

**Students' Perspectives on The Ninth Grade
Academy of the Talent Development
High Schools in Philadelphia: 1999-2000**

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Executive Summary

This report depicts ninth and tenth grade students' descriptions of their experiences in two comprehensive high schools in the School District of Philadelphia that have adopted the Talent Development high school reform model. This program, developed by the Center for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University, is one of the federally approved Comprehensive School Reform and Demonstration (CSRSD) programs. The initiative is funded by CRESPAR with federal funds, by the School District, and by the Philadelphia Education Fund, a nonprofit school reform organization.

For this study, almost 80 students were interviewed during the 1999-2000 school year at each of the two high schools, both in their first year of implementing the model. Approximately 90 percent of the students in both schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. One of the high schools has about 1200 students, nearly all of them African-American. The other is much larger, 2800 students, 70 percent of whom are of Hispanic origin.

Students talked about dramatic differences in general school environment from previous years, both outside and inside the classroom. Outside the classroom students said that their behavior was better than the previous year. They had been divided into smaller learning communities, there was enhanced security, the building was safer, and the school was better organized. Inside the classroom they reported that students arrived on time, that the work was more demanding, and that teachers were more likely to be helpful.

Those interviewed were clear about what it meant for teachers to be helpful. Helpful teachers made sure everyone understood what was being taught before moving on to the next topic, explained material over and over, explained it in a variety of ways, found time to talk to students about their work, were strict, would not excuse anyone from doing an assignment, established real relationships with them, gave them second chances, and showed them that they cared.

Students praised the critical components of the program for their contributions to the schools' new tone. Foremost was the block schedule. While students sometimes complained about the longer class periods, those complaints paled in comparison to the benefits they saw for both teaching and learning. From the pedagogical side, students pointed out how teachers could explain content in more depth, use a greater variety of activities and ways of organizing students to do work, and develop richer relationships

between students and teachers. More learning took place, students said, because they better understood the work they were doing, they were more likely to be able to complete it, and they were able to keep track of assignments and retain what they learned.

Students were also quick to point out three other program components that supported their success: the fall semester Freshman Seminar course, the physical separation of the grades, and second chances at promotion. The Freshman Seminar, to which three-quarters of the students gave positive marks, provided students with skills to organize themselves for all their classes. The ninth grade Success Academy was also separate from the rest of the school with a separate entrance — and identity — in the building. While there was some grumbling about isolation, the separation provided a more orderly academic environment. Finally, there were several aspects of the program that gave students second chances to succeed. For example, teachers made efforts to be available before and after school, arranged formal tutorial sessions, and exuded more confidence in student abilities to succeed. Additionally, the schools offered special second-semester promotion to repeating ninth graders.

The report details students' lofty future plans, indicating that almost none of the students had given up on furthering their education and entering a rewarding career. Students displayed tremendous faith in their schools to guide them through graduation and toward a college program that would provide them with important occupational skills. Students clearly heard the message of the value of education, even in the face of the low odds that they would be able to take full advantage of it.

The report concludes with a summary of students' own ideas about what the schools should do to continue improving. Most had little to offer. Rather, they wanted their schools to continue doing what they were doing and make sure that all their teachers would begin to act like the best ones.

Such advice was both heartening and challenging.

While students clearly recognized and appreciated the changes that were made in their schools, they placed an extraordinary degree of trust in their teachers. Students expressed high expectations for themselves and were confident that what teachers had them do would break previous patterns of failure. The implication was that teachers had better be very sure that what they asked students to do had a direct connection to future success. Students, in other words, were challenging teachers to help them live up to their expectations.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE NINTH GRADE ACADEMY OF THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT HIGH SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA: 1999-2000

I don't feel like I have to do things by myself. I have someone (the 9th grade team) to help us. You know, they [teachers] are there to help you before you go home. They don't let you give excuses. They are there for you, like a family. We do more stuff together [in the classroom]. Our teachers make it funner. Also, we are growing up and experiencing things like big kids. There is no more of the sit down and shut up stuff. (ninth grader)

People are going to classes. Even if you late, if he [teacher] give you your work, you can still catch up on it. Missing a class now is like missing a whole week's worth of work. It seem like people behaving differently. Seem like every student wants to come to class. Last year they were playing around. They more serious now. The teachers want to see us get out of school. I see the tenth and eleventh graders that were playing around last year now doing their work. They're doing what they should have been doing last year. They know what the consequences are. They doing what they got to do to get out of here. There has been one fight and I don't even think it was a fight. Seem like everybody more into going to school. (tenth grader)

These two students were reacting to changes in their school that stemmed from adoption of the Talent Development Model of comprehensive school reform. The program, developed by the Center for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University, is one of the federally approved Comprehensive School Reform and Demonstration (CSRSD) programs. It is one of a handful of promising models aimed at high school improvement. Support for the model (which costs about \$180,000 per school annually) comes from federal funds from CRESPAR, school budgets, School District funds, and from a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the Philadelphia Education Fund, a private non-profit local education fund. Several different teams of researchers are studying the impact of the effort, including studies of students' grades, test scores, attendance, and behavior as well as teachers' assessments of the program (Useem, 2000). This particular study looks at the Talent Development Model from the students' perspective.

The above two comments were typical of students' views in one school. In interview after interview, students shook their heads in amazement at what a difference a year made. Tenth graders said that the school was better than the year before. Ninth graders (most of whom had attended middle school in the same building) said that the

high school was better than what they had seen from their front-row vantage point in eighth grade and that the entire building had a previously-unfelt calmness and order. They observed, for example, that the stairwells in the five-story building had always been a gathering place – for trash, graffiti, and people – and now they were remarkably free of all three, with the infrequent exception of students changing floors to reach the lunch room, gym, or an occasional class on a different floor from their primary one. Most telling, students noted, was the almost complete lack of fights. To be sure, students still verbally abused one another – both jokingly and sincerely – but somehow, they said, none of this had become physical.

As frequent visitors to the building over the years, we had to agree with students' observations. The yelling of adults and students that in prior visits had reverberated constantly up and down the nearly two football field-length halls was more muted. We encountered many fewer students as we made our way up the stairs, and most of these were going somewhere rather than just hanging out. The number of students ambling about during class changes actually ebbed within several minutes rather than more than ten. Something dramatic had indeed taken place.

The changes were not all external to the classroom apparently. Inside, ninth graders talked about most teachers' unflagging willingness to give them help on assignments and repeated explanations of hard-to-understand material. This situation was diametrically opposed to the stories they had heard about what instruction in high school would be like. In high school, others had told them, students would be on their own, totally responsible for figuring out what they were to do and for completing their work on time. High school was sink or swim. Do it or else. Pass or fail. It was all up to the students. This was fine with students and the way it ought to be, they said, except when they had not really caught on to what the teacher wanted them to do the first time, or somehow an assignment became more confusing in the doing, or their independent work habits had not yet been established, or they had missed content in previous classes that had to be mastered to do current work, or they either refused to or could not accomplish much work at home. All of the myriad reasons why students struggled in school had accompanied them in the transition from middle to high school, and they were extremely grateful that their teachers seemed to recognize this.

The turnaround, according to students, was the function of a host of changes in the building. They noted metal detectors, a computerized attendance system, more non-teaching aides (NTAs) in the halls who also enforced the rules, doors that broke up the long halls into shorter units, less distance to travel between classes, more time in class due to longer periods, more time in class spent on school work due to students actually getting to class on time – to name a handful of the changes students saw.

All of these changes were intentionally set in motion because of the school's association with Talent Development. The model, aimed at improving high-poverty high schools such as these that face serious problems with student attendance, discipline, achievement scores and dropout rates, consists of specific changes in school organization and management, curriculum and instruction, and teacher professional development. In the two high schools implementing the model (the first of six to adopt it in Philadelphia), the vast majority of students—90 percent—are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. At one of the high schools, nearly all of its 1200 students are African American. At the other, 70 percent of the 2800 students are Hispanic, 25 percent are African American, and 5 percent are either Asian-American or from other ethnic groups. The cornerstone of the program, the Ninth Grade Success Academy, addresses the catastrophic failure rates that have long characterized Philadelphia's ninth graders in these two high schools and the other 20 comprehensive secondary schools in the District (Furstenberg, Neild, and Weiss, 1998). The Academy promotes high expectations and extensive academic and social support as central vehicles for putting the belief that all students can succeed into action.

