



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

Implementation of the Ninth-Grade Academy Model, 2018-19

Key Findings

- Some components of the Ninth-Grade Academy (NGA) logic model were implemented consistently across most or all schools. These components included an orientation, town hall meetings, scheduling students for their “four core plus one more” classes, and teacher observations. Implementation of other components varied across schools.
- Assistant Principals (APs) who were the only AP in their building found it challenging to focus only on Ninth-Grade Academy.
- APs said relationship-building and finding teachers who are a “good fit” for ninth grade are keys to a successful NGA.
- The physical and logistical realities of some schools (particularly at Career and Technical Education schools) make it difficult to implement some NGA components.

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About Ninth-Grade Academies

In 2018-19, under the direction of the School District of Philadelphia's Office of High School Supports (OHSS), 27 District high schools implemented a Ninth-Grade Academy (NGA), an approach intended to smooth the transition for students from eighth to ninth grade. The Academy approach is holistic and focused on creating a community where ninth-graders can create a strong high school foundation that will lead to graduation in four years. A designated ninth-grade Assistant Principal (AP) was assigned to each Academy to lead implementation.

What We Examined

This report focuses on the implementation of the NGA model as described by NGA Assistant Principals at 27 District high schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study of NGA implementation:

1. How do Assistant Principals (APs) understand their role in the context of the NGA model?
2. According to APs, what are the successes and challenges of NGA implementation?
3. To what extent have schools been able to implement certain components of the NGA model?
4. What supports, resources, and contextual factors, if any, have APs found helpful to NGA implementation?

Methods

In Spring 2019, ORE staff interviewed Assistant Principals (APs) at 24 of 27 NGA schools.¹ Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. We asked APs about their background, their vision for the NGA at their school, and the extent to which they were able to carry out that vision. We also shared a list of NGA components² (Box 1) and asked APs about the successes, challenges, and contextual factors associated with the implementation of each component. The components listed were meant to reflect the ideal version of a NGA, not to function as a checklist of required elements.

¹ APs at two schools declined to be interviewed, and another AP was unable to schedule an interview with ORE staff.

² The Office of High School Supports provided the list of components.

Box 1: Components of a Ninth-Grade Academy

Communication: High schools receive information about incoming ninth-graders from their feeder schools.

Scheduling: All ninth-graders are rostered in the required courses (“four core plus one more”).

Orientation: The school holds a fall event or series of events for incoming ninth-graders designed to familiarize them with the school building, staff, and expectations for ninth grade.

Seminar: All ninth-graders take a class focused on topics including ninth-grade transition, successful matriculation through high school, post-secondary planning, goal setting, and progress monitoring.

Town hall meetings: The school holds Academy-wide gatherings at least monthly.

Commitment Day: The school establishes a day to acknowledge first-year students’ commitment to graduating high school.

Academics/grade monitoring: There is an Academy-wide system for academic advising and grade monitoring.

Behavior monitoring: There is an Academy-wide system to monitor and address behavior issues with appropriate interventions.

Assigning ninth-grade teachers to ninth-graders: Ninth-grade teachers only teach ninth-grade students.

Common planning time: The school maintains frequent and regularly scheduled time for ninth-grade teachers to collaborate during the school day.

Teacher observations: Teachers are observed and provided with timely feedback, and there is a system in place to address the feedback received.

Dedicated space for ninth-graders: There is a specific area in the school building reserved for all ninth-grade classrooms.

ORE staff reviewed interview transcripts to determine the extent to which NGA components were implemented at each school. For each component, we assigned each school a number (0-5) reflecting the component’s degree of implementation and the extent of associated challenges (Box 2). We then aggregated the school-level scores for each component. For each component, we calculated overall implementation scores by counting a score of 5 as five points in that category, a score of 4 as four points in that category, and so on. We used overall implementation scores (Appendix B) to determine the order of the components in the table.

Box 2: Component Rating Scale

5: Component is in place with no challenges described by Assistant Principal (AP).

4: Component is in place with minor challenges described by AP.

3: Component is somewhat in place with minor challenges described by AP.

2: Component is somewhat in place with major challenges described by AP.

1: Component is not in place due to challenges.

