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Navigating the Shoals of Ninth Grade

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The State Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recently released the first “cohort graduation rate,” showing that little more than two-thirds of high school students graduate in four years. The first questions asked by many people have been: How does this happen? How can we fix it? And, as with many questions that concern children and young adults: When do we fix it?

When we take a close look at the numbers, one year stands out: ninth grade. Ninth grade is a critical transition for students; many stumble at this stage and never recover. Yet, if students successfully make it through ninth grade — if they are there to be counted at the beginning of tenth grade — their chances of graduating improve dramatically.

The Department of Public Instruction arrived at a four-year graduation rate of 68 percent by following the Class of 2006 from its entrance into high school in 2002 through 2006, the year they should have graduated. Looking at the data from the 2002-03 school year, we can see the results of what the Class of 2006 encountered in its first year of high school:

- > 5.3 percent of ninth graders dropped out
- > 14.2 percent of ninth graders were held back at the end of the year

If a student is retained a grade in high school, the chances that he will graduate plummet. Last year, DPI reported the much criticized “on-time graduation rate” of 97.8 percent. This tells us that only 2.2 percent of graduates take longer than four years to graduate. We also know that 14.2 percent of ninth graders were not promoted; these students would require a fifth year to graduate from high school. Students requiring more than four years to graduate, therefore, make up at least 14 percent of the Class of 2006, but only 2 percent of the graduating Class of 2006.

Before the Class of 2006 made it to tenth grade, approximately one in every six students had been left behind.¹ Some of them will still graduate, although late. The vast majority will not.

What obstacles did these students encounter?

DPI data reports that most ninth graders dropped out for general “attendance-related reasons.” In other words, for work, family or personal reasons, they simply showed up less and less often. When school started again in the fall, they did not return. Looking at some of the more concrete reasons given, 8 percent dropped out due to disciplinary problems — most received long-term suspensions and did not return. Another 9 percent cited academic problems, 5 percent chose to attend community college, and 4 percent chose work over school.

Students had trouble with attendance. They had trouble with discipline. They had trouble with academics. They had trouble with high school.

Researchers at Augusta State and George Mason Universities reported that middle schools and high schools operate in very different ways, and that students struggle with the change. They found that schools with more extensive transition programs between middle school and high school — counseling, school visits, and summer programs — had significantly lower non-promotion and dropout rates for ninth graders.

How can we reduce these obstacles?

While many students handle the transition to high school well, a significant number do not. Researchers tell us that these students need extra help to get started on the right path in high school. Successful transition programs include activities like the following:

- Visits from ninth-grade counselors and teachers to eighth grade to talk to students; visits by eighth grade teachers to high schools to understand high school expectations
- High school tours for eighth graders
- Summer programs located at the high school to orient middle school students to their new school
- Self-contained ninth-grade academies that somewhat insulate ninth graders from the rest of the high school

Beyond the transition period itself, other measures must still be taken to guide students successfully through high school. Researchers have asked dropouts what would have kept them in school. Many report that their classes were uninteresting and seemed irrelevant to their lives; no one seemed to care if they showed up; they had fallen too far behind to catch up with their class; and they had too much freedom. The students also indicated that if their teachers and schools had higher expectations, they would have met them.

There is no single reason that students drop out, and therefore, no single solution to keep them in school. Helping students transition into the ninth grade is only one step, but an important one in the process. In future briefs, the Civitas Institute will explore other viable options for reducing dropouts that give at-risk students alternatives to the traditional public school setting.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ The one in six figure assumes a significant number of ninth grade dropouts were repeating ninth grade and therefore not part of our Class of 2006



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