

Evaluation of the Washington Ninth Grade Success Program

Evaluation Summary Report

Prepared by

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Prepared for

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This report summarizes findings from an independent evaluation conducted by Education Analytics Consulting on behalf of the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The analysis, findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of the evaluator and were prepared for OSPI's Ninth Grade Success Program.



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Introduction and Background

Many school districts in Washington and across the country struggle to support students during the transition to high school, a shift that brings new academic expectations and social norms. Schools especially struggle to produce equitable outcomes for students of color and those classified as low-income. Extensive research demonstrates that students who pass all their ninth grade coursework, and who maintain lower rates of absenteeism and disciplinary infractions, are more likely to finish high school on time, and are more likely to pursue higher education.ⁱ Within this context, schools have implemented student support systems focused on ninth graders, often called early warning systems, to help keep grade 9 students on track for graduation.

In 2019-20, Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) launched an early warning system called **Ninth Grade Success (NGS)** in five high schools. Over the next seven years, the program expanded to 78 schools, reaching every Education Service District in the state. OSPI partnered with Education Analytics Consulting, a Seattle-based education research firm led by Dr. David Knight, to evaluate the NGS program. This document presents a summary of that evaluation, with additional information in a full report available from OSPI.

NGS Program Design and Roll Out

Washington's NGS program is based on the [University of Chicago Freshman Success Framework](#), a model early warning system pioneered in the early 2000s, and implemented in schools across the country. To support implementation, OSPI partnered with [Stand for Children's Center for High School Success \(CHSS\)](#), a non-profit educational service provider with experience supporting similar programs nationally. The model emphasizes five components: (a) Success Teams; (b) data; (c) interventions; (d) transition into grade 9; and (e) classroom instruction. Participating schools receive a grant from OSPI to support implementation.

OSPI launched NGS as a pilot in five high schools in 2019-20 and 2020-21. The number of grantee schools increased to 25 in 2021-22, and then to 55, 58, and 61 in the subsequent three years. In 2025-26, several schools became "alumni schools," continuing to implement NGS, but no longer receiving a grant from OSPI, reducing the number of grantee schools to 50 statewide.

Evaluation Research Questions

Drawing on state administrative and survey data from the first through sixth year of implementation, 2019-20 to 2024-25, the following research questions guide the evaluation:

- (1) What is the impact of NGS on course completion, attendance, student discipline, and high school graduation, and how do these effects vary across student subgroups and school contexts?
- (2) What components of NGS, including the formation of success teams, increased access to student data, transition programs, interventions, and instructional change are implemented at different points in the school year?

Evaluation Design

The evaluation draws on both administrative data covering 2014-15 to 2024-25 and survey data from 2022-23 and 2023-24, and is part of a longer-term study that additionally draws on interview data with program implementers.ⁱⁱ Student outcomes assessed in the evaluation are based on measures that OSPI has established and published as part of their online [Report Card data](#), and include the following: (1) Ninth grade *on track*: the percent of first time ninth graders in each school who pass all their attempted courses; (2) regular attendance rate: the percent of ninth graders attending 90% of school days during the year; (3) exclusionary discipline: the percent of ninth graders who are excluded from the regular school day for one full day or more as a result of a disciplinary infraction; and (4) high school graduation rate: the proportion of ninth graders who graduate from high school within four years of starting their ninth grade year. For graduation rates, we can only estimate effects for cohorts that started by 2021-22, and we exclude schools where more than 20 percent of students transfer into the 9th grade cohort as 10th, 11th, or 12th graders to ensure a sufficient number of the graduating class actually participated in NGS during 9th grade.

To estimate the impacts of the NGS on student outcomes, we examined changes in student outcomes from before to after implementation of NGS, and compared those changes to a group of comparison high schools, a methodology called “difference-in-differences.” Comparison group schools consist of traditional public high schools located in the same county, but not receiving the intervention. Table 1 displays average outcomes for grade 9 students in NGS schools, comparison group schools, and all schools statewide. Comparison group schools have roughly similar outcomes prior to the program launch, and these two groups of schools also share similar characteristics in terms of student demographics and size. The technical appendix for this evaluation includes additional information about the sample, methodology, and findings, and is available upon request from the Ninth Grade Success Program Supervisor, [Jenna Millett](#).

