NINTH GRADE COUNTS

Strengthening the Transition into High School

A THREE-PART GUIDE

1 Systemic Transition Strategies
   English Language Learners
   Summer Bridge Programs
Ninth Grade Counts

Strengthening the Transition into High School

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INTRODUCTION

Why We Created this Guide
Ninth grade is a potential minefield for many young adolescents. During the freshman year, incoming students encounter new emotions, new social situations, and new intellectual challenges. And they also begin creating an enduring academic record that will either open up a world of exciting opportunities upon graduation or prematurely foreclose on their collegiate and career prospects. We know that more students fail ninth grade than any other grade, creating what has been called the "ninth-grade bump"—struggling, off-track students are held back by negative self-beliefs, a lack of credits, and an inability to recover from past failures, and the freshman class swells to become the largest in the high school. We also know that many students enter high school performing two or even three years below grade level, and that these students are most at risk of continued failure or dropping out. At the same time, we also know that early warning signs—such as irregular attendance, persistent behavioral issues, and poor grades in middle and elementary school—are often predictive of high school underperformance or a failure to graduate. If educators monitor early warning signs, and if they take proactive steps to strengthen the ninth-grade transition, fewer students will fail and more will graduate prepared for college and the modern workplace.

This guide was created to help schools diagnose weaknesses in their ninth-grade programs, and then develop a purposeful, proactive plan to strengthen this critical educational transition. Focusing on a selection of effective strategies and practices, the guide will equip districts and schools with a comprehensive, step-by-step process they can use to build a high-impact ninth-grade action plan. Specifically, the guide will help districts and schools:

* Engage their faculties in self-reflective discussions about ninth-grade success—what it takes to make sure all students are on track academically and on target to graduate prepared for college by the end of tenth grade.
* Isolate both strengths and weaknesses in their ninth-grade programs.
* Identify high-impact instructional and support strategies likely to increase the achievement and attainment of ninth-grade students.
* Determine action-plan priorities that will help schools achieve their distinct goals for ninth-grade success.

How to Use the Guide
Ninth Grade Counts was developed to help districts and schools strengthen the programs and practices they use to support students entering ninth grade. The tool includes three main components:

1. A self-assessment protocol and activity that will help schools engage in small- and large-group discussions about existing ninth-grade programs.
2. Four brief vignettes of real high schools that have adopted innovative practices to strengthen their ninth-grade transitions.
3. A series of three "planning roadmaps" that will help schools identify best practices, leadership strategies, and action-plan priorities.

Planning Roadmaps
The three roadmaps are organized into the following subsections, each of which features a selection of high-impact practices and recommendations:

DISTRICT + SCHOOL CONDITIONS
- Culture + Expectations
- Professional Development
- Leadership + Resources
- Policies + Accountability

PLANNING + INDUCTION PROGRAMS
- Middle School Collaboration
- Grouping + Support Planning
- Orientation Programs
- Summer Bridge Programs

INSTRUCTION + INTERVENTION PROGRAMS
- Learning Environment
- Personalized Instruction
- Academic Support
- Social + Emotional Support
Instructions

STEP 1
Begin by reviewing and discussing the selection of best practices in teams. Compare the strategies with existing practices in your district or school, and begin to identify where the practices align or diverge. The accompanying vignettes will help you to consider the strategies in context.

STEP 2
Review the column entitled What Leaders Can Do, a selection of guidance and recommendations for school leaders overseeing the implementation of ninth-grade improvement work. This step is intended to get administrators, project directors, and teacher-leaders thinking about and discussing the leadership and coordination strategies needed to successfully implement an action plan focused on the ninth-grade transition.

STEP 3
Each of the planning roadmaps includes workspace to record what’s working and what’s not, and to begin mapping out ninth-grade improvement priorities. In the What’s Working and What’s Not Working columns, you should only record existing strategies and practices, not plans that have yet to be implemented.

STEP 4
The Priorities + Next Steps column is where you can begin to record action-plan activities designed to strengthen the ninth-grade transition. Once your district or school has completed the process, you should have a clear set of strategies and action steps that can be incorporated into a systemic district or school action plan.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

1. The self-assessment and planning process outlined in Ninth Grade Counts is not a perfect measure of school performance, but simply a useful action-planning framework that educators can use to help make the complexities of school improvement more manageable.

