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Five Rural High Schools of the Ninth Grade Transition Program  
and/or Strategies**

Sheila Vonta McGee-Carlton

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The Perception of Administrators and Guidance Counselors in Five Rural High Schools  
of the Ninth Grade Transition Program and/or Strategies

By  
Sheila Vonta McGee-Carlton

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  
2018

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Sheila Vonta McGee-Carlton under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Stephen Laws, Ed.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Date

---

Bruce Boyles, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Laura Boyles, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Jeffrey Rogers, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Gayle Bolt Price School of  
Graduate Studies

---

Date

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank God for allowing me access to my prayer warriors, family and friends who continuously encouraged me to complete this enigmatic journey. To my husband Paul, thanks for being supportive. To Danniell, Casonja, Taurean, Patrice, Fiona, and all my grandchildren, I apologize for missing family time; I am back!

Thank you to Dr. Stephen Laws for serving as my chair and supplying unwavering wisdom and support. Thank you to my committee members, my dynamic duo, Dr. Bruce Boyles and Laura Boyles, for their dedication and insight.

I am passing the baton of higher education on to the next generation. The bar has been set high, and you should aim to keep it that way.

## **Abstract**

The Perception of Administrators and Guidance Counselors in Five Rural High Schools of the Ninth Grade Transition Program and/or Strategies. McGee-Carlton, Sheila Vonta, 2018: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Perception/Administration and Guidance Counselors/Ninth-Grade Transition/Ninth-Grade Strategies

Ninth-grade students are in danger of not succeeding more than any other grade level in high school. High school freshmen are at a higher risk of dropping out of high school than any populace of students. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of administrators and guidance counselors on the interventions/strategies utilized to achieve success of first-time ninth-grade students in five rural high schools located in southeastern North Carolina. Data-driven documentation assisted with methods that were in place with decreasing absenteeism and behavioral issues along with increasing course performance during the transitional phase in ninth grade. An analysis of qualitative response data followed an open coding process to identify themes from one-on-one interviews of administrators and guidance counselors from five rural high schools on the impact of ninth grade transition programs/strategies used on site. The data collected in the areas of absenteeism, behavior, and course performance assisted with determining the success of the ninth-grade students. The findings depicted that the interventions/strategies varied from high school to high school to best fit the needs of the ninth-grade populace. The interventions/strategies used positively impacted the matriculation rate from ninth grade on time and to ultimately increase the graduation rate in the district to meet or surpass the state-level data with students in the same cohort. The study contributes to positive outcomes to decrease the retention rate in ninth grade and the drop-out rates of the student populace served in the five rural high schools.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was passed in 2002 by President George Bush. This legislation required a level of accountability in education never before witnessed. New federal guidelines were adopted to increase student achievement, causing implementation of numerous measures to assist with the reduction in dropouts, to implement improvement on testing results, and to strengthen academic outcomes successfully. NCLB also required graduation percentage rate targets to be met by every high school in all 50 states in the U.S., with 100% set as the target for the year 2014 (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman & Francis, 2007).

In the United States, approximately one million students continuously get lost in high school and do not meet the challenge to graduate high school with the same group of students they entered high school with their freshman year (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation [MDRC], 2004). Graduation rates have improved in recent years within the U.S.; however, one third of students from Hispanic descent and one third of Black students will not graduate from high school with their peers. According to research, more than one fifth of all students will become a statistic that has the propensity to not graduate with their cohort (MDRC, 2016).

National estimates put students in a slow matriculation rate before tenth grade (Dedmond, 2008; Education Week, 2017), and it is too blatant to be ignored. During the transition phase, numerous students are laborious in completing ninth grade, but they are oftentimes left to survive or not survive during high school (Silberman, 2004). Research reveals that more than any other grade level in high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007),

there is a need for interventions during the transition phase for eighth graders as they enter the high school environment (Alspaugh, 1998; Smith, 1997). It is highly evident that ninth-grade students fail significantly more often than all other grades in high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

### **Statement of the Problem**

During the 1970s, attrition rates were 5%, according to a researcher for Boston College's Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy, Walt Haney. The "attrition rates" between freshmen and sophomores rose to 10% or to about 400,000 students throughout the U.S. annually by the mid-1990s (Black, 2004). Additionally, in North Carolina, approximately 1 of 5 students or 20% of the approximately 110,000 freshmen students did not graduate with their cohort in 2011-2012 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).

Undeniably, the massive numbers of students who do not successfully proceed beyond their freshman year in high school cause school policymakers across the nation to seek methods to adapt and resolve the issue (Haney et al., 2005). Many teenagers in ninth grade begin to negatively express themselves. Researchers have noted challenges that encompass attendance; co-curricular participation; declining grade point averages (GPAs); feelings of being accepted by peers, teachers, and administration; and an upsurge in apprehension linked to school expectations and procedures. Social difficulties and changes in relationships with parents are also listed as potential challenges facing ninth-grade students (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Schiller (1999) noted high school for many students is crucial, and the ninth-grade year of transition serves as a defining year between academic success and dropping out of school early. Too often, many ninth graders fail to meet the high demands entering high

school and never graduate. An overshadowing prevalence of low results on tests, reduced attendance, and disengagement from school prevents many students from completing high school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Iver, 2007).

There are two critical outcomes for ninth graders to graduate with the cohort that they began high school with as freshmen. Students must increase their academic skills and mature to complete high school successfully or they reach an impasse in school and eventually drop out (Baltimore Education Research Consortium [BERC], 2011b). Many students are besieged with higher levels of anxiety as new social concerns become evident, academic expectations rise, and behavioral responsibilities become apparent. Research conducted by Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007) identified predictors leading to academic failure that could be linked with increased drop-out rates. The predictors include historical data of high absenteeism rates in school, low engagement in school, low level of parental education, a pattern of “problematic or deviant behavior” (Ritter, 2015, p .1), relocating to a different school district during their freshman year of high school, attending a school with lower achievement scores, social anxiety, and students with work or family responsibilities (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrick, 2008; Suh et al., 2007). The list below includes various groups of students with reasons that may cause them to consider dropping out.

- a. In some cases, life events cause students to drop out. This issue is normally an occurrence that transpires outside of the school settings, e.g., teen pregnancy that leads to parenthood. Early pregnancy and parenthood is an established pattern personified for almost one third of teenage females who drop out of high school (Tucker, 2013).
- b. Some students become fade-outs. They become frustrated and bored with

school, although they have not repeated or failed any grades (Tucker, 2013).

- c. Other students become pushouts. Students who do not adjust well to the mundane drudgery of school and students who are subject to present an adverse effect to the success of the school overall might be compelled to withdraw or transfer away from school (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006).
- d. The last group of students plateau and do not reach high school success. The students exit school after establishing a negative pattern of high absenteeism, academic failure, or lack of engagement (Tucker, 2013).

Ninth grade has been deemed a minefield for the most vulnerable students in high school (Institute for Higher Education, 2006).. A lack of bonding with teachers, administrators, and other students in high school could cause some students to become disengaged and discouraged in high school. Some disconnected students could become at high risk of dropping out (Black, 2004).

Much research has been conducted regarding students dropping out of school or failing academically in ninth grade (Ma'ayan, 2010). Some reasons for the continuous concern surrounding ninth-grade retention follow.

- The National High School Center (2012) shared data which revealed that during the year 1982, “ninth grade enrollment was 4% higher than eighth grade enrollment” (p. 1). In the year 2011, the enlarged group of ninth graders had grown to 12% (National High School Center, 2012). Inflation of the ninth grade is depicted in the following figures: Approximately, 22% of students repeat ninth grade (National High School Center, 2012).
- Countless students remain stuck their freshman year and consequently do not get promoted to the tenth grade with their cohort. Students who do not rise

with their peers generate the struggling group deemed “ninth-grade bulge” and “tenth-grade dip.” The ninth-grade attrition rate is largely entrenched in students at the lower socioeconomic level. Schools in highly impoverished districts produce 40% of dropouts in contrast to 27% of students who drop out after ninth grade in lower poverty districts (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

- In high school, freshmen students fail more frequently than any other grade level. The massive number of students not reaching the tenth grade on time and the students vanishing from high school due to dropping out before becoming sophomores are major issues (Abbott & Templeton, 2012).
- The strongest predictor that a current student in high school will drop out is “low attendance during the first 30 days of their ninth grade year” (Therriault, O’Cummings, Heppen, Yerhot, & Scala, 2013, p. 6). Eighth grade has indicators such as test scores, academic achievement, and students who are overage, but they carry less weight than the ninth-grade predictor (Therriault et al., 2013).
- New economic realities — such as the need for 21st-century skills to secure employment— and new research on student engagement clearly show that the middle school students’ journey should prepare them for high school graduation and college and career readiness (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Numerous school districts are searching for and developing effective approaches to reduce drop-out rates. Several programs based on a collection of various research-driven data present insight into prospective areas of implementation or the expansion of

existing programs that have been highly effective for scores of students (Prince George's County Public Schools [PGCPS], 2017). The following interventions have shown promise throughout the United States in improving retention rates and/or improving on-time graduation rates and academic achievement beginning with ninth grade.

1. High Schools that Work (HSTW) was established by SREB to reform schools with low graduation rates. The ultimate goal is for 80% or four of five ninth graders to graduate high school prepared for career training or ready to enter college (SREB, 2016).
2. Career/technical education adds invaluable substance to high school studies. At-risk freshmen should be subject to career/technical education (SREB, 2016). Classes are held in a laboratory setting for a year to familiarize students with project-based career exploratory courses that maximize their experiences to promote academic achievement and career skills. High schools can no longer afford to let students “muddle through the middle.” They need to implement a roadmap for change. Schools need to implement methods that include
  - a. Common standards that are immersed in preparation for college and career readiness,
  - b. Project-based learning,
  - c. Literacy promotion as a learning tool across the grade levels,
  - d. Provisions to strengthen weak students,
  - e. Using science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) to advance student knowledge based on their interests and aptitudes in the career market,

- f. Hiring and grooming leaders specifically for the middle grades who can motivate teachers and students, and
  - g. Providing guidance to promote experiences students need to lay out career and college plans for continuous improvement to be successful in high school (Parikh, 2012).
3. Early Warning Systems (EWS) successfully identify at-risk students using various data. Multiple schools analyze at-risk student data to assist with deciding strategies and interventions school wide. Using student data from absenteeism, course failures, credits earned, and GPA, schools can correctly identify potential dropouts upon entry to high school (Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). Graduation rate indicators were used to categorically identify a freshman as “on-track or off-track” in terms of students on the right path in pursuit of graduation or needing interventions to achieve on-time graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). During the freshman year of high school, 82% of the on-track students graduated from high school within 4 years. Only 22% of the off-track students graduated on time during the same time frame. Studies produced evidence that ninth graders who were deemed on track at the end of the freshman year were 3.5 times more likely to graduate than the students who ended their freshman year off track (Allensworth, 2013).
4. Ninth-grade academies (NGAs) provide ninth-grade students with a “school within a school” for students to remain on track through what is typically the most difficult year of their secondary school careers (NCDPI, 2006). Each ninth-grade team has a dedicated counselor who works closely with students to enhance the quality of school life. The bonds are established with teachers

and other staff members for students to feel supported and experience a sense of belonging in the school (Abbott & Templeton, 2012).

5. Talent development is a large-scale initiative which implements structural remodeling in school management and organization for low-achieving schools with continual attendance and discipline problems, poor student achievement, and high drop-out rates (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2007). A high school education is not considered adequate to provide for a better way of life in today's society; therefore, policymakers are incessantly demanding that schools nationwide graduate all students prepared for college and/or careers (Roderick, Kelly-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014).
6. Ninth grade faculty teams aid teachers in joining forces and sharing information about students to provide individualized support. Implementing these components should involve members who possess leadership skills, knowledge of scheduling, and technologically knowledge. The teachers meet as frequently as once per week throughout the school year to discuss the academic progress of the ninth-grade students assigned to their course (Neild, 2008, p. 18).
7. Peer mentoring programs include a diverse group of upper classmen who volunteered to provide incoming students guided supervision. The upperclassmen provide positive influences to an array of diverse incoming students. The handpicked mentors help create a fun, creative learning environment for the new arrivals (Rhodes, 2016). To become a mentor, students must be well rounded with a broad range of interests and should be familiar with various activities that are offered on the high school

campus. The mentor role includes waylaying some of the fears stemming from academic, social, and emotional skills needed for new freshmen (Rhodes, 2016).

8. Summer bridge programs can last from a few hours to several weeks. Some components of the program that assist students are covered in English class include reading and writing activities, exposure to algebraic fundamentals, exposure to practical life, and study skills deemed necessary to progress successfully through high school to build college knowledge for postsecondary aspirations (Abbott & Templeton, 2012). Research suggests that incoming ninth graders who attend summer bridge programs gain methods to eliminate or decrease skill gaps, have been subjected to accelerated learning, and experienced enhanced preparations for ninth grade. The exposure provided to the freshmen during the summer bridge program should prevent them from becoming statistical data on an annual drop-out report for ninth grade (Abbott & Templeton, 2012).

Ninth-grade interventions dealing with high school attendance, academic course credits earned, and promotion rates indicate positive results. Transitional programs are needed to assist with student success during this critical year (Buhrman, 2010).

Comprehensive school restructuring efforts have shown promising results that increase the capacity of high schools. NGAs house a “school within a school” that allows physical space for a close, intimate learning environment (Poiner, 2014). Three major requirements for ninth-grade success involve preparedness in both English and math, ensuring that students are immersed in the high school concept, and preparing students to achieve academic expectations by exposing at-risk students to confidence-building skills

to cope with social, emotional, and academic issues during the transition (Abbott & Templeton, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine school-based administrator and counselor perceptions of ongoing impacts of various ninth grade transitional programs and/or strategies. Ninth grade transitional programs are defined as having ninth grade specific classes, strategies, and efforts used by schools to ease the transition of eighth-grade students into high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Eighty-two NGAs were studied in North Carolina, and the research revealed that “non-promotion rates” were notably “lower than the state average” (Balfanz, 2009, p. 35). Multiple interventions exist that are geared towards answering risk factors during a student’s high school education. The interventions are designed to motivate students to succeed academically and to give struggling students some much-needed, extra assistance in high school (Meador, 2016).

### **Overview of the Study**

This study evaluated various transitional programs for students promoted from middle school to high school utilizing personal interviews. For the purpose of this study, the term “transition” makes reference to middle school students’ crucial navigation through the first year of high school (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). The selected schools in the district highlighted details as they pertain to absenteeism, discipline, and academic performance.

### **Research Questions**

The questions chosen for this qualitative study included the following.

1. What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth transition programs and/or strategies on the

retention rate of ninth-grade students?

2. What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the drop-out rate of ninth-grade students?
3. Which components of the freshman transitional programs and/or strategies should be kept/added to increase the impact the program may have on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates?

These questions guided this study and required a design that would reveal the relative impact of each upon promotion to tenth grade and through twelfth-grade graduation.

### **Definitions**

The following terminology referenced throughout the study is provided to define and provide clear details.

**Adequate yearly progress (AYP).** The foundation of the accountability programming developed from the federal education initiative NCLB. Federal law requires that each state implement and modify standards ensuring academic achievement and accountability for all students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). AYP highlights achievement for both whole groups and subgroups (National Longitudinal Study of No Child Left Behind, 2009). In North Carolina, each public school and Local Education Agency (LEA) report on the same 10 student subgroups which are (NCDPI, 2017a) measured by test participation; academic achievement; and a district-defined “second indicator,” oftentimes attendance or graduation rate. The high school scores are based on the North Carolina High School Graduation Test in both mathematics and reading/language arts (NCDPI, 2016a).

**Attendance.** In this study, “attendance uses the percentage of unexcused absences of the students” by the North Carolina State Board of Education (Great Schools Staff, 2016).

**Behavior.** (a) Following consistent rules that reinforce respectful and responsible behaviors that lead to positive conduct (NCDPI, 2012); (b) NCDPI (2006) decreed that students should put forth efforts that promote high student performance in learning academic tasks. On the premise of assisting students with becoming higher achievers, teachers/mentors incorporate building skills using personified challenges, goals, and interest (Rahim, 2012); (c) Participation in school-related activities provides opportunities for students to compete with other schools in athletics, a wide variety of clubs, and for a student government that promotes leeway for students to plan and implement various student-driven activities (Roosevelt High School, n.d.).

**Chronic absenteeism.** “Missing 10 percent of the designated school year (180 days) regardless of the purpose” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 3).

**End-of-course (EOC) exams.** For high school students, the North Carolina EOC exams are state-mandated assessments used to extract samples of individual student’s knowledge pertaining to subject-related concepts using the guidelines as specified by the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. According to NCDPI (2017b), criterion-referenced results serve “to provide a global estimate of the student’s mastery of the material in a particular content area” (p. 1). In North Carolina, EOC “tests were initiated in response to legislation passed by the North Carolina General Assembly – the North Carolina Elementary and Secondary Reform Act of 1984” (NCDPI, 2017b, p. 1).

**Retention rate.** The percentage of students who fail to complete a grade level within the span of the 180 days in a designated school year (Georgia Department of

Education, 2015), including summer school activity (NCDPI, 2016c). All school districts throughout the state submit an absenteeism report to NCDPI in September. The collection of data, which includes the number of students who were retained, promoted, or graduated was used to assess the needs of the students. The numbers must align with the number count of students enrolled on the last day (MLD) as reported using the “9th Principal's Monthly Report” of the reporting school year. Data from the report are used on various levels to report to local, state, and federal agencies and other organizations (NCDPI, 2016c).

**Small learning community (SLC).** A high school model that breaks large high schools into smaller units to increase personalization, relevance and rigor of coursework, and teacher collaboration (David, 2008). The contained atmosphere allows for links to real-life application that is represented in the local community. To make learning more relevant, students are provided time and support to adequately master the knowledge provided by mentors, tutors, and advisors (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

Extensive research is available on transition programs, but only a minute portion of the research is from the viewpoint of the administrators and guidance counselors. The intended purpose of this study was to analyze school-based personnel perceptions of ongoing impacts of various ninth grade transition programs. Focus on promotion to tenth grade can provide evidence of the immediate impact of local transition programs and their potential to mitigate factors such as high absenteeism, an extensive number of discipline referrals, and low EOC scores in schools. Typically, during this adjustment period, ninth graders experience excessive retentions and higher drop-outs rates and are

unsuccessful academically more than other grade levels during high school (Somers, 2016).

### Context

Table 1 presents the 2014-2015 cohort graduation rates and selected demographics for the high schools in the rural district.

