

**Ninth Grade Academy Planning Workshop
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Question and Answer Guide

**Note on format:
Planning Domain**

Bold font: Key questions for your consideration

Regular font: How we answered that question at East Irondequoit's NGA

1 – Leadership, Planning, Communications, and Collaboration

1. Who will be involved in your planning process?

We utilized: Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, (ASI), one school administrator, teachers, counselor, one secretary, communication with union official, site based team.

2. How is this group connected to the larger school community? Superintendent / DO, school board, feeder school, rest of HS, union leadership, parents, upper-class students?

District liaison through the Office of Instruction and the ASI. Through public forums and reports to stakeholder groups, such as SITE based team and PTSA. Continuous updates to the Board, high school faculty, feeder school.

3. How will leadership be distributed? What role will the principal play in planning, leading, and celebrating the initiative?

Principal/designated administrator played key role in the organization. He was recognized as leader of the NGA under the “umbrella” of high school principal. The teachers participating in the NGA also had specific roles in development.

4. Are your goals clearly identified?

Goals were jointly developed by the NGA team (collaboration). We intentionally kept them simple and straightforward (clarity). All members of NGA team agreed to target goals all at all times (consistency).

5. What program marketing strategies will be employed?

We coordinated all efforts with district communication director. Public forums were held that allowed parents to ask questions. Continuous updates to School Board/Central Office and school stakeholder groups. Publicity in school newsletter / local newspaper.

6. Who will be the lead person in communicating the 9th grade initiative to internal and external audiences?

The administrator in charge of the NGA was the liaison for all communication. Take special note of the relationship between the HS principal and the NGA principal. Be sure to clearly define lines of authority and responsibility.

7. Will you consider a 10th grade initiative?

We did not because we expected our students to gain more independence as they moved out of the NGA.

8. How will you plan your interface with your feeder school and high school - curriculum, scheduling, student placement, and faculty connections?

Our NGA counselor met on regular basis with 8th grade counterpart to facilitate student placement. Members of NGA team met with Middle school faculty to facilitate alignment, develop diagnostic testing and assist in student placement. While our NGA faculty met as a unique group, they were also part of joint faculty meetings with the rest of the high school faculty. Our 9-12 Curriculum leaders (a teacher position) were used to maintain program alignment.

9. In order to assist with the 8-9 transition, might “looping” of some teachers or a counselor be considered? Will some teacher “loop” from grade 9 to 10?

We decided not to loop. We wanted to maintain continuity of NGA teaching staff. Nonetheless, communication between 9th and 10th grade teachers is paramount. The NGA counselor stayed with the NGA. She needed to become familiar with program and needs of ninth graders. She also developed a relationship with our feeder school and placement process. The remaining 10-12 counselors looped with their classes.

10. How do you balance the team spirit of the NGA without alienating the rest of the high school faculty?

This is very difficult, because the NGA was seen as a close knit group of innovators at the high school. We sometimes drifted close to an “us” vs “them” situation with the rest of the HS faculty. We minimized that by fostering joint activities and celebrations. We also invited the HS faculty to the NGA to see how we were operating. Ultimately many of the NGA approaches “bubbled up” as the students moved to 10th and 11th grade. Our NGA functioned as a change agent for the high school.

2 – Curriculum, Data and Instructional model

1. Will 9th grade teachers use a common instructional model - common terms, strategies, and processes?

For consistency, we based our model on the district’s instructional model. It was a key to success. NGA principal facilitated group discussions in order to achieve

common terms, strategies, and processes. Staff took ownership of instructional process and results.

2. What role will rigor and relevance play in your program? Will professional development be provided to assist teachers in designing lessons that are both rigorous and relevant?

Professional development was essential to developing a successful program. Collegial circles were another component that proved to be effective. Our ASI provided training in Rigor and Relevance- our foundation for a successful NGA. Students were given non-negotiable expectations.