2. The planning roadmaps give school leaders a logical structure and process to follow when addressing critical aspects of ninth-grade success—but they are not the only important features to consider when developing effective transition programs. Real schools are not neatly organized into clear-cut categories, education research cannot take every factor into account, and systemic school improvement rarely unfolds according to a perfectly charted step-by-step process. Schools are complex, interdependent learning environments with unique qualities and characteristics, which means that no tool or process—no matter how well devised—will be able to anticipate or address every need.

3. The three approaches in the self-assessment activity—Passive, Reactive, and Proactive—give schools general profiles of ninth-grade transition programs at distinct stages of development. These descriptions are merely brief, representative illustrations, and schools will likely recognize elements of their organization or culture in all three approaches. Users should avoid attempts to perfectly match their district or school to a specific approach—the purpose of the activity is to encourage faculties to engage in the kind of frank, constructive, forward-looking discussions that move them from where they are to where they want to be.
SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPECIAL-NEEDS INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Long Beach Unified School District, which educates 83,000 students in 84 public schools, has numerous student support and intervention programs in place, but project director Nader Twal says that a comprehensive review of performance data revealed that the district was not reaching the neediest population in their schools: students with disabilities. The district discovered that, upon entering high school, these students could not fully participate in the smaller learning communities and related SLC activities offered in its schools. To address the situation, the district created a task force to tackle barriers to full SLC participation for students with disabilities based on their individual preferences. The district is also working to systemically increase elective participation for all students with disabilities and is currently piloting other authentic inclusion opportunities. The work is being guided by a tiered support system that allows full integration of students with disabilities into SLCs when they enter in the ninth grade. Student career-interest data and support from the IEP team is being utilized in the SLC integration process, with additional flexibility that allows the students to participate in learning-pathway activities and performance assessments. Whenever possible, students with disabilities in the district are mainstreamed into SLC classes.

According to Twal, the district’s support and inclusion strategies have helped schools take full advantage of their Response to Instruction and Intervention program, which is designed to provide “consistent and sustained support to ensure that all students achieve their maximum potential.”

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPECIAL-NEEDS INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Self-Assessment Protocol

The following protocol provides an opportunity for districts and schools to engage in a self-reflective conversation about freshman success and ninth-grade transition strategies. The goal of the activity is to examine your district or school in terms of three different approaches to ninth-grade instruction and student support: Passive, Reactive, and Proactive. When it comes to successful transitions, proactive strategies are essential—a school community that strategically plans and prepares can ensure all students succeed as they transition into high school. Working in small groups, the protocol will help school leaders, educators, and staff assess where they are and determine where they would like to be—an essential first step in the action-planning process.

Purpose

To identify strengths and weaknesses in existing ninth-grade programs and strategies as a first step toward building a more effective transition for incoming students.

Structure

Divide into groups of four and assign the roles of facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper.

Time

Between 60–90 minutes.

Protocol

[Adapted from the School Reform Initiative’s Save the Last Word for ME protocol]

1. Individually, read the three descriptions—Reactive, Passive, and Proactive—on the following page. Keep in mind that these descriptions are merely concise, illustrative profiles that are based upon a synthesis of observations, research studies, and reports from schools. Your district or school may closely resemble one of the descriptions or it may reflect elements of all three. The goal is to provoke thoughtful, self-reflective discussions about how your school is structured for ninth-grade success. While reading, participants should identify the specific features they believe accurately describe their school or district, and then select two or three passages they consider particularly important.

2. When the group is ready, a volunteer reads one passage that he or she has found to be the most significant. NOTE: The volunteer should not reveal why the passage is significant at this time.

3. After pausing briefly to reflect upon what has been said, the other three participants will have one minute to respond to the selected passage and express what it made them think about and what questions it raised.

4. After the three have spoken, the first participant has three minutes to explain why he or she selected the passage.

5. The group conducts four rounds of seven minutes each. The same process is followed until all members have had a turn.

6. Participants share their opinions and thoughts about the district or school’s general approach, making sure to base their comments on concrete evidence, observations, and hard data as much as possible.

