

Supporting Grade Nine: Early Trends in Student Outcomes at High Schools Implementing 9th Grade Interventions

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Key Findings:

High schools that were selected to receive 9th Grade interventions demonstrated need for additional support. These schools had low baseline scores for attendance, out of school suspensions, and 9th Grade On-Track rates.

After a year of implementation, student outcomes at intervention schools were still lower than non-intervention schools. However, with only isolated exceptions, all schools with interventions showed improvement from 2016-17 to 2017-18.

Schools receiving contracted support from ISA have shown the most consistent improvement among all interventions, and for all metrics.

All high schools in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) are implementing strategies to improve student attendance, behavior, and achievement as part of the District's [Action Plan 3.0](#).

During the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years, SDP provided selected high school with additional resources to improve their student outcomes, with particular energy and attention to supporting the 9th grade year. This approach is informed by both internal¹ and external² research that consistently associates 9th grade outcomes with lasting patterns of success and/or failure.

This brief focuses on student outcomes at all high schools, with a focus on those that were implementing at least one of three “interventions” during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years (see page 2):

- 9th Grade Academy
- College and Career Readiness Pilot
- Institute for Student Achievement;

and uses three metrics, aligned with the District's Action Plan and [Outcome Goals](#), to describe high school performance (see page 3):

- **Attendance:** The percent of students that have attended at least 95% of school days.
- **Suspensions:** The percent of students receiving zero out-of-school suspensions.
- **9th Grade On-Track:** The percent of first-time 9th graders that earn at least one credit each in English, math, science and social studies, plus an additional fifth credit.

¹ Theodore Wills, [Defining 9th Grade Success: A New 9th Grade On-Track Definition \(Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, 2018\)](#).

² Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, [The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation](#) (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005)

High School Interventions

Three high school interventions are the focus of this brief.

9th Grade Academy (20 high schools)

The Ninth Grade Academy (or 9GA) model is designed to proactively support the academic and social transitions that students experience between eighth and ninth grade. As part of the model, academic, social, and physical structures were established in each high school to help incoming 9th grade students adapt more smoothly to their new environment. In SDP, high schools that are implementing a 9th grade academy are expected to:

- Conduct a freshman orientation,
- Enroll students in a freshman seminar,
- Provide dedicated space for the 9th grade,
- Assign teachers in core subjects who are dedicated to teaching 9th grade class sections only, and
- Provide the 9th grade academy teachers with common planning time.

In addition, beginning in the 2016-17 school year, the 20 schools implementing a 9th grade academy were provided with a designated 9th grade assistant principal to support expanded activities and expectations.

College and Career Readiness (CCR) Pilot (4 high schools in the 2016-17 Cohort, 3 additional schools in the 2017-18 Cohort)

Seven schools implementing the 9th Grade Academy also received two additional full-time personnel to support 9th grade: a College and Career Coordinator and a Climate Manager. Additional activities that these schools were expected to implement include:

- Providing additional programming and activities to promote awareness of post-secondary educational and career options, and
- Using the [Naviance](#) system to assess student strengths, and develop post-secondary plans.

Institute for Student Achievement (4 schools)

During the 2017-18 school year, SDP contracted with the [Institute for Student Achievement](#) (ISA) to assist four high-needs high schools. These schools were selected because they had a recent history of poor performance on school accountability metrics (e.g., School Progress Reports, or SPR), but also had leaders and staff that were considered well-positioned to collaborate well with ISA.

ISA describes itself as “a team of committed educators who join with schools and districts to transform public high schools.” ISA was established as a not-for-profit in 1990, but became a division of Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 2013. ISA works closely with school leadership to create a customized, comprehensive plan to achieve and sustain success. ISA also provides intensive coaching for school leaders, teachers, counselors, and support staff. Collectively, they aim to develop a

sustainable culture of collaboration, with high standards of practice, and a sense of collective responsibility for student success³.

High Schools for Comparison

Understanding changes and trends over time at the intervention schools requires some basis of comparison. All other SDP high schools not implementing one of the interventions described above are also included in this brief to provide context, and are subdivided into the following two groups:

Career and Technical Education Schools (5 schools)

This group includes the five schools that have been designated by the Districts as Career and Technical Education (CTE) Schools. These schools have Citywide⁴ admission policies. Prior to 2017-18, these schools used admission criteria to screen applicants. However, these criteria have been eliminated, and any student who applies has an equal chance to be admitted. All students in grades 10-12 at CTE schools enroll in CTE programming.