Table 1

#### *Percentage of Enrollment: Student Background and Demographics*

Groups and Subgroups	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Total Students	180	995	811	328	66.0
Graduation Rate	88.0	84.0	70.0	83.0	76.0
Male	33.0	53.0	51.0	53.0	57.0
Female	67.0	47.0	49.0	47.0	43.0
Black	26.1	13.3	42.3	11.4	33.9
Hispanic	40.6	30.8	36.8	42.6	32.0
White	30.6	53.7	18.0	44.1	31.5
Other	2.7	2.2	2.9	1.9	2.4
Limited English Proficient	2.0	9.0	12.0	11.0	8.0
Students with Disabilities	6.0	13.0	13.0	15.0	12.0
Academically Gifted	12.0	5.0	9.0	10.0	12.0

Based upon the aforementioned data analysis of all five schools, Table 1 presents a display of demographic information of each research school. School A has the least amount of students, the highest graduation rate, the largest percentage of females, the lowest percent of students with disabilities, and was tied with School E for the highest percentage of academically gifted students. School B has the largest student body, the highest percentage of White students, and the least percent of academically gifted students. School C has the second largest student body, the lowest graduation rate, the highest percentage of Black students, the lowest percentage of White students, the highest percentage of students deemed other, and the highest percentage of limited English proficient students. School D has the least percentage of Black students, the largest

percentage of Hispanic students, the least percentage of ESL students, and the highest percentage of students with disabilities. School E has the highest percentage of male students, the least percentage of female students, and was tied with School A for the highest percentage of academically gifted students.

High School A in this study consisted of Grades 9-12 and served approximately 180 students with a 99% average daily membership rate. The average graduation rate from 2011 to 2015 for High School A was 88%, which is higher than the district's 78% and North Carolina's 82% (NCDPI, 2016b). There were seven classroom teachers employed at the school, of which 98% were highly qualified as defined by federal law.

At High School A, the student population was 67% female and 33% male. High School A is 40.6% Hispanic, 30.6% White, 26.1% Black, and 2.7% other. The percentage of students who received free or reduced meals attending School A was approximately 68.9% (NCDPI, 2016b), and the percentage of exceptional children was approximately 10%.

During 2014-2015, the percentage of students at School A who received disciplinary actions in the form of in-school suspension was 1.2% and out-of-school suspension was 4.7%. At this school, the total of chronically absent students reached 12%.

High School B has 995 students. School B in this study consisted of Grades 9-12 and has a 99% average daily membership rate. The average graduation rate from 2011 to 2015 at High School B was 84%, the district was 78%, and North Carolina was 82% (NCDPI, 2016b). There were 55 classroom teachers employed at the school, of which 98% were highly qualified as defined by federal law.

At High School B, the student populace was 53% male and 47% female, and the

total minority enrollment was 46.3%, and 53.7% Caucasian (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). The percentage of students who received free or reduced meals at School B was approximately 54.4% (NCDPI, 2016b), and the percentage of exceptional children was approximately 13%.

During 2014-2015, the percentage of students at School B who received disciplinary actions in the form of in-school suspension was 24.5% and out-of-school suspension was 12.2%, which are both above the disciplinary action rates across high schools in North Carolina. School B had a significantly higher rate of chronic student absenteeism at 31% than the state average at 18% and 16% in the U.S.

High School C had 811 students, which is the average number of high school students assigned to high schools in North Carolina. High School C in this study consisted of Grades 9-12 with a 99% average daily membership rate. The average graduation rate from 2011-2015 for High School C was 70%. The district average was 78%, and North Carolina average was 82% (NCDPI, 2016b). There were 42 classroom teachers employed at the school, 98% of whom were highly qualified as defined by federal law.

At High School C, the student population was roughly an equal percentage of males and females with 51% males and 49% females (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). The demographic breakdown of High School C was made up of 79.1% of minority students on average and 20.9% Caucasian students.

During 2014-2015, the percentage of students at School C who received disciplinary actions in the form of in-school suspension was 33.4% and out-of-school suspension was 17.4%. Significantly higher rates of students at this school were chronically absent at 39% when compared to the 18% average for North Carolina and

16% for the U.S.

The percentage of students who received free or reduced meals at the research site was approximately 69.5% (NCDPI, 2016b), and the percent of exceptional children was approximately 22%. As of 2014-2015, the percent of students at this school who demonstrated proficiency on the North Carolina EOC in English was 44%, 37% proficiency in math, and 43% proficiency in science.

High School D had 328 students in this study that consisted of Grades 9-12 with a 99% average daily membership rate. The average graduation rate from 2011-2015 for High School D was 83%; the district was 78%; and North Carolina was 82% (NCDPI, 2016b). There were 18 classroom teachers employed at the school, 98% of whom were highly qualified as defined by federal law.

At High School D, the student population was roughly an equal percentage of males and females, with 53% males and 47% females (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). High School D consisted of 44.1% Caucasians, 42.6% Hispanics, 11.4% Black and 1.9% other.

During 2014-2015, the percentage of students at School D who received disciplinary actions in the form of in-school suspension was 1.9% and out-of-school suspension was 14.4%. At this school, the total of chronically absent students reached 20%.

The percentage of students who received free or reduced meals at School D was approximately 53% (NCDPI, 2016b), and the percentage of exceptional children was approximately 15%.

High School E had 667 students. High School E consisted of Grades 9-12. The average graduation rate from 2011-2015 for High School E was 76%; the district average

was 78%; and North Carolina average was 82% (NCDPI, 2016b). There were 39 classroom teachers employed at the school, 98% of whom were highly qualified as defined by federal law.

At High School E, the student population consists of 57% males and 43% females (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). High School E consisted of 33.9% African-American students, 32.2% Hispanic students, 31.5% of Caucasian students, and 2.4% other.

During 2014-2015, the percentage of students at School E who received disciplinary actions in the form of in-school suspension was 3.4% and out-of-school suspension was 20.9%. At this school, the total of chronically absent students reached 22%.

The percentage of students who received free or reduced meals at the research site was approximately 64.9% (NCDPI, 2016b). The percent of exceptional children was approximately 24%.

Table 2 displays the comparison of the students in each school within the district based on attendance. The attendance rate includes in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions.

Table 2

*School Discipline and Absenteeism Rates by Percentage*

Absent from School	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
In School Discipline	1.2	24.5	33.4	1.9	3.4
Out of School Discipline	4.7	12.2	17.4	14.4	20.9
Attendance	12.0	31.0	39.0	20.0	22.0

Table 3 shows the high percentage of students on free or reduced lunch. More than 50% of the students at each of the five schools took part in the free or reduced meals

program.

Table 3

*Percentage of Students Who Received Free and Reduced Lunch*

Free/Reduced Lunch	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
	68.9	54.4	69.5	52.8	64.9

School C had the highest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. School D had the lowest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Table 4 illustrates percent proficiency in math, English/language arts, and science EOC exams at the five rural high schools.

Table 4

*EOC Results*

EOC Results	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Math	67	43	37	52	22
English	82	49	44	40	43
Science	78	38	43	53	41

**Overview of the Methodology**

This study evaluated the perception on the impact of transition programs and strategies at five rural high schools from a county located in the southeastern region of North Carolina. This study used qualitative data that included open-ended interview questions asked of administrators and guidance counselors.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this qualitative study consisted of a small, specified group of administrators and guidance counselors at local high schools, seeking their perceptions of ninth-grade interventions/strategies programs. The qualitative study revolved around the use of interview responses adding limited bias in the perceptions of the interviews.

The delimitations of the qualitative study consisted of high schools located in rural areas in southeastern North Carolina. The results may not compare with other schools' environments in other locations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine school-based administrator and counselor perceptions of ongoing impacts of various ninth grade transitional programs. The review of the literature is concerned with various high school transition programs. It is divided into specific distinct sections. The literature review will deal with research-based information regarding the impact of intervention program issues encountered by students transitioning to high school in an attempt to assist with increased grades, a decrease in behavior issues, and a decrease in drop-out rates.

In eighth grade, each course a student fails increases the odds of students falling between the cracks while transitioning from ninth to tenth grade by at least 16% (Christie & Zinth, 2008). Approximately one third of the nation's recent high school dropouts were unsuccessful beyond ninth grade. Neild (2009) found that some of the students were stuck in ninth grade recreating the unwanted continuous growth of enrollment of ninth-grade students called a "bulge." In 2011, this bulge ballooned to a 12% increase in enrollment of ninth-grade students. Enrollment is highly impacted in high schools with socioeconomic challenges. Tragically, as many as 40% of freshmen students in highly impoverished schools tend to drop out prior to tenth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Many years prior to dropping out of high school, students present traceable data collected by school districts. School districts keep running data on enrolled students that can be used to project the need for interventions (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram, 2017).

Highly successful eighth graders sometimes crash when they enter the ninth grade. Using eighth-grade data, researchers from Philadelphia found an eighth grader

had, at a minimum, a 75% chance of dropping out based on the following educational indicators:

- a. Attendance: Is generally marked by a decline in attendance (Ritter, 2015).
- b. Behavior: The link between student behavioral issues and dropping out does exist (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Research shows that the freshman year of high school represents a symbolic passage into near adulthood, with teenagers much more likely to be impulsive and take risks (Poiner, 2014).
- c. Course achievement: The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that more than 25% of eighth-grade students failed to demonstrate proficiency using fundamental skills to produce success in high school level mathematics, while 22% failed to demonstrate proficiency using the fundamental skills to reach success in reading (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010).

### **Absenteeism**

Using a wealth of data available to determine students who were at risk of not transitioning well through ninth grade, some schools identify students who are on track as an indicator of who will graduate with their high school peers (Roderick et al., 2014). Poor attendance is a major indicator. A bolstered number of unexcused absences primarily drove the increase, which is nearly an increase four times larger in ninth grade than recorded in the eighth-grade year. In Chicago Public High Schools (CPHS), ninth-grade students were absent “27 days of school, with 21.4 of those days due to unexcused absences” during the 2008-2009 school year (Rosenkranz, De la Torre, Stevens and Allensworth, 2014, p.. 4), possibly placing them on a course to not complete high school.

The high school drop-out rate is directly impacted by a student's level of success in ninth grade, according to research compiled by Chicago CCSR; Rosenkranz et al. (2014). University of Chicago CCSR conducted a study entitled ninth Grade is the Key to Solving the Dropout Crisis. The researchers revealed that attendance in ninth grade was a key indicator of students deciding to graduate from high school (Rosenkranz et al., 2014). Student attendance tends to decline considerably when they move from eighth to ninth grade (Benner, 2011). Unexcused absences quadruple from eighth to ninth grade, from 5 days to 21 days, on average (Rosenkranz et al., 2014).

A study that was completed through the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation, the Aaron and Lillie Straus Foundation, and the Wright Family Foundation found students who missed less than 2 school days in the month of September continued to average less than 2 days of absenteeism each month of school. The students ended the year with absenteeism totaling an average of 10 days per school year. The group of students who were absent between 2-4 days followed a trend of missing 2-3 days each month, which averaged a total of 25 days for the school year. For the group of students who were absent more than 4 days, they followed a trend of missing an average of 6-9 days each month, which led to an average total of 70 days for the school year. Due to the totality of days missed, the latter group was deemed chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008).

In New Jersey during the 2013-2014-school year, a staggering 125,000 students were “chronically absent.” The students were “absent 10 percent or more of scheduled school days, for excused and/or unexcused absences,” according to statistics from the New Jersey Department of Education (2015, para 4.). The group of absentees accounted for approximately 10% of New Jersey’s kindergarten through twelfth grade student

population (National High School Center, 2012).

Many schools operate on a 180-day school year. Students who are absent 18 days or more per school year or approximately two full days every month are considered chronically absent. Districts with a consistent total of 10% chronically absent students are categorized as “high-absenteeism” school districts. School absences affect individual students and also impact all students in the classroom. Chronically absent students force teachers to provide additional assistance as they return to make up work causing other students to receive less attention (Chang & Romero, 2008).

In the Redwood City School District in Georgia, a research study of chronic absenteeism predictors was conducted. Researchers discovered that the best indicator was if the student had been chronically absent the previous year (Sanchez, 2012). Data are validated by a study conducted by Olson (2014), which found a small proportion of students (12.6%) who missed fewer than 2 days in September went on to be chronically absent. In contrast, nearly half (49.5%) of those missing 2-4 days in September went on to be chronically absent, and 87.8% of students absent for more than 4 days in September grew to become chronically absent students over the entire school year. These results suggest that schools need to pay attention to student attendance from the earliest days in September and intervene to get students who are chronically absent back on track quickly (Olson, 2014).

A study linked a connection between the number of days a ninth-grade student is not present in school and the probability of graduating with their peers. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg established a program that spanned from 2010-2013. Under the guidelines of the program, a task force was convened to combat truancy, chronic absenteeism, and school engagement. More than 60,000 students were involved in the

study. The research concluded that students who were absent at least 20 days of school per year (Roderick et al., 2014) had a 10% chance of graduating on time; and for students who doubled to 40 or more days, the study projected zero probability of the students graduating with their ninth-grade peers (Allensworth, 2013).

In many cases, students become overage due to poor attendance. Typically, students who are overage for a grade were retained in the current grade or a prior one. Analysis by the nonprofit Attendance Works of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, which bills itself as the national report card, shows, in many cases, students with chronic absences are 1 or 2 years behind peers with better attendance (Groves, 2015).

Public schools can identify characteristics that relate to a student's being at risk for leaving high school prior to graduation. Research of public schools found that the following factors in eighth graders were strong indicators of students dropping out: low attendance, poor grades in core courses, and being overage for one's grade (Achieve Incorporated, 2010). Ninth-grade students were deemed at risk if they attended school no more than 30% of their ninth-grade year, earned less than two credits during the ninth grade, or did not become a high school freshman on time.

A daunting group of students are in danger of becoming dropouts. Four of five students who were categorized as at risk in eighth and ninth grade dropped out of high school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012).

### **Behavior**

The relationship between academics and behavior exists. Research has found that an issue in either area places a student at risk for problems in the other area. In a study of 330 students in the Pacific Northwest, researchers tried to predict problems in behavior

and/or academics in ninth grade by examining office discipline referrals (ODRs) from eighth grade, student scores on the Oregon State Assessment (OSA), and ninth-grade GPA from the three core academic courses—language arts, mathematics, and science (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). The researchers examined “crossover effects” of academics on behavior compared to behavior on academics. The effect of eighth-grade behavior on ninth-grade behavior and the effects of eighth-grade academics on ninth-grade academics were compared. Researchers found that there was a significant crossover effect from behavior problems to academic problems but not vice versa. In this study, problems in behavior seemed to have a greater impact on problems in academic performance (McIntosh et al., 2008).

In a poll of American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 17% of teachers admittedly missed half a day or more hours of teaching per week due to disruptive student behavior. Another 19% of AFT teachers admittedly lost control of the class at least a couple of hours per week due to students presenting behavior issues (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

The Center for Mental Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services compiled a litany of possibilities that cause students to misbehave. The key factors noted are listed below.

- Alcohol and drugs use in the home that could lead to abuse and neglect.
- Stress related to abuses such as emotional, physical/sexual.
- Adjusting to changes in family dynamics (death or divorce).
- Dysfunctional parenting that propels students to model the behavior.
- Emulating media violence that could begin with incidences of bullying.
- Negative attitude towards school due to feeling overwhelmed or

underwhelmed.

- Parent criminality history.
- Poverty that might cause a student to feel like an outcast (Johnston, 2015).

Middle school behavior data can assist with the prediction of a student's successful ninth grade school year and graduating on time. Chronic absenteeism, low participation in school, parent lack of education, deviant behavior, and relocating to a new school have proven to increase a student's chance of dropping out of school (Moore, 2014).

The outcome was that students with more ODRs had lower GPAs (McIntosh et al., 2008). The GPAs of students with two or more referrals dropped from fall to spring, whereas the mean GPA of students with up to one referral was stable. Students with six or more ODRs in eighth grade had a ninth grade fall GPA of 1.18 and a spring GPA of 0.82. The study found that most ninth-grade students (65%) did not have problems in either academics or behavior; however, 35% of students did have challenges and needed support in one or both areas: 5% had behavior challenges; 12% had both academic and behavioral challenges; and 18% had academic challenges (McIntosh et al., 2008).

Freshmen students have more referrals due to behavior issues than other grade levels during high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Some of the misbehaviors and poor choices that are revealed by research are chronic absenteeism, in- or out-of-school suspension and retention.

Students suspended (in or out of school) become a part of high alert warning signals that plague ninth grade for a massive amount of students. Members of the student body who are suspended one or more times are projected to be twice as likely to not complete high school (Neild, 2009). Out-of-school suspensions in ninth grade are in

conjunction with undesired decreased graduation rates in the state of Florida. Three of four Floridian ninth graders who did not have an out-of-school suspension experience as a freshman graduated from high school. For ninth graders who experienced out-of-school suspension at least once, there was a 52% graduation rate; and there was a 38% graduation rate for students who were suspended out of school twice during their freshman year (Shah, 2013).

Although, schools in North Carolina and other states in the southeastern United States resort to suspensions more often than other parts of the country (Neff, 2015), research shows that schools in North Carolina are working to reduce suspensions. During 2011-2012, public schools in North Carolina suspended 258,197 students short term (i.e., out-of-school suspensions lasting 1-10 school days); ninth graders received the largest number of short-term suspensions with over 70,000 (Bonneau & Owen, 2010). More than 1,600 freshmen students received long-term suspensions (i.e., out-of-school suspensions lasting 11 school days or more (NC Child, 2014). By comparison, during the 2013-2014 school year, North Carolina public schools imposed 198,254 short-term suspensions, and long-term suspensions fell to 1,085 in that year (Hinchcliffe, 2016). Based on data reported by all public schools in North Carolina, the number of out-of-school short-term suspensions given to students increased 5.2% -- from a 2013-2014 a total of 198,254 to 208,650 in 2014-2015. During this time, the number of long-term suspensions decreased from 1,088 to 1,085 (Hinchcliffe, 2016).

Approximately nine of every 100 students enrolled in North Carolina high schools were disciplined by being the recipient of at least one out-of-school (short-term) suspension during the 2014-2015 school year. Statewide, there were more than 86,570 short-term suspensions in Grades 9-12 reported during the 2014-2015 school year, an

increase of 2.7% from the 2013-2014 total of approximately 84,290. In 9-12, the short-term suspension rate averaged 1.95 suspensions per 10 students. According to research, many suspended students received a single suspension each year, while students with more issues received short-term suspensions through the year. During the 2014-2015 school year, North Carolina high school students received short-term suspensions that averaged 6.44 days, and the total of all students averaged 5.51 days. The average duration of a single short-term suspension for high school students was 3.51 days (NCDPI, 2016c). The number of long-term suspensions changed minutely from 1,088 in 2013-2014 to 1,085 in 2014-2015. Average school days per long-term suspension rose by approximately 9%. High school students in North Carolina received 760 long-term suspensions, revealing a 6.6% rise over the 2013-2014 (NCDPI, 2016c).

In 2014-2015, of the 2,801 students who were enrolled in the district being studied, 785 short-term suspensions were imposed and 65 students dropped out. Of the 65 students who dropped out, 45 were male; 32 were Hispanic; 20 were Caucasian; and 10 were Black (Hinchcliffe, 2016). Statistically, during the school year 2014-2015, ninth graders, Blacks, Native Americans, and male students along with students receiving special education services were predominantly among the subgroups suspended the most in North Carolina (Hinchcliffe, 2016).