7. Each group makes a collective determination about where their district or school falls on the passive-reactive-proactive continuum and cites three specific supporting examples that came up during the session. One group member should be the recorder for this exercise. The group may use a flip chart or computer to record the examples.

8. The groups reconvene and share their results with the larger group.

9. The large-group facilitator collects the results and examples for future planning, making sure that all participants receive copies.
Ninth-grade teachers are provided with some data on incoming students, but there is no formal process for using data to inform ninth-grade practices and little collaboration or communication with feeder middle schools.

Students who are entering below grade level or who have failed multiple middle school courses may be encouraged to pursue summer-school courses or tutoring at their own expense, but the high school does not provide a summer bridge program.

All incoming students are given printed orientation materials—the student handbook, a course-selection guide—but actual orientation programs tend to be short, cursory, and sporadically offered; parents may or may not have easy access to these materials.

There is little contact and communication between teachers and parents, and the default expectation is that it is the parents’ responsibility to request calls or conferences with teachers, counselors, or the support staff.

There are few or no policies governing ninth-grade support systems, interdisciplinary learning, or team planning.

Ninth-grade teachers develop their own curriculum and largely work in isolation, and their classrooms are distributed throughout the building. Leveled course placements are made based on past performance, test scores, and teacher recommendations, and learning expectations may vary widely from course to course.

Teachers and counselors provide a range of support opportunities to students, but the programs are largely elective; even though many parents are not well informed about the options, they are still expected to request these services.

Students who are in danger of failing, losing credit, or dropping out are referred to counselors or support specialists, who tend to work in isolation from teachers.

The district and school apply the same general practices, policies, and procedures to the ninth grade that they do to other grade levels.

Problems with ninth-grade programs and students are rarely discussed during staff meetings.

Advisory opportunities are scheduled, but they tend to be disorganized, which results in squandered time; when advisories do meet, little time is devoted to interventions or postsecondary planning.

Ninth-grade teams request data and guidance from sending middle schools only after specific students have been identified as at-risk and off-track by high school staff.

Summer bridge programs are provided only to a limited number of students who have failed courses in middle school or otherwise been identified as being at higher risk of ninth-grade failure.

Optional summer orientation programs introduce students and families to the high school’s learning opportunities and academic expectations, but attendance is often low and few efforts are made to advertise the programs or engage the parents of at-risk students.

Teachers, counselors, and the support staff are encouraged to reach out to the parents of at-risk students, but there are no formal policies or monitoring procedures to ensure that communication takes place.

Ninth-grade teams have been created, but team members are not given common planning time during the school day, they teach other grade levels, and their classrooms are spread throughout the school.

Students are placed into course levels based upon their prior academic record, and many lower-track courses offer less demanding content taught at a slower pace.

Staff members may identify high achievers and provide supplemental learning opportunities to ensure they are challenged.

Intervention strategies are based on standardized expectations for student performance at a particular course level, not on identified student needs.

When problems arise, teachers typically provide support to students on their own, not as an extension of team collaboration or an established intervention protocol.

Teachers refer students to counselors who meet with students only as needed.

The district and school recognize that ninth-grade course failures, achievement gaps, and dropout rates are a significant problem, but the response consists of quick-fix strategies and attempts to minimize, rationalize, or excuse the problem.

Advisory time is used to teach “freshman success” skills, but students may not be paired with team teachers.

Every year, ninth-grade teachers and counselors meet with middle school educators in the spring to review data and identify students at risk of failure, dropping out, or entering high school below grade level.

The school’s four-to-six-week summer bridge program is offered to all transitioning students at no cost.

A comprehensive orientation program addresses not only academic preparation, but also strategies and support related to study habits, attendance, and other social, emotional, and personal factors that can adversely impact learning and achievement.

As an extension of ninth-grade policy, teachers and counselors reach out to the parents of incoming ninth graders during the middle school years and over the summer, ensuring that all students and parents are well informed about school programs.

Ninth-grade teams are given dedicated space in the school facility to encourage a collective sense of responsibility for the success of every student.