Other Models (27 schools)

This group includes the remaining 27 SDP high schools. Because schools with demonstrated needs were prioritized to receive the interventions described in this brief, many of the schools in this group are relatively high-achieving. The group is comprised mostly of schools with Citywide or Special Admissions policies.

Student Performance Metrics

Throughout this brief, three metrics are used to describe school performance: student attendance, student suspensions, and 9th Grade On-Track rate. Each of these metrics is aligned with the District's [Outcome Goals](#) for Anchor Goal 1 (*100% of students will graduate ready for college or career*).

Three years of data are presented for each metric. The first year, 2015-16, pre-dates the interventions, and represents the baseline year. The second year, 2016-17, marks the first year of the 2016-17 CCR Pilot intervention, while the 2017-18 CCR Pilot and ISA interventions began during the third year, 2017-18.

Attendance

External and internal research both confirm that attendance is a critical predictor of success. This is especially true in 9th grade - a crossroad year when poor habits can form.⁵ For this reason, schools with low attendance rates were more likely to be targeted to receive interventions. Baseline data confirm this, as schools receiving interventions had lower attendance rates than the *CTE* and *Other Models* schools.

³ <https://www.studentachievement.org/our-story/history-isa> :Accessed August 27, 2018.

⁴ Students must apply for admission to schools with Citywide or Special Admissions policies. Citywide schools may have standards for student grades, attendance and/or behavior; Special Admissions schools may also have additional criteria.

⁵ [Theodore Wills, Factors Associated With 9th Grade Success: Analysis of First Time 2011-2012 9th Graders in SDP \(Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, 2017\).](#)

Across the District, all groups show large year-to-year (also known as “year-over-year” or “YOY”) increases in 9th grade attendance. However, this is due in part to a transit strike that took place during the 2016-17 school year. This strike by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) had widespread effects on attendance across the entire District. For this reason, the change from 2015-16 to 2017-18 (*2-year improvement*) is likely to be a better indicator of true improvements in attendance.

For all groups, the percentage of students who have consistently attended increased over the past two years (Table 1). The gains among the intervention groups vary widely, from a minimum of 6 percentage points (for the *9GA Only* schools), to a maximum of 21.7 percentage points for the *2017-18 CCR Pilot* group. The *CCR Pilot group* (21.7 percentage points gain), the *ISA* schools (16.9 percentage points gain), and the *CTE* schools (17.1 percentage points gain) all narrowed the attendance gap with the *Other Models* schools over a 2-year period (*Other Models* improved 13.9 percentage points during that time).

Table 1: Students Attending 95% of School Days

Group*	2015-16 Baseline	2016-17	2017-18	1-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)	2-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)
9th Grade Academy (All Subgroups)	18.3%	16.6%	28.6%	12.0	10.5
9GA Only	16.9%	17.0%	22.9%	6.0	6.0
CCR Pilot 2016-17	15.3%	10.9%	26.8%	15.9	11.8
CCR Pilot 2017-18	27.0%	26.2%	48.7%	22.5	21.7
ISA	17.6%	13.6%	34.5%	20.9	16.9
CTE	28.4%	25.6%	45.5%	19.9	17.1
Other Models	54.7%	44.6%	67.1%	24.0	13.9

Note: Data were downloaded from SDP’s Benchmarking, Analytics and Management: Climate Matters application. Data are aggregated by groups. Schools that were implementing more than one intervention are included in the data presented for each relevant group. In other words, their school-level data are included in more than one category. Final (June) data are displayed for 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18. In addition, 1-year (from June 2017 to June 2018) and 2-year (June 2016 to June 2018) changes are displayed. June 2016 is the baseline time point, preceding all interventions, while June 2018 is the most recent available data. All data represents all first-time 9th graders only.

**Due to the opening and/or closing of schools, some groups change across the three years. For this reason, the 1- and 2-year changes might not match the values expected from the data for individual years.*

Out of School Suspensions

Research has found that out of school suspensions (OSS) are associated with poor academic and behavioral outcomes for students.⁶ OSS data for District high schools are displayed in Table 2. Compared with the *Other Models* group, high schools implementing one or more of the interventions were much more likely to suspend students at the 2015-16 baseline. Through 2017-18, the gap has narrowed, though the intervention schools still use OSS more frequently. The recent trend data are similar to those for attendance (Table 1); most intervention groups have made gains over the past year, with the *ISA* schools showing the largest improvement. Unlike with attendance, the *2017-18 CCR Pilot* schools had smaller gains than the other intervention groups. *CTE* schools had strong improvements in the percentage of students receiving zero out-of-school suspensions.