Retention (Groves, 2015) is also major issue in ninth grade. The ninth grade has the highest enrollment rate in high schools, due to slightly more than 21% of students repeating ninth-grade classes in the U.S. This number can be significantly higher in large urban high schools (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Nearly two in 10 students in North Carolina repeated ninth grade (Viadero, 2009).

A student's education plays an important role for his or her success in school

(White & Kelly, 2010). Many parents have the misconception that when entering high school, ninth-grade students have reached a maturity level where they are more responsible and independent. A lot of ninth-grade students need parental support during their freshman year of high school. Parents should seek opportunities to be well informed with updates of upcoming school events. Ninth-grade parents should plan to attend as many functions as possible to remain in the loop. In 2012, 79% of ninth-through twelfth-grade students had parents who attended a meeting with a teacher (Child Trends, 2013).

In reality, students entering ninth grade face many new and challenging events that can influence graduation (Blount, 2012). Physical, emotional, and hormonal changes add to the stress of the transition to high school (Sparks, 2013). Other fears about transition, expressed by high school students, include a fear that their new teachers will not like or support them; they are not prepared academically; the new assignments will be too difficult for them; and they will not find a way to fit in at their new school (Hauser, Choate, & Thomas, 2009).

Within most of North America, age 15 is traditionally associated with a time students cave to peer pressure and become more vulnerable to negative and even harmful influences. Many students gravitate in the school settings to their peers as a status with their early high school peers (Doornwaard, Branje, Meeus, & ter Bogt, 2012). For some students, ninth grade can stir up feelings of insecurity and alienation as students try to find ways to establish their own place within the student population (Poiner, 2014). Students need the proper directives and support prior to entering ninth grade. Multiple students who lack pre-infused guidance as incoming ninth graders might perceive high school as a negative in their daily lives. If students fall into that category, they might turn

to unconstructive behaviors to find fulfillment (Oakes & Waite, 2009).

### **Course Achievement**

Approximately 40% of retained overage students drop out of school. Many struggling students have issues that make them need support beyond academic remediation. Some of their immediate needs may include “multi-faceted, intensive and customized support in all areas to achieve social, emotional, and academic progress” (Louisiana Believes, 2015, p. 1) in order to place them on the pathway to becoming optimal students.

For every student who failed in eighth grade, the chances of them falling through the cracks from ninth to tenth grade increased by more than 15% (Christie & Zinth, 2008). Declining achievement levels during the transition from middle school to high school leads to high student drop-out rates (Balfanz, 2009).

A student’s academic standing during the ninth grade could be the best indicator of them becoming a high school dropout (Louisiana Believes, 2015). Of the 469 high schools in North Carolina, 92 high schools, approximately 20%, had 4-year graduation rates of less than 75% in the school year 2011-2012. In North Carolina, approximately 45,000 students did not graduate with the cohort they began with in ninth grade during Classes of ’11 and ’12 (Charter School Application, 2013).

Researchers tracked a cohort of approximately 20,000 ninth graders in approximately 950 schools (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013). The research was completed using both private schools and public schools. Focus was placed on the results of mathematics assessments and exposure to math courses, while also offering contextual data provided by administrators (Council for American Private Education, 2011).

The results revealed that mathematics achievement among ninth graders varied

considerably by type of school, with 59.2% of private school students scoring in the top two quintiles of performance compared to 38.5% of public school students. Course taking showed that in private schools, 91.3% of ninth graders were enrolled in algebra I, algebra II, or geometry; but only 78.8% of the ninth graders in public schools were enrolled in algebra I, algebra II, or geometry (Council for American Private Education, 2011).

The ultimate goal for any ninth grader is to become a sophomore. Sometimes in the quest to graduate ninth grade, students are not successful with standardized testing. During those occasions, real-time data could be used on instructional leadership to continuously improve instruction and develop or expand data collection systems to allow for customized, real-time data analysis (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2014). Real-time data can be used to intervene using integrated approaches that look at multiple factors across educational levels to support increased graduation likelihood with students who exhibit one or more early indicators of dropout (Ritter, 2015). During 2007, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began an approach to reduce the number of students who failed courses in the ninth grade. In CPS, students who do not earn on-time promotion to tenth grade and/or who fail at least one semester core class are categorized as having a high probability of dropping out of school. Tracking student data from CPS suggests that focusing on the ninth graders with test scores in the third quartile (roughly equivalent to being at the third quartile on national norms), 35% were off track at the end of freshman year and only one quarter of these higher achieving students graduated, a rate more than three times lower than their counterparts with similar test scores who had more successful transitions to high school. Thus, despite their skills, many of these freshmen had difficulty in ninth grade, and these students were very

unlikely to graduate. Schools across Chicago initiated new strategies to improve that transition, making use of new data reports for monitoring and supporting students in real time as well as ninth-grade coordinators and summer transition programs (Chicago CCSR, 2014).

Math is considered one of the most telling subjects in the academic success of a student in ninth grade. For students receiving a D or below in mathematics, the odds tripled in making students more likely to drop out of high school. With regard to GPA, ninth-grade students with a GPA below 1.20 were twice more likely to drop out of high school than students with a GPA of 1.20 or above. Having a first marking period GPA below a 3.00 more than quadrupled the odds of dropping out at Grade 9 (West, 2013).

Research shows that ninth grade is a major year of consideration for reducing dropouts (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Failure rates indicate that 24.5% of ninth-grade students fail and do not graduate on time (NCES, 2010).

Students are regarded as on track for graduation if they earn at least five full-year course credits and no more than one semester F in a core course in their first year of high school (Chicago CCSR, 2014). Ninth-grade students who had a GPA of 2.5 or higher, passed algebra 1 with a C or higher by Grade 8, failed one or fewer semester courses, were absent fewer than 8 days, were never suspended prior to Grade 9, and never moved between schools during middle school were continuously on track for Grade 9 promotion (Ritter, 2015).

### **Interventions**

Ninth grade represents a chance for districts to flex their innovative muscles that target their unique student population (Poiner, 2014) using data from various transitional programs to keep students in school past the ninth grade (Willens, 2013). A national

study focused on students failing ninth grade (Willens, 2013) indicated that a freshman made the decision whether to drop out by November of their first year in high school (Willens, 2013). Freshman seminar is highly revered for student guidance in their freshman year of high school according to the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins School of Education. The program provides various learning materials and training specialists to daily assist students in study and social skills (Willens, 2013); thus, providing educators a chance to offer support and assistance to ninth-grade students when support from adults is crucial. Students at risk for dropping out of school display certain easily identifiable characteristics that relate to their daily performance in school.

CPS incorporated an initiative that promoted the use of data to monitor student levels of drop-out risk throughout the ninth-grade year, thus allowing teachers to intervene before students fall too far behind. The range of strategies included calls home when students missed a class, tutoring in math such as algebra, and assistance with various homework assignments. The ultimate goal was to match the intervention to the specific needs of the individual student and prevent the dramatic decline in grades and attendance that most students experience when they transition to high school (Chicago CCSR, 2014). Students were classified as off track if they had to retake courses or defer graduation to a later date (Neild, 2009) due to poor standardized test scores, poor attendance, multiple disciplinary actions, poor GPA, and previous grade retention (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2012). An early warning system uses readily available data to systematically identify students who are at risk. Identified students then can be matched with appropriate interventions to help them get on track for graduation (Wright, 2010). The CPS on-track rate has risen 25 percentage points, from 57% to 82% (Chicago CCSR, 2014).

Numerous students become overage in ninth grade. “Overage for grade” means a student is over the traditional school age for his or her grade level and lacks adequate credit hours for his or her grade level (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Approximately 65% of the students in the New York City who drop out of high school were overage when they began ninth grade, according to a 2008 study from the department’s Office of Accountability (Horowitz, 2009).

According to researchers from Duke University, retained students tend to be at greater risk for behavioral problems, which can heavily impact other students (Khrais, 2014). Overage students have more problems with friends and behavior, and research reveals that they are 5-11 times more likely to drop out of school. Students become overage when they repeat grades; and by the teen years, overage students have different developmental interests than kids in their grade (Williams, 2013). Suspensions and behavioral problems escalate among students across the school community as the number of older or retained students increases (Khrais, 2014).

Overage oftentimes becomes a too familiar factor. After extensive research and development work, The Frayser Prep Academy in Memphis, Tennessee implemented a program for overage students. Frayser has a student body of nearly 1,000. About half of the school is comprised of students who are overage for grade. The enrolled students were not successful in learning English, math, and science in a traditional way. Students are on a block schedule to allow them to pick up more credits, and they complete four classes per semester. The prep academy does not recognize grade levels. Instead, students are classified based on mastering levels 1-4. The first is entry level and the fourth is exit level. The prep academy also includes creative programs for advancement and individualized training that include

- E-learning enhances the student's computer-based literacy skills,
- Course recovery allows students to retake a course,
- Workforce initiatives prepare students for the current job market, and
- Academic and social mentoring increases student academic and social skills (Tri-State Defender, 2008).

There are various options for students desiring to complete their high school education. A list of some of the options are provided below.

1. Transfer High Schools allow students to enter at age 16 to 17 if they have earned less than ninth-grade credits. The essential elements of Transfer High Schools include a personalized learning environment, rigorous academic standards, student-centered pedagogy, support to meet instructional and developmental goals, and a focus on connections to college (New York City Department of Education, 2017).
2. Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) are small learning environments that support students in earning a diploma during the evenings. Students attend YABCs through a shared instructional model and receive a diploma from their high school of origin upon completion of their credits and exams (New York City Department of Education, 2017).
3. GED programs – In North Carolina, a full-time GED program is for students who are at least 16 years of age (American Radio Works, 2017). The essential elements include a youth development approach, integrated thematic units, developmental portfolios, innovative systems for student engagement, assessment, and progression, connections to postsecondary training, and in-depth career exploration (American Radio Works, 2017).

4. Learning to Work (LTW) is designed to help overage, undercredited students stay engaged in school by developing the skills they need to complete high school, gain employment, and succeed in postsecondary education. The program includes attendance outreach, individual and group counseling, academic tutoring, and youth development supports. LTW students have the opportunity to participate in intensive employability skills development workshops, subsidized internships, college and career counseling, and job placement (New York City Department of Education, 2017).

Schools must be mindful of the challenges dealing with improving chronic absenteeism. BERC (2011a) found three major pitfalls in sixth grade. Chronic absenteeism, course failures, and suspensions were indicators associated with not graduating within 1 year of the expected date. Chronic absenteeism had the strongest relationship of all the indicators (BERC, 2011a).

In an analysis of data using sixth-grade attendance and the percentage of students graduating within 1 year of expected on-time graduation data, approximately 70% of the students missing 0-10 days graduated; 51% of students missing more than 10 but fewer than 20 days graduated; 36% of students missing 20-39 days graduated; and just 13% of students missing 40 or more days graduated (BERC, 2011a). Addressing chronic absenteeism must be a team effort, which includes school leaders, teachers, parents, and administrators. Each person can play an important role in making a difference in reducing absenteeism (Chicago CCSR, 2014).

Scheduling sessions in which upcoming ninth-grade students can meet high school administration, faculty, support staff, and upperclassmen are prime opportunities for streamlining the transitory process.

Schools also can send messages to parents early and often. The best way of addressing chronic absenteeism is to prevent it before it becomes a problem. Schools play an important role in promoting attendance by helping parents understand, particularly in the early years, that coming to school every day is critical to their child's educational success (Chang & Romero, 2008). The same message, sent as often as possible, should be conveyed by all key players in a school community—teachers, principals, and superintendents—in order to develop a culture of attendance from day one to the end of the school year.

Schools should analyze absentee data frequently, especially during the first month of the school year. The objective is to identify any student body member who reaches the 2-day absence rate in the first 30-31 days. Students who meet the criteria should be provided an intervention to curtail the pattern. The intervention could include insight and support from family members (Chang & Romero, 2008). The major reasons to involve family contacts may include health-related issues, housing instability, and inadequate transportation. Once the problem(s) is understood, schools are better positioned to help address them. While making those individual connections is important, identifying and understanding the broader barriers is also critical.

School leaders, teachers, and other staff can improve attendance by taking steps to strengthen connections between school and home. This step should help school staff more effectively address issues that may arise for children and families.

Many believe there is a “crisis” in ninth-grade education. In the Program for International Student Assessment (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2009), of 34 countries, American ninth graders rank 25 in math, 17 in science, and 14 in reading achievement. In the U.S., during the 2012-2013 school

year, 81% of students who started as freshmen 4 years earlier received a high school diploma (Mason, 2015).

As schools seek to address the challenges of ninth-grade transition, which includes the high rate of course failures and drop-out rates, it is critical to (a) ensure a smooth, well-planned transition for all students; and (b) plan proper supports for struggling students who need additional academic remediation (Williamston, 2010).

The Talent Development Secondary program is an education reform initiative that aims to improve student success by an accelerated curriculum using high impact instructional practices in a learning environment that supports the students' high needs as they strive to close achievement gaps (Keierleber, 2015). Major findings indicate that the Talent Development Secondary model in Los Angeles improves many students who continue to enter or progress through school behind their grade level in English and mathematics. In 2012, when the Los Angeles Unified School District began their program, only 6% of students were proficient in English, and 12% were proficient in math. By 2015, results from testing showed 89% of students passed their English classes and 92% passed math—both above the district average (Keierleber, 2015).

To assist with the daunting task of transitioning, some schools have implemented summer programs to increase success for ninth-grade students. Multiple schools provide non-credit summer programs for students at high risk of academic failure who have shown promise. In partnership with the Portland (OR) Public Schools, the Step Up Program at the Open Meadow Alternative School provided a summer leadership camp and academic skills program that has been successful with academically challenged students entering ninth grade. The first Step Up Program began in 2003. Between 2003 and 2009, three more high schools implemented the program. In the 2008-2009 school

year, 100% of the students remained in school at the end of the school year. At some schools, ninth graders are assigned to a core content team as a positive intervention to promote a better opportunity for a triumphant year. The team provides a specific group of ninth-grade at-risk students who need transition services (Pokorski, 2011).

The Step Up Program is a routine platform that reinforces student commitment to their growth with self-defined short-term or long-term goals. Students face challenges that depict growth while using leadership and team-building activities. Ninth graders relate to understanding how to achieve their dreams through education and hard work with the support of an advocate. These self-defined goals form the basis for their participation in Step Up throughout the following year. By the end of the week-long camp, students and their advocates have formed close relationships based on a mutual commitment to success in high school (Open School Programs, 2016).

During the freshman year, advocates partner with the school to offer daily, individualized afterschool tutoring and homework assistance that form the core of afterschool activities. Using a predesigned system of information sharing and accountability enables advocates to track student assignments and course performances to better assist the students, thus creating a strong bond with classroom teachers that ultimately benefits the students (Open School Programs, 2016).

Leadership development and close social/emotional support is delivered in small groups of 10-15 students. Individual counseling that focuses on personal responsibility, conflict resolution, and healthy relationships along with organization and study skills is also provided. High volume phone and email contact with their students outside of the afterschool sessions to provide emotional support for challenges that interfere with school success is heavily promoted (Open School Programs, 2016).

Advocates engage closely with parents to share student successes, strategize around challenges, and provide opportunities for social support and peer interactions with current students, thus allowing students to begin building new relationships, obtain reliable information from “insiders,” and feel welcomed to the high school community.

Other possible interventions include

- Orientation and mentoring programs of incoming students with upperclassmen for support.
- Open house for eighth graders, hosted by current ninth graders.
- Supervised attendance at eighth grade/ninth grade social functions.
- “Newcomers Festival” for all new students before school starts.
- Separating lunches by grade level.
- Scheduling regular open hours with counselors or regular counselor visits to ninth-grade classes.
- Ninth-grade hotline to counselors or administrators for parental contact (BERC, 2011b).
- Provide assistance in supporting their child’s success in school (Open School Programs, 2016).

According to Step Up guidelines, a post-freshman year summer school is conducted at each school site. The program also offers an intensive proficiency-based summer school after the ninth-grade year where students can make up failed course credits through completing target areas they struggled to master during the school year. Working in conjunction with the high school teachers, this method resulted in a high rate of success for students (Open School Programs, 2016).

Another method to create a less menacing ninth-grade experience for students

acculturating to the high school is to teach them positive behaviors (Couvillion, 2017). In many high schools, SLCs are represented in NGAs, which often consist of an interconnected system of people, courses, and services. The interconnected system may include personalized instruction, study skills training, orientation programs, family outreach, mentoring, remediation strategies, designated halls or buildings, and dedicated faculty members (Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013) to lessen the calamities of ninth grade. Multiple program strategies consistently recommend ninth grade transition programs and curriculum, academic support and intervention, programs that promote school connectedness, and the school-within-a-school structure for ninth-grade students (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). These programs are designed to ease the transition into high school and ensure that students remain on track through what is typically the most difficult year of their secondary school careers (NCDPI, 2016b). NGAs must provide a trained faculty for the ninth-grade student body that allows teachers to plan and design classroom-based interventions using data provided by and reviewed with middle-level teachers and staff and efforts to create a more personalized and responsive learning environment (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008).

Ninth-grade academies have dramatically improved student transition rates in the nation's capital by placing all incoming freshmen together and coordinating curricula that give students a streamlined experience at the beginning of high school in a separate ninth-grade facility/area (Camera, 2015). The instructional environment should meet each student on their level so learning activities are relevant, differentiated, and applicable to the student's concrete experiences (California Comprehensive Center, 2014). In accordance with federal guidelines, all schools must provide for students, regardless of handicaps or disabilities (Camera, 2016), the opportunities for equitable outcomes,

access, inclusion, and treatment (California Comprehensive Center, 2014).

Freshman academies (FAs) provide a nurturing environment for students to develop bonds with teachers and peers. FAs “assist students with improving their understanding of their high school success and future opportunities while using a strong accountability system to ensure that schools provide students with the best education possible” (SBE, 2016, para. 4). Academic interventions should be an ongoing process of gathering evidence to determine what each student actually knows, understands, and can do, with results used to improve instruction and program design. (California Comprehensive Center, 2014).

Course failures and credits earned are recognized during FA. Longitudinal data from a Freshman Wing Academy at Findlay High School, located in Findlay, Ohio suggests that, for the participating Classes of 2004-2007, the number of ninth graders who were failing classes decreased substantially during that period of time (McIntosh & White, 2006).

An FA should include

- a. Strong school leadership with a freshman principal, counselor, and intervention specialist who works with a new freshman class every school year (instead of moving with that class to the next grade level).
- b. Teachers’ common planning time should be more than one time per week for more than 40 minutes.
- c. Teacher/student ratio should be less than 25:1.
- d. Veterans who have worked more than 3 years within an academy with the same grouping of teachers/students.
- e. Separate identity academy-specific to assist with focus on freshman

curriculum.

- f. Decision-making should be academy decisions made autonomously within academy (Lipes, 2012).