The program advises participating schools that prior to making substantial progress academically, they will have to get their buildings under control. Many of the changes students in the above school talked about had order as their goal. The detectors, doors, record-keeping system, effective NTAs, and fewer times for students to be in the halls were all proposed to combat specific problems that the school previously had faced. As such, they affected all students in the building, not just the ninth graders.

But the program also confronts the quality of instruction. The foundation of the Success Academy includes a school-within-a-school, interdisciplinary teaming, and a flexible block schedule (which was also implemented for all grades). The school-within-a-school is self-contained, with its own administrative and teaching staff, as well as a separate physical space. Students remain inside this space for all periods, except lunch and certain

classes. The interdisciplinary teams consist of four or more teachers sharing a group of 150 to 200 students for mathematics, English, science, and social studies. The teams have common planning time to plan instruction as well as to discuss students, communicate with parents, and evaluate the team's performance.

The flexible block schedule provides four instructional periods of 90 minutes. During these, students receive mathematics both semesters (a transition to advanced mathematics in the first semester and algebra during the second), a focused literature and writing course both semesters, a science course one semester and history the other, and a special Freshman Seminar for the final course during the first semester. Elective courses are available during the second semester.

Finally, to work with students who do not successfully complete ninth grade previously, Talent Development advocates both a ninth-grade repeat program that allows students to move up to tenth grade mid-year if they pass first semester classes and an after-school program where students can obtain an additional credit toward graduation in one semester. In addition, students who have not adjusted well to the routine of regular school day because of behavior or work requirements are also given the option of an evening Twilight School.

While Talent Development originated in the above school as an attempt to boost the success of ninth graders, various changes implicated the entire school. Among the ninth graders, they essentially said that they were unable to distinguish their first year of high school from middle school. Some said this with dismay, as they pointed to their separation from older students and claimed to have been "cheated" out of actually entering a high school. However, instructionally, this similarity to middle school was nearly uniformly acclaimed. For example, 80 percent of the students argued that not only were their high school teachers as helpful as those in middle school but also many were more helpful, taking time to explain concepts and assignments more than once and in more than one way, to solicit and answer questions, and to work with students in groups and one-on-one. Students certainly did not give any sense that their academic progress had hit a brick wall; indeed nearly every one of them remained confident that high school graduation was a certainty.

Students did not necessarily associate particular changes with particular outcomes. That is, they did not say anything that would suggest ways of prioritizing the changes so that other schools interested in altering their conditions could pick and choose from among possible improvement strategies. All the students knew was that noticeable changes had been made in the physical, organizational, and instructional operation of their building and that the school seemed to be a different place than the year before.

A variation on the above turnaround theme also played out in a second high school. Because there was no middle school in the building, all of the new ninth graders had only heard about the school secondhand and because a number of the changes associated with being a Talent Development High School had been in place for two years, the tenth graders as well had never experienced life there under different circumstances. However, they all had heard the rumors.

Student 1 (S1): They used to say this was a bad school.

S2: Some students at other schools still think this school is bad.

S3: The reputation was bad: people always fight and the NTAs was on drugs.

S4: I heard a lot. It was one of the things I was scared about.

S5: I wanted to go to other high schools more, from the rumors about this school.

S6: It was my second choice. My mother was choosing my high school and I did it behind her back. She graduated from here and heard rumors of how the school was.

But they found an entirely different place.

S1: But we have won several things (sports awards). Attendance is better. Kids are acting better. There haven't been any stabbings. In high school we need to set an example. It ain't nothing like what I heard. You used to read in the paper about stabbings. People be cool with each other here.

S2: When I first got here, there were no problems. My sister goes to [another school]; supposedly it's a good school. But every week, she's fighting.

S3: But it was nothing like that [bad reputation]. It was like real good.

S4: It's nothing like everyone says it is [scary]. I pictured it like a bum school. But it is nice, clean, and everyone is mature. See if a kid gets out of hand, they get taken out of day school and put 'em in night school.

S5: But it's not that bad. This new program, it's better than what people tell me. In the Success Academy, they guide you and help you and show you the way.

S6: But not none of it is true [rumors], the people, the school, the classes. It's calm enough for me.

As with the first school, students noted a host of factors similar to those that made the school a safe and comfortable place and the classrooms primarily a source of support for learning.

Thus, this report details a story of urban education on the ascent, at least according to the students that inhabit the buildings. And their message is quite simple: they attend school in safe, mostly orderly, places where their teachers work hard to help them succeed.

The report contains six sections. The first looks closely at students' descriptions of their school environments, contrasting their impressions of what high school would be like with their actual experiences. The second section zeroes in on one particular aspect of their school environments – teachers' willingness to help them learn – because this characteristic so dominated their depictions of the schools' instructional settings. The next two sections discuss how particular aspects of the Talent Development High School contributed to students' perceptions that teachers had their best learning interests at heart. Specifically, these components were the block schedule and three other components intended to support student success: the Freshman Seminar, the physical separation of the grades, and second chances at promotion. The fifth section details students' lofty future plans, which indicated that almost none of the students we talked to had given up on furthering their education and entering rewarding careers. The report concludes with a summary of students' own ideas about what the schools should do to continue improving.

The data from these sections represent 160 students' opinions about their high school experience during the winter and spring of the 1999/2000 school year. We sampled an equal number of students at each school, randomly selecting students to ensure a balanced distribution by grade (ninth and tenth), performance, behavior, and gender. Approximately half of the tenth graders were actually repeat ninth graders, having failed to pass enough courses to be promoted. Some sampling exceptions were made to include tenth graders who were also part of an earlier sample of students we interviewed throughout their middle school tenure. In our conversations with students, we covered such issues as attendance, tardiness, learning and mastering academic content, school safety and order, promotion likelihood, and integration in school life. In the interview excerpts, the "T" stands for the interviewer and the "S" represents the student.

Overall Environment

The students were in an ideal position to comment on changes in their schools. For the ninth graders, who had just been promoted from middle school, their comparison was between that experience and their new high school setting. For most of the tenth graders, the comparison was with the same high school the previous year, but one where important

changes had taken place—tightened security and attendance procedures, a new curriculum, a block schedule, and clearly defined small learning communities (often referred to as “academies” by students).

Urban students often struggle to make the transition from middle schools to high schools. Indeed, in these two high schools, fewer than half of the first-time ninth graders had been promoted to tenth grade the previous year. As students told us during their middle school years, in high school they would be expected to act like adults, there would be fewer accommodations made for work not completed, and teachers would show less concern. They would be on their own to sink or swim.

[My teacher] says the high school teachers aren't going to care and keep you [for help]. If you don't do the work, they won't boller at you. They just put an F down. (middle school student)

In high school they won't take all our fooling around. They just are more stricter. They only give you a certain amount of time to get to class. You do your work or you fail. (middle school student)

So in the transition from middle school to high school, it was not surprising to hear some apprehension from students about their new environment. In addition to the cautions of middle school teachers, the students also talked about high school reputations spread by siblings and the general word in the neighborhood.

S: I was supposed to go to [another high school]. At first I didn't want to go here.

I: Why not?

S: The kids on the street say its bad.

I: What is bad about it?

S: They say there are gangs and fights. But that is not true. I like it and want to stay.

S: The Success Academy is a really good program. I don't dislike nothing about it. It has made a big impression on me. My older brother went here and he said it was bad. He moved to [another community] because there were too many fights and the teachers don't care. But I feel safe here.

I: Do teachers care?

S: I disagree with my brother. They really do care and so do the team leaders.

Students entered high school with some trepidation. They came with negative biases about what they would likely find — biases that reflected reputations kept alive by cohorts of students. Students were surprised by what they found.

I wanted to go to another high school. I heard about this school, it was bad. It's not like that. People talked about how it was back then, before it had the Success Academy.

When we asked students to make comparisons between their current year's experiences with their previous ones, we heard resoundingly positive responses. Eighty percent of the students responded that the present situation was preferable to their prior experiences. This trend was consistent both across grades (the tenth graders were as positive as the ninth graders) and across both schools. For the remaining students about half (ten percent) characterized their experience as being no different than the previous year, while the other half (final ten percent) rated their current school environment as less favorable.

