MULTI-LEVEL CONSULTATION WITH AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT TO PROMOTE 9TH GRADE SUPPORTS FOR ON-TIME GRADUATION

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This case study documents a multi-level consultation regarding a district-led initiative, designed to increase the number of students starting 10th grade on track for on-time high school graduation. The case study focuses on one neighborhood high school (9th grade student $N = 440$) in an urban district in the Intermountain West. Consultation occurred with teachers, teaching teams, support staff, school administrators, and district personnel. Data sources included consultation notes, observations, surveys, interviews, and district records. The findings included that students enter with various risk profiles that require immediate differentiation of supports, students' entering risk profiles were not fully predictive of where they would be by the end of 9th grade, the consultation with teaching teams and teachers increased their ability to support student needs, and the systems-level consultation led to significant building and district changes. Suggestions for the practice of school psychology and future research are given. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Graduating from high school and obtaining post-secondary training is considered critical for an individual's employability, and for the nation's economic prosperity (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In stark contrast to claims that public education promotes equality, the opportunities to enjoy economic stability and be a productive member of society are not equally available to all U.S. students. Poor students and students of color in urban school districts are just as likely not to graduate on time from high school as to do so, and, even for those who do graduate from high school, they are usually not prepared to succeed in college or other post-secondary training programs (Darling-Hammond, 2010; National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2011). This article reviews the high school graduation literature and what is known about the critical transition from middle to high school, presents findings from a case study of a middle school to high school transition initiative in an urban district, and makes recommendations for practitioners and future research.

Increasing High School Graduation Rates in Urban Districts

The high school graduation rate has remained fairly stable over the past 30 years (Dynarski et al., 2008) with approximately 75% of students graduating from high school with their cohort (Aud et al., 2012). Graduation and dropout rates vary by student race and economic status. For instance, although only 2% of White students drop out each year, 5% of Hispanic and 6% of Black students drop out each year (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). Poverty is an even greater predictor of dropping out: 9% of low income students drop out each year (Chapman et al., 2010). Beyond student characteristics, there are discrepancies in graduation rates between states, between districts within states, and between schools within districts. Schools with graduation rates of 50% or less

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have been labeled dropout factories (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Hornig Fox, 2010). Although these schools represent approximately 10% of all high schools, they are responsible for half of the nation's dropouts. And these schools are mostly large urban institutions that disproportionately serve low-income and minority students (Balfanz et al., 2010). For poor minority students in urban districts, on time high school graduation rates are estimated to be 50% (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Although dropping out of school is often a long-term process with indicators evidenced by elementary or middle school (Balfanz et al., 2010; Finn, 1989; National Research Council, 2004), utilizing those risk factors to identify the appropriate students for drop-out prevention interventions has had limited success (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The three most highly predictive indicators of a student dropping out are the ABCs: Attendance (below 90%), Behavior (two or more infractions), and Course Performance (inability to read at grade level by 3rd grade, failure in English or math in 6th through 9th grade, high school GPA lower than 2.0, or failure to earn on-time promotion to the 10th grade) (Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz, 2011). Although the indicators of importance seem to be agreed upon, their predictive utility is still being debated. A meta-analysis indicated that risk factors were only able to predict who would drop out with 42% accuracy (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). However, at the local level, district-developed early warning indicators and intervention systems (EWS) appear better able to recognize which students are at risk of dropping out or graduating unprepared for post-secondary success (Bruce et al., 2011). For instance, in Chicago Public Schools, the EWS predicted which 9th grade students would graduate from high school with 80% accuracy (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Middle to High School Transition

The transition from middle school to high school is a pivotal time in the lives of youth. Not only is it a coming-of-age ritual for many, but also a student's level of success in 9th grade often predicts her likelihood to finish high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Therefore, to increase high school graduation rates, it is essential to take note of practices that have been found to be effective in helping to create positive transition experiences for students. We have divided the middle to high school transition process into three stages:

1. *Preparation for the transition*: actions taken during or prior to the 8th grade year.
2. *During the transition*: actions taken during the summer between 8th and 9th grade.
3. *After the transition*: actions taken after the student has arrived in the new school location (from the first day of 9th grade on).

The following review incorporates best practice research and recommendations drawn from practices in this urban district. Many of the recommendations for each stage can and often should be implemented during multiple stages. An inventory that can be used to assess implementation of best practices can be obtained from the first author.

Preparation for the Transition.   Although the responsibility for school completion is typically placed on high school educators, all personnel in a school system across students' academic career contribute to students' graduation success (Bruce et al., 2011; National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2011). Earlier grades must develop foundational skills in students that will help them master higher level academic content, as well as help children learn to set goals and see the importance and joy of gaining a full and comprehensive education. For example, to be successful in high school, students need to develop strong comprehension skills and vocabularies in elementary and middle school (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008), and to be successful in high school math, middle school students need competence in fractions, decimals, and signed numbers (Neild, 2009).

Vertical partnerships among feeder and recipient schools are an important key to a successful transition. These partnerships between elementary, middle, and high schools should stress alignment in both curricular and behavioral expectations (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008; Oakes & Waite, 2009). Behavior policies that are remedial instead of punitive have been shown to increase graduation rates (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Although ideally all school personnel would be involved in these exchanges, they can be initiated by administrators and mental health personnel.

During the spring of students' 8th grade year, students and families should be preparing for the move to high school through orientation activities (such as school visits, open houses, and student shadowing) and developing course plans with advice from middle and high school staff (Oakes & Waite, 2009). Most students will be more committed to their plans of study when they see the alignment between the plans and their career and academic goals.

During the Transition.   Summer orientation programs, ideally one week or longer, have been shown to increase student motivation in high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). These orientations should include pragmatic topics (e.g., getting around the new school), as well as social and emotional topics (e.g., making new friends) and explanations of academic expectations. Opportunities for social networking for students from different middle schools (Landerkamp, 2009) and gender-specific orientation time (Oakes & Waite, 2009) have been shown to be beneficial. Selected upperclassmen can be powerful role models during orientation. Orientation for parents will help the family to support the student, especially when they have input into course selections (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Some summer orientation programs have offered course credits as an incentive for attendance and to promote on-track status (Graduation Pathways, 2009).

For students who have struggled academically in middle school, the summer before high school can be used to provide academic tutoring so that they are better prepared to be successful in high school. Ideally, these supports are provided at the high school that they are about to enter by the high school teachers and staff, as summer programs have greater impact when they help to establish connections between entering students and staff (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008).

After the Transition.   Many students enter high school without the behavioral skills necessary to be successful in high school. As well as addressing these topics in a summer orientation program, a freshman seminar on study skills, organization, note taking, character building, time management, social skills, and career planning will increase freshman success (Oakes & Waite, 2009) through increasing students' academic focus (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

If high schools wish to promote positive and lasting change, they must focus on structural changes and how they deliver a rigorous, engaging curriculum. Without supportive school structures or challenging academic material, a school is not providing the maximum benefit to its students. Students enter high school with long academic histories and differing skills. It is important to provide all students with rigor; equally, students should be provided the differentiated supports needed to be successful. In order to successfully engage with the high school curriculum, some students will benefit from increased exposure to core academic content (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008).

Students forming relationships with adults and adults being accountable for student success have been shown to greatly impact students' success in 9th grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Any scheduling or curricular activity that increases meaningful student to adult contact can contribute to both of these objectives. Examples include dividing students into cross-curricular teams, providing advisory periods, physically separating freshman classrooms from other school spaces, providing a separate lunch period, and providing a common planning time for teachers.

Students, families, and teachers also need clear, current information about students' academic status. Use of EWS and on-track indicators has been shown to increase the percentage of students who are on track for graduation (Bruce et al., 2011; Neild, 2009). Teachers need to be trained

and supported in the analysis of these data so that they can plan how to provide differentiation in the classroom (Horwitz & Snipes, 2009). Students and families will also benefit from support in interpreting the data, understanding what these predict for a student's post-secondary goals, and knowing about the resources they may access to support student needs and interests.