The collaborative nature encourages common beliefs and practices and a shared sense of responsibility by teachers for the learning occurring in the classroom (Song & Looi, 2012). During the year 2007, four high schools in the Ascension Parish Public School system in Louisiana added FAs. A major finding in their first year was nearly 10% fewer freshmen failed one or more classes than the previous year (Colvin, 2008).

The FA program put into place years ago at the Ascension Parish public district's high schools features team teaching and class scheduling that placed students with the same group of teachers throughout the day while providing enrichment and intervention for students who are struggling. At each high school, the FA program also has its own associate principal and is staffed with teachers who are currently teaching in the FA (Couvillion, 2017). Using data, the school system has announced it is increasing the number of FAs with the size of the freshman student body (Couvillion, 2017).

Albuquerque Public Schools implemented an FA for incoming ninth-grade students. The key components used in the model achieved notable improvements in school climate (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011), student attitudes, and academic persistence (Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008).

In 2011, the Small Schools Coalition commenced with an extensive year-long comparison of large and small school attributes. A sense of students feeling connected/belonging was felt in the smaller schools by most of the stakeholders. Overall, FAs exhibited higher test scores, fewer failures, fewer discipline problems, and higher rates of attendance, as these studies show (Couvillion, 2017). Success in ninth grade can

be obtained if schools use teaching strategies and engaging, interactive, role-playing exercises to make learning relevant and fun (The Real Game, 2012). Due to today's economy, students need critical skills that go beyond the basics. Schools must implement strategies that improve achievement and close gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Some districts gather real time data to enhance strong norms for students that allow them to persevere when facing difficulty (Couvillion, 2017). Early Warning Indicators (EWIs) are examples of how to use student-level data including attendance, behavior, and course failures (the ABCs) to identify cut points that are related to an increased likelihood of students dropping out of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Ninth grade EWIs typically include attendance below 85%, two or more suspensions or serious disciplinary incidents, and failing a mathematics and/or English course (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

A study focused on students who were identified by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) as members of Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) high school Class of 2011 who used EWIs. The EWIs' analysis used signs of students disengaging from school, providing MCPS with the opportunity to not only intervene with potential dropouts but to also provide supports to students who are struggling with school who may not eventually drop out (West, 2013). This study focused specifically on the 9,583 members of the MCPS Class of 2011 who were enrolled in ninth grade during the 2007-2008 school year. For all Class of 2011 students enrolled at the time, the model number of days absent was 2 days and the average number of days absent was 6 days; however, the average number of days absent for Class of 2011 dropouts was 9 days, while the average for non-dropouts was 5 days (West, 2013).

Course performance, attendance, and behavior issues in ninth grade combine to form powerful indicators of whether a student will go on to graduate or drop out (Poiner, 2014).

For policymakers and educators, the task of increasing high school graduation rates means carefully studying which students experience trouble in ninth grade and the reasons for their difficulty (Ritter, 2015). Many interventions are available to assist with student success in high school. All good interventions should aspire to create a “match” with students. A variety of transition-oriented efforts are utilized by school systems (Neild, 2009). These programs and strategies can include ninth grade introductory programs, special supports for targeting incoming ninth graders, and a variety of specialized academies which usually have embedded strategies to mobilize home involvement and engagement (Neild, 2009).

Intervention programs and strategies may be applied independently, but they work best when utilized in a strategic and systemic manner. An instrumental step in the compilation of the best programs/strategies for first time ninth graders could involve vertical alignment. Feeder middle schools collaborate with secondary schools to discuss transitional concerns for struggling students. Teachers and administrators from both schools can plan assemblies and activities throughout the upcoming year. Multiple opportunities to promote students interacting with faculty, staff, upper classman, and administrators from their perspective high school should be planned (Edutopia, 2014). As schools connect, they often plan Summer Bridge Programs for first time ninth-grade students to participate in a pre-freshman year summer leadership camp. The program is designed to build a sense of relevancy for students and help develop the mindset needed for success in high school (Abbott & Templeton, 2012). A version of

The Countdown to High School (CD2HS) is an initiative designed to support eighth- and ninth-grade students in Baltimore Public Schools (BPS). The CD2HS initiative deals with issues such as transportation, attendance, change in academic expectations, lack of structured afterschool time, decreased communication as students get older, and appropriate school match for students. BPS teachers and administrators run the program while using a series of interventions to alleviate stressors embedded in the transition for students entering high school. The intervention reduces student failures and increases the likelihood that students will successfully graduate with their cohort (CD2HS, n.d.).

Some school districts use Personalized Learning Community (PLC) programs that allow for more flexible options to achieve educational requirements for students in semester-long courses. The PLCs feature smaller class sizes and project-based learning that promote students relating directly to the world in which they live by building rigorous projects that are core to learning (Edutopia, 2014).

BPS creates a personalized success plan accessible to students, families, and staff. The individualized plans evolve as students grow to promote closing the gap. Planning begins in middle school using a “living plan” to insure that all school staff and parents remain informed of student progress. Effective guidance is provided during the process for students who need it (Camera, 2016).

A new change assists with closing the achievement gap between Black and White students in Syracuse, New York in the years 2015 and 2016. During 2015, Black students were two percentage points ahead of their White counterparts for graduation. The two groups of students graduated at exactly the same rate, 64% in 2016. The New York State Board changed the graduation requirements to increase the "pathways" for students to receive a degree (McMahon, 2017). The change creates a route for more

students to meet the high school graduation requirements (Buckshot, 2014). Under the old regulations, students were required to pass five Regents exams in high school prior to graduation. The classes with the exams included two social studies, one English, one science, and one math. The new "4+1" option permits students to take four Regents exams and the option to select a comparably rigorous exam in one of the following areas: the arts, bi-literacy or the humanities, or career and technical education that encompass science, technology, engineering and mathematics ([STEM]; Buckshot, 2014).

Therefore, students taking one social studies exam to graduate could choose to test from the STEM classes, which include automotive technology, culinary arts, and welding to meet one of their graduation requirements (Buckshot, 2014). STEM allows student involvement with planning the direction of projects. During the planning process, the students practice critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity to achieve success (Edutopia, 2014). Students make connections to their personal lives across multiple disciplines that use skill-based or knowledge-based learning under the guidance of a teacher (Linson & Lamon, 2015).

Some high school freshmen benefit from transitional courses. Various transitional courses can promote ninth graders learning to communicate effectively, manage time, and set short- and long-term goals. These lifelong skills will help students while they are in high school and later with other personal endeavors (Maricopa, n.d). To strengthen interaction with ninth-grade students, some schools choose more experienced teachers to mentor nonveteran teachers in the process of standardizing expectations and developing cross-curriculum methods that focus on incorporating district standards and initiatives in content areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

In many districts, to encourage student growth, common planning for ninth-grade

teachers is a requirement. Common planning allows team leaders and faculty teams time to confer. Team leaders assist with ensuring effective communication that places emphasis on analyzing off-track data to set goals for students by monitoring trends to allow teams to foster achievement (Maricopa, n.d). Faculty teams concentrate on solutions that resolve issues dealing with individual student attendance, discipline, and learning problems (Maricopa, n.d).

Teachers initiating peer mentorship programs for youth are commonplace in today's society. Successful peer mentor programs could include

- a. Teacher-formed pairings are used to ensure that tutors have the adequate levels of mastery and the two students are likely to work well together.
- b. Structured interventions ensure that students are clear about what the tutee must achieve, what is expected of them, and how to perform to reach their expectations.
- c. Personalized curricula should align with students' current levels of mastery and understanding.
- d. Determine the tutee's new level of mastery by using real-time data from current assessment, as opposed to no assessment or normative assessment.
- e. Earned rewards, where both students earn some form of reward if the tutee demonstrates they have mastered the components (Killian, 2016).

During the process, students are provided individual instruction aligned with their specific needs and guided practices that allow prompting and immediate feedback from peers/teachers (Killian, 2016).

Academic rigor and high standards are required for student work across multiple disciplines. Support for students includes advisories, monitoring of student progress, and

provision for timely interventions to address areas of need. A component effectively uses data to track student progress, identifies areas of need, and provides feedback for interventions. Some data promote strategies to strengthen high-level literacy skills, introduce students to high school study skills, and monitor ninth-grade student progress and behavior for early signs of failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Scheduling can assist with students being successful in high school. Some students need a more flexible schedule. Rigorous online courses are available for students who fall behind. Flexible scheduling allows for students to take year-long online catch-up courses. Classes are offered in English, math, science, and history as remediation and credit recovery. Many students retake courses to increase their GPAs, while others gain enough credits necessary to graduate on time (North Carolina Virtual Academy, 2017).

Another form of addressing the needs of individual students could include using block scheduling. During block scheduling, students attend fewer classes for a longer block of time. Instead of seven or eight classes that last 55 minutes each, a student might attend only four core classes a day, but each class would last for 90 minutes (NCDPI, 2017a). Core classes include English, math, science, world studies, and U.S. history. Block scheduling assists with students who could become overwhelmed with stress by the experience of adjusting to six to eight teachers in 1 day, juggling multiple assignments, and tests over a full school year (AASA, 2017).

Due to high stress levels, many students need assistance with mental health and social issues during the transition to high school. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a program that is advancing the science and practice of school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) as an integral part of education from

preschool through high school. SEL programs promote essential social and emotional competencies that include school-related attitudes, behaviors, academic performances, reducing emotional distress, and providing a foundation for lifelong success (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015).

Many first time ninth graders are ready to achieve higher goals entering high school. College preparation courses are readily available to promote higher expectations for ninth graders. A planned vision is connected to a pathway to postsecondary education, training, and access to resources to help students gain access to postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Multiple high schools have a career academy component to assist students with connecting what they learn in school with their future career aspirations and goals. Career academies use a multifaceted approach to link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a disciplined environment that promotes academic success, and mental and emotional health along with labor market success (Page, 2012).

### **Summary**

Freshman year of high school represents a symbolic passage into near adulthood, with teenagers much more likely to be impulsive and take risks (Poiner, 2014). Comprehensive whole school reform efforts should be used to create personalized learning to meet the individual needs of each student to increase success in high school. Various programs and/or strategies are used to be successful. Some of the programs/strategies include EWS, NGAs, Talent Development Model, and Ninth Grade Faculty Teams. A list of some programs and strategies used to enhance a successful ninth-grade transition are shown in Figure 1.

1. Personalized learning	15. Block/flexible schedules
2. Common planning teachers	16. Project based learning
3. Faculty teams	17. Rigorous assignments for students
4. Veteran teachers	18. First time ninth graders only
5. Data to foster achievement	19. Science, Tech., Engineer and Math (STEM)
6. Off track data	20. Social and emotional aspects
7. Transition course for freshmen	21. Pre-high school activities
8. Parental involvement	22. Integrated curriculum
9. Diverse groups	23. Philosophy that all students
10. Yearlong math	24. Separate ninth grade facility/area
11. Yearlong reading	25. Academic interventions
12. Online catch-up courses	26. Vertical alignment with feeder school
13. Peer Mentorship	27. Summer bridge program
14. College Prep	28. Bridging communication gap

*Figure 1.* Best Practices for Ninth-Grade Transitions.

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This study evaluated various transitional programs for students promoted from middle school to high school utilizing personal interviews. For the purpose of this study, the term “transition” makes reference to middle school students’ crucial navigation to the first year high school (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). The selected schools in the district highlighted details as they pertain to absenteeism, discipline, and academic performance.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine high school based administrator and guidance counselor perceptions of the ongoing impacts of various ninth grade transitional programs and/or strategies. This section presents a discussion of (a) the research questions, (b) the research design, (c) data collection, (d) timeline, (e) site, (f) participants, (g) instrument, (h) data analysis, and (i) data confidentiality.

The researcher studied five local high schools using details from absenteeism, behavior, and course performance (grades) to assist with understanding the issues of ninth-grade students. Determining the perceptions of the administrators and guidance counselors of ongoing ninth grade transitional programs and/or strategies in the rural school district could assist other schools with adding to/tweaking their programs for incoming freshman.

### **The Research Questions**

This study focused on the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students?
2. What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the drop-out rate of ninth-grade students?
3. Which components of the freshman transitional programs and/or strategies should be kept/added to increase the impact the program may have on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates?

## **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative method to examine the three research questions to assist with determining the best practices and/or strategies used in ninth grade transition programs in five local high schools. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), qualitative research focuses on understanding the actual nature of research, not the quantity of observed characteristics.

Qualitative research was chosen as the most appropriate method in order to produce detailed views using a qualitative study to explore individual participant perceptions of ninth grade transition programs. Using one-on-one interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to discuss their experiences and allow for follow-up questions for clarity, as needed using triangulation. Triangulation is standard practice when collecting interview data.

## **Data Collection**

The questions in the instrument called for open-ended responses to provide freedom in answers (Nohl, 2009) from administrators/guidance counselors. The qualitative study design allowed a greater understanding of the issue (Yin, 2014). “These human affairs should be reported and interpreted through the eyes of specific interviewees, and well-informed respondents can provide important insights into a situation” (Yin, 2014, p. 92).

Qualitative data were generated through individual interviews. Responses that allow for the perceptions of the administrators and the guidance counselors were needed for evaluation. The researcher reviewed all the data and organized it into categories or themes that cut across all the data sources (Creswell, 2013). For the study, the sources were administrator and guidance counselor perceptions regarding ninth-grade retention,

drop-out rates, and the success of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies in the five high schools.

### **Timeline**

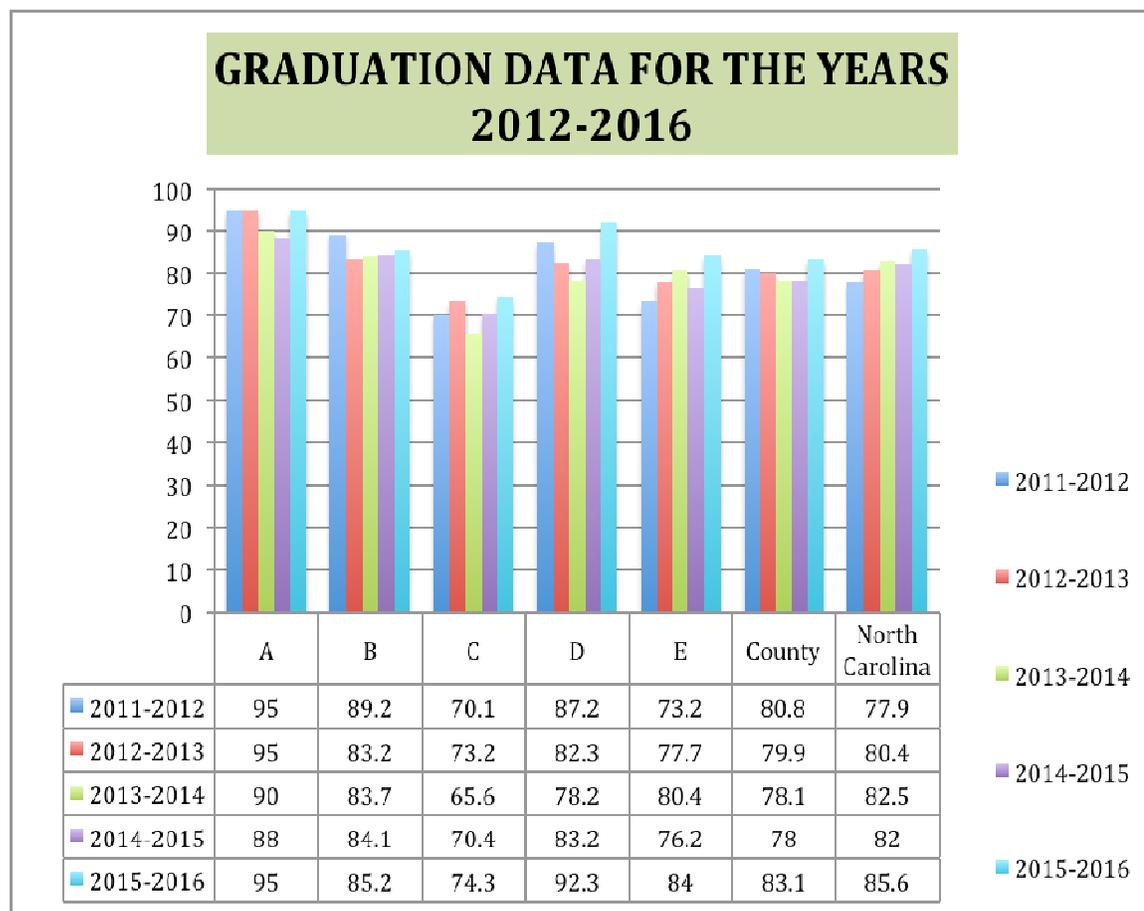
The timeline allowed for various methods to contact participants. The initial contact with participant schools was established via electronic mail to arrange a time to explain the study to the administrators/guidance counselors. Dates for one-on-one interviews were during the winter at the convenience of the participant's schedule. The researcher interviewed participants using Zoom, What's App, Google Hangouts, or other electronic methods upon request. An hour per participant was sufficient to interview the participants.

### **Site**

The chosen study region is located among the pines, sandy fields, and small agricultural towns in North Carolina (SREB). The high schools are located in the southeastern coastal plain (The Legend: NC Property Mapping Association). Employment is a major cause of concern; more than 45% of all jobs in the county are related to the agricultural industry. Many of the agriculture positions are at or below minimum wage. The jobs are heavily based upon agriculture, livestock, poultry, and manufacturing industries (Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board, 2013). The district's 4-year graduation rate is below the 4-year graduation rates established under NCLB (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2012). North Carolina's 4-year cohort graduation rate for the school year 2014-2015 was 85.6%, while the district's was 83.4%. In the year 2015-2016, a slight increase moved the state graduation rate to 85.8% (Neff, 2015), and the district's rate increased to 83.9% (NCDPI, 2016b). Graduation outcomes for the district over a 5-year span of time are depicted using the five area high

schools in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows graduation rates from district high schools for recent school years by school, by district, and by state.



*Figure 2.* Summary of Graduation Rates from 2012 thru 2015.

*Note.* This chart was developed from U.S. Department of Education (2015a).

Because graduation rates have been identified as a conclusive measure of a school's effectiveness, promotion to tenth grade is the first step toward graduation. Prudence dictates further research focused on the impact of transition programs that foster promotion to tenth grade on time. Focus on promotion to tenth grade can provide evidence of the immediate impact of a local transition program and its potential to

mitigate factors such as high absenteeism, a high number of discipline referrals, and low EOC scores in schools. Unfortunately, during this adjustment period, ninth graders experience more absenteeism, course failure, and retentions that lead to dropping out of high school (Ritter, 2015).

Data from the high schools of study is a significant concern. During 2010-2011, 87 students dropped out of high schools in the district. In the 2015-2016 school year, 17 fewer students dropped out of school than in 2011-2012 in the district. The number of students who dropped out overall and the number of retained students fluctuated in the last 5 years. The state data reveal that the district has not met the state graduation rate (NCDPI, 2016b).