Students offered very detailed accounts of their positive impressions of their present environment. In the broadest of terms, their comments either revolved around the general tone in the school outside of the classroom or focused on what happened inside the classroom. Students were twice as likely to talk about the general tone, but provided equally rich descriptions of what they saw as different inside the classroom.

Outside the Classroom

Six specific characteristics of the general tone of the school came up in student portrayals. Students first described their own behavior. They discussed how they and their peers were fighting less, attending more regularly, and generally getting along with one another better than in the past.

I heard there was a lot of fighting, but it ain't like that. When my cousin came here, he was always fighting, but it's more peaceful.

There are not as many fights. You can get a better education without fights. In the eighth grade you could do whatever you like. Not in the ninth grade.

They say it's a bad school. But it's not true. Everybody gets to class on time. We don't have no trouble in my classes. Everybody gets along with everybody.

Students mentioned a couple of important new organizational characteristics that accounted for much of their self-reported improved behavior. The first concerned the separation of students from their older peers. In one building, the ninth graders were housed on a separate floor from the rest of the school. The separation at the other was

not as cleanly defined by floors, but rather involved sections of hallways recently partitioned. In the former case, students were inclined to note just that the change had been made – ninth grade students were newly segregated from the rest of the school by being placed on the top floor of the building. No upperclassmen were permitted on that floor and the only times ninth graders came down were for lunch or assemblies. In the latter, they were more inclined to note that the partitioning of hallways (not just for ninth grade Success Academy students but for all the upper grade academies as well) created a whole different environment in the building. Rather than having huge expanses of open hallways that stretched the length of a city block, there were smaller divisions that provided more order and routine to the day.

The doorways and SLCs [Small Learning Communities] breaks things up a bit more. There are fewer kids in the hallway. In the past there was lots of commotion.

When they separate us, we don't know as many people. There's no time to go in the other hallways. The school is way better. Academics is up, the crime rate is better. The school has got way, way better. I don't know, it's getting us separated. We walk in the building separated, plus we are in the class an hour and a half. I'm proud of this school. There was always a million people in the hallways [before this year]. Now only one or two people and they got passes in their hand. It's improved. For that reason I decided I would stay.

A second significant organizational characteristic that students said contributed to the overall positive environment of the schools was the addition of **tightened security** in the building. Both schools instituted metal detectors and students were required, upon entry to the building, to have themselves and their belongings scanned for possible illegal possessions. Most students seemed to tolerate this process, except those few who portrayed the school as feeling like a “prison.” Accompanying the metal detectors were also computerized scanners that enabled the schools to keep much more accurate and timely records of student attendance. Students were issued plastic ID cards that were color-coded to match their academy. Students were quick to point out that this system was responsible for reducing absences and tardiness. Linked to the more timely attendance records were also regularly posted displays of attendance by classroom and academy, as well as individual certificates for perfect attendance.

Last year, kids cut a lot. A lot don't cut more cause there's nowhere to cut. A lot cut in the gym but they're stricter. Can't cut in the hallways for an hour and a half.

S: School is better this year. . . . My attendance is way better. My advisory has 80 percent attendance almost every day. We have perfect attendance awards every week.

I: Do the kids like that?

S: I do. Any award is good for your college application.

When describing the general environment in their schools, students also talked about the importance of teacher and hall monitor behaviors reinforcing these arrangements. Students liked the idea that adults had stricter rules about student behavior (in comparison to prior years) and that there was more consistency in carrying out those rules.

The teachers are more strict. They deal with problems immediately. You can't roam the building anymore. They know our faces. We have ID cards which is good. It is harder to cut. You are going to get caught no matter what.

This school is okay. The majority of the fight kids don't go here. It's calm because the principal lay down the rules to teachers and teachers give it to the students. Students who don't go to learn, they give consequences. They try to do a lot of things to help us out. Like we are one big family.

While some students did cite specific causes for the changed environment in the building, there were a number of comments about how the school just felt **“safer.”** Students elaborated on this by noting their school was “calmer,” “cleaner,” “had no weapons,” and was “brighter” because of new paint.

I didn't want to go here. I didn't see it as an academic school. I see myself as being smarter, getting good grades. But it's okay. It's better than I expected it to be. I thought it would be out of control but no it's not. It's safe. So, I don't see a real horrible place. I don't see a major problem.

Finally, students alluded to the idea the school just seemed better **“organized.”** By that they meant that the place seemed to run more smoothly and that the new sense of order was a welcome change from the more chaotic days of either middle school or previous years in high school.

It's like this school is more organized (compared to another attended). Over there, is like the bell rings and like twenty minutes later students walk in, without no note. Be in hallways. Be in stairways. Over here, they have more control. I like that.

Inside the Classroom

As students reflected on their schools, they tended mostly to highlight positive changes going on outside the classroom, but they also talked animatedly and enthusiastically about life inside the classroom. What most impressed them about the difference were

constructive behaviors of teachers.

This behavior is described in more detail in the next section on “Help in the Classroom.” Students liked teachers going out of their way to help, teachers not giving up on students and always encouraging them to do more, teachers setting clear expectations, and teachers providing challenging work that excited students about learning.

S: My math teacher taught us stuff we didn't learn last year. He takes his own time to explain things. He will also stop the class to explain stuff. He is willing to redo stuff if I didn't get it.

I: What else do the teachers do?

S: If I couldn't do it, the teachers got on me and told me I needed to try. If I got it wrong, they'd help me.

A student who failed most of his classes the previous year, but now was getting B's and C's offered this assessment:

S: The school feels different.

I: How so?

S: . . . They [teachers] know us better and they know if we are supposed to be there. They all care more this year. They won't settle for you failing.

I: Can you give me an example?

S: Our English teacher required a black and white notebook. But instead of giving us a 0 if we didn't have it, he went out and got it for us. Also, we were going on a trip and needed the paper signed. If we didn't have it, our teacher called our house and got permission. . . . The teachers are better.

A new transfer student liked the clear expectations:

S: I like the system here.

I: What do you mean?

S: They're straightforward. They tell you that your goal is to get 4 credits a semester. If you only pass three, they help you get the fourth through an after school program.

Finally, a fourth year student who had just earned enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade liked the new challenges teachers offered him.

I: Why did you come back after three years of not attending?

S: I don't know.

I: Why have you stayed this year?

S: It was more of a challenge. In the past it was too easy. This work makes me think, and it's about solving problems.

Students, without mentioning teachers or characteristics of the program, also described a difference in the “learning environment.” This often came from students who had struggled in the past, had been retained, and were forced to re-evaluate their own behavior and purpose for being in school. As part of that reflection, students quickly and eloquently recounted how the school had a different feel to them, one in which learning took on more significance.

The educational system also got better. In the past the teachers didn't care 'cause the students didn't care. Students now care more.

I guess they [rowdy kids] see other teenagers willing to learn and they encourage others to want to graduate.

Students are more responsible for their grades. We need to take charge of our education.

A smaller group of students also referred to aspects of the **Success Academy program** with its special classes, extra help emphasis, after school and summer school credit make-up opportunities, and more careful attention paid to student-teacher relationships as valuable in making the environment a more positive one.

The teachers don't talk the whole time. We do group work all the time.

The SLCs help some kids. They are smaller and you can get more help. If it was just one big school, you might not notice if you have problems.

S: They have programs and after school activities – that is the key.

I: What programs?

S: After school tutoring. There is no way to fail in class unless all you did was play around.

Over the years in our conversations with Philadelphia students, they acknowledged that a few students severely disrupted instruction. It was hard for teachers to work with students who wanted to learn when they had to stop and deal with those who did not (or, at least, those who hid behind behaviors that masked their lack of understanding of content). Students were adamant that one of the reasons that the school environment was more positive was **Twilight School**, an evening program where disruptive students could pursue high school credits in smaller classes, obtain appropriate counseling assistance for coping with the difficulties of adjusting to high school life, and get back on track in the regular day school program.

Before the school was wild. Now people who failed go to Twilight School.

They are getting the bad kids out. They are going to Twilight. Our class which started with 50 students is now down to 15.

Overall, then, students said that they were now in schools that differed dramatically from what they had expected, from what others had told them would be the case, or from what they had directly witnessed. The next section looks closely at one of the most noted differences – teachers’ willingness to help students learn.