Extracurricular activities can be extremely important in students' school commitment and academic success. When working in culturally diverse communities, it is important to make sure that extracurricular activities are responsive to the students' linguistic and cultural histories (Lys, 2009), and that financial or logistical barriers have been removed. As extracurricular activities are often provided by community partners, district as well as school personnel can take leadership in forming alliances with community members to maximize the extracurricular offerings and their academic benefits.

Consultation as a Means to Support the Effectiveness of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Educational Equity

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) (previously Response to Intervention) model is intended to promote the educational obtainment of all students. Generally, universal interventions are indicated when the incidence of a problem is greater than 20–25%, as a system will be ineffectual and overwhelmed if trying to provide targeted or intensive supports to a greater percentage of students than this (Bender, 2012). This norm-referenced approach can be contrasted to criterion-referenced standards (such as students should be able to read at grade level) in determining which students should be provided with additional supports. In many urban high schools, the majority of students may not be performing to grade-level criteria in one or more subjects. This suggests that universal interventions will often need to differentiate for students who are not performing at established standards. Applying a public health perspective, utilizing preventative and universal means to support students is critical to success, even when additional supports are also needed (Hess, Short, & Hazel, 2012).

One means of empowering teachers to utilize their skills to differentiate for students' needs is through consultation. In most school consultation models, there are two goals: (1) support the consultee to work more effectively with the client, and (2) increase the capacity of the consultee to work more effectively in the future in similar situations (see, e.g., Zins & Erchul, 2002). Consultants operating from a social justice perspective strive to find common ground as well as identify individual differences "toward the end of finding just solutions to challenging problems and opportunities facing individuals and schools, with particular attention to students and families who have been disenfranchised through larger system and institutional biases and barriers" (Shriberg & Fenning, 2009, p. 4). For school consultants practicing from a social justice frame, consultation has the additional goals of advocacy and decolonization (Clare, 2009). However, teachers work within larger systems, which can be systems of oppression or empowerment. Systems-level consultation regarding accountability and standards-based reform has the potential to increase equity in educational outcomes (Roach & Elliott, 2009), which was the goal of this case study.

The Transition Initiative

This case study documents one year of a district-led Transition Initiative, with a focus on how it was implemented at one high school. The Transition Initiative was designed to be a systematic integrated MTSS process to support the academic success of all 9th grade students. There were four identified district-level activities:

- develop data systems to support individualized interventions for each 9th grade student;
- provide aligned and targeted professional development for teachers;

- link students' needs to school and community resources; and
- leverage supplemental resources for school staff and teachers.

The goal for the year was to define the elements necessary for schools to implement the Transitions Initiative. The ultimate district objective was to develop various models of best practice in secondary schools to support students and families from the spring semester of 8th grade through the beginning of 10th grade, so that students started their second year of high school on track for graduation within four years.

The presented Transition Initiative case study was a consultation process that occurred at many levels: (1) school psychology graduate students consulted with individual teachers regarding individual students and classroom management; (2) the graduate students and the school psychology faculty member consulted with teaching teams about cross-disciplinary strategies to support individual students, groups of students, and all students; (3) the graduate students, the faculty member, and a district administrator consulted with a representative from each teaching team on supporting their team in the implementation of the Transition Initiative; (4) the graduate students, the faculty member, and the district administrator consulted with the school's administrators and support staff regarding how to better support teachers and students; and (5) the faculty member consulted with many district personnel about their student outcome data and how district systems could be leveraged to better meet the needs of building-level administrators, support personnel, and teachers such that they could more effectively support student success.

METHOD

This study was conducted in accordance with the research guidelines of the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (2010). Support for the research was received by the participating district and the Internal Review Board of the University of Denver.

Research Approach

We approached this study from a social justice frame. Therefore, we embraced the Community-Based Research (CBR) model, a form of action research, in which academic researchers and community members collaborated on all aspects of the project design and investigation (Strand et al., 2003). CBR utilizes multiple methods of discovery, validates multiple sources of knowledge, and disseminates the findings through multiple venues. The goal of CBR is to promote social action and change for the purpose of achieving social justice.

As this was an applied project, the study evolved across the year. Our analysis of the initial data guided subsequent data collection, and analysis of those data guided the next collection. Grounded theory methods "consist of simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other throughout the research process" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 506). Further, applying grounded theory to the advancement of social justice requires "attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510). Our social justice agenda was to promote urban school environments that prepare all students for post-secondary success, such that they can lead fulfilled lives that contribute to the wellbeing of their communities.

Case Study Site and Participants

District Characteristics. This case study was in an urban district in the Intermountain West. The district served nearly 80,000 students at over 160 schools. In this district, 77% of the students

were identified as ethnically diverse (58% of students were Latino and 15% were Black), 72% qualified for Free or Reduced Price lunches, 36% were English Language Learners, and 11% qualified for Special Education services.

The district had an on-time graduation rate of 52%, compared to the state rate of 72%. The district had established a goal of 90% on-time graduation and the Transition Initiative was designed to support that goal. Drawing from an external evaluation, the district had created risk profiles for each incoming 9th grader based on four identified 8th grade risk factors: having (1) failed math, (2) failed language arts, (3) attended less than 90%, or (4) been suspended or expelled. The four risk factors were added to create a composite risk score, ranging from 0 to 4. Color-coded rosters of students were created by risk: *green* for no risk factors or one risk factor, *yellow-green* for two risk factors, *yellow* for three risk factors, and *red* for all four risk factors. The District wanted to use high schools' student risk factors as a formative means to evaluate a school's effectiveness in supporting the increased on-time graduation goal.

School Characteristics.   The case study school had shown great gains in the past few years in many areas. It was a large, neighborhood high school in a poor area of the city. When the principal had been appointed, it was an unsafe school with neighborhood gang disputes being fought within the school. The staff had addressed these problems and after four years, fights on the school grounds had gone from 45 to 8 per year. At the same time, student enrollment had increased by almost 700 students in the last five years as more students chose to attend this high school. Students were showing gains on the annual state standardized assessments and on the ACT; similarly, there had been increases in students completing dual enrollment courses (gaining college credit for their high school work) and advanced placement courses (allowing them to test out of entry-level college courses). Graduation had increased from 47% to 64% on time graduation, and 85% of graduates from the last two years had been accepted into post-secondary institutions. The district believed it could learn from the successes of this school, and that with additional supports even greater gains could be made.

Ninth Grade Programming.   There were various programs and structures designed to support students in being successful during the 9th grade. The school offered a one-week summer program for incoming 9th graders to acclimatize them to the expectations of the school; 67% of the students had attended this program. There was an assistant principal and school counselor dedicated to the freshman cohort. The assistant principal and principal actively sought to recruit their master teachers to the 9th grade year. The students were physically separated from the upperclassmen by having all their classes on the top floor of the building; the top floor was selected to make leaving during the school day more difficult. Each day started with a 30-minute Zero Period, designed to reduce the number of students tardy to their first period class and provide an advisory time for students. For all grade levels, there was a very active attendance team; they prioritized ensuring that 9th grade students' attendance stayed above 90%. They did this by developing and maintaining relationships with students and families. When students were absent, they would often go to the home of the student that day; for students with frequent absences, they visited or contacted families regularly. Students who had been absent or who were performing below expectations were assigned to attend school on Saturday; during this time, they were expected to perform community service (e.g., pick up trash around the schools) and engage in general academic remediation activities.

The students were divided into four groups (called academies), each named after a local university. Teachers for all core subjects taught students from only one academy to enable cross-disciplinary discussions about students. Teachers' daily planning period was common by discipline (e.g., all 9th grade math teachers had the same daily planning time). Weekly, there was a two-hour professional development session for all teachers. Once a month for the 9th grade core teachers, this

Table 1
District and School Student Demographic Percentages

	District	School
On-Time Graduation Rate	52	64
Racial or Ethnic Minority	77	95
Free or Reduced Price Lunch	72	82
English Language Learner	36	62
Special Education	11	10

time was supposed to be devoted to meeting as an academy team to review data and discuss student progress. However, due to other school-level needs, the student-focused professional development time only occurred every other month.