### **Participants**

The researcher chose five employees from each of the local high schools in the district, three administrators and two guidance counselors. The 25 high school administrators and/or guidance counselors were identified as participants to elaborate on their perceptions of various ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies. The participants in this study were identified based on their likelihood of interacting with the ninth-grade students to some degree. Also, during the ninth grade transitional process, the participants had access to data detailing student scheduling and programs and strategies that address attendance, behavior, and course grades.

Following permission to conduct the study from Gardner-Webb University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher provided the superintendent with a formal introduction and requested to conduct this research study (see Appendix A). The request includes the researcher's intent to interview administrators and guidance counselors within the district. Appendix B contains the interview questions. An outline

of the study was provided that addressed the purpose and proposed procedures and goals along with the benefits that the study could provide.

The next step involved acquiring permission from the proposed participants. The researcher planned to interview the administrators and guidance counselors at five local high schools. See Appendix C for email to administrators and guidance counselors requesting them to participate. The selected participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interview process. Appendix D contains the informed consent form; see Appendix E for the consent for participation letter. The selected participants were interviewed via email, telephone, or during a meeting face to face with the subject, depending on what worked best for the subject. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher entered data using a software program.

### **Instrument**

The interview questions were developed to collect data on the perceptions of administrators/guidance counselors pertaining to ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies used at five local high schools. To validate the open-ended interview questions, two guidance counselors from a surrounding county reviewed, approved, and returned the questions to the researcher (Vogt, 2005). Appendix B contains the interview questions. The interview questions allowed the school administrators and/or guidance counselors to expound upon the research questions for participants to share both facts that matter as well as their opinions and insight regarding attendance, behavior, and coursework during the ninth-grade transition. Follow-up questions could have been asked to serve as probes into these areas of ninth-grade transition.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was a deductive process that used the interview questions to

develop findings from the review of the literature. Data analysis was conducted through content, which was previously explained. For question 1, the researcher recorded the perceptions of the administrators and guidance counselors as they pertained to the retention process of each school. For question 2, the researcher compiled the perceptions of administrators and guidance counselors on the impact ninth grade transition programs had on the drop-out rate of high school students. For question 3, the researcher focused on the components from each participant's responses to determine the strength of ongoing programs and/or strategies.

To analyze the data in this study, the researcher used the following steps of Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral. Organizing the data allowed the researcher to use Microsoft Word software to distinguish each of the five schools and the participants using alphabetical identifiers to maintain confidentiality. Reading the interview responses multiple times allowed the researcher to break data down into key concepts or clusters to filter/aggregate the data into smaller identifiable segments that were placed into specific fields to depict repetitive themes. Data interpretation based on intuition gained from the literature review and data collection processes allowed the researcher to create tables that convey the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Confidentiality**

This descriptive qualitative study provides a holistic account (Merriam, 2009). The intent of this study was to capture the perceptions of five local high school's administrations/guidance counselors within a rural setting as each school works to increase ninth grade promotion rates. All participants included in the perception study were school personnel. The instrument used did not identify participants. At the onset of the study, it would be communicated to participants that pseudonyms would be used for

confidentiality. Only members of the research team were allowed to access study documentation.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher entered data using a software program. Each participant received a copy of the transcribed data to peruse for approval to ensure their perceptions had been represented correctly. All audio was deleted upon completion of the study. The transcription data was kept under an encrypted password.

## Chapter 4: The Findings

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine principal and guidance counselor perceptions of students transitioning to ninth grade in five rural high schools. Interviews were used to reflect upon each school's existing ninth grade transition programs/strategies. Each school is represented as an intricate qualitative study with the findings organized within the framework of the research questions as they were examined through the interviews. In order to protect each school's and the participant's anonymity, each school is presented as a collective body and will be referred to as School A, School B, School C, School D and School E.

The length of time for the interview ranged from 35-45 minutes. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to provide their thoughts of how the transitional programs and/or strategies were performing. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher organized the response data from the schools to determine overall themes shared by the participants in the text that emerged from each question. The researcher coded the data by hand, using colored index cards. The researcher revealed the primary experience shared by individual participant responses. The results are presented under each research question.

Chapter 4 is divided into two sections. Section one highlights information about the administration and guidance counselor participants involved in the study. The second section details the qualitative data, which consist of the review of the transitional program and the strategies that are being used in the five rural high schools. Quotations are used from interview transcripts to support three themes of focus.

The three themes that emerged were attendance, behavior, and course

performance.

### **Background of Participants**

The first contact resulted in the researcher receiving 15 responses for interviews. After 7 days, the researcher phoned the schools and spoke with the participants personally and seven others volunteered to participate in the study. At the end of the interviews, the researcher took responses from each individual question to determine how to summarize the information gleaned from the responses and combined them collectively by school for a more enhanced grouping of interview answers from all of the administrators and guidance counselors.

The researcher received responses from 22 respondents from the high schools. The participants of this study were comprised of 14 administrators and eight guidance counselors from the rural high schools. Nine of the administrators were males and five were females. They ranged in age from 25-65 years old. Six participants reported fewer than 3 years of administrative experience; four administrators had 5-10 years of experience, and four administrators claimed 19-25 years of administrative experience. All 14 administrators had previous teaching experience. The eight guidance counselors were females. The guidance counselors ranged in age from 28-63 years of age. Appendix F provides demographics of the participants and their backgrounds. Three strands were created using the software program by the researcher to follow the interviews of the participants. The three strands are included in the appendices; see Appendix G for absenteeism, Appendix H for behavior, and Appendix I for course performance.

High School A is the newest school in the district and members of administration and the guidance counselor have been working onsite for less than 5 years individually.

Administration and the guidance counselor are females. High School B's administrators each have at least 5 years and consist of two males and one female. The guidance counselors are relatively new with less than 3 years of experience in a high school setting. High School C has one male administrator with 20 years in the school system. The other two administrators consist of one female and one male, both with less than 3 years of experience. The guidance counselors are both female each with more than 10 years in the educational system. High School D has two male administrators; one administrator has 5 years of experience and the other one has less than 3 years as an administrator. School D has two guidance counselors and each counselor has more than 15 years of experience. High School E has the highest number of experienced administration and guidance counselors in the district. Administration consists of three males with experience that ranges from 6-25 years and two female guidance counselors. Each guidance counselor has 30 years of experience in the school system.

Each administrator has been a teacher with daily interaction with students. Most of the participants described themselves as having worked with ninth-grade students prior to becoming high school administrators. One participant was an elementary teacher and two other participants were middle school teachers prior to their roles as administrators and guidance counselors.

There was considerable overlap among the themes. In some cases, the recorded responses answered multiple interview questions resulting in data being placed in the category that it fits best or occasionally in more than one place.

### **Background of the High Schools**

In 2016-2017, High School A in this study served approximately 180 students of which 45 were first-time freshmen while adding one retained student, making a total of

46 ninth graders. High School B served approximately 998 students of which 205 were ninth graders and 188 were first-time freshmen. High School C served approximately 722 students of which 196 were freshmen and only 194 were first-time freshmen; High School D served approximately 510 students of which 100 were freshman and 96 were first-time freshmen; and High School E in this study served approximately 712 students of which 200 were ninth graders and 187 were first-time freshmen.

During this study some of the high schools held high achievement rates, while others held low achievement rates. The schools that held the highest achievement rates primarily held the lowest absenteeism and discipline rates. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2003), students dropping out of high school are connected to school discipline. High schools have few alternatives for handling problems in the classroom. Suspensions, expulsions, placements in alternative schools, and referrals to law enforcement become the norm for multiple students in high school. Research connects students who are removed from school as more likely for academic failure and student dropout (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).

The high schools with the higher number of discipline rates also had the highest amount of absenteeism and lower course performances. Schools with lower achievement rates tended to show higher rates in absenteeism and discipline issues, i.e., being suspended or expelled could have caused students to fall behind on classroom assignments and instruction (Noguera, 2008.)

High Schools A, B, C, D, and E had an NGA. Structural and instructional support included methods used to holistically support their students. The students were located on a separate hall in the high school buildings. Schools also assigned the new freshmen

to a team of teachers who held weekly meetings to concentrate on affective support structures (e.g. intervention and enrichment, advisories, MTSS, school support team meetings). The teams utilized PLCs to focus on student learning, using data analysis from formative, summative, and benchmark assessment data (PowerSchool, EVAAS) to align instruction and create common formative assessments. Each team consisted of four core teachers; one each for math, science, social studies, and English who fostered personalized support to overcome transitional obstacles.

### **Research Question 1**

**What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students?** Research Question 1 was designed by the researcher to analyze the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students. The administrator and guidance counselor responses that correlate to the themes of attendance, course performance, and grades are described in the text below.

When asked what are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students, the participants from Schools A, B, C, D, and E shared commonalities. Each school had existing transitional teams in place. The teams approached issues for at-risk students such as absenteeism, discipline, and course performance to support the likelihood of students successfully being promoted to tenth grade, to lessen the retention, decrease the drop-out rate, and increase the chance to graduate with their cohort.

Participant A1 stated, “Most of the team teachers had common planning time to discuss the needs of individual students (a few teachers taught Ninth Grade Academy classes and honors on the same days).”

The same homeroom teachers serve as the teacher advisors for the student’s entire high school experience, which allowed them to personalize their relationships with students. Schedules are adjusted for extra time in classes for projects or labs. Yearlong classes are required for some students to provide extra support.

(Participant B2, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant C2 stated, “We monitored the at-risk ninth-grade students to decrease the likelihood of them falling through the cracks.”

We identified all students who were connected to the ninth-grade cohort and monitored the discipline referrals and progress of all identified students through the Student Assistance Team. Parents were contacted immediately to assist with choosing a recourse that would benefit the student and their feedback was priceless. (Participant C3, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

In addition, students were assigned to smaller classes for an opportunity for more bonding one on one with their teachers during class, and participation.

Participant D1 stated, “Tracking the needs of ninth-grade students accounted for various measures to assist them.”

At-risk students were encouraged to sign up with Talent Search or Upward Bound for tutorial services. It is another opportunity for students to progress in their classes, catch up or make up work to assist with remaining on schedule to advance to the tenth grade on time. PEPs were used for all struggling students identified in a specific cohort group. (Participant D2, personal communication,

January 8, 2018)

### **Absenteeism**

Participant A1 stated, “Once the students get behind from being absent, too often their grades fall.” High school is different than middle school.

We had students who failed core classes because they were suspended too many days. A student in ninth grade who continuously missed the same class (es) found it easy to get off track to be promoted to 10th grade. The ninth-grade teachers and staff try to assist students with catching up in classwork. Buffers are in place to keep the students from repeating a class or a year. Sometimes it was overwhelming for a student to remain on track. (Participant A3, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

Similar responses were found from all schools. Participant B1 stated, “We discourage absenteeism on a daily basis in every class.”

We had a student who failed ninth grade the first year, he failed Math and English, which were yearlong classes and he was suspended "multiple times," for repeating the same infraction. There is still hope for the student to graduate. The school has a lab to assist students with recovering classes online. Many of our students who use the lab do graduate. (Participant B2, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant C3 stated, “Teachers had small groups, which allowed more time to answer questions per student and to give more time to reinforce material for students who could easily get off track.”

Participant D2 stated, “The school declined in absenteeism rates due to ensuring that the school had a full-time nurse to assist with mitigating absenteeism.”

A nurse is employed full time at the high school to align with the school district's promoting prevention and wellness early. The school nurse was instrumental in the identification and making referrals to community resources for students with mental health concerns. School nurses are oftentimes the only health professionals that our students see on a regular basis. The nurse assists students on the spot and waylays any fears or provides professional validation of student's illness- or injury-related medically complex conditions and chronic health illnesses, who require the knowledge, assessment skills and judgment of a school nurse to manage their normal care. (Participant D3, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

Participants E2 and E4 shared the usage of data, data, and more data. The school used data to track student progress or to note a lack of progress. Data projected the need for the interventions that were put in place on behalf of student success in being promoted on time.

### **Behavior**

Ninth grade in a new school is different. Participant A2 stated, "Many ninth-grade students were not ready for high school. They were immature!" Some of the students tried hard to stay in place and a few tried hard to remove themselves from assigned areas to socialize with upperclassmen.

Again, there was general agreement among the schools. Participant B3 stated, "The first few days a lot of nurturing is needed. Some of the students need extra reassurance that they will be okay." Within the first few weeks, some students were written up for infractions due to being immature, tardiness, and being in unassigned areas.

Participant C1 added,

Teachers worked together to set norms for the expectations and behaviors desired in the classrooms. The ninth-grade teachers were unified over the needs of the ninth-grade students. They were dedicated and willingly served the rowdiest group of students in school.

Participant C2 commented, “The diverse group of teachers and staff connected to the ninth-grade academy.” The diversity allowed the teachers and staff to learn about other cultures.

The teachers formed a vastly diverse team. The school wanted the ninth-grade academy teachers to be diverse in order to better serve the incoming ninth-grade students from diverse backgrounds. The school added to the standard mix of diversity, which included young, old, male, female, Black, Hispanic, and White teachers. Diversity was a norm for the ninth-grade academy; our students were submerged in diversity. The teacher pool expanded to include teachers from China, Turkey, Jamaica, New York, and Wyoming to name a few places. The students embraced the diversity of the ninth-grade teachers. (Participant C4, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant D1 responded, “To create another level of bonding with the students, we used various coaches in the academy.” The students gravitated to the coaches. The coaches and the students bonded quickly.

To continue with strengthening the academy concept the ninth-grade team had several interventions in place. The team understood that extracurricular activities were incentive for many ninth-grade students. A lot of students desire to play sports. The students were more cognizant of their grades and the behavior needed

to be a team member. Coaches as teachers worked to establish deeper bonds with the students in the academy. Other strategies used to reduce ninth-grade retention included the upcoming ninth-grade tour of the high school with their eighth-grade team; parent night, parents and students visited classrooms on the ninth-grade hall and interacted with the teachers. We feel that these strategies led to success with our students. (Participant D2, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

### **Course Performance**

High Schools A, B, C, D, and E each had students who struggled in ninth grade. School A created multiple teams to assist with decreasing the number of students being retained. Participant A1 stated, “Every student was assigned to one or more teams.” Participants A2 and A3 shared that the team meetings seemed endless. The need of the ninth-grade students drove the number of teams that collaborated on their behalf.

Ninth-grade students usually need more attention than other grades. There was a team for every student. Teams were developed for students who needed yearlong classes, students assigned to honors classes, students with attendance issues, students with behavioral issues, students with grade issues. Creating all the teams and following up with students worked well on behalf of the student’s needs.

(Participant A2, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

Participants from School B shared that in addition to teams, schedules were used to accommodate the needs of the at-risk ninth-grade students. Principal B2 stated,

We used a “four-by-four block schedule that allowed only four classes a day for 90-minute periods for a portion of the school year instead of the more traditional schedule 6-8 periods a day for 40-50 minutes each for the entire school year.

Participant B3 revealed during the interview that the high school was challenged to

incorporate “a block schedule.” The school ran two schedules, a block schedule and a traditional schedule. For the good of the students, some teachers were scheduled to teach a traditional class schedule and a block schedule creating a mixed schedule. Participant B4 stated, “Some teachers were assigned mixed schedules” that included some ninth-grade and some upper-grade classes resulting in fewer teachers exclusively teaching ninth graders.

For the teachers who taught a mixed schedule, a conflict developed with weekly scheduled team meetings. The student’s success was the top priority. Mixed schedules made a unique situation. Including the non-traditional academy teachers in regularly scheduled PLC meetings during the school day was not an option. The academy teachers were willing to hold meetings prior to school beginning to include the teachers and their invaluable input. The teachers proved that they want the best for the ninth-grade students by continuously making adjustments to accommodate growth in the students that attend the ninth grade academy. (Participant B5, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant C1 stated, “We understood that it would take more time for some ninth-grade students to adjust in the classroom to become successful.”

As a part of serving low performing students, the students were assigned double block classes, which provided students with seat time in a core class for two class periods back to back on alternate days. We had a hard time with scheduling the ninth graders. (Participant C2, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant D1 felt the need to insure that students were not retained in ninth grade. Participant D2 stated, “We worked hard to decrease the number of students who repeated a class or grade.”

Students who needed yearlong classes were given this option. For students assigned to this group their “attendance data” was closely monitored by teachers, guidance counselors and the social worker. Every morning a stakeholder scanned data to determine if there was a student who needed an intervention for absenteeism. We diligently conferenced with students and parents to get work made up. (Participant D3, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

Participant E2 added that the school culture promoted ownership by both staff and students daily. The goal was to decrease retention for ninth-grade students. Participant E3 stated, “Various positive changes were used to address keeping the students on point to graduate with their cohort.”

As students were absent, they were allowed 5 days to complete make-up work. Students were required to remain after school to finish work. Teachers were available during lunch and after school at least twice a week. Students were also encouraged to contact teachers via email if they had questions. There were many ways for students to fail, but there were many interventions to keep them from failing, also. (Participant E4, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

## **Research Question 2**

**What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the drop-out rate of ninth-grade students?** When asked the perceptions of the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the drop-out rate of ninth-grade students, participants at schools A, B, C, D, and E agreed that attendance was the major reason for numerous students choosing to drop out of high school.

## **Absenteeism**

Participant A1 shared that the ultimate objective was to keep students coming to school on time every day. The goal is to meet students where they are and to provide methods that will allow them to advance with their cohort. Participant A1 stated, “High school is different from middle school. Absenteeism is viewed differently and impacts the student’s grade differently.” Participant A2 stated, “Once the students get behind from being absent, too often their grades fall.” A student who is continuously tardy or misses the same class can get off track to be promoted with their classmates.

Missing school leads students to missed coursework, which is the beginning of many students getting off track. We have a policy in place that allows students to recoup assignments, if they have an excused absence, within 5 days. I believe that all of the ninth-grade teachers allow students to make up work regardless of the reason the student was absent. When it is time for grades to be recorded for progress reports and report cards, multiple teachers are prompting students to turn in assignments and finding ways to provide extra credit to motivate the students to achieve passing the class. Many of our students accomplish staying on track due to the dedicated teachers’ efforts to keep them on track. (Participant A3, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

Participant B2 commented, “Too, often they miss core classes and they feel that they cannot catch up with their classmates and they decide to drop out.” Classes move quickly. Participant B3 explained, “If a student misses three days consecutively, they are three to six hours behind in each class depending on being assigned a block schedule or traditional schedule.” For some students it takes 2 weeks to make up for 3 days of being absent.

Participants C4 and C3 similarly stated that if the students attend school for the

180 days, they stand a better chance of keeping on track to graduate with their cohort. Educating all the stakeholders assisted with students not falling behind due to absenteeism.

Some of our parents do not initially understand that in high school if students miss a class it counts against them. We found that educating the parents is the key.

We have a parent night and we explain the significant effect of missing 1 day of high school and how long it takes to make up missed classwork for four to eight classes. We assure them that we are aware that there is a litany of logical reasons many students are absent that range from remaining home with a sick child, a lack of housing, working to assist with supporting the family, and translating during appointments for family members are a some of the main reasons students are absent. (Participant C5, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant E2 responded, “We could react to the students quicker and turn them around sooner if they are present in class.” Students coming to school and complying with the assignments is a major issue.

