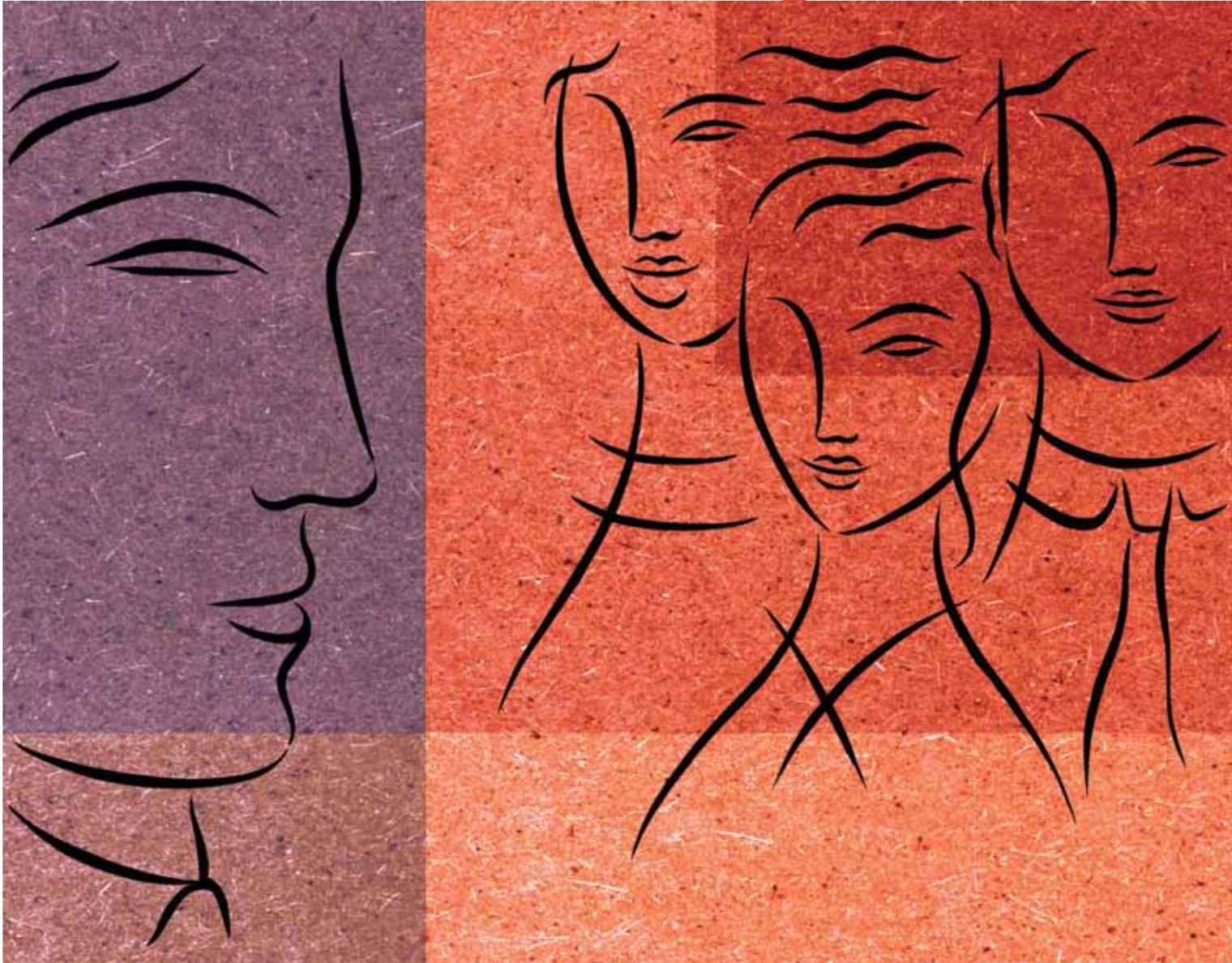


professional development



for parents

Every secondary school leader in the United States is aware of the importance of a successful transition from middle to high school. Schools and districts have implemented many programs specifically designed to help rising freshmen successfully make the transition to high school, such as ninth-grade academies, mandatory interventions, small learning communities, summer school programs, orientations, mentoring programs, and support teams. The ultimate goal, of course, is to help students get on track to graduate on time and be prepared for college and careers. Those efforts have, at times, generated positive results. But a key ingredient is often missing from many of these well-intentioned programs: the parents and guardians of the rising freshman—perhaps the most important group of people in this transition process—are often given no training or support whatsoever.

