

2009

A Case Study of a High School Transition Program into the Ninth Grade

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A Case Study of a High School Transition Program into the Ninth Grade

By
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A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
August 2009

Approval Page

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Abstract

A Case Study of a High School Transition Program into the Ninth Grade. Durant, Jamie Douglas, 2009: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Freshmen Transition/Ninth-Grade Transition/High School Transition

This dissertation was designed to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of a Ninth-Grade Transition Program at a Rural High School in Central North Carolina. The ninth grade is a pivotal year that determines which students will prevail and which students will fail to finish high school (Hertzog, 2003). It is essential that schools put in place components that ease the transition into high school and provide ongoing support.

Investigation measuring instruments used by the researcher included a two-part student survey and focus groups involving students in the ninth grade and those teachers who teach in the ninth grade. The data collected from both instruments was tabulated and common themes were identified. Results indicated that the practices in place in their school had a positive impact on student behavior and their attitude towards school.

Recommendations for further research included (a) continue with a multi-year study to increase validity and identify trends or patterns; (b) conduct research to determine parental perceptions of the transition process; and (c) involve other high schools in the district to gain additional data to establish significance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The ninth grade is a pivotal year that determines which students will prevail and which will fail to finish high school (Hertzog, 2003). Jay Hertzog, professor and researcher at Slippery Rock University, described the ninth grade as the “holding tank” for high schools (Hertzog). Students failing courses during the first semester of high school were more likely to experience further deterioration in their school performance and not likely to recover (Roderick & Camburn, 1999).

Director of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy at Boston College, Walt Haney, called this holding tank “the ninth-grade bulge,” the larger number of students enrolled in Grade 9 compared with the number enrolled in Grade 8 the previous year (Black, 2004). The bulge indicates that many students are being retained in Grade 9 and fewer are going on to tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades (Black).

Ninth grade – typically the first year of high school – comes at the end of what are widely considered kids’ most vulnerable years. Between jocks, bullies, squirts, and geeks, these middle years present some of life’s first real chances for average kids to fail (Jonsson, 2004).

The beginning of high school is a critical time for students. Research shows that making a successful transition to high school can help students form lasting attachments to school and increase students’ likelihood of graduating from high school (Kerr, 2002).

The transition to high school has never been more treacherous nor the consequences more personally disastrous for so many. All over America, thousands and thousands of ninth graders are and have been painfully failing (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The number of students who disappear between Grades 9 and 10 has tripled over the past 30 years (Courrege, 2004). During the first half of the 1970s there were less than 4% fewer students enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 the previous year (Haney, 2003). Attrition between Grades 9 and 10 started increasing in the late 1970s and accelerated from the mid-1980s onward (Haney). By the turn of the century there were nearly 12% fewer students enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 the previous year (Courrege).

Academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out (Legters, 2000). Over 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8% of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty. Across the nation, freshmen are considered more likely to drop out or be held back than any other students (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). An increasing percentage of adolescents are not graduating from school in 4 or even 5 years (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). A related cause for concern is the increase of students who are stuck in the ninth grade bottleneck and fail to progress into the tenth grade on time (Wheelock & Miao).

A student's outcome after the transition to high school plays an important part in determining his/her future educational pathway (Kerr, 2002). Roderick and Camburn (1999) found that students failing courses during the first semester of high school were more likely to experience further deterioration in their school performance and not likely to experience a recovery. Academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out (Kerr).

Hertzog and Morgan (1999) described the ninth grade as a pivotal year that determines which students will prevail and fail to finish high school. Their 1998 study of

450 high schools and their feeder middle schools shows ninth grade spells doom for about 25% of ninth graders nationwide. Ninth grade has become the holding tank for high schools (Hertzog & Morgan).

The results of difficulty during a school transition can be seen in negative outcomes for students. In general, there is a decline in student achievement following a school transition (Kerr, 2002). The average drop in grades is 18%, following the transition to high school, a decline corresponding to letter grades (Roderick, 1993). Roderick and Camburn (1999) reported that students making the transition to high school are at great risk for early course failure. Of the ninth graders they studied, course failure immediately following the transition to high school was not limited to students with low prior academic skills, making the threat of course failure an issue for entering ninth graders of all achievement levels (Roderick & Camburn).

Nationwide, Boston College researchers found that ninth-grade enrollment bulges had grown in all but three states: Arkansas, Louisiana, and Maine (Viadero, 2006). The percentage of “extra” students in the ninth grade was 15% more in 12 states (Viadero). The bulge has grown from 4% in 1970 to 13% in 2000 (Viadero).

Compared with enrollment numbers in 8th grade, 9th grade enrollments are larger than ever. If students are progressing on time through the education pipeline, student enrollment in any particular grade should be about the same as enrollment in the previous grade. Such is the case in most of the grades. However, 9th grade enrollment relative to the 8th grade enrollment belies this expectation. Enrollments are increasingly bunching up in grade 9. As of 2001, 13 percent more students were enrolled in grade 9 than in grade 8 the previous year nationwide, while the bulge can be

much larger for some states. For example, in Florida, as many as 32 percent more students were enrolled in grade 9 than grade 8 the previous year. (Wheelock & Miao, 2005)

Wheelock and Miao (2005) went on to explain that the largest dip in enrollment from one year to the next is now between Grades 9 and 10. The ninth-grade bulge is illustrated by the following numbers provided by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES, 1995): enrollment figures show 4.19 million students enrolled in Grade 9 during the 2003-2004 school year, while figures for the following school year, 2004-2005, show enrollment numbers for tenth grade at around 3.75 million – a loss of 10.5% in 2005.

Attrition between Grades 9 and 10 started increasing in the late 1970s and accelerated from the mid-1980s onward (Haney, 2003). By the turn of the century there were nearly 12% fewer students enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 the previous year (Haney). The Education Pipeline provides staggering numbers that explain the attrition problem. In 1998-99, there were 3.86 million students enrolled in Grade 9 in public schools in the U.S., but in 1999-2000, there were 3.42 million enrolled in Grade 10. The difference, 440,000 students, means that 11.4% of ninth graders in 1998-99 did not show up as enrolled in Grade 10 in 1999-2000. In short, by the end of the century the Grade 9 to 10 transition was clearly the largest leak in the education pipeline (Haney).

Nationally, as of 2001, while 10th grade enrollment was between 11 and 12 percent smaller than 9th-grade enrollment the previous year, the difference was much higher in some states. For example, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia and Texas have grade enrollments that are twenty percent smaller than the grade 9 enrollment the previous year. In contrast, prior to the mid-1980s, between 2 and 5

percent of 9th graders failed to progress to 10th grade, and the loss of students from the pipeline was most pronounced after grade 11. (Wheelock & Miao, 2005)

Analysis of enrollment data at the state level reveals that there has long been substantial variation in rates of student attrition between Grades 9 and 10. Between 1984-85 and 1985-86, when the rate of attrition between Grade 9 and 10 nationally stood at a little less than 5%, six states had attrition rates of 10% or worse (Georgia 16.5%, Texas 14.9%, Louisiana 13.2%, South Carolina 11.5%, Kentucky 11.2%, and Virginia 10.0%), but ten states showed Grades 9 to 10 attrition of less than 2% (California, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, Utah, Kansas, Wyoming, South Dakota, Hawaii, and Wisconsin) (Haney, 2003).

By the end of the century, however, the list of states with attrition rates between Grades 9 and 10 of more than 10% had more than tripled. As the number of states with ninth to tenth grade attrition rates more than tripled, the ninth to tenth grade attrition rate nationally had more than doubled during that same interval, from less than 5% to more than 11%. What is striking about the list of states is that it includes not just southern states (the only ones with such attrition rates of more than 10% in the mid-1980s), but also northern and midwestern states such as New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Ohio, and Michigan (Haney, 2003).

Researchers have described the transition from middle school to high school as one that is a stressful time for adolescents. Students who fail their classes are likely to (a) begin questioning their ability to make graduation requirements, (b) lose interest in school, and (c) consequently drop out of school (Reents, 2002). Entering ninth grade can be one of the most emotionally difficult, challenging times in a child's life. Researchers have identified ninth grade as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students

from losing motivation, failing, and dropping out of school (Reents).

The Middle School Movement of the 1960s (focused on moving the ninth grade out of the middle school and into the high school) has left educators questioning the best placement for ninth graders for 3 decades (Kerr, 2002). High school educators are faced with the challenge of providing a positive transition program that will promote success among ninth graders. The research indicates that facilitating young adolescents' transition from middle to high school requires programs that specifically address the transition period (Cognato, 1999). In school systems with full-blown transition programs, the researchers found a significant impact on the number of student dropouts – an 8% dropout rate at schools with such a program versus a 24% rate at those without (Reents, 2002).

Hertzog and Morgan (1999) conducted a study of 56 schools in Georgia and Florida and found that schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than those schools that provided few activities focused on transitions.

The transition itself is at the root of the academic distress of ninth grade, rather than individual development changes that just happen to coincide with the move to high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2001). However, the pressure of making a school transition is amplified by the developmental struggles students are facing as adolescents, leading to a greater chance for negative outcomes (Legters & Kerr, 2001). “The traditional high school is not developmentally appropriate for ninth-graders” (Chute, 1999, p. 1).

Many ninth graders have a difficult time adjusting to the demands of high school, resulting in lower grades, more disciplinary problems, higher failure rates, and feelings

that they don't fit in to the high school community (Legters, 2000). As students struggle to fit in socially, they also face more demanding academic requirements that can be daunting for those with poor prior preparation in core subjects (Legters & Kerr, 2001).

Many students who are not successfully integrated into the school community make the decision to drop out early in their high school career, often during or immediately following the ninth grade (Legters & Kerr, 2001). Ninth-grade students are faced with a complex, new environment upon making the transition to high school.

Three facets of the high school environment present specific challenges for transitioning students. First, upon entering high school, students face a larger, more diverse student population. With a greater number of peers and less individual contact with teachers, students are likely to feel a greater degree of anonymity and a decreased sense of belonging (Roderick, 1993).

Second, academic demands increase at the high school level. Students face new rules and raised academic expectations, an increase in departmentalization and differentiation by academic ability, and different instructional techniques that require new, more advanced skills (Roderick, 1993).

Third, upon entering high school, students encounter new social structure and a dramatic change in their social status. Referred to as the "top dog" phenomenon, ninth graders go from being the oldest, most experienced students in the middle level school to the youngest, newest members of the high school population. The change from "top dog" status to "bottom dog" may cause greater feelings of anonymity and isolation, thus hindering students' abilities to become integrated into the new school community (Kerr, 2002).

Many North Carolina students hit a brick wall in ninth grade. They fail too many

classes to be promoted and are held back. Some of them just drop out or eventually quit (Silberman, 2004). A recent study of all 50 states cites North Carolina as having one of the nation's worst attrition rates between ninth and tenth grades. The state's sophomore class in 2000-01 shrank 18% from the freshman class the year before – the result of students held back and others who just quit (Silberman).

In North Carolina – an extreme case, but emblematic of a national trend – about 15% of kids are now “retained” in ninth grade, according to a new Boston College study. Some suspect a correlation with the staggering dropout rate: Nearly 1 in 5 students never returns for Grade 10. Then, too, by the time retained students finish ninth grade, many are near the age at which they can quit without parental permission (Jonsson, 2004).

About 15% of high school freshmen in North Carolina were required to repeat ninth grade in 2002, up from 10% in the early 1990s. Wake County schools held back almost 16% of its ninth graders in 2002; Durham 22%. Chapel-Hill-Carrboro was better than the state average at about 9% (Silberman, 2004).

Of the 19,000 North Carolina high school students who quit last year, more than a third were ninth graders. Yet many struggle with the shift from middle to high school where they are more likely to be left to sink or swim. Teachers tend to expect more of students, both in study habits and maturity. Family issues can be a factor. Students who have been held back reach their 16th birthday, the age at which state law allows students to drop out (Silberman, 2004).

In the 112,000 student Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, school system, a school watchdog group flagged a 29% bulge among ninth graders as early as 2002 (Viadero, 2006). “I was drawing bar graphs, and all of a sudden this bar for ninth grade was so big I had to check myself,” said Steve Johnston, the executive director of the

Swann Fellowship, the Charlotte-based nonprofit group that drew attention to the issue there (Viadero, p. 2). Local school officials said at the time that the numbers had ballooned because the district had enacted tougher high school promotion requirements. In an effort to build in extra safety nets, Charlotte Mecklenburg school leaders have since initiated ninth-grade “academies,” an extended “freshman focus” period, tutorial programs, and career planning help for ninth graders (Viadero).

Purpose of the Study

The research indicates that school district’s transition programs have a significant impact on the number of student dropouts. The purpose of this study is to evaluate a ninth-grade transition program, review what type of assistance was given to students to support the transition process to ninth grade, and to gain insight into why students experienced transition success.

Overview of the Study Design and Procedures

This study used a mixed method approach in the form of a case study to evaluate the best practices of a high school transition program and the impacts on student behavior and attitude. Three types of data collection instruments were implemented, themes were identified and triangulation of data was utilized to better support the results.

Research Questions

The following questions were investigated during the research process:

1. What is the impact of the current practices in place on improving ninth-grade students’ behaviors and attitudes towards school?
2. What are the factors associated with transition success or lack of success?
3. To what extent did the students experience transition success?

Definition of Terms

Adolescence. The period of growing to maturity, specifically the ages 13-18, when a child moves toward adulthood.

Advisory. A class or program focusing on developmental issues facing students, including drugs, alcohol, peer pressure, decision making, health issues, and other topics encountered by students as they experience puberty and adolescence.

At-Risk Students. Students who demonstrate qualities or background factors which could indicate a potential for low academic performance.

Middle School. A school which serves students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 and is organized to address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of early adolescents.

Orientation. Activities, meetings, or programs that focus on transitioning to a new school and explaining/providing expectations, organizational, and general information to new students and their parents.

Transition. The movement from one school organization structure to another, such as the movement from middle to high school.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the importance of assisting students with a successful transition to high school, the background and significance of the problem, research questions, definition of terms, and summary. The beginning of high school is a critical time for students, and a successful transition can increase the likelihood that students will graduate. Chapter 1 presented evidences that a successful transition program provides a foundation for high school success.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a current transition program at a high

school and the impact it had on student behavior and attitude.

Chapter 2 includes a literature review of research and practices relevant to ninth-grade transition and the impact a negative transition can have on a student's educational experience. This chapter also provides nationwide and individual state statistics concerning the transition into high school. The chapter ends with various components of transition programs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This research venture was to find the best practices that promote success among ninth-grade students in their transition to high school. This project evaluated one high school and the practices currently used in the transition process. The school was a public high school located in an agricultural community in central North Carolina and served students in Grades 9 through 12.

The research was a mixed method case study that examined the practices currently being utilized. Interviews, observations, surveys, and student data were collected over a 1-year period. Conclusions from the case study and other gathered data determined the effectiveness of the transition program that was in place.

Introduction

Entering ninth grade can be one of the most emotionally difficult, most academically challenging time in a child's life. Along with the self-esteem issues, developmental changes and environmental shakeup faced by the young adolescents, school districts risk watching their ninth graders fall through the cracks without proper transitional programs in place. In fact, researchers have identified ninth grade as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, failing and dropping out of school (Reents, 2002).

As they make the transition into high school, many young adolescents experience a larger, more impersonal, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment than they experienced in middle school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). They experience a greater diversity of teachers and peers, and have more choices to make in their curricular and extracurricular activities. In this environment, many young adolescents' grades drop, and

they do not attend school as regularly as they did (Mizelle & Irvin). They also develop a more negative view of themselves and feel an increased need for peer friendships (Mizelle & Irvin).

The research indicated facilitating young adolescents' transition from middle school to high school requires programs that specifically address the transition period as well as middle school programs that challenge and support students (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001).

Fewer students were retained in the transition grade when middle school students experienced a high school transition program with several diverse articulation activities (Mac Iver, 1990). According to Mac Iver, those transition programs which were successful included activities that provided students and parents information about the new school, provided students social support during the transition, and brought middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum requirements.

Hertzog and Morgan (1999) conducted a study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools in 1999. They found that schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided students few articulation activities. They concluded that the best transition programs were those which included a variety of activities—in particular, counseling, school visits, and special summer courses to help students understand their new school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001).

As part of the secondary reform efforts, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2004) published *Breaking Ranks II*, a list of recommendations for all high schools. It stated that all programs should provide a high level of core knowledge to every student; have meaningful personal connections with

students; guide students with personal planning for their high school career and beyond; adapt the instructional program to the different ways in which students learn; use time flexibility; distribute leadership among teachers, parents, students, and administration; and provide continuous staff development.

These suggestions are essential in reaching out to ninth-grade students so they are encouraged to stay in school, and feel they can be successful and have a strong sense of purpose and goals. The research continuously mentions the importance of personalization, students developing personal bonds with adults that include tailored support, and students connecting with the course content so that they see its relationship to real life (Walker, 2006).

Based on the *Breaking Ranks II* recommendations to high schools, the following are seven components of successful transition programs sponsored by the Union Pacific Foundation and Dr. Karen Walker (NASSP, 2004).

1. *Goals*. Goals have been developed by the stakeholders, have been based on the needs of the student body, are realistic and have the support of the school community.
2. *Physical Space*. One critical component is for ninth-grade students to have their own physical space, whether that is a specific ninth-grade wing, community, school-within-a-school, or separate building.
3. *Math and Language Arts*. Another commonality is that, in the majority of programs, ninth-grade students receive a double dose of math (usually Algebra I) and language arts (usually English I) for the entire year. Students who fail this at the end of their first ninth-grade semester can have a clean start and repeat it the second semester.
4. *Rigorous and Meaningful Curricula*. Students who feel engaged and stimulated by the curricula tend to stay in school and make better grades than those who do not.

5. *Support.* All students are connected with caring adults who guide them, help them plan for their present and future, and push them to move on to higher levels. Teachers are supported by administration and staff in their work with ninth-grade students by providing time for collaboration, common planning and ongoing staff development.

6. *Buy In.* This comes from the district office, school administration, staff, community, parents and students. All have been educated in the purposes and importance of providing a specific ninth-grade program. All teachers in the program want to teach and work with this age group.

7. *School-based Assistance Teams.* These teams consist of the student's teachers, counselor, parent/guardians, other support personnel and people from appropriate agencies who are involved in the student's life.

Components of a Successful Transition Program

Activities that provide information to students and parents. Middle school students want to know what high school is going to be like, and they and their parents need to know about and understand high school programs and procedures (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). In particular, parents need to be actively involved in the decisions their eighth graders are asked to make about classes they will take in ninth grade and understand the long-term effects of the course decisions (Paulson, 1994).

The following are examples from the ERIC Digest, *Helping Middle School Students Make the Transition into High School*. Mizelle (2000) explained that some of the ways students can learn about high school include visiting the high school in the spring, perhaps to "shadow" a high school student; attending a presentation by a high school student or panel of students; visiting the high school in the fall for schedule

information; attending a fall orientation assembly (preferably before school starts); and discussing high school regulations and procedures with eighth-grade teachers and counselors. In addition to face-to-face activities, another possible source of information is the Internet. High school students might, either as a class or club project, set up a web page that would provide incoming students information on different high school activities and clubs and offer them an opportunity to get answers to any questions they may have from the “experts” (Mizelle).

Activities that provide social support. At a time when friendships and social interaction are particularly important for young adolescents, the normative transition into high school often serves to disrupt friendship networks and, thereby, interferes with students’ success in high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991). Thus, it is vital for a transition to include activities that will provide incoming students social support activities that give students the opportunity to get to know and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Mac Iver, 1990).

A “Big Sister/Brother” program that begins in eighth grade and continues through ninth grade, a spring social event for current and incoming high school students, and writing programs where eighth graders correspond with high school students are just a few ways that transition programs can provide students social support. Middle and high school educators should also look for opportunities to develop more long-term activities such as peer mentoring or tutoring programs (Mizelle, 2000).

In one such program, Cognato (1999) found that students who participated in a number of different interactions, including meetings, letter writing, and a picnic with older students, received fewer failing grades and missed fewer days of school than students who did not participate in such programs (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). Furthermore,

females in the treatment group benefited more from the program in terms of socialization, self-esteem, and academic performance. The social interactions in this program included ninth-grade students meeting with eighth graders to dispel some of the misconceptions about high school, eighth graders shadowing a ninth-grade student, and eighth-grade students writing to a ninth-grade buddy (Mizelle & Irvin).

Activities that bring middle and high school educators together. Underlying successful high school transition programs are activities that bring middle and high school administrators, counselors, and teachers together to learn about the programs, courses, curriculum, and the requirements of their respective schools (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). Activities that create a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at both levels and the young adolescent learner will help educators at both levels to develop a high school transition program to meet the particular needs of their students. In addition to the more typical committee or team meetings with representatives from each level, these activities may include K-12 curriculum planning meetings, and teacher or administrators visitations, observations, and teaching exchanges (Mizelle, 2000).

Designing these activities should include input from students and parents at both levels. Coinciding with these ideas, Lena Morgan, co-chair of the Center for Transition Studies at Augusta State University and the State University of West Georgia, recommended that a transition program include (a) visits to eighth graders by the ninth-grade counselors and teachers; (b) visits to high school by eighth-grade teachers, students, and parents; (c) professional development programs on the development of young adolescents for high school teachers; and (d) a high school design where freshmen can stay with the same group of teachers and remain somewhat separate from older high school students (McAdoo, 1999).

Barbara M. Fulk, a professor at Illinois State University, explained that during these meetings, middle school and high school teachers must share concerns as well as relevant student information, instructional strategies, and ideas. In addition to an evening orientation, she recommended an additional orientation entitled “step-up days” which are conducted at the high school during the school day (Fulk, 2003). Each of the middle school teams receive a 2-hour orientation conducted by successful upper classmen. Students are then divided into smaller groups that allow for questions and a tour of the building. The purpose of this orientation is to ease students’ anxiety about entering high school and to capitalize on the enthusiasm and “know-how” of successful upperclassmen (Fulk).

Activities that involve parents. Middle school students want to know what high school is going to be like (Mizelle, 1995), and they and their parents need to know about and understand high school programs and procedures (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). What is a vocational class? Should I take College Prep Algebra I or General Algebra I? How should I know, and what can I do if I get in the wrong class? Providing students and parents the answers to these and many other questions should be a central component of a high school transition program (Mizelle & Irvin). In particular, parents need to understand and be actively involved in the decisions their eighth graders are asked to make about classes they will take in ninth grade (Paulson, 1994). Parents need to understand students’ options and the long-term effects of the course decisions (Mizelle & Irvin).

The importance of parents being involved in their young adolescent student’s transition from middle to high school can hardly be overestimated. When parents are involved in their student’s transition to high school, they tend to stay involved in their child’s high school experiences (Mac Iver, 1990). When parents are involved in their

child's high school experiences, students have higher achievement, are better adjusted, and are less likely to drop out of school (Mizelle, 2000). The concern for educators is that typically parent involvement in young adolescents' school related activities decreases during the transition from middle school to high school, unless schools and teachers work to encourage their involvement (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001).

Parent involvement in the transition process to high school can be encouraged through a variety of activities. Parents may be invited to participate in a conference (preferably at the middle school) with their child and the high school counselor to discuss course work and the schedules, visit the high school with their child in the spring or in the fall, spend a day at the high school to help them understand what their child's life will be like, and help design and facilitate some of the articulation activities for students. In planning activities for parents, high school educators will want to remember that parents of students who are already in high school are an excellent resource for new high school parents, and may also help to encourage new parents to be more involved in school activities. At the middle school level, teachers and administrators can inform parents about transition activities and encourage them to participate. Perhaps more importantly, they can work to keep parents involved in their child's education and school activities during the middle school years so that they are comfortable "coming to school" and confident their involvement makes a difference in their child's academic success (Mizelle, 2000).

Middle school programs that support a successful transition. While providing young adolescents with activities that relate directly to their transition into high school is important, providing young adolescents with a challenging and supportive middle school experience is equally important in their making a successful transition into high school

(Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). Mizelle and Irvin found that students who stayed together with the same teachers through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and experienced more hands-on, life-related learning activities, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning groups were more successful in their transition to high school than were students from the same school who had a more traditional middle school experience (Mizelle & Irvin).

At the same time, those students who received a traditional middle school experience recognized they were stressed about their grades because high school teachers expected them to learn more and faster and to do more learning on their own. Upon reflection, these students indicated that their middle school program would have eased their transition into high school if it had provided them with an even more challenging curriculum and if teachers had held students more responsible for their learning and taught them more about strategies for learning on their own (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001).

Summer program activities. Summer sessions prevent loss of learning for at-risk students and give them a head start on the coming school year (High Schools That Work, Web-Site). Barbara M. Fulk, a professor at Illinois State University, worked with a district that instituted a 4-week summer orientation class to prepare selected students for the rigors and expectations of high school (Fulk, 2003). Middle school counselors and principals recommended students for participation based on risk factors observed at the middle school.

The curriculum included instruction on study skills, organizational skills, making the right decisions, using a school planner or organizer, using the Instructional Media Center, and becoming familiar with their class schedules. High school administrators and counselors served as guest speakers. Students earned elective credit upon successful completion of the class. These interventions are of primary importance since they directly

target those students who are identified as high-risk for failure (Fulk, 2003).

High Schools that Work recognized Margaret Brent Middle School in St. Mary's County, Maryland, for their program involving low performing eighth graders (NASSP, 2004). They provided extra help and time, a different type of instruction and a way to help close the gap between their achievement and state standards.

Tutoring activities. "Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School," an article published by the High Schools that Work organization, discussed extra help and extra time to meet high standards as a component of an effective transitional system (NASSP, 2004). Teachers at effective schools make it known that they believe students can do high-level work; students at these schools believe their teachers will be available to help them meet the standards. Many schools have discovered extra-time and extra-help programs work best when teachers assist students in mastering the content standards formerly reserved for the "best" students. This help often occurs in out-of-school time.

Fulk (2003) referred to a Midwestern school district and how the tutoring was provided by university students majoring in education or curriculum and instruction. This has been extremely well received by students at both levels. Students were either self-nominated or were referred by teachers, parents, or counselors for this extra assistance. Depending on their needs and availability, students worked with tutors daily either during their study halls or lunch periods. Some of the tutors were paid through school improvement grant funds, where other tutors earned academic credit (Fulk).

Student planners as active involvement. Fulk (2003) explained how one school district implemented the use of student planners. An important step, taken at the beginning of the school year was to provide each freshman student with a school

handbook and planner during registration. Costs were offset by donations, parent organizations, and the athletic booster club. The planner also included a calendar with all school activities and events listed on the appropriate dates. Students were encouraged to use the calendar to track their assignments and test dates for optimal planning of their studies and projects. Some instructors also provided students with a list of classmates' names and telephone numbers to use as resources when stuck on homework problems (Fulk).

In his annual back-to-school address in 1999, The United States Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, echoed the sentiments from the 1996 *Breaking Ranks*: "Changing an American Institution" article. In his remarks, the Secretary recommended high schools consider creating smaller, more personal learning environments for students where it will be less likely students will "slip through the cracks" (Riddle, 2000).

Summary

Research highlighted the facts and factors that contribute to transition difficulties for some students; the plan for transition must be differentiated to address the needs of students, parents, and staff. The areas of focus to provide a successful transition program are activities that provide information to students and parents, activities that provide social support, activities that bring middle and high school educators together, parental involvement, middle school programs that support a successful transition, summer programs, tutoring, and student planners.

A literature review supported the importance of providing students with a successful transition program. It also provided research indicating the impact a negative experience can have on a student's outlook on high school. Data was provided to indicate that there needs to be a concern for the current situation schools in the United States are

facing regarding the high school transition.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology utilized in the case study. It presents the research questions that were used, the research design, the procedures, the instruments, and the participants involved in the study. The chapter concludes with the delimitations and limitations of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Problem to be Addressed

Across the country, official reports of high school students dropping out of school do not always reflect the scope and extent of an urgent but neglected national educational problem: The nation's graduation rate is in steady decline. An increasing percentage of adolescents are not graduating from school in 4 or even 5 years. A related cause for concern is the increase in students who are stuck in the ninth-grade bottleneck and fail to progress into tenth grade on time (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school is not a new concern for middle-level educators. In fact, one of the fundamental functions of the initial middle-level education movement was to articulate young adolescents' transition into high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2001). Nevertheless, young adolescents today frequently have a difficult time making the transition into high school. Many drop out, often shortly after they enter high school, or they fall behind and fail to graduate on time (Mizelle & Irvin).

The focus of this dissertation research was to evaluate a ninth-grade transition program and understand what type of assistance was given to students to support the transition process to ninth grade, and to gain insight into the extent that students experienced transition success. Many students struggle their freshmen year in high school because of the difficult transition. The study's findings focused on school environments and programs that support and promote successful transitions for all students from the middle school to high school.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies and components of high

school transition programs. As the first year of high school, ninth grade becomes a critical time for students in the development of an educational trajectory that will carry them through high school and beyond. Unlike their older high school peers, ninth-graders represent a unique part of the high school population and have a unique set of needs (Kerr, 2002).

Roderick and Camburn (1999) explained that schools do little to provide students with support as they make the transition into high school, instead integrating ninth graders into the larger school population and allowing them to fend for themselves. Many ninth graders have a difficult time adjusting to the demands of high school, resulting in lower grades, more disciplinary problems, higher failure rates, and feelings that they don't fit into the high school community (Legters, 2000).

To guide this study the following questions were investigated:

1. What is the impact of the current practices in place on improving ninth-grade students' behaviors and attitudes towards school?
2. What are the factors associated with transition success or lack of success?
3. To what extent did the students experience transition success?

Study Design

The design of this study was a mixed method research design in the form of a case study researching the best practices of a high school's current transition program. A case study is the most appropriate method and allows for an in-depth exploration of the transition program. A case study allows for the collection of detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures, both quantitative and qualitative.

Concurrent procedure mixed method design allows for the convergence of quantitative data and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the

transition program selected. This method allows for both forms of data to be collected at the selected school and then be integrated to examine the results.

The concept of mixing different methods probably originated in 1959 when Campbell and Fiske used multiple methods to study validity of psychological traits (Creswell, 2003). This prompted other researchers to utilize the mixed method approach in association with field methods such as observations and interviews (qualitative data) combined with traditional surveys (quantitative data) (Creswell). This allows one method to be nested within another method to provide insight into different levels or units of analysis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Site Selection

The school selected for this study was a high school located in rural central North Carolina. The school was in existence for 50 years and served four small agricultural communities. The school included students in Grades 9 through 12 and had a current enrollment of 1,187 students. The demographics were 70% white, 22% African-American, and 8% Hispanic. There were two feeder middle schools; one was a primary feeder school that supplied 245 students for the 2008-2009 school year and the other was a secondary feeder school that supplied 40 students.

The students involved in the study transitioned into the ninth grade during the 2008-2009 school year. The freshman student body was comprised of 140 male students and 145 female students. Of the 285 students that made up the ninth grade, 72% were white, 23% African American, and 5% Hispanic. There were 30 students identified as Exceptional Children.

Instruments

There were three data collection tools used in this study: (a) student focus groups

that were conducted in 30- to 60-minute sessions, (b) freshmen teacher focus groups that were conducted in 30- to 60-minute sessions, and (c) a survey/questionnaire that was administered to students in 30-minute sessions.

Surveys and focus groups are commonly used assessment instruments in research. Questions are usually classified as one of two types: (a) behavior and attributes, or (b) attitudes and beliefs (Salant & Dillmon, 1994; Straus, 2000). The survey that Straus developed sought to reveal attitudes or beliefs of students related to their experience of ninth-grade transition to high school after middle school.

The student survey questionnaires were distributed to those students in the ninth-grade class who were granted parental permission to participate (Appendix A). This was a two-part survey that was created by Dr. Ilene Straus while conducting research on ninth-grade transition programs (Straus, 2000). The survey consisted of two parts. The first part of the survey was designed to obtain demographic background information about the student's family and living situation. Straus designed these questions to allow students to check responses about who lived in the student's house during the ninth grade, where the student went to receive help, and how they rated their high school transition. These questions provided correlations in an attempt to isolate individual and family information that may affect the transition experience (Appendix B).

The second part of the survey was developed employing a scaling technique. Scaling techniques are used to improve the researcher's ability to measure attitudes and beliefs and involve creating a series of questions in which patterns can be determined as to how individuals answer questions in a series (Salant & Dillman, 1994; Straus, 2000). The Likert scaling technique measures attitudes by attempting to locate the respondent's position in an affective continuum ranging from "very positive" to "very negative"

(Straus). Quantification is accomplished by tallying participants' responses to positive and negative belief statements. In this questionnaire developed by Straus, each Likert item is phrased as clearly negative, as reflected in categories ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Ilene Straus worked with Peggy Lyons, former RAND corporation researcher, to develop an instrument that collected information focused on factors which may have affected the student's transition success (Straus, 2000). The format they developed allowed students to check six possible responses to activities participated in, seven possible responses of who helped them with school work, and eight possible responses as to what helped them "make it" in the ninth grade. This part of the questionnaire was developed to gain additional demographic data beyond the data available in the district's data base.

The second part of the survey was modeled after the survey developed by Martin Maehr and his colleagues at the University of Michigan in a previous study of student transition from elementary to middle school. This instrument, the PALS, was a validated survey instrument created by Martin Maehr in 1996 and utilized by Dr. Ilene Straus in 2000.

The scale was developed for the PALS instrument using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The instrument had 23 statements that students had to rate with 1 indicating "not at all true," 3 indicating "somewhat true," and 5 indicating "very true." Students circled the number that best showed their opinion about the statement, with words describing the rating just below the number on the survey to help students make the decision (Straus, 2000).

Questions 1-6 assessed the individual's emphasis on learning. The questions

identified those students who placed value on effort, improvement, and progress towards mastery with intrinsic motivation and errors viewed as part of the growth process. These questions, along with identified themes from the focus groups, helped the researcher gain information concerning student attitude towards school. This helped answer research question one: What was the impact of the current practices in place on improving ninth-grade students' behaviors and attitudes towards school?

Questions 7-12 identified students who place an emphasis on high grades and high performance compared to others. These questions identified students who wanted to avoid failure, wanted to be the best, and value social comparisons when they performed better than others. They helped identify students who viewed failure as evidence of a lack of ability or self worth and wanted to figure out what was needed to get the grade rather than valuing the process of learning and growth towards mastery. These questions helped identify students who placed an emphasis on high grades and their behaviors and attitudes towards school.

Questions 13-18 identified the student perceptions regarding high school structure and the perceived learning environment provided. The questions evaluated the learning environment and the teachers' emphasis on doing one's best, making progress, lack of competition, and the value of the learning process. These questions also helped identify the students' behaviors and attitudes towards school and their perception towards their learning environment.

Questions 19-23 evaluated the schools emphasis on competition, hierarchies of performance, recognition of some students over others, norms and social comparisons and an emphasis on being the best. These questions helped provide information concerning the students' perceptions towards competition and recognition and their

attitudes and behaviors towards these topics.

Percentages of responses for each question were tallied for analysis. Common themes were then identified; questions 1-6 emphasis on learning, questions 7-12 emphasis on high performance, questions 13-18 the perceived learning environment, and questions 19-23 evaluate the school's emphasis on competition. These questions helped evaluate student behaviors and attitudes towards the current transition process in which they are involved.

Using a previously-employed instrument ensured reliability and provided the researcher the ability to produce more consistent results. The surveys were administered in February and March of the 2009 school year.

The focus group is a group interview which takes place in a formal, prearranged setting, with eight to twelve persons (Morgan, 1997). The interviewer is directive, and the discussion is guided by a structured or partially structured question format. Focus group research is conducted to gain more complete understanding of a person's motivations, feeling, and ideas about a topic (Krueger, 1998). Focus groups draw on three of the fundamental strengths shared by all qualitative methods: exploration and discovery, context and depth, and interpretation (Morgan, 1997).

This study's student focus groups were conducted with six groups comprised of eight to ten students randomly selected. The questions were based on the components of the transition program of which the students had been a part. The student focus groups were conducted to gain more information and a better understanding of student perceptions and their experiences during the transition into the ninth grade. The purpose was to elicit further clarification and elaboration on themes that emerged from the data analysis. The focus groups helped us gain a better understanding of the challenge ninth-

grade students face when transitioning into high school and gain insight into their opinions and beliefs. The selected questions helped assess student attitudes towards school and the transition process.

Data were compared between focus groups to identify patterns and make comparisons and contrast one group with another. Themes that emerged from each focus group were compared with the other groups.

The sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed to analyze the sessions.

1. What's the best/worst thing about school?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the eighth grade? Why?
3. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the transition into ninth grade? Why?
4. What are the differences in the following: teachers, class work, homework, grades, and extracurricular activities?
5. Who helped you prepare for high school?
6. What advice would you give to eighth graders about ninth grade?
7. How has being a part of the Freshmen Academy helped/not helped you in the ninth grade?

These questions allowed the researcher to identify current practices and the impact they had on student behavior and attitude. The researcher was able to identify factors that are associated with the transition and the success or lack of success during that transition.

The freshmen teacher focus groups were comprised of three groups of four to six teachers currently teaching ninth-grade students. The questions were focused on the impact that the transition program was having on student behavior and attitude towards school. The sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed to analyze the sessions.

1. Discuss the various transition programs and the impact that they have on the behaviors and attitudes of students.

2. What are some of the challenges that you face concerning the attitudes and behaviors of ninth-grade students?

3. If you could change or add anything to the transition program what would it be?

4. What would you tell eighth grade teachers to do to better prepare students for the ninth grade?

These questions provided data to identify transition practices and the impact they had on student success. Teachers will be able to identify the impact the current practices had on student behavior and attitude towards schools compared to past students who were not part of a Freshmen Academy.

Focus groups were conducted on campus in conjunction with the written surveys. Every teacher on the campus who taught freshmen was provided the opportunity to participate in the focus groups. The researcher and the site administrator over the ninth grade made the arrangements which best suited both parties. The student focus groups were randomly selected by the site administrator and conducted in the freshmen advisory groups. The advisory groups were developed at the start of the 2008-2009 school year and students were randomly selected for each group.

Questions in these sessions were open-ended and aligned with the original research questions provided earlier. Focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis and coding purposes.

Data Sources

Data was collected utilizing the teacher and student focus groups and student

survey. The collected data allowed the researcher to examine student behavior and attitude towards the ninth grade, impacts that the current transition program had on student success, and teacher perception of the current transition program. The collected data focused on the students' attitudes and behaviors that were significant. This was accomplished by utilizing the previously mentioned instruments.

Analysis of the student survey was performed by calculating the percentage of responses to each question. Frequency distribution tables were developed by analyzing the questionnaires to discover the central tendency of each question. This allowed the researcher to identify common themes. Respondent answers to the questions were analyzed for mode, median, and mean calculations. The tallies were calculated by hand on the number of responses for each question. The data gathered in the student questionnaire allowed the researcher to identify common themes based on student responses. The identification of themes allowed the researcher to probe in depth to elicit further information pertaining to the results utilizing frequency tables (Appendix C & D).

The responses gathered in student and teacher interviews and focus group interviews were involved in a detailed analysis with a coding process. Response percentages in the student survey were documented for each item in the selections of "not at all true," "somewhat true," or "very true." This allowed the researcher to assign an overall strength code in the discovered themes. Coding is the process of organizing the materials into "chunks" before bringing meaning to those "chunks" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Responses were assigned one of four strength codes: no response, weak response, moderate response, and strong response.

The following strength codes were used in the analysis process of interviews and focus groups: "no response" was given if the theme was not addressed; "weak response"

was given if the theme was addressed with a short answer such as a simple yes or no; “moderate response” was given if the theme was addressed with a specific example of the theme; and a “strong response” if the theme was addressed elaborately with actual examples of processes that pertained to the theme. A researcher can use a coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis (Creswell, 2003).

The coding process allowed the researcher to generate themes for analysis, and frequency tables were prepared for all thematic categories for each of the groups. This was accomplished by identifying common themes in each data collection instrument. A triangulation process was completed following the content analysis. Data triangulation was accomplished by subjecting the data to common theme analysis. The concurrent triangulation approach is probably the most familiar of the six major mixed methods models (Creswell, 2003).

Triangulation of data, or the comparison of data from two different sources, is generally considered valuable (Morgan, 1997). This approach was used in this study because it allowed the researcher to determine if data from one source was consistent with information from other sources.

Delimitations of the Study

1. This research was a mixed method design in the form of a case study examining one public high school in North Carolina, the students they serve, and the staff employed there.

2. Analysis of the school included current ninth-grade students, repeating ninth-grade students, and the staff members involved with the ninth-grade students.

Limitations of the Study

This study examined one high school that currently has a transition program in place. Interviews and focus groups only reflect what the respondents chose to reveal to them. No community, resource, or parent input was solicited.

Other variables affecting student behavior and attitude, such as parental education, class size, principal and teacher degree status, were not considered.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to determine what transition program components are successful in changing students' behaviors and attitudes towards school. The research examined what components of the transition program support the student transition from middle school to high school. This chapter has described the procedures, methods, and resources which were utilized to conduct the study and analyze the data.

Chapter 4 will provide a description of the sample population, analysis of the research data, and a synthesis of the comments recorded in the focus groups. The results have been tabulated and common themes will be shared in reference to each of the three research questions.

Chapter 4: Results of the Study

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program and determine the impact of the experience on students entering high school. The study evaluated the current practices in place and determined if they influenced a change in students' behaviors and attitudes towards school. The data identified factors associated with transition success and identified the extent of success that students experienced.

Using the two-part student survey developed by Dr. Ilene Straus in 2000 for a similar study, demographic information was collected and students' attitude towards school were established. The data collected in the student survey were then correlated with the data collected from student and teacher focus groups.

Student and teacher focus groups were conducted during this study to determine the impact that the current transition program has on students' behaviors and attitudes. The focus groups assisted in identifying those practices and components that have the greatest impact on student success and those that do not.

The following topics are covered in this chapter: description of the sample population, analysis of research data, and a synthesis of the comments recorded in the focus groups.

Description of the Sample

The population of this study consists of ninth-grade students who were enrolled at a high school in rural North Carolina. All students were provided a letter for their parents asking them to provide permission to participate in the study. It was expected that at least one-third of the letters would be returned. Of the 263 eligible ninth-grade students, 91 letters were returned providing parental permission. This was just over the expected

return at 34%.

Students were provided an opportunity to respond to the student survey during the school day in small groups. One student chose not to participate, and one student did not complete the survey. This provided a total of 89 respondents to the provided survey.

There were 47 female participants and 42 male participants.

The participants of the student focus groups were randomly selected from the 91 participants that received parental permission. Of the 11 teachers involved in teaching ninth-grade students in the Freshmen Academy, all teachers agreed to participate in the teacher focus group.

Analysis of Data

The data collected from the student survey provided demographic information and identified attitudes and beliefs that students have concerning their ninth-grade transition. The first part of the survey was a series of questions about characteristics present in their home and their perspective of their transition experience. The second part of the survey measured the attitudes and beliefs of the participants utilizing the Likert scaling technique. A series of questions were provided and the participants responded on a continuum ranging from “not at all true” to “very true.”

Quantification was accomplished by tallying the responses to the positive and negative belief statements. Frequency distribution tables were created identifying central tendencies and common themes.

The data collected during the student and teacher focus groups was analyzed and a coding process applied. An overall strength code was applied and themes discovered. The coding process allowed the identification of themes for analysis and frequency tables were prepared. A triangulation process was accomplished by subjecting the collected data

to common theme analysis.

Research question 1. What is the impact of the current practices in place on improving ninth-grade students' behaviors and attitudes towards school?

Students responded to a variety of questions that measured their attitudes and beliefs towards school based on a Likert scale. The responses were calculated to find the average for each question. Students were asked to base their responses on their ninth-grade experience up to the current date.

Questions 1-6 assessed the individual's emphasis on learning and identified those students that place value on effort, improvement and progress towards mastery. The following Likert scaling technique was utilized: 1 "not at all true," 3 "somewhat true," or 5 "very true." The average response to these questions was 3.09, which is just above "somewhat true" on the Likert scale. Question 4, "an important reason why I do my work in school is because I want to get better at it," received the highest response of 4.0.

Table 1

Individual's Emphasis on Learning

1. I like schoolwork that I'll learn from even if I make a lot of mistakes.	3.5
2. An important reason why I do my schoolwork is because I like to learn new things.	3.4
3. I like schoolwork best when it really makes me think.	2.8
4. An important reason why I do my work in school is because I want to get better at it.	4.0
5. An important reason I do my schoolwork is because I enjoy it.	2.4
6. I do my schoolwork because I am interested in it.	2.6

Questions 7-12 identified students who place an emphasis on high grades and high performance compared to others. The following Likert scaling technique was

utilized: 1 “not at all true,” 3 “somewhat true,” or 5 “very true.” The average response to this group of questions was 3.3, which is just above “somewhat true” on the Likert Scale. Question number 7, “I want to do better than other students in my class,” received the highest response of 4.2.

Table 2

Emphasis on High Grades and High Performance Compared to Others

7. I want to do better than other students in my class.	4.2
8. I would feel successful if I did better than most of the other students in my class.	3.8
9. I'd like to show my teacher that I'm smarter than the other kids in class.	3.2
10. Doing better than other students in class is important to me.	2.9
11. I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher's questions in class.	2.8
12. It's important to me that the other students in class think that I am good at my work.	2.9

Questions 13-18 identified the high school structure and the learning environment provided. The following Likert scaling technique was utilized: 1 “not at all true,” 3 “somewhat true,” or 5 “very true.” The average response to these questions was 4.0, which is between “somewhat true” and “very true” on the Likert scale. Question 15, “Mistakes are okay as long as we are learning,” and Question 18, “trying hard counts a lot,” both received a score of 4.3.

Table 3

High School Structure and Learning Environment

13. Teachers believe all students can learn.	4.0
14. Understanding the work is more important than getting the right answers.	4.0
15. Mistakes are okay as long as we are learning.	4.3
16. Teachers think how much you learn is more important than test scores or grades.	3.3
17. Teachers want students to really understand their work.	3.9
18. Trying hard counts a lot.	4.3

Questions 19-23 evaluated the school's emphasis on competition and hierarchies of performance. The following Likert scaling technique was utilized: 1 "not at all true," 3 "somewhat true," or 5 "very true." The average response to questions 19-23 was 2.4. Question 21, "at my school, teachers only care about the smart kids," received the lowest score of 1.9.

Table 4

School's Emphasis on Competition and Hierarchies of Performance

19. At my school, teachers treat kids who get good grades better than other kids.	2.8
20. At my school, only a few kids get praised for their schoolwork.	2.3
21. At my school, teachers only care about the smart kids.	1.9
22. My school has given up on some of its students.	2.0
23. At my school, special privileges are given to students who get the highest grades.	2.7

Eight focus groups were conducted and students were asked to respond to a

variety of questions concerning their transition into high school. This list of questions can be found on page 31. The selected questions helped assess student attitudes towards school and the transition process. The sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed to analyze the sessions.

Table 5

Themes Associated with Research Question 1

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
Advisor/advisee time	Moderate response	Moderate response
Peer tutoring	Strong response	Moderate response
Teachers	Strong response	Strong response
Freshman Academy	Weak response	Strong response
Summer Orientation	Moderate response	Moderate response
Extra curricular	Strong response	Strong response
Freedom	Strong response	Strong response
Attendance	Strong response	Strong response
Everything counts	Strong response	Strong response

The responses from the focus groups provided data related to the first research question: What is the impact of the current practices in place on improving ninth-grade students' behaviors and attitudes towards school? This data was tabulated and the following themes were identified.

Students identified several components that helped their transition into high school. Students indicated that the advisor/advisee time improved their attitudes and

behaviors towards school as indicated by the following responses. “My advisor takes the time to explain things to us and helps keep us informed about what is going on around school. Knowing that I have 25 minutes per day to relax is enjoyable” (E. Hain, personal communication, May 27, 2009). The teachers who participated in the focus groups agreed that the advisor time provided more opportunities to communicate with students. One teacher stated, “The advisor is another adult who is keeping a thumb on students and reinforcing the common goal we are all working towards” (A. Waldo, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

Not all students took part in the peer tutoring program, but those who did emphasized that this was really beneficial. The participants all indicated the extra time focused on either English I or Algebra I has improved their performance in class. One student expressed this by saying, “Sometimes having someone else explain something to me helps me. Math is my most difficult subject, and I hated math. The peer tutoring has changed my attitude towards math” (M. Williams, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Students also indicated that this has improved their grades and led to fewer behavior issues in class.

The teachers added that the tutoring will have a positive impact on standardized testing performance. Teachers added the following concerning peer tutoring, “I know if a student is struggling with a concept they will get additional remediation within the next school day. The students do not feel like they are getting further behind, and this has improved their attitude towards school” (K. Lineberry, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

The focus groups indicated that teachers have had the biggest impact on student behavior and attitude towards school. Students indicated that their teachers are wonderful

and are always helpful and provided these comments. “Teachers know we can do it and believe we can do it. They want to see us walk across that stage when we graduate” (B. Basinger, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Another student replied, “Teachers are not going to take it easy on you. That is something that I need; it has forced me to be responsible” (L. Fesperman, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

The focus groups discussed the Freshman Academy in which they had taken part. Students indicated that they understand the benefits of the Academy, but it is very similar to middle school. Most students indicated that the Academy was beneficial the first few months of school, but is not needed during the second semester. Students felt that the Academy helped control student behavior and kept students from getting into trouble. One student stated, “It is good for the grades and stuff and makes it easier for us, but you don’t see other people and have an opportunity to socialize” (J. Adkins, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Another student added, “I did not see anything wrong with the Freshman Academy. It helped us because we are all new and did not know many people” (C. Edwards, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Another replied, “I don’t think some freshmen are mature enough to have older students in their classes. Some girls would go crazy over the older guys in class” (P. Snyder, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

The teachers all agreed and provided comments which indicated the Freshman Academy was a major factor in student attitude and behavior. Over half of the teachers participating have experienced teaching middle school and said since they have witnessed students at both levels and better understand the transition difficulties, the Academy makes this experience much easier. A former middle school teacher stated, “I taught middle school and the academy provides the students a baby step when transitioning from

the middle school” (C. Epps, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

Another teacher stated:

One thing I like is that the students and teachers are all together and this allows for better communication. I can walk over to my neighbor’s classroom and ask her about a student. How was he/she in class? Before, I may not have seen that teacher throughout the day to ask those questions. (D. Bynum, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

Another teacher added:

Since all the students are in one building, I may not teach all of them, but I feel obligated to correct them and move them on to class because I see them everyday. I feel like we have a motherly instinct over all of these ninth graders. We are responsible for everyone in here. (A. Waldo, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

Another teacher responded:

It is easier to keep students informed as to what is going on. They are all pretty much here. Being in the freshman academy I have noticed that it takes students longer to develop the bad habits they can form when coming to high school because they are secluded from the upperclassmen. (M. Parrish, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

A teacher new to the school stated, “Coming from a school where there was not a Freshman Academy in place, I feel there are fewer issues here than what I previously experienced. It goes back to the constant communication” (A. Richmond, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

Another teacher responded:

You see the students more often. It makes it easier to support them on the day to day basis. As a teacher, it is easier to take a special interest in a student who is struggling and provide that needed support. You can see how far away their locker is and who they are hanging with that could impact their behavior. It is easier to target them and provide them with that needed TLC. They feel that the teachers really understand them. (C. Epps, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

An English teacher added:

I can see a difference in the students I had first semester in Success 101 and now because of the Freshman Academy. The logistics provides the opportunity to use more technology. We can better make decisions to meet the needs of students.

The students had an opportunity to meet their English I teacher for 2nd semester early. They were not new at the beginning of the semester, and they already knew what was expected of them, and she knew their interests and strengths, and it did not take a few weeks to discover these important details and the students were comfortable with her. We can communicate to place students for review sessions. (S. Johnston, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

Another teacher added, “The students don’t feel pressured to show out in front of each other. The pressure to impress the upperclassmen is not there. Some of these students have been together since kindergarten and are comfortable with each other” (B. Linville, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

All students who attended the summer orientation said that it helped improve their attitudes in getting prepared for school. Their discussion indicated that they felt that getting to see the campus and locate all of their classes was beneficial to their success. A

student who attended the orientation stated, “Knowing where your classes are and meeting my teachers made it easier the first few days of school” (C. Estrada, personal communication, May 27, 2009). A student who transferred from a private school responded, “The Summer Orientation allowed me to meet students from other schools and make friends before school started” (A. Baucom, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

While discussing the summer orientation the teachers expressed the belief that it was beneficial for students to attend. All of the teachers agreed that the summer orientation provided students an opportunity to get comfortable in their setting. They felt that due to the orientation students knew they were in this building for the majority of their day and did not worry about getting lost. Most felt that seeing the same teacher(s) throughout the day was a comfort to most freshmen.

All students who were involved in an extracurricular activity expressed that it has helped their behaviors and attitudes towards school. The following responses indicated the positive impact that extracurricular activities have on students. A band member stated, “Being in marching band, I know I can’t get below a certain grade and I have to stay out of trouble” (J. Angle, personal communication, May 27, 2009). A JROTC student provided the following, “JROTC helped my behavior and gave me someone to go to and talk to when I felt frustrated” (M. Hunter, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Another student stated, “I need to have the grades to be in clubs and be on teams. This is something that I am always thinking about during that school day” (M. Cogburn, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Teachers also observed an improvement in student behavior and attitude when involved in extracurricular activities. One teacher stated, “Being involved in

extracurricular activities such as band, ROTC, and athletics, students are conscious of their performance in the classroom” (N. Brown, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

Several freshman teachers are also coaches on staff and a teacher shared the following:

During our meetings we can discuss and share our concerns with those people who can take care of any issues we may be experiencing. Anytime we have had an issue with an athlete or a band member it was quickly corrected when it was brought to the attention of the person in charge. (S. Johnston, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

A math teacher who taught Introduction to Algebra and Algebra stated:

I have had some students all year. I can definitely see a difference in a student’s attitude and behavior when they are part of a season compared to when they are not involved in anything. These students’ performance definitely improves when they are involved in extracurricular activities. (N. Brown, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

The majority of students spoke about the amount of freedom they have compared to middle school. They all felt they were being treated as young adults and enjoyed not being walked everywhere. They also referred to the fact that this also increased the amount of responsibility they now had. This was evident in the following responses shared by students. One student responded,

In middle school I was walked everywhere and told where to go and when to go there. Here, in high school, I make the decision if I want to go to class or be late to class. I also know I will face the consequences of my decisions. (S. Rucker, personal communication, May 27, 2009)

Another responded, “My attitude toward school is much better in High School. I

don't feel like teachers are watching every little thing that I do. They treat us like young adults, and I like that" (K. Whitaker, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Teachers also observed the benefits of increased student freedom and responsibility. One teacher stated,

I see the students being more accountable and making better decisions while being in the academy from when I have taught students in the past. It made things a little smaller for them and made it easier to see the big picture and not feel overwhelmed. (B. Earnhardt, personal communication, May 28, 2009)

In their responses, students indicated that the attendance policy at high school is more strict than that of the middle school. Knowing that every day counts, students were less likely to get into trouble because of the impact being out of school has on their grades. In the following responses students provided insight concerning the attendance policy. "You have to be there every day; if you are out you will miss way too much" (R. Brown, personal communication, May 27, 2009). "In middle school I could get suspended and come back to school and jump right back in. At high school if you are suspended you could fail" (L. Dauria, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

All students indicated that they have developed an understanding that everything counts in high school. The following statements are evidence that this has a huge impact on their behavior and attitude. One student replied, "I take high school more serious than middle school. I want to go to college and I know my ninth-grade year counts" (M. Dunn, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Another student added, "We understand that our work now is going to impact us later in life" (E. Rayl, personal communication, May 27, 2009). A student who indicated she struggled in middle school said, "We realize that the ninth-grade counts and it can impact our graduation. You see seniors with good

grades who want to go to college. That makes me a better student” (M. Moore, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Every focus group indicated that they made better decisions than when they were in middle school. Several students pointed out they had very few decisions to make in middle school and high school is different. One student stated, “In middle school most of the decisions were made for us. In high school we are not treated like five-year-olds. We are expected to make decisions for ourselves” (M. McCachren, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Research question 2. What are the factors associated with transition success or lack of success?

Question 6 allowed students to check activities that they participated in as a ninth-grade student.

Activities Participated in as a Ninth-Grade Student

Sports	51%
Clubs	43%
Tutoring	20%
Freshman camp (summer)	5%
Community activities	26%
Community service activities	26%

Question 9 asked students, what was the most important thing that helped them through the ninth grade? The following responses were provided.

Most Important Thing that Helped You Get Through the Ninth Grade

Friends	92%
Parents	69%

Depending on yourself	72%
Asking for help	52%
Being in a sport	30%
Coming to school everyday	63%
Tutoring	19%
Being in a music program	13%
Study group with friends	17%
Church work	13%
Other	4%

Students who provided “Other” as their response offered the following additions: studying, JROTC, FFA, and their teachers.

During the focus group sessions students were asked to respond to a variety of questions that identified factors that helped them during their transition into high school. Every student who participated in the focus group was asked if he or she experienced a positive transition experience. All students responded “yes.”

The following were themes that were identified during the focus groups as related to transition success:

Table 6

Themes Associated with Research Question 2

Theme	Student	Teacher
Advisor/advisee time	Moderate response	Moderate response
Peer tutoring	Strong response	Moderate response
Teachers	Strong response	Strong response
Freshman Academy	Moderate response	Strong response
Summer Orientation	Strong response	Moderate response
Extra curricular	Strong response	Strong response
Spring visit	Strong response	Moderate response
Student mentor	Moderate response	Moderate response

In reference to their advisor/advisee time, the responses varied depending on the teacher assigned as the student advisor. Most students said that this time was valuable in providing much needed information in the first few months of school. The following responses provide evidence that the advisor/advisee time was successful for most students. A student responded, “My advisor provided me with much needed information the first few weeks of school. I know that I can still go to this person and get information when needed” (L. Kraft, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Several students have utilized this time for tutoring from peers or individual teachers. A student who was involved in the tutoring responded, “I have gone to my Algebra teacher on several occasions to get help with my math work; this has really improved my grades in math class” (E. Satterwaite, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

The common theme that teachers identified when discussing the advisor/advisee time was the ability to provide much needed communication with students. This was evident in their responses. One teacher responded, “Based on the prepared curriculum, I know that all of my students are getting the same information. We are able to discuss items that need to be reinforced, and it can happen during this time” (D. Bynum, personal communication, May 28, 2009). Another teacher shared, “It provides students with another adult on campus who is an advocate for them” (M. Parrish, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

While discussing peer tutoring, students who participated expressed that this helped them academically. Most students indicated that they wanted to see more peer tutoring implemented during the school day. The teachers agreed that the peer tutoring provided immediate remediation for students who were showing signs of struggling. One teacher responded, “The peer tutoring has definitely impacted those students who can not stay after school. Providing time during the school day to improve their academic performance has increased student performance in the classroom” (K. Lineberry, personal communication, May 28, 2009).

While discussing the number one factor that determined transition success, all students indicated that their teachers played a major role in their success. Students felt that high school teachers made learning more fun than did middle school teachers. The fact that students enjoyed their classes more made the transition much easier and this is evident in their responses. One student provided the following response, “My teachers make learning fun. We are always doing hands-on activities, and I am never bored like I was in middle school” (J. Porter, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Students indicated that their teachers wanted to see them be successful and took the time to help

them when needed. A student responded, “Teachers seem to help you more in high school and are willing to take the time to answer my questions when I don’t understand something” (T. Johnson, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

The teachers also indicated that it is important for those teachers to want to be part of the Freshman Academy. A teacher responded and all other teachers agreed, “Teaching freshmen takes someone who is dedicated and is willing to take the extra time to meet the needs of students. Teachers must want to do it; if they are forced and don’t have their heart in it, they will not be as effective” (S. Johnston, personal communication, May 28, 2009). The teachers expressed that it is much easier because they are all working towards a common goal and provide support and guidance to each other.

The Freshmen Academy was something students felt was beneficial during the first few months of school. Students felt that it did help reduce anxiety the first few weeks. The following responses provide evidence of these feelings. One student responded, “I liked the Freshmen Academy because I did not have to walk all over campus to get to my classes. This made things easier the first few weeks of school” (L. Powell, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Some students felt that they were in a spotlight as one student indicated. “Everyone knew we were the freshmen. The building made it easier for students to identify us” (C. Brown, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

During the teacher focus group, the following was shared,

Students have a better attitude towards school because they feel there is more support. The support of the staff in the freshman academy is unified between the teachers and the mentors. They feel that support and don’t feel like they’re all on their own and they know that people are going to help them. (A. Waldo, personal

communication, May 28, 2009)

A majority of the students indicated that they attended the summer orientation prior to school opening. The participants said that it helped them to navigate the campus, find their classes, and meet their teachers.

Every student was provided an upperclassman who served as a student mentor during their advisor/advisee time. All students responded that this person helped them with their transition and improved their attitudes and behaviors towards school and provided the following statements to support this. One student replied, “My student mentor helped me with tutoring when I needed it during my advisee time” (Q. Phifer, personal communication, May 27, 2009). Another student replied, “My behavior in high school is better than middle school. Having someone to go to during my advisee time has helped me make better decisions and stay out of trouble” (A. Casper, personal communication, May 27, 2009).

Research question 3. To what extent did the students experience transition success?

Question 8 provided students an opportunity to rank their ninth-grade experience as “easy,” “same as middle school,” or “hard.” They were then provided an opportunity to provide a description of what they found difficult in high school. Of the 89 students who responded, 54% of the students said that their ninth-grade experience has been easy, 31% said that the ninth grade was the same difficulty level as middle school, and 15% said that the ninth grade was hard.

Students who felt that ninth grade was difficult provided the following reasons: getting used to a new campus, more homework, more difficult tests, more difficult work, tougher attendance policy, new lunch schedule, and much tougher math classes.

Question 10 provided students an opportunity to respond to the following question: What do you wish happened at your school to help in ninth grade? Twenty percent of the students responded that they would change nothing, while 12% provided no response. The following were common responses that were provided:

- More hands on activities
- More time to get to class
- More individual help
- More projects
- More tutoring opportunities
- No Freshman Academy
- Less drama

During the focus groups, students were asked if their transition into high school was successful. All students indicated that their transition was successful, and they would change very little. Some students indicated that the first few days were scary and that it was an anxious time, but felt that the teachers quickly made them feel comfortable.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided data from our sample population's ninth-grade students and their teachers. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data were utilized to best answer the three questions in the research. Chapter 5 will provide an overall summary, draw conclusions, and offer recommendations based on data collected in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the study, implies some conclusions, and offers recommendations for further research. Many ninth graders have a difficult time adjusting to the demands of high school, resulting in lower grades, more disciplinary problems, higher failure rates, and feelings that they don't "fit in" to the high school community (Legters, 2000). As students struggle to fit in socially, they also face more demanding academic requirements that can be daunting for those with poor prior preparation in core subjects (Legters & Kerr, 2001).

This study sought to determine what factors within a sample existing program provided students with a successful transition from middle school into high school. The research identified current transition practices and the impacts they had on transitioning students. In school systems with full-blown transition programs, the researchers found the ninth-grade transition programs had a significant impact on the number of student dropouts – an 8% dropout rate at schools with such a program versus a 24% rate at those without (Reents, 2002).

Overview of the Study

The focus of this dissertation research was to evaluate a ninth-grade transition program and understand what type of assistance was given to students to support the transition process, and to gain insight into the extent that students experienced transition success. The ninth grade is a pivotal year that determines which students will prevail and which will fail to finish high school (Hertzog, 2003).

There were three types of data collection tools used in this study: student focus groups, freshmen teacher focus groups, and a survey/questionnaire. The student survey

consisted of two parts: The first part was a series of demographic and attitude questions that asked students about characteristics present in their home and then a series of questions related to their perspectives on their transition experience. The second part was a Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS); this is an instrument designed to provide additional information about the psychological phenomena associated with students' transition as they faced a new academic environment.

The student focus groups were conducted with six groups comprised of eight to ten students randomly selected. The questions were based on the components of the transition program in which the students were involved. The student focus groups were conducted to gain more information and a better understanding of student perceptions and their experiences during the transition into the ninth grade. The purpose was to elicit further clarification and elaboration on themes that emerged from the data analysis. The focus groups helped create a better understanding of the challenge ninth-grade students face when transitioning into high school and provided insight on their opinions and beliefs. The questions selected helped assess student attitudes towards school and the transition process.

A total of eighty nine students participated in the student survey and sixty students participated in the student focus groups. Nine teachers were involved in the teacher focus groups.

Summary of Results

After statistical analysis of the data, the three research questions were answered as follows:

1. Current transition practices have a significant impact on students' behaviors and attitudes.

2. Multiple factors are associated with transition success.

3. All of the students in the sample population indicated that they experienced success when transitioning from middle school to high school.

The findings of this study show a significant relationship between current transition practices and a positive impact on students' behaviors and attitudes towards school. While reviewing the data from the student survey, there were several questions that indicated that students had a positive attitude towards their school. For instance, students responded that they want to do better than other students in their classes and that trying hard counts a lot. They also indicated that mistakes are okay as long as they are learning. The responses also pointed out that students feel teachers believe that all students can learn and very few students feel that teachers only care about the smart kids.

The student and teacher focus groups provided the following comparable data. Strong responses were provided and the following common themes were identified in improving students' behaviors and attitudes: teachers, peer tutoring, extra curricular activities, freedom, attendance, and significance of effort.

The responses provided from the student survey, as mentioned above regarding the study as a whole, indicated that students are comfortable with their learning environment and understand the importance of learning—not just doing the work. Students also pointed out that trying hard “counts a lot” and wanting to do better than those around them is a strong motivator. They felt that teachers believe that all students can learn and all students are cared for—not just the smart ones. Students provided responses in the focus groups that this has not always been the case for them in their education. They have not always felt supported and have sometimes felt that not all students were treated fairly.

The common themes identified during the focus groups provided components of the ninth-grade impact on students' behaviors and attitudes. The strongest theme identified was the teacher. Students felt supported and referred to the continuous encouragement and help provided by the staff. The teachers felt that it takes someone who is dedicated and a team player. Teachers also indicated that the format of the Freshman Academy provided the environment to provide the much needed continuous support for students.

Those students who participated in extracurricular activities understood the importance of positive behavior and attitude. They understood the academic and conduct requirements required to be part of a team, band, or organization. Teachers stated that this was beneficial for students who sometimes expressed an "I don't care" attitude. They felt that at anytime they could go to a coach or sponsor and get more positive results from a struggling student.

Peer tutoring provided students with extra help several times each week. Students were able to see concepts explained in a different way or ask the questions that they sometimes would not ask in a whole class setting. Students do not feel like they are falling behind when they don't understand a concept because the remediation is immediate. Teachers felt that this improved student performance and classroom attitude. Students knew that if they were struggling with a concept, they would be provided additional help outside of the classroom.

Students enjoyed the additional freedom that high school brings. They feel that it provided them time to be themselves and make decisions on their own. This gave them a positive outlook towards school. Teachers also felt that students feel less monitored and became better decision makers with the freedom that high school provides. Teachers and

students point out that the attitudes and behaviors of students are more positive when students feel they are being treated as young adults. This added freedom provides students the opportunity to make poor decisions. Some students felt that in those situations they had no one to blame but themselves and all they could do is learn from their mistakes.

“Attendance” and “everything counts” were also identified as themes that impact students’ behaviors and attitudes. Students felt that since they enjoy school, their attendance has improved. They also understand the importance of being in class and that everything counts on a daily basis. Students also understand that all of their classes count towards graduation and the teachers remind them everyday that everything counts over the next 4 years. Teachers encouraged students to be in attendance and felt that attendance is not an issue for a majority of students. Teachers felt that providing students with a positive learning environment both fostered learning and encouraged daily attendance.

Through the study, the researcher was able to identify not just themes, but those practices that have an impact on transition success. Advisor/advisee time, peer tutoring, teachers, Freshman Academy, summer orientation, extracurricular activities, and student mentors were all components that positively influence the transition experience.

The advisee/advisor time provided students with ongoing support throughout the school year. Students were provided with a variety of activities that focused on team building, leadership, and character education. The advisor served as an advocate for students who needed that extra guidance. This was also a time that students received their peer tutoring during the regular school day. Advisee groups were also provided a student mentor. This student served as a mentor for students and provided them with an

upperclassman that they could ask questions of and relate to.

The Freshman Academy provided students a comfort zone the first few months of school. The Academy allowed students the opportunity to get acclimated to the school campus and high school life. It kept students and teachers in close proximity and provided teachers the opportunity to provide that continuous support students need during the transition period.

In the student survey, students pointed out three major activities which had a positive impact on their transition success. Sports, clubs and tutoring all had strong endorsement from students. These were also factors in students' attitudes and behaviors towards school during their transition year. During the focus groups students responded that they became part of the school by getting involved and did not just attend the school.

The survey also asked students to identify the most important thing that has helped them get through the ninth grade. The top four responses were "friends," "parents," "myself," and "attendance." Students indicated that "friends" and "parents" provided the support needed when times are difficult being a ninth grader. They also know that it is their responsibility to get things done for themselves and to be in attendance.

All of the study findings indicated that the student sample population experienced success when transitioning from middle school to high school. Students responded to a question in the survey that asked them to describe their ninth-grade experience as "easy," "same as middle school," or "hard." Over three-quarters of the students indicated that it was easy or same as middle school. This is an indicator that students had a transition that was positive and relatively easy.

Students were also asked to respond to what they wish happened differently at

their school during the ninth grade. Over a third of the students provided no response or responded “nothing.” All other responses were “positive” or “personal request.”

Conclusions

From the findings, it can be concluded that the transition activities within which a student is involved determines the level of success a student experiences. Throughout the study, students and teachers identified activities that they believed assisted ninth graders in accomplishing their transition into high school.

It is also clear that the practices a school has in place impacts the level of transition success a student experiences. As indicated by previous research, there are practices that high schools can implement to determine the level of success students experience. Throughout the study, students and teachers referred to the current practices that were in place and how they assisted them in their transition.

Limitations

The findings of this research were limited by several factors. The study was limited to a specific high school located in the central piedmont of North Carolina. Only students and teachers from the school were selected and used in the analysis of data. This could impact the external validity of the research. The findings may also be limited by using only 1 year of data and one set of survey data to complete the study.

Recommendations for Improvement

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that there is a strong positive relationship between the transition practices that a school has in place and the transition success that a student experiences. The data collected from students and teachers concerning the freshmen transition may be applicable to other high schools. Therefore, the following recommendations for improvement are presented:

1. It is recommended that the selected school review the data from the students and teachers and use this information to assist in assigning teachers to work with freshmen students in the future. Both the students and the teachers indicated that the teachers are vital in the success that a student experiences during their ninth-grade year.

2. It is recommended that the students be encouraged to become involved in extracurricular activities at the school. The data collected from the students and teachers indicated that those students who are involved in extracurricular activities become part of the school culture. This recommendation may require the school to develop clubs or organizations that focus on freshmen to provide more opportunities for these students to get involved.

3. It is recommended that the administration and teachers develop a schedule that provides tutoring during the instructional school day. The data indicated that those students who were involved in teacher-directed or peer tutoring were positively impacted.

4. It is recommended that the high school teachers and the administration develop collaboratively with the teachers and the administration of the feeder middle schools. This will help foster a positive relationship between the middle schools and the high school.

5. It is recommended that the administration review the data and develop a summer orientation that meets the needs of all students entering high school. This opportunity allows students to become comfortable with their new learning environment and meet other students who will be entering the ninth grade with them.

6. It is recommended that the administration develop a master schedule that will provide time for teachers to plan collaboratively and focus on the needs of the students they are teaching.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings regarding the impact that transition practices have on transition success, student behavior, and attitude for students entering high school, the following are recommendations for further research:

1. Multi-year research should be conducted to see if there is valid cause and effect between the transition practices and the transition success, behaviors, and attitudes throughout high school. This would allow the researcher to identify trends or patterns in the ninth-grade transition to high school and beyond.

2. Research should be conducted to determine parental perceptions of the transition process.

3. Research should be conducted by selecting other high schools in the district to participate in the data and survey analysis to establish significance.

Summary

High school can be a scary place, a place where students find themselves spinning their wheels and going nowhere. The transition of middle school students to the ninth grade is a major issue districts face across the nation. Research indicates that the ninth-grade year will determine the level of success students will experience in their remaining years at high school. Schools are struggling to identify those practices that foster student success and keep students from becoming dropout statistics.

Teaching is often referred to as a passion not a profession and is considered a lifestyle. This is especially true for those who teach freshmen. The data collected from this research indicated that the teacher has a major influence on the success or lack of success that a student will experience in the ninth grade. Administrators need to be willing to identify those teachers who have a talent for working with freshmen and

develop a community of teachers who share the same passion for working with these students.

This research identified those practices that have assisted students in being successful during their ninth-grade year. Schools need to identify those practices that meet the needs of their own learners that they serve and promote success in transition from middle to high school. Schools need to be willing to think outside the box and try new things when what they are doing is not working.

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Appendix A

Parent Letter

March 17, 2009

Dear West Rowan Parents/Guardians,

Many of us have identified the ninth grade transition as a difficult time for all students entering high school. West Rowan has identified many of the areas that students struggle with and have worked hard to put a transition plan into place to help students cope with this transition.

As part of my dissertation study, I am looking at the transition from middle schools to the ninth grade at West Rowan. We will be surveying and interviewing ninth grade students concerning their transition they experienced entering high school. The study will look at the perception students have towards ninth grade, what helped them during this transition, how they found support and their academic standing during this time. We will try to determine if there are trends that will help us better support these students.

If you are willing to provide your child permission to participate in the student survey and interview please sign and return this form. If I can be of any assistance, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Jamie Durant
Principal, West Rowan High School

My child has permission to participate in the student survey and interview session:

Name _____ Date _____

Appendix B
Student Survey

STUDENT SURVEY: TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

Student Name: _____ School ID #: _____

Male _____ Female _____ Date of Birth _____

1. During ninth grade, who lived in your house?

	Yes	No
Mother		
Father		
Stepmother		
Stepfather		
Grandmother		
Grandfather		
Older brother		
Older sister		
Younger brother		
Younger sister		

2. Does your mother work away from home?

Yes	No

If yes, check:

Full time	Part time

3. Did anyone in your household move in or out while you were in ninth grade?

Yes	No

Who? _____

4. What is the highest level of school that your mother completed?

Check one:

8 th grade	
High School	
Junior College (2-year college)	
College (4-year college)	
More than 4 years of college	
Don't know	

5. What is the highest level of school that your father completed?

Check one:

8 th grade	
High School	
Junior College (2-year college)	
College (4-year college)	
More than 4 years of college	
Don't know	

6. Check any of the following activities that you participated in as a ninth-grade student.

Sports	
Clubs	
Tutoring	
Freshman camp (summer)	
Community activities	
Community service activities	

7. Who helped you with your school work when you were a ninth grader? Check all who helped you.

Mother	_____
Father	_____
Older brother or sister	_____
Tutoring on campus	_____
Tutoring off campus	_____
Teacher	_____
Counselor	_____
Vice Principal	_____
Friends	_____
Other	_____

Who? _____

8. How would you describe your ninth-grade experience?

Easy	_____
Same as middle school	_____
Hard	_____

If anything was hard, what was?

9. What do you think was the most important thing that helped you get through the ninth grade?

Check all that helped you.

Friends	_____
Parents	_____
Depending on yourself	_____
Asking for help	_____
Being in a sport	_____
Coming to school everyday	_____
Tutoring	_____
Being in the music program	_____
Study group with friends	_____
Church work	_____
Other	_____

What?

10. What do you wish happened at your school to help in ninth grade?

1. I like schoolwork that I'll learn from even if I make a lot of mistakes.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

2. An important reason why I do my schoolwork is because I like to learn new things.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

3. I like schoolwork best when it really makes me think.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

4. An important reason why I do my work in school is because I want to get better at it.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

5. An important reason I do my schoolwork is because I enjoy it.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

6. I do my schoolwork because I am interested in it.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

7. I want to do better than other students in my class.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

8. I would feel successful if I did better than most of the other students in my class.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

9. I'd like to show my teacher that I'm smarter than the other kids in this class.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

10. Doing better than other students in this class is important to me.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

11. I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher's questions in class.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

12. It's important to me that the other students in this class think that I am good at my work.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

13. Teachers believe all students can learn.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

14. Understanding the work is more important than getting the right answers.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

15. Mistakes are okay as long as we are learning.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

16. Teachers think how much you learn is more important than test scores or grades.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

17. Teachers want students to really understand their work, not just memorize it.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

18. Trying hard counts a lot.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

19. At my school, teachers treat kids who get good grades better than other kids.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

20. At my school, only a few kids get praised for their schoolwork.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

21. At my school, teachers only care about the smart kids.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

22. My school has given up on some of its students.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

23. At my school, special privileges are given to students who get the highest grades.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at All True		Somewhat True		Very True

Appendix C

Frequency of Themes/Student Focus Groups

Frequency or Themes/Student Focus Groups Freshmen Transition Program 11/1/08

Theme	Focus Group A	Focus Group B	Focus Group C	Focus Group D	Focus Group E
Positive High School Transition					
Negative High School Transition					
Change in Attitude Towards School + or –					
Attendance + or –					
West Block Advisor/Advisee Time					
Student Mentor					
Involvement in Extra Curricular Activities					
Summer Orientation					
Freshmen Academy					
Change in Behavior at School + or –					
Quality of Work + or –					
Decision Making + or –					
Time on Task + or –					
Promptness + or –					

Appendix D

Frequency or Themes/Teacher Focus Groups

Frequency of Themes/Teacher Focus Groups Freshmen Transition Program 11/1/08

Theme	Focus Group A	Focus Group B	Focus Group C	Focus Group D	Focus Group E
Teacher Teams					
Common Planning					
Freshmen Academy					
Student Behavior and Attitudes					
Student Preparation					
Parental Support					
Involvement in Extra Curricular Activities					
Summer Orientation					
West Block Advisor/Advisee Time					