

*Make Me Care About...*

Make Me Care About...Ninth Grade

Podcast episode eight transcript

**Jen Hatmaker:** So I don't know if you know this about your host, but I actually have five kids. It's so many, and I have ushered them almost all the way through public school. I've got one left in the hopper. And so if you were to ask me, "Jen, what do you think is the most important grade, if there is one?" I would probably either say kindergarten, just because it is that early childhood emerging literacy space. I'm just throwing education terms at you from my olden days as an elementary teacher. Or I think I might say their junior year, because that's so packed with college readiness or post-high school readiness, but that would be my uneducated guests. But turns out, you guys, there's actually a different grade that matters more than every other grade, and there's a lot of data to back it up, and I've never even heard about it. And this one may surprise you, you guys. So, all right, Krystal, fill us in.

**Krystal Payne:** Ninth grade success is the most powerful metric we know of that predicts high school success, college success, and career success.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Created in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this is Make Me Care About. I'm Jen Hatmaker, and with me is Krystal Payne, Co-Executive Director at the Network for College Success. And today, Krystal is helping us care about ninth grade. Hi, Krystal. Welcome.

**Krystal Payne:** Hi, Jen. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Okay, Krystal. I really wouldn't have guessed that ninth grade was all that important, so please tell me more.

**Krystal Payne:** Well, first, the jump from middle school to high school is an incredibly consequential moment, and if students get off track in ninth grade, it is very predictive of whether they will not only complete high school, but if they will succeed in college as well. Also, if you're on track, you are nearly four times more likely to graduate from high school within four years. And lastly, if you stay on track, it's more than just grades. It's the ABCs of student secondary school success. That's a combination of their attendance, their behavior, and their course performance, which we know is great.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Ninth grade. Whoa, I'm in my feelings.

**Krystal Payne:** Oh, yeah.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I've had a bunch of ninth graders. I have five kids. I've been in ninth grade five times.

**Krystal Payne:** Wow.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So I'm not sure that I ever necessarily knew that ninth grade was such a pivotal and predictive year. So can you explain this to us? Why ninth grade? Why is that the year that is such a make or break for students?

**Krystal Payne:** Well, ninth grade is a critical developmental and academic milestone for young people. When we talk developmentally, at this age, they're focused on belonging. They're focused on how relevant what they're learning in school is to them personally. They are beginning to solidify their mindsets about their own intelligence. And when we start to talk about academics, ninth grade becomes the make or break year of high school because ninth graders who are on track to graduation are almost four times more likely to graduate than their peers who fall off track.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Wow. Four times.

**Krystal Payne:** Yeah. We know that the research is showing us that being on track is more predictive of graduating from high school than factors like, let's say, mobility or economic status or your gender or your race. As a matter of fact, it's more predictive than all of those variables combined. And then when we start to talk about grade point averages, students in ninth grade who earn in a 3.0 or higher grade point average that ninth grade year, they tend to keep that average through 12th grade, and a higher high school grade point average then increases the likelihood of those students not only enrolling in college but persisting and graduating from college, whether they immediately enroll in a two-year college or a four-year college. So yeah, ninth grade is super important to the trajectory of a young person's life.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So now that we know that this year really, really, really matters and we're paying attention to it, can we drill down a little bit more into specifics? Is there a set of skills or experiences or support? What, in other words, needs to be wrapped around a ninth grader so that he or she has the highest chance of success?

**Krystal Payne:** I love that phrase wrapped around. In terms of skills students actually need, I tend to steer clear of that because while that is important, what's more important is the ability of the adults to educate them, or like you said, to wrap around them, to create sustained spaces where they can grow in their agency, in their identities and in their academic skills so that when they graduate from high school, they're successful adults. That said, I will mention that executive functioning skills like managing your time and making sure you can plan and prioritize have to be cultivated. Because once students have these skills in ninth grade, it'll empower them to achieve goals beyond ninth grade in a healthy way.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I love that. So Krystal, while I've got you here, you're fancy now, but you used to be a ninth grader, like the rest of us.

