

# The Linchpin

*To truly improve the freshman year, we must turn the conventional wisdom about staffing and culture on its head.*

**Billie Donegan**

**W**hen it comes to where I focus my energy in education, I call myself a reformed elitist.

After 20 years at South Grand Prairie High School, I was teaching Academic Decathlon (the nine smartest students in the building), Advanced Broadcast Journalism (the 12 most popular students in the building), and honors courses for seniors. Then my principal insisted that I teach what she had the nerve to call “regular freshmen,” which everyone knows is an oxymoron. I tried logic, pleading, and tap dancing to get out of it. She persisted.

Switching my focus to freshmen

changed my teaching life, and I’ve never looked back. Not only do 9th graders’ skills and attitudes grow before your eyes, but their bodies also morph so quickly that you barely even recognize your students by the end of the year. For my last seven years of teaching and my subsequent seven years as a school reform consultant, 9th grade has been my passion. I have realized a key truth: If you want to reshape high school, start by changing 9th grade.

## **Tinkering Around the Edges**

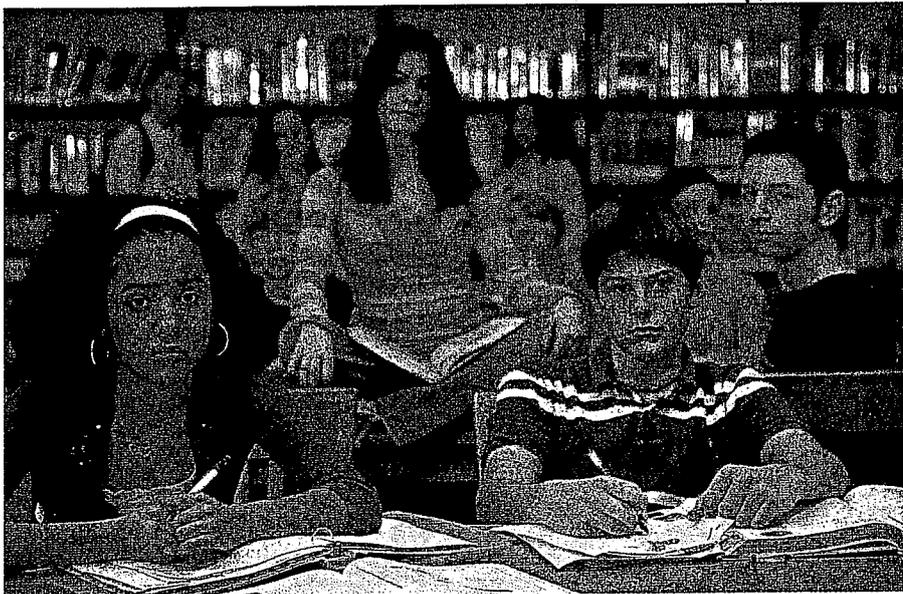
When it comes to changing 9th grade, words abound but actions are few. Everywhere you turn in the “high school conversation,” people are writing

and talking about 9th grade as the foundation for high school redesign. Collectively, researchers agree that the first year of high school is pivotal in terms of adjustment and achievement. Everyone nods when presented with data telling us that more students fail 9th grade than any other year, that discipline referrals and absentee rates increase in 9th grade, or that the dropout rate peaks between 9th and 10th grade. We chorus in unison that the quality of instruction in the first year of high school is the determining factor in subsequent academic accomplishment.

Knowledge, however, is not action. Successful transition to high school is an ongoing process. It cannot be accomplished in a day, in a week, or through a single program. It requires a fundamental reshaping of the culture in secondary schools and classrooms—and you can’t do that kind of reshaping without stepping on a few toes. To truly change the 9th grade experience, schools must value ensuring the success of students above maintaining harmony among all the adults in the building.

Unfortunately, as I’ve observed while working on 9th grade reform initiatives through such groups as High Schools That Work, the Education Alliance, and the Center for Secondary School Redesign, schools rarely take this risk. What many schools proudly call their emphasis on 9th grade mostly involves tinkering around the edges, focusing on isolated activities or programs. In the sincere belief that they are doing something, such schools design their freshman transition programs as a series of events rather than a process that they must maintain before, during, and even after the 9th grade year.

