

For many students, the transition to high school can feel overwhelming: a new school, new teachers, higher expectations, and more independence.

The start of high school is a pivotal time that can set students on a path for success later in their high school career and beyond. In fact, 9th grade GPA has been shown to be predictive of 11th grade GPA, postsecondary enrollment, and first-year retention. More states and communities are realizing the importance of this critical year and are investing in strategies to support students through this transition.

One of these communities is the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System (CMCSS) in Tennessee. As part of the district's participation in ESG's Momentum Metrics Network, they made 9th grade success a focus of their efforts during the 2022-2023 school year. First, the district invested in a new data system to improve access to real-time data for 9th grade teachers and counselors. Next, building off the success of the College and Career Readiness Coordinator model the district had piloted in the previous year, they instituted 9th Grade Success Coaches at each of the district's seven traditional high schools. These coaches served all 3,306 9th graders during the academic year. The individuals who served as Success Coaches varied by school, but were typically 9th grade teachers or counselors. Coaches also received a stipend for the additional time they dedicated to building 9th grade supports. Under the leadership of the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, these coaches analyzed 9th grade data, engaged relevant stakeholders, developed action plans, and coordinated activities that would address specific student needs at their schools. They dedicated four to six hours a week to coordinating interventions and other services both during the day and after school. These interventions included during and after school tutoring, mentoring, individual counseling sessions regarding grades and motivation, attendance meetings, and parent newsletters and information nights. At the end of

THE MOMENTUM METRICS NETWORK

was a cohort experience that provided dedicated coaching and support to help districts identify data-driven strategies to improve students' postsecondary attainment, with a special focus on students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college-going students. The experience was grounded in ESG's seminal report *From Tails to Heads: Building Momentum for Postsecondary Success*, which identified eight high-leverage metrics that states, districts, and communities can prioritize to help more students move successfully through high school and into postsecondary education and training.

The "Momentum Metrics" are designed to help educators and administrators develop effective district-wide strategies and target key supports at the school and student level. Over the past two years, ESG has provided individualized coaching to a set of Tennessee districts, enabling district teams to analyze data, assess implementation capacity, identify sources of funding, and design and implement aligned district strategies to increase college and career readiness. During year one, district teams created action plans to drive improvements on specific Momentum Metrics; in year two, each district focused on deeper implementation of one of their plan's core elements.

CMCSS BY THE NUMBERS

37,043

Total Students
Enrolled

48%

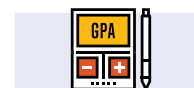
Black, Hispanic &
Native American

25%

Economically
Disadvantaged

Data pulled from the Tennessee Department of Education [District Report Card](#).

METRIC OF FOCUS



9th Grade On-Track

each grading period, the coaches spent several hours reviewing student grades (particularly in English Language Arts and mathematics), adjusting their action plans, and sharing lessons learned with one another. While the 9th Grade Success pilot is still in its early stages, there are some emerging bright spots including increases in Algebra I and English I course pass rates.

INCORPORATING STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

CMCSS embedded specific engagement activities into its action planning protocols to ensure that the project design reflected stakeholder voices.

First, high school principals provided feedback that led to the strategic prioritization of the 9th Grade on Track Momentum Metric, after which they identified 9th Grade Success Coaches to coordinate efforts at their sites.

Using a common template, the 9th Grade Success Coaches developed action plans that included focus-group questions for key stakeholders. For example, after analyzing student data, 9th Grade Success Coaches were prompted with the following: “Speak to an Algebra I teacher, ELA I teacher, or assistant principal about trends they are seeing with struggling 9th grade students regarding time management, organization, etc. What were the trends that you heard from this conversation?” Similar focus groups were conducted with school counselors, attendance clerks, truancy officers, educational assistants, parents, and students.

The 9th Grade Success Coaches then synthesized their findings into common challenges and developed their site-specific supports to address those challenges, such as tutoring, small group organization help, and mentoring.

