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Improving the Educational Possibilities of Urban High School Students as They Transition from 8th to 9th Grade

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This study reports the findings of an ongoing collaborative partnership between the UCLA EASE Project[1], The Dream Foundation, and the educators at Valley High School to develop and evaluate a transition model that creates "a college-going culture" among entering ninth grade students. We offer four policy recommendations that can help school communities, and the educators within them, facilitate effective and successful transitions from middle school to high school and ultimately lead to high school graduation:

* Allocate resources to support and oversee the 9th grade transition
* Fund programs that create intentional opportunities of positive peer networks
* Educate Families about the importance of the 9th grade Transition
* "Over-determine success" in the 9th grade

High School Student Are Still Being Left Behind

Despite the millions of federal dollars invested in closing the achievement gap with the implementation of No Child Left Behind, the vast majority of California's urban youth are still under-prepared to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities. The lack of academic success among California's urban youth continues to result in a persistent decline in under-represented students enrolling in and graduating from competitive four-year colleges and universities in the state. A recent study concluded that the underachievement of urban students can be attributed to the large number of students who drop out of the educational process early in their high school careers (Legters, 2000). Students who fail to successfully integrate into the culture of the school drop out as early as the end of the ninth grade. For example, in a typical Los Angeles area high school, more than 1,500 new students will enter the ninth grade in the fall and yet four years later, less than 500 will graduate. This means that close to 70% of students who attend high school in the urban areas of Los Angeles will fail to graduate.

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[1] The UCLA EASE Project is a multidisciplinary research collaborative which engages in research activities that promote greater equality of educational opportunities for urban youth. The primary purpose of the UCLA EASE Project is to conduct and disseminate research that broadens our understanding of issues of equity and access in K-16 U.S. education pipeline. It is the goal of the EASE project to provide comprehensive data analyses and evaluations that translate new discoveries into effective programs, policies, and practices that result in increased academic outcomes for poor and minority students and facilitate positive institutional change within schools. From its inception in the fall of 2001, the work of the UCLA EASE Project has focused on creating the conditions in urban schools needed to improve educational outcomes so that more students have access to post-secondary opportunities.

Obtaining a high school diploma is a goal that is embraced by most urban youth, yet the reality of obtaining it eludes them. The inability to obtain a high school degree has its roots as early as the transition from middle school to high school. The transition from middle school (junior high school) to high school can be a very difficult process for many youth. The large, bureaucratic nature of most high schools challenges students to adjust to new rules and new expectations, while providing them little, if any, adult support and nurturing. As students struggle to fit in socially, poor prior academic preparation in core subjects exacerbates the anxiety associated with transitioning into high school. For many students, these feelings of anxiety lead to self-doubt, alienation, and disengagement from school.

A difficult transition to high school is not only connected to academic underachievement, but also may signal the end of a student's high school career altogether and positive career opportunities for life. As the shift from an industrial economy to one based on service, information, and technology continues to evolve, a student's ability to acquire the knowledge and skill set needed to obtain meaningful employment and to fully participate in our democracy will be predicated on his/her level of academic preparation.

Why Is This Type of Research Important?

Focusing on the transition from middle school to high school is critical to educators and policymakers because difficult transitions at this stage in a student's career often leads to lower levels of student academic achievement and satisfaction. Students who have a difficult time adjusting to the academic and social demands of high school also experience higher rates of:

* Academic failure,
* Disciplinary problems,
* Feelings of not belonging
* Dropping out.

Students who experience a rocky transition to high school are less likely to be motivated, prepared, and ready to attend college. For urban students who already face a multitude of educational hurdles, such as fewer honors/ Advanced Placements courses, resources, and fewer credentialed teachers, a rough transition may continue to perpetuate the lack of student achievement and college-going in urban areas and contribute to widening the achievement gap in these areas.

