

High schools seeking to raise graduation rates offer a number of programs to support students, beginning while students are in the middle grades and continuing until they complete the senior year. Successful schools engage students actively in learning and give them something to look forward to in the future.

The methods include curriculum alignment with the middle grades, summer programs for rising freshmen, ninth-grade academies and transition programs, and academic catch-up classes during the freshman year. Effective ways to improve graduation rates also include exploratory career courses, career/technical majors allowing students to envision future success, joint enrollment for college credit and industry certifications.

Many schools provide adult mentors to guide and advise students and offer credit recovery programs and grading policies that do not allow students to fail.

Getting At-Risk Students Off to a Good Start in Grade Nine



The failure rate among high school freshmen is higher than for students at any other grade level. Students who are unprepared for high school and fail the ninth grade are far less likely to graduate four years later.

These facts are well known. The task facing many schools is how to redesign the ninth grade so that at-risk students will find success in a new school environment with higher standards and expectations.

Gene Bottoms, founding director of the national *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* school improvement initiative, advises schools seeking to improve the ninth-grade experience to focus on five major components of effective redesign. The components are:

- **Work with middle grades schools to prepare students for high school life.** It is very important to align the middle grades core academic curriculum, classroom assignments and assessments to high school readiness standards so that students will be able to perform at a high level in grades nine through 12. Familiarize students and parents with what to expect in high school, correct misinformation and alleviate students' fears about entering the ninth grade.
- **Provide a summer bridge program to bring students up to speed.** The program should last four to six weeks and be taught by the best eighth- and ninth-grade teachers using an out of the box approach to make instruction meaningful. The summer program should address specific academic deficits, especially in language arts, reading and mathematics. It also should help students acquire coping, study, relationship and time management skills. Career exploration will reinforce the important role of high school in achieving educational and career goals.
- **Establish a ninth-grade academy to offer double sessions of English/language arts and mathematics.** Freshman academies are small learning communities staffed by quality teachers in a low student-teacher ratio setting. The best teachers become team leaders to ensure rigor and relevance in the academy. Teachers have common planning time to develop interdisciplinary activities, projects and themes to help students relate more closely to their studies. English catch-up courses feature multi-day units incorporating essential standards and literacy strategies. They contain high-interest and grade-level reading content as well as opportunities for students to apply communication skills.

Teachers emphasize the reading, writing and study techniques that help students succeed in all classes. They also use technology and software programs to strengthen students' literacy skills. Mathematics catch-up courses have many of the same characteristics, including multi-day standards-based units focusing on essential knowledge and skills. Students have opportunities to apply algebra and pre-algebra skills to solve real-world problems. They work in groups, use technology and do engaging classroom assignments.

- **Enroll students in a career exploratory course.** Such courses utilize technology in blending rigorous reading, writing, mathematics and science concepts into career content. They require students to apply academic learning to authentic projects like the ones they will encounter in career fields. Students develop the skills employers seek when hiring new employees. Job shadowing, business tours and opportunities to interview business leaders are integral parts of a career exploration course.
- **Offer a teacher-adviser program to help students set educational and career goals and obtain extra help to reach their goals.** “A strong guidance, advisement and support program is the first line of defense against disengagement leading to student dropouts,” Bottoms said. A system in which teacher-advisers meet with 12 to 15 ninth-graders weekly will help students adjust to the demands of high school. Teacher-advisers should watch carefully to make sure students' work is meeting course standards and to connect students to extra help as needed. They should be equipped to involve and prepare parents in supporting their children's educational and career goals. Bottoms stressed the importance of a supportive grading policy in which success is the only option. “Failure does not motivate at-risk students to stay in school,” he said. In the same vein, students do not benefit from passing without meeting standards. Two options are a credit recovery program and a no-zeroes policy. In credit recovery, a student who fails a course may use online or regular instruction during a study period or an elective period, before or after school and/or on Saturdays to pass the course. Extra help and extra time are built into the schedule. Teachers agree on what constitutes grade-level assignments. At schools that implement a no-zeroes policy, students receive a grade of I for Incomplete instead of a D, an F or a zero. “This policy sends the message that all work is important and must be completed at a high level,” Bottoms said.

Schools that want to get started redesigning the ninth grade to promote success for incoming freshmen can take the following actions:

- Convene middle grades and high school leaders to discuss the ninth-grade transition.
- Develop policies and methods to track ninth-grade failure rates and student achievement.
- Set goals for improvement in school and classroom practices and student achievement.
- Send teams of teachers to professional development to learn new instructional techniques to help students meet standards.
- Provide resources to modernize career/technical labs so that students will have access to the equipment and procedures of a real-life career.
- Establish a block schedule to give students more time in a particular subject.
- Create incentives for teachers to teach ninth-grade courses.
- Encourage school and teacher leaders to visit schools that have implemented effective ninth-grade programs.
- Provide time and urge teacher teams to meet to coordinate instruction, identify problems and consider student support services.
- Train teachers to serve as teacher-advisers to guide students and parents in educational and career goal setting and planning.

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Four Strategies Combine to Raise Graduation Rate

The renovation of the 50-year-old **Greeneville High School** building in Greeneville, Tennessee, prompted school leaders to redesign the interior as well as the exterior of the school. To do so, they created a school improvement plan designed to boost student achievement and graduation rates.

Greeneville High School enrolls 900 students in grades nine through 12. The ethnic makeup of the school is 96 percent white, 2 percent black and 2 percent Hispanic.



Leaders and teachers implemented a four-pronged approach to increasing graduation rates: 1) credit recovery, 2) the Graduation Access Program (GAP), 3) the Success Academy and 4) the Power of I.

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high school and obtain an associate degree in four years. Another program allows students who finish high school in four years to complete an associate's degree in the fifth year.

"Although the curriculum includes AP and dual enrollment courses, our graduation rate had fallen to 76 percent with the new AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] calculations," said Assistant Principal **Vivian Franklin**. School administrators needed a plan to convince the faculty to take ownership of the problem.

