

# Making the Move: Transition Strategies at California Schools with High Graduation Rates

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September 2011

*The full report will be available in mid-September at the following link: <http://www.cacompcenter.org/cs/caccl/print/htdocs/caccl/resources.htm>*

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This work was supported by the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, a partnership with the American Institutes for Research and School Services of California. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U. S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U. S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.



## **Executive Summary**

Education practitioners and policymakers grapple with ways to ensure that students are adequately prepared for college and careers. An important step is ensuring that students graduate from high school. A number of studies indicate that programs and strategies designed to assist middle grade students' transition to high school can contribute toward graduation. To better understand the factors that make such programs successful, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd (CA CC), worked with the California Department of Education (CDE) Middle Grades Improvement Office to identify and gather information from schools with high graduation rates.

Using publicly available data, we identified high schools with graduation rates that were substantially higher than statistically predicted given certain characteristics of their student population (such as the percentage of low-income students). We selected nine of these schools, seeking variation on factors such as urbanicity, district type, and size. We then conducted screening interviews with the principals of these nine high schools and with an administrator from their districts to learn about the strategies they implemented and the challenges they faced in achieving high graduation rates and in assisting middle grades student transition to high school. Based on these interviews, we selected four schools for visits, where we conducted interviews and focus groups with staff and students at the high school and its most predominant middle grades feeder school.

Respondents commonly cited the following strategies as successful in helping students transition successfully between school levels:

- Creating opportunities for staff across school levels to jointly plan and collaborate
- Arranging activities for transitioning students to become familiar with the high school campus and culture prior to enrollment
- Ensuring all students feel connected to the new school
- Identifying students who are struggling prior to transition
- Preparing timely and individualized supports for such students

We also heard prevailing themes in the strategies these high schools use to promote graduation:

- Enabling strategic collaboration between teachers
- Providing students with multiple opportunities for academic support
- Working diligently to connect all students to school through programs and activities
- Instituting a strong, individually focused counseling program
- Maintaining school-wide high expectations for all students

Many participants cited the importance of caring staff who help students connect with various aspects of school. School and district staff often referred to their personal responsibility to ensure student success by any means necessary, emphasizing the importance of a caring environment and school culture to increase the likelihood of students staying in school.

Regarding challenges, nearly all respondents mentioned that the state's difficult fiscal climate and declining resources have negatively impacted many school programs, including transition- and

graduation-focused programs. However, they also conveyed a determination to continue their efforts to ensure students' academic success.

These findings suggest the following implications for practitioners:

- Find ways to engage all students in some aspect of the school (e.g., classes, activities, clubs, and sports) to foster outside-the-classroom relations with staff.
- Provide staff collaboration time for teachers and principals across school levels (i.e., between the high school and its middle grades feeder schools) to create partnerships that focus on using data to vertically and horizontally align instruction and curriculum.
- Ensure that there are multiple opportunities for students to recover credits and receive academic support.

Our findings also suggest the following for policymakers:

- Simplify streaming patterns across schools which facilitate coordination among staff, but also minimizes disruption to cohorts of students as they move through the grades.
- Recognize the vital role of counselors in planning for and easing student transitions.
- Support activities in high school beyond academics to improve student engagement and persistence to graduation.

An important question remains: What state and county policies and strategies could encourage practices that facilitate school transition and graduation? Given what we heard about the importance of collaboration within and across schools, states and county offices of education could encourage this by creating further opportunities for partnerships between schools and districts—partnerships in which teachers and administrators form communities of practice to examine data, share information about members' strengths and challenges, and learn from one another.

It is also important to better understand successful transitions from elementary to middle grades, and other educational transitions through post-secondary completion. These are potential topics for future research involving the CA CC and the CDE.