

PUTTING NINTH GRADE FIRST:

PHOENIX UNION'S SYSTEMWIDE APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Powered by the Center for High School Success (CHSS) | September 2025

INTRODUCTION

Phoenix Union High School District (PXU) is one of the largest and most diverse high school districts in the nation, serving over 24,000 students across 20 school sites. With a student population that is predominantly Latino, as well as a high percentage of English Language Learners and students from low-income backgrounds, PXU faces challenges common to large urban districts—including lower graduation rates, high rates of chronic absenteeism, and persistent opportunity gaps.

Recognizing these challenges, PXU leaders knew that systemic change had to begin with ninth grade—a pivotal year that [research](#) shows has more impact on graduation than any other.

In partnership with the [Center for High School Success](#) (CHSS), PXU launched a districtwide effort to put ninth grade at the center of its high school improvement strategy. Today, all 11 comprehensive high schools in PXU are CHSS partner schools, and the results speak volumes.

Dr. Thea Andrade, PXU Superintendent, echoes this:

"Center for High School Success is the biggest bang for your buck because we end up with higher attendance rates, less dropouts, higher graduation rates. We end up with students on track and succeeding, parents satisfied with the school, so it's very clear that that is at the top of mind for resources."



THE CHALLENGE: ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES IN 9TH GRADE

Camelback High School exemplified the urgent need for change. Prior to partnering with CHSS, only 42% of ninth grade students at Camelback were on-track to graduate. Chronic absenteeism was rampant and teacher retention rates hovered around 75%.

CHSS partnered with PXU to shift from reactive responses to proactive, system-level change.

The cornerstone of the CHSS model is the 9th Grade On-Track metric, which identifies students as "on-track" if they have earned at least a quarter of the credits needed for graduation and have no more than one failing grade. Decades of [research](#) show that this measure is the most accurate early indicator of high school graduation, more so than race, income, or test scores.

CHSS SUPPORTS SCHOOLS WITH THE PRIMARY DRIVERS FOR 9TH GRADE SUCCESS:



DATA

Using real-time data to identify students at risk of falling off-track early, including grades and attendance



EDUCATOR TEAMS

Building cross-disciplinary 9th Grade Success Teams



INTERVENTIONS

Implementing targeted supports through group-based high school classes to develop student skills



TRANSITION

Creating systematic supports for students' transition from middle to high school



INSTRUCTION

Ensuring consistent, rigorous, relationship-driven teaching

The comprehensive, research-based approach not only improves outcomes but also increases return on investment. As the CHSS approach has scaled, quality has improved, and CHSS estimates a 6–10x ROI through cost reductions

related to retention, attendance, and credit recovery. This means that school leaders can be more efficient with per-pupil spending over time and reinvest dollars in what is working.

SPOTLIGHT: CAMELBACK HIGH SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

At Camelback High School, the CHSS approach catalyzed a school-wide transformation. Early implementation success involved building buy-in from staff and creating space for cross-functional collaboration. Camelback leadership realized that classroom teachers did not have the necessary time to work together in cross-curricular teams to identify and support students before they are off-track. Teachers engaged in

professional development in how to utilize real-time data to unlock early warning indicators for students likely to be off-track. Teams meet weekly to design and adjust interventions tailored to individual students. These decisions are made based on strength-based protocols to identify root causes of struggle, assign interventions, and track and monitor progress over time.

THE KEY STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION INCLUDED:

UPPERCLASSMEN MENTORSHIP	9TH GRADE SUCCESS TEAM MEETINGS	ADVISORY PERIOD	“FRESHMEN SUCCESS”
Developing a peer mentorship program for incoming freshmen, which is known as “Link Crew” at Camelback High School	Replace language with what’s in comments Establishing dedicated 9th Grade Teams with weekly data meetings	Creating structured advisory periods served as an intervention tool to support students	Opportunity for all Freshmen to learn and build executive functioning skills like goal setting, note-taking, and monitoring their own data and progress

Students embraced the new advisory structures and peer mentorship opportunities with positive responses, and educators embraced the consistency and clarity of the CHSS Roadmap as

well as the built in support that came from the team meeting structure. These systemic changes created a sense of momentum and possibility that sustained the change management.

Principal James Arndt describes the evolution:

"In the beginning, we didn't immediately have this incredible 9th Grade On-Track Rate. We were patient, and we kept reinforcing our processes and systems. And then, we went from a 42% 9th Grade On-Track Rate to 83%... When teachers feel successful, they are happy. And so, we've had over a 90% teacher retention rate. Every educator

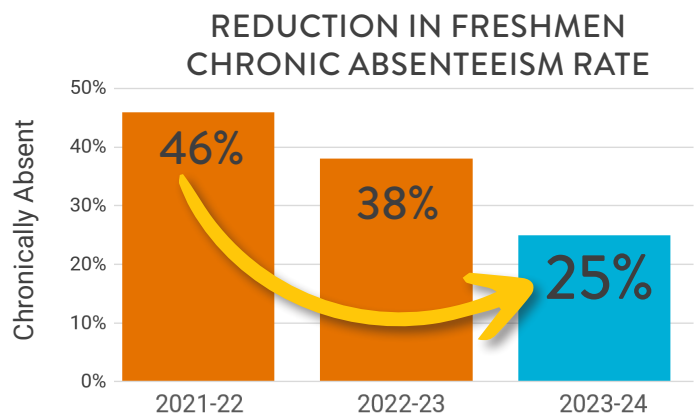
knows that chronic absenteeism has become a real problem, and with our 9th Grade Success model, we reduced chronic absenteeism by 20%. Now beyond that, we massively grew dual enrollment: last year, over 600 students took a dual enrollment class over 3,000 college credits were earned."



KEY RESULTS AT CAMELBACK HIGH SCHOOL

Camelback is seeing the tangible impact for students and teachers. The high school boasts significant improvement on its 4-year graduation rate and dramatic reduction in chronic absenteeism. Before beginning work with CHSS, fewer than half of students (42%) were on-track in 9th grade. For SY 2022-23, 83% of freshmen were on track—a nearly 100% increase. The positive trend continues in reducing chronic absenteeism: Almost half as many freshmen were considered chronically absent for SY 2023-24 compared to 2021-22, and the trajectory continues through their sophomore year and beyond. Early data for the current school year (2024-25) shows only

15% of freshmen students are chronically absent at Camelback.



THE BROADER IMPACT: BUILDING A CULTURE OF BELONGING, RIGOR, AND SUPPORT

The CHSS partnership with Camelback didn't just change metrics—it transformed mindsets. Teachers and students alike now point to the school's cultural transformation. The 9th Grade Success Teams became hubs for early intervention and collective problem-solving, helping educators feel more connected to each other and to their students.

Kimberly Shaffer, a ninth grade biology teacher, shared:

"We talk about things that we've noticed, interventions that we have tried with [students], and then the next steps. So, we could put together pieces really quickly and get the help or whatever support the student needs."

Julian, a tenth grade student, added:

"Our teachers talking about us just really boosts our morale, makes us want to strive for more, makes this relationship with our teacher like a bond."

Though Camelback is the focus of this case study, similar stories can be shared across all PXU's comprehensive high schools. Dr. Andrade emphasized that CHSS is not a standalone program but a systems-level approach that aligns staff, builds sustainable practices, and delivers long-term gains across multiple campuses.

This impact extends beyond Camelback; educators across the district report increased morale, reduced burnout, and greater alignment around what it means to support students during a pivotal year. As schools adopted shared language and common practices for tracking and responding to student needs, the district began to experience a broader cultural shift—toward proactive support, data-informed decision-making, and a stronger sense of purpose—it transformed mindsets.

A POLICY WIN: ARIZONA'S HISTORIC INVESTMENT IN 9TH GRADE SUCCESS



The success in Phoenix has caught the attention of state policymakers. In 2025, Arizona lawmakers approved a \$3.4 million increase in Ninth Grade Success Grants, more than tripling

the original funding. This investment was directly influenced by the outcomes seen in PXU and other CHSS districts.

LOOKING AHEAD: SUSTAINING AND SCALING

The future of ninth grade success in Arizona is bright. As CHSS is partnering with all comprehensive high schools in PXU, the state funding is enabling more districts to launch similar efforts. CHSS is also scaling in other states, including Colorado, Washington, Louisiana, and many more, where its ROI-driven model is proving both cost-effective and impactful.

As districts seek to improve outcomes for students, high school success and relevancy is central. CHSS offers a replicable, scalable model rooted in research and demonstrable results to improve engagement, attendance, and academics.

CONCLUSION

Education leaders, policymakers, and funders looking to create sustainable, system-level impact should look to Phoenix Union as a model—and to CHSS as a proven partner. Whether you're a

district considering a high school improvement strategy or a state leader exploring targeted funding, these all begin with a focus on 9th Grade Success: now is the time to act.

ABOUT

THE CENTER FOR HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS

Connect with the **Center for High School Success** to explore how this approach can work in your district or state. Ninth grade is not just the beginning of high school—it is the foundation of student success.



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