"We showed photos of former students, including some who graduated and some who dropped out before finishing high school," Franklin said. "Teachers recognized the honor graduates, but they were surprised to learn that some students failed to graduate, even though they may have seen them struggle in their classes." After stunned silence as the reality set in, teachers took responsibility for ensuring that every student is encouraged and supported to graduate and that an intervention is put into place as soon as a student begins to fall behind.

The Greeneville faculty teaches 107 different courses across the curriculum. The courses include honors courses in English, mathematics and science and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in English Composition (English IV), Calculus AB, Biology II, Chemistry II, U.S. History, European History and Music Theory. About one-third of students enroll in AP courses.

Walters State Community College (WSCC) is located across the street from the high school. In a dual enrollment program, students take classes at Greeneville High School and WSCC simultaneously. The high school and the college designed a program for students to graduate from

Leaders and teachers implemented a four-pronged approach to increasing graduation rates: 1) credit recovery, 2) the Graduation Access Program (GAP), 3) the Success Academy for freshmen and 4) the Power of I grading policy.

The **credit recovery program** allows students to improve grades of F in courses they have completed. These students meet after school for two hours four days a week. The school provides transportation home after the sessions. The program is also available during the summer. Students seeking to recover credit use a computer-based curriculum system that diagnoses their needs and requires them to complete only the material that they have not mastered. As a result of the program, fewer students are enrolling in summer school and repeating courses. In the past three years, 189 students have participated in credit recovery for a total of 167 credits reclaimed. Without the program, these students would have had to make up the work in summer school or repeat the course with the danger of not meeting graduation requirements.

The **Graduation Access Program (GAP)** provides an alternative path for students to earn high school diplomas. While Greeneville High School requires 28 credits to graduate, the state of Tennessee requires only 20. Students who exhaust other ways to earn a high school diploma can enroll in GAP to meet state graduation requirements and earn a state diploma. During the first two years, 24 of 26 students who enrolled in GAP completed the program and obtained their diplomas, making it possible for them to enter technical schools and community colleges to continue their studies.

The **Success Academy** is the freshman academy. Ninth-graders attend classes in one section of the building. The only exception is science, which has all students studying in new laboratories in the science wing. The fact that freshmen come into contact with older students when they take science classes away from the academy helps ease the transition from the ninth to the 10th grade.

Under the **Power of I grading policy**, students receive a grade of I for Incomplete if they fail to turn in an assignment or if the assignment does not meet C-level standards. Students receive tutoring to change a grade of I to a 50. Without the Power of I policy, the grade would have been zero.

The graduation rate at Greeneville High School has climbed steadily since the school introduced the new strategies. The rate increased from 75.7 percent in 2004 to 83.9 percent in 2005, 92.6 percent in 2006, 93.7 percent in 2007 and 96.9 percent in 2008.

"Greeneville High School will continue to work on improving the graduation rate each year while we strive to maintain a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for postsecondary placement into colleges and universities, careers and/or the military," Franklin said.

Helping Ninth-Graders Look to the Future

How can high schools motivate freshmen to continue along a path to personal, educational and professional success? Leaders and teachers at **Socastee High School** in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, made school and classroom changes designed to increase graduation rates and improve students' readiness for college and careers. The changes constituted a new way to meet the needs of freshman students.

Socastee is an increasingly diverse suburban school with an enrollment of 1,500 students. Forty-five percent of the almost 350 ninth-graders qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, 15 percent represent minority populations and more than half do not live with their biological parents. Thirty percent of ninth-graders are identified as gifted and talented.

Principal **Paul Browning** and his staff decided to focus on increasing the number of students who graduate with the credits necessary to attend a four-year college. "We want to help students overcome potential roadblocks that hinder and interrupt their completion of high school and their preparation for postsecondary education," Browning said.

The school's efforts to promote high school graduation and college enrollment included the following actions:

- In English/language arts, the school moved to a yearlong 90-minute course to strengthen ninth-graders' literacy and life skills. Teachers developed a curriculum infused with the actions outlined in Sean Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. Teachers also chose readings from books such as *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom and expected students to complete an oral history project. "By providing opportunities for students to develop life skills, English classes became a setting for students to address career questions and challenges," English teacher **Allie Hilliard** said.
- The mathematics goal is to enroll an increasing number of students in college-preparatory mathematics courses. In 2008-2009 the school is offering a **one-semester Algebra I refresher course** for elective credit for students with average grades of less than 77 in Algebra I in the previous year. The purpose is to help more students complete Algebra II successfully in preparation for college-level mathematics courses.
- Guidance counselors, in conjunction with health and computer applications instructors, developed a **one-semester life skills class** for all ninth-graders. They used the book, *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make: A Guide for Teens*, by Sean Covey. The course helps students strengthen their study skills, deal with peer pressure, build successful relationships with teachers and students, write résumés and develop career plans. Guest speakers bring perspectives from the outside world to the students.
- All ninth-graders met with guidance counselors twice a year to work on state-developed **Individual Graduation Plans (IGPs)**. More than 95 percent of parents participated in the meetings.
- Faculty and staff members organized a **ninth-grade Initiation Day** that took place on the third day of the school year. The freshman class participated in seminars, heard pep talks, ate lunch together and received t-shirts and a "ninth-grade survival guide." In addition to school rules, a list of key people, a daily schedule and a map of the school, the guide contains tips for academic success. The day ended with a class picture taken in the stadium. The consistent message for the event was "What students do in the ninth grade counts toward graduation."

The failure rate, which has been a priority issue for years, has been below 8 percent each year, including 7.2 percent in 2005, 6.9 percent in 2006, 7.3 percent in 2007 and 6.3 percent in 2008. Ninth-grade attendance has been uniformly high at more than 95 percent in 2006 through 2008.

English I end-of-course pass scores grew from 71.4 percent in 2007 to 78.4 percent in 2008, while Algebra I scores remained about the same at 76.4 percent in 2007 and 75.5 percent in 2008 despite the fact that 15 percent more ninth-graders took Algebra I in 2007 than in 2008.

Socastee High School's Tips for Freshman Success

- Always be prepared. Have a pen, pencil and paper with you in class.
- Spend quality time on projects and assignments. Don't wait until the last minute.
- Take part in classroom discussions.
- Keep your notebooks, notes and tests organized. You may need them to study for finals.
- Ask questions if you don't know something.
- Be at the right place at the right time and do what you are asked to do.
- Be patient! One day you will "know it all" just like the seniors.