Schools engage in time-consuming,



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# Year

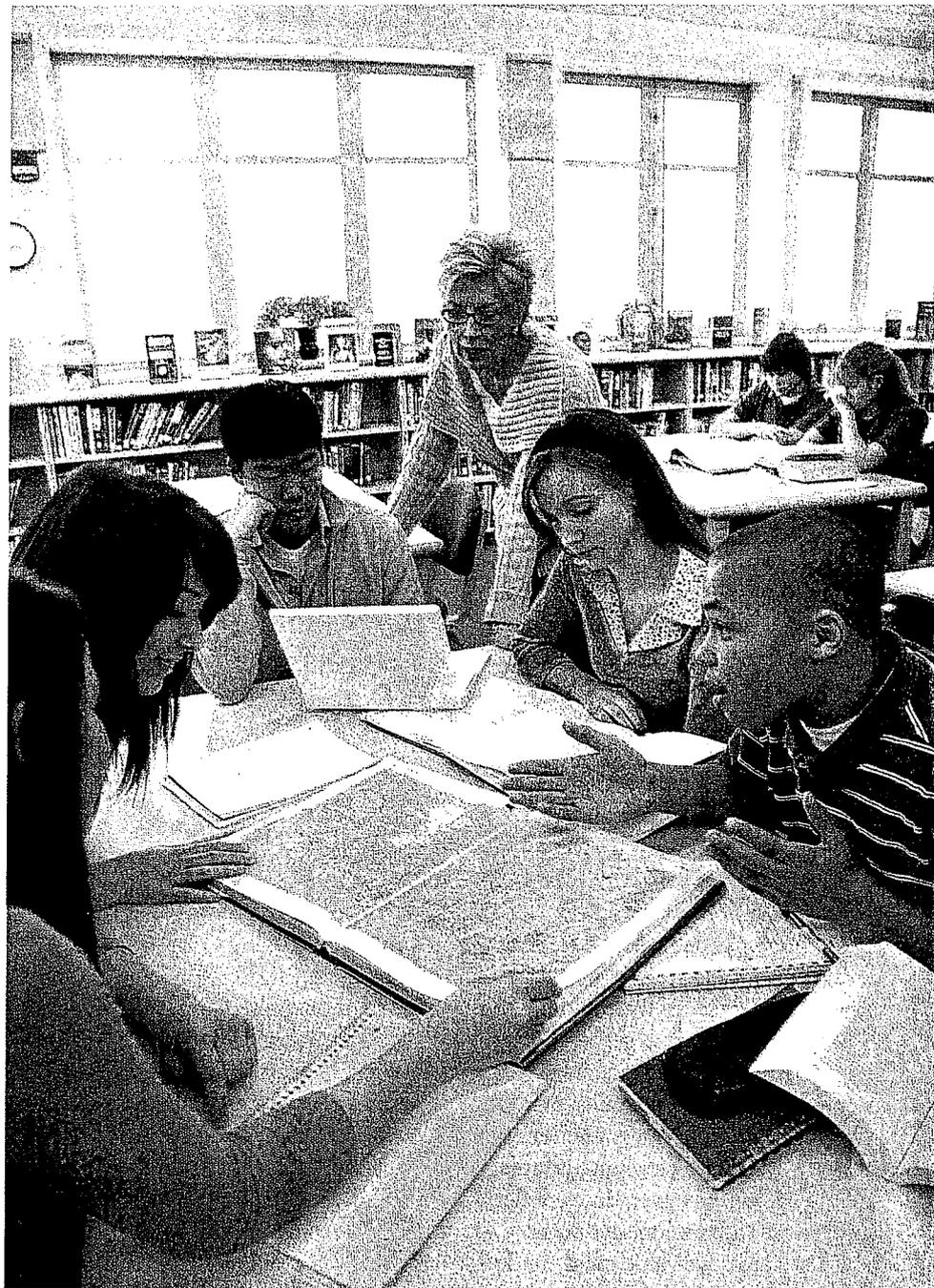
glitzy programs that often yield little result. For example, some invest in a freshman orientation package complete with ropes courses and videos yet fail to ask themselves which students most needed orienting to begin with, which students didn't attend and why, and whether this elaborate orientation made a difference.

Other schools create an advisory program that resembles a content-crammed course, with Cornell note-taking introduced one week and character education the next. Even with no evidence that freshmen's note-taking skills or character have improved, the show must go on. I've heard administrators state that a 30-student 9th grade advisory period, which meets once every other week for 30 minutes, "ensures that every student develops a caring relationship with an adult advocate." Or that every 9th grader in the school has a personal plan that includes a career goal and an "academic program of study for the 21st-century workplace." A walk-through of classrooms, however, reveals low-level assignments, outdated instruction, and students with paltry understanding of or commitment to their plan.

## Why Are the Newbies Teaching 9th Grade?

High school leaders may say, with all sincerity, that they value 9th grade as the linchpin of secondary school redesign. But if you want to know what and whom a school *really* values, examine its master schedule. Staffing and scheduling decisions are clear evidence of where priorities—and status—lie.