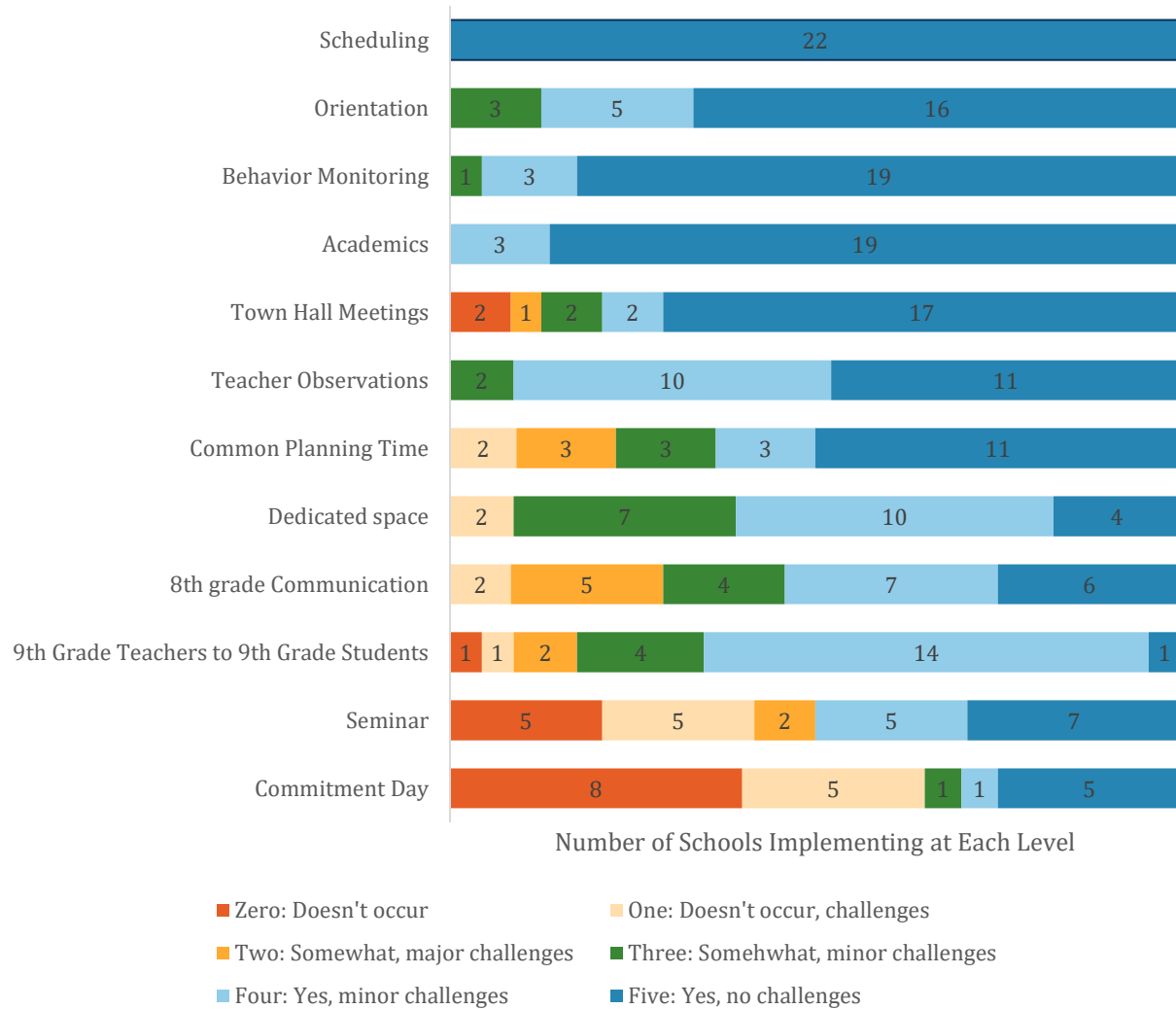
0: Component is not in place by choice *or* AP is not aware of component.

Findings

Overall Implementation of Components

The implementation of NGA components varied across schools and by component. Out of 12 components, only one (scheduling ninth-graders for “four core and one more”) was reportedly implemented with no challenges by all interviewed schools. Six components (academics/grade monitoring, behavior monitoring, freshman orientation, town halls, observations of ninth-grade teachers, and common planning time) were occurring with zero or minor challenges at the majority of interviewed schools. Commitment Day was fully or partially implemented at the fewest number of schools (seven; Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of schools implementing each NGA component at each level of implementation



Note: Although we interviewed 24 NGA APs, we were not always able to determine, based on the interviews, the extent of implementation for each component. As a result, some components have fewer than 24 schools represented in this chart. We used overall implementation scores (Appendix B) to determine the order of the components in the table. Implementation scores were calculated by counting a score of 5 as five points in that category, a score of 4 as four points in that category, and so on.

General Findings

Nearly all APs who were the only AP in their building expressed frustration that being the only AP prevented them from focusing solely on ninth grade.

Of the 27 NGA APs we interviewed, 14 were the only AP in their building. APs in this position frequently reported that it was difficult to focus on ninth grade because they were often called on to help support the rest of the school. One AP stated, “I’m all over the building, not just ninth grade—which I feel has really been a disservice to the Academy because I’m not totally focused on ninth grade.”

Another AP, who was one of two APs at their school, said they didn’t think they would be able to implement improvement plans for NGA if they were the only AP at their school:

If it was just me, it wouldn’t work...this position in this school is very reactive at times. We plan, we make calendars and all that, but... There are almost a thousand students, and we’re trying to be very specific and direct with the improvements we’re making. You’re putting out fires while you’re trying to plan at the same time.

Some APs at larger schools also reported that they were sometimes pulled into non-ninth grade responsibilities, even though their school had multiple APs. Sometimes responsibilities were allocated based on expertise, such as an AP’s background in special education or social studies instruction, and sometimes the additional responsibilities were minor and situational (for example, managing prom).

Ninth-Grade Academies at Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools had additional considerations when implementing the model.

CTE schools have workshops that must be taken into consideration when implementing the NGA model. Several APs at CTE schools reported that it was difficult to isolate their ninth-graders in one dedicated space when their school model requires physical workshops accessible to students from all grades. Scheduling around workshop classes also added an extra layer of complication to the process of scheduling students for required classes, advisories, or seminars, and this made it more difficult to schedule common planning time for ninth-grade teachers.

Finding teachers who are a “good fit” for ninth grade is key to a successful NGA, but this can also be a challenge.

Some APs emphasized the importance (and difficulty) of finding teachers who are a “good fit” for ninth grade in terms of skill, personality, and desire to work with ninth-graders. One AP was concerned with experience: “We’ve found that it’s hard to find seasoned teachers for ninth grade. You have a lot of teachers coming right out of college.” A few APs said experienced teachers did not want to teach ninth grade: “Moving to ninth grade was seen as a demotion and as a punishment.”

Personality, enthusiasm, and the ability to build relationships with ninth-graders were also described as very important to NGAs: “Ideally, you need to understand our ninth-graders, you need to have very good de-escalation skills, you need to be able to connect with them... I think that relationship is the key.” Another AP said:

With anything, I think you have to love it, because ninth-graders can be challenging, but I think that if you find teachers that are willing to take on that challenge and support them, I think that they’ll be able to work for you.

Relationship-building is a key component of making a NGA successful.

All APs highlighted the importance of teachers and staff building and maintaining strong and trusting relationships with ninth-grade students:

I think we have built so much of a family here... I think every one of my students can at least identify one adult they can go to if they have an issue with someone. That still doesn’t cut down on a lot of the nonsense that the kids go through, because they’re teenagers. But I think that every one of them can say, “If I have an issue, I can go to this person in the Ninth-Grade Academy to help support me.”

Another AP used similar language when speaking about the importance of teacher-student relationships:

We’re making really good strides with teachers building relationships with students. That’s, I think, one of the reasons we’re doing well in the areas [where] we are doing well, like in attendance. It’s because the kids know that they can count on certain individuals.

APs also described their own trusting relationships with students: “I always tell them, I’m like mama bear. Ninth-graders know I’m mama bear.”

Implementation of Individual Components

For the purposes of this report, we divided individual components into four thematic categories: *Culture-Building*, *Logistics*, *Teacher-Focused*, and *Monitoring*. This section describes the components in each category as well as the associated implementation challenges, successes, and contextual themes reported across schools. Assistant Principals provided all information during interviews conducted in Spring 2019.

Culture-Building Components

NGAs provide new high school students with supportive and encouraging communities. APs reported using NGA culture-building components (orientation, town halls, Commitment Day, and freshman seminar) to establish culture and expectations.

All schools have an orientation.

In 2018-19, every NGA school had some form of new student orientation, either specifically for ninth-graders or more broadly for new students. Orientation typically took place in late August in the week before school started.

Most orientations included a school tour, a presentation by school leadership, and logistical activities (e.g., locker assignment, uniform purchase, handing out schedules, making student IDs). Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools reported giving tours of different shops. Some schools use orientation as an opportunity to sign students up for extracurricular activities.

In addition to logistics, some schools used orientation to convey expectations, establish school norms, and work on culture- and relationship-building with incoming students. This sometimes took the form of a presentation or assembly led by school leadership on topics including school rules and expectations, programs offered by the school, or the ABCs (Attendance, Behavior, and Credits). Other culture- and relationship-building activities reported included a scavenger hunt, circle sessions/breakout sessions, or in one case, a mini-advisory period. Some schools involved upperclassmen in the orientation to lead activities or tours.

APs said they invited and encouraged parents to attend, but parent/guardian participation varied widely across schools. Among APs who reported good turnout, strategies for increasing participation included providing food, doing several rounds of outreach and follow-up, and

Box 3: Culture-Building Components

Orientation: The school holds a fall event or series of events for incoming ninth-graders designed to familiarize them with the school building, staff, and expectations for ninth grade.

Town Hall meetings: The school holds Academy-wide gatherings at least monthly.

Commitment Day: The school establishes a day to acknowledge first-year students' commitment to graduating high school.

Seminar: All ninth-graders take a class focused on topics including ninth-grade transition, successful matriculation through high school, post-secondary planning, goal setting, and progress monitoring.

attaching some sort of event to the orientation (e.g., a school band performance). At some schools, APs described separate events for parents and students.

Many APs started at their school the week before orientation and reported that they had very little time to put together orientation and mold it to their vision of NGA.

Most NGAs host town hall meetings.

According to the logic model, fully implemented NGAs hold an Academy-wide town hall meeting once a month. There is no prescribed purpose to a NGA town hall, but APs who felt town halls were successful at their school described them as a way to build a positive culture and increase feelings of community among the ninth-graders.

Most NGA APs reported holding town hall meetings or assemblies, but these meetings varied in frequency and content across schools. Monthly (or almost monthly) meetings were common, and many schools had weekly town halls or assemblies. A few NGAs met multiple times a week. Some APs reported that they scheduled town halls as needed to address important topics as they come up:

They're definitely scheduled once a month, but we also do them as needed based off of the environment. [Last year] we just had a lot of fights that were breaking out for nonsense. We called a big town hall meeting, and we went over things, and we stayed there for quite a while going over behaviors and expectations.

Assistant Principals reported that they most typically used their ninth-grade town hall as an opportunity for “housekeeping”: to make announcements and share logistical information with all of their ninth-graders and NGA staff at once. Another common use for this time was to celebrate or honor successes (often through certificates, displaying the honor roll, or with “shout-outs”) and to offer incentives. Less common, but also mentioned, was the use of town hall time to share data with students and staff, usually about attendance, behavior, or credits (the ABCs). Some APs felt it was useful to show students where they were as a class to either celebrate progress or talk about a course correction.

Several schools also used town halls to invite guest speakers to talk to the ninth-grade class about various topics. One AP invited local business owners to talk about owning their own businesses:

I want them to have those types of experiences so they understand not only the importance of coming to school every day, being dedicated to your work ethic, but also seeing how that translates to the real world of people who are working day in and day out and living their dreams.

Some APs preferred to reach their ninth-graders in smaller groups, either in addition to, or instead of, town hall meetings with the entire Academy. One AP felt they were able to accomplish

everything they would want out of a town hall in their advisory period, without the distractions and logistical difficulties of a grade-wide assembly. One AP said that with guest speakers, they sometimes broke up the ninth-graders into smaller groups to allow for a more intimate, comfortable setting, particularly when addressing sensitive topics (e.g., for a talk given by Women Organized Against Rape).

Most APs said they took the lead on planning for and presenting during town halls, but some wanted to move toward a more collaborative, interactive, and teacher- or student-led town hall. One AP talked about student interaction:

I want it to be a real town hall where freshmen or students can come and voice opinions and talk about things...But it's tough getting them to engage...It's difficult for them to step up and be vocal about things that they want to be vocal about in front of their peers.

Another AP said teacher involvement was a goal:

I'm working towards more other teachers having ownership of the town halls. I don't particularly relish talking in front of kids or people. I feel it's also more powerful if the teachers have an active role in it so that they themselves can feel more of a part, and the kids can know that they're more of a part.

Not all NGAs have a Commitment Day.

The purpose of a Commitment Day is to acknowledge the commitment of the freshmen students to graduating high school. NGA schools did not all have Commitment Days in 2018-19. Some APs said a Commitment Day or a Pinning Ceremony was a very important part of building the culture of their NGA and that it helped orient everyone toward the goal of graduation in four years.

At the schools that did hold a Commitment Day, it took different forms, including a Pinning Ceremony or a Reverse Graduation, which is a ceremony where students pledge to graduate in front of their families. Pinning Ceremonies are commonly held for seniors at the beginning of their expected graduation year to celebrate the beginning of their last year. Students usually receive a class pin for their school uniforms, and sometimes family members are invited to do the pinning. Some NGAs did an equivalent ceremony for their freshmen or said they had considered it:

We actually have a senior pinning ceremony in the fall, so we talked about incorporating a ninth-grade commitment ceremony. Not into that day, because that day is all about the seniors, but having the ceremony separate and apart for the incoming kids so that they feel that pledge...that we're all in this together to get them through these next four years.

Some APs were not familiar with the concept of a Commitment Day. Others had not seriously considered it but indicated interest in organizing one. (Again, many of the APs were new in 2018-19 and only had a week or so to prepare for start-of-the-year activities and events.) Other APs

expressed some interest but described barriers, usually limited funding and insufficient planning time. APs who did not plan on having a Commitment Day said that within their current time and budget constraints, planning and hosting the event was either not a priority or was not possible.

All the stuff you got to go through to buy stuff, it's a hassle. It's a hassle to buy the stuff or you want to have food for them. Who's paying for it? How's it getting paid for? If you want to buy them stuff, who's them? How's it getting paid for?

Other APs said they were not very interested in having a Commitment Day at their school. One AP said it seemed too much like a one-time focus on graduation when they wanted their students to feel like it was an ongoing, constant commitment. Another said it seemed too showy. One AP said, "You have to be mindful of how many times you invite parents," expressing concern that Commitment Day would be one event too many.

Many APs reported challenges trying to implement a freshman seminar.

One component of a NGA is a freshman seminar class. APs mentioned several possible topics that could be covered during a seminar, including ninth-grade transition, social-emotional learning, drop-out prevention, post-secondary planning, goal setting, study skills, and various other "soft skills" needed to support success. A few APs said they either already used seminar or advisory for restorative practices or that they would like to use the time for that purpose.

Some APs reported holding a freshman seminar, but many APs described a great deal of associated difficulty. Some APs did not have what they considered to be a freshman seminar, but they did have freshman advisory periods that they believed fulfilled many of the same functions.

One of the primary reported challenges to implementing freshman seminar was a lack of clear guidelines or curriculum for structuring seminar. One AP said:

...it lacks curriculum, [and] kids have to buy into it. If you're going to call it an elective course, you could call it anything, but don't call it freshman seminar because it very, very quickly becomes something like, "OK, this is stuff I know," or "Really? I'm taking class in how to make sure I take a shower every morning?"

Another AP said:

I think it would be nice to have a standardized curriculum for freshman seminar, because then you can measure how well each program is doing, and it would be an evaluation tool, because right now, everyone is doing their own thing.

APs also reported scheduling or staffing limitations that prevented ninth-grade teachers from having the time to teach a separate period of seminar. Another reported difficulty was assigning teachers to teach seminar who were comfortable implementing the seminar curriculum, if it

existed, or creating their own. APs also said a teacher’s ability to build rapport with students was important to seminar success. APs who believed their seminars to be effective credited the success to seminar teachers having positive and trusting relationships with students.

Logistics Components

Some components of Ninth-Grade Academies deal with the logistics of planning and organization. These components include communication with eighth-grade feeder schools, scheduling ninth-graders for “four core plus one more” required classes, and dedicating a space solely for NGA.

There was wide variation among schools in terms of communication with eighth-grade feeder schools.

According to the NGA logic model, each high school communicates with the schools sending students to the NGA the following year. Communication with feeder schools can allow a NGA to better prepare to meet the specific needs of the incoming class, and it also allows NGAs to let future students know what to expect.

In 2018-19, the level of communication with feeder schools about the incoming ninth-grade class varied widely from school to school. One major factor affecting communication was school type. It is easier for neighborhood schools to establish information-sharing practices because they have a limited number of set feeder schools. APs at neighborhood high schools usually reported being able to meet annually with teams from feeder schools to share knowledge about the incoming class and to discuss potentially necessary supports. Special Admission and Citywide schools, which pull students from a wider range of middle schools, weren’t always able to set up regular communications in the same way. APs at neighborhood high schools did report some difficulty maintaining communication when Learning Networks change:

Last year, we weren’t able to do that with all the kids because we changed learning networks, and we had some new kids that came in after I think school closed, like July 1, so we weren’t really able to plan for those kids until September, but usually what we do is plan ahead of time and try to be proactive.

There were alternative strategies for communicating with potential future students. Some schools described visits to feeder schools to host events for current eighth-graders. One AP said, “We also take the show on the road, so to speak, and we actually go to some of our feeder schools and we talk about our programs.” One school has a designated counselor who focuses on eighth-grade

Box 4: Logistics Components

Communication: High schools receive information about incoming ninth-graders from their feeder schools.

Scheduling: All ninth-graders are rostered in the required courses (“four core plus one more”).

Dedicated space for ninth-graders: There is a specific area in the school building reserved for all ninth-grade classrooms.

transitions: “He goes out and makes visits to the schools and he talks to them, does a semi-program...then he does a lot of follow-up. He’s constantly following up.” Other high schools hosted events and invited students from many different schools, or they participated in high school fairs.

Most schools did not experience challenges when scheduling students for their “four core plus one more” classes.

To be “on track” to graduation, ninth-graders in SDP must earn credits in “four core and one more” (one credit each in English, math, science, social studies, and an additional class). Rostering all ninth-grade students into their “four core and one more” from the beginning is a crucial start to staying on track. Most NGA APs said they were able to schedule their ninth-graders for their four core classes and one elective without difficulty.

Several APs indicated that a good roster chair (a school-based staff member tasked with managing the school roster) is invaluable to this process. One said, “Our roster chair, and then the principal and myself, we work with her to make sure that all students are properly rostered. Our roster chair is a whiz...she does such a fantastic job, and she’s been here for a really long time. She is just amazing.” An additional staff member, either the principal, AP, or counselor, typically audits the schedules produced by the roster chair to double-check that all students are enrolled in the proper number and type of credits: “I make sure that once the school year starts, I have a counselor who does a thorough review of each and every roster just to make sure that they are rostered into every core course as well as the additional credits.”

Most NGAs were not able to dedicate space strictly for ninth-grade students due to various challenges.

According to the logic model, NGAs should occupy a dedicated space within the larger school. Ideally, this space includes all ninth-grade classrooms and shared-use areas, including a cafeteria, bathrooms, and science labs. The intent of a dedicated space is to foster a sense of Academy community, remove the distraction of upper-grade students, and allow the NGA to function more easily as a school-within-a-school. APs reported that they were usually able to partially achieve this by grouping the ninth-grade core classes in one area, but the blueprint of most school buildings made it difficult to fully isolate ninth-graders into one physical space.

Many APs reported difficulties related to the layout of their school buildings. Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools have labs and workshops that must be shared across grades, and these are often not on the same floor as the core ninth-grade classrooms:

A lot of the barriers are the physical plan of the building, the restrictions that lays out. The shops. Some of those pieces, there’s not much that can be done about them, but some of the other pieces, we just have to be more creative in our approach to them.

Science labs, cafeterias, gyms, and auditoriums often need to be used by everyone, and this can result in cross-grade traffic within these spaces as well as in the hallways that lead to them. One AP described how all students must pass through the ninth-grade hallway to get to other areas of the school: “Their classes are strictly ninth-graders, but [that area] does lead to the lunchroom and it does lead to the gymnasium and the auditorium, so yes, others have to walk through.” One AP in their second year of NGA did note that, with time, this problem can be addressed: “I have to say this year was even better than last year—we recognized things last year, and this year we implemented different traffic patterns, so that really helped.”

Another reported difficulty was that not all teachers teach just one grade. A math teacher might be situated in the ninth-grade block of core classrooms and teach mostly ninth-grade math classes, but they might also teach one or two periods of math to other grades, resulting in students from other grades entering the ninth-grade area.

Teacher-Focused Components

According to the NGA logic model, classes are taught by a team of ninth-grade teachers who plan and work as a coordinated unit. To allow for this level of coordination, Academy teachers should only be assigned to NGA classes and should share common planning time. The third teacher-focused component is that the NGA AP serves as the instructional leader, observing ninth-grade teachers, organizing professional development, and coaching accordingly.

Box 5: Teacher-Focused Components

Assigning ninth-grade teachers to ninth-graders:

Ninth-grade teachers only teach ninth-grade students.

Common planning time: The school maintains frequent and regularly scheduled time for ninth-grade teachers to collaborate during the school day.

Teacher observations: Teachers are observed and provided with timely feedback, and there is a system in place to address the feedback received.

Schools encountered challenges assigning ninth-grade teachers to only ninth-grade students.

APs reported that they thought it was important to assign ninth-grade teachers to ninth-grade students for the purposes of a cohesive Academy and for the ease of scheduling common planning time. One AP pointed out that having 100% assignment would make it easier to roll out initiatives consistently and broadly.

Many APs said they were able to assign the teachers of the four core classes *mostly* to ninth-graders, but they also said it was very difficult to assign ninth-grade teachers *only* to ninth-grade classes. In many cases, circumstances required teachers to teach a section or two outside of ninth grade. For example, a science teacher might need to teach one tenth-grade section, or a math teacher might teach one advanced class for upper-graders. Similarly, one teacher might need to teach computer

classes for all grades. Additional difficulties arose when non-ninth-grade students needed to re-take ninth-grade classes they did not pass. This required scheduling a ninth-grade teacher to a section for repeating ninth-graders.

Some APs also stated leveling could result in a ninth-grade teacher teaching classes in other grades because they have to take over classes previously taught by another person, or vice-versa.

Some schools established common planning time specifically for NGA teachers, while other schools experienced challenges.

According to the logic model, NGA teachers should have common time to collaborate and coordinate. APs said they made an effort to give NGA teachers dedicated, common planning or Professional Learning Community (PLC) time. Many were able to do so regularly, but some reported difficulties with scheduling this time for all teachers teaching ninth-grade classes.

One AP said they were not able to hold common planning time for all of their ninth-grade teachers, so they prioritized common planning time for the teachers of the four core content classes (math, English, science, and social studies). This AP also pointed out that beyond coordinating lesson content, common planning time also allows these core teachers to share information about student academic and behavioral progress:

The core content teachers should be specifically for ninth grade ...That makes it easier when you are collaborating to talk about students because you have the entire team there, at least the core team there.

Another AP said that for teachers, common planning time is “the only time that they have to sit down...to look critically at who’s doing well and who isn’t.”

The NGA logic model says that in addition to common planning time, APs will also ensure that ninth-grade teachers form professional learning groups together. Many APs reported doing so during the same block of time used for common planning. Planning sessions and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) frequently alternated, and APs also used this time to provide Professional Development (PD) specific to their ninth-grade teachers.

APs who reported that they were not able to easily schedule common planning time or ninth-grade specific professional learning time usually pointed to complicated schedules and teachers who teach across multiple grade bands or content areas as the main challenges. Many of these APs said the school schedule will change in 2019-20 and common planning time will become possible:

We don't have common planning time (in 2018-19). A lot of the work that I have to do and communicate to my teachers is done through email, or stopping by classes, or meeting with teachers on prep, individually. I can never get a whole meeting with a group of teachers unless

they are on the same schedule, but then you're pulling their prep, so it's an issue... I cannot wait for common planning time and admin time next year.

An AP from a CTE school explained how it is difficult to have all the ninth-grade teachers free to meet at the same time, in part because students' schedules also need to accommodate their CTE courses ("the shops"):

I don't use [common planning time] as much as I would like to use it here, in part because... I can't free up my ninth-grade core teachers at one period here. As a result of the roster, I mean, everything like said is driven in the roster by the shops, I might be able to free up my English department at one point, or I might be able to free up my math department at one point, but that has not been a priority here... But meeting as a group literally only occurs on professional development day.

Another AP indicated that leveling made it difficult to find common planning time just for NGA teachers because, after leveling, teachers were assigned to teach students in multiple grades. As a result, all teachers did not teach the same students, and some taught other grades³:

One of the barriers we spoke about was the common planning time just not being pure; that was really the biggest thing after leveling, that our teachers [were] getting kind of tossed around in a sense and [moving] between academies, that really made it very difficult to just have that meeting time to talk about the same freshmen students, so that was a really big barrier.

Most APs conduct observations of ninth-grade teachers without many challenges.

Another aspect of managing ninth-grade teachers is conducting regular observations and providing timely feedback using a system that allows for discussion. According to the logic model, NGA APs are to observe all ninth-grade teachers. Ninth-grade APs reported that they usually observed ninth-grade teachers, but they sometimes split observations with their principal or another AP based on content area or another division that made sense based on their expertise or on logistics. One AP explained that both school size and expertise played a role in the division of observations:

Ideally, I would do the ninth grade, but there's [many] of them that teach ninth grade. That includes gym and art and all that stuff, so that's not feasible. I can do informals, which – and I pretty much have stuck to doing informals for ninth-grade teachers or ninth-grade classes, at least.... The formal observations we also split up, and we generally try to divide them up [according to] some kind of logic. I'll handle majority English and science, but there's – it's not like I'm just focused on ninth grade.

³ Teacher assignments are based on projected enrollment in the spring. "Leveling" is the process by which teachers are re-assigned in the fall to match actual enrollment. The leveling process begins on the first day of school; in 2018-19, leveling had to be complete by October 1.

Many APs said regular “walkthroughs” or “informals” (casual observations outside the required formal observations) were important tools for the continuous development of effective NGA teaching practices:

I try to make myself available so that teachers don't feel like I'm only coming in to be evaluative. But I try to pop in and just be a support, whether it's just, "Hey, how you doing?" I like [teachers] to see me without my laptop, or without a notepad.

Most APs reported fairly frequent informal observations or walkthroughs, complete with a mechanism for sharing and discussing feedback with teachers. Some APs used Cornerstone for all observation purposes, while others preferred to use Cornerstone only for formal observations. Other options included Google sheets or forms, email, or a school-created rubric shared over email. APs agreed that in-person conversations were ideal. Several APs also noted that they shared the observation feedback with teachers the same day or the following day, either in-person or electronically.

Many APs said they were not able to do as many informal observations as they would like due to time constraints. This was especially a problem for NGA APs who also served as school-wide APs:

The informals should be ongoing, daily, although that's a challenge as well because it's only the principal and myself. We're always called away for something.

Another AP noted how time constraints were also a challenge to scheduling follow-ups:

I always try to have a conversation with teachers after any kind of observation – formal or informal. Sometimes, if it's a formal and the teacher's fine with their feedback, then because of time, then we'll skip it.

Student-Monitoring Components

A key function of a NGA is to provide ninth-graders with focused attention during a difficult transition period in order to address issues before students potentially veer off-track. This requires regular monitoring and a system for providing students with necessary supports and interventions as soon as possible. In interviews, APs framed the components of academic advising and grade monitoring as separate from behavior monitoring, but they reported that the two processes were usually tied together in practice. APs frequently referred to the ABCs (Attendance, Behavior, and Credits) when they discussed the goals of their NGA.

Box 6: Student-Monitoring Components

Academics/grade monitoring: There is an Academy-wide system for academic advising and grade monitoring.

Behavior monitoring: There is an Academy-wide system to monitor and address behavior issues with appropriate interventions.

APs said constant and regular monitoring of grades was important.

Academic monitoring teams usually track grades and credit attainment on a regular basis, identify and assign students to different intervention groups, and then follow an intervention and follow-up plan. Monitoring is often done using the Grade Monitoring Tool in Qlik and/or Google Sheets or Docs to allow for coordination and record-keeping. APs said constant, regular monitoring is key: “It’s not a one-time activity, it’s ongoing.” Every AP said they were involved in academic advising and grade monitoring, although some APs monitored other grades in addition to ninth. Monitoring was frequently done by a team, which often included a counselor and teachers.

APs and monitoring teams divided students into groups or rankings in different ways at each school, but grouping typically involved distinctions like “honor roll,” “on track” (to promotion and graduation), “close to off track,” and “off track.” Many APs engaged students in the monitoring process and reported that their students are frequently shown their grades and data, either during freshman seminar or advisory, or one-on-one with a counselor, mentor, or the AP. One AP explained:

What we wanted to do was find a way to sit down with a student and have their information in front of them, a sheet. Academics, behavior stuff, attendance. What I did was, I took the – there’s a thing called the Grade Monitoring Tool – and made that ... copied and pasted it into form letters ... I could sort them and print out ninth grade. It will have their quarterly grades, their predicted grades, some of their attendance stuff. I added columns for Keystones or benchmarks, and then we would kind of sort those by how many core failures they had.

Many APs stated that one of the difficulties of working with ninth-grade students is helping them learn that they have to earn credits in order to be promoted and eventually graduate on time:

It's the biggest difference, because a lot of students are used to, "Hey, if I fail Science and Social Studies in 7th grade, I'm still going to eighth grade." ... But in high school they don't understand that every class...is a totally individual course that you must pass to graduate. And so, that's one of the things that we start with right away.

Another said:

Over the course of my career as an assistant principal there is definitely this belief among the fourteen-year-old kids that "If I just go to this school for four years, just show up every day... someone will give me a cap and gown and I'll walk down the aisle and I'll be a high school graduate." No clue at all that they actually have to earn credits and pass things in order to get that done.

One AP described the approach their school took to address this issue:

At the end of the semester, after the semester grades have gone in, all of our advisors sit down and have one-on-one conferences during advisory and say, "Here is your credit profile, here is what the grades are, this is what it means, and this is what you need for the end of this school year." It's having those continual conversations about progress monitoring. That's done throughout the year with our advisors, which has really been helpful.

APs said constant and regular behavior monitoring was important.

APs reported that behavior monitoring frequently took place in conjunction with academic grade monitoring and followed a similar process of working with a team to track students, identify groups or individuals for intervention, and track and communicate the process with the relevant people. For behavior monitoring, students are usually grouped into interventions using the MTSS⁴ (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) framework.

The intervention aspect of academic and behavior monitoring differed from school to school, but mentoring programs and parent communication were common components. Several APs reported success implementing a mentoring program where students were assigned to a teacher for check-ins:

When it comes to individual students who we're trying to get to improve slightly, we'll put together a smaller—a small kind of incentive intervention program. For example, we'll give them a mentor who will track their attendance for a week, two weeks, and incrementally try to get them to improve.

⁴ For more information about MTSS, visit <https://www.philasd.org/specializedservices/what-we-do/mtss/>.

One AP found the mentor-mentee relationship was particularly positive when they allowed students to select their mentor and ask them to perform that role. In addition to mentor programs, behavior contracts were also common tools for outlining behavior interventions and encouraging students to commit to them.

The behavior monitoring team is often the same team that monitors grades, but sometimes a climate manager, dean of students, attendance liaison, or additional teacher focused on climate will also participate. According to some APs, counselors can't always be involved with NGA grade and behavior monitoring because they are overextended:

We have one counselor for the entire building...our counselor is geared toward getting kids ready to graduate and go off. Not only does she have the college part, but she also has our kids...that may be going into the world of work, into the military, to tech schools. Those kinds of things, so she's dealing with that, and also the social/emotional needs of our students is tremendous. One kid could take up a third of her day with one issue.

Several APs described their approach to behavior as non-punitive. For example, APs mentioned using restorative practices, incentive-based programs, or positive reinforcement. Some schools used Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)⁵, while others used other programs or implemented different aspects of restorative practice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

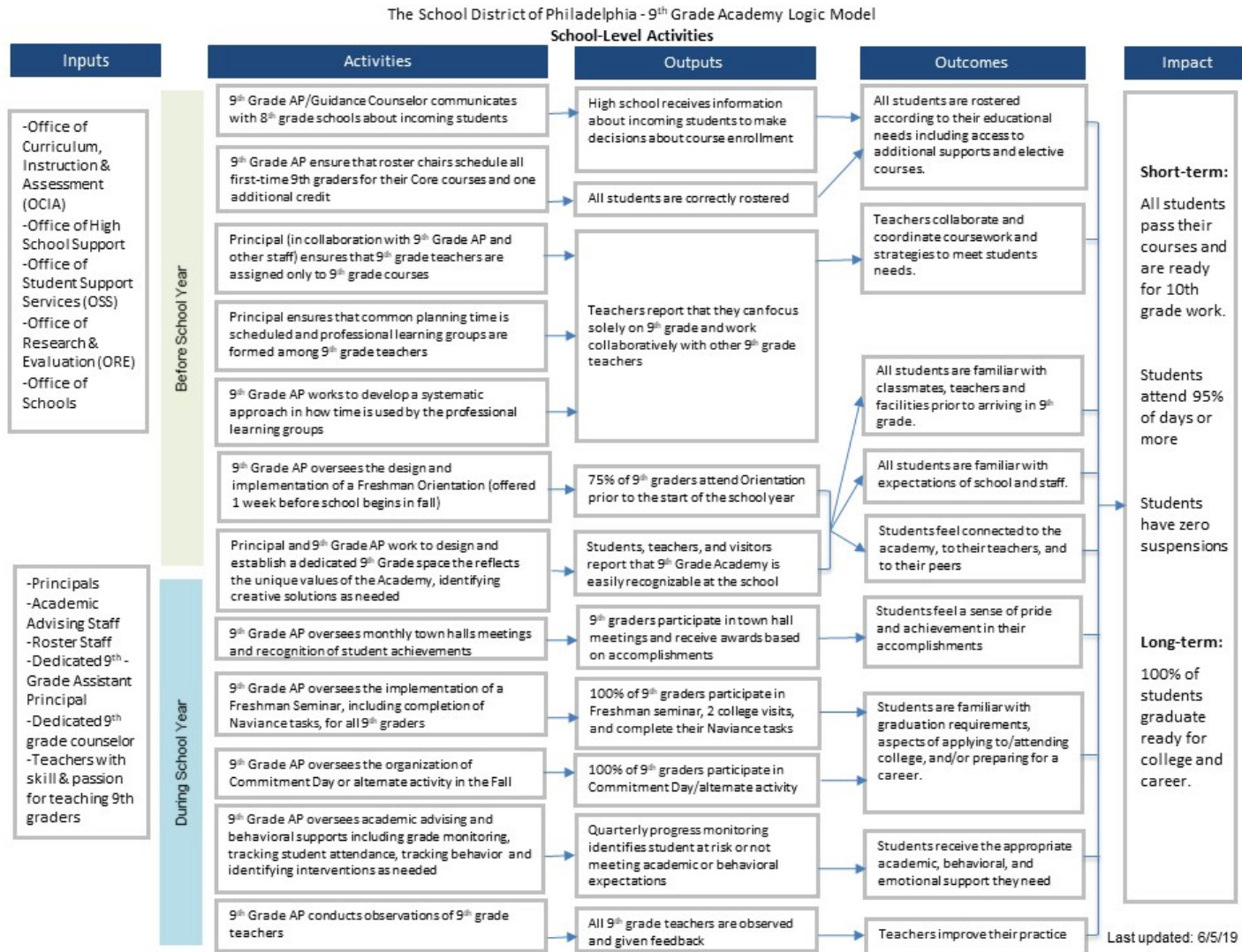
While some components of the Ninth-Grade Academy (NGA) logic model were implemented consistently across most or all schools (such as having an orientation, hosting town hall meetings, scheduling students for their “four core plus one more” classes, and observation of teachers), implementation of other components varied across schools. Based on the AP perceptions we gleaned from the interviews, ORE recommends the following:

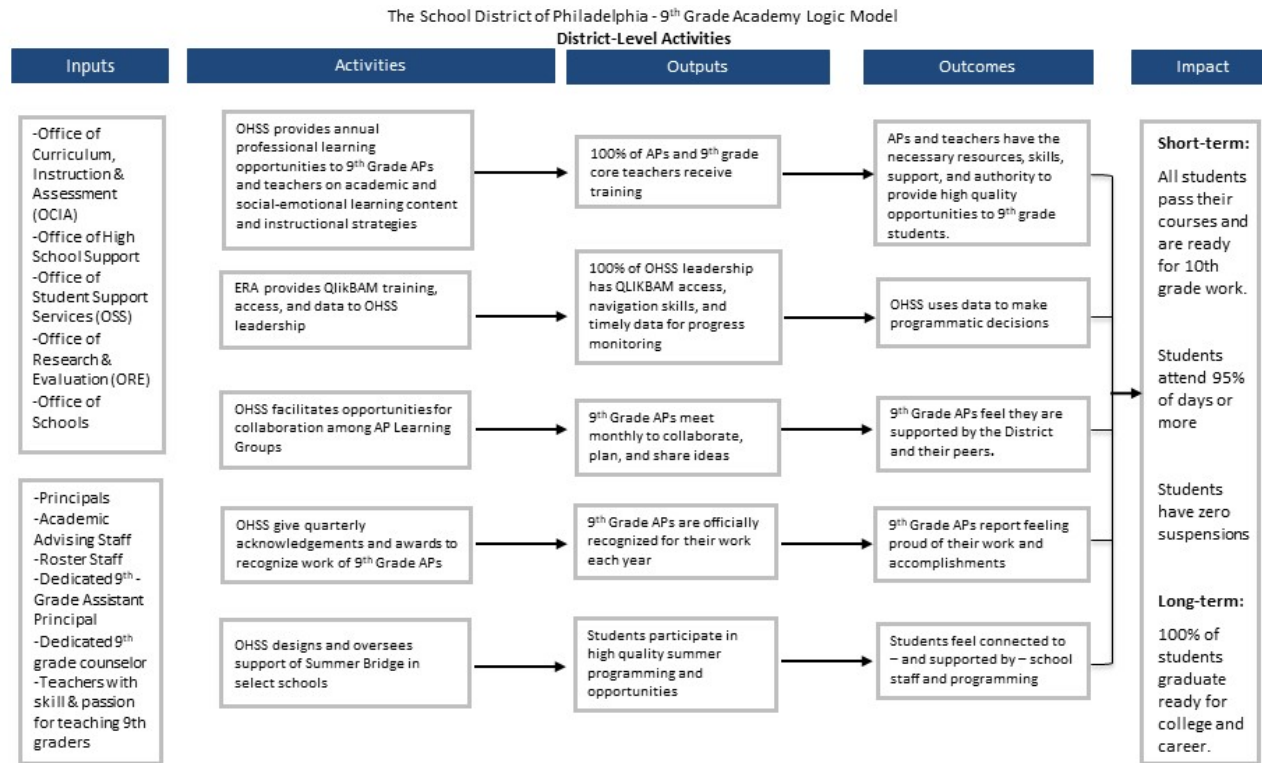
- **Clarify which components of the Ninth-Grade Academy logic model are required versus which are suggested.** School type should be considered when deciding what components should be required. For example, a CTE school may not be able to establish an entirely dedicated ninth-grade space due to the immobility of certain resources (for example, ovens for cooking courses).
- **Schools should receive support implementing required components of the NGA model, and this support should include specific implementation strategies, plans, and budgets.** For example, some schools did not understand the purpose of a Commitment Day, and others expressed not having the funds to support such an initiative.

⁵ For more information, visit <https://www.philasd.org/schoolclimate/programs-services/pbis/>.

- Because freshman seminar implementation varied widely across schools, with many schools unclear on what a freshman seminar should look like and others using a specific curriculum, it would be helpful to **select and disseminate a common curriculum to ninth-grade APs in order to facilitate more consistent implementation of freshman seminar.**
- **Consider supporting additional AP positions** in schools where the NGA AP is the only AP in the building.
- **Offer additional PD opportunities on relationship-building strategies** for APs and teachers to help foster a strong Academy.

Appendix A: Logic Model





Last updated: 6/5/19

Appendix B: Component Implementation Scores

Table 1: Total score for each NGA component

Component	Total Score
Scheduling	110
Orientation	109
Behavior	108
Academics	107
Town Hall	101
Observations	101
Common Planning Time	84
Space	83
Eighth-Grade Communication	82
Ninth-Grade Teachers to Ninth-Grade Students	78
Seminar	69
Commitment Day	32

ORE staff reviewed interview transcripts to determine the extent to which NGA components were implemented at each school. For each component, we assigned each school a number (0-5) reflecting the component's degree of implementation. We then aggregated the school-level scores for each component and calculated overall implementation scores by counting a score of 5 as five points in that category, a score of 4 as four points in that category, and so on. Thus, across all schools, the components with higher scores were implemented more frequently and more fully than components with lower overall scores.