The very small gain (1.3 percentage point improvement over 2 years) by the *Other Models* group is due to what is often called a “ceiling effect.” These schools are already close enough to 100% that there is limited room or opportunity for additional improvement. From this perspective, the observed gain of 1.3 percentage points is still meaningful.

Table 2: Students receiving zero out-of-school suspensions

Group*	2015-16 Baseline	2016-17	2017-18	1-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)	2-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)
9th Grade Academy	71.6%	73.7%	79.9%	6.2	8.0
9GA Only	69.1%	69.8%	76.6%	6.8	7.5
CCR Pilot 2016-17	73.2%	77.7%	82.5%	4.8	7.6
CCR Pilot 2017-18	78.4%	81.4%	84.3%	2.9	5.9
ISA	73.1%	74.4%	83.7%	9.3	10.6
CTE	76.6%	80.6%	86.5%	5.8	9.9
Other Models	94.7%	95.6%	94.7%	0.4	1.3

Note: Data were downloaded from SDP’s Benchmarking, Analytics and Management: Climate Matters application. Data are aggregated by groups. Schools that are implementing more than one intervention are included in the data presented for every intervention that they are receiving. In other words, their school-level data are included in more than one category. Final (June) data are displayed for 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18. In addition, 1-year (from June 2017 to June 2018) and 2-year (June 2016 to June 2018) changes are displayed. June 2016 is the baseline time point, preceding all interventions, while June 2018 is the most recent available data. All data represents all first-time 9th graders only.

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9th Grade On-Track Rates

In Spring 2018, SDP formalized a new [9th Grade On-Track Metric](#). SDP 9th graders end the year On-Track if they earn at least one credit in each of the four core academic areas (English, math, science and social studies), *and* if they earn at least 5 credits in total. Although schools were not held

⁶ Noltmeyer, A., Ward, R. E. & Mcloughlin, C. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review* 44(2), 224-240.

accountable for this metric during the years covered in this report, data from several recent cohorts show that students who meet these criteria are much more likely to graduate in four years than those who do not.

Compared with the *Other Models* schools, those that received interventions had lower On-Track rates at the 2015-16 baseline, and were still lower through 2017-18 (Table 3). However, most intervention groups did make 1-and 2-year gains. Notably, the *2016-17 CCR Pilot* group gained 20.4 percentage points across the two years of implementation, moving from 38.3% of 9th grade students On-Track at the end of 9th grade to 56.8% of 9th grade students On-Track. For the more recent interventions, *ISA* schools showed a 1-year gain of 4.4 percentage points, but *2017-18 Pilot* schools declined by 4.2 percentage points.

Table 3: Students meeting 9th Grade On-Track Definition

Group*	2015-2016 Baseline	2016-2017	2017-2018	1-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)	2-Year Improvement (Percentage Points)
9th Grade Academy	46.7%	57.7%	58.1%	0.4	11.7
9GA Only	43.3%	54.9%	56.3%	1.3	13.0
CCR Pilot 2016-17	38.3%	58.1%	56.8%	-1.3	20.4
CCR Pilot 2017-18	68.5%	64.3%	60.1%	-4.2	-8.4
ISA	52.9%	59.1%	63.5%	4.4	10.6
CTE	73.4%	70.4%	70.6%	0.2	-2.8
Other	80.7%	77.1%	84.8%	7.8	4.2

Note: Data were downloaded from SDP's Benchmarking, Analytics and Management: Course Marks and Credits application. Data are aggregated by groups. Schools that are implementing more than one intervention are included in the data presented for every intervention that they are receiving. In other words, their school-level data are included in more than one category. Final (June) data are displayed for 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18. In addition, 1-year (from June 2017 to June 2018) and 2-year (June 2016 to June 2018) changes are displayed. June 2016 is the baseline time point, preceding all interventions, while June 2018 is the most recent available data. All data represents all first-time 9th graders only.

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What's Next?

The programs described in this brief are ongoing, and we will continue to report on their progress. We will continue to track outcomes for 9th graders, but in time we will also be able to assess longer-term outcomes, including graduation rates.