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Several changes were made in the English curriculum, including moving from a thematic to a genre-based scope and sequence, giving uniform assessments in all classes, offering end-of-course simulations, teaching contextual grammar and using real-world texts. In algebra, the school added the Algebra I refresher course, an inclusion model for teaching Algebra I and a process for grouping, re-grouping and reteaching.

Socastee administrators conducted a 10-minute interview with each ninth-grader to ask whether the activities were beneficial to them and whether they planned to attend college. On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the highest, the students' average rating of the ninth-grade year was 8.5.

Large Urban School District Redesigns the Ninth Grade

The **DeKalb County School District**, a large urban system in Georgia, was losing students. "We knew we couldn't wait until the 11th or 12th grade to address the dropout problem," said **Gloria Talley**, deputy superintendent for instruction. So the system decided to redesign the ninth grade to give incoming freshmen a solid foundation and reasons to stay in school and graduate.

With a goal to increase the four-year graduation rate to 100 percent from its current 75 percent, the school board and

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— **Gloria Talley**
Deputy Superintendent
DeKalb County School District

the superintendent welcomed an alliance with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in a special initiative to change the ninth-grade experience. All schools in DeKalb County are members of SREB's *HSTW* school reform initiative. Ten of these schools were selected to lead the way in redesigning the ninth grade.

SREB convened a meeting with leaders and teachers from the district and the 10 schools to share national research and data on dropouts. **Gene Bottoms**, senior vice president of SREB, described actions that can be taken to strengthen the ninth grade. The meeting also featured school leaders from other parts of the nation that have had success with giving ninth-graders a solid experience in their first year of high school and keeping students in school through graduation.

"The first step was to send a message that the central office was behind the project all the way," Talley said. A director or a coordinator from the central office is assigned to each participating school. The lineup of coaches includes Talley and an associate superintendent. The central office "coaches" meet with their school teams at least monthly and stay in touch the rest of the time. One method of communication is an Internet connection linking the coaches and the schools electronically.

The ninth-grade year at the 10 DeKalb schools was expected to be very different in 2008-2009 than in the past. New curriculum modules, written by DeKalb and SREB staff members working together, will boost academic skills and introduce students to career/technical education. "We want to make the first year of high school more interesting and supportive so that students will want to stay in school and graduate on time," Talley said.

Talley expects attendance and student achievement to improve during the first year of implementation. She also anticipates that teachers will be working more closely together in teams to support and encourage students to meet higher standards.

Cross Keys High School

LaShawn McMillan, principal at **Cross Keys High School**, meets regularly with a leadership committee consisting of the assistant principal for instruction, a career/technical teacher, a mathematics teacher, a language arts teacher, a counselor, a business partner and a parent. The committee has formed subcommittees to involve other members of the faculty and staff. These groups meet regularly to address issues such as the schedule and the advisement program for ninth-graders.

The ninth-grade redesign at each high school varies depending on the student population and what an analysis of test scores and other data have shown to be the most pressing needs. "We included a career/technical course for ninth-graders to give students something that appealed to them to study as soon as they walked through the door," McMillan said. "We had noticed that a lot of students were dropping out because they weren't interested in high school." The career/technical course is designed to show students options that are available to them in preparing for success in high school and beyond.

Other features of the Cross Keys program are vertical teaming with the middle grades school to smooth the way for incoming freshmen and to ensure that they are ready

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*Principal
Cross Keys High School*

for higher expectations in high school; a mentoring initiative to place every student with a staff member who will help with the transition to high school; and a mathematics support course for all ninth-graders.

McMillan says the biggest challenge was to redesign the schedule to accommodate the needs of ninth-graders and to

provide common planning time for teachers. The school operates on a block schedule.

“By assigning the best teachers to the ninth grade, we believe we are giving these students the best instruction possible,” McMillan said. Teachers have received professional development in effective instructional techniques for ninth-graders and in what to look for in conducting peer observations in the classroom.

Teacher empowerment is the key to success, McMillan says. “Our leadership committee gave teachers an opportunity to be involved in the ninth-grade redesign from the very beginning,” she said.

McNair High School

Nicole Harper is ninth-grade academy coordinator at **McNair High School**. Giving teachers two planning periods — one to meet with a content-specific team and the second to meet with a student’s instructional team, followed by a conference with students and parents to discuss academics and behavior — is ensuring a personalized education for every student.

Other changes that McNair is implementing for ninth-graders is to offer a grading policy that gives students chances to improve low grades, a process to help teachers decide what constitutes grade-level work, extra help for students who need it, more project-based learning incorporating technology and real-world experiences, and a freshman portfolio containing specific assignments. The school is also considering an extended-day program for the first six weeks of school to help students with histories of low achievement in English/reading and mathematics.

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Freshman Program Prepares Minorities for Graduation

Leaders and teachers at **South Robeson High School** in Rowland, North Carolina, developed a comprehensive ninth-grade transition program to combat a history of poor performance and high dropout rates among incoming freshmen. The program was implemented in 2007-2008.

South Robeson enrolls 550 students, including a largely minority population of 51 percent Native Americans and 45 percent black students, plus small percentages of Hispanic and white students. Most students (80 percent) are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

The school has made progress in preparing ninth-graders since the freshman program began in 2007-2008. Ninth-grade attendance increased from 91.9 percent in 2006-2007 to 93.8 percent in 2007-2008. Algebra I end-of-course scores increased by 37 percentage points, from 48 percent to 85 percent, with the advent of the freshman program.

Summer Orientation

The freshman transition program begins with a three-day orientation for new ninth-graders in August before the first day of school. Students meet high school administrators and teachers, learn about academic expectations, become familiar with school rules and policies, and choose their favorite extracurricular activities.

“We provide transportation, breakfast and lunch each day,” Principal **DeRay Cole** said. “All incoming freshmen receive book bags printed with the school name and their graduation date to reinforce the goal they are striving to reach.”