Ninth-grade support teams thoughtfully create balanced, heterogeneous student teams and plan curriculum, instruction, and support collaboratively during professional development time that has been incorporated into the school day.

Teachers use middle-level data to design appropriate supplemental-instruction opportunities and classroom-embedded interventions.

The ninth-grade core curriculum engages students in authentic learning experiences that connect content to real-world problems, student interests, and community issues.

Literacy strategies and interventions are embedded in all ninth-grade classes.

Students exhibiting early warning signs, whether behavioral or academic, are provided with a range of appropriate support strategies that are intensively focused on learning acceleration.

When standards are not met, all students are given multiple opportunities to revise work, retake assessments, and accelerate their learning.

Advisory groups meet regularly with team teachers to review learning progress, discuss social issues, and develop a personal learning plan focused on college and career preparation.
District policies provide clear and explicit guidelines on how middle school structures and practices—for example, an untracked core curriculum and standards-based approaches to instruction, assessment, and reporting—reinforce the school’s commitment to high standards and equitable outcomes. The faculty embraces change, and practices are regularly modified or abandoned if they fail to produce equitable learning outcomes for all students. All staff members clearly and consistently communicate learning expectations to students, parents, and community members, and all students know that failing to meet standards is not an option. From the moment they enter the school, the school’s educators and support staff keep students focused on the end goal: graduating prepared for college and careers.

文化的期望
- 行政人员、教员、并支持人员分享共同的承诺，为了所有学生为大学及大学后生活做准备，他们以零容忍的态度，帮助所有学生无论背景、过往表现或感知能力，都取得成功。
- 学校结构和实践，例如，一个非跟踪的核心课程和基于标准的课程，指导学生的评估，评估并强化学校的承诺，高标准和公平成果。
- 学校拥抱改变，并在实践不满足标准时定期修改或废弃。所有工作人员清楚地、一致地与学生、家长和社区成员沟通学习期望，所有学生都清楚不达到标准不是选项。
- 从他们进入学校那一刻起，学校的教育者和支援人员将学生聚焦在最终目标：为大学及职业生涯做准。
What Leaders Can Do

✔ Articulate a bold, coherent vision of high expectations for every student, and ensure that all policies, resources, programs, practices, and leadership decisions are consistent with the vision.

✔ Develop an integrated K–12 data system that uses unique student identifiers to flag early warning signs such as inconsistent attendance, behavioral concerns, and underperformance to equip teachers with the information they need to customize interventions.

✔ Use tools, policies, and resources that are known to work, such as established response to intervention practices or the early warning protocol developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

✔ Give team-based professional learning groups a clear set of directives: e.g., all groups will (1) identify and monitor student learning needs, (2) engage in constructive peer observation and feedback, (3) co-develop and refine lessons and instructional practices, (4) improve support systems, and (5) ensure that every student receives a personalized learning experience in the classroom.

✔ Know your research and statistics—and use them to inform your ninth-grade transition strategy. For example, 80% of students who repeat their ninth-grade year do not graduate. If higher graduation rates are the goal, invest in learning acceleration and move away from grade repetition.

✔ Audit policies to identify and remove roadblocks to ninth-grade student success. For example, policies that require suspension for unexcused absences, automatic course failures for missed days, or grading systems that make it harder for students to build confidence and overcome early failures can inadvertently undermine ninth-grade transition strategies.

✔ Consider the realities of adolescent social, emotional, and cognitive development when developing transition strategies. If a strategy is not developmentally appropriate, it’s less likely to work.

✔ Utilize data systems and student surveys to track the success of specific interventions—whether it is tutoring, online credit recovery, companion courses, or advisories—as a way to ensure the efficient and effective use of resources.

What’s Working

Priorities + Next Steps

What’s Not Working
PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM

Prince George’s County Public Schools, the second largest district in Maryland serving more than 123,000 students in grades K-12, created a unique program to help students transition academically and socially into high school. Called Jumpstart to Graduation, the program is designed to get students focused on graduation and postsecondary planning before they even begin high school. Students attend the program for five hours a day, four days a week, for one month during the summer before ninth grade. The program utilizes a project-based-learning curriculum and also includes advisory periods, college visits, team-building exercises, and a variety of activities intended to boost confidence and preparation for high school. Participating students also meet with high school staff and take classes with many of the same teachers they will have in the ninth grade. The program also provides a preview of the curriculum and instruction that students will experience in their core academic subjects. Unlike the district’s remedial summer-bridge programs, Jumpstart to Graduation is open to all rising ninth-grade students.

