

Roanoke Rapids City School District

About Our School District

Roanoke Rapids City School District 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy is located on two campuses that are a mile apart. The Transition Academy serves approximately 225 eighth grade students and 245 ninth grade students each year. Its faculty consists of one director, 26 teachers, 2 guidance counselors (one for the 8th grade and one for the 9th grade). On each campus there is a principal and two assistant principals with whom the director of the transition academy works closely. The academic classes of 8th and 9th grades are located in one wing of its respective campus. When the students take their elective courses, they do go to other parts of the campuses for these. Eighth and ninth grade students in the transition academy participate in all sports and clubs offered in the school district.

Roanoke Rapids City School District is a small district in rural eastern North Carolina. The district has one high school, one middle school, two elementary schools, and one pre-k school. It serves approximately 3000 students. The high school's enrollment is approximately 900 students, middle school – 600, two elementary schools – 1400, and pre-k – 100.

Forming the Academy

The idea to form the 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy evolved over a period of time as the district analyzed its data and found that academic achievement for 9th grade students was extremely low (56% of freshmen in 2007-2008 were failing one or more courses), that discipline referrals were very high, and that 17 first time freshmen dropped out in school year 2007-2008. The transition academy was formed to address these concerns. Previously, in 2006-2007, Roanoke Rapids City Schools had formed a redesigned school within a school: Roanoke Rapids Living to Learn High School for a cohort group of 8th and 9th grade students. This redesigned school targeted 100 8th grade students the first year and followed them into the ninth grade. Roanoke Rapids Living to Learn High School had such tremendous success with increasing student achievement, lowering discipline referrals, and decreasing the dropout rate that the school district wanted to expand this success to reach all of its 8th and 9th grade students. The design principles from Roanoke Rapids Living to Learn were carried into the new Roanoke Rapids 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy where all of the school district's 225 eighth graders and 245 ninth graders received the benefits.

The 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy has no extra funding except for the director's salary. The director's role is to work side by side with the middle school principal, high school principal, and both guidance counselors to ensure a smooth transition from 8th grade to 9th grade. The director monitors academic achievement and non-negotiables in all classes, plans field-based learning experiences, directs college visitations, coordinates parent education nights, directs and implements Windows to Your Future (a career site visit study/experience and Futures for Kids (a website that engages students with electronic career mentors across the nation), designs summer camps, implements character education assemblies, coordinates community service opportunities, plans celebrations of success, directs professional development for the staff, and works along side the guidance counselors to help direct the academic and social/emotional success of all students.

Design Principles

The design principles of the transition academy loop with the students from 8th grade to 9th grade. The teachers themselves do not loop, but time and experiences are provided to the 8th grade students for them to get to know their 9th grade teachers some before they come to the high school campus. Students constantly see the director who travels with them on all field-based learning trips, and the director is constantly in and out of classes in the 8th and 9th grade discussing with the students their learning experiences. The 9th grade guidance counselor also travels with the 8th grade students so there is a building of familiarity and comfort level with the director and guidance counselor before they come to the high school campus. Students begin in the 8th grade to learn the non-negotiables of the transition academy: Cornell note-taking skills, Window note-taking, low stakes writing, student reflection, project-based instruction, primary source implementation, and reading strategies (summarizing and talking to the text).

Research-based Instructional Strategies

The design principles of the 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy have been implemented to reduce dropout risk factors. These design principles were established by the 8th and 9th grade teachers during training to create the transition academy. The teachers wanted research-based instructional strategies that have proven positive results. Through design principle number 1, powerful teaching and learning, the academy has non-negotiables in the 8th grade and 9th grade classrooms that all teachers implement. These non-negotiables include Cornell Notes, Window notes, Low stakes writing, reading strategies (summarizing and talking to the text), critical reading circles, student reflection, and implementation of primary sources. Cornell note-taking and Window note-taking are two strategies that engage students in note-taking.

Cornell note-taking involves a two column and summary approach wherein students document facts in one column and ask questions and/or make comments about the facts in the second column. Students are interactive with their note-taking. In Window note-taking, students draw four panes: Facts, Feelings, Questions, Connections. As they read material or hear a lecture, they interact by analyzing the information through their feelings, questions, and relevant connections.

Low stakes writing requires the students to constantly write about what they have learned. This writing can be done in the form of an exit ticket wherein students can show the teacher what they have learned that day or have questions about or it can be implemented anytime during the class period where the teacher wants to see if the students are really understanding the material. Critical reading circles are implemented throughout the classes wherein each student and/or group has a role to fulfill as the material is being read or delivered.