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Student Outcomes for Ninth Grade Success Schools and Comparison Group Schools During Pre-Implementation Years, 2014-15 to 2018-19

Student outcome measure	Ninth Grade Success Schools	Comparison Group Schools	All Schools Statewide
On Track Rate	67%	70%	72%
Regular Attendance Rate	79%	81%	83%
Excl. Discipline Rate	7%	7%	6%
4 yr. Grad. Rate	86%	86%	88%

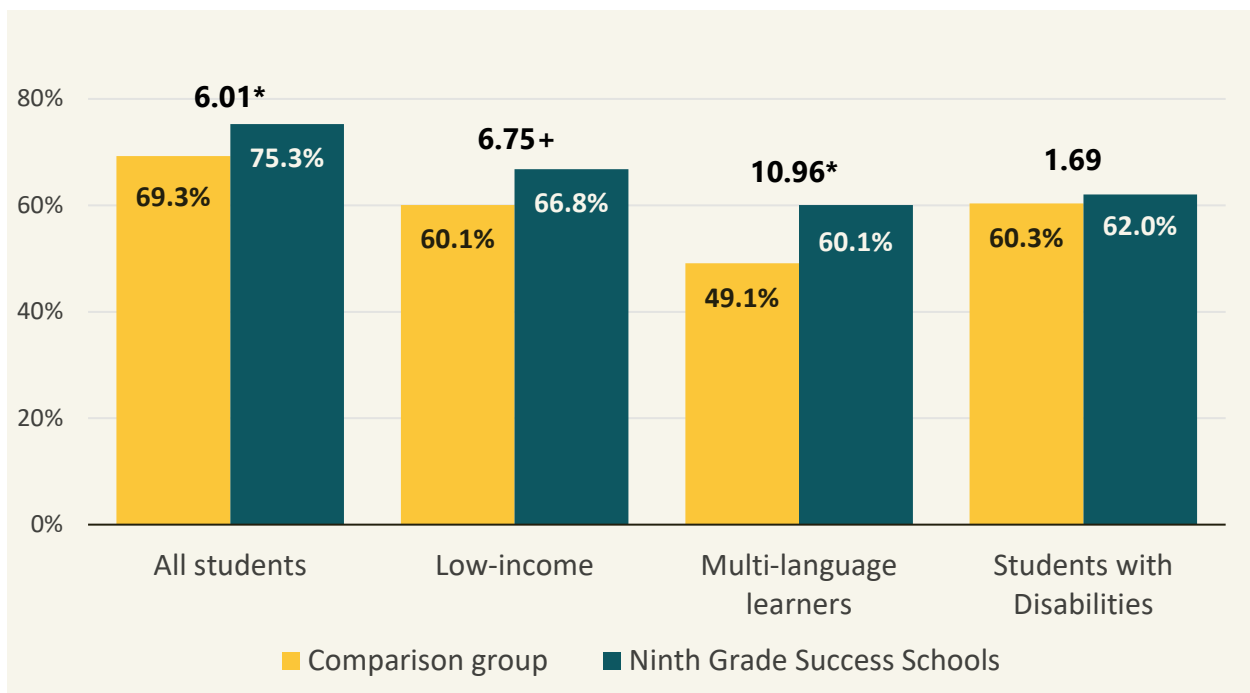
Note. All schools statewide includes all traditional public schools with enrolled ninth graders and excludes alternative, charter, re-engagement, and Tribal Compact schools.

Key Findings

This document highlights four key findings from the evaluation:

1. NGS caused significant gains in ninth grade on track rates, with the typical NGS school experiencing a **6.01 percentage point increase** in on track rates. In practical terms, this means for the average high school that enrolls about 250 ninth graders, approximately 15 more ninth-grade students stayed on track to graduate due to NGS, for each year of implementation. Over six years, 60 more ninth graders would pass all their courses.
2. Effects were slightly larger for students classified as low-income, 6.75 percentage points, and almost twice as large for multi-language learner students, who experienced a 10.96 percentage point increase in ninth grade on track rates. The evaluation found no significant impacts for student with disabilities. Estimated effects were greater in high schools with larger enrollment sizes and schools that serve a higher percentage of lower-income students and students of color.
3. NGS had no significant impacts on regular attendance rate or on the percent of students who experience exclusionary discipline. The evaluation found suggestive evidence that NGS increased high school graduation rates by 2.26 percentage points.
4. Survey data show that schools succeeded in developing Success Teams and gaining access to data dashboards, but often struggled to implement individual interventions and new instructional practices.