Student Characteristics. Approximately 450 students made up the freshman cohort. This study reports on the 440 students for whom the district had 8th grade risk indicators and who completed the first semester at the case study school. Within the total school population, 95% of the students were students of color (almost exclusively Latino), 82% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunches, 62% qualified as English language learners, and 10% qualified for special education services. See Table 1 for a comparison of the school and district demographic rates.

Procedures

As the methodology dictated, data collection and service provision were intertwined. One graduate school psychology student met with each cross-disciplinary team and consulted with individual teachers as they developed strategies to increase the number of students who were on track for graduation by the end of their freshmen year. The school psychology faculty member and the graduate students met weekly for consultation supervision. We reviewed school and district data, surveyed teachers and support staff, conducted interviews with teachers and key support staff, observed in classrooms, attended staff meetings, and held focus groups and interviews with students. The research team met weekly to discuss progress and plan next steps; these meetings included the graduate students, the school psychology faculty member, district personnel, school administrators, and a teacher representative from each cross-disciplinary team. The graduate students and faculty member consulted with building staff on 9th grade supports. Also, the faculty member consulted with building administrators and various district personnel on the broader goal of increasing on-time graduation rates and to discuss any logistical issues regarding the case study.

The main sources of data were consultation notes, observations of classrooms and academy meetings, surveys, interviews, and district records. Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and building administrators and support staff. Surveys were used to initiate interviews with teachers and support staff. The interviews and member checking are described in greater detail below.

Student Interviews. The district generated student risk reports for the freshman class based on their 8th grade performance (Entering Risk Reports) and at the end of the fall semester (End-of First-Semester Risk Reports). From the analysis of the Entering versus End-of First-Semester Risk Reports, we identified eight student categories from which we wished to interview students. For students that were on track to graduation, we conducted focus group interviews and for students currently showing signs of being at risk for not graduating with their cohort, we conducted individual interviews. As it was a district initiative, passive parent consent was obtained. Students assented to the interviews and were offered pizza to compensate them for their participation. All individual

Table 2
Number of Students by Entering and End-of-First Semester Risk Categories (N = 440)

| Entering Risk | Total | Risk After End-of-First Semester | | | |
		Green	Yellow-Green	Yellow	Red
Green	73	43[a]	14	8[b]	8[b]
Yellow-Green	169	77	31	21	40
Yellow	177	36[a]	21	27[b]	93[b]
Red	21	2[a]	2	4	13[c]
Total	440	158	68	60	154

[a]Students from this category interviewed in focus groups with other students in this category.
[b]Students from this group interviewed individually.
[c]Students were never interviewed as not in attendance, although repeated attempts were made to invite to interviews.

Table 3
Student Individual and Focus Group Interview Protocol

Questions and Prompts

1. What is the best part of being a student at [name of school]?
2. Compare your experience in middle school to your experience in high school so far. Tell me about what has changed the most. What was the easiest part about coming to high school and what was the most challenging?
3. Now that you are at [name of school], what advice do you have for administrators/principals to help middle school students prepare for high school? Any specific ideas that you think should happen during middle school?
4. You have (struggled/done very well) so far at [name of school]. Why is that? What type of support would help you be more invested and successful in your education?
5. Who are the adults here at [name of school] that have helped you the most? How have they helped you?
6. Tell me about your goals and plans for the future. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not important at all, and 5 being extremely important, how do you see your experiences at [name of school] helping you to obtaining these goals?
7. What do you hope stays the same next year at [name of school]? What do you hope changes?

Possible questions (depending on answers to above):

8. What are some things your teachers do or say that let you know they care about you?
9. What extra-curricular activities, if any, are you involved in (athletics, clubs, church groups, etc.)? How often do you participate and in what way do these activities impact your academic performance?
10. Tell me about the people in your life who have had the greatest impact on you or who provide you with the most support?
11. What helps you feel excited about school? What makes you feel discouraged about school?
12. In what ways do other students at [name of school] help you feel connected?

and group interviews lasted approximately one hour. For each category, we interviewed three to four students, except for students who had entered at and were currently at the highest risk level. We were unable to interview any students in this category because they were all absent each day across numerous weeks that we attempted to interview them. See Table 2 for an overview of students interviewed and Table 3 for the student interview protocol.

Teacher, Administrator, and Support Staff Interviews. We developed a survey protocol that was administered to all teachers (Table 4) and support staff (Table 5). We used those survey protocols as a starting point for interviews. Twenty of the 26 teachers completed the surveys (either independently or through an interview) and all the support staff completed a survey (5 out of 5). The graduate student who had been working with each cross-disciplinary team asked each team member to be

Table 4
Teacher Survey

<u>Please take a moment to complete this brief survey:</u>

This survey is to better understand how [name of school] is supporting 9th grade students.

Your answers will be combined with others from your academy and reported in the

Transitions Program Evaluation Report. If you are willing, we may ask to discuss your

answers with you to better understand them. The Report will be used to understand how 9th

grade students are being supported and where we might do an even better job, so that more

students are on track for 4 year graduation. Thank you for your time and honesty in

completing this, and especially for all you do to help students be successful!

Circle your academy: [names listed]

Circle your content area: Literature   Science Math   Social Studies
       History   Geography   World Languages
       Other:_____

How often do you collaborate with other teachers in your academy?

         Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Almost Always   Always

On average, how often do you communicate with parents regarding students that are not on track for graduation?

     Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Quarterly   Semester

On average, how often do you discuss concerns and/or progress with a student not on track for graduation?

     Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Quarterly   Semester

Please provide three (3) or more strategies you use <u>frequently</u> to increase student engagement and motivation during learning.

| |
| |

I feel well enough equipped and skilled to assist students not on track for graduation.

     Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

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(Continued)

Table 4
Continued

I feel well informed on the accommodations and modifications that some of my students require in an academic setting.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

Overall, I feel that my students are making adequate progress towards achieving a year's content knowledge.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

Please provide three (3) or more strategies you use <u>frequently</u> to increase student study skills, time management, and/or organization skills.

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Please provide three (3) or more strategies you use <u>frequently</u> to help develop students' abilities to reason and solve problems.

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Please provide examples of how you help develop and maintain trusting and caring relationships with your students.

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I am comfortable interpreting the ABC Stoplight reports.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

How often do you use the ABC Stoplight reports to guide your daily teaching practices?

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

Comments/Feedback:

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individually interviewed; 16 of the 26 (62%) teachers consented to participate. We interviewed, at least twice, building-level administrators and staff: the principal, the 9th grade assistant principal, the 9th grade counselor, the two behavior interventionists, and the two attendance interventionists. All administrators and support staff consented to participate. Adults received a coffee bar beverage of their choice to compensate them for their participation.

Table 5
Support Staff Survey

<u>Please take a moment to complete this brief survey:</u>

This survey is to better understand how Lincoln is supporting 9th grade students. We have asked the same questions of the teachers but would also like to have the perspectives of the building-level people who have such an impact on our students. Your answers will be combined with others from your department and reported in the Transitions Program Evaluation Report. If you are willing, we may ask to discuss your answers with you to better understand them. The Report will be used to understand how 9th grade students are being supported and where we might do an even better job, so that more students are on track for 4 year graduation. Thank you for your time and honesty in completing this, and especially for all you do to help students be successful!

Circle your department: Attendance   Behavior   Social/Emotional/Psych

Circle the grade level with whom you primarily work: 9   10   11   12

1. How often do you collaborate with teachers or other staff members outside your department?

   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Almost Always   Always

2. On average, how often do you communicate with parents regarding students that are not on track for graduation?

Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Quarterly

   Semester

(Continued)

Table 5
Continued

3. On average, how often do you discuss concerns and/or progress with a student not on

track for graduation?

Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Quarterly

        Semester

4. Please provide three or more strategies you use frequently to increase student

engagement, motivation, and overall student improvement?

5. I feel well equipped and skilled to assist students not on track for graduation

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

6. I feel well informed on the accommodations and modifications that some of my students

require

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

7. Overall, I feel that my students are making adequate progress towards achieving a year's

knowledge of the "[name of school] Way" expectations

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

8. Please provide three or more strategies you use frequently to increase student time

management and/or organizational skills

9. Please provide three or more strategies you use frequently to help develop students'

abilities to reason and solve problems

10. Please provide examples of how you develop and maintain trusting and caring

relationships with your students

Table 5
Continued

11. I am comfortable interpreting the ABC Stoplight reports

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

12. How often do you use the ABC Stoplight reports to guide your daily interactions with

students?

Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Quarterly

        Semester

13. I feel that PD has given me the resources to work with my students and the support I need to be effective .
        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly Agree

14. How effective are the 9th grade support teams in helping with Level II supports for attendance, behavior and academics?
        Highly Effective   Effective   Neutral   Ineffective   Highly Ineffective
What's working well?

Recommendations?

Comments/Feedback:

Member Checking. For the district, a program evaluation report was generated. The sections on each cross-disciplinary team were reviewed with the team's teachers and the whole report was reviewed by the principal and assistant principal before the report was submitted to the district. The material in this article was drawn from that report.

R<small>ESULTS</small>

The results are arranged by students' entering risk profiles and by academies. Also presented in the results are building-level and district initiatives that occurred in response to the systems-level consultation.

Student Risk Profiles

Based on their 8th grade performance, most (76%) of the students entered in either the yellow-green or yellow risk level; in other words, most students had two or three of the four risk factors (see Figure 1). At weeks 6 and 12, many students (41%) were in the green category, with no risks or only one risk. At the end of the fall semester, the distribution had become bimodal, with most students
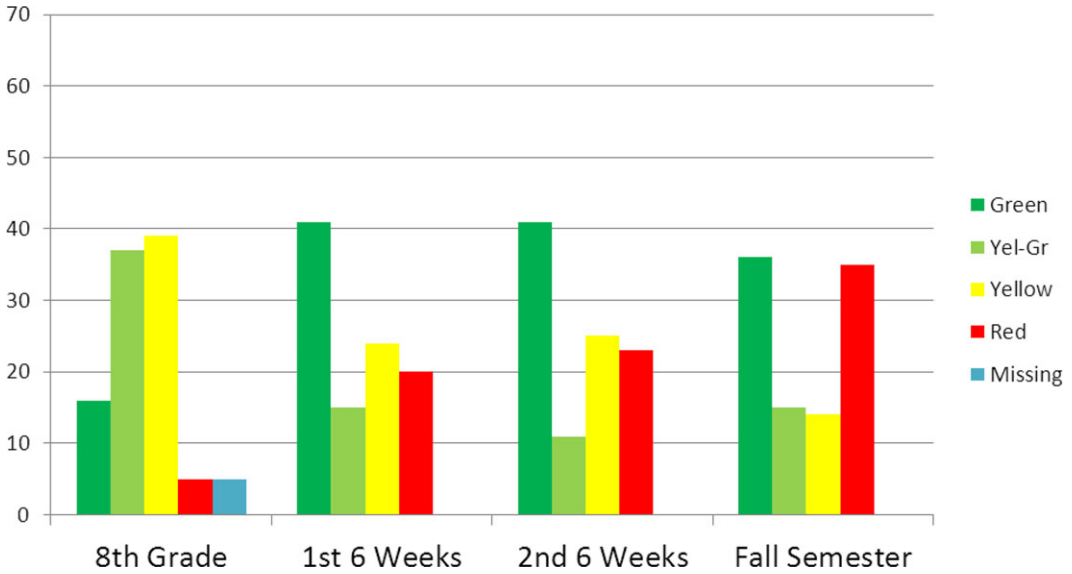
FIGURE 1. Percentage of students in various risk categories at entry and across fall semester ($N = 456$). Color versions of all figures are available from the first author.

either in the green (36%) or red (35%) category. Figure 2 shows the risk category that students were in by the end of the fall semester based on their entering risk categorization. Most students who entered in the green and red categories remained in those categories (59% and 62% respectively); however, over a third did not. The proportion of students who entered in the green and red categories was small. For the majority of the student population, those entering in the yellow-green and yellow categories, about half went toward their respective poles (yellow-green to green [46%] and yellow to red [53%]). However, almost a quarter went the opposite direction; 24% of the students who entered in the yellow-green risk category were in the red risk category after a semester and 20% of the students who entered the yellow category were in the green category after a semester. The following explanations for students' progress during their first semester of high school are based primarily on student interviews.

Students Who Entered in the Green Risk Category.   Only 16% of the freshmen students entered with a green risk level (zero or one risk factor). After the fall semester, only 59% of these students were still at a green risk level. Students who had maintained their green risk level reported participating in sports and extracurricular activities, feeling supported by teachers and coaches, and planning to attend college. Students who had entered at a green risk level but transitioned to a red risk level reported not participating in extracurricular activities, not feeling supported by adults at the high school, and struggling to understand the credit system.

Students Who Entered in the Yellow-Green Risk Category.   A total of 169 students (37% of the cohort) entered their freshman year identified as within the yellow-green risk category (having two of the four risk factors). Of these, 46% were categorized as at a green risk level after the fall semester and 24% were at the red risk level. Due to time constraints, we did not interview any students from this risk category.

Students Who Entered in the Yellow Risk Category.   The largest group were the 177 students (39% of the cohort) identified as in the yellow risk category from their 8th grade performance. At the
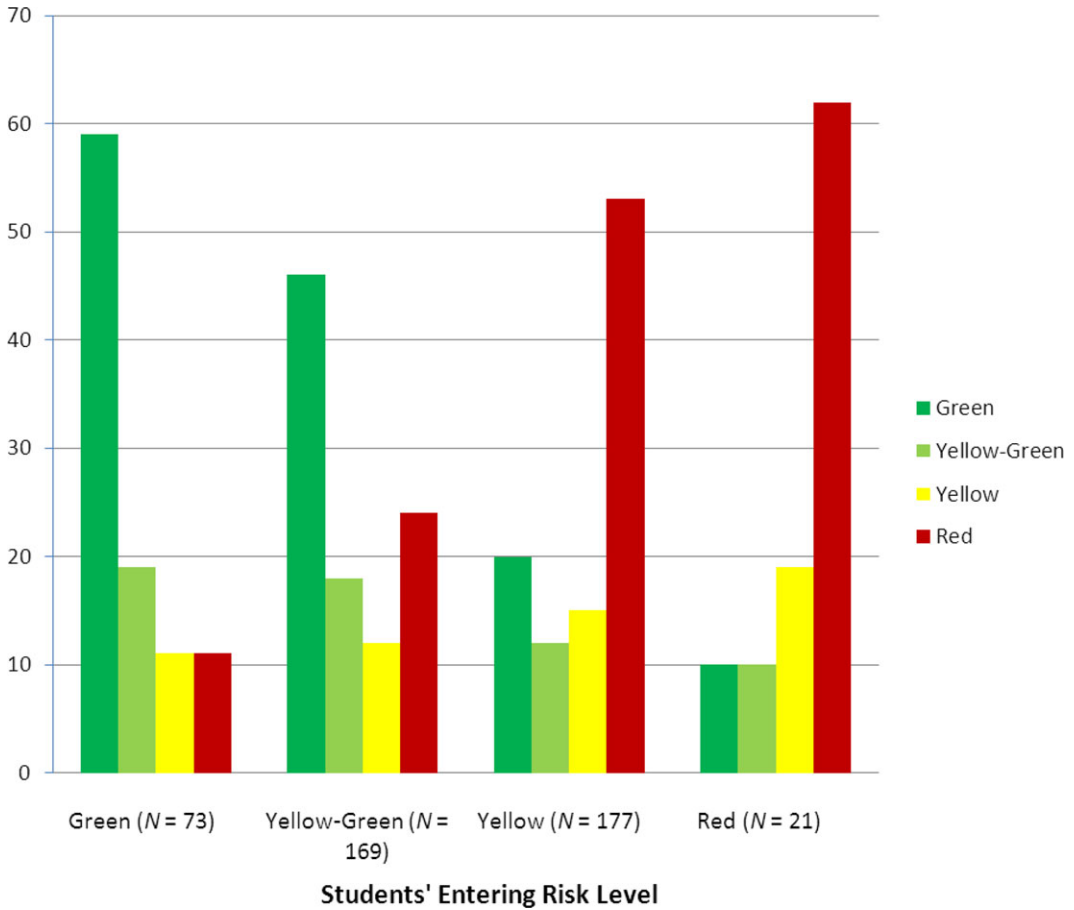
FIGURE 2. Percentage of students in various risk categories at end of fall semester by entering risk level ($N = 440$).