Most public school leaders insist that they want parents to be involved with their children's education. But high school educators also tell parents that they want students to take responsibility and ownership of their own educations, their grades, and their decisions. The unspoken message to parents is that "being involved" in their children's education means being supportive of the consequences that schools assign for misbehavior or academic struggles. So the per-

ception is that instead of true involvement in the school's mission and direction, what high school leaders really want is unconditional support for their decisions. As a result, parental involvement at the high school level often translates to working the concession stand at the Friday-night football game or participating in fundraising activities. This mindset must change if educators want to improve the shocking high school drop-out rate in this nation and improve the performance of ninth-grade students.

Parental Conflict

On a November school day a few years ago, a well-respected English teacher stormed into the office in tears. "Look at the e-mail Mrs. Smith sent me last night. She said that I must not know what I'm doing and that I obviously don't know her son very well, and she demands a full explanation about what happened in class yesterday." We all looked at one another, shook our heads, took a deep breath, and wondered aloud about the type of parent Mrs. Smith must be. Defensively, the teacher responded, "The apple doesn't fall from the tree. I see why her son acts the way he does."

A more-savvy parent would handle a difficult situation with a teacher differently. He or she would skillfully work with the teacher and administration to remedy the conflict

Transition programs often overlook the fact that parents are key to a successful transition to high school.

Many parents lack the "school sense" they need to work with educators.

Teaching parents how to talk to teachers and be involved in their children's high school career supports students and builds a strong school community.

Make a plan. Students and parents must visualize where the students will be after high school, then work together to make plans to reach those goals.

Get organized. Successful students balance the academic, social, and cocurricular demands of high school.

Form positive school relationships. Students benefit from having a community of support that includes their parents, teachers, counselors, and other important adults.

Get involved. Student *and* parent involvement helps ensure that students will never get lost in the shuffle of high school life.

Provide supervision. Parents aren't always aware that their children act differently away from them. Appropriate boundaries and limits are essential.

Monitor progress. Parents must walk the line between allowing their children to have ownership of their learning and keeping an eye on their children's academic progress.

six steps

without creating animosity or bad blood. Parents with good “school sense” seem to have insider knowledge about how to resolve problems, remain on teachers’ good sides, and support their children’s education. You know the parents we’re talking about: the ones who easily develop positive relationships at the school, are members of the important committees and groups (so they can be “in the know”), and proactively work at home and at school for the success of their children. Why can’t all parents do the same?

In truth, we have yet to meet a parent who doesn’t want his or her child to be treated fairly, be successful in classes, and graduate from high school. Yet some parents act in a manner that does not support those objectives simply because they haven’t learned how to act any differently.

Simple Suggestions

Each spring we hold an orientation night for parents and guardians of eighth graders—the parents of the rising freshmen who will be coming to our high schools the next fall. We have held orientations at Telluride (CO) High School and Osbourn Park High School in Manassas, VA as well as at their feeder middle schools. Either venue provides positive opportunities to reach out to parents. A cooperative approach with the middle school counselors is vital because

the eighth-grade counselor plays a key role in helping rising ninth graders select their courses. Our presence at the middle school is well-received by families and counselors because everyone is working collaboratively toward the same goal.

The goal is simple: help parents support their students so that they can achieve success in high school. Every year, we hand out “10 Simple Suggestions for a Successful Transition to High School,” a list that we created on a whim when we couldn’t figure out why certain parents didn’t have the common sense we expected them to have. The suggestions seemed like simple ideas to us, but they were complex to “rookie” high school parents.

The first time the list was distributed, parents’ reaction was overwhelming. They ate up the information, asked insightful follow-up questions, and were profuse in their thanks. The next year, we tweaked the list and received even more overwhelmingly positive results. It was at this point that we knew that we had stumbled upon a weakness in our attempts to help ninth graders successfully transition to high school. We had expected parents to know how we wanted them to act; to understand how educators expected to be treated; and to always follow the rules, volunteer at the school, and raise a perfect child without any guidance,

support, or training from us. But parents need training and support, too, and finally, we were providing it.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

New teachers are expected to meet the minimum requirement of being certified in the area they are teaching and having basic training and experience as educators. Nevertheless, schools always provide additional professional development to support their teachers and, ultimately, benefit their students. If professional development is important for teachers, why wouldn't it be just as important for our parents?