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The South Robeson transition program consists of five “best practices” for helping ninth-graders get the most out of their first year of high school. The practices are:

- **Ninth grade academy** — The ninth-grade academy is a small learning community with a team of teachers having common planning time. It is housed in a special section of the building where teachers and students can focus on academic and social skills. Only first-time ninth-graders are scheduled into the academy; ninth-grade repeaters attend classes with all other students. Assistant Principal and Academy Coordinator **Denise Hunt** says the academy is designed “to provide an environment of learning for everyone, to promote skills and behaviors that will prepare students to make a smooth transition into high school, to equip students to use technology and research skills to gain knowledge for lifelong learning, and to provide additional support to help students reach necessary skill levels.” Hunt coordinates professional development for teachers, handles discipline problems, interacts with parents, and works with curriculum development and implementation. Academy teachers set high expectations and provide challenging academic studies for their students. They are members of a professional learning community for shared leadership and participate in book studies and action research to strengthen instruction.
- **Adviser-advisee program** — Each academy student has an adult adviser in a ratio of 10 students per adviser. Students meet with their advisers twice a week during an activity block. At each meeting, the advisers use materials developed especially for ninth-graders. Advisers are encouraged to develop relationships with students to meet their needs for academic and career planning and preparation. Students’ parents are contacted regularly to keep them abreast of their children’s progress and to discuss any concerns about grades, homework, classroom participation or discipline problems.
- **Power of I grading policy** — Teachers believe that allowing students to retake an assessment or an assignment provides opportunities for relearning and re-teaching. The South Robeson policy includes a time frame: Students have five days to retake a test or a quiz or redo an assignment to improve a grade to at least a C. Teachers have the flexibility to give students more time as needed.
- **Extra help and support** — Students can receive tutoring during school, after school and on Saturdays. They also have access to intervention specialists in the form of administrators, a curriculum specialist, guidance counselors, social workers, a youth development specialist, a reading specialist, a resource officer and various faith-based groups. Members of the school’s athletic teams spend 30 minutes per day tutoring students in the classroom or helping with homework assignments.
- **Incentives and rewards** — Students who perform at high levels in the ninth grade are eligible for monthly prize drawings for attendance and promptness, pizza parties and awards for “students of excellence,” and cash prizes for academic improvement and achievement. The five students who improve the most during the ninth grade receive awards of \$50 each. The 10 students with the highest academic averages for the year receive \$25 each. In a partnership with Jostens, a supplier of class rings and yearbooks, the school has created a tradition of having each ninth-grader sign a banner agreeing to stay in school and graduate.

Program Modifications

“The ninth-grade academy is here to stay at South Robeson, but it is a work in progress,” Cole said. “We did not have time in the first year to do all the things we planned.”

Several new features have been added to the program in 2008-2009. Classes are smaller and a computer lab has been established in the ninth-grade building. Program leaders are refining the Power of I grading policy and are receiving student information earlier to schedule and provide support services. Ninth-grade teachers have received professional development in topics such as classroom management, instructional strategies, differentiated instruction and adding rigor to the curriculum.

Career/Technical Center Sponsors Summer Program for At-Risk Students in Grades Nine and 10

Caddo Career & Technology Center, the career/technical magnet of the Caddo Parish School Board in Shreveport, Louisiana, provides programs to prepare high school juniors and seniors to meet workplace demands, pursue postsecondary education and address life's challenges. Two such programs are dual college enrollment and a required senior capstone project. The center enrolls 667 students, two-thirds of whom are minority students.

Gayle Flowers, the center's director of career, adult and alternative education, noticed that the district was losing many ninth- and 10th-graders before they had a chance to experience high-quality career/technical studies at the center. With a goal to retain potential dropouts and connect them to a career field beyond high school, Flowers worked with the center's faculty and the school board to develop a summer dropout prevention program for at-risk freshmen and sophomores. To ensure buy-in for the program, Flowers personally contacted every member of the school board before she submitted the proposal.

The Technical Careers Exploration program targets students who have struggled with academics in the ninth and 10th grades but have demonstrated the ability to succeed on state assessments. "We asked principals and guidance counselors to select students who have shown a desire to achieve, have parental support, have no behavior problems and have good attendance and punctuality records but are not experiencing the desired academic success," Flowers said.

Eight students were chosen to participate in the first program in June 2008. Of these eight students, six had failed at least one course in the first semester and four had failed multiple courses.

Students rotated through four career/technical fields of study during the program. The fields were construction, including HVAC, carpentry and drafting; manufacturing; information technology; and graphic arts. In each field, students received information on career opportunities, potential salaries and educational requirements. They participated in hands-on, real-world activities and worked with the materials, equipment and vocabulary of the field. Guest speakers and field trips to business and industry sites were vital parts of the agenda.

Teachers designed the content to be project-oriented, team-focused, high energy — and fun. In construction, students learned mathematics and construction terminology as they built a scale-model house. In information technology, students collected data from flights of paper-and-balsa airplanes (built after learning to read blueprints in machine shop and doing drafting rotations), entered the data into a spreadsheet, and uploaded data files to a computer server for use by all students.

Because career exploration was the focus of the program, students were not required to master specific occupational or academic skills. Rather, they were exposed to a variety of jobs, skills requirements and industry practices.

Academic content was integrated into all projects to help students understand the valuable role of a high school education in reaching their career goals.

"This program proved to students that they have the capacity to learn the content," said instructor **Paul Miramon**. "We taught content in the context of projects and then showed students the subjects they had just learned."

Caddo leaders say time will tell whether the program is a success in terms of preventing dropouts, but they believe it has already accomplished a great deal by engaging at-risk students in learning.

The six-hour-per-day program began only two days after the end of the regular school year. Six of the eight students had perfect attendance, while the others missed only one day each. "This high level of participation indicates a high level of engagement in learning," Flowers said.

Dedicated instructors are vital to the success of the summer program, Flowers says. The school prepared the faculty beforehand to ensure a solid foundation of learning. In preparing to teach the courses, teachers designed projects with input from student focus groups composed of 11th- and 12th-graders; reviewed *HSTW* materials on designing quality projects; and identified the English, mathematics and science competencies embedded in each project.