end of the fall semester, 32% were now in the green or yellow-green category (positive change) and 53% were now in the red risk category (negative change). Students who had moved from a yellow to green risk status reported involvement in extracurricular activities, feeling strongly supported by teachers, feeling safe, and wanting to attend college. Students who had dropped from a yellow to red risk level stated that they felt supported by teachers academically but not as individuals, struggled with the increased responsibility of high school, and were mainly motivated to attend high school to socialize with friends.

Students Who Entered in the Red Risk Category. A very small number of students ($N = 21; 5$%) entered their freshman year identified as in the red risk category (having all four risk factors). Most students (62%) who entered in the red risk category were still in the red category after a semester. The two students who had entered at the red risk level but transitioned to the green level during their fall semester reported that they appreciated the increased challenge and rigor of the academic work and felt supported by faculty both academically and personally, but they did not participate in extracurricular activities and were not motivated by the social aspects of school. Although repeated attempts were made, the students who had entered in the red risk category and were still in the red

risk category could not be found at school to be interviewed, suggesting that they were attending minimally or not at all.

Summary of Results by Students' Entering Risk Categories

Most students entered with targeted risk levels and were either in need of universal or intensive interventions after one semester. Based on their 8th grade performance, 76% of students entered at the intermediate yellow-green or yellow risk levels. By the end of fall semester, most students were at a green risk level (36%) or a red risk level (35%), with only 29% now in the yellow-green and yellow categories. During the fall semester, many students moved into a path of academic success or failure.

Successful Students. Students who were successful during their fall semester reported support from teachers and planning for college. Most successful freshmen reported that a major component of their success was involvement in some group activity outside of academics; the exception was students who had entered in the red risk category. The successful freshmen reported feeling supported by their teachers academically and comfortable telling their teachers about personal concerns. These students reported wanting to attend college and believing that they were receiving the supports to make that goal a reality.

Struggling Students. Students who were struggling reported difficulties with the required personal responsibility, not feeling that teachers cared about them, and not being involved in extracurricular activities. For struggling students, the increased personal responsibility that came with transitioning to high school seemed to be a challenge. These students reported that it was difficult to keep track of credits, homework, and other assignments independently. Many reported that, although most of their teachers cared about their academic progress, they did not feel that their teachers cared about them as individuals.

Ninth Grade Results by Academies

Incoming freshmen were divided into four academies to provide them with more individualized attention. Only students with English acquisition plans were placed in Academy D; students who had been identified by their middle school counselor as showing academic excellence or potential were prioritized for Academy A; the remaining students were divided so that Academies B and C were of approximately equal size. Although teachers participated in professional development once a week, professional development by academy only occurred about once every two months. Each academy received individualized support from one graduate school psychology student. As part of that support, the students interviewed academy teachers to gain their perspectives on the functioning of the academy and the Transitions Initiative. The following sections describe each academy and the students' on-track status after one semester in the academy. Most of the explanation for student success by academy was drawn from observations and teacher interviews.

Academy A. Academy A was designed to support students in college readiness. Academy A had 169 students and six core teachers (28 students per core teacher). Most students (49%) were in the yellow-green risk level when they entered Academy A. After the first six weeks, most students were in the green risk level and the percentage of students in the green risk level continued to increase across the semester with 64% of the students at the green risk level by the end of the fall semester (see Figure 3). This team worked cooperatively and was eager to make use of data about their students. The teachers supported each other, sharing ideas about students and what worked in the classroom. They mentioned that the time that they spent as a team discussing students was
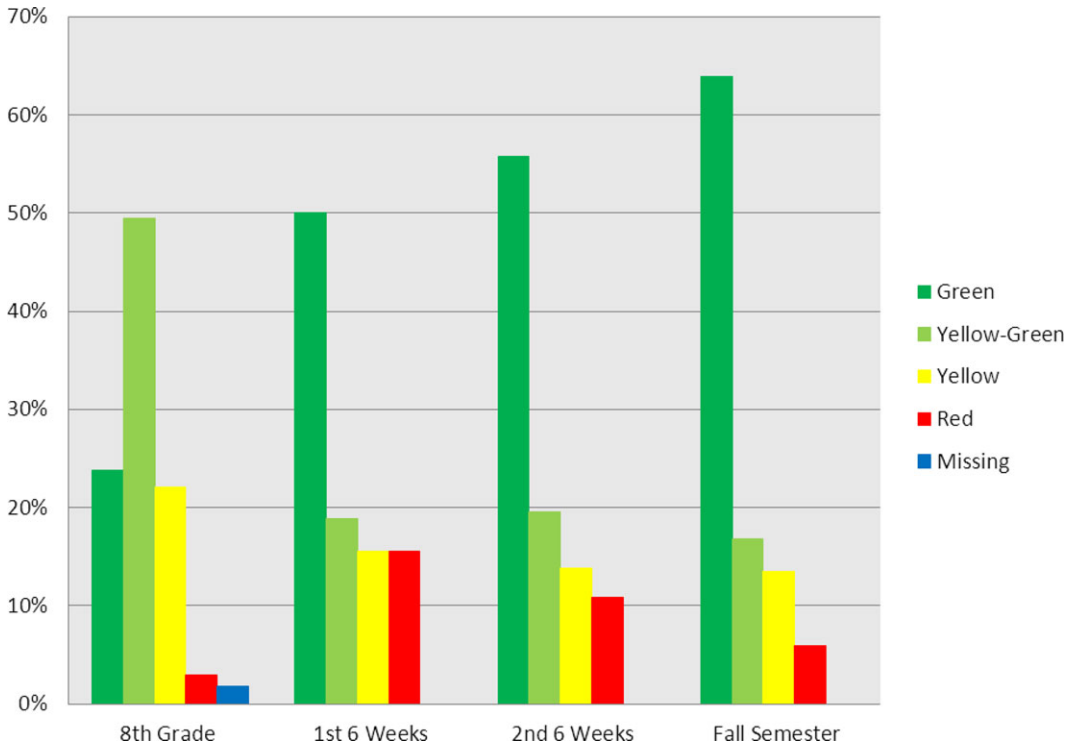
FIGURE 3. Percentage of students in various risk categories at entry and across fall semester in Academy A ($N = 169$).

tremendously beneficial to their abilities to support students. A concern that came up in most of the meetings was that there was not enough time to meet as a team.

Academy A had few behavioral problems; however, they struggled with their students' attendance and Fs. From their fall semester student data, they decided to focus on increasing students' GPAs during the spring semester. The team developed strategies to facilitate success and increase motivation. To increase academic success, Academy A created a tutoring system, provided students with practice tests, and developed a homework system. The motivational strategies included posters with graphs and stickers, recognition of individual students, setting class goals, and providing rewards for behavior. When the graduate school psychology student interviewed the teachers individually, they said that these strategies had motivated the students to work harder and this was having a positive impact on students' GPAs.