Parents come with no certification or real training when they bring their children to high school for the first time. If they are lucky, their frame of reference is their own successful personal high school experiences. But many of the parents who need the most support are the ones who may not have had positive personal experiences in high school. Some may even be dropouts or, in the case of many parents of students who are English language learners, may never have attended high school in the United States at all. Many parents end up relying on the stories or advice of their neighbors or friends or on depictions of school in movies and television.

FOCUS ON WHAT THE PARENTS CAN DO

When we work with parents at our own schools and at schools across the United States, we map out a plan to help them in their new role as high school parents. Much of our advice is proactive and allows parents to put protocols and structures in place at home to help set the stage for academic success before their children walk into high school on the first day. We talk about the lessons we have learned from the savvy parents who have navigated this path before. We show them how to positively interact with school staff members by building relationships and communicating effectively. We also teach parents how to monitor the progress of their children.

In addition, we examine the touchy subject of teen supervision. This topic is one that schools tend to be nervous about addressing with parents because parents may interpret it as being outside educators' sphere of influence. Ironically, however, when we discuss ninth-grade transition with other educators, they say, "Be sure to emphasize that parents need to supervise their kids!" On the other hand,

many parents think, "My kid is a good kid, so he (or she) will be fine." Parents must recognize that all teenagers need proper supervision, even the ones with straight As.

Our Six Steps

When we work with parents, we walk them through six steps that we recommend they take to put their children on the track to experience success in high school, including specific and detailed advice and tools for them to use as they plan to support their children.

Make a plan. Parents need instruments that they can use with their teenagers as they make plans for life after high school. First, students and parents visualize where the students will be after high school. Only then can they work together to make plans to reach this goal. The instruments that they use in this step are easy to complete and help students and parents begin talking about their visions for where the students will be in the future. The instruments will also help students and their parents research exactly what it will take for the students to reach their stated goals and dreams. This approach allows the students to backwards plan their high school journeys.

Get organized. Successful students balance the academic, social, and cocurricular demands of high school. Parents should adopt some protocols and procedures that will support their teenagers' success, such as using a daily planner and developing rules for how and where school work will be done at home.

Form positive school relationships. Students benefit when their parents and school staff members have positive relationships. Simple strategies teach parents how to be school savvy as they proactively take steps to create their own "small town feeling" for their children. School-savvy parents foster the positive relationships at the school that help their teenagers be successful. Parents should learn how to handle communication protocols with staff members and teachers. In addition, parents must know which staff members—besides their children's teachers—they will want to cultivate a special relationship with (e.g., counselors, athletic directors, and school secretaries).

Get involved. This section outlines the importance of getting involved in high school. We show how a commitment to a full high school experience enhances all aspects of school life. We teach parents about the importance of student involvement and parent involvement, and how

10 Simple Suggestions for a Successful Transition to High School

Friendly hints to help parents survive ninth grade

1. Be involved in your child's academic program of study.

Make sure that your child is challenged and taking courses now that will help meet future goals. Math course selection is vital and the single most important class decision for the ninth-grade year.

2. Get your child involved in a positive activity... but don't overextend.

Research says that students who are involved in an activity, club, sport, music, etc., are much more likely to have a positive high school experience and get better grades than students who are not involved.

3. Know your child's friends.

Research says that when a teenager is faced with a critical decision, the influence of peers (positive and negative) and parents/families make the difference.

4. Register for Intouch Online and SchoolFusion.

This enables you to track your student's attendance and grades right from your computer. SchoolFusion will allow you to track your student's assignment, projects, and tests.

5. Have your child attend the Freshman Festival.

More details to follow.

6. Attend Back to School Night.

7. Don't allow your child to get lost in the shuffle.

In a large school, a student can get lost or fall through the cracks. Research says that when a student makes positive connections with adults (teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, etc.), it stops this from happening.