Help in the Classroom

In our past research with students (Wilson and Corbett, 2001), a teacher’s willingness to offer help proved to be a defining characteristic as to whether a student considered that teacher to be a “good” one – more than being funny, more than giving students free time, more than acting the students’ age, more than an easy workload, more than any superficial quality that adults might expect adolescents habitually to zero in on as denoting the kind of teacher they liked. Instead, students defined good teachers in terms of the teachers’ contribution to learning, or more precisely, to “doing work.” They wanted teachers to help, to explain content and directions clearly, and to be strict with discipline and with making sure students finished assignments.

Help dominated our interviews with the high school students as well. This was by design because we were curious to see if students perceived any change in the support available to them as they moved from middle school to high school. We already knew that this teacher attribute was important to students; we now wanted to know how much of it they had found at a higher-grade level. The high school stories they had been told led students to think that they would be more on their own to succeed. Teachers, parents, and siblings alike had alerted them to the probability that there would be no handholding, no arm-around-the-shoulder encouragement, no second chances. “It’s all on you,” they repeatedly heard.

We asked students if this was true or not. Sixty-seven out of 79 ninth-graders from the two schools said, “No.” They claimed that, contrary to the rumors, their high school teachers were just as – if not more than – helpful as the ones they had had in middle school. Moreover, in each case where a student labeled the two sets of teachers as equally supportive, he or she indicated it was a positive pairing. For example:

They’re the same ... a good same. They make sure you understand what they are teaching.

According to the majority of the 67 students, the ninth grade teachers had not just kept pace with their middle school colleagues; they had exceeded the amount of help that students had encountered previously.

What students said about the ways in which teachers gave support mirrored those we had heard about from middle school students. Like the younger students, the ninth graders were fairly specific in depicting what help looked and sounded like. The list was a long one.

They said that helpful teachers **made sure that everyone understood** what was being talked about before moving on to the next topic or assignment. Repetition and questions seemed to be indicative to students of the extent of a teacher’s supportiveness.

They are willing to go over it ‘til we understand it.

Because they explain it more than once, and they ask you lots of questions.

They keep asking us if we understand.

Students said that helpful teachers not only checked to make sure everyone understood what was going on in class but also they **explained material over and over.**

My teachers are the best at explaining it. They will break it down into pieces. First they put it on the board, and they explain it. Then they will show you how to do it. Next they give us a chance to do it ourselves. Finally, they will help us one-on-one.

The teachers teach it and go over it. They keep going over it 'til you get it. Last year you just copied stuff off the board. Now we do worksheets and we work with partners. Last year they didn't take the time to explain it. Kids didn't understand the work. The teachers just put the stuff on the board and made us write it down. They never explained what it means. We had to figure out all the words for ourselves.

And, they **explained in a variety of ways**.

My math teacher makes work understandable. He plays games and relates the work to things we like.

They explain stuff right. They give good examples.

Students said that helpful teachers always seemed to **find time to talk with students about their work** and in ways that were most comfortable to the students.

They are also willing to schedule time after school. Our teacher wants us to come in. She wants us to pass.

Like they asked if we had any questions after explaining something and said if we need help and didn't want the whole class to know we can meet after school.

Students said that helpful teachers tried to **establish real relationships** with them. This implied that the topics of interactions went beyond the academic and that students highly valued teachers' sensitivity to their situations.

They listen to you when you have problems.

The teachers here care about you. They let you have talks with them. And if you have a problem they will try and help you out. Like the other day I had an argument with the girls in our class and the teacher help us solve it.

Students said that helpful teachers **were strict**. They rolled their eyes when we asked whether this quality seemed a lot like nagging to them and nodded slowly when we inquired whether the behavior made them angry at times. They countered, however, that they wanted teachers to be like this.

The rules are also more stricter and clearer. There is not a whole lot of chaos going on.

The teachers treat you like they are supposed to – strict.

Students said the being strict was more than discipline-related. It also applied to schoolwork. Thus, students said that helpful teachers had an edge to them. Rather than pandering to students' habitual complaining about how much work they had to do or ignoring students who refused to work, the teachers basically **would not excuse anyone from doing an assignment or getting a passing grade.**

If you have a problem, they won't send you on your own. They make sure you pass the class. They give you lots of support. They won't let you fail.

If they see you dropping, they stay with you. They make you hit the grade. They just don't say, "It's on you."

The teachers in eighth grade didn't push us. In ninth grade they want us to pass. They sit us down and influence us to do our work.

They try to help you and, if you do something wrong, they know you can do the work. They say to you, "I don't want to see you here next year."

Students said that helpful teachers also **gave them second chances** to redo missed or poorly executed work and to retake tests. To them, this meant that teachers wanted them to learn and understand the material foremost.

If you don't understand, they will help you. They give you something else to do to boost up your grade, like extra credit or a retake. If you didn't understand it the first time, then they show it to you the next time and you understand it.

Here, if you are failing, they make you do it over.

The very best teachers, according to students, seemed to use many – if not all – of these ways of offering help to students. The following student expressed great appreciation for the combination of tactics her teacher employed.

One teacher gives us hard work, but she turns it around to make it easier to understand. For example, we had to do an outline for a topic, and she made us brainstorm some ideas and organize them. A bunch of us did not understand it so she had us stay after school. She explained it six or seven times 'til we all got it. She really wanted us to pass her test.

Most important to students was that a teachers' willingness and ability to help them with their work and with other problems showed them **how much a teacher cared** about them. The ninth-graders, as had middle school students, often invoked this word in their discussions about help and in a way that suggested that it was the overriding quality that they looked for in their teachers. Caring meant that a student was worth worrying about and had a chance to be successful in school and life.

More strict is better 'cause they like care more about you. In middle school, teachers didn't care. They didn't want you to go nowhere. My teachers call like your mom and say they want you to do better.

The teachers like they help you more, get involved with you more. Like they care about you. If you have a problem, they talk to you. In middle school, all they did was teaching.

Last year, the teacher did care, but didn't "care" care. This year teachers are on a student's back like they supposed to be. They don't want to see my face next year (in ninth grade). They want to help us and don't want to see us on the streets.

Students argued that such actions and attitudes on the part of teachers made a difference in their school performance.

The teachers understand a youngster's point of view. They won't take it out of you. They are willing to talk to you and not push you off to the side. I am doing better in here than in middle school 'cause the teachers help you out more. They tell me they believe in me.

As the students talked, it seemed that they were saying primarily that it was in the quantity of help teachers offered that the difference resided rather than the quality. The high school teachers, in other words, had not discovered any radical alternatives to what students had experienced and valued in middle school; the ninth grade teachers simply did more of it. Indeed, it was the word "more" that, beyond any other, infused students' comparisons of their middle and high school teachers. At the risk of too much repetition, the following examples abundantly prove the point:

*They teach us **more** stuff. They explain it **more**...*

*They give you **more** time. They also explain it more. Like in math – last year they would give us a problem, then we would check it. But the teacher wouldn't say why we got it wrong. You had to find that out for yourself. This year the teachers help us **more** and they explain why we got it wrong. (One teacher) he won't leave a problem 'til you understand how to do it.*

*Teachers listen **more**. Like if I ask a question, they will make sure I don't have no doubts.*

*You are able to get closer with your teachers this year. We have a **more** in-depth relationship. Teachers interact with you **more**. They talk to you **more**. They ask what's wrong. They give help when you need it.*

*They are teaching us **more**. They go into **more** detail. We go further than we are supposed to go.*

The question, of course, was where did this “more” come from? Teachers in the Talent Development schools had engaged in a series of professional development activities, had organized themselves into teams, and had gotten involved in any number of activities to promote better student learning. However, both of these steps were ones that had been taken in many of the schools in Philadelphia as part of the Children Achieving initiative instituted by a former superintendent. It was far beyond the reach of student interviews to suggest whether the particular forms that these steps took in these two schools were inordinately superior to what was going on in other schools. Indeed, students' descriptions of the daily routines in their classrooms did not sound dissimilar from the ones they had described to us when they were in middle school – i.e., a pre-class task, a teacher explanation of the day's lesson, individual or group work on the topic, and a possible homework assignment, with the routine occasionally altered by a movie and less frequently with a hands-on activity.

Students' comments offered one possible explanation: time. Apparently what really set their ninth-grade classrooms apart from their middle school ones was the length of the class period. Students often invoked that word in their comparisons of teachers' helpfulness.