Ninth-grade teachers work hard for all their students, but for students who continuously miss multiple days it seems to be a never-ending saga. It is a challenge for some of them to make up their classwork. Classmates and teachers are willing to assist the student with understanding how to catch up. Having smaller classes assists with building camaraderie. Students volunteer to assist with helping other students to stay on track. (Participant E5, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

## **Behavior**

When asked the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the significance of ninth grade discipline referrals, their overall perception was that there is room for improvement, but it is better than it was in the past years.

When asked what types of data were collected, Schools A, B, C, D, and E shared similar responses. Participants A2, B2, C2, D2, and E2 divulged that data were collected for some of the most common disciplinary issues, which included disrespect for teachers and administration, bullying, fighting, drugs, alcohol, and excessive tardies. Students who received office referrals could receive suspensions or expulsions, depending on the level of the infraction.

School A allowed the teachers to keep the initial phase of discipline if the referrals were not administrative worthy. Participants A1 and A3 similarly shared that mentors were used to assist students with decreasing discipline issues. Students were encouraged to immediately address issues that ranged from being overwhelmed with classes to perceived negative experiences with students/staff.

Participant B3 stated, “The total number of suspensions and expulsions are submitted annually at the state level to the Department of Education.” Participant B3 indicated that teachers kept track of dates on tardies to individual classes and “any parental contact” prior to office referrals while the schools collected overall attendance data (i.e., absences and tardiness).

Participant C2 stated, “We had a separate book to record ninth-grade referrals to make them easier to track.” Participant D3 stated, “We started tracking referrals early.”

We used a strategy to assist with reduction in office referrals which, involved using a timeline for comparable data; i.e., September of the previous year’s data was compared with September of the current year’s data. Comparisons were

made monthly and shared at each “School Improvement Team meeting.” During the meetings the best methods to handle the volume of referrals for repeat offenders were discussed along with ways to prevent/deter other students from becoming discipline issues. (Participant D4, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant E3 stated, “We had the student write reflections pertaining to their poor behavior choice and discussed skills that would allow them to not repeat the same behavior.” The good thing is that it worked for a few of the ninth-grade students.

### **Course Performance**

All of the schools used a variety of data to meet the needs of the students in order to put them on a pathway to success. Schools A, B, C, D, and E agreed that data used to identify at-risk students in the five rural high schools are discipline data, attendance data, progress reports, report cards, teacher discipline referrals, and teacher referrals to the Student Assistance Team. Strategies used to serve the needs of at-risk students include Personal Education Plan (PEP), which allows input from the students and provides a forum for teachers to reveal academic expectations that identify strategies to meet the needs of the student. Any combination of teacher/student/parent/administrative conference(s), guidance counselors (conferences, home visits), social worker (conference, home visits), behavioral contracts, placement at the alternative school, and at-risk/dropout prevention specialist increased the chance of the ninth-grade student promotion with their graduation cohort. Lunch and Learn tutorials and student mentors are also available for at-risk students on a daily basis.

Participant A3 stated, “Stakeholders continuously viewed and reviewed data as it applied to the individual students and their needs. If absenteeism was a problem for a

student, it correlated with discipline issues and poor course performance.”

Participant B3 shared that students were provided with time to catch up work after they returned from out-of-school suspensions.

We used ISS more to assist students than we had in the past. Some students were assigned dual suspensions; i.e., a student may be suspended for 10 days, 5 days out-of-school suspension and 5 days of in-school suspension. The 5 days of in-school suspension allowed students to get their make-up work during their suspension, thereby minimizing the risk of dropping out or falling so far behind that they lose interest in school. (Participant B4, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant C4 responded, “For students who were homebound, regular classroom teachers and homebound teachers collaborated with the family to ensure consistency of academic work.” Coursework was sent home twice a week and returned to the regular teachers using the same bi-weekly schedule.

Participant D3 stated, “We try to motivate the students through ownership in the classroom.” Ninth-grade teachers promote student buy-in by giving students options in the classroom.

Students have access to various resources to create projects from home for their classes. The students can choose to complete a project using numerous ways. The students could create a story, make a project that includes the subject at hand, or make a video using their cellphones. The opportunity can be personalized to fit the student. As students have a hand in making decisions about their education, we found they are more likely to commit to them. (Participant D4, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

### **Research Question 3**

**Which components of the freshman transitional programs and/or strategies should be kept/added to increase the impact the program may have on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates?** Question 3 was designed by the researcher to analyze the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the freshman transitional program that should be kept/added to increase the impact the program may have on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates.

### **Practices to Maintain**

When asked what are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth-grade transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students and drop-out rates, Schools A, B, C, D, and E collectively placed strong emphasis on the usage of the “Below 80 List.” The Below 80 List was used to determine at-risk students. The names of students who had less than an 80 for any class at the end of every 6 weeks were collected and placed on a list for intervention. The students on the Below 80 List were required to attend 30 minutes of intervention per day, referred to as, “Learn.” Student Support Teams held regularly scheduled meetings that analyzed the specific needs of individual students to assist with personalizing methods to strengthen them academically. Additionally, teachers were required to hold at least two after-school tutorial sessions in their classrooms per week (teacher designated days of the week they would stay after school) for any student(s) who needed extra assistance.

School A shared that primarily, mentors were used to assist the ninth-grade students with becoming acclimated to the school, to mediate issues between students, and

to prepare students to rise to the high expectations of their ninth-grade year to remain on course to graduate with their cohort group. Participant A2 stated, “We assisted with maintaining passing courses and the graduation rate for first time ninth-grade students by connecting people, courses and services.” Students were provided the best interventions to allow for student success.

In ninth grade, we focus on study skills, test-taking skills, problem-solving skills along with applying a character word each month such as respect and responsibility to assist with the success of the ninth-grade students. The list of skills that ninth graders acquire is not for ninth grade only. The skills provided in ninth grade are fundamentally sound for the student’s future success in high school annually. Focusing on instilling skills for longevity in our ninth-grade students is a must. (Participant A3, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

Participant B1 stated, “We looked for patterns to provide positive methods to keep the student on track by using data.” Data should be continuously used to assist the students with ninth-grade success.

The ninth grade increased the rate of attendance for at-risk students by keeping records of student attendance per class period daily and keeping in constant contact with the students and parent or guardian as absences occurred. The school also audited the tardies after the first two weeks of school to increase ninth-grade student success. Tracking students with tardies and absences allowed for immediate interventions to keep the students on track for success for promotion with their 4-year cohort. (Participant B3, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant C1 stated, “We looked at the broad concept of increasing the

graduation rate by concentrating on using data.” Participant C2 stated, “The absenteeism data allowed the school to implement a team to review and contact the stakeholders immediately to acknowledge a problem and intervene.” Team members met weekly, if possible, with the student who needed the intervention for missing classes/days.

The absenteeism data provided a need for the school to implement a team to review and contact the stakeholders immediately to acknowledge a problem and intervene, if possible, with the student missing classes/days from school. The team worked for countless hours connecting with parents via the phone and email. The group learned that texting parents resulted in quicker response time.

(Participant C5, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant D2 added, “The school culture promoted ownership by both staff and students daily.” The goal was to decrease retention for ninth-grade students. Participant D3 stated, “Various positive changes were used to address keeping the students on point to graduate with their cohort.”

Participant E2 stated, “As students were absent, they were allowed 5 days to complete make up work.” Students were provided various choices to make up work.

Students were required to remain after school to finish work. Teachers were available during lunch and after school at least twice a week. Students were also encouraged to contact teachers via email if they had questions during the absences. There were many ways for students to fail, but there were many interventions to keep them from failing, also. (Participant E4, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

### **Additional Interventions/Strategies**

To assist ninth-grade students from feeling marginalized, teachers were

encouraged to share their perspectives on essential strategies that could be added to increase the impact on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates.

Participants B2 stated, “Mentors could serve as ninth-grade liaisons to better serve the needs of the at-risk students.” Volunteers could be members from the community, i.e., alumni, partners and upper-class students.

Participant C4 stated, “Every ninth grader in the school could be assigned to a group of students to seek assistance. BETA Club members, Student Council members, and Teacher Cadets could lead some of the groups.” Students who have depicted maturity since their ninth-grade year could be chosen to lead a group of first time ninth graders also.

Participant E3 stated, “I think having a Teen Court Program on campus could be an integral part of the school’s supportive disciplinary process.” Teen Court can assist students with learning about the judicial system.

Teen Court is a youth court program that serves as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures such as suspension and detention. Teen Court is a voluntary diversion program from Juvenile Court that provides a forum for students to explain their involvement in the offense and a structured environment in which the words and actions of students who admit their wrongful acts are evaluated and judged by a jury of their peers. Another component allows an opportunity for students to accept responsibility for their actions by fulfilling the jury's sentence of community service hours and future jury duty assignments, both of which are designed to be constructive and rehabilitative. (Participant E5, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

When asked is there any other information you would be willing to share about

freshmen transitioning in your school that would be helpful in capturing your perception, School A responded, “No.”

More parental involvement was the resounding chorus from Schools B, C, D, and E. Participant B3 stated, “We have a lot of methods in place to assist our students, but we would like to provide more reasons to involve parents on a positive level for higher visibility in the high schools.”

Participant C3 stated, “We could include more feedback in the form of a survey to follow trends in the parent’s perception of the high school environment.” Parental involvement is paramount for ninth-grade success.

Participant D3 stated, “Parental involvement is a must.”

Positive reasons for parental involvement must be an intricate part of school practices for students to be successful with resolving problems proactively that occur in the high school atmosphere. Parents could volunteer to be positive role models as mentors from the community, guest speakers, and chaperones for school field trips and/or sponsors for students who cannot afford to attend or participate in various activities. (Participant D4, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

Participant E1 stated, “Increased parent involvement is needed in a positive manner.” Most parental contact has a negative connotation attached to it.

Oftentimes, students are threatened with the knowledge that their parents/mentors will be contacted as a heavy-handed tactic to get them back in line or to encourage better outcomes as it pertains to discipline, attendance, and grades. Positive contact with parents with information about students would work

better for the schools on a regular basis. (Participant E2, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

“Connecting teachers with training is imperative to decrease the number of students dropping out in the ninth grade” (Participant E3). Data training is a need. If the teachers understand the data, the students are able to reap better results sooner.

Special training in data would help foster change in the ninth-grade academy.

Teams of teachers could benefit by understanding how to personalize assignments to the student’s individual needs. Decisions by an autonomous group would be more in depth for ninth-grade students. Teachers need training, resources, specific guidelines and as well as on-site support to make them more effective for ninth-grade students. (Participant E4, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

The lack of teacher training could have impacted variations in the quality of NGAs across the school district. Some teachers did it well and showed a lot of promise. Other teachers found it was challenging along with their other responsibilities.

### **Summary**

The research covered several variables that the administrators and guidance counselor perceived had an impact on ninth-grade students during their transition to five rural high schools, which included absenteeism, behavior, and course performance.

According to the findings of this qualitative study, the collective perception is that the ninth-grade interventions used in the five rural high schools positively impact the ninth-grade transition overall. The five rural high schools must continue to focus on increasing attendance rates, positively impacting EOC scores, and decreasing office referrals.

Research has identified appropriate interventions that improve school climate and

reduce suspensions and expulsions.

The interviews supported administrator and guidance counselor perceptions that overall, the interventions and/or strategies are positively impacting the ninth-grade level of success in the five rural high schools.

## **Chapter 5: Comments and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine school-based administrator and counselor perceptions of ongoing impacts of various ninth grade transitional programs/strategies. Direct connections to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 were identified through the analysis of data recorded through interviews. Literature-based issues discussed in Chapter 2 included methods to increase the academic performance of ninth-grade students, decrease negative behavior issues, and decrease the number of students who choose to drop out. Participants in this study had wide ranges of experiences with student data. Specifically, data pertaining to ninth-grade absenteeism, behavior (discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions), and course performance were addressed at the five rural high schools for students who meet district and state criteria for being at-risk of failure in the school setting. According to DePaoli et al. (2017), some practices/strategies for ninth-grade students at risk of dropping out of school can be identified as early as middle school through three key indicators: poor attendance, poor behavior, and poor course performance.

### **Research Question 1**

**What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance counselors on the impact of ninth-transition programs and/or strategies on the retention rate of ninth-grade students?**

### **Absenteeism**

Findings parallel the research-based assertion that eighth graders with strong indicators of being retained or dropping out in high school experience low attendance and poor grades in core courses. Researchers found that if a student was chronically absent in

eighth grade, it was a strong indicator the same behavior would be repeated the following school year (Achieve Incorporated, 2010). Participant D2 stated, “Reviewing eighth-grade student data is a good place to start for incoming ninth-grade students.”

### **Vertical Alignment**

Edutopia (2014) explained that vertical alignment team meetings are opportune times to view data and discuss expectations for first-time ninth-grade students.

Vertically aligned team meetings with our sister school allow eighth-grade teachers to meet with ninth-grade teachers to share data and concerns about students that include chronic absenteeism, behavioral issues, and course performance. Rising ninth-grade students with chronic absenteeism and excessive tardies are of primary concern to ninth-grade teachers. (Participant D2, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

### **Chronic Absenteeism**

Research reveals that most eighth-grade students who were chronically absent for any reason (i.e., suspension or expulsion, illness) entered high school at risk of not being successful in ninth grade (MDRC, 2016). Schools should analyze absentee data frequently, especially during the earliest days in the first month of the school year. Any student body member who reaches the 2-day absence rate within the first month of school should be provided interventions to get the back on track (Olson, 2014).

During ninth grade, absenteeism data alert schools of students with an issue that predictively leads to low grades in the first months of their freshman year (Chicago CCSR, 2014). Participant C4 stated, “We attempt to reduce office referrals at the beginning of the ninth-grade year and we attempt to decrease the absenteeism data aligned with ISS and OSS during the year.”

### **Make-up Work**

Chronically absent students force teachers to provide additional assistance as they return to make up work (Chang & Romero, 2008). Participant E4 discussed methods used to make up work such as lunch-to-learn and remaining after school with ninth-grade teachers to complete lab assignments and other work. Teachers provide email information on their school webpages for easy accessibility for students and parent contact. Students were also encouraged to keep in contact using the county-assigned email accounts.

### **Nurses on Site**

Nurses on site assist students who face medically complex conditions and chronic health illnesses by providing quick professional assessments to manage normal care (Maughan, 2016). High school nurses collaborate, promote, and support students with multiple specialists in the local communities to maximize physical, social, emotional, and educational growth of students in the school atmosphere (Health and Human Services, 2016).

Participant D1 responded,

The usage of nurses in the high schools assisted with a decline in absenteeism rates. Our district ensured that all of the schools have a full-time nurse to assist with mitigating absenteeism. The rate of absenteeism for ninth grade is better than it was last year in ninth grade.

Schools with a full-time nurse can assist students on the spot and provide professional validation for a student's illness or injury. All the stakeholders trust the nurse's decision. The nurse being able to make a determination on campus has curtailed students leaving school early, thus decreasing the absenteeism rate for

ninth grade. Nurses assigned to schools are oftentimes the only health professionals who our students see on a regular basis. (Participant E2, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

The researcher determined that each high school had multiple methods in place to assist students with absenteeism issues. The county had some preset routines; and on each campus, they were adjusted to benefit the individual students with unique issues.

### **Behavior**

Behavior data in middle school have proven to be a reliable predictor of an unsuccessful ninth-grade year (Moore, 2014). Freshmen students have more referrals due to behavior issues than other grade levels during high school. Some of the misbehaviors revealed by research are in- or out-of-school suspension (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Members of the student body who are suspended one or more times are projected to more than likely to drop out of high school (Neild, 2009).

Participant C2 stated,

We recorded infractions in a separate book for ninth grade. Using a separate book makes it easier to keep a real time account of the number of times an individual student received punishments (i.e., ISS/OSS) that removed them from their regularly scheduled classroom atmosphere. Students received harsher punishments over time if they continued with misbehaviors.

Some of the misbehaviors revealed by research lead to retention (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Researchers from Duke University discovered that retained students tend to be at greater risk for behavioral problems, which can heavily impact other students (Khrais, 2014).

At the beginning of the school year as small incidences developed, we started

warning the parents and the students of the impending infractions if the behavior persisted by referring to the handbook that is provided online for guidance.

Tracking referrals early allowed us to decrease negative behavior. Some students adhered to the policy and procedure of the day while several others were repeat offenders. Both parents and students were alerted that a student's poor choices could lead to them being retained in ninth grade and no one wanted that to occur. Unfortunately, we had more than one student who was retained their first year of high school due to lack of self-control. (Participant D2, personal communications, January 8, 2018)

Methods used to combat misbehavior include the use of SLCs that are represented in NGAs, which often consist of an interconnected system of people, courses, and services. The interconnected system may include personalized instruction, study skills training, orientation programs, family outreach, mentoring, remediation strategies, designated halls or buildings, and dedicated faculty members (Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013). All of the participants from the five high schools in the rural district incorporated NGAs to combat misbehavior in the incoming freshman class and various other measures used at each high school on behalf on the incoming ninth-grade class.

Participant 1 from High School A stated, "Mentors were used to assist students to handle discipline issues. Ninth-grade students were assigned upper classmen as mentors." Participant 2 shared that ninth-grade students were encouraged to immediately address any issues with their mentor. Time for mentors and mentees is built in a daily schedule. The meetings were held in a supervised location to create a feeling of safety and belonging.

A method that assisted with changing the mindset of some ninth-grade students on

the wrong path involved writing reflections. After the student completed the reflection, they had to research some better choices to use for coping skills for future references. The ninth-grade student also addressed the issue with an adult prior to returning to class. (Participant E3, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

### **Team Bonding**

NGAs must provide a trained faculty for the ninth-grade student body. The assigned faculty should include administration, guidance counselors, and teachers (Cook et al., 2008) who provide a nurturing environment for students to develop bonds with teachers and peers (SBE, 2016) with methods to be successful by continuously reflecting upon interventions as a team (McMaster, 2015).

Teams for ninth-grade students bond by implementing and sustaining programs/strategies that provide little-to-no opportunity for retention of freshmen students at the high school level.

The cohesive bonded team includes ninth grade administration, guidance counselors, and teachers who are aware of the important role they play in the life of the ninth-grade student. Providing opportunities to bond with ninth-grade students is an impactful method that is needed for students who are immature and need nurturing. (Participant A2, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

Participant B2 stated, “The ninth-grade homeroom teachers serve as teacher advisors for the same students throughout their high school years. The advisors and students bond, which allow them to build their own lasting relationships.”

Participant D3 shared that teacher advisors bonded by gaining the trust of their students. High school students are more willing to talk about issues that affect their

choices in ninth grade and throughout their high school experience if they are familiar with the teacher.

Scheduling classes for ninth-grade students can assist with curtailing poor behavior choices. Ninth-grade students using a block schedule have a limited number of class changes, therefore lessening the opportunity for disruptive and disorderly conduct in the hallways as classes transition (NCDPI, n.d.).