Program Update

Caddo plans to continue the program into the future. Flowers has submitted a proposal for funding to the superintendent to present to the school board for summer 2009 and has requested that the program be included as a regular item in the district budget for 2010-2011.

Some 15 to 20 students will be enrolled in 2009 as counselors and principals become more familiar with the program. "Based on the success of the program and teachers' willingness to work during the summer, the potential enrollment is 60 to 90 students each year," Flowers said.

The program was held for four weeks in 2008 and will be six weeks long in 2009. An analysis of the results will determine the best time frame for future summers.

In 2009, the program will add a coordinator and will include rotations in health care and business and marketing for a total of six career rotations. It will also feature more career research and a higher level of academic integration.

“We expect to enroll students who successfully complete the summer program in Caddo Career & Technology Center for the 2009-2010 school year, being mindful of course prerequisites and age requirements,” Flowers said.

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From Dropout to Diploma: Motivating Students to Graduate and Enter a Promising Career Field

The **ADEPT School** in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, is a 501(c)(3) organization that gives at-risk students and dropouts a second chance to earn a high school diploma and acquire skills needed for a good job. ADEPT stands for “Adept Diversity in Education and Program Technology.” It is the first dropout recovery school in the state, serving 48 students from seven counties with a waiting list of 200. The school was modeled after the ISUS (Improved Solutions for Urban Systems Inc.) dropout program in Dayton, Ohio.

Deborah Woullard, superintendent of the ADEPT School, says the number-one reason given by her students for dropping out is that no one at their traditional schools listened to them and met their needs. “We give students reasons to get excited about school,” Woullard said. “Students receive the academic instruction to pass state-required competency-based tests to graduate and career/technical skills they can take with them into the workplace.”

Ranging in age from 16 to 20, students focus on academic studies in the morning and work-based learning in the afternoon. Through partnerships with local community colleges and businesses, students can participate in dual high school and postsecondary enrollment and can learn valuable skills on the job during the school day.

Life Skills

A life skills counselor works with students to build the career skills that employers are seeking. The counselor also teaches students about financial matters and budgeting. Parents are involved in students’ educational and career plans through bi-monthly conferences and home visits.

School leaders researched job demands and growth industries through the U.S. Department of Labor before deciding to offer National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) certification to students. The goal is to prepare young people in the Hattiesburg area to pursue construction and technology trades to meet the needs of the local construction industry.

“Workforce development and economics go hand in hand,” Woullard said. “A successful dropout recovery program is based on offering academic and career/technical studies together to make high school graduation a lucrative decision that excites and benefits students.”

Construction Skills

The ADEPT School links skills learned in the construction trade with academic knowledge and skills in all core subject areas. For example, students learn fractions through the use of measurements, geometry by pouring concrete footings, and ratios and proportions by reading and preparing blueprints. Students also write about their life experiences and real-world problems, including the impact of drugs and crime on the community and how to get and keep good jobs.

Chrishuna Love, recent class president at the ADEPT School, said she never imagined she would be standing at a podium telling her story to a group of teachers and administrators from across the nation at the *HSTW* Summer Staff Development Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2008. Love is a dropout who received a second chance to earn a high school diploma. “ADEPT taught me how to be a leader and gave me someone to push me to graduate,” she said. Love chose to participate in dual enrollment with Pearl River Community College in Poplarville, Mississippi, where she is studying pre-law.



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— Deborah Woullard
*Superintendent
ADEPT School*

The school uses a number of sources to measure how students are doing and to keep them on track for graduation. The sources include the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), a diagnostic test to determine skill levels; the school-to-career program Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG); and state assessments. The school keeps a daily log of student attendance and contacts parents when students are absent. School leaders also stay in touch with the district attorney and parole officers about students under their authority.

"We retained 27 of the 28 students who initially enrolled," Woullard said. "One student scored 18 on the ACT, 10 students are preparing for their GEDs and the others are completing the high school program of study. Coupled with seven students who are employed, these findings are stable results compared with past outcomes."

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Business Leaders Mentor Students to Higher Achievement

The state of Texas requires high school students to complete one of the following programs for graduation: the Minimum High School Program, the Recommended High School Program or the Distinguished Achievement High School Program — Advanced High School Program. The Minimum High School Program is unavailable unless a student's parent or guardian and a school counselor or an administrator agree that the student should be permitted to complete the minimum program.

Leaders at **Graham High School** in Graham, Texas, realized that students in the minimum program were not being prepared for college. At the same time, local business leaders expressed concern about the education and skills that high school graduates were bringing to the workplace. The high school enrolls 685 students, including 80 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic and 3 percent black. Twenty-six percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged.

The result is a joint effort between the **Graham Independent School District** and local business leaders to encourage students to complete the Recommended High School Program and at least two courses eligible for college credit. By drawing on the *HSTW* key practice of offering a guidance program with an adult mentor for each student, the group of educators and business leaders developed the Helping Our Students to Succeed (HOSTS) program. HOSTS is unusual because members of the business community, in addition to teachers, serve as mentors/advisers to the students.

The first HOSTS curriculum, which was written by high school staff members, emphasized personal traits such as self-worth, integrity and avoiding peer pressure. Business leaders expanded the curriculum to include career aspects, such as preparing a résumé, building communication skills and developing essential life skills. The revised curriculum includes materials for encouraging success in postsecondary education and careers.

Graham High School had 41 advisory groups in the 2007-2008 school year. Each group consists of 12 students and a community mentor who stays with the same students the entire time they are in high school. The groups meet four times per year during which mentors deliver the curriculum and share recommendations for success in college and the workplace.

School and business representatives evaluate the HOSTS program at the end of each school year. "The evaluation provided feedback to modify the HOSTS curriculum to reflect the skills students need for careers, not just in the local business sector but in a global economy," Principal **Delesa Styles** said. After receiving feedback from the 2007-2008 school year, HOSTS leaders reached a consensus to continue to reduce the student-mentor ratio from the original 18 students per group to 12-13 students to provide more opportunities for mentors to build relationships with students.