*Teachers last year wouldn't take as much **time** to help you.*

*In middle school, they just give you the work. They never explained it. Here they take the **time** to explain it to you.*

*The middle school teachers didn't take **time** with you; they rush through the year. Here the teachers take **time** with you, and let you know what's got to be done.*

We were inclined to agree with this explanation, especially given students' reactions to the institution of the 90-minute block. The next section of the report, therefore, looks at this development in greater detail.

The Benefits of the Block

Students' complaints dotted the interviews. The block was "too long to try and sit in one seat." (1219) "You just be sitting there and you be tired," (1551) they said, adding "four classes is a killer." (1521) They concluded, "After a while, you get bored." (2521) The moans were entirely predictable, given that these adolescents had become accustomed to 45 minutes a class, at the most – and much less, usually, by the time they and their classmates had straggled into their rooms.

In a 45-minute class, it take 15 minutes to settle down and 15 to get ready to go at the end of the period. You only have 15 to have classes.

Against the backdrop of constant motion, then, the block and students' energy were not necessarily a good match.

That did not matter, however. Sitting for too long and occasionally being bored turned out to be minor irritants in the grander scheme of things.

Sometimes four classes is too long. But you can focus more on the work, and the teacher can explain more; so, you have a better understanding.

It is boring, but you learn better.

For the most part, students were willing to overlook their periodic restlessness and acknowledge that the block was a positive change with respect to learning. In fact, 107 out of 148 students said that they preferred 90-minute classes to shorter ones. Of the 41 who did not prefer the new schedule, six were neutral and not a single student among the 41 argued that they learned better with shorter classes.

The benefits that 75 percent of the students saw all concerned improved learning and a more supportive environment for doing so. Six such benefits were mentioned repeatedly – three of which were related to better teaching and three of which were related to improved learning. Students said that:

- ◆ Teachers did a good job of explaining content and assignments.
- ◆ Teachers used a variety of activities and ways of organizing students to work.

- ◆ Teachers established relationships with students.
- ◆ Students understood the work they were doing.
- ◆ Students were able to finish their work.
- ◆ Students were able to keep track of their assignments and retain what they were learning.

This did not mean that they thought all of their classes were perfect. They understandably were pleased with some teachers more than others. What students were claiming was that the benefits occurred more often in the block classes than they had with schedules of seven or eight classes.

The value that students placed on a teacher's ability to explain what they were to learn and do well received considerable attention in the previous section. Students did not like being confused about what was going in the classroom and stated quite aggressively that one of the major reasons why their classmates acted up in class and did not do their work was because they did not understand what they were supposed to do – either because they had not learned something that was a prerequisite to current work or because they had not grasped an explanation of current work the first, second, or third time it was given. The block had ameliorated this problem noticeably. Students said teachers had **more time** to devote to explanations.

The teachers can explain things better. They don't have to cram it in.

You learn more with just four classes because the teacher has a longer time to explain it right.

Instead of rushing us, the teacher can give more time and explain things a little longer.

The additional time meant that teachers could elaborate their explanations and respond to questions.

The teacher can explain it better and give us more examples.

Classes is longer but we learn more. They go over assignments and have enough time to answer questions.

Even students who were dissatisfied with the block personally recognized that the more time spent on explanations benefited others.

I get my work done early, and there is nothing to do but just sit there. But it is good if you don't understand something. It gives more time for the teacher to explain things.

A second benefit to the block that students noted was that teachers were able to **inject variety into the activities** students engaged in and to organize the class in different ways within the same lesson. Not surprisingly, students enjoyed variety in what they did in class. They did not mind teachers talking for awhile, as long as it was not too lengthy and the content was interesting and understandable. However, students also pointed out that teachers could organize the students into small groups and work with them one-on-one each day. This, they argued, greatly enhanced their ability to grasp material because they had multiple opportunities and multiple sources for explanations of the work. Over and over they talked about their classes following a routine of teacher talk, whole group practice or discussion, small group work, and individual work. They liked it.

We have more time for discussion. The teachers spend more time talking to us about the lesson. We have time to practice, and they teach it again.

There is more time for the teachers to help you. They can explain the work. We get to also work in groups and if I don't understand, someone else can help me.

We get to do more things. We get to work by ourselves, we get to work together, and we get to go over the work more.

The third benefit that students saw was that the block enabled their teachers to **develop relationships** with them, to get to know them better and to take a little more time with each one-on-one.

You can build a relationship with the teacher. We can have more one-on-one interaction.

It gives the teacher more time to explain and know the students well.

We should emphasize that students primarily thought of this relationship in educational terms. That is, students felt that their teachers' willingness to help them often and whenever it was needed resulted in the teachers' knowing the students' abilities well and affirmed to the students that the teachers believed that they were capable of succeeding in that class and life. From this, students inferred that teachers cared about them. While several students also mentioned teachers who had helped them with personal

problems, generally they were not claiming that the block put the teachers in a better position to counsel them. Rather, they indicated that the increased time for help deepened teachers' ability to connect their instruction to students' specific educational needs.

Students talked about other benefits of the block as well. These were the ones they turned to in defense of the block, even when they had indicated that 90 minutes was sometimes too long – although it should be inserted here that no more than half of the students referred to their classes in this way. The other half argued that the school day actually went faster with the block and that even their classes seemed quick, especially when there was work to do the whole time. In any event, students said that they now **understood the content and the work better** than they had with shorter periods. As one student explained:

You have enough time to study, do the work, ask questions, and have the teacher explain the answers to you.

Thus, again, the interviews revealed the ways that increased time served as a lever to boost the amount of help available to students and consequently their understanding of what they were doing and learning. Time made a difference. As another pointed out:

In math, I'm not that good. It gives me more time to ask the teacher how to do a problem.

Students' understanding of a subject was helped by simply **being able to finish their work** – the fifth benefit of the block. Students often described for us a “cycle of failure” (our term, not theirs) in the classroom. In this cycle, students began a lesson, were unable to finish what they were doing in class, and were given the remainder as homework. They did not do the homework, either because of a lack of understanding or a lack of effort. Regardless, they came back the next day unsure of the previous day's content and, yet, launched right into new material. The cumulative effect of combining prior confusion with current work was profound befuddlement.

Ninety minutes afforded teachers and students the opportunity to reach closure on a lesson. As the above students observed, they could listen to the teacher, try the work themselves (individually and in groups), ask questions, listen to additional explanations, and complete the work – all in the same time slot. This was a new, and welcomed, experience for them.

Before there was not enough time to do everything we have to do. You can finish class work and it makes the day go by fast. Teachers are willing to help in class, but before we didn't have enough time to discuss it. Class was already over.

When you have seven classes, it's only a short period of time, and you won't have time to finish work. If it's a workbook you couldn't take home, you had to do it the next day plus the new work. It was hard to keep up.

Finally, students expressed relief that they were now **better able to “keep track” of their classes**. They used this expression over and over. By it, they meant partly that they simply could stay on top of what they were supposed to do, such as with tests, homework, and class content.

You can study for a test without worry about another thing to do.

There's not all that work at one time. If you got different homework from each class, it's too much. I had all those classes before. You might forget what you had to do. It's easier this way.

Before we were memorizing everyday, doing class work. It was confusing with all the other work. The main thing now is less memorizing. I would have passed last year with less classes.

They also meant that they could learn the subject better. They said that they could “focus” on a class better and, thus, remember the content better.

You're more focused on one subject. I become more focused. With nine classes, oh God, it drove me crazy. I had to study all those things. Now I get most of my stuff done and when I go home, I can just study my stuff.

Four classes is better for my opinion. You know what you're doing more better. They leveled down to major subjects, and you can focus on classes.

For any student anywhere, the block's benefits would seem to apply. But for this particular population of students, who were entering a situation from which few traditionally emerged successfully, more time for teaching and learning appeared to be an overwhelmingly appropriate change. As one final student commented:

Before, I couldn't get much out of it. Now we can get through the book. Before, it was horrible. There wasn't enough time to review the work or ask questions. I have a bad memory. Imagine having to keep track of seven classes.

The block, with its extended time devoted to fewer subjects, was a big help to students. But there were also other support mechanisms put into place by the Success Academy program. Students viewed three such supports as being particularly helpful.