Academy B. Academy B consisted of 116 9th-grade students and seven core teachers (17 students per core teacher). The Academy B teachers believed that they had the majority of students who qualified for special education services; records did not substantiate this, although they did have the highest percentage of any academy of students who had been in the yellow risk zone at the end of 8th grade (see Figure 4). By the end of the fall semester, most students were in the red zone.

The Academy B teaching team was diverse in their skills and attitudes toward working with students. The Academy B teachers struggled during the fall semester during their Transitions professional development time to work collaboratively and to utilize the data to design differentiated supports for their students. However, during a February professional development meeting where they discussed the students' fall data with the school psychology graduate student, the team became
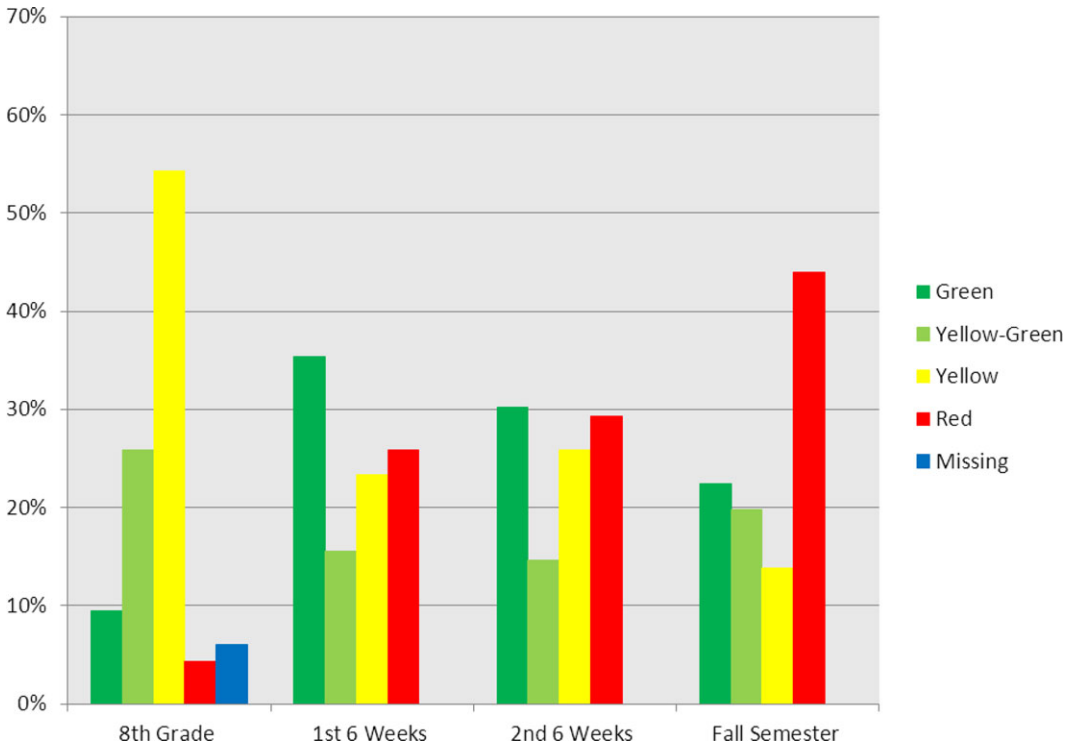
FIGURE 4. Percentage of students in various risk categories at entry and across Fall semester in academy B ($N = 116$).

engaged and worked collaboratively. Based on the student fall data, the team decided to focus on de-creasing student Fs for the spring semester. They developed an F Recovery Plan, aimed at supporting students with current Fs.

The F Recovery Plan including assigning one teacher as a mentor to each student with one or more F grades, an F Recovery Contract, and a tutoring attendance tracking sheet. The teacher mentor was responsible for meeting with each mentee to develop an individualized F Recovery Plan, checking in weekly with his or her four to seven mentees, and checking with other teachers on the students' progress. With support and consultation from the school psychology graduate student, the teachers continued to monitor the progress of their mentees, which led to many students increasing their grades to passing grades before the end of the spring quarter. The Academy B teachers commented that their infrequent opportunities to meet as a team impeded their ability to support students and that they were most effective in utilizing data to individualize student supports when they did meet together.

Academy C. Academy C teachers did not perceive Academy C as having its own distinct identity, although the Academy C teachers frequently explained that they had "all of the behavior problems" (this was not substantiated by data). Academy C consisted of eight core teachers and 143 students (18 students per core teacher). Most of these students entered high school identified as being in the yellow-green or yellow risk level (see Figure 5). By the end of the fall semester, most students were in the red risk level.

The Academy C teachers did not embrace the Transitions Initiative initially; they perceived that it added more work to their already busy schedules and were skeptical of the utility of the
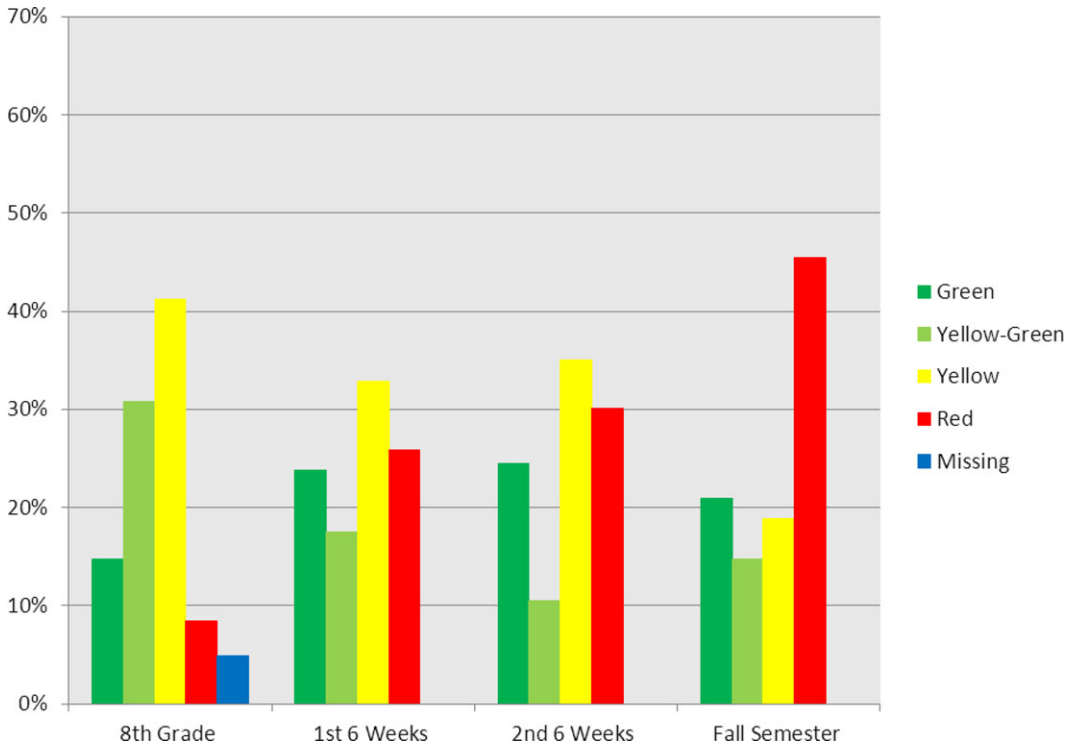
FIGURE 5. Percentage of students in various risk categories at entry and across Fall semester in academy C ($N = 143$).

data reports. Much of the first semester was spent by the school psychology graduate student trying to bolster the reputation of the Transitions Initiative and develop relationships with individual teachers. Because of Transitions' professional development meetings that were hijacked by other school agendas, the Academy C teachers voluntarily met in October during an early release day to review the risk reports and discuss strategies to support students. This meeting and the November Transitions professional development meeting created momentum for the team; however, they did not develop specific targets or activities, and the momentum was lost by the next meeting in February. At the February meeting, the teachers decided to prioritize reducing Fs for the spring quarter. Their strategies included consistent responses to classroom behavior problems, individual conferences with students with one or more Fs, more communication between team members about these students, utilizing a tutoring program, weekly incentives for students with completed work (computer time, homework pass, movies, time for music), and a pizza party for the class with the highest grades (class periods would compete against each other).

