

# Ninth Grade Success Stories

## Thorton High School, Adams 12 Five Star Schools

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The Ninth Grade Success Grant initiative at Thornton High School included a comprehensive Freshman Foundations program spanning 14 classes. The program aimed to improve ninth-grade outcomes by building consistent support systems, promoting student voice and leadership, and strengthening family-school partnerships.

The success of this practice relied on cross-functional collaboration among deans, principals, assistant principals, family outreach liaisons, counselors, teachers, and other school staff. Much of the foundational work involved strategic communication and thoughtful coordination.

The curriculum covered a variety of foundational topics such as professional communication, financial literacy (in partnership with Canvas Credit Union), social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, and relevant topics like vaping. By addressing these needs early, the program aimed to create a more engaged, successful freshman cohort and reduce behavioral and academic barriers throughout high school. This practice was unique in its intentional inclusion of marginalized students—especially English Language Development (ELD) learners and

those with behavioral challenges—in leadership roles and recognition opportunities. For example, the *Student of the Month* program prioritized growth over achievement. Each student received a framed photo and certificate, and staff celebrated them both in-person and through mailed recognitions. These photos and certificates in families' homes created a tangible reminder of student success and belonging. During a second-semester event, every freshman participated in a celebration of growth, each receiving certificates of achievement.



*Kid Talks* was a particularly effective component of this initiative. In Semester 1, these involved only staff and focused on collaborative support planning for students who were identified at-risk by grades, behavior, and attendance. In Semester 2, students were brought into the conversation to discuss their strengths, interests, and goals. Staff collected data on grades, attendance, registration, and withdrawals. This created shared ownership of outcomes and promoted collaboration across roles, while reducing silos between data and practice.

Organizers of this initiative have several pieces of advice for those hoping to replicate the practice. Be prepared to advocate for time and space during the school day, especially when it comes to developing students' public speaking and leadership skills. Prioritize students who are often overlooked for leadership opportunities. Don't be afraid to push back when instructional time is questioned; the long-term gains in student confidence, engagement, and belonging are worth the investment.