When working with individual high school principals, I frequently walk them through two activities using the



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master schedule. First, I have them calculate a quick average of the student-to-teacher ratio in classes at each grade level. This analysis frequently reveals that the lowest student-to-teacher ratio exists at the senior year and the highest

ratio at the freshman year. This alone rings an alarm bell. That alarm usually sounds louder when the principal and I examine teacher quality and experience.

The second activity typically takes place behind closed doors and with a shredder handy. I ask principals to identify the top 10 teachers in their building and tell me what and whom those teachers teach. More often than not, this list predominantly involves honors courses or upperclassmen. We then look at where first-year teachers are assigned. You guessed it: They are predominantly teaching 9th grade. In schools where

tracking exists, many are teaching lower-level 9th grade courses.

We have wonderfully talented teachers coming into the profession, but everyone will tell you that a learning curve exists. Administrators don't seem to grasp that it's unwise to put teachers who are still feeling their way into the job with the students in greatest need. The most disturbing comment I heard in this regard came from a math department chair. She had assigned a first-year teacher with poor classroom-management skills and a sorely inadequate repertoire of teaching strategies to teach remedial algebra to freshmen. When I asked her about the wisdom of such a staffing decision, the department chair stated, "I put him where he would do the least damage."

In the medical field, the mark of a top professional is the ability to problem solve the hard cases. So why do so many top teachers wind up working with only top students, avoiding the hard cases altogether? Because many high schools have developed an unacknowledged seniority system that says, "The longer you're in the building, the better the students you get"—and by *better*, we mean older students or honors students. Most faculty members admit that teaching 9th grade does not carry the prestige of teaching honors seniors. Rarely, however, do we reflect on what this admission says about which students we value most. To do so would make us uncomfortable and force us to rethink our use of teacher assignments. It might force us to act on our pronouncements about the high priority of 9th grade—by making staffing decisions that reflect that priority.

### **Breaking Through "School as Usual"**

In school redesign, we are constantly battling the gravitational pull of school as usual. Even more pernicious than the structural status quo is the instructional status quo. Freshman transition is no exception. Administrators may earnestly want to make instruction more challenging, personalized, and aligned with

21st-century realities, yet most 9th grade courses retain the shape of former decades. Schools' ability to creatively reform instruction, in turn, depends on wise staffing and scheduling decisions, on getting the right people into the places that most need quality.

So how can administrators overcome the pull of school as usual to recast the freshman year? Here are a few beginning steps I've seen schools use successfully to foster productive changes in scheduling and staffing.

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### *Change Staffing*

First, conduct a staff analysis to determine who's teaching which kids and how placements should change. Analyze data to see whether a relationship exists between class size and student failure. Armed with the results, shift assignments where they matter most. Ninia Aldrich, principal at Kamehameha School in Hawaii, which has achieved great results through reshaping its freshman year, notes, "I hand-pick who gets to teach 9th grade."

In getting buy-in for necessary shifts in staffing, take one of two approaches. Either talk with the teachers you want to tap for 9th grade one-on-one, letting teachers know it's because of their skill that you want them with the freshmen. Call it missionary work, strike deals if you have to, but don't take no for an answer. Or, talk with the school as a whole and gradually build up the idea that the best and brightest should be teaching 9th grade. When you announce staffing changes, those who shift to 9th will know it's a compliment.

### *Change Scheduling*

A key change is to design and offer math and English electives—taught by your top in-house educators—that help lower-skilled 9th graders catch up. North Lawndale High School in Chicago, for instance, schedules double blocks of English 9 and a remedial reading program called Read 180 for their many freshmen who read far below grade level.

You might also allow freshmen to defer a required course (such as physical education) so that they can take an elective that taps into a personal interest or talent. A chance to enjoy and excel in at least one class should decrease frustration and boost enthusiasm for school.

Arrange for interdisciplinary teams to teach the same small group of 9th graders. Each team should have *most* of their students in common: The more students a teacher team has in common, the more invested teachers become. Help each team develop a plan for providing personalized support and innovative instruction to their 9th graders. One caution: don't leap to collaboration on cross-disciplinary *instruction* until you are sure that all teachers involved are solid in their own discipline and all practitioners in the same content area are in synch. Teams can collaborate on relationship building with common students, but hold off on cross-content lesson planning until content-area teams are solid.

Changes like these can yield great results—and high schools can adopt many of them simply by reallocating resources and reassigning teachers. We must stop avoiding the challenge of reshaping 9th grade at a foundational level out of fear that shifting that foundation will smash a few toes. If we truly believe that freshman year is the linchpin of high school reform, let's move beyond words to actions. ■

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