Jumpstart to Graduation is starting to show promising results. Yet even with its proven success, the program remains a work in progress. According to Darlene Bruton, the SIC project director for the district, support programs such as Jumpstart must be continually evaluated and modified to ensure that they are meeting the needs of participating students and achieving the desired results. Bruton also emphasizes the need to ensure that support programs are fully integrated into district-wide improvement work.
What Leaders Can Do

- Create clear processes and guidelines that ensure academic support teams—teachers, advisors, counselors, and support staff—maintain ongoing communication and contact with students and parents throughout the transition process.
- Ensure that the faculty and support staff are on alert during the critical first 30 days of school so that early warning signs can be efficiently flagged and responded to as they manifest.
- Make that all personnel compiling and preparing data are well trained and follow clear protocols to ensure that all data is properly imputed and coded—the utility and effectiveness of an early warning system is only as good as the quality and accuracy of its data.
- Don’t overbuild your monitoring and support systems—make sure staff can handle the monitoring requirements and focus the early warning system on the indicators that matter most, such as attendance, behavior, and performance in the core content areas.
- Establish clear performance expectations for all students in the core content areas, and especially in reading, writing, and math. Make sure all learning standards and academic expectations are clearly and repeatedly communicated to middle school teachers, parents, and incoming students to improve awareness and preparedness.
- Participate actively in planning time and professional learning groups as a way to stay connected to daily instruction and student needs, and make sure that this time is intensively focused on what matters most: personalizing interventions, developing authentic learning, and keeping students engaged and on track.
- Use learning materials to enhance parent awareness, understanding, and engagement. For example, rubrics and performance reports that clearly articulate learning standards and objectives can help parents understand instructional goals and better support student learning at home.
- Don’t assume that some students are already prepared—build orientation and support programs on the belief that all students need help to succeed. Even the highest-performing students may need personalized attention, whether it’s accelerated learning opportunities, college-planning guidance, or social and emotional interventions.

What’s Working

Priorities + Next Steps

What’s Not Working
INSTRUCTION + INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

NINTH-GRADE TEAMS

Lincoln High School, which enrolls more than 1,500 students in Lincoln, Nebraska, uses teaming and collaborative planning in the ninth grade to improve student outcomes. All ninth-grade English, science, and social studies teachers are on teams that meet three times a week. Team schedules are determined in advance of the rest of the school schedule to ensure that teaming time remains a top priority—not an afterthought or an add-on. Teams regularly discuss attendance, individual interventions, and curriculum and instructional strategies. Each team educates 60-100 students, and dedicated administrators meet regularly to review student data and ensure consistency across teams. Individual and aggregate student data is collected every four to five weeks and reviewed during team meetings. Teachers look at the numbers of students passing and failing each subject (including non-team classes), attendance rates, and other data to develop and refine student interventions.

The teacher-collaboration process was not always easy, but it improved significantly when the teams started to analyze concrete data. According to Jill Able, the site coordinator for Lincoln High School, “It is about building relationships among teachers and administrators and talking about the importance of what we need to do for students.” Focusing on data, says Able, keeps faculty conversations continually focused on “where we are” and “where we want to be.”

Learning Environment

- Core content-area courses are heterogeneously grouped and all courses offer honors options for accelerated students.
- The physical environment provides dedicated personal learning space to students.
- Ninth-grade class structures—teams, work groups, advisories, course designs, and support opportunities—balance academic personalization with school-wide opportunities and social inclusion.
- The design and application of instructional strategies are the foundation of academic personalization, with advisories, interventions, and support programs supplementing and reinforcing the instructional program.
- The schedule balances time for teacher planning and professional development, large- and small-group student work, and support opportunities, including advisories, companion classes, tutoring, and other strategies.