**Krystal Payne:** Yes.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So what was ninth grade like for you?

**Krystal Payne:** Honestly, I cried the first day of school. I was tiny, and I saw these giants entering the building. As I sat in my mom's van, it was like, "Oh my goodness, I don't know if I can do this." I

only knew one other person in my high school. She was my neighbor. She was a sophomore. She was cool, and I was not. However, academically, I loved ninth grade. To have access to a science lab, which I had never experienced before, to learn about different authors, even learning to speak Spanish, all of that stuff was fun. And I would say in terms of my bright spots, they were Mrs. Robertson and Mrs. [inaudible 00:06:32]. They challenged me, they celebrated my brilliance and amplified it, and they would not let me slip through the cracks. When they saw me investing the bare minimum, they called me in and gave me the support I needed. Sometimes it was tough love, but I wouldn't trade it for the world. I really wouldn't. They helped me get through freshman year.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So tell us this: if students fall behind in ninth grade, according to your data and research, how likely are they to catch up?

**Krystal Payne:** Wow. Well, about 30% of ninth grade students who fall off track in the ninth grade graduate high school.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Wow.

**Krystal Payne:** We have to have early intervention, appropriate intervention. These are crucial to prevent ninth graders from falling off track in the first place.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Okay. Obviously, this is a huge deal.

**Krystal Payne:** Yeah.

**Jen Hatmaker:** This matters. This is important. So you touched on this earlier very briefly, but I am curious if you could parse out for us exactly what you mean by the ABCs of secondary school success. What does that mean and why do they matter?

**Krystal Payne:** So A is the attendance. Simply stated, students who go to school every day have a higher chance of being on track by the end of ninth grade year than those students who are chronically absent.

**Jen Hatmaker:** This makes sense.

**Krystal Payne:** Yeah. What a lot of people may not realize is if a student's missing five or more days of school per semester, it totally impacts their graduation percentages.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So that's attendance.

**Krystal Payne:** Yep.

**Jen Hatmaker:** And what's B?

**Krystal Payne:** B is for behavior. Ninth graders who struggle with connectedness at school may exhibit some behavioral challenges that make staying engaged in their own learning more difficult. Of course, this tends to result in decisions to either not show up in class or disciplinary actions like

in school suspension or out of school suspension. And C is course performance. We of a certain era know those as grades.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Sure.

**Krystal Payne:** Right. So it's about earning a 3.0 or better grade point average. That makes the student college and career-ready.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So obviously, with such incredible data and knowledge at our fingertips, knowing that this is the year to really dial it in tight, what are some of the tools or resources or best practices that educators and school systems can use to keep their freshmen on track?

**Krystal Payne:** Data is one of the most powerful tools any educator has at their disposal. And as they're transitioning in from eighth grade, schools can start by actually reviewing the incoming ninth graders' eighth grade attendance in their eighth grade core course grade point averages. Students who have 80% attendance and higher grades are usually more likely to be on track than those who are not.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I have a follow-up question on that, Krystal. Knowing that that year is so pivotal, also knowing the key factors to be paying attention to and investing in, what are some, I guess same question, tools or best practices that parents can be using at home to help their freshmen stay on track?

**Krystal Payne:** That's an excellent question. First and foremost, have conversations with your young people about how they're experiencing school. It's not just about, "Hey, do you have homework?" It's also about, "Hey, what's something you learned today that you didn't know yesterday? What is something you're still interested in learning?" And when asking those questions, sit and listen. Listen to what young people are saying. It's also important to be involved in the school as much as you possibly can. Now, I do realize that there are some families that work all kinds of hours and may not be able to be at every single thing. But what they can do is, for some districts, they have online tools where you can check grades, where you can check attendance, and then sit with your young people and have a conversation about, "Okay, so what do you feel strong in?" Because not all students are going to excel in every single class. And so communicating that success is not just the grades, but also are you well-rounded as a human being, I think will be really important.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Fantastic questions, Krystal. I love this. This is super, super interesting to me as a parent. So you guys, I'm still pretty curious about how families can recover from the effects of COVID on their ninth graders, so we'll talk about that and more when we come back after the break.