Three Supplemental Supports: The Freshman Seminar, Separation, and Second Chances

The Success Academy team acknowledged the reputational concerns mentioned at the beginning of this report and recognized that something needed to be done to better prepare students for their lack of experience with the high school culture. They constructed three support mechanisms that stood out in the minds of impressionable freshman experiencing their first and often traumatic year in high school. The first was a common seminar course required of all students that was intended to provide them with the skills necessary to cope with high school curricula. The second was the physical separation of the Success Academy program from the rest of the high school. And the third was the notion that “second chances” were essential for students to help them get caught up with their class if they did not perform well during their first year in high school.

Freshman Seminar

The Freshman Seminar is a first-semester required course designed to ensure that all ninth graders:

- ◆ Know about credits, high school graduation requirements, and the courses they need to take to enter a two-year or four-year college or university.
- ◆ Learn the study skills they will need to succeed academically in high school and beyond.
- ◆ Develop the social skills they will need to be effective learners in school and other arenas.
- ◆ Learn important life skills such as goal setting, decision-making, and effective communication and apply these to the challenges and responsibilities of early adulthood.
- ◆ Develop a strong awareness of college and postsecondary options and an understanding of the steps they need to prepare for and finance their education beyond high school.
- ◆ Explore career interests and learn about educational requirements and job-seeking processes for different jobs in preferred career clusters (Morrison & Legters, 1998).

Almost three quarters of the students were favorably disposed to their Freshman Seminar experiences (55 positive, 20 negative) and suggested that the course warranted being a required course for all incoming freshman in the city. Most noteworthy in students' eyes was how the course provided them with organizational skills that helped them in all their other classes. The content focused not only on providing more order to their cluttered notebooks, but also on devising important strategies for completing their assignments. In other words, they were learning how to learn.

I learned how to set up my binders and how to organize my work. It helped me so that I have my work organized now instead of being in one big pile.

In FS we learned about study strategies, test anxiety, mind maps, drawing conclusions, organizing our work, how to prepare for the school year . . . We learned how to take responsibility for ourselves.

An important part of this kind of learning was that the skills could be transferred and used with all subjects.

It helps you out with all your other classes. It shows you how to study, how to take notes, how to take your time with your work, and how to pay attention . . . If you had bad study habits, it would help you do better in all your classes.

The Freshman Seminar is a good thing to have. It taught you stuff you could use in other classes, stuff you can use in English and math.

The course was also viewed as helpful because it provided students with an opportunity to think about and analyze some of the differences between what they were doing in high school and their experiences in middle school. It legitimized students' taking the time to reflect about their school experiences, contemplate differences they saw between their middle and high school experiences, and consider seriously adjustments they needed to make to their behavior and work ethic.

I was skeptical, but it showed you the difference between ninth grade and middle school.

It was a good thing to do. They teach you how big a step it is from middle school to high school. They teach you what to expect.

For many students it was also a way to begin thinking about their futures. The course provided an opportunity for students to consider what jobs they might be interested in pursuing, what training they might need (including college), and how they might go about applying for jobs.

I: What did you learn in FS?

S: It was all about paths to career goals. I really enjoyed that.

I: What are you thinking about for a career?

S: I would like to be a psychologist?

I: How did FS help you?

S: I have had lots of problems in my life. I would like to help people with problems. I know what it's like to be in trouble.

It was worthwhile, it prepare you for the real world, teach you about jobs, what you got to do to get there, what you need to make it.

It teaches you about job interviews: how to be on time, how to dress nice, and how to keep track of your papers and stuff.

But students also said they liked the class for other reasons as well. One was the reflection it promoted. Teachers were also often able to make it fun, something that was sometimes lacking in their more traditional academic subjects.

We learned how to go on job interviews. The teacher made it fun. We got to videotape the interviews and we kept track of the good things and bad things we did in the interviews.

My favorite class. That's a class where we get to express ourselves. Like if we want to talk about something in life, we could talk about it with the teacher. That way we can learn about what happening in the real world.

As with any teenage endeavor, there were also some negative opinions. Not everyone was enthusiastic about this course option. These students offered three reasons for their assessment. First, there were students who ended up with a string of substitute teachers who were not well informed about the purpose of the course or regular teachers who failed to embrace the principles of the seminar. Those teachers often struggled with providing students with a meaningful seminar experience. In those situations, students reported seeing little or no purpose to the course.

We had no teacher. Our first teacher left in October. We had subs until late January when [current teacher] came. I didn't even know what the class was for.

I didn't get the experience. We had a substitute. The teacher I had left. We just did crossword puzzles. It don't explain about jobs.

There were also a handful of students who were anxious to move on with learning content in more traditional areas (science, mathematics, English, history, etc.). These students saw the skill-building goals of the seminar as a distraction or something of lower priority.

Not a good subject. It has nothing I like to learn about. I know how to be mature. I don't need nobody teaching me how.

I don't think they should keep it. All you do – it's not like science, something you need next year. It don't have nothing to do with what we do next year. We did projects, talk about basketball players, watching movies. It was to get the ninth grade more comfortable.

Finally, there were students whose teachers, for whatever reason, simply used the class time as an opportunity to get a further jump-start on a particular content area. So, students felt like they were getting a double dose of content. Not knowing what they were supposed to get they couldn't speak intelligently about what they had been deprived of, but they had a sense that they were missing something.

It would have been better if we had a different teacher. All we did was write in our journals.

It seem like a regular class, like a normal class. You learn a little bit of everything. It wasn't helpful.

Physical Separation

An important structural element to the Success Academy was its separate location in the building. In both schools, a special effort was made to create a physical space that was unique for ninth graders. The schools also created separate entrances so that ninth grade students did not mingle with the upperclassmen. In addition, the ninth grade class had a separate lunch period from the rest of the school. The Success Academy students were also positioned so that other students would not encounter them during class changes.

Students at the two schools had different opinions about the value of this organizational arrangement. At the one school where many of these same ninth grade

students had been enrolled for two previous years as part of a combined middle/high school, there was considerably more enthusiasm for the separation. By a two to one margin they lauded the initiative (21 in favor, 11 against). Many of them had been part of a school that was disorderly, graffiti infested, and litter strewn. They remembered a building where students previously wandered unimpeded throughout the building, taking little pride in the appearance of the impersonal building. They returned to a new school year with partitioned hallways and more controlled access to newly defined houses of the building – several schools within the school, including the Success Academy. It was now much easier to take ownership of their own section of the building, ensuring safety and cleanliness.

Their enthusiasm for the separation derived primarily from the fact that there were fewer disruptions to the academic environment, and students could thus concentrate on their work.

In middle school there were lots of disruptions. There is much less of that now.

Probably in a way would be more fun not to be [separated]. You'd know more people but you gonna wanna play around and you ain't gonna want to do work.

Several students were even willing to admit that they had changed their minds from being opposed to the separation to supporting it after watching its effects on their peers.

I didn't like it so well earlier. Now I think it's better. You get mixed up with the higher kids. So it's another way to keep an eye on you and make sure you're ready for high school. It's for the best of us.

It's just right to stay with your own age. I didn't like it at first. We felt like we were prisoners. We got punished if we were where we were not supposed to be. But it blocked us from all the bad kids in the twelfth grade.

Another positive spin on the separation was the belief that students were less likely to be bullied by older students. Also, with less movement from fewer class changes during the day and closer proximity of classes, there was less likelihood that bumping and shoving would turn into fights and name-calling.

People get along better. There is less movement. We don't have to move as often, and we stay in one section so less chance for fights. They also stop fights quicker.

I like that because the eleventh graders start fights and then you got a rumble on your hands. Should keep us separate until tenth grade.

In between those who criticized the separation and those who praised its virtues were a handful of students who saw both the good and the bad from this structural change.

It was good and bad. It was good because younger girls tend to be attracted to older guys. Some would sneak out and hang out with them and hooky. So now they have less chance of doing that. But in a way it's bad. We felt like we not really in high school.

I don't like being separated from the rest of the school because I can see my other friends and family. But there are fewer distractions. If we weren't here, there would be more cutting of classes.

The arguments advanced for not being separated revolved around being treated like less than high school students and not being able to socialize and interact with other students in the school.

I don't like it. They treat us like babies. They tell us what to do, just like in middle school. When they tell the whole high school to report to the auditorium, that doesn't include us.

We don't get to communicate with anybody else. That won't help us for when we get to tenth and twelfth grades. We won't know anybody.