### **Course Achievement**

Administrators and teachers meet prior to the arrival of incoming students to put interventions into place to ensure student success. For at-risk students and higher achieving students, schedules are devised to maximize learning opportunities in the classrooms. Scheduling that benefits all students involves a lot of time and planning.

### **Ninth-Grade Schedules**

Incoming ninth-grade students could be scheduled for yearlong honors or remedial classes (Campbell, Brown, & Guy, 2009)

Participant A2 stated, “Teachers collaborate with the guidance counselors and administrators to assist with creating schedules to benefit all ninth-grade students referenced by using data to determine which schedule would be most beneficial.”

In high schools, LEAs have the authority to adopt the most appropriate scheduling practices for individual students using blocked, traditional, or hybrid classes (Campbell, et al., 2009). Scheduling classes plays a major role in the success of first-time ninth-grade students. Scheduling is rigid for first-time ninth-grade students as they enter high school. Ninth-grade students are assigned to a schedule most relevant and applicable to their individual needs (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Ninth grade functions best when teachers have time in their schedule to

collaborate with students on a daily basis. On behalf of the students, schedules are long enough for teachers to cover the material in depth and provide time to critique the student's work before they get behind. Schedules also allow teachers time to build strong bonds with at-risk students that also assists with keeping them on pace to successfully complete ninth grade with their cohort. (Participant D3, January 8, 2018)

Using a block schedule is best for some students. During block scheduling, students attend fewer classes for a longer period of time; thus, a student might attend only four core classes per day, but each class lasts for 90 minutes (NCDPI, 2016c). Core classes include English, math, science, world studies, and U.S. history. Block scheduling assists with students who could become overwhelmed with stress by the experience of adjusting to six to eight teachers in 1 day, juggling multiple assignments from various classes, and testing over a full school year (AASA, 2017).

Multiple participants mentioned scheduling in multiple capacities. Participant B2 stated, "Some at-risk ninth-grade students were assigned to a double block class schedule in order to achieve success to lessen the chance of being retained."

Many LEAs perceive that block scheduling provides enough time for the teacher to fully teach, less time for disciplinary problems among students, and a lower absenteeism rate (Campbell, et al., 2009). LEAs also perceive that drop-out rates have decreased due to the use of the block scheduling system (Campbell, et al., 2009). Participants 1 and 2 from High School D focused on not retaining ninth-grade students by using data from eighth grade to assign the most at-risk students to a block schedule.

Using the block schedule, teachers can permit time to support more at-risk

students or to increase the number of projects and experiments assigned to a group of students. Traditional scheduling allows students to take an additional elective or seek assistance for coursework as needed (Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, & Shane, 2016).

There are hassles creating a block schedule for some ninth-grade students while allowing for a traditional schedule for other ninth-grade students. Ninth-grade students who miss three days consecutively are three-to-six hours behind in each class depending on being assigned a block schedule or traditional schedule. Once some students fall behind in core classes, ninth grade becomes a living nightmare for them. (Participant B3, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

The advantages of a block schedule for ninth-grade students include students being assigned to take four courses per semester for a total of eight courses per year instead of six. Students are provided an opportunity to earn more credits in one year towards graduation, thus students have twice as many opportunities to complete the required courses if they fail a subject. (Participant E2 personal communication, January 9, 2018)

Traditional schedules in high school present academic benefits for both teachers and students. Teachers are able to differentiate instruction due to fewer students per class in core classes, i.e., math and English. The students master smaller segments of curriculum while increasing their knowledge over the entire school year (Campbell, et al, 2009). A traditional school schedule allows ninth-grade students to take seven 45-minute periods per day throughout the entire school year (Corrin et al., 2016).

High schools that offer hybrid class schedules are considered the best for students (Campbell, et al., 2009).

Some teachers taught mixed/hybrid schedules. Hybrid schedules combine the 4x4

block semester schedule structure with the traditional single period schedule.

With the hybrid schedules in the rural high school, classes are offered in varied lengths of time for a semester or an entire year for ninth graders. Many ninth-grade students benefit from this type of a hybrid schedule. A student may need extra time in Math class but excel in English class. Therefore, a hybrid schedule would be in the student's best interest. (Participant B4, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Flexible schedules can assist with students being successful in high school.

Rigorous online courses are available for students who fall behind. Flexible scheduling allows students to take year-long online catch-up courses. Classes are offered in English, math, science, and history as remediation and credit recovery. Many students retake courses to increase their GPAs, while others gain enough credits necessary to graduate on time (North Carolina Virtual Academy, 2017).

Data are used to assign ninth-grade students to a schedule, which promotes their achievement and determines interventions that are needed to improve success levels in ninth grade and decrease the number of students who are retained in high school (Corrin et al., 2016). Participant E2 used multiple data for at-risk students to lessen their opportunity of being retained in ninth grade. The data used to track the ninth-grade students included attendance, behavior, and course performance to ensure a successful ninth-grade year. Administrative staff and guidance counselors have effective plans based on data in place that monitor student attendance, decrease poor behavior, and increase course performance in order to curtail retention of ninth-grade students.

## **Research Question 2**

**What are the perceptions of high school administrators and guidance**

**counselors on the impact of ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies on the drop-out rate of ninth-grade students?**

**Absenteeism**

Students being absent part of the day increases substantially as they transition to ninth grade (Whitney & Liu, 2017). Participant A1 stated, “Ninth-grade students who miss excessive days of school for any reason tend to get off track. Students with high absenteeism are prime candidates to be retained in ninth grade.”

Tracking data allows ninth-grade stakeholders to identify early warning signs and implement support to strengthen the percentage of students (Corrin et al., 2016) in ninth grade who will complete ninth grade on time and graduate with their cohort.

Schools play an important role in promoting attendance by helping parents understand, particularly in the early years, that coming to school every day is critical to their child’s educational success (Chang & Romero, 2008). Students have three to seven more absences in first period more often than from other classes throughout the day (Cortes’, Bricker, & Rohlfs, 2009). Recently, the United States Department of Education used 15 days of school absences per year or more as its definition of chronic absence (Office of Civil Rights, 2013).

In order to preclude chronic absenteeism, school administrators, teachers, parents and the social worker must be a team. Addressing chronic absenteeism makes a difference in reducing absenteeism (Chicago CCSR, 2014) for ninth-grade students. During ninth-grade absenteeism, data alert schools of students with an issue that predictively leads to low grades in the first months of their freshman year (Chicago CCSR, 2014).

Participants from the five rural high schools referenced absenteeism in various

capacities. When transitioning to ninth grade, the freshmen must adjust to the way absenteeism counts per class in high school. Participant A2 stated, “Counting absenteeism per class causes making up work to be of utmost importance that wreaks severe consequences if not completed in a timely manner.”

Currently, students are held accountable for seat time in the classroom, and making up class work in a timely manner proves too be difficult for many students, becoming a factor for students to drop out of high school. The earlier absenteeism is identified, the earlier interventions are in place to making up that increases the opportunity for ninth grade success. (Participant A3, personal communication, January 5, 2018)

Participant B2 stated, “Teachers in ninth grade have higher absences from their first-period classes more often than middle school teachers.” First-period class is reported to have the highest percentage of absences in high school followed by seventh-period class (Whitney & Liu, 2017). Participant B3 indicated that teachers kept track of dates on tardies to individual classes.

Students who have core classes at the beginning of the day oftentimes arrive to school tardy, which causes them to get behind in course assignments. Many students with core classes at the end of the day oftentimes leave school early, which also causes some of the students to get behind in classwork in core classes. Although, teachers keep a count of the number of classes the student misses, it becomes frustrating to address the recurring issue multiple times with the same student. Teachers are thankful that social workers are on sight and the offending student can be referred for home visits. (Participant C5, personal communication, January 7, 2018)

To decrease the chance of retention due to absenteeism, one intervention that was used involves the social worker making home visits on behalf of the student. The social worker teamed with the nurse to schedule home visits for chronically absent students. The teacher was informed when the student was expected to return to school. The student receives assistance from peers and in other situations the teacher is available for guidance to keep the student on track.

(Participant E3, personal communication, January 9, 2018)

Some at risk ninth-grade students are unable to complete assignments in a timely manner after missing days. If ninth-grade students get off track, the school provides them with means to master skills at their own pace using competency-based strategies. Credit can be earned or awarded, while providing students with personalized learning opportunities. The strategies available include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

### **Behavior**

Building a bond between two people allows the mentor to exude positive ideas and values to the mentee (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Schools that use mentors to build bridges are proactive. In ninth grade, some mentors assist with lessening the number of common discipline referrals that lead to suspensions.

Decreasing ninth-grade misbehavior would be a great feat. A strong desire was to lessen suspensions and expulsions annually for ninth graders. Some of the methods include encouraging teachers to initially use classroom rules to track tardies and minor offenses that provide a paper trail. Teachers should discuss incidences with parents prior to referring students for administrative discipline

also. An established paper trail assists with intervention methods needed for ninth-grade students. (Participant B3, personal communication, January 6, 2018)

Teams of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administrators, and mentors) should meet regularly to track student disciplinary referrals/suspensions to plan interventions for students in need of support (Corrin et al., 2016).

Participant C4 shared that the school reduced office referrals by comparing data from a month from the previous school year with the corresponding month of the current year. The School Improvement Team assisted with interventions to decrease the high rate of offenses and to decrease the likelihood of students dropping out of school. Most eighth-grade students who were chronically absent for suspension or expulsion entered high school at risk of not being successful in ninth grade (MDRC, 2016).

Participant D2 stated, “During vertically aligned meetings, teams share data about students with major discipline issues of rising ninth-grade students. Students with high absenteeism rates due to suspensions usually struggle in ninth grade.”

### **Course Performance**

Academic interventions should be an ongoing process of gathering evidence to determine what each student actually knows, understands, and can do, with results used to improve instruction and program design (California Comprehensive Center, 2014).

School leadership plays a large role with how data are used to improve teaching. Teachers must develop goals, have support, and work in an environment that routinely allows them to develop skills to sufficiently use data, which ensures that students are not retained in ninth grade. Teachers need frequent and consistent feedback on their teaching that focuses on both their strengths and weaknesses (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013) to use student data effectively.

Multiple teams meet and use data on behalf of the students. Some data are used to analyze and develop Ninth Grade Student Teams to intercede on behalf of the students. Teachers use other data to make recommendations for creating PEPs. Data were displayed between ninth-grade students with high levels of absenteeism, multiple discipline referrals, and poor coursework was highly prevalent. (Participant A3, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

In-school suspension can utilize academic instruction (American Psychological Association, 2015). Students who are removed from class for minor infractions are oftentimes sent to in-school suspension. Students are expected to complete all work assigned from their regular classroom teacher while they are temporarily reassigned to in-school suspension. The usage of in-school suspension encompassed students making up work upon their return from out-of-school suspension.

For students who experience out-of-school suspension, the latter half of their suspension would be utilized to ease students back into regular class mode. Some of the advantages for the student include the fact that, upon request from a teacher, a student could return to class to learn new material, make up work was provided to the student in ISS. Teachers can be contacted in a timely manner during the day to explain assignments. Students are provided assistance with getting back on track by making up the late assignments quickly. The individual student regains support and guidance to lead them back into the regularly scheduled classroom atmosphere. (Participant B3, personal communication, January 6, 2018)

Teachers understanding the importance of building relationships within a school cannot be overemphasized (Education Week, 2017).

On behalf of student success, multiple agencies are available on campus after school to assist struggling students twice a week. Talent Search and Upward Bound representatives provide another opportunity to assist students with make up work and tutorial services on site. Qualified teachers are representatives who assist students with making up/catching up coursework from their core classes. (Participant D2, personal communication, January 8, 2018)

### **Homebound**

Teachers are required to work with students who cannot maintain a regular school day schedule. Teamwork on behalf of the students strengthens the chances for ninth-grade success.

Due to profound health issues, some students are not traditional students. Many ninth-grade students are not allowed to attend classes on campus and they must receive their education at home for varying amounts of time. On behalf of homebound students, regular education teachers collaborate with the assigned homebound teacher and family members to ensure consistency in the coursework that went home to be returned completed. (Participant C4, personal communication, January 6, 2018)

### **Personalized Learning**

Students learn best when they are given an opportunity to pursue their interests and abilities in ways that recognize and affirm what makes them unique (Education Week, 2017). In order for students to thrive, they need opportunities to engage in a manner relevant to one's abilities and interests to reach their full potential (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Participant D4 stated, "In ninth grade, opportunities for diverse learners in the classroom are provided to allow them choices that promote

excellence. When teachers allow students a choice, the students showcase their talents.”

With the ninth grade being heralded as the most crucial year in high school, the more the students are monitored using data the better. Positive role models are a must. The more the schools and parents can partner on behalf of the student, the better the chances are that the student will be more successful in ninth grade and not drop out of high school.

Stakeholders build teams that include teachers along with student mentors and leaders from the community to bond with ninth-grade students. Team bonding builds loyalty and school spirit throughout the school and community (NCDPI, 2017b). Teams that include administrators, teachers, parents, and students ensure a more successful ninth-grade transition (Mizelle, 2005).

### **Class Recovery**

To minimize retention, in some cases students attend a post freshman year summer school, which offers an intensive proficiency-based method to recoup class credits. The ninth-grade students work with ninth-grade teachers to make up failed core class credits by mastering targeted areas (Open School Programs, 2016). Online courses are offered in English, math, science, and history as remediation and credit recovery. For students who fall behind, flexible scheduling allows them to take year-long courses to catch up with classmates (North Carolina Virtual Academy, 2017).

Any student who failed a core ninth-grade class can possibly graduate with their cohort. High schools provide a lab with access to core courses online for students to recover classes needed to graduate in a supervised setting. Many students work hard to recover classes online and complete high school on time with their cohort. (Participant B2, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

### **Research Question 3**

**Which components of the freshman transitional programs and/or strategies should be kept/added to increase the impact the program may have on ninth-grade retention and drop-out rates?** The five high schools in the study provide different types of strategies based on the needs of their ninth-grade students and the culture of the school. The structure of the NGAs, along with the strategies and programs, varied due to the strategies used and the students involved in the ninth grade.

### **Findings**

The researcher found that each of the five high schools within the district focused on various ninth-grade transitions by choosing the interventions and/or strategies that best suited the current student body. The transitional program/strategies assisted with organizational structures used to address the usage of data collected to enhance a successful ninth-grade year and to increase the graduation rate. Teams that included students, parents, teachers, and school staff were more successful with at-risk students.

Students are intricately immersed in the bonding and team-building practices to enhance the opportunity of graduating with their cohort. Each school realizes that ninth grade is the most crucial year for high school students. The need for more parental involvement is of utmost concern. High schools must ensure that parents and families are continuously engaged in ninth-grade student education and provide appropriate resources to promote success (DePaoli et al., 2017). High schools are challenged to create ways to engage parents and families with the staff and students (Henderson, 2015) in an effort to increase student academic achievement to meet the state's high standards for success. Schools need assistance from ninth-grade stakeholders with diverse backgrounds (i.e., students, teachers, administration, guidance, and parents) to develop

activities for parental involvement. The ultimate goal is to provide an opportunity for parents of ninth-grade students and first-time ninth-grade students to jointly bond with school staff (DePaoli et al., 2017).

It is imperative that ninth graders understand the total impact that their ninth-grade experience will have on their immediate and/or long-term future goals. To strengthen the success rate of ninth-grade students, as a team, parents and schools must work together to promote intrinsic methods to build good study skills as a part of a daily routine. It is crucial for ninth-grade at-risk students to literally plan time to study and complete multiple assignments in a timely manner. (Participant A2, personal communication, January 4, 2018)

### **Recommendations for Practice**

- Be proactive in educating all the stakeholders in eighth grade on the expectations of first-time ninth-grade students. Have eighth-grade students develop questions about transitioning to high school and hold a forum to allow a diverse group of ninth-grade students to answer their questions and provide other valuable information.
- Set up a school blog at each high school managed by upperclassmen in different languages to educate students and parents with apprehensions about students entering ninth grade.
- Due to numerous ninth-grade students being overwhelmed with social and emotional issues, hotline numbers should be provided to assist students on the county and/or high school websites.
- Publicly display ninth-grade data online: States should separately include counts of first-time ninth graders in their basic data reporting. If states were

asked to report both the first-time ninth-grade student head count and total ninth-grade enrollments for schools and districts as part of the already publicly available fall membership reports, this would enable a more accurate and timely examination of rates of ninth-grade retention. States, districts, and schools should provide a standardized check using different methods and criteria to establish which students are and are not removed from the adjusted first-time ninth-grade graduation rate cohorts.

- For every student who failed in eighth grade, the chances of them falling through the cracks from ninth to tenth grade increased by more than 15% (Christie & Zinth, 2008). Although, it takes planning to implement and time to model positive concepts and values to influence the impressionable learner (Williams & Bryan, 2013), building relationships in ninth grade could assist with decreasing the number of students who are unsuccessful. Teaching positive behaviors creates a less challenging transition for ninth-grade students. Creating positive behavioral experiences for students acculturating to the high school is a must (Couvillion, 2017). Participant A3 stated, “Mentoring is a highly valued method used to present positive behavior in the ninth grade. Students have a tendency to emulate people whom they like. Therefore, they begin to emulate their peer mentors and teacher’s positive behavior.” Declining achievement levels during the transition from middle school to high school leads to high student drop-out rates (Balfanz, 2009).
- Track the data. The five rural high schools mentioned stakeholders tracking data in ninth grade to increase the chances of students progressing to the tenth grade on time.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

It is recommended that parents, teachers, and ninth-grade students take part in future studies for greater understanding of the ninth-grade phenomenon. This study was limited to perceptions of administrators and guidance counselors.

### **Limitations**

There were several factors that limited this study's findings. Participants for this study were limited to administrators and guidance counselors who work in a rural district in the state of North Carolina. The researcher focused only on ninth grade.

### **Summary**

The results from this study found strengths and weaknesses based on the procedures used by each high school's method of ninth grade transitional programs and/or strategies. The study of the NGAs in the district and the various applications of the strategies proved to be enlightening. The five rural high schools had effective transition programs/strategies in place, which are designed to help keep students in school and on track to graduate with their cohort group.

The schools have incorporated essential personalized strategies that cater to the uniqueness of the high school's students and the community. Teachers need to meet the students where they are in relation to their skill level by using their learning style and providing enough time to master a concept before they move on to the next, and often more difficult, skill.

Absenteeism, behavior, and course performance (ABCs) are intricately intertwined in assisting student success in ninth grade or, for noncompliant students, in contributing to their failure. Although there is always room for improvement, perceptions from this study indicate that the ninth grade transition programs in the five

rural high schools adequately ease freshman transition.

