



The Transition to High School: Implications for Educational Success in High School

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What We Studied

In the American K-12 educational system, school transitions are frequent and predictable—typically occurring when students enter kindergarten and when they move from elementary to middle school and again from middle to high school. Although quite normative in nature, school transitions can disrupt student functioning across developmental domains (Benner, 201; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Although we know much about the short- and long-term implications for the transition to formal K-12 schooling and the transition into middle school, how the transition to high school influences the immediate and long-term educational prospects of American students is relatively unknown and is the focus of the current study.

Specifically, I sought to determine whether the high school transition influences students' educational engagement (as assessed by attendance), which students are most at risk for experiencing transition difficulties as they move from 8th to 9th grade, in what types of schools are students doing best, and how success or challenges across the high school transition affects students' educational trajectories across high school and their early educational attainment.

The state of Texas has recognized the challenge of the transition to high school for some time. In 2000, the state passed and the Texas Education Agency implemented the Ninth Grade Success Initiative (NGSI). At that time, policymakers and educators saw that the state's ninth grade students were struggling academically, wherein a much higher percentage of students were retained in ninth grade compared to other grade levels (17% of ninth grade students retained in grade in 2000; TEA, Lee, Roska, Shen, & Lynch, 2002).

Through NGSI and its larger successor, the Student Success Initiative, retention rates in ninth grade have dropped, yet despite these supports, in 2013-14, the most recent year that the Texas Education Agency provided retention data, 9% of ninth grade students were retained in grade, almost double that of every other grade level (K-12; TEA, Division of Research and Analysis, 2016). These data suggest that Texas continues to have a ninth grade problem, and it is for this reason that the current study focuses specifically on the high school transition experiences of Texas students.

How We Analyzed the Data

Data for the current study are drawn from datasets available through the Texas Education Research Center, a clearinghouse for data from several state agencies, including the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission. I draw data for the current analyses from three successive cohorts of students who were in sixth grade in the 2000-01, 2001-02, and 2003-04 school years ($N = 810,248$). Below, I report on the primary findings of this research study.

What We Discovered

Is There a Link between Making a School Transition and Students' Short- and Long-term Educational Outcomes?

There were no differences in the magnitude of change in students' attendance from 8th to 9th grades between those making a normative physical transition from middle to high school and either those who remained in the same school from 8th to 9th grades or those who made a non-normative transition over these grade levels (that is, those whose schools included both 8th and 9th grades but the student made an unexpected/non-normative move to a new school in 9th grade).

In contrast, high school completion status was tied to the transition experiences of youth from 8th to 9th grades. Students who remained in the same school from 8th to 9th grades were less likely to drop out of school (versus graduate or remain in high school) than those who made a normative school transition from 8th to 9th grade. However, students who made a non-normative school transition—that is, those who switched schools from 8th to 9th grades despite the fact that their 8th grade school included the 9th grade level—had a higher likelihood of high school dropout than those who made a normative school transition.

What are the Individual and School-Level Factors that Influence Students' Challenges across the Transition to High School?

Overall, few individual student characteristics were linked to transition disruptions. African American students, poor students, and students who were over-age for grade experienced greater declines in attendance across the transition from middle to high school than their White, more affluent, and younger peers.

For school-level influences, students struggled more in terms of attendance as they moved from 8th to 9th grade when in more affluent high schools, in high schools serving more limited-English proficient students, in larger schools, and in schools with lower academic press (as measured by school accountability ratings). In considering changing school contexts, when students went to high schools that were more racially/ethnically diverse than their middle schools, they experienced more attenuated declines (or improvements) in their attendance across the high school transition. Similarly, student attendance changes across the high school transition were more positive the larger their high schools were in relation to their middle schools.

Finally, when students went to high schools with higher attendance rates across the student body as compared to their middle schools, students were less likely to experience disruptions in attendance across the transition from 8th to 9th grade.

Do Challenges across the Transition Have Lasting Implications for Students' Educational Success?

The more students' attendance was disrupted across the high school transition (that is, the greater their absences were in 9th grade compared to 8th), the greater their subsequent declines in attendance across their first four years of high school. These greater disruptions in attendance across the high school transition were also related to a greater likelihood of dropping out of school (versus graduating or remaining enrolled in high school).

Policy Recommendations/Conclusions

School transitions are often predictable experiences of most Texas school children. Indeed, almost 95% of Texas students in three successive cohorts (2000-01, 2001-02, and 2002-03) physically moved to a new school building when transitioning from middle school to high school. The focus of the current study was squarely on the experiences of students making this normative high school transition, specifically seeking to identify who was most at risk for transition challenges, what contexts exacerbated these transition disruptions, and the potential long-term implications of transition disruptions for students' engagement and educational progress.

These findings suggest that it is not just 9th grade attendance, but it is the disruptions in attendance that students face as they negotiate physically moving from middle school to high school that can derail educational trajectories. Changing school characteristics seemed particularly influential for students' attendance across the transition to high school, and disruptions in attendance as students transitioned from middle to high school exacted a toll on their attendance trajectories across the first four years of high school and their likelihood of school dropout.

These findings suggest that this critical school transition is disrupting the educational careers of a not-insubstantial number of Texas students. Addressing Texas's ninth grade problem is important for ensuring the state increases its number of highly qualified high school graduates and that these high school graduates make successful transitions to college and the world of work, and the current study suggests that Texas schools and districts should place strong attention on enacting intervention strategies that better support students as they move from middle to high school.

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