3. What should you expect to see in the classroom?

NGA Principal and ASI did joint observations / evaluation of NGA faculty. They looked for a structured environment consistent with the NGA approach to Rigor, Relevance and Relationships. Classes should have a welcoming and student-centered atmosphere with consistent academic rigor.

4. Should you utilize common planning time?

Common planning time was not scheduled. Frequent communication did play an integral role.

5. Which core classes do all freshmen currently take? Will the core required classes be the same in the new initiative? How will elective courses be handled / scheduled?

All students took basic core classes. Classes for struggling and honors students were offered. Students were allowed to take electives when possible.

6. How will ability grouping be handled?

An array of indicators were gathered for each student. An eight grade diagnostic test was developed jointly by the 8th and 9th grade teachers for each subject. Note: they sometime differed in their perspectives. They were designed to indicate strengths and weaknesses of students. We also used state testing results, 8th grade report card and a personal profile provided by 8th grade counselor and teachers. It was the 9th grade counselor's responsibility to make the placement determination. If possible, we had two people review each placement.

7. Is there a reading/literacy plan for the 9th grade program?

Yes. We developed a literacy plan.

8. How will math be scheduled?

We found Algebra I was the “gatekeeper to graduation” so we created a double math session for a target group of incoming ninth graders and developed a profile to identify them. Students met twice a day in a program designed by our math faculty. (Not consecutive periods – remember attention spans!)

- Session 1- lessons on theory, order of operations, class examples etc.)
- Session 2 - a quick review of session 1. Followed by practical applications of session 1.

Lessons were relevant to life examples and actively engaged students. We made use of individual problems, group problems and had students explain work to each other. We encouraged students to relate theory to practical applications.

9. How will ability grouping be handled? Will all classes be heterogeneous? If so, what professional development will be offered to teachers?

Students were placed in math and English according to ability. Diagnostic testing and previous student performance results were considered. Teachers were given latitude to design programs to meet students' needs. This gave them ownership of the program.

10. Will there be special programming for those identified as gifted/talented?

Honors courses were available were available in the core areas plus LOTE. Objective criteria were instituted in middle school to ensure that the honors program remained rigorous. Student who did not make honors in 9th grade had other opportunities to move to honors later in high school if their performance improved.

11. Will there be an emphasis on curriculum integration and/or interdisciplinary teaching?

We did not offer interdisciplinary courses.

12. Will there be a special required “seminar” or career planning class of some kind?

We included a seminar stressing importance of education, making future career choices, and importance of planning and time management.

13. How will all grade 9 teachers, on a daily basis, inform students “this is how you will use in the future what you are learning today”?

Lessons should be related to real-life applications (especially math). Stress relevance.

14. What data will be generated during implementation to support the initiative? How will it be reported to internal and external audiences?

We used: Passing rates/mastery level, attendance and suspension rates. Our ASI worked with admin and teacher leadership to develop a “Data Sharing Protocol” which defined what types of data would be shared with which audience.

3 – Program, Schedule and Facilities

1. Will the 9th grade initiative be for all freshmen? First time 9th graders only? Only those likely to be academically or behaviorally challenged? How will you program for over-age 9th graders?

Our NGA was for all freshmen. Over-age students received more intensive intervention.

2. Will 9th grade classrooms be grouped together somewhere in the building?

We grouped in two wings of the HS - it was essential to our success. Our NGA had 325 students in 13 classrooms, Principal's office, Counselor's office, and a secretarial station. Because we had a small gym nearby, we used it a NGA-only. It also served as our NGA "auditorium" for "town meetings." Grouping core classes in a common area created a sense of safe community for students and built camaraderie among staff. We were amazed at the positive supportive atmosphere it created! Electives, LOTE classes, cafeteria, library and all other services were shared with the high school.

3. Will there be an isolated lunch period just for 9th graders?

We did not. We thought it was important for students to have the opportunity to interact with other grade levels.

4. How will common planning/preparation time be scheduled for the teachers?

We did not have common planning time during the school day . Our NGA team did meet weekly (after school) to discuss students and program.

