

Dallas Independent School District

### **Improving Freshman Year Performance: Ninth Grade Success and High School Completion**

The freshman year of high school can be “make or break” for many students, in terms of high school success. In 2007, at the direction of the Superintendent, Dallas ISD conducted a Freshman Year Performance Study that demonstrated strong connections among ninth grade absences, course failure rates and credit accumulation. The study concluded that failure to accumulate course credit was a more serious barrier to on-time graduation than student failure on the exit-level *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)*. Furthermore, course completion is increasing in importance in Texas, because the high school *TAKS* tests are being replaced by end-of-course assessments, beginning in 2011-12.

Results of the study were presented to the Board of Education in January 2008. In the spring of that year, the district organized a Ninth Grade Task Force, composed primarily of secondary principals and Learning Community Executive Directors. The task force developed a set of strategies collectively known as the Freshman Year Success Initiative. Key among these strategies, was early intervention for struggling students by the fourth week of school, including parent notification and individual student conferences, double-blocked academic courses, and tutoring within the school day. Freshman mentoring programs were piloted at four high schools. Teachers were trained on a revised grading policy, designed to improve GPA and credit accumulation, as well as on indicators for freshman success. An Early Start bridge program for incoming ninth-graders was introduced in summer 2009, connected to a year-long freshman transition program.

The Department of Evaluation and Accountability (E&A) developed and validated an On-Track Indicator, based on the model used in the Chicago Public Schools, which assessed whether students were on track for four-year graduation at the end of their freshman year. The ninth grade On-Track Indicator was reported as a district and campus-level baseline measure in 2007-2008, and has been proposed this year, as part of the district’s Performance Targets and Principal Appraisal System. Because of the need for early intervention, E&A also developed a Dropout Early Warning System. The Dropout Early Warning System notifies school administrators and counselors of students not on-track at each six-weeks grading period throughout the year, based on course grades, absences, and other indicators.

Outcomes from the first year of implementation are promising. The percentage of freshmen (non-Special Education) who were on-track at the end of 2008-09 was 75%, compared to 66% in 2007-08. Mean credit accumulation for first-time ninth grade students increased by one-half credit over the previous year, from 6.2 to 6.7 credits. The percentage of freshmen gaining six or more credits increased from 72% to 83%; all but two of 28 high schools averaged at least six credits accumulated. As well, the percent of ninth-grade repeaters who accumulated enough credits to attain junior status increased from 15% in 2007-08 to 24% in 2008-09. Ongoing studies will determine whether graduation rates consequently improve for 2008 and succeeding cohorts.

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