At the other school, students' assessment of being separated from older students was more mixed with just under half in favor (n=14) and just over half (n=16) opposed. For this school a less dramatic change in overall school environment from the previous year contributed to this less positive view. For them, the only real change was that the ninth grade was now on the third floor while the upperclassmen were distributed throughout the lower two floors.

Those in favor of being separated offered similar positive arguments to the students noted above, that fewer disruptions to classroom instruction would occur during a given instructional period and fights would erupt less frequently between classes, particularly with older students picking fights with the newer freshmen.

It all right. You don't have all these kids running around.

It's a more safer environment. The 10th graders can't pick on us.

Those weighing in against the separation felt as though they were being excluded from the social benefits of the high school, and they argued that the regular routine of similar faces in classrooms and corridors quickly grew tiresome.

I prefer to be mixed. I won't be ready for tenth grade. I won't know the rest of the school very well.

I don't like it. We end up staying with the whole class all day. I would rather see different people. It is boring to see the same people all day. Also, we only have lunch with other ninth graders. We don't get to mix with other classes.

Second Chances

Furstenberg, Neild, and Weiss (1998) reported that Philadelphia ninth graders were almost twice as likely to fail one course (58 percent) than were the same students as eighth graders. With recent increases in graduation requirements being implemented over the course of the next few years, there was a concern that this history of failure would only be exacerbated unless high schools took additional steps to work with those likely not to be promoted.

At one of the high schools, ninth graders who failed were given the opportunity to re-enroll in the ninth grade but with the added carrot that if they performed well in the first semester, they could matriculate as tenth graders beginning as early as the second semester of their second year of high school.

In concrete terms, for students to be considered as tenth graders, they needed to pass five classes. In the past, if they failed more than two of their seven yearlong courses, it meant they were retained. Furthermore, under the old program, it took the full year to earn any credits toward graduation and advancement to the next grade. But with the addition of the block schedule as part of the Success Academy program, students were able to earn four credits each semester and a total of eight for the year. Some of the repeat ninth graders had successfully completed only one or two credits during their prior year. If they worked hard in the first semester of their Success Academy year, they would be eligible for tenth grade at the end of the first semester. But for others who had failed their full complement of courses in their first year of high school, there was yet another option. They could enroll in the four classes during the first semester and also commit to regular attendance in an after school program for an additional fifth credit. That way the complete failure of an entire year could be reversed.

We spoke with 18 students who had failed their first year of high school, and who had committed themselves to the program that enabled them to fast track their promotion back into the tenth grade. What impressed most of these students were the messages they received about what it would take for them to succeed and the additional message that teachers had faith in their ability to do so.

One student, typical of many failing students, came to high school enthusiastic about learning but struggled almost from the first day. He began cutting classes and when he did attend he “found the class covered so much that I couldn’t keep up.” He ended up only passing two credits. He admitted giving up fairly early in that first year:

After the first couple of months I saw I wasn’t going to pass so I started cutting. I asked one teacher before she left if I was going to pass and she said “probably not.”

But then he went on to describe how this year was totally different when compared to his first year in ninth grade.

S: This year (rolling his eyes and flicking his wrist) is totally different.

I: How so?

S: The school said they got tired of having older kids not pass their classes. But I never thought they’d get it together. In September when I went into the gym to get my roster I saw the ninth and tenth grade lines. I just went to the ninth grade line because with 5 F’s I was pretty sure I was going to be left back. I was reluctant to go to class. But I went and when I got there I didn’t know what to expect. But all the classes had one thing in common. They all told us this was our second chance and that we could make up the four credits we needed (to advance to tenth grade in five months). My advisory teacher set us down and told us our chances. The Success Academy coordinator came and told us, too. They said we had two choices: (1) if we passed we would move up to tenth grade. (2) If not, we would be put in Twilight. That got me to thinking, when they told us we had a chance to make up ten months in five. From that day my goal was to get out of ninth grade by February. . . . Also there were other programs.

I: What were they?

S: They had an after school class where if we did our assignments they would give us another credit. I said to myself “what’s another half an hour?” I immediately signed up to go three or four times a week. I went every time! I also got close to [advisory teacher]. She saw I was a hard worker.

I: What else did you like about her?

S: She was willing to help me. She never hesitated if I needed help. Teachers didn’t do that last year. She always gave us our lists of assignments and what we were to cover that week. She gave us folders to keep our work in. . . They gave us a second chance. We won’t get no third chance.

Students liked the structure that allowed them to make up credits quickly, but alone that was not sufficient to ensure success. What was also needed was teacher confidence in these students. For this same student, it was what motivated him to learn.

S: I don’t know why, but I can talk to all of the teachers. Last year I went to none of them.

I: What do you talk about?

S: We talk about anything. I used to think they didn’t care, but they do. They say they could make more money elsewhere, but they see something in us so they want to work here. . . . They knew we wanted to learn. If I have a problem, I feel I can go to them, even this semester [after being moved to 10th grade].

This one student was not alone in his assessment. Another student, who had failed most of his classes the previous year but this year was getting Bs and Cs, also praised the fact that teachers were more willing to help and would not give up on them.

I: Why are you doing better?

S: I am coming to school more. [He pauses to think] Last year I asked myself ‘What is there to look forward to when you make up the work?’ And my answer was ‘nothing.’

I: And this year?

S: It’s fun.

I: How so?

S: The teachers, they are younger. They teach better. They don’t just give you papers to do. They’re active – they help you and they put stuff on the board.

I: What else do they do?

S: They help us individually. Last year was easy but boring. This year is challenging, but fun.

I: How about your teachers?

S: We get along with them.

I: Why?

S: They won’t accept failing. They give us extra help. We work with them.

These supports provided added confidence in students that they could succeed in the classroom and be promoted to the next grade. In the next section we review how that confidence was also reflected in students' views of their long-term future goals.

Future Dreams

The objective evidence does not bode well for Philadelphia high school students. Only about 59 percent of those entering ninth grade graduate within six years. Only three out of every five first-year ninth graders from across the city meet the new requirements for promotion to tenth grade. The statistics are considerably starker for students in the city's poorest neighborhoods. In those schools, only one in three meet the promotion requirements. While the demographics of the two Talent Development schools reflect this latter group, their promotion rates looked more like the city average.

Despite the harsh numbers concerning academic failure, students remained upbeat and optimistic about their futures. When we talked to a similar group of students in middle school, 90 percent of them suggested that they had plans for college (Wilson and Corbett, 2001). Those proportions have not changed significantly among this group of high school students. Eighty-five percent of the students who talked about future plans definitely mentioned college being on the horizon. Eight percent were unsure, with many of them saying either their grades, family finances, or unclear occupational goals might cause them not to attend. Only seven percent had completely ruled out post-secondary plans.

Some of the more detailed discussions of college plans came from students who had been participants in a myriad of programs to educate poor, urban students about future educational opportunities. These students spoke highly of their experiences on local college campuses and the motivation that prompted to continue dreaming about college. Some of the programs that students mentioned included College Access, ASPIRA, Philadelphia Futures, the Pipeline Program promoting medical careers through the University of Pennsylvania, White-Williams, the Young Scholars Program at Temple, a summer residential program at West Chester University, and a six week summer program at Penn Charter School.

Of all the students we interviewed, only one mentioned that he did not plan to finish high school. But even he had clear plans for the future, sharing his desire to enroll in the Job Corps, get his GED, and learn a trade.

As students talked about their futures, more often than not, they did not even highlight high school graduation because for them secondary school matriculation was a

foregone conclusion despite the above-mentioned statistics and students' own accounts of their less than stellar high school performance. Instead of dwelling on those troubling numbers, they would launch directly into their optimistic post-secondary plans. And these plans would be the delight of any parent. They ranged across the full spectrum of occupations from doctors, lawyers, engineers and business owners to electricians, policemen, cosmetologists, and military employees.

One of the few gender differences in the interviews cropped up when students spoke of their occupational futures. Females were most likely to mention a profession in the medical field (n=22, equally spread between doctors and nurses), law (n=8), business (n=6, often with a preference for owning their own), or cosmetology (n=5). Males on the other hand, voiced preferences for construction/trades (n=15), sports (n=11), engineering/science (n=8), or computers (n=6). Interestingly, every single occupation volunteered by students required some degree of advanced training and skill.

Only about one student in every eight was unsure of what he or she wanted to do. Even the uncommitted were not bashful about listing some of their options and being clear about post-secondary education as the ticket to get them there.

