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Lifelong Learning

Schools Focus Extra Efforts On Ninth Grade

By ROBERT TOMSHO

THE 3,475 ninth graders at the Aldine Independent School District in Texas are old enough for high school this fall, but instead they will attend one of four freshmen-only facilities, which offer smaller classes, double doses of reading and math and after-school mentoring by older students and adults.

Otis Wiley says the extra attention helped boost his self-confidence and his algebra grade, to a B from a C. "They helped me out with a whole lot of stuff," says the 16-year-old, now a sophomore at one of Aldine's high schools.

Under pressure to improve graduation rates, more school districts are aiming their efforts at the freshman year. With research suggesting that students who do poorly in ninth grade are less likely to graduate, dozens of districts around the country have opened freestanding freshman schools designed to ease the transition to high school. Others, particularly low-income urban districts, are launching new support programs for ninth graders or transforming parts of existing high schools into freshman academies.

Although the efforts are scattered, there are signs that they are working. At Aldine Ninth Grade School, Jeanie Outhouse, the principal, says 93% of her students were promoted to 10th grade last year, up from 85% when the school opened in 1998. Meanwhile, incidents resulting in discipline at the school have dropped by more than 39% over the past two school years, which Ms. Outhouse attributes to closer contact between students and teachers.

Dropout rates are under heightened scrutiny as business and political leaders demand that high schools do more to produce a better-educated work force. Estimates vary, but somewhere between 11% and 30% of all students leave high school before graduation, and many do so in the early years.

Since the early 1970s, the proportion of ninth graders who don't show up for 10th grade has tripled to about 11.4%, according to a 2004 study led by Walter Haney, a Boston College education professor whose research also indicates that about 70% of the students who fail ninth grade never make it to graduation.

Ninth grade presents tough challenges. Teenag-

Cutting Class

Percentage of ninth grade public-school students who didn't advance to 10th grade:



Source: Education Pipeline Project, Boston College

Schools Mentor Ninth Graders to Cut Dropout Rates

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ers are going through physical and emotional changes while entering a learning environment that is often less nurturing and regimented than middle school. Gary Orfield, director of Harvard's Civil Rights Project, says the resulting pressures have intensified as many states have instituted mandatory graduation tests, often beginning in the 10th grade. "It's just a disaster, especially in high-poverty schools," says Mr. Orfield, co-author of a 2004 study indicating that only about half of black, Hispanic and Native American ninth graders will stay in school to earn a regular diploma.

The Grand Prairie Independent School District, near Dallas, now requires all ninth graders to take a course in study skills and time management. Polytech High School, in Woodside, Del., dispatches teachers to the homes of incoming ninth graders to make personal connections with families.

Residents of the Aldine school district, just north of Houston, voted to take more dramatic action in 1997 when they approved a bond issue that covered the opening of four new ninth-grade schools. "We felt like it would be a way to buy ninth graders a year to grow in maturity," says Nadine Kujawa, superintendent of the district, which has 56,000 students.

Aldine ninth graders can go to the district's traditional high schools for ad-

vance-placement courses or extracurricular activities. But most spend their school days in ninth-grade schools that have their own staff. Class sizes average fewer than 25 students, compared with about 30 in the senior high schools, and core classes such as math and English last for up to 90 minutes a day.

Tyler Pitch says he might not be a sophomore this year if his English teacher at Aldine Ninth Grade School hadn't helped him after school and pressured him to complete a key paper. "They just kind of keep you on track on where you have to go," the 16-year-old says.

Although the district has launched other changes, Ms. Kujawa, the superintendent, says ninth grade schools are at least partially responsible for a graduation rate that has increased by about six percentage points over the past three years, to 80.4%.

With land and funding for new schools hard to find in many urban districts, establishing freshman "academies" within existing high schools is another approach. That's a key element of a model jointly developed in 1994 by researchers at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Adopted by more than 80 schools nationwide, the so-called "talent development" model organizes incoming freshmen into small learning groups overseen by a few teachers. "The whole idea is to

personalize it for the young people so that they have someone who is in their face, but in a caring way," says James McParland, director of John Hopkins' Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Edison High School, in Philadelphia, turned its third floor into such a freshman academy seven years ago. These days, small groups of four or five teachers with adjoining classrooms educate about 150 freshmen. The teachers in each group have joint planning periods to meet with parents and strategize about the problems of individual students.

Math teacher Darryl Johnson recalls that, after the grades of one ninth grader began to suddenly slide, the teachers in his group learned that her parents had thrown her out of the house because she was pregnant. "We let that young lady know we were there to support her," says Mr. Johnson, who adds that teachers also located an aunt who took in the girl, who remained a student.

A study last year of five talent-development schools in Philadelphia found that 25% more first-time ninth graders in the program passed algebra than their counterparts in similar schools without the program, and 8% more students who started the program graduated on time. The study was conducted by MDRC, a New York and California-based research organization that focuses on low-income issues.