While the transition from middle school to high school symbolically represents a coming of age, research suggest that it is also a time in a young person's life that can create feelings of isolation, disconnection, and an immeasurable sense of loneliness. The challenges of new relationships, academic rigor, negotiating the physical plant, and fitting in all can serve to make a very natural part of life's course seem too daunting, and feelings of isolation, rejection, and alienation can arise. These feelings are only exacerbated for youth in urban areas from families with low income levels, who are ethnic minorities, immigrants, and without a family history of success in schooling environments.

Generating empirical evidence about the relationship between a student's propensity to successfully transitions from middle school to high school is critical. Such data help in the design of effective support systems and programs to ease this transition and perhaps influence the number of students who remain in high school, graduate, and explore post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, research on this topic is essential if educators and policymakers are to take seriously the economic and political realties of large numbers of urban students continuing to drop out of the educational pipeline as early as the ninth and tenth grades. The implications are wide and varied, and greatly influence our ability to sustain a strong democratic society.

Current Study

The data presented in this policy brief come from 150 participants and their families in UCLA 2003 EASE Project Summer Bridge program. The Summer Bridge program is a summer residential program for ninth grade students to encourage and foster career exploration and positive college-going identity. During the Summer Bridge Program, students work with UCLA undergraduate role models (many of whom are themselves underrepresented students) on college-going activities to develop academic identities that make going to college both attainable and worth seeking. In order to attend the summer program, students had to be an entering freshman at Valley High School, and had to submit an application, which included an essay on why they wanted to attend. All students who applied to the summer program were granted admissions.

As a Title I school, Valley High School had 4,147 students, and among them, 1,470 students (34%) were categorized as English Learners (EL). According to the race/ ethnic data of the school, the majority of the students (98.1%; 4068) were Hispanic. Located in a high-poverty area, current data on Valley High School's college-going rates underscore the need to create a stronger college-going culture in the school. For example, in 1999, Valley High School had 1,446 freshmen distributed across three calendar tracks, but had only 699 seniors. More than 50% of Valley High School students drop out before their senior year; and of those who stay and graduate, only 14% of the senior class continue on to four-year colleges and universities. To put these statistics into perspective, in a high school of over 4,500 students, less than 100 will attend a public four-year college. Of the large number of graduates who enroll in community college (approximately 30-45%), less than 10% transfer to a four-year institution.

Study Methods

Research on the Summer Bridge Program utilizes a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data consist of focus group interviews (8 to 11 students per group). Additionally, focus group interviews were held with the families of these students in conjunction with our family day activities at the end of the program.
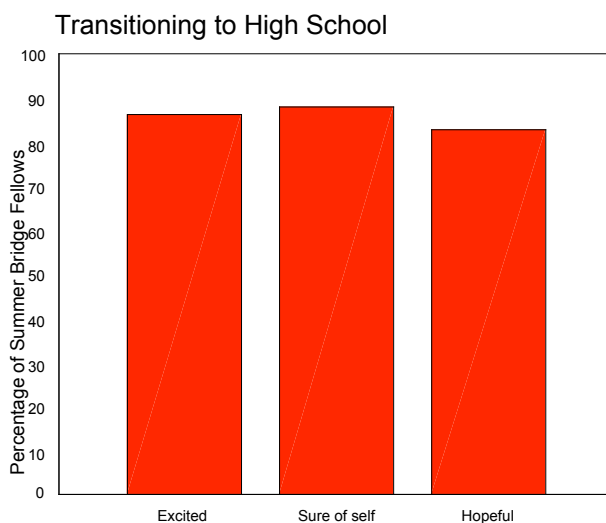
Quantitative data were gathered through student surveys, using the Multi-dimensional Student Transitional Choice Scale. This is a 45-minute, 85 item, self-reported instrument, assessing the influences and importance of the three spheres of influence (family; peer networks; and school structures, policies, practices, and culture) on students' attitudes and experiences during their transitional year in high school. The scale taps into a range of educational decisions that student must make while transitioning from middle to high school: (1) the decision to continue their education at the next level [academic predisposition], (2) the decision to engage intellectually in the course work at the new school, [academic transition]; (3) the decision to pursue one's academic goals despite barriers [academic resiliency]; (4) the decision to get involved in both the official and unofficial culture of the school. This is most apparent through a student's participation in extra curricular activities [social transition]; and (5) the decision to abide by the rules and policies of the new school [social adjustment]. The construct of a Transitional Choice Model is an attempt to develop a structural model that captures the multitude of concurrent changes that are taking place in the academic life of adolescents' during a very volatile period of their lives. To maximize the academic potential of urban students, we must first fully understand the factors that contribute to their positive academic self-identity and how these factors exert their positive influence.

The vast majority of the responses on the instrument are on a 5-point Likert scale (extremely important, important, doesn't mater, not very important, and not important at all). Scoring of each domain, as well as the total score, is obtained by summing the relevant items and then dividing them by the number of items comprising each sphere. Negatively worded item are reverse-keyed so that the higher scores is indicative of higher influence or importance. Although this instrument was developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at UCLA, it is comprised of a compilation of several established measurements including: 1) *National Gear Up* survey, 2) the *School Attitudes* measurement (Nukulkij), 3) *Perceptions of Educational Barriers* measurement (Taylor), and 4) *Putting College Plan Into Action*.

It is important to note that the EASE Project makes every efforts to ensure that the sample of students who participated in the program and the research accurately reflect the enriched experiences of all students at Valley High School and the communities in which they live.

Lessons from the Field

Despite conventional wisdom regarding urban youth, over 80% of students in our study were excited, hopeful, and sure of themselves with regard to entering high school.

Transitioning to High School

These students felt confident that they could do well in school (mean score of 4.06 on a scale of 5), get good grades (mean score of 4.19), and complete homework on time (mean score of 4.10). These are all positive academic attributes that lead to academic success. It is often believed that a fluid transition would follow for students with such strong academic attributes. Yet, our students reported feelings of anxiety about transitioning to high school.

Worries and Fears

As ninth graders, these students are entering a school environment that is twice the size of their middle schools. Students reported that the large physicals layout of the school, as well as the increased number of students on the campus, created fear and trepidation. Students were experiencing feelings of being lost and not being connected. Several students indicated that students do whatever they want on campus because the teachers don't even know who they are. This newfound anonymity, coupled with the many unfamiliar faces in their classes, creates a strong sense of anxiety. Exacerbated by the possibility that the class load may be more demanding in high school as subjects advance in difficulty, many students express worry and fear about their successful transition to high school.

Interestingly enough, the type of worries and fears that students talked about differed by gender. For the girls, the concerns were focused on academic adjustments. Conversely, for the boys the concerns were far more social. The worries and fears for the boys, for example,

concentrated around the threat of being a victim of gang violence. Male students talked about the fear of unintentionally getting involved in gang activities. They talked about the fear of having gang members bumping them in the hallways, pushing them into the lockers, or "jumping" them after school. There was general consensus that a student is not safe just because he/she chooses not to participate in gangs. Also in accordance with the literature, boys reported perceptions of receiving disciplinary actions at a greater rate than girls, and experiencing negative interactions with teachers and administrators.

It is important to note that student experiences also differed by academic track. For example, student who are participating in the school's magnet program report feeling less concerned about safety issues, negative interactions with teachers, and the size of school. The difference in level of worry by academic track assignment may highlight an important concern regarding student access to varying educational quality and resources during their academic transition.

What Can Educators and Policymakers Do to Ease the Transition from 8th to 9th Grade?

1) Allocate resources to support and oversee the 9th grade transition: Within many urban communities, resource allocation disadvantages incoming 9th grade students. The focus and priority of many schools is placed on juniors and seniors as they prepare for graduation. Our data suggest, however, that the 9th grade year is perhaps the most critical year of students' high school experience. Without a positive 9th grade experience, many students choose not to continue.