5. Will additional resources, such as more teachers, be allocated to 9th grade?

Our NGA was run with no additional resources or staff. Modest funds were used for summer planning.

6. What NGA class size guidelines will be utilized?

The smaller the class size, the better the results. However, small class sizes will not determine the success of a NGA. Our NGA classes were on par with 10-12.

7. How will extended learning time be made available/required for academically challenged students?

Academically challenged students received remedial support in lieu of electives.

8. What type of schedule will be developed and will it be different from grades 10-12?

We used the same modified block as the rest of HS. We did this to maximize resources and student course choices.

4 – Relationships with Students

1. Are you able to describe the academic and personal character of the ninth grader you hope to foster?

The NGA team discussed this point extensively. We also tried to project how this student would progress to graduation and need to become more independent as they moved 10 – 12. Our NGA philosophy influenced the rest of the HS program.

2. What will you do to eliminate 9th grade student anonymity?

We created a strong sense of community where no student was left out. It was based on Rigor, Relevance and Relationships. We held frequent planning meetings to discuss students. Our teachers and NGA principal were highly visible and accessible to students.

3. Will there be an advisor/advisee program of some type? How will it be structured?

Our 9th grade teachers acted as advisors. Upperclassmen were also recruited to serve as student advisors.

4. What role will counselors play in your 9th grade initiative?

Our counselor was a dedicated to the NGA and a key component of the success of the program. Students felt comfortable talking to her. She was well respected by staff and involved in our instructional discussions. She had a good working relationship with the NGA principal and assisted with some leadership duties.

5. Will students be given a clean slate beginning 9th grade or will an attempt be made to identify students before the year begins who might need attention?

Student issues were quickly identified through common meetings. Student profiles were generating by the teachers, Administrator and Counselor to share information about students who are having difficulties. Additionally, they were also used to record and share strategies to help the student. After all that was done, students were given a clean slate to strive for success as new ninth graders.

6. What will be the special literacy/reading intervention strategies?

AIS support was delivered to any freshmen needing it.

7. How will you program for special needs students – special education, ESL, 504, etc.?

Special needs, ESL, 504 were programmed like any other student who has needs. Common communication ensured the sharing of successful instructional strategies among staff members. Non-negotiable expectations encouraged students to perform to their highest ability.

8. Will academically challenged 9th graders be assigned “more of the same” or will there be an enlightened approach to teaching the core basics?

Our classes were not more of the same. Students were given relevant, real-life experiences to supplement classroom instruction.

9. What concerns currently exist about 9th grade behavior, attendance and attitude?

Before we instituted the NGA we felt that our freshmen were lost in the shuffle. With so much anonymity, it seemed that staff members do not know our freshmen.

10. What interventions and consequences have been used in the past and have they been successful?

Previously, we had a more traditional approach of disciplining students in an “assembly-line” fashion. Students were not treated as individuals. Punishments did not seem to deter future negative behavior by students.

11. Does the school staff currently have a consistent unity of purpose in terms of enforcing necessary school rules and regulations?

Yes. Consistency is the key to a successful NGA.

12. What positive demonstrations of character are desired from students?

Students are expected to be polite, courteous, prepared and on time. Teachers and administration model this both in and outside the classroom.

13. What strategies to promote character might be considered?

We periodically held “NGA Town Meetings” in our gym to address issues of climate and culture. Character education was taught through physical education classes. Reinforcement of these lessons are modeled and reinforced in core classes.

14. Despite the extraordinary 9th grade commitment, how will you program for the few students who will not academically “graduate” to grade 10?

After all interventions have been exhausted, students would be retained in the NGA.

15. Will there be an additional summer school for any incoming ninth graders?

We utilized a number of summer school models. Some exiting 8th graders went to a traditional academic summer school for make up or new course work. We offered a Summer Literacy / Math Academy to exiting 8th graders (as part of a 1st - 8th program) This was an innovative model that combined afternoon PD for teachers with morning support for students. Title I and Title III (ESOL) funds were used to pay for the student AIS. Title II funds provided for our teacher training. We also offered some entering students an orientation focused on social and emotional skills. They received an extended session just prior to the whole school orientation at the start of school.

