Stand Stronger: Stand-Out Practices from the Pandemic

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Last year tested the mettle of educators like no other experience in our lifetime. The Center for High School Success, a program of Stand for Children, works with 155 high schools in six states. Our partner schools range from those in rural single-high-school districts to ones in large urban districts. Our unique vantage point enabled us to witness firsthand the many triumphs and challenges schools experienced as they attempted to educate students during the global pandemic. Below are the stand-out practices that have our full endorsement for the 2021-2022 school year and beyond.

# Implement a 4x4 Schedule

Ninth graders are three to five times [more likely to fail](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/free-fail-or-track-college) a course than students at any other grade level, and students across all achievement levels experience a decline in GPA from eighth to ninth grade. [Research](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/FoF%20Why%20Grades%20Drop.pdf) attributes this decline in academic performance to students feeling less well known or supported by adults; students feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of transitions they must make daily; and students' inability, because of their underdeveloped executive functioning capacities, to effectively manage the increase in the number of courses they take.

An analysis of the performance of ninth graders in our partner schools last year surfaced a compelling, although not surprising, result: **Students with fewer courses each term stay on track at significantly higher rates.** Staying on track is defined as earning one quarter of the credits needed to graduate and earning no more than one F during the ninth grade year. A 4x4 schedule reduces the number of courses per day (to four) and extends the length of each class; by doing so, students and teachers have more manageable schedules, fewer transitions, more chances to build authentic relationships and the opportunity to cover course content in greater depth.

In [76 schools across 6](https://highschoolsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/4x4-On-Track-Data-2020.21-Partner-Schools.pdf) states, schools with 4x4 schedules had 11% more ninth graders on-track rates than their counterparts at schools who maintained traditional schedules (74% to 63%). This performance difference persisted across all racial groups. Significantly, the gaps were wider for students enrolled in English language learner (66% to 45%) and special education services (70% to 55%) and for those who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (75% to 55%).

# Start a Ninth Grade Success Program

Research overwhelmingly points to ninth grade as the “make or break” year. Students who successfully pass all their ninth grade classes are four times more likely to graduate than those who don’t pass all classes. Further, for each course a student fails during their ninth grade year, the likelihood of graduation [reduces by 30%](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/use-ninth-grade-early-warning-indicators-improve-chicago-schools). In fact, the degree to which ninth graders stay on track is a stronger predictor of on-time graduation than the combination of eighth grade test scores, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and student mobility.

Establishing a ninth grade success program is a low-cost, research-supported strategy to support incoming ninth graders. In the fall of 2021, when many of these students will not have been inside a schoolhouse since the middle of their seventh grade year, such support will be even more vital. The ninth grade year is an especially complex and consequential year for adolescents, and this year’s ninth graders will be entering high school less prepared than ever, with unprecedented layers of academic and social-emotional complexities.

[Stand for Children’s Center for High School Success can help](https://highschoolsuccess.org/how-we-help/)! By starting your own Ninth Grade Success Program, you can change the trajectory for this pandemic-plagued group of entering ninth graders.

# Offer Competency-Based Credit Recovery

Exceptional numbers of students ended the 2020-21 school year with historic numbers of failing grades and/or “incompletes.” CHSS has insights into how to establish an effective credit-recovery plan. In short, we caution against assigning students to retake courses online through outside providers disconnected from the students’ schools, teachers and completed work. Students shouldn’t have to repeat an entire course when they only failed half of it. It’s better to identify what kids still need to learn or demonstrate mastery of, and give them the opportunity to do just that. Ideally, credit-recovery classes are built into the school day and allow students to earn additional elective credits. Strategies such as this not only aid in credit recovery, they elevate student agency as well.

# Provide High-Intensity Tutoring to Accelerate Learning

Under normal conditions, the average ninth grader enters high school [two to three grade levels behind in Math and ELA](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/FoF%20Why%20Grades%20Drop.pdf). Predictably, research shows higher failure rates and lower GPAs in ninth grade math and English than in other courses. Moreover, struggles with reading, writing and math have spillover effects on other content areas that require the ability to calculate, communicate effectively, comprehend written text and respond in writing. After nearly one and a half years of disrupted learning, we can expect most of next year’s ninth graders to enter high school with significant learning gaps, especially in math and literacy. Addressing these skills gaps will require a higher-than-usual quantity of high-quality math and literacy learning supports.

[High dosage tutoring (HDT)](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/nyc_tutoring13_with_tables.pdf), defined as tutoring that takes places in small groups of six or fewer students that meet at least three to four times per week, is a research-validated strategy that holds tremendous promise for supporting learning recovery. Over 40 years of research supports the effectiveness of HDT in improving student achievement and closing racial and income achievement gaps across grade bands and grade levels. With an anticipated increase in ninth grade enrollment next year — due to higher proportions of ninth grade repeaters — districts will do well to provide HDT to targeted groups of students.