2) Fund programs that create intentional opportunities for positive peer network development: Students in our study report that in high school peer group association is far more influential than the family or the school. While a student's behavior is constrained by school and family rules and regulations, his/her attitudes, ideas, and options are not. However, the cumulative influences of family and school are not negated by the strong influence of peer networks; rather, they exist in constant competition. Students in our study who were more successful in negotiating a balance between the competing spheres of influence were those students who reported early success their academic pursuits. The challenge of negotiating these multiple influences is heightened for many urban students because of their doubly marginalized status of being both poor and of minority status.

3) Educate families about the importance of the 9th grade transition: When parents have not had formal or positive educational experiences, it is difficult for them to properly guide their child in the process. The importance of a smooth transition from 8th grade to 9th grade cannot be emphasized enough, as this transition will determine a student's success in high school as well as decisions about their post-secondary school life. Therefore, there must be an effort made to inform parents of the importance of this transition, especially those who have no formal educational training at this level.

**4) Urban schools must place an explicit focus on "over-determining" success.** Over determining success involves creating (and in the case of many 9th graders, exposing them to) opportunities to participate in multiple, evidenced-based activities and programs that enhance academic success and college awareness. The idea is that while many evidence-based activities and programs can stand alone and lead to enhanced outcomes, when placed together they can have a multiplied effect on student success. Such activities would include cultural and social skill-enrichment, mentoring, and access to technology.   Schools must be able to demonstrate to students the importance, advantages, and realities of post-secondary education by providing an explicit focus on "over-determining" success. Over-determining success (Boykin, 1996) consists of providing the resources and information necessary to pursue post-secondary education in amounts that exceed those usually considered to be adequate to accomplish such a goal. Students must be encouraged and prepared to move beyond the educational levels of their families and reconcile both their fears of failure and fears of success. Urban schools must work in partnerships with families to build supportive and nurturing, yet challenging learning environments that help students transition into high school, college and beyond with ease!

Creating Partnership for Action

Education is the key for many of our urban youth trapped in a cycle of educational failure. Consequently, educators, policymakers, and researchers must diligently search for new ways to understand the persistent age-old problems that confront public education. While the percentage of low-income and minority youth who graduate from high school has increased over the past two decades, there remains a significant gap between low-income and middle income youth who enroll in post-secondary schools and graduate from college. Over-determining success is the first step to closing these gaps.

 If school communities are committed to the academic success of all students, schools need to intervene before the end of eighth grade to determine which students have developed the coping skills to transition from middle school to high school. We need to design transition programs and support services for ninth grade students that aggressively provide them with the knowledge, skills and experiences that allow them to be successful in high school, rather than passively allowing these students to follow a path toward disengagement and academic failure.

Educators and policymakers must continue to seek to identify possible strategies and relationship that increase the social and political capital needed to increase the number of urban high school students who discover their academic potential and successfully transition into high school, and eventually make what is often a long journey to college.

For affluent students who are the children of college graduates, the primary goal of secondary education is often to reproduce for students the level of knowledge, skills, and abilities their parents already have. For example, it is not uncommon for doctors, lawyers and business leaders to be the sons and daughters of such professionals. In middle class households college is often perceived as a birthright and the focus of decision-making is placed on "which" college a student should attend, rather than whether or not she or he should go to college. The psychological orientation of the families and schools serving middle class students gives them a competitive edge in higher education. However, among poor and minority students, a different

situation is more prevalent. Many students at-risk of educational failure belong to families where neither parent attended college; indeed, many never finished high school. In order for urban students to discover their full academic potential, the schooling process within the urban context must become transformative

Conclusion

Positive transition from middle school to high school is critical to the long-term academic achievement and subsequent career development of urban youth. Programs such as SB 2003 are helpful in informing and pushing our thinking with regards to programs that will result in more urban youth attending and graduating from both high school and college. Given the unique social, cultural, political, historical context in which urban youth are situated, the transition to high school is not just about navigating and negotiating between and across multiple worlds; it is also about creating a space where they have voice to articulate and shape how and when these worlds interact, mesh, and when they remain separate. Identifying and isolating the factors that both support the pursuit of educational opportunities for urban students, as well as, those factors that serve as barriers to that process, is critical to closing the achievement gap and easing the transition into high school, college, and beyond!

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