For a different summer intervention model combining skills, motivation and physical activity see “Summer Prep School” at the website below.

5 – Relationships with Parents

1. Will parents be involved in your planning process?

They were not directly involved in our planning process. We did gather input at parent update sessions.

2. How will you communicate with grades 8 through 12 parents?

Parents are anxious as their children entered high school. The purpose of the NGA is to provide a safe, nurturing high school environment. Public meetings were used to inform parents, answer questions and show them the dedication the NGA team has for their students. This was a great time to involve our PTA network and other parent groups.

3. How will you assist 8th grade parents through a seamless transition process to 9th grade?

Counselor held meetings with 8th grade parents and students beginning in spring, prior to going to the NGA. Orientation meeting were held beginning in summer. Administration was available to discuss individual parental concerns whenever necessary.

4. Will there be special activities or training for parents of 9th graders? What unique communication/dialogue strategies might you use for parents of 9th graders?

The ASI designed and implemented a “Parent Involvement Survey” in conjunction with our PTSA. This helped us to target our efforts. Parents want to feel connected to every teacher. We encourage the use of e-mail. Parent newsletters and use of the district website helped in the communication process. Administration was always readily available.

We held parent orientation nights during the summer. We conducted parent universities addressing topics from social / emotional issues (Discipline with Dignity, Creating an Academic Environment at Home) to current state assessments. We involved parents as much as possible to make them part of our NGA community.

6 - Teacher Support and Staff Assignment

1. Is it possible to assign an administrator full time to the 9th grade?

We had a fulltime NGA Principal. It was crucial to have his office and primary responsibilities set in our NGA. He also had additional 10-12 building responsibilities. Our NGA was part of a 1000-student high school with a Principal and two Assistant Principals (one the NGA Principal). The District Athletic Director was also stationed at the high school and assisted in admin duties.

2. What motivational strategies will be employed to cause teachers to apply to serve as 9th grade teachers?

We create a sense of urgency, a common goal and philosophy that teachers felt empowered to support and implement. The NGA Principal invited staff ideas and was not afraid to take risks. The NGA Principal was highly visible in halls and in every classroom for multiple visits daily.

3. How will 9th grade teachers be recruited and selected?

NGA Principal first met with the teachers union to clarify process for assignment of teachers to NGA. Potential NGA teachers expressed interest. They were willing to put forth time for planning. We looked for teachers who were open-minded and willing to collaborate on a team philosophy that suited the needs of the NGA.

4. How will counselor support be provided?

Our counselor was designated for NGA - only.

5. Will secretarial, student attendance personnel, data generation and management, etc. be provided to the 9th grade team?

Other than the NGA administrator's and counselor's secretaries we did not dedicate any other support positions.

6. Will staff to serve special needs students be assigned to the 9th grade initiative? How will these critical people be integrated with the teachers and teacher teams?

Staff were proportionately distributed to the needs of the NGA students. They worked as part of the NGA team.

7. Will NGA teacher receive specialized staff development? Is there a commitment of extra professional development assistance for the 9th grade team?

It is important that our k-12 program have a consistent instructional flow. Our entire district faculty received training in designing lessons that are both rigorous and relevant. Key training was also offered in teaming, differentiation, and teacher leadership. Other than this the NGA teachers did not receive any specialized "NGA-only" training.

We relied on teacher expertise, experience and desire to play a key role. Teachers felt like equal partners in developing the NGA.

8. Are professional development "experts" available in the school district to assist 9th grade staff?

We used the expertise of the ASI and other members of the Office of Instruction. We also utilized some outside trainers. However, our NGA team's strong commitment to academic excellence and their sense of ownership of the program proved to be the critical resource.