Many different instructional strategies allow teachers to use their professional judgment as to which strategy will be more successful for the task at hand; however, all teachers implement critical reading circles. Primary source implementation is encouraged throughout all classes and much success has been seen in the history, English, and science classes. All of these non-negotiables are research-based practices. These non-negotiables help students make the transition from the 8th grade campus classroom to the 9th grade campus classroom easier. The director of the academy monitors the students' success with these strategies and offers support to those in need.

In addition, the transition academy provides place-based learning. Field studies are taken throughout the year: 8th grade – Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park, Historic Halifax, Chowan University, and Washington, DC; 9th grade – college visits. All students participate in these field

studies. These trips are funded by asking all students to bring \$20.00 at the beginning of the year. Not all students do this, but we are able to travel on what we collect. We also try to have one other fund raiser throughout the year. Another part of this design principle is project-based learning and collaborative group work. All teachers in both the 8th and 9th grade classrooms facilitate project-based and collaborative group work. These are part of our non-negotiables as well.

Personalization

Our design principle number two is personalization. The Transition Academy has an advisor/advisee program for the 9th grade and a mentor program for the 8th grade. Every 9th grade student has an adult advisor on the high school campus. Students meet with these advisors every three weeks to discuss grades, concerns, high school life, etc. The 8th grade students who have shown the need for a mentor are assigned one at the beginning of the year. This mentor monitors the student's progress weekly and has weekly meetings with the student to discuss his concerns.

A CARE (Character and Relationship Education) class has also been established for ninth grade students. The teacher of this class has written the curriculum so that it meets the social, emotional, and academic goals of the students. Seminars on leadership, making the right choices, and citizenship, along with community and school service, and character education make up this class. This class has been so successful in its first year of implementation that the students are asking for a CARE II class. Also included in personalization is the building of relationships through traveling for field studies, celebrations, providing an 8th grade prom, and constant communication with the student and the parent from the director and guidance counselor.

Strong Work Ethic

The third design principle, requiring a strong work ethic, is a strong principle which has shown proven results as the failure rate of the freshmen has decreased. A working lunch is a requirement of any student who has not fulfilled his required assignment. Teachers have the extra support of being able to use the working lunch consequence in an effort to encourage a strong work ethic. Extra support is given to these students through the guidance counselor and the director to help them be successful and see that their work is completed.

Parental Involvement

The fourth design principle, parental involvement, has been implemented through consistent parental contact. Newsletters go home consistently throughout the year, parent education nights are held which are student led, and the director and guidance counselor hold conferences with parents consistently to ensure that each student's needs are met. Our Parent Education Nights have increased in participation from the first year's implementation – 25 eighth grade parents to over 100 in the second year and 40 ninth grade parents the first year to around 80 in the second year. The transition academy stays on top of the individual student's need and takes action to ensure that the student will stay in school and continue his education.

Community Involvement

The fifth design principle, community involvement, has really sparked our students' interests. In both the 8th and 9th grades, all students participate in Windows to Your Future. Each student visits local job sites throughout the year to learn of the educational requirements and skills necessary to enter the work force. *Futures for Kids* is also implemented in the transition academy. This is a web based experience wherein students learn about careers and also are engaged with electronic mentors in careers across the nation. Students, as well, become involved in community service projects as the director contacts community agencies to find out about needs in the community; students learn to give of themselves and learn to have pride in helping others.

All five of these design principles help give students more pride in their educational experience. Constant communication with the students, parents, and the community keep students involved in positive experiences. These positive experiences in turn help reduce the dropout rate and help to ensure individual student success and growth.

Dynamic Early Results

The Roanoke Rapids 8th/9th Grade Transition Academy has seen dynamic results in its first year of implementation (School Year 2008-2009). We have cut the failure rate of freshmen in half just in the first year. Before the Transition Academy, 56% of freshmen were failing one or more courses. With the Transition Academy in place, only 28% have failed one or more courses. Also, before the Transition Academy 17 first time freshmen dropped out. After the establishment of the Transition Academy, 5 first time freshmen dropped out. There has also been a decrease in our disciplinary referrals for ninth grade students. The Transition Academy has also seen a 26% increase in the Algebra I EOC scores and a 12% increase in the English I EOC scores. Now that we have almost completed our second year, our data has shown positive results once again. At the end of the first semester of 2009-2010 school year, 6% of those freshmen who participated in the transition academy their 8th grade year were failing one or more courses. English I EOC scores have risen from 73.09% to 94% proficient, and Algebra I scores have increased from 63% to 70% proficient. Three first time freshmen have dropped out and our discipline referrals continue to decrease.