture necessary for student success. Schools that have high expectations, that demand students’ best efforts, and that provide extra help and support to boost student confidence have students who succeed. Similarly, schools that set high expectations for teachers, demand their best efforts and support them as professionals have faculty members who expect more of students and who help them achieve.

A Well-Planned Transition

Middle level and high schools can work together to ensure that almost all students complete college-preparatory English in grades 9 and 10 and college-preparatory algebra and geometry by the end of grade 10. They can provide information to students and their families about the importance of higher-level courses in high school to college transitions and career aspirations.

The following actions are steps schools can take to accelerate student achievement.

Middle level schools can:

- Change the grade 8 mathematics curriculum so all students complete either pre-algebra or Algebra I successfully.
- Expect all students to read 25 books or the equivalent across the curriculum each year in the middle grades.
- Identify students in grade 7 who may have difficulty completing a challenging curriculum in grade 9 and take steps to increase their instructional time in reading, English, and mathematics.
- Place struggling students in an accelerated curriculum with the best teachers.
- Take steps to provide all students in grades 7 and 8 with teachers who have at least a minor or major in the content area they are assigned to teach.
- Work with students and families to educate them about which courses lead to greater achievement and to develop a five-year educational plan for high school and one year beyond.

High schools can:

- Provide catch-up courses, double periods, and extra help for students who need extra instruction and time to

meet higher course standards.

- Rethink placement practices and take steps to increase annually the percentage of entering ninth-grade students assigned to college-preparatory English, math, and science courses.
- Take immediate steps to enroll at least the same percentage of incoming ninth-grade students in college-preparatory courses as high-enrollment schools.
- Teach all students to the same challenging standards, provide extra help and extra time for those who need it, and require students who earn below a C at any time to spend additional time studying and get extra help.
- Appoint a special committee of teachers to study placement practices. The committee would visit high schools that enroll a higher percentage of ninth-grade students in college-preparatory courses, and it would be responsible for developing a plan to enroll more students in higher-level classes while reducing failure rates.

Together, middle level and high school leaders can:

- Organize vertical teams of middle level and high school teachers in English, mathematics, and science to align curriculum and performance standards to the level needed for challenging high school studies.
- Work together to orient families, middle level students, and teachers about the rising workplace and high school graduation requirements and the importance of a challenging program of studies in high school.
- Convene panels of high school and middle level teachers in language arts, mathematics, and science to identify readiness indicators that can be used to assess whether students are prepared for college-preparatory work in grade 9.

Summary

One of our nation’s most challenging tasks is to help students successfully transition from middle level to high school with a demanding program of study. If we continue with the present system, too many students will not complete high school or will graduate from high school inadequately prepared for further study or the workplace. The result will be too many people competing for a shrinking number of low-skill jobs and too few people prepared for jobs that require some postsecondary education. It is imperative that middle level schools and high schools work together to improve the transition process so all students are prepared to embark on the path to success. **PL**

Sondra S. Cooney (sondra.cooney@sreb.org) is director of the Middle Grades Education Initiative at the Southern Regional Education Board.

Gene Bottoms (gene.bottoms@sreb.org) is senior vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is located at the top of this bar.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: From the middle level to high school: a big step toward success

SOURCE: Principal Leadership (Middle School Ed.) 2 no9 My 2002

WN: 0212107206007

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: <http://www.naesp.org>.

Copyright 1982-2002 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.