The Academy C teachers were strong individuals, some with amazing teaching skills; however, they struggled to collaborate. This was made all the more difficult by the health problems of the teacher who was expected to provide the Transitions leadership. They reported that the risk reports would be much more useful to them if the reports were generated more frequently and if they were provided with regular time to discuss the reports.

Academy D. Academy D was composed of just 28 students supported by five core teachers (six students per core teacher). All Academy D students were English Language Learners (ELL) and took English Language Acquisition (ELA) classes. Almost all of the Academy D students entered
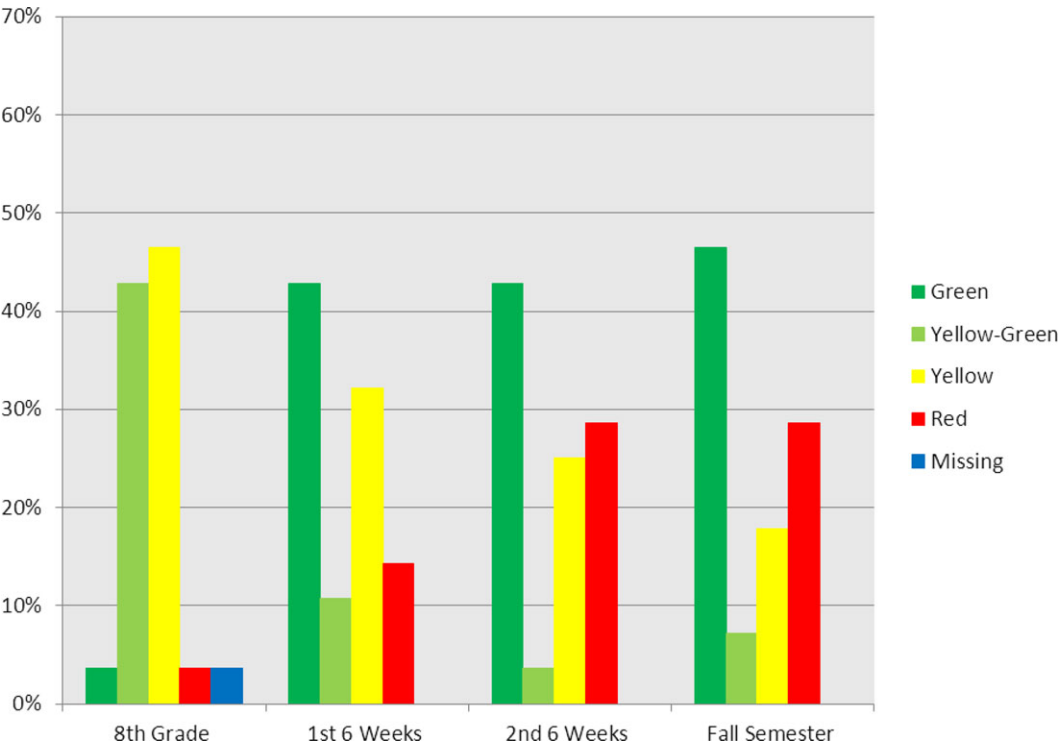
FIGURE 6. Percentage of students in various risk categories at entry and across Fall semester in academy D ($N = 28$).

high school in the yellow-green or yellow risk levels (see Figure 6); by the end of the fall semester, most students were in the green risk level.

Because of the ELA course scheduling, the Academy D teachers had daily common planning time and met together at least weekly to discuss their students. Their main concerns were on finding motivational strategies for their students, placing their students in the correct ELA level courses, and supporting their students so they could be successful when they were not in ELA classes (e.g., in electives). Based on the students' fall data, the Academy D teachers decided to focus on decreasing student Fs for the spring semester. The strategies that they developed were to schedule parent-teacher conferences about students with failing grades, to make phone calls to families about positive student behaviors, to refer students with absences to the Attendance Team (they had not been doing this), and to refer students who were not making academic progress to the Student Support Team (they had been doing this very rarely). Although this team met beyond the Transitions Initiative, they repeatedly mentioned that meeting as part of the Initiative was helpful and that they appreciated being provided the risk reports and supported in interpreting the data.

Summary of Findings by Academies

Freshmen were divided into one of four academies, designed to organize students into smaller groups to facilitate academic and social supports. Academy D had a specific focus: to support recent immigrants in the acquisition of English. Academy D was small and cohesive, with a teacher to student ratio of 1:6; their greatest gain during the year was to better utilize building-level supports for their students. Academy A was the "star" Academy; their mission was to prepare their students

for college; their teacher to student ratio was 1:28. Their students had slightly lower 8th grade risk levels than Academies B and C; however, at any entering risk level, students had greater success in this academy during their freshman year than those students in Academies B and C. Most students in Academies B and C were in the yellow-green or yellow risk category when they entered high school and were in the red risk category by the end of their fall semester. The teacher to student ratio in Academies B and C was 1: 17–18. Academies B and C did not have a positive group identity, nor cohesion among the core teachers. When the teachers from Academies B and C were supported in working together to utilize data to make instructional changes, there were noticeable attitudinal shifts. With the infrequent cross-disciplinary meetings, these advances were not sustained.

The student results show that Academies A and D were the most successful in supporting students. Academy A had been established as a college preparatory academy to recruit academically oriented neighborhood students, who otherwise might select to attend other district high schools. As Academies B and C did not have unique identities, many of the teachers in Academies B and C perceived their students and themselves as "less than" those in Academy A. This perception was heightened by the administrators' belief that competition between academy teacher teams was a useful strategy to increase motivation and student outcomes. This impeded the ability of academies to learn from each other. All teachers commented that regular time to meet to discuss students would improve their ability to utilize student data and provide differentiated supports for students.

School and District Response to Findings

Three EWS Reports. Based on the utility of the risk report, the district's data department now generates three main EWS reports. They create incoming risk scores for students entering grades 6 through 9. Based on teacher and administrator requests for live-time information, a daily student status report was created that tracks academic performance, attendance, and behavior infractions; this report is updated constantly for all secondary students. Teachers not updating grades weekly remain a barrier to accurately identifying students failing courses. For sophomore through senior high school students, an on-track to graduation report (based on graduation requirements) is provided after each semester.

A glaring realization during this year was that there was no standardized method for assuring that students were on track for graduation. At each high school in the district, counselors manually compared the courses that students had successfully completed to the list of courses that their school identified as meeting the district's requirements for high school graduation. For instance, the course that fulfilled the geography requirement (typically accomplished the freshman year) was titled differently from school to school. To address the variance of courses across high schools, the district embarked on a course-code reduction and standardization project. Further, because only one year of geography was required, a student might not be identified as off track for graduation until his or her senior year, even though the student had failed the course during his or her freshman year. The district-generated on-track to graduation report required monumental collaboration to create, but has allowed counselors, students, and families to identify sooner if a student is at risk of not graduating with his or her cohort.

After-School Tutoring Center. In the spring, the school opened an after-school tutoring center where students could receive support on class assignments—a first for this high school. The academies are now able to assign students who were absent or failed a curricular unit to additional, meaningful academic supports. Implementing a tutoring program that was linked to course assignments was an obvious solution, but huge accomplishment for this school.

Revised Advisory Period.   Recognizing that the Zero Hour advisory was not supporting students, the advisory period was moved to the middle of the day and is now a time for students to receive additional academic instruction and personal attention.