This is Make Me Care About, I'm Jen Hatmaker, and with me is Krystal Payne, Co-Executive Director at the Network for College Success. And today, Krystal is telling us all about ninth grade. Let's go back to this because I really am impacted by what you're saying right now in terms of this hugely important relationship between the teachers, counselors, administrators, and the kids. So how important is it for educators to get to know their students and to truly understand their stories?

**Krystal Payne:** Getting to know students and understand their stories is very important. When students are transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade, a lot is changing for them. Their student-teacher relationships, monitoring and support. They're coming into a new school environment, so they may wonder about their safety. But guess what doesn't change? Academic demand. And most people think that when students transition from eighth grade to ninth grade, the coursework gets harder. Actually, the academic demand doesn't.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Okay.

**Krystal Payne:** But here's the piece. Young people are very perceptive though. When they come into the school communities, they know which teachers care about them and which ones couldn't care less, and they tend to show up and work harder for those teachers who have invested in them personally. It's not about becoming a ninth grader's best friend. It's really about educators giving themselves permission to put their own assumptions, their own biases on mute, and dialing up instead on their listening.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I really appreciate you saying that. I mentioned earlier I have five kids.

**Krystal Payne:** Yes.

**Jen Hatmaker:** The youngest is a junior in high school, so I've been through ninth grade a few times. One of my kids came into ninth grade hell on wheels, and had a lot of defenses built up, was prepared to be unliked by his teachers, was prepared to be set back on his heels. And I can tell you right now, every single detail about that kid's ninth grade teachers who were able to overcome that hurdle, which was just ninth grade bravado, and see my kid, loved him, got to know him, listened to him. I'm telling you, that kid would've done anything for those teachers. Anything. He was going to succeed in their classes at all costs. What you're saying is true. Whatever those ninth graders look like on the surface deserves a second look. The data has a lot to tell us, but that kid has more to tell us. And so you've got this holistic work that you do between the educators and the students, the data and the research.

I have a big question for you because I'm listening to this conversation, and my youngest kiddo was a ninth grader during that first full year of the pandemic. And so she started ninth grade in August. We were not even five, six months into COVID. Everything was up for grabs. We had virtual school. We were trying to figure out hybrid school. Their social connections were broken. The normal transitions that any other kid got to have moving into high school were disrupted. It was such a hard year, and my kiddo struggled greatly, having never struggled before. We'd have been one of those good data points probably. And that year, all bets were off academically, emotionally, socially, mentally. It just felt like a nightmare, and I know she wasn't the only one. I know that we're just now, of course, starting to gather data on the impact of COVID on our kids.

But as it relates to ninth graders here in this conversation with you, what do you have to tell us about the impact of the pandemic on the success of the on track initiative? And it's so early. We're probably still making some guesses at this point, but I'd love to hear what you think about these ninth grade COVID kids.

**Krystal Payne:** Yeah. Ninth grade on track rates in some districts initially took a dip, but I'm confident that as school communities continue to focus on relearning how to be in community, in

person, we'll see an increase most definitely. I've seen a number of schools start to double down on what it means to build community within the school, what it means to embrace students, actually asking students how are they experiencing school, how can we make school better, where you feel like you belong, where you are seen, where you are held, where you are heard? And then actually taking that data and doing something with it rather than just asking, and then it goes off into a vacuum. So I'm hearing administrators, I'm hearing teacher teams, I'm hearing counselors asking students more about how are they experiencing school and what do they need in order to be fully present in school. That's something that I've seen in some schools. But now, because of this pandemic, it has brought those types of conversations and movements to the fore, which is a great thing.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So as a parent, you guys, I thought whole conversation was fascinating to me. Unfortunately, of my five kids, they've all already been through ninth grade, and so I'd love to have it back to be able to put into practice some of the stuff I learned today. But I will not forget this, and I will for sure be passing this on for my nephews and nieces and friends' kids, and everybody else who still has ninth grade in their future.

To learn more about Krystal's work, please check out the show notes. Make Me Care About is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum of Magnificent Noise. Our production staff includes Sabrina Farhi, Hiwote Getaneh, Julia Natt and Kristen Mueller. Our executive producer is Eric Nuzum, and I'm the host, Jen Hatmaker.