Figure 1. Effects of Ninth Grade Success on Ninth Grade On Track Rates, All students and Selected Student Subgroups, 2019-20 to 2024-25



Note. * indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.05$, + indicates $p < 0.10$.

Effects Ninth Grade Success on Student Outcomes

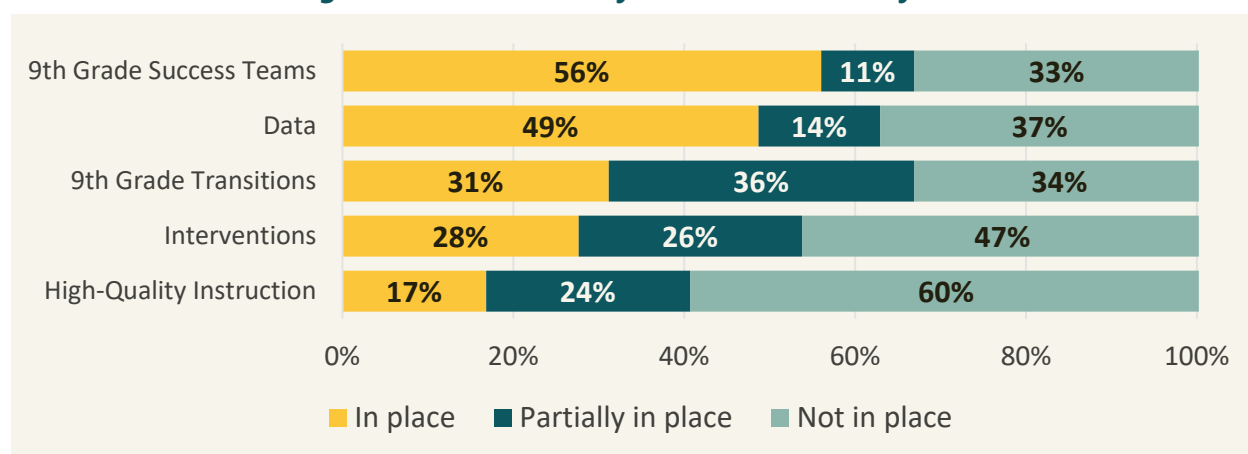
Figure 1, above, shows a summary of impacts for ninth grade on track rates for all students and for selected student subgroups, focusing on the three most prevalent student enrollment classifications, students classified as low-income (53% of NGS students), multi-language learner students (14% of NGS students), and students receiving special education services (13% of NGS students). The evaluation found no impacts on student attendance rates or on exclusionary discipline outcomes.

For schools that started NGS by 2021-22, it is possible to measure impacts on the four-year high school graduation rate. The evaluation found evidence that NGS increased high school graduation rates by 2.26 percentage points, with slightly larger effects in higher-poverty schools (those with greater than 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price meals).

Implementation of Ninth Grade Success

Figure 2 displays the results of the survey data, collected in 2022-23, for schools that had been implementing NGS for at least two years. Success Teams were asked about whether different elements of each component were in place, partially in place, or not in place. For instance, several survey items asked about the 9th Grade Success Teams component, with statements such as “Our team knows the shared purpose of our work, and we regularly re-visit and follow our working agreements.” The figure shows that by the end of the year, over 60% of elements were in place or partially in place for three components of NGS, Success Teams, Data, and Transitions, but less implementation occurred for Interventions and Instruction.

Figure 2. Average percent of items in place, partially in place, and not in place, for each element of NGS, during the 2022-23 school year, based on surveys of Success Teams



These survey results suggest that schools at least partially implemented much of the key structures of NGS, which demonstrates meaningful progress, but also reinforces that NGS is a multi-year effort. Core systems come first and may be more achievable—schools more consistently implement foundational components like Success Teams and Data, which are critical building blocks for impact. However, deeper instructional change takes longer. Lower

implementation of instructional components suggests that improving classroom practice is more complex and requires sustained support over time. Additional analyses of student outcomes show that impacts grow over time, suggesting that the full benefits of NGS occur after three to four years of implementation.

Success Stories

Lastly, we highlight a few success stories to provide specific examples of where NGS schools have experienced improved student outcomes. Toppenish and Wapato High Schools are both located in the Yakima Valley region of central Washington. Both schools serve a student population in which over 95% identify as American Indian/Native, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander/Hawaiian Native, or as two or more races, and over 90% of students qualify for free and reduced price meals. These two high schools were part of the pilot year of NGS, starting in 2019-20, after averaging 9th grade on track rates of 47% (Toppenish) and 57% (Wapato) in the three years prior to 2019-20, regular attendance rates of 86% and 80%, and exclusionary discipline rates of 4% and 8%, respectively. Comparing the average of the three years prior to and after implementation of NGS, Toppenish HS increased on track and attendance rates by 22.4 and 1.5 percentage points, respectively, and reduced exclusionary discipline by 1.9 percentage points. Wapato HS saw a 13.3 and 6.8 percentage point increase in their on track rate and attendance rates over this same period, and a 5.9 percentage point reduction in exclusionary discipline rates. These changes paid off in the long term. For Toppenish and Wapato High Schools, the 2019-20 9th grade cohorts saw a 1.9 and 2.7 percentage point increase in their 4-year graduation rate, respectively, compared to the ninth grade cohort prior to adoption of NGS.

Ferndale High School, near Bellingham, Washington, serves a student population where about 45% of students identify as a person of color and the same percent are classified as low-income. Ferndale first received an OSPI grant for NGS in 2021-22 and started working with CHSS that year. The prior three years, Ferndale HS had ninth grade on track rates of 54%, 66%, and 44%, and the graduation rate ranged from 84% to 86% during that period. In the first year of NGS, 2021-22, the on track rate increased by 18 percentage points from the prior year, from 44% to 62%, increasing to 66%, 68%, and 72% in year 2, 3, and 4 of implementing NGS. In total, students increased their ninth grade on track rate by 28 percentage points from 2021-22 to 2024-25. By 2024-25, Ferndale HS's first 9th grade cohort of NGS schools became seniors, and 89% graduated high school within four years, the highest of any year over the past decade, representing a four percentage point increase from the three years prior to starting NGS. Over this period, attendance and disciplinary rates did not change substantially, but significant growth in on track rates likely contributed to the increased high school graduation rate.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the evaluation found that the Washington Ninth Grade Success program has led to increases in the percent of ninth graders passing all of their coursework, which in turn likely led to improvements in on time graduation rates. While the findings suggest that students are

benefitting from the program, the evaluation did not identify consistent transformational changes, such as widespread implementation of new interventions, or substantial changes in instructional quality. Relatedly, the evaluation did not identify significant improvements in student attendance or disciplinary infractions. Based on the evaluation findings, the following represent possible opportunities for future exploration and consideration:

1. Maintain funding for NGS and consider increasing the resource intensity of the program, without necessarily expanding to more schools.
2. Assess the current cost and resource allocation practices associated with NGS.
3. Conduct follow up interviews of Success Teams in schools with the highest and lowest implementation scores according to survey data.
4. Work with Success Teams and the external partner, CHSS, to help support more transformational changes that lead to improvements in classroom practice.
5. Consider selecting future NGS schools that serve a larger percentage of multilanguage learner students, low-income students, for whom estimated effects are larger.

Ultimately, dramatically improving high school student outcomes and closing opportunity gaps will require more than one program targeting one grade level, but this evaluation shows that NGS provides meaningful, positive impacts on important student outcomes.

Endnotes

ⁱ Allensworth, E. (2013). The use of ninth-grade early warning indicators to improve Chicago schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 18(1), 68-83.

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ⁱⁱ Duncheon, J. C., Knight, D. S., & Almasi, P. & Anderson, K. (2024, April). "That first year is make or break": Results from a three-year mixed-methods evaluation of the Ninth Grade Success program in Washington state. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA.

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