S: I think I want to be one of four things: (1) undercover cop, (2) lawyer, (3) veterinarian, or (4) computer repairman.

I: How much school will you need?

S: I know I am going to college, cause I'll be broke if I don't go to college.

Students with dreams of vocations that traditionally do not require a college degree had somehow also gotten the message that in this day and age a college education is a minimal ticket to success. One student, who planned to follow in his father's footsteps and work alongside of him in the electrical trade, acknowledged that he would "probably get four or five years of college" to make sure of being "well prepared for the future."

Students, then, had an unerring faith that they would eventually end up in college. Accompanying that faith was a confidence that they could turn things around in high school despite what for many of them to date was less than stellar academic performance. A typical example of the logic that past performance could be altered came from a student

who had set her sights high (medical school) while choosing a curricular path in high school that did not necessarily match those hopes.

I: What was your first choice for next year's academy?

S: Cosmetology.

I: What are your plans for the future?

S: I want to be a pediatrician.

I: What made you decide that?

S: I like taking care of babies.

I: How much education will you need?

S: Six years of college.

I: Are your grades good enough to go to college? [She has mostly Cs and Ds, with one F.]

S: No. I need to bring them up.

I: How will you do that.

S: I will need to pay more attention.

I: Why do you think you will pay more attention next year than you did this year?

S: The classes will be more interesting.

Another student whose program choice in high school was a closer fit to his career goal, but whose performance undoubtedly would restrict his post-secondary options, remained optimistic that he could turn things around. He was only reiterating what many of his peers said.

I: What academy are you going to be in next year?

S: Law and education.

I: Why did you choose that one?

S: Because I want to be a cop. I have wanted to do that since I was five years old.

I: What education will you need to become a cop?

S: I need to go to college.

I: Are you on track to accomplish that? [He has failed half of his classes.]

S: No, but I will try to make it.

I: What will you need to do?

S: I need to study more, pay attention, and ask for help.

What was missing from these two comments was any realistic understanding of what it would take to move students closer to their dreams. Many say that it is unrealistic to expect students to see the complex link between short-term obligations, exemplified by high school performance, and big dreams. But students, even following a career path with simpler connections, failed to make such links between current hard work and future success. Two good examples come from students who saw themselves as budding professional athletes.

S: *I want to play baseball professionally.*
 I: *Are you playing on the school team?*
 S: *I played last year on the school team, but I got home too late (lives 30 minutes from school) so I quit.*
 I: *How about this year?*
 S: *The coach wouldn't let me play.*
 I: *Why not?*
 S: *He was my gym teacher and he wouldn't let me try out.*

S: *I want to play in the NBA.*
 I: *Are you good enough?*
 S: *Yeah.*
 I: *How are you doing now?*
 S: *Last year [at a suburban NJ high school] I played in two scrimmages but it was not worth my while.*
 I: *Why not?*
 S: *They had a losing team and I was the only one with any talent.*
 I: *How about this year? [His school had the best team in the city.]*
 S: *I didn't try out.*
 I: *But don't you need some experience to play in college? [He had suggested earlier that he wanted to play four years of college ball.]*
 S: *I played for four years in the summer Sonny Hill league, but not this year because I wanted to get a job.*

But for every student whose future dream seemed unrealistic, there were others who, when you heard their stories, you had the feeling that they might just pull it off with the right support system.

I: *What are you thinking about in the future?*
 S: *[Showing a sparkle in her eyes, sitting taller in her chair, and sprouting a big grin on her face, one student suggests] I say every day to my parents I'm going to own my own corporation. It will be something in computer technology or computer animation. I want to go to college and I'll stay until I understand what I need to know. I want to be able to buy everything I want. I have no doubts about my dreams.*

Another male, who we had interviewed several years before as a middle school student remarked in response to our query about his future:

S: *What I want to do is focus first on the little picture.*
 I: *What is that?*
 S: *To get from the ninth to the tenth grade. [He is a repeat ninth grader who just moved up.] Then I want to move to the big picture. I want to keep adding pieces to the picture.*
 I: *How about the long term?*

S: Once I finish college, then I want to do what we talked about before. I still want to own my own business. I want to create something that people won't forget about!

One step might be to raise adults' expectations for students. For example, the 16th Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher showed that nearly 71 percent of secondary students plan to attend a four-year college while 52 percent of their parents expect this to happen and only 32 percent of their teachers (Galley, 2000). The question becomes: Who needs to hear and accept the "stay in school" message more? Students? Or the adults around them? Our point here is that students heard the message and said they believed it. Yet the statistics say that, in Philadelphia, their aspirations were likely to be unrealizable. As the next section shows, students had few ideas about how to improve their schools. They liked them and trusted that by doing what they were told, they would graduate and get to college. This would seem to shift considerable responsibility to adults to create schools where students actually succeed.

Students' Recommendations for Improvement

The above sections paint promising portraits of the two Talent Development high schools, from the students' points of view. Students described orderly, safe schools where most of the teachers were keenly interested and active in helping students succeed. The schools' current overall environments were in marked contrast to what students had heard the schools would be like and/or to what they they had experienced previously. Thus, it may well have been that their teachers were always eager to help but short classes, lengthy class changes, and routine disruptions greatly constrained the opportunities they had to do so. Regardless, the tone of nearly every one of our interviews was of optimism – optimism that these schools were providing a good education and optimism that students would graduate and go on to college.

Whether such optimism was true of students in the other comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia was not known. However, we do know from our research with students at all grade levels and from several locations that students tend to be generally positive about their futures and that, if they work hard and get good grades, their schools will contribute considerably to subsequent attainment, even in schools that are obviously struggling. Students, however, have little basis for comparison at the school level. That is why we concentrated on comparisons between middle and high school, between one year to the next, and between rumors and reality. These were comparisons students could, and did, make often. And, as was illustrated, they liked what they now saw.

We gave them a final chance in the interviews to adopt a more critical stance by asking them to offer some advice to the teachers and principal about what else they could do to make the schools better. Most had little to offer. One spoke for many:

No, not really, I don't have anything. It looks like they trying their best.

And they reinforced all of the previous comments from the beginning of this report.

Is like this school is more organized. Over here, they have more control. (In my other school) is like the bell rings and like 20 minutes later, students walk in, without no note. They be in the hallways, be in the stairways. It's more safe over here.

Other than the above comments, with respect to the schools overall, students wanted to see changes that tied in with their personal interests, such as adding a sport, starting a new club, giving them more time at lunch, letting them use headsets at free time, offering after-school classes in their favorite subjects, and getting more textbooks or better books in the library.

Where students did have occasional advice, it concerned the area with which they had had extensive experience – the classroom. There, they had daily comparisons to draw on, not to mention those from previous years. Still, they reiterated what they valued in teachers – being willing to help – which meant a host of actions: taking time with students, being fair with them, being caring, and explaining material well. In other words, their call was simply for all teachers to become like the best ones. For example:

The teachers need to get off the kids who work in class and get on the case of those who don't work.

If one student be bad, the teacher don't have to be hard with all students. But they don't really have to change nothing, except how some teachers are with some students.

S: They need to get some better teachers.

I: What do you mean by that?

S: You know, control students more. They need to make kids who don't disrespect teachers.

I: What do teachers who have the most respect do?

S: They don't play around. They say they come here to do one thing – teach students.

Some teachers just don't really care. Some act like anything you say, they don't want to hear it. Even if you are giving the answer to a question, they just don't want to hear it. They should get teachers who really want to teach and don't do it for the

money. They're not helping me out. They should be committed to it.

Thus, if it were up to students, the two schools would continue to do what they were doing and all of their teachers would begin to act like the best ones. Such limited criticism and extensive praise should be both heartening and challenging for the educators who work with these students. The advice should be heartening because students noticed the changes and greatly appreciated the differences they made inside and outside of their classrooms. “Organized” schools and “helpful” teachers made for pleasant, rewarding days in school.

However, students’ advice, or lack of it, should challenge educators because it showed that students were placing an extraordinary degree of trust in their teachers. Students expressed high expectations for themselves, much higher than the actual success rates of previous cohorts that had gone through the same schools, and yet were confident that what their teachers asked them to do was what they needed to do in order to be able to break this pattern and, someday, graduate and go to college. The implication was that teachers had better be very sure that what they asked students to do had a direct connection to future success. Students, in other words, were challenging teachers to help them live up to their expectations.

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