

Transforming 9th Grade Through Transitions, Relationships, and Grading

By applying CORE's cross-district insights and embedded coaching, Garden Grove USD strengthened crucial entry-year supports, set up collaborative teacher teams, and redesigned grading and scheduling. The result was a smoother start to high school and improved student outcomes.



Garden Grove USD: Recognizing 9th grade as the Make-or-Break Moment

When Garden Grove began its Break Through Success Community journey, nearly 4 in 10 freshmen were off track for graduation—with rates as high as 56% at some schools. While many districts focused on supporting juniors and seniors, Garden Grove took a different approach. Leaders followed the research: getting students on track early is the strongest predictor of future success.

Opportunity

Garden Grove Unified saw an urgent opportunity to reduce the number of off-track 9th graders by embedding a proactive, systemwide approach that aligned district and site-level strategies from day one.

Insight

District leaders recognized that sustainable change would require teacher buy-in, collaborative leadership, and a shared understanding of what drives student success in 9th grade. Building strong relationships and equitable grading practices would be essential.

Intervention

District administered a Summer Bridge program, supported teacher teams, and embedded CORE coaches to guide adult teaming, grading equity, scheduling improvements, and relationships.

Impact

85% of high school freshmen can name an adult they can go to for support in school. More students than ever will complete their freshmen year on-track for success after high school, and there will be fewer Ds and Fs on freshmen transcripts and higher freshmen GPAs across all high schools.

85%

85% of high school freshmen can name an adult they can go to for support in school.

3.0

The average districtwide GPA for 9th graders has risen to 3.0.

13%

D/F rates dropped from 24% (2020–21) to 13% (2023–24).



CORE's 9th Grade On-Track work has been transformative for off-track students across our seven comprehensive high schools. Each school team is working collaboratively to ensure students' academic and personal skills are supported in order to enhance students' sense of belonging and efficacy. Our work together truly changes students' lives.

Gabriela Mafi

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