The results of the program are impressive. Graham High School's graduation rate exceeds the state average, and 87 percent of students graduated from the Recommended High School Program in 2008. More students are taking Advanced Placement (AP) and other higher-level courses.

The business community's involvement in the school has grown tremendously. "Business leaders have made graduation more relevant to students," Superintendent **Beau Rees** said. "Now students see the connection between high school and their goals for postsecondary education and careers. As a result, our students are better prepared for college and better prepared to enter the workforce."

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Teachers Can Help Students Graduate: Tips and Tools to Prevent Dropouts

Every school day, the equivalent of 171 busloads of children leaves school in the United States, never to return. That's our daily dropout rate. Do you think we can afford that? I don't.

— Franklin Schargel

Franklin Schargel, senior managing associate of the School Success Network in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has devoted his life to improving education. His career has included classroom teaching, school counseling and school supervision and administration. He is the author of books such as *152 Ways to Keep Students in School: Effective, Easy-to-Implement Tips for Teachers and Strategies to Help Solve Our School Dropout Problem*.

In the book, *Helping Students Graduate: A Strategic Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Schargel and co-author **Jay Smink**, executive director of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina, provide 15 strategies to address the dropout problem.

The strategies are designed to help teachers be proactive in helping at-risk students to graduate. They are research-based, data-driven and linked to each other, Schargel said. They have been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the United States Education Goals Panel as “the most effective strategies to solve our school dropout problem.”

Dropout Prevention Strategies

The **basic core strategies** are mentoring and tutoring, service learning, alternative schooling and extended learning opportunities. **Mentoring** is a caring, supportive relationship based on trust between a mentor and a mentee, while **tutoring** focuses on meeting students' specific academic needs. Sometimes older students are asked to tutor younger students in reading, mathematics or science during a lunch period or a study hall. “Mentoring and tutoring might include pairing every senior with a freshman student to build ninth-graders' academic skills,” Schargel said.

Service learning connects community service with academic learning. It promotes personal and social growth, career development and civic responsibility. “Service learning connects school to the workplace and gives students reasons to attend school and learn,” Schargel said.

Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation. Many schools provide **extended learning opportunities** after school and in the summer to eliminate information loss and heighten students' interest in learning. Teachers can build extended learning opportunities into the school day to engage students who use the Internet and watch movies and television.

In the group of dropout prevention strategies known as **early intervention**, educators should consider early childhood education, early literacy development and family engagement. “The most effective way to reduce the number of children who ultimately will drop out of school is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience,” Schargel said. Early childhood education is important, he said, because the dropout process can begin in kindergarten. **Early literacy development**, designed to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills, can establish the foundation for effective learning in all subjects, Schargel said. Reading and writing to learn are vital skills in keeping students enrolled in school until graduation. “Assign books that students like to read,” Schargel said. Research has shown that **family engagement** has a direct, positive effect on student achievement and is an accurate predictor of a student's success in school, Schargel said. He suggests surveying families to determine the best time and place to hold meetings aimed at involving families in helping their children meet academic goals.

The next set of dropout prevention strategies contains ways to **make the most of instruction**, including professional development, active learning, educational technology and individualized instruction. “Effective **professional development** programs are long-term and school-based,” Schargel said. “They include demonstration, practice and feedback; comprehensive staff involvement; and sufficient time and resources to deliver new instructional techniques.” Teachers who work with at-risk students need to feel that they are supported in developing instructional skills and techniques and learning innovative classroom

strategies. **Active learning** includes methods of involving students in the interactive pursuit of learning. “When students are shown that there are different ways to learn, they find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success and become lifelong learners,” Schargel said. **Educational technology** allows teachers to deliver instruction that engages students in authentic learning and addresses individual learning styles. **Individualized instruction** provides a customized learning program for each student and gives teachers flexibility in their instruction.

Dropout prevention strategies that **make the most of the wider community** include systemic renewal, school and community collaboration, career/technical education and safe schools. **Systemic renewal** calls for an ongoing process for evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners. When groups support the school through **school and community collaboration**, the result is a caring environment where students can thrive and achieve. “Schools cannot do it alone,” Schargel said. “They must work with a number of groups to build an infrastructure of support.” In recommending **career/technical education** as a dropout prevention strategy, Schargel credited it with being goal-oriented, creating awareness of possibilities, providing needed experiences, developing career skills and encouraging positive habits. **Safe schools** are made possible by adopting clear discipline policies, offering anger management and conflict resolution sessions, and maintaining a caring and cooperative school culture that respects diversity.

“Increasing the graduation rate and reducing the dropout rate are great economic incentives for the community,” Schargel said. He explained that more than 80 percent of prisoners are dropouts and that the average cost per prisoner is \$41,000 per year. “Ignorance is expensive,” he said.

“More than 80 percent of prisoners are dropouts, and the average cost per prisoner is \$41,000 per year. Ignorance is expensive.”

— Franklin Schargel
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Service Learning Contributes to Higher Graduation Rates

The **Henry County School System** in Paris, Tennessee, uses service learning to involve students in relevant, engaging studies as a way to raise academic achievement and motivate students to stay in school until graduation. Students at all six schools in this rural district in northwest Tennessee participate in service learning projects throughout the school year.

Rick Kriesky, director of schools, said service learning goes deeper than community service by adding a specific learning component. For example, students might clean up a shoreline to benefit the community, but they would also analyze samples from local water sources, document the results and present scientific findings.

Two examples from Henry County are:

- **Lakewood Middle School** conducted an African project in which students examined the effects of poverty and the dangers of malaria and other mosquito-borne illnesses while exploring cultural diversity. The project integrated more than 40 seventh-grade learning standards.
- **Henry County High School** students participated in a project known as Camp Hazelwood, in which they learned about conservation, native trees and efforts to preserve a local retreat as part of the state parks system.

Dawn Poole, service learning coordinator for Henry County schools, described three types of service learning as

2) indirect — a process or product intended to benefit the community and 3) advocacy — producing social change by speaking out on a subject.

Service learning has four components:

- Preparation and Planning — Do a needs assessment and identify multiple course standards.
- Action — Make sure the project is academically engaging and meets a need in the community.
- Reflection — Evaluate and analyze the results, and document the changes.
- Celebration — Honor teachers and students for their efforts.