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Appendix A  
Superintendent's Letter

Email Letter of Permission to Rural School District Superintendent

Dear Superintendent:

I am writing this email requesting your support of a doctoral dissertation study at Gardner-Webb University entitled, "Perception of Ninth Grade Transition Programs and/or Strategies: A Qualitative Study." I need to disperse a data collection instrument regarding the ninth grade transition process and its possible impact on student retention and dropout rates in the district, as well as possible relationships to student absenteeism, student behavior, and course grades.

If your permission is granted, I will contact the administrators and guidance counselors at each high school for participation in the study. Participants will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview this fall at their convenience using email to conduct interviews or to conduct one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times throughout this process. All participants will remain anonymous throughout the duration of the study. Participants will be provided with an informed consent document that will provide additional information regarding their participation in the study.

The information gathered could be useful in evaluating ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies. The results of this study will be made available to you upon request.

If you are willing to allow the administrators and guidance counselor to participate, please respond to this email accordingly. If there are any questions, please feel free to contact me at [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX@XXXXX.XXX](mailto:XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX@XXXXX.XXX) XXX-XXX-XXXX

Sincerely,

Sheila McGee-Carlton

Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Appendix B  
Interview Questions

## Interview Questions

### *Introduction*

How long have you worked in a high school setting?

How long have you worked with ninth grade students?

*General Information: Please describe the school by including the following*

What is the total enrollment of the high school 2016-17?

What is the number of ninth graders at the high school 2016-17?

What is the number of first time ninth graders in the high school 2016-17?

- IQ1: What is the name of the ninth grade program/curriculum in place at your school?
- a. What specific transition aspects are being targeted with this program for ninth grade students?
  - b. What component(s) or strategies promote a successful transition to assist in accomplishing your target?
  - c. What statistics illustrate your program and/or strategies are meeting the desired goals for the program initiative?
- IQ2: What is your perception of the student's absenteeism in the ninth grade?
- a. What strategies are in place to assist students with chronic absenteeism issues?
- IQ3: What is your perception regarding assessments in ninth grade?
- a. What is your perception of ninth grade students passing courses on time?
  - b. What strategies are in place to address students with low grades?
- IQ4: What is your perception of the significance of ninth grade discipline referrals?
- a. What types of behavior data are collected on ninth grade students?
  - b. How often is ninth grade behavior data monitored?
  - c. What types of measures are in place to curtail negative behavior?
- IQ5: What is your perception of the success of the program and/or strategies?
- IQ6: What strategies should be considered for improving the transition of ninth grade students?
- IQ7: Is there any other information you would be willing to share about freshmen transitioning in your school that would be helpful in capturing your perception?

*Thank you*

## Appendix C

E-mail to Administrators and Guidance Counselors Requesting Participation

## E-mail to Administrators and Guidance Counselors Requesting Participation

Dear X,

I am a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University conducting a research study to examine administrator's and guidance counselor's perceptions of the ongoing impacts of various Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and/or strategies at five high schools in a Rural Area. It is my believe that the results from this study could benefit the high schools as well as, the school district and possibly other school districts in the future.

I am writing to request permission to include you as a participant within a research study involving the local school district. At your convenience, during the fall I will be interviewing participants for 30-60 minutes to try and determine trends that will help schools better implement transitional ninth grade programs and/or strategies.

Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any time without a reason. If you are willing to assist me, please reply to this email with an "I consent."

All information shared during the interview will remain confidential. Participants will be provided with an informed consent document to provide additional information regarding their participation in the study.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact me at  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX@XXXXX.XXX      XXX-XXX-XXXX

Sincerely,

Sheila McGee-Carlton

Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Appendix D  
Informed Consent Form

## **Informed Consent Form**

### Title of Study

The Perception of Administrators and Guidance Counselors in 5 Rural High Schools of The Ninth Grade Transition Program and/or Strategies

Researcher:

Sheila McGee-Carlton

Department of Education

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### **Purpose**

The purpose of the research study is to record the perception of administrators and guidance counselors in 5 rural high schools on the ninth grade transition programs and/or strategies being used at their schools.

### **Procedure**

I plan to interview the administrators and guidance counselors at five local high schools. The selected participants will receive an e-mail that provides an explanation of the role and the responsibilities of the researcher. The e-mail will explain that responding to the e-mail with "I consent" indicates their willingness to participate. Participants that do not reply will be regarded as declining participation in the study. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will enter data using a software program. Participants can skip any question that causes discomfort and they can stop the interview any time. Each participant will receive a copy of the transcribed data to peruse for approval to ensure their perceptions have been represented correctly.

### **Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 30-60 minutes of your time.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data that has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

### **Confidentiality**

#### **Data Linked with Identifying Information**

Your name will not be used in any report. The information you provide will be assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed all material will be destroyed.

**Anonymous Data**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Only members of the research team will be allowed to access study documentation. All audio will be deleted upon transcription. The transcription data will be kept under an encrypted password.

**Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

**Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio tape will be destroyed.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

If you want to withdraw from the study, *"tell the interviewer to stop the interview."* There is no penalty for withdrawing.

If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact: Sheila McGee-Carlton at [shcarlton@gmail.com](mailto:shcarlton@gmail.com)

**If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals**

Sheila McGee-Carlton  
Department of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
(910) 285-7183  
[shdavisarlton@gmail.com](mailto:shdavisarlton@gmail.com)

Dr. Stephen Laws  
Department of Education  
Gardner-Webb University

Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
(704) 406-4403  
[slaws@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:slaws@gardner-webb.edu)

**If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

Dr. Jeffrey S. Rogers  
IRB Institutional Administrator  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
(704) 406-4724  
[jrogers3@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:jrogers3@gardner-webb.edu)

Appendix E

Consent for Participation Letter

## Consent for Participation Letter

### **Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the confidential survey.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the confidential survey.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the focus group.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the focus group.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interview session(s). I understand that this interview may be audio recorded for purposes of accuracy. The audio recording will be transcribed and destroyed.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the interview session(s).

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Printed Name

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix F

Background of Administration and Guidance Counselors

**Table 6***Background of Administration and Guidance Counselors*

Position	Gender	Years as Administrator	Years as Guidance Counselor
Participant A1	Female	2.0	0
Participant A2	Female	2.0	0
Participant A3	Female	0.0	1
Participant B1	Male	20	0
Participant B2	Male	5.0	0
Participant B3	Female	9.0	0
Participant B4	Female	0.0	2
Participant B5	Female	0.0	2
Participant C1	Male	20.0	0
Participant C2	Female	2.5	0
Participant C3	Male	2.0	0
Participant C4	Female	0.0	12
Participant C5	Female	0.0	15
Participant D1	Male	5.0	0
Participant D2	Male	2.5	0
Participant D3	Female	0.0	16
Participant D4	Female	0.0	17
Participant E1	Male	25.0	0
Participant E2	Male	19.0	0
Participant E3	Male	6.0	0
Participant E4	Female	0.0	30
Participant E5	Female	0.0	30

Appendix G  
Attendance Strand

## **Attendance Strand**

### **Participant A1:**

Once the students get behind from being absent, too often their grades fall. Every Friday I have a Make-Up Day for each class for any students that have unfinished work. Some of the students choose to assist their peers to complete task but it's their choice.

High school is different from middle school absenteeism is viewed differently and impacts the student's grade differently. Ninth grade students who miss excessive days of school for any reason tend to get off track. Students with high absenteeism are prime candidates to be retained in ninth grade.

### **Participant A2:**

Counting absenteeism per class causes making up work to be of utmost importance that wreaks severe consequences if not completed in a timely manner.

Once the students get behind from being absent, too often their grades fall.

The earlier absenteeism is identified the earlier interventions are in place to making up that increases the opportunity for ninth grade success.

### **Participant A3:**

Missing school leads students to miss coursework, which is the beginning of many students getting off track. We have a policy in place that allows students to recoup assignments, if they have an excused absence, within five (5) days. I believe that all of the ninth-grade teachers allow students to make up work regardless of the reason the student was absent. When it is time for grades to be recorded for progress reports and report cards, multiple teachers are prompting students to turn in assignments and finding ways to provide extra credit to motivate the students to achieve passing the class. Many of our students

accomplish staying on track due to the dedicated teachers efforts to keep them on track.

We had students who failed core classes because they were suspended too many days. A student in ninth grade who continuously missed the same class (es) found it easy to get off track to be promoted to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The ninth-grade teachers and staff try to assist students with catching up in classwork. Buffers are in place to keep the students from repeating a class or a year. Sometimes it was overwhelming for a student to remain on track.

Currently, students are held accountable for seat time in the classroom and making up class work in a timely manner proves too be difficult for many students becoming a factor for students to drop out of high school. The earlier absenteeism is identified the earlier interventions are in place to making up that increases the opportunity for ninth grade success.

**Participant B1:**

During morning announcements we discourage absenteeism on a daily basis. Teachers remind students about reporting to classes on time in every class. Every morning there is an announcement about not being tardy and coming to school.

**Participant B2:**

We had a student who failed ninth grade the first year, he failed Math and English, which were yearlong classes and he was suspended "multiple times," for repeating the same infraction. There is still hope for the student to graduate. The school has a lab to assist students with recovering classes online. Many of our students who use the lab do graduate. Unfortunately, we have to many students that get discouraged and quit trying.

Teachers in ninth grade have higher absences from their first-period classes more often than middle school teachers.

**Participant B3:**

If a student misses three days consecutively they are three to six hours behind in each class depending on being assigned a block schedule or traditional schedule.

The ninth grade increased the rate of attendance for at-risk by keeping records of student attendance per class period daily and keeping in constant contact with the students and parent or guardian as absences occurred. The school also audited the tardies after the first two weeks of school to increase ninth grade student success.

Teachers kept track of dates on tardies to individual classes. Tracking students with tardies and absences allowed for immediate interventions to keep the students on track for success for promotion with their 4-Year Cohort.

**Participants C2:**

The absenteeism data allowed the school to implement a team to review and contact the stakeholders immediately to acknowledge a problem and intervene.

**Participant C3:**

Teachers had small groups, which allowed more time to answer questions per student and to give more time to reinforce material for students that could easily get off track.

Teachers shared ideas and resources, and they discussed common errors, how students might have misunderstood a concept, as well as how they might teach it differently for the students to learn it better the second time.

**Participant C5:**

Students that have core classes at the beginning of the day oftentimes arrive to school tardy, which causes them to get behind in course assignments. Many students with core

classes at the end of the day oftentimes leave school early, which also causes some of the students to get behind in classwork in core classes. Although, teachers keep a count of the number of classes the students misses it becomes frustrating to address the recurring issue multiple times with the same student. Teachers are thankful that social workers are on sight and the offending student can be referred for home visits.

The absenteeism data provided a need for the school to implement a team to review and contact the stakeholders immediately to acknowledge a problem and intervene, if possible, with the student missing classes/days from school. The team worked for countless hours connecting with parents via the phone and email. The group learned that texting parents resulted in quicker response time.

**Participant D2:**

We are blessed that the county hired full time nurses for every school. The school declined in absenteeism rates due to ensuring that the school had a full time nurse to assist with mitigating absenteeism. I don't think it's enough that the nurses provide referrals for students with emotional, social or mental needs. I believe that it would be better to be proactive and provide resources online for the parents and students to access at their own liberty. Numbers to Hotlines that deal with teenaged students on the school website and/or the district webpage would be helpful. That's my opinion.

**Participant D3:**

A nurse is employed full time at the high school to align with the school district's promoting prevention and wellness early. We have students that really have mental issues at our school. The school nurse has been instrumental in identifying and making referrals to community resources for students with mental health concerns. In our rural area the school nurses are oftentimes the only health professionals that our students see

on a regular basis. The nurse assists students on the spot and waylays any fears or provides professional validation of student's illness-or injury-related to medically complex conditions and chronic health illnesses, who require the knowledge, assessment skills and judgment of a school nurse to manage their normal care. We are fortunate to have a full time nurse at every school.

**Participant E2:**

We could react to the students quicker and turn them around sooner if they are present in class. Getting students to come to school can be a chore. The sad truth is that our students have adult sized issues in many cases. Some of our students are on probation and have court dates other students translate for their parents during medical and business transactions.

**Participant E3:**

To decrease the chance of retention due to absenteeism, one intervention that was used involves the social worker making home visits on behalf of the student. The social worker teamed with the nurse to schedule home visits for chronically absent students. Teachers were informed when the students was expected to return to school. Upon returning to school the student receives assistance from peers and in other situations the teacher is available for guidance to keep the student on track in a timely manner.

**Participant E5:**

Ninth-grade teachers work hard for all their students, but for students who continuously miss multiple days it seems to be a never-ending saga. It is a challenge for some of them to make up their classwork. Classmates and teachers are willing to assist the student with understanding how to catch up. Having smaller classes assists with building camaraderie. Students volunteer to assist with helping other students to stay on track.

Appendix H  
Behavior Strand

## **Behavior Strand**

### **Participant A1:**

Mentors were used to assist students to handle discipline issues. Ninth grade students were assigned upper classmen as mentors. My perception is by ninth graders having an assigned mentor, the transition to high school from middle school has resulted in fewer discipline issues as a result of ninth grade students being more comfortable and have the opportunity to speak with an upper classman, than not asking at all about particular issues from a teacher or administration.

### **Participant A2:**

Many ninth grade students were not ready for high school. They were immature! They were probably lost the first few days and after that they acted like they were lost for fun. The tardy referrals started. There is a distinction from middle school and high school tardy policies and procedures. Ninth grade students are in shock when they arrive to high school and realize it is a whole new world of rules, policies, and procedures and they are expected to be informed, met expectations and follow all policies. Middle school is more lenient where students are given many chances when they are tardy before being placed in after school detention, if reported, and ninth graders have immediate consequences and are held accountable for being tardy.

### **Participant B2:**

The ninth grade homeroom teachers serve as teacher advisors for the same student's throughout their high school years. The advisors and students bond, which allow them to build their own lasting relationships. Often times it is the homeroom teachers serving in advisory positions who offer stability, encouragement, trust, and support for the ninth graders for the first time in their lives; especially if they are foster students, come from

single parent, or broken and divorced homes. Ninth graders know they can count on their advisor to be there for them year in and year out and influence them in positive manners as they nurture and grow their students as they prepare them for college and career readiness.

**Participant B3:**

The first few days a lot of nurturing is needed. Some of the students need extra reassurance that they will be okay. We have a nurturing program that enables ninth graders to acclimate to high school with less pressure from older students because they are separated in a different part of the building. Upper classmen assigned as mentors to ninth graders relieve a lot of stress and anxiety. The ninth graders come to high school expecting it to be similar to middle school however, the complete opposite is true and many ninth graders are immature and will act out behavior wise in an attempt to cover up their insecurity. Homeroom advisors provide an additional layer of support from day one as a contact for the extra reassurance that the students will be okay and successful.

The total number of suspensions and expulsions are submitted annually at the state level to the Department of Education. Data is gathered from each grade level of high school, with ninth grade normally with a higher number of suspensions due to ninth graders becoming acclimated to the high school environment and realizing in fact “choices have consequences.”

**Participant C1:**

Teachers worked together to set norms for the expectations and behaviors desired in the classrooms. The ninth-grade teachers were unified over the needs of the ninth grade students. They were dedicated and willingly served the rowdiest group of students in school. Though ninth graders are rowdy and spirited, they are still children needing

guidance and direction. Setting norms for the expectations and behaviors reinforces the desired outcomes in and out of the classrooms. In reality, not only ninth graders, all students want to know what is expected of them and their boundaries.

**Participant C2:**

The diverse group of teachers and staff connected to the ninth grade academy used data to meet the individual needs of the incoming freshman class. Meeting students where they are involves knowing who they are and what their needs are in order for them to be successful. A cumulative folder is only a snap shot of a student academically but does not tell the life and living situation of the students. Ninth grade academy is geared to specifically meet the needs of all students and all learning levels, so all students understand they are going to be successful both academically and personally.

We had a separate book to record ninth grade referrals to make them easier to track. Through tracking ninth grade referrals it was easy to identify the “frequent flyers”, meaning the students who are written up on a regular basis. Tracking data allows opportunities to look deeper in a ninth grade students’ situation where there may be underlying causes for the behaviors resulting in a referral.

We recorded infractions in a separate book for ninth grade. Using a separate book makes it easier to keep a real time account of the number of times an individual student received punishments (i.e., ISS/OSS) that removed them from their regularly scheduled classroom atmosphere. Students received harsher punishments over time if they continued with misbehaviors. Through the transition and adjustment “honeymoon period” of ninth graders entering high school, the data is used to step up the harsher punishment as ninth graders become repeated offenders and are written up on a referral. Ninth graders begin to realize through consistent consequences they must meet the expectation of the norms

remembering “choices have consequences”.

**Participant D1:**

To create another level of bonding with the students we used various coaches in the academy. Ninth grade students are assigned a teacher advisor, an upper classman as a mentor, and are assigned additional coaches in the academy; athletic coaches, guidance counselors, and social workers on a case by case basis, depending on the needs of the students.

**Participant D2:**

To continue with strengthening the academy concept the ninth-grade team had several interventions in place. The team understood that extra curricular activities were incentive for many ninth grade students. A lot of students desire to play sports. The students were more cognizant of their grades and the behavior needed to be a team member. Teachers bonding with ninth grade students was clearly needed to increase the success rate of some students. Coaches as teachers worked to establish deeper bonds with the students in the academy. Some of the other strategies used to reduce ninth grade retention included the upcoming ninth grade tour of the high school with their eight-grade team; parent night, parents and students visited classrooms on the ninth grade hall and interacted with the teachers. We feel that these strategies led to success with our students. Prior to eighth graders going with their team to tour the high school, upper classmen come to the middle school to meet with all eighth graders in the gym to talk with them about the expectations of high school and to alleviate any fears students may have through a questions and answering session at the end of the high school presentation. Once students attend the tour of the high school, they are relieved, a little more relaxed, and for some in shock of the changes that are coming as ninth graders.

At the beginning of the school year as small incidences developed, we started warning the parents and the students of the impending infractions if the behavior persisted by referring to the handbook that is provided online for guidance. Tracking referrals early allowed us to decrease negative behavior. Some students adhered to the policy and procedure of the day while several others were repeat offenders. Both parents and students were alerted that a student's poor choices could lead to them being retained in ninth grade and no one wanted that to occur. Unfortunately, we had more than one (1) student that was retained their first year of high school due to lack of self control. Again, ninth graders realized "choices have consequences." The tracking referral data put in place specific consequences for specific behaviors and ninth graders knew what would happen should they decide to have a particular negative behavior. What ninth graders thought was cute and they got away with in middle school, now realize both parents and students were to be held accountable for their actions.

**Participant D3:**

We started tracking referrals early. We used the digital handbook that is provided online for guidance. By tracking referrals early in the beginning of the year, all parties involved were immediately informed of the infractions. The handbook assisted in educating parents and students realize that there are procedures in place to reach the high expectations set for our students. On the other hand, there are also consequences for each level of behavior infraction for students who don't comply. Consistency for all the students involved was of foremost concern with parents and community members. I think all the students were treated fairly on a daily basis.

**Participant D4:**

Attempting to circumvent suspensions became the norm. We used a strategy to assist

with reduction in office referrals which, involