

Issue Brief: High School Transition Activities

April 2017

Introduction

In 2014–15, the high school graduation rate reached a record high of 83 percent (U.S. Department of Education 2016). Despite the gains, over half a million students still drop out of high school each year (U.S. Department of Education 2015). High schools have adopted various strategies designed to keep students who are at risk of not graduating in school and on track for earning the credits required to graduate. “At-risk” students are defined as those failing to achieve basic proficiency in key subjects or exhibiting behaviors that can lead to failure and/or dropping out of school. Dropout prevention strategies are diverse; they vary in type of program, services offered, frequency, intensity, and duration of contact with target students.

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) sponsored the **National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS)**, which aimed to provide descriptive information on the prevalence and characteristics of dropout prevention strategies for at-risk students. The survey collected data in the 2014–15 school year from a nationally representative sample of 2,142 public high schools and focused on 13 specific high school improvement strategies¹ identified by a panel of external experts and senior Department officials. This brief on **high school transition activities** is the seventh in a [series of briefs](#) being released this year with key findings about these high school improvement strategies.

Definition of High School Transition Activities

The HSS defined **high school transition activities (HSTAs)** as activities for first-year high school students that are designed to ease the transition into high school. HSTAs can be used to provide support to selected students who are identified as needing assistance as they enter high school or can be implemented as a strategy for all first-year students. These activities may include new student orientation (e.g., summer bridge programs and orientation sessions), specific transition interventions to support the academic needs of first-year students (e.g., freshman academies and advisory classes), assistance from a [student support team](#), and [mentors](#) assigned to help new students.

¹ The survey examined 13 strategies designed to improve high school outcomes for at-risk students. These strategies are: (1) academic support classes, (2) academic tutoring, (3) career-themed curriculum, (4) case management services, (5) college-level coursework, (6) competency-based advancement, (7) credit recovery, (8) early warning systems, (9) high school transition activities, (10) mentoring, (11) personalized learning plans, (12) social services, and (13) student support teams. See <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oeped/ppss/reports-high-school.html> for the series of briefs.

Research on High School Transition Activities

More students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Herlihy 2007). Researchers have noted the importance of supporting students as they transition to high school, especially students who have risk factors related to dropping out (Neild 2009). Research has identified ninth-grade academic performance, in particular, as strongly correlated with high school graduation (Allensworth and Easton 2007).

Few studies have focused specifically on the impact of HSTAs on high school graduation, most likely because HSTAs are often implemented as one of several high school improvement strategies. Some programs that include HSTAs have promising evidence. A quasi-experimental study was conducted of one of these programs, Talent Development High Schools, a schoolwide reform model that features a freshman academy among other academic support strategies for first-year students. The researchers found small improvements in the average number of credits earned and grade promotion for students enrolled in a Talent Development High School compared to students who were not enrolled in one (Kemple and Herlihy 2004).

Survey Findings on High School Transition Activities

This brief describes the prevalence of HSTAs as a dropout prevention strategy. It does not measure the effectiveness of HSTAs, but instead describes the implementation of HSTAs in high schools across the country. This analysis included an examination of four school characteristics: (1) size, (2) poverty, (3) locale, and (4) graduation rate. Only statistically significant differences within school characteristics (at $p < .05$) are discussed; non-statistically significant differences are not reported. School characteristics were defined in the following ways:

School size. School size categories consisted of small schools (fewer than 500 students), medium schools (500–1,199 students), and large schools (1,200 or more students) based on 2013–14 Common Core of Data (CCD) student enrollment data.

School poverty. Poverty levels were based on 2013–14 free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) and total CCD school enrollment data. The poverty categories were low-poverty schools (below 35 percent students with FRPL), medium-poverty schools (35–49 percent students with FRPL), and high-poverty schools (50 percent or more students with FRPL).

School locale. School locale included three mutually exclusive locales from the CCD: rural schools, suburban/town schools, and city schools.

Graduation rate. School classification by graduation rate was based on three categories: low graduation rate (67 percent or lower graduation rate), medium graduation rate (68 to 89 percent graduation rate), and high graduation rate (90 percent or higher graduation rate).

Summary of Key Findings

- Overall, 59 percent of high schools offered at least one HSTA to help first-year high school students in 2014–15; an estimated 72 percent of all first-year high school students nationwide participated in at least one HSTA, according to school principals.
- Low-graduation-rate schools were less likely than high-graduation-rate schools to have HSTAs; high-poverty schools were less likely than low-poverty schools to have HSTAs.

- The most common HSTA was an individual high school graduation plan (61 percent), followed by support teams that monitored ninth-grade students' progress (37 percent), yearlong advisory classes (35 percent), and summer bridge programs (35 percent). The prevalence of specific types of HSTAs varied by school size, school poverty level, school locale, and graduation rate.
- Of the high schools with HSTAs, 91 percent of schools offered them to all first-year students while 9 percent offered them only to selected first-year students, most commonly on the basis of a student's academic performance, discipline records, and attendance.

What was the prevalence of high school transition activities?

Overall, 59 percent of high schools in 2014–15 reported having at least one HSTA to help first-year high school students. An estimated 72 percent of all first-year high school students nationwide participated in at least one HSTA, according to school principals. The prevalence of HSTAs varied by school size, school poverty level, school locale, and graduation rate (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Percentage of high schools offering high school transition activities by selected school characteristics, 2014–15

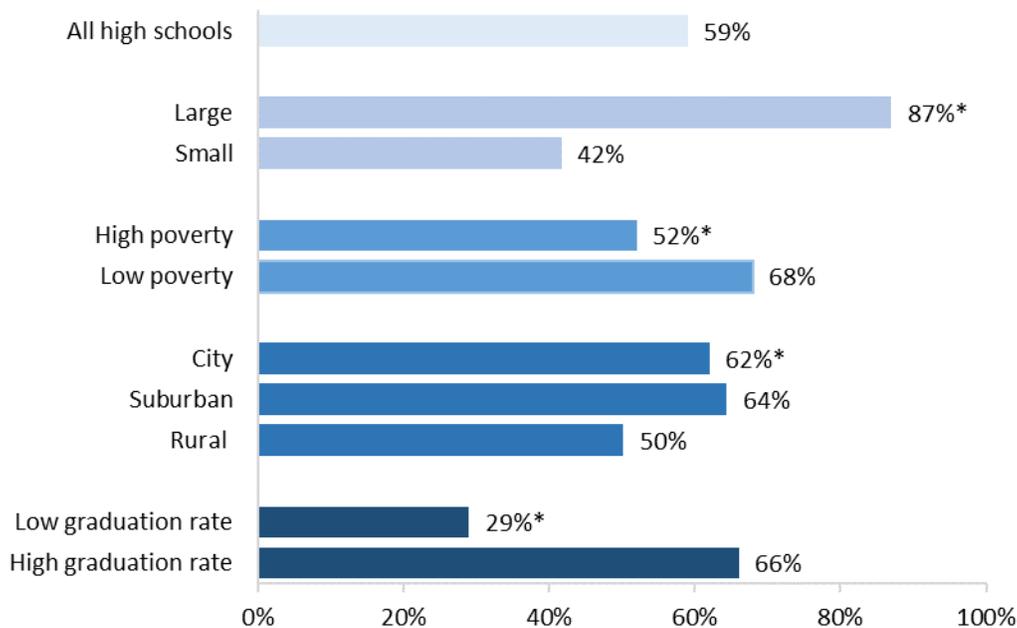


Exhibit reads: In 2014–15, 59 percent of all high schools offered high school transition activities.

* $p < 0.05$

NOTE: An asterisk is placed on one case per comparison. Differences across school characteristics with two categories were based on comparisons between the two groups. Differences across school characteristics with three categories were based on goodness-of-fit across all three categories.

Unweighted $n = 1,925$ high schools.

SOURCE: HSS survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 93).

Differences by school size. Large high schools were more likely than small high schools to have HSTAs (87 percent compared with 42 percent).

Differences by school poverty. High-poverty schools were less likely than low-poverty high schools to have HSTAs (52 percent compared with 68 percent).

Differences by school locale. City schools (62 percent) and suburban schools (64 percent) were more likely than rural schools (50 percent) to have HSTAs.

Differences by graduation rate. Low-graduation-rate schools were less likely than high-graduation-rate schools to have HSTAs (29 percent compared with 66 percent).

What types of high school transition activities did high schools provide?

The most common HSTA was an individual high school graduation plan (61 percent), which school staff created to help students develop concrete steps toward graduation, including selection of courses (Exhibit 2). The next most common HSTA was a ninth-grade² support team that monitored first-year students' progress and provided interventions to address any academic or social problems presented by the student (37 percent). The third most common HSTA was a yearlong advisory class that provided information and support to succeed in school such as study skills and time management (35 percent). A summer bridge program, which brought first-year students together for academic and social activities before the school year, was also the third most common HSTA (35 percent). The prevalence of various high school transition activities differed by school size, school poverty level, school locale, and graduation rate (Exhibit 2).

Differences by school size. Large schools were more likely than small schools to offer a summer bridge program (45 percent versus 25 percent), a freshman academy (35 percent versus 16 percent), assign student mentors to all first-year students (30 percent versus 15 percent), and assign adult mentors to specific high-risk students (21 percent versus 13 percent) and were less likely to help students develop an individual high school graduation plan (58 percent versus 66 percent).

Differences by poverty level. High-poverty schools were more likely than low-poverty schools to offer a summer bridge program (45 percent versus 29 percent) and assign student mentors to specific high-risk students (12 percent versus 7 percent).

Differences by school locale. City schools were more likely than suburban and rural schools to offer support teams to monitor first-year students' progress (43 percent of city schools versus 37 percent of suburban schools and 31 percent of rural schools), a yearlong advisory class (40 percent of city schools versus 36 of suburban schools and 29 percent of rural schools), a summer bridge program (53 percent of city schools versus 33 percent of suburban schools and 22 percent of rural schools), and assign a student mentor to specific high-risk students (13 percent of city schools versus 11 percent of suburban schools and 7 percent of rural schools). Suburban schools were more likely than city and rural schools to assign student mentors to all first-year students (25 percent of suburban schools versus 22 percent of city schools and 18 percent of rural schools).

² The HSS used the term "ninth grade" to represent the first year in high school. Approximately 7 percent of high schools begin in a different year, such as eighth grade or tenth grade.

Differences by graduation rate. Low-graduation-rate schools were less likely than high-graduation-rate schools to teach parents strategies to help their child make the transition to high school (25 percent versus 37 percent) and to assign a student mentor to all first-year students (17 percent versus 26 percent).

Exhibit 2. Among high schools with HSTAs, the percentage of schools that offered specific transition activities, by graduation rate, school size, school poverty level, and school locale, 2014–15

Activity	All schools	Low grad rate	High grad rate	Large	Small	High poverty	Low poverty	City	Sub-urban	Rural
Develop an individual high school grad plan	61%	65%	60%	58%*	66%	62%	57%	61%	59%	64%
Support team monitors 9th-grade students' progress & provides interventions	37%	37%	34%	37%	33%	37%	36%	43%*	37%	31%
Yearlong advisory class provides information & support to succeed in high school	35%	35%	32%	35%	33%	37%	32%	40%*	36%	29%
Summer bridge program for incoming 9th-graders	35%	39%	32%	45%*	25%	45%*	29%	53%*	33%	22%
Teaching parents strategies to help their child transition to high school	33%	25%*	37%	36%	31%	31%	34%	34%	33%	34%
Freshman academy	25%	29%	24%	35%*	16%	27%	23%	31%*	26%	17%
Student mentor assigned to all incoming 9th-grade students	22%	17%*	26%	30%*	15%	20%	24%	22%*	25%	18%
Adult mentor assigned to specific high-risk students	17%	14%	18%	21%*	13%	16%	17%	19%	17%	16%
Adult mentor assigned to all incoming 9th-grade students	16%	19%	14%	15%	17%	16%	15%	17%	15%	16%
Student mentor assigned to specific high-risk students	10%	15%	9%	11%	8%	12%*	7%	13%*	11%	7%

Exhibit reads: Among high schools that offered high school transition activities in 2014–15, 61 percent developed an individual high school graduation plan with students.

* $p < .05$

NOTE: An asterisk is placed on one case per comparison. Differences across school characteristics with two categories were based on comparisons between the two groups. Differences across school characteristics with three categories were based on goodness-of-fit across all three categories.

Unweighted $n = 1,118$

SOURCE: HSS Survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 94).

How did high schools target students for participation in high school transition activities?

Of the high schools with HSTAs, most reported offering or assigning HSTAs to all first-year students. Sixty-nine percent *offered* HSTAs to all first-year students, and 22 percent *assigned* HSTAs to all first-year students. A small percentage of high schools offered or assigned HSTAs to only selected students. Five percent *offered* HSTAs to a subset of first-year students, and 4 percent *assigned* HSTAs to a subset of first-year students.

Schools that focused on selected students for participation in HSTAs reported various reasons for targeting these students, including academic performance, discipline issues, and attendance issues. There were no statistically significant differences in targeting students when examining variations by school size, school poverty level, school locale, and graduation rate.

Methodology

The **National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate** was a survey of 13 high school strategies designed to improve graduation rates among students at risk of dropping out and was administered in the 2014–15 school year. The 13 strategies are: (1) academic support classes, (2) academic tutoring, (3) career-themed curriculum, (4) case management services, (5) college-level coursework, (6) competency-based advancement, (7) credit recovery, (8) early warning systems, (9) high school transition activities, (10) mentoring, (11) personalized learning plans, (12) social services, and (13) student support teams.

The purpose of the survey was to inform education practitioners and policymakers about the prevalence, characteristics, and students served by these strategies in U.S. public high schools. The descriptive study did not measure the effectiveness of particular strategies but instead examined implementation factors in high schools across the country. The study team identified the 13 strategies and designed survey items for each strategy with input from a panel of external experts in the field and senior Department officials.

The researchers selected a nationally representative sample of high schools³ using a random sampling approach, stratifying high schools based on graduation rate (from [EDFacts](#))⁴ and locale code (from [NCES 2013–14 Common Core of Data](#)). The survey collected data from high school principals (or designees knowledgeable about programs and strategies) at sampled schools. The survey response rate was 90 percent. The survey responses, after cleaning and processing, were analyzed in SAS and Stata using

³ All U.S. public high schools providing instruction to 12th grade students in the fall of 2010 were included in the sampling frame unless (1) the lowest offered grade was 11th grade or higher, (2) there were fewer than five students in grades 9 through 12, (3) the percentage of students enrolled in grades 9 through 12 was under 20 percent of the total school enrollment and the total number of students in grades 9 through 12 was fewer than 20, or (4) the school name contained one of nine keywords indicating juvenile detention center or hospital. Of the 103,813 total schools listed in the 2010–11 CCD, 22,447 high schools met the criteria to be included in the sampling frame.

⁴ There were 3,302 schools without graduation rate information in the 2010–11 *EDFacts* public use data set. The researchers used an imputation approach to assign these schools to either the high- or low-graduation-rate stratum. The imputation process began by examining the distribution of the high/low graduation rate classification for the 19,145 schools by sampling locale. The percentage of schools classified as high graduation rate was calculated separately for each locale sampling stratum: 68.4 percent of rural schools were classified as high graduation rate, 63.0 percent of suburban schools were classified as high graduation rate, and 41.0 percent of city schools were classified as high graduation rate. The research team randomly assigned each of the 3,302 schools with unknown graduation rates to the high graduation rate stratum with probability 68.4 if the school was classified as rural, with probability 63.0 if the school was classified as suburban, and with probability 41.0 if the school was classified as urban. The sample size was adjusted upwards to account for potential misclassification due to this method. In analysis, the researchers used the restricted-use 2013–14 *EDFacts* data and graduation rates published on school and district websites to fill in this missing data.

descriptive techniques that apply the appropriate statistical population weights to account for stratification by graduation rate and locale.

Results reported in this brief reflect the full survey sample unless otherwise noted and are representative of U.S. public high schools nationwide. References in the text to differences between subgroups based on sample data refer only to differences that are statistically significant using a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

References

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- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2015. "Table 219.57. Population of 15- to 24-Year Olds Enrolled in Grades 10 through 12, Number Who Dropped Out (Event Dropouts), Percentage Who Dropped Out (Event Dropout Rate), and Percentage Distribution, by Selected Characteristics: 2014." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_219.57.asp

Appendix: High School Transition Activities (Survey Excerpt)

National Survey on High School Strategies to Help At-Risk Students Graduate

This section asks about **Middle to High School Transition**. For the purposes of this survey, middle to high school transition includes planned activities to ease the transition from middle to high school, such as special outreach and transition programs (e.g., summer bridge program, freshman academy), and/or providing adult or student mentor.

93. In the 2014-15 school year, does your school have any middle to high school transition activities (past or planned)?

(Please select only one)

Yes No

94. In the 2014-15 school year, does your school have any of the following middle to high school transition activities (past or planned)?

(Check all that apply)

- Summer bridge program for incoming 9th graders (more than a one-day orientation)
 - Freshman academy (students housed together as a smaller unit within the high school campus with an assigned group of teachers)
 - Support team that monitors 9th-grade student progress and provides interventions
 - A student mentor assigned to specific high-risk students
 - A student mentor assigned to all incoming 9th-grade students
 - An adult mentor assigned to specific high-risk students
 - An adult mentor assigned to all incoming 9th-grade students
 - A year-long advisory class to provide information and support to succeed in high school (e.g., lessons on organizational and study skills or graduation requirements)
 - Teaching parents strategies to help their child make the transition to high school (e.g., graduation requirements, strategies for academic success)
 - Develop an individual high school graduation plan
 - Other
(Please specify _____)
-

95. How are middle to high school transition activities allocated to students entering high school?

(Please select only one)

- Offered of all students (school-wide)
 - Offered to a subset of students
 - Assigned to all students (school-wide)
 - Assigned to a subset of students
-

If user responds "Subset of students" to Q095, ask Q96 & Q97. Otherwise, skip to Q98.

96. On average, approximately what percentage of high school students in your school participates in middle to high school transition activities in the 2014-15 school year?

{Slide bar for 0% to 100%}

97. Are any of the following subsets of students targeted for receiving middle to high school transition activities?

(Check all that apply)

- Students with attendance issues (e.g., truancy)
 - Students with discipline or behavioral issues
 - Students performing below standards or grade level
 - Students performing above standards or grade level
 - Students recommended by high school staff (e.g., counselor or teacher)
 - Re-entry students
 - English Language Learners
 - Other
- (Please Specify _____)
-

The full survey is available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports-high-school.html>