8. Remember that all teenagers (including straight-A students) need proper supervision.

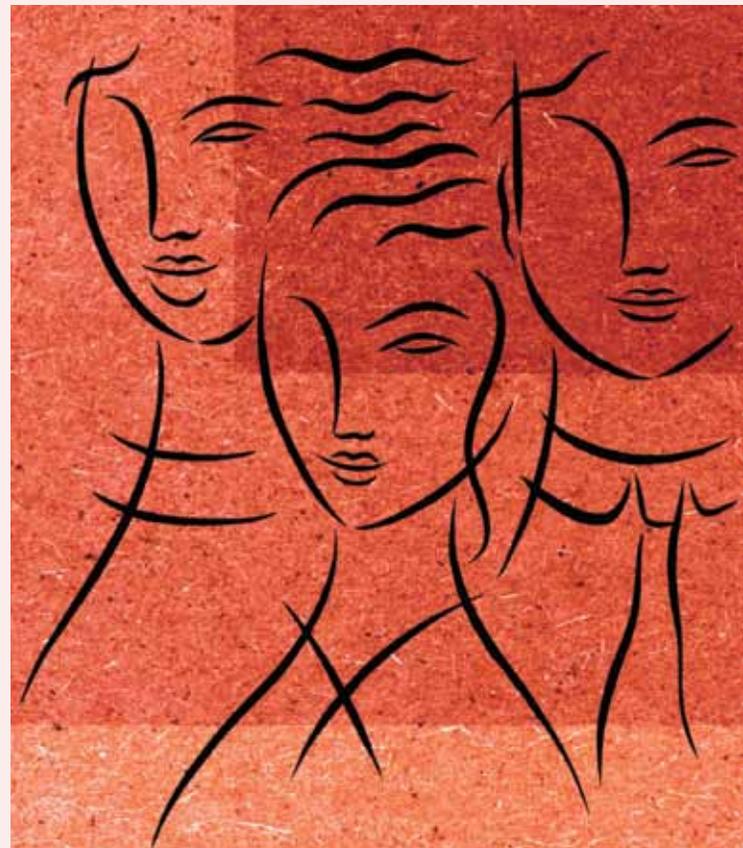
This supervision includes online supervision and supervision of technology. Remember, good kids make mistakes too. Your child should always know that you love him/her, but make sure he/she knows your expectations. Know where your child is and who they are with all the time.

9. Get to know your child's teachers and guidance counselor.

Stay in positive contact with the teachers and don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember that e-mail is a great tool for quick information, but it's not such a great tool for dealing with more-difficult issues. Don't fight the small battles for your child...keep things in perspective.

10. Get involved in school yourself.

The most successful students I have seen are the ones whose parents are at the school, attend functions, join the PTSO or athletic boosters, or serve on the advisory council or some other group. In a sense, these parents are the ones who are in the know, and they use this information to support their children and the school!



having both ensures that students will never get lost in the shuffle of high school life.

Provide supervision. High school freshmen are not “all grown up.” Parents must establish appropriate boundaries and limits for their teenage children. We provide parents with some tried and true strategies for parental supervision, such as setting curfew limits, expectations for after school and weeknights, and establishing expectations about the use of technology. We also give parents some insider knowledge about teenagers and how they act away from their parents. We give practical “look fors” and advice—for example, if their ninth-grade child begins to socialize with twelfth graders outside of school, they should be aware and concerned.

Monitor progress. Parents should keep tabs on their student’s academic, attendance, and social progress as they make their way through the ninth-grade year. Parents are informed of the ubiquity of online progress monitoring systems that schools use to communicate academic and attendance information. We also encourage parents to reach out to teachers periodically to ensure that their teenagers are experiencing success in their classes. We help parents understand the balance between allowing their teenagers to take more ownership of their learning and keeping a close

eye on their children’s academic progress.

The Results

When school leaders partner with their parent organizations (e.g., PTA, PTO, principal’s advisory council) and provide professional development for parents, they are seen as creative educators who care about both the students and the parents and guardians in their school community. Should you decide to offer professional development to your parent community, you will find that parents appreciate your desire to assist them in a compassionate, thoughtful way by giving them practical insider knowledge that they need to support their children’s success throughout high school and beyond. **PL**

Alex Carter (acarter@telluride.k12.co.us) is the principal of Telluride (CO) High School and a 2003 National Milken Educator Award Recipient.

Tim Healey (healeyt@pwcs.edu) is the associate superintendent for student learning and accountability for Prince William County (VA) Public Schools and the former principal of Osbourn Park High School in Manassas, VA.

They are the authors of two books on the ninth-grade transition: The Insider’s Guide to High School: A Parent’s Handbook for the Ninth Grade Year (Vandamere Press, 2010) and The Insider’s Guide for High School Students: A Handbook for the Ninth Grade Year (Vandamere Press, 2011).