Projects for students in kindergarten through grade eight might include recycling, pen pals, a library makeover or a health project. Students in grades nine through 12 enjoy projects such as a renaissance festival, law enforcement, historical markers or a cemetery cleanup. “The key to involving teachers in developing service learning projects is to encourage them to tap into their areas of personal and professional interest,” Poole said.

The Henry County School System will award 10 bonuses of \$1,500 each to teachers who create and implement outstanding service learning projects in the 2008-2009 school year. The awards are based on meeting the criteria of a rubric

that incorporates all four components of service learning as listed above. “Elements of the rubric are adapted from the National Youth Leadership Council of Essential Components of Service Learning, the Institute for Global Education and Service Learning and the Maryland Assessment for Best Practices of Service Learning,” Poole said.

Teachers chosen for the awards, along with their students and community members involved in the service learning projects, will be honored at a reception in May.

The school system supports service learning through grants, community partnerships with civic clubs and businesses, and title programs focusing on topics such as safe and drug-free schools.

Service learning in Henry County schools has contributed to a reduction in the dropout rate from 17 percent in 2001 to 2 percent in 2006. Another benefit has been increased enroll-

ment in advanced courses. The gains between 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 included a 52 percent increase in students taking Advanced Algebra and Trigonometry, 71 percent in pre-calculus, 83 percent in AP calculus, 104 percent in physics and 18 percent in Honors Biology II.

“Success requires commitment and support,” Kriesky said. He listed the elements of success as a coordinator to oversee the activities and write grants; funding for teacher training, materials and student recognition; and education to ensure the support of the school board and the community.

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Senior Projects Personalize Learning, Keep Students Interested in High School

Seniors at **Greenville Technical Charter High School** (GTCHS) in Greenville, South Carolina — like 12th-graders at many other schools across the nation — are expected to complete an interdisciplinary senior project as a condition of graduation. One significant difference at GTCHS is that all seniors attend a senior project class five days a week throughout the school year as a component of the senior project.

During the class, students work on the three other components of the senior project: a portfolio, a product and a presentation. Each segment counts as 25 percent of a student’s final grade. The final senior project grade takes the place of the second semester exam in all high school classes.

If a student does not succeed in completing a project, he or she is given an opportunity to resubmit the unsatisfactory component but does not participate in the graduation ceremony.

GTCHS is a public high school open to any student eligible to attend public schools in South Carolina. Because of a limited number of openings, the school uses a lottery to select from among eligible students. The school population is just over 400, including 30 percent minority students.

Senior Project Committee

The principal names five faculty members to serve as the senior project committee to oversee the yearlong project. The committee approves topics and is available to meet with students to hear explanations of late or missing work, grade appeals, academic honesty issues and product changes.

“Senior projects allow students to solve problems, communicate with experts, organize information and reflect on their learning,” said **Mary Brantley**, senior project coordinator. “It has contributed to the school’s 98 percent graduation rate over the past three years by engaging students in completing projects that are meaningful to their lives now and in the future.”

Students benefit from the senior project by being able to show that they have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to become **self-directed lifelong learners** who take pride in their work and can access information from a variety of sources; **flexible workers** who can lead, make good decisions, work in teams and use technology; **complex thinkers** who can analyze situations and identify and solve complex problems; and **effective communicators** who can express knowledge, ideas and feelings orally and in writing.

“We know that many college courses of study and many jobs require in-depth, self-directed work,” Brantley said. “Judges from education and business who help us evaluate oral presentations tell us that students are demonstrating the skills needed for success in education and business.”

“Senior projects have contributed to the school’s 98 percent graduation rate over the past three years by engaging students in completing projects that are meaningful to their lives now and in the future.”
— Mary Brantley
Senior Project Coordinator

Choosing Topics

During **senior project class**, students brainstorm possible project topics according to their passions, career interests, hobbies and desires for new experiences. After choosing three possible topics, they evaluate each one by asking the following questions to determine if the topic is a good choice:

- Can I conduct research on this topic by using the library, the Internet, bookstores or interviews with experts?
- Will I have a minimum of 10 research sources?
- Are local experts or mentors available to spend the necessary time with me?
- Can I complete a product that will illustrate my essential question and my learning?
- Is there a full year's worth of work for me on this subject?
- Can I demonstrate that the topic is a learning stretch for me?
- Do I like the subject enough to spend an entire year working on it?
- Can I afford this topic? Will I be able to get financial donations or other support?
- Is the project safe and legal? Will my parents agree? Will the faculty approve the topic?
- Can I acquire tools, equipment and materials to complete the product?

Students in the senior project class receive coaching from the instructor as they work to complete their projects. The coach provides access to computers and library resources, gives assignments, helps students tweak ideas for projects, makes sure students follow the project schedule and helps students practice their presentations. Coaches notify the parents of students who fail to participate or to complete assignments. They may also set up a meeting with the senior project committee or assign students to academic assistance to improve their senior project class grades.

When a topic is selected, each student drafts an essential question to guide his or her research and writes a project proposal that is given to the senior project committee for approval. The proposal begins with an abstract describing the contents and benefits of the project, the skills the student will need in order to complete the project, the steps to be followed, justification for the project and the product, projected costs and a statement of academic honesty (promising to document the sources of any information that is not the student's own work). Once the proposal is approved, the student finds an adult who is both a member of the community and an expert in the subject of the project.

Typical Projects

The following examples of essential questions and products are typical of senior projects completed at GTCHS:

Essential Question: How do you restore an antique tractor?

Product: A restored, fully functional 1949 Farmall Cub tractor.

Essential Question: How do you cater an Italian meal for a large group of people?

Product: An end-of-season banquet for GTCHS soccer players and coaches.

Essential Question: What equipment and expertise are needed to write a curriculum to teach basic meteorology to high school students?

Product: A meteorological curriculum for GTCHS students.

Essential Question: What do female teenagers need to know when faced with a highway emergency?

Product: A conference and an instructional pamphlet on auto care and repair.