Common Planning Time for Teachers.   Probably most important to the teachers, the 9th grade course schedule was rearranged so that each academy's core teachers had one common planning time per week. This time is intended for core teachers to use the EWS reports to design interventions for students and track their progress. However, supports to best utilize this time were not provided. As mentioned in the results, there was great variability in the belief systems and skills of the teachers, especially the teachers in Academies B and C. Not all teachers had embraced the assumption inherent in MTSS that teachers and students are jointly responsible for students' learning. For some that did embrace this belief, they did not know how to convey this to students (and families) or how to differentiate instruction to the students' learning needs.

Coordinated MTSS Supports.   During the case study year, district supports for a universal positive behavior system and restorative justice for behavior infractions were introduced to the high school. The positive behavior and restorative justice programs were met with resistance: most adults perceived that a nonpunitive discipline policy would have limited impact. This again speaks to the need to address beliefs and assumptions held by adults about students. However, there was recognition that the Saturday morning punishment system was not working. The assistant principal began implementing weekly MTSS meetings; these were attended by the 9th grade attendance, behavior, and achievement staff. This allowed staff to identify students who were expressing multiple needs and plan proactively.

Summer and Extracurricular Programming.   As data showed increased success for the students who attended the one-week summer orientation, the school wrote a grant so that they would have funding to offer the orientation to all students the following summer. Recognizing the importance of extracurricular involvement to academic success, the district wrote and received a grant to provide each student with at least one free extracurricular activity, of the student's choosing.

Vertical Alignment and Communication.   The district encourages families to consider various district schools that would best meet their child's educational needs, rather than promoting geographic attendance (i.e., neighborhood schools). There are some school feeder patterns, but there is also a fair amount of crossover. In response to this fluidity, the district counseling department instituted a middle-to-high-school transition day where secondary school counselors meet with counselors from multiple other schools to discuss middle school students transitioning to high school. At these meetings, universal supports to assist students and families with the transition, as well as proactive differentiated supports for select students as they enter high school, have been designed.

Discussion

This case study documents one year of a high school transitions program at one high school with the 9th grade staff. Through consultation with the 9th grade teachers, the cross-disciplinary teaching teams utilized data to more quickly intervene with students at risk of failing one or more classes.

Major Findings

Students Entered With Various Risk Profiles that Required Immediate Differentiation of Supports.   At each transition between school levels, a "wait and see" approach is often taken. However, at the secondary level, there is not a need screen students or wait for academic deficits to materialize

(Fuch, Fuch, & Compton, 2010). At this school, the data showed that a critical window to set students up for high school success was missed by not providing tailored supports as they were about to and as they transition into the high school environment.

Students' Entering Risk Profiles Were Not Fully Predictive of Where They Would Be by the End of 9th Grade. Although students entered high school better or less well prepared to succeed, how well the environment met their needs greatly predicted their 9th grade success. In this case study, there were great differences in students' success based on the academy in which they were placed. Although there were population differences between academies also, this still suggests that teaching teams and appropriate supports have a huge impact on student outcomes. Students at all entering levels of risk cited a relationship with a teacher where they perceived that the teacher cared about them as a whole person as instrumental to their success. Other studies have found that teacher support can reduce the probability of dropping out by half (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

The Consultation With Teaching Teams and Individual Teachers Was Perceived by Teachers as Increasing Their Ability to Support Student Needs. The teachers reported that meeting as cross-disciplinary teams with the consultant to analyze student data and plan support strategies had a positive impact on students' academic success. Often these group conversations then led to individual teachers seeking consultation. We perceived that many of the teachers had greater adherence to team plans due to the consultant's follow-up and individual consultation services. To support the effectiveness in their consultation and learning of the graduate students, the graduate student consultants met for consultation supervised from the school psychology faculty member who has an expertise in consultation. Consultation is a cost-effective means to "give psychology away" (Albee, 1982) to natural caregivers, so that they are better equipped to meet student needs and more empowered to advocate for their and students' needs.

The Systems-Level Consultation of the Transitions Initiative Led to Significant Building and District Changes. As well as teaching team supports, systemic supports in response to student data are critical to allow teachers to be more effect and to better meet student needs. We were able to consult with building-level personnel as well as district-level personnel. Consulting simultaneously at multiple levels created a synergy that could not have been produced through more limited consultation. For instance, EWS are considered critical to refine, systematize, and redirect data to educators (Bruce et al., 2011) but fancy data analysis systems often suffer from lack of data being entered in a timely fashion or the reports not being utilized. When teachers saw that building administrators and district personnel were designing or revising systems based on needs that they had identified in their consultation, the teachers became much more invested in the process and vocal in expressing to administrators and district personnel what they wanted to be better able to serve students. Reciprocally, when district personnel saw the engagement of the teachers and subsequent student impact, the district personnel became more invested in the Initiative.

Limitations

There are important limitations to this study that should be kept in mind. First, the data reported were only from one freshman cohort at one high school. There may be cohort effects that help explain the progress of students from the various academies or even the entering risk groups. Also, student and adult perspectives may be biased. Focus group or individual interview sessions were held with students from various risk score groups. Although selected randomly, the number of students involved in the group and individual interviews was limited, so the results cannot be generalized to the entire student population. Similarly, the data from the adults may only be representative of them.

Second, there was no family or community perspective included in the data collection. Undoubtedly, families of these students would have valuable insights into their students' progress and the transition experience. Utilizing the resources of the families and communities would have increased the cultural saliency of the Transitions Initiative for their students. It also could have been an opportunity to empower families and community partners to engage with the school and district about issues of importance to them.

The third limitation that should be considered is the data from the EWS reports. The selection of the risk rubric for students' middle school performance was based on retrospective research of the district's students who did not complete high school. Further, the students' identified risk levels were created by adding their risk factors; these factors may or may not be additive. Arguably, this crude method was useful for discussions about groups of students but it is not nearly accurate enough to use to make an important decision about any one student. However, the goal of an EWS is to provide simplified information so that decisions can be made about many students. As this report was what was being espoused by the district, our consultation also used this tool as it had face validity and meaning to the participants. Because of how utilized this tool was and concerns about its precision, the district is now using longitudinal data to constantly refine a school dropout risk logarithm for students from elementary through high school.

Implications for School Psychologists and Questions for Future Research

This study, and the district reports, showed that most students in this district started high school with two to three risk factors. Without appropriate and immediate supports, many freshmen will struggle with the content and disengage from school during their 9th grade year and many of these students will not graduate from high school. Similar to most urban districts in the U.S., these students were predominantly poor and ethnically diverse. As school psychology practitioners and researchers, we have the opportunity to raise consciousness of these inequities (Darling-Hammond, 2010); if we do not, our actions support school systems as perpetuators of social injustice (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). In this case study, multi-tiered consultation was utilized toward the social justice mission of supporting 9th grade urban students to remain on track for four-year high school graduation.

A mindset that we found difficult to challenge was that by differentiating supports for students (before or) as they entered high school, they were being punished for past behaviors and not given a fresh start. This finding implies that differentiated supports were viewed as punitive or as placing the students on a path to fewer post-secondary options. And historically, differentiated instruction has been one or both of these things. We need to address students' needs in a way that promotes their ability to be successful with rigorous curriculum and increases their engagement with the content. Research into how to do this successfully with urban high school students is sorely needed.

In tandem with exploring curricular and instructional issues, it is critical to address the beliefs that the faculty hold about the students and their families. As seen in the comparison of the academies, two of the four academies were more successful in promoting their students' academic success. However, with support, each team of academy teachers made gains in working collaboratively and providing appropriate differentiated supports for students. Similar to entering students, the academy teams and the teachers had different risk profiles and needed differentiated supports to enhance their ability to teach, connect with, and motivate students. School psychologists have a critical role to play in supporting general education high school teachers in forming relationships with students that promote students' engagement and establish mutual accountability with families for students' academic success. School psychologists can also consult with teams on how to work collaboratively with data to differentiate instruction for students. However, many of the gains that teachers or teaching teams were able to make were facilitated by building-level or district-level

supports. Research into how multi-level consultation can support the work of teachers and promote equity in student outcomes is ripe for investigation.

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