In addition to the 9th Grade Success Coaches, the district also institutionalized a “High School 101” summer bridge program for rising 9th graders. The program was initially designed as a series of workshops to be delivered to 9th grade students during the academic year and received positive initial feedback. In order to make the program more preventative, rather than reactive, the district shifted

the workshops to a summer bridge program. The High School 101 program leveraged 8th grade data to identify and recruit participants who would benefit from extra support and academic preparation before high school. The district provided training for teachers as well as consistent operational processes (calendars, daily schedules, instructional materials) and curricula for all schools. The summer bridge program ran from 7:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. for seven days. Each day included two hours of ELA and two hours of mathematics to give rising 9th graders early exposure to the content that they could expect to see during their freshman year.

MAJOR WINS

1. Improvement in 9th grade core course grades and test scores. In Algebra I and English I, spring semester pass rates increased by six and two points, respectively. Compared to the previous year, 171 fewer freshmen in the 2022–23 cohort failed Algebra I and 64 fewer students failed English I. These improvements in course grades were seen in state exams as well. In Algebra I, the percentage of students who met or exceeded expectations increased six points compared to the prior year and the percentage of students who tested below expectations in English I dropped by four points.

2. Development of a summer bridge program for incoming 9th graders. Moving the High School 101 course to the summer before 9th grade allowed the district to target students who would benefit from additional support before entering high school. While it is too early to know the program’s impact on grades and test scores, teachers rated the program highly and 94 percent of participants attended the majority of the program.

3. Significant improvement in data use. In addition to the improvement in 9th grade supports, the district also invested in their data system and educators’ capacity to use it. CMCSS embarked on a district-wide data use professional development effort. Using a train-the-trainer model, principals, assistant principals, and academic coaches received training on new data system features and were

tasked with sharing the information with educators in their schools. For the coming school year, high school academic coaches created professional development materials on how to use the data system for instructional purposes and the training will be delivered during pre-service PD days before the start of the school year.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

- 1. Project timing.** The CMCSS team began the 9th grade intervention program in November of 2022, several months after the school year began. As a result, some students were already significantly behind in their coursework. Moving forward, the district will be starting their data tracking and interventions earlier, starting with the High School 101 program that works with students the summer before their freshman year.
- 2. Baseline data.** Baseline data were difficult to compile to be able to compare semester grades of the current freshman class with previous classes. The investments the district has made in its data systems and data training will ensure accurate data are collected in the future.
- 3. Fidelity of implementation.** The 9th Grade Success Coaches came from different backgrounds and brought varying types of expertise to the work. While the ability for coaches to tailor interventions to their school populations' needs is important, at times this led to inconsistent project implementation from campus to campus. By the end of the school year, it became clear what the standard workflow and timeline for 9th Grade Success Coaches ought to be, which was documented for future years. Building in opportunities for coaches to connect, review data together, and learn from one another also helped to build collaboration and standardization among coaches.

THE ROAD AHEAD

CMCSS plans to sustain the 9th Grade on Track project in three ways. First, the district intends to embed the most promising practices within existing district structures. Two key examples are the incorporation of the Response to Intervention and data training within required professional development days and the building of the High School 101 program into the district's summer school programming. The bridge program will continue to be supported by state funds and is structured with compliant operational systems such as attendance and pre- and post-tests.

Second, CMCSS seeks to continue encouraging schools to expand 9th grade services and share learnings with one another. Specifically, a few high schools are piloting additional strategies during the coming school year. Northwest High School will bring together 9th grade teams for monthly or bimonthly collaborative meetings—an extension of what the 9th Grade Success Coach initiated. The school will also implement 9th grade tutoring from the very beginning of the school year in an attempt to prevent students from falling behind. Montgomery Central High School will offer a freshman capstone course that includes tutoring, social-emotional learning, and other supports. The course will be taught by an ELA and a math teacher, and students will be assigned according to their needs, as determined by an early warning system.

Finally, CMCSS plans to formalize the 9th Grade On Track project as part of the college and career readiness responsibilities of new leaders. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction (9-12) will oversee the project under the supervision of the Director of Teaching, Learning, and Innovation. Their onboarding process will include instruction on key components of Momentum Metrics to ensure the sustainability of the initiative.