Project Components

In the **portfolio** component of the senior project, students assemble professional-looking binders containing all information related to the project experience. Each portfolio contains notes, a bibliography, weekly journal entries, time lines and other materials collected and produced during the year. “This activity gives students opportunities to develop organizational, reflection and active learning skills,” said **Bob Ground**, science and senior project instructor at GTCHS.

More than a visual aid, the **product** demonstrates how a student has “stretched” to apply new learning. The product must address the essential question and must be approved by the student’s senior project coach and the senior project committee. It represents what a student can do. For example, a student might research how P-51 Mustangs impacted World War II and then create a series of digital stories about the fighter planes. Or a student might research how to become a luthier (someone who makes or repairs stringed instruments) and then build an electric guitar.

The final 25 percent of the senior project grade comes from the **presentation**. Students dress professionally to deliver 15-minute speeches they have written to explain all aspects of their senior project experience and to highlight their products. A panel of three judges, including one with expertise on the student’s topic, asks questions and evaluates the presentation. The school provides a grading rubric and a training session on how to use the rubric to evaluate students’ presentations.

School leaders have learned a number of lessons in implementing the senior exhibition of mastery:

- The skills needed for a successful senior project need to be taught in the years prior to the senior year.
- The entire school (all teachers and courses) must help prepare students for the project by teaching research techniques, academic skills, public speaking, and personal habits such as making and keeping time schedules and having a strong work ethic.
- Even though the senior project is an independent project, students need help and encouragement to be successful.
- Some students will have more problems than other students, and the problems will vary.
- Students are proud of their work. Some graduates have phoned or e-mailed the senior project coach to tell how they are using skills from the senior project in college or work.

“Each year, a team of senior project coaches and advisers recommends changes in the project,” Brantley said. “This year we have strengthened the grading rubrics for the product, the presentation and the portfolio and have placed additional emphasis on ethics, integrity and avoiding plagiarism.”

A copy of the Greenville Technical Charter High School senior project guide is available on the school’s Web site at www.gtchs.org. Click on Senior Project in the left column and then on Senior Project Resources to find the guide.



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Teachers Working Together Spells Success for Students at Career/Technical Center

The days of “them” and “us” are gone forever at **Pioneer Career and Technology Center** in Shelby, Ohio. Using the *HSTW* Key Practices to guide their efforts, all academic and career/technical teachers are working together on a daily basis to motivate and prepare students for graduation and beyond.

Pioneer enrolls juniors and seniors from 14 partner schools and provides a choice of 37 career/technical programs. The object is to give every student a “salable skill.” As a result of upgrades in curriculum and instruction in recent years, students have access to an array of programs needed for success in college and careers.

Scores on the *HSTW* Assessment of reading, mathematics and science have risen and the school has been named a *HSTW* Pacesetter School for 2007-2010. Pacesetter Schools must meet a number of criteria, including meeting state Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or having a graduation rate of at least 85 percent.

Here are some highlights of educational opportunities available to Pioneer students:

- **Rigorous academic and career/technical curriculum** — Students spend three periods per day in career/technical labs. In addition, juniors take English III, a mathematics course, a science course and a fourth academic or interest course. Seniors take English IV, mathematics, government/economics and a fourth academic or interest course. All English/language arts courses are taught at the college level, and reading and writing for learning are taught in all classes across the curriculum. The advanced mathematics courses include pre-calculus and calculus; the advanced science courses include chemistry, physics and anatomy; and the college-level courses include psychology, sociology, speech, nutrition and medical terminology. Students graduate from their home high schools after completion of all required course work and the Ohio Graduation Tests.
- **Postsecondary Education Options** — College-level courses for credit are available to students through North Central State College. Classes are offered at Pioneer or on the college campus and are taught by either regular college faculty or Pioneer faculty as adjuncts to the college.
- **Work-based Learning** — Students engage in work-based learning with companies that specialize in computer technology, health care and many other career fields.
- **Senior Project** — All seniors complete a capstone project before graduation. Pioneer has streamlined the process

so that all projects are completed by October and presented to a panel of judges by mid-January. Students must complete a project in order to earn a career/technical certificate. Academic and career/technical teachers worked together to design a rubric for the senior project.

- **Career Passport** — Successful completers of Pioneer programs can earn a career passport that documents their competencies for employment. The passport also contains a career/tech certificate and students’ grades, attendance record and résumé, along with Pioneer’s training warranty and WorkKeys job skills assessment scores. The Pioneer training warranty includes the offer of free additional training to ensure that a student is able to obtain industry or business credentials associated with the student’s career/technical program.

The basis of the school’s success has been the willingness of academic and career/technical teachers to work together to help students succeed. “Since we joined *High Schools That Work* 10 years ago, all of our school teams have been composed of both academic and career/technical teachers,” said **Gregory Nickoli**, director of operations.

Teachers participate in focus groups on topics such as senior projects, curriculum design, adviser-advisee activities, promotion of literacy and numeracy, and discipline. They voluntarily attend monthly professional development sessions to learn proven techniques, such as inquiry-based learning. They also take part in semi-annual reviews of students’ progress. School begins late once a month to allow teachers to meet and plan together. An entire day is devoted to sharing best practices from academic and career/technical classrooms. “Changes are driven by teachers rather than administrators,” said **Jim Grubbs**, director of business affairs.

Pioneer students increased their scores on the *HSTW* Assessment between 2000 and 2006 from 271 to 289 in reading, from 297 to 308 in mathematics and from 286 to 302 in science. The school out-performed similar *HSTW* sites in Ohio and scored well in comparison to high-performing *HSTW* sites nationwide in 2006. The average reading score was 289 for Pioneer, 279 for all sites and 292 for high-scoring sites. In mathematics, the average score was 308 for Pioneer, 301 for all sites and 312 for high-scoring sites. In science, students had an average score of 302 at Pioneer, 293 at all sites and 310 at high-scoring sites.

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This newsletter of “best practices” in implementing the *High Schools That Work* (*HSTW*), *Making Middle Grades Work* (*MMGW*) and *Technology Centers That Work* (*TCTW*) school improvement models is based on presentations at the 22nd Annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in July 2008.