Personalized Instruction

- Teachers combine a caring attitude—encouragement, attention, and positive reinforcement—with high expectations: they do not accept failure, let students give up, or water-down learning standards.
- Detailed data on the learning progress of individual students and student groups—from assessment scores to formative feedback to conversations with team teachers, the support staff, and parents—are used to modify and optimize classroom practice.
- Personal learning plans and portfolios are used to establish academic goals, incorporate future planning, and track learning progress and attainment.
- All academic reporting clearly articulates learning targets, progress made on the achievement of standards, and high-priority improvement areas in ways that students, parents, and guardians will readily understand.
- Students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate skill acquisition and the achievement of standards.

Academic Support

- Classroom instruction and academic support are intensively focused on learning acceleration—standards, instruction, and expectations are not watered down and essential-skill acquisition is not postponed.
- 21st-century skills—such as critical thinking, teamwork, technological literacy, and multicultural understanding—are embedded throughout the curriculum and in every class, every day.
- Time is allocated in all courses and support programs for lessons in academic skills such as research practices, study habits, organizational strategies, writing effectively, speaking persuasively, and using technology.
- The school’s early warning system includes on-track and off-track indicators that are used to inform interventions, and additional literacy and numeracy instruction is provided—both inside and outside the classroom—to ensure students stay on track with college-preparatory learning standards.
- In every course, teachers model and cultivate the executive-function skills—persistence, focus, self-control, planning, confidence—that are essential to success in learning and in adult life.
- The ninth-grade experience is characterized by both flexibility (in scheduling, instruction, and the use of space) and firmness (in consistency of support, instruction, and learning expectations).

Social + Emotional Support

- Teams of teachers, staff, counselors, and classmates work together as an extended support group for learning, and the monitoring of individual student well-being and progress is shared by multiple teachers and adults in the school.
- The school’s structures, practices, and professional development are designed to make sure that all ninth-grade students are well known, feel supported, and experience a sense of belonging in the school community.
- Affirming aspirations–building messages are delivered in every class, and college and career planning begins the moment students begin ninth grade.
- Each ninth-grade team has a dedicated counselor who works closely with teachers and the support staff, and students in need of social services are referred to appropriate specialists in an efficient and timely manner.
What Leaders Can Do

✔ Make sure the school’s early warning system focuses on the high-priority ABC warning signs—Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance—and make the review and analysis of these indicators a top priority for ninth-grade teams.

✔ Use small interventions that can make a big difference—for example, require teachers and support staff to check in with every ninth-grade student at least once a week about academic progress, future planning, social assimilation, and personal issues.

✔ Be disciplined and purposeful with interventions, and make sure that resources, staff, and time are devoted not only on those students who are furthest behind, but also those who have recently fallen off track.

✔ For ninth-grade courses, compliment teacher-directed instruction and practice with hands-on, project-based lessons that explore student interests and real-world issues.

✔ Don’t assume you know what your students are thinking or feeling—ask them directly and use the feedback to inform instruction, interventions, and program design. Use multiple anonymous student surveys over the course of the ninth-grade year to get insights into the learning experience from the student perspective.

✔ Avoid placing students back in the same classroom environments, with the same instruction and curriculum, that didn’t work the first time. Instead, diversify teaching and intervention strategies, and multiply opportunities for students to get extra help, complete missed work, demonstrate mastery of standards, and recover credit.

✔ Use your communications assets—websites, email lists, the student information system—to compliment and improve interventions. For example, some student information systems include automatic email notifications to parents when students fall off track.

✔ Move students on to tenth grade no matter what. Holding students back only increases their chances of dropping out or not graduating. Redouble and intensify efforts to accelerate learning instead of slowing learning down.
About the Smaller Learning Communities Program

The U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Program awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies to support the implementation of smaller learning communities and activities designed to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Smaller learning communities include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or themes, “houses” in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, autonomous schools-within-a-school, and personalization strategies such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.

In May 2007, the U.S. Department of Education established a new absolute priority for the program that focuses grant assistance on projects that are part of a larger, comprehensive effort to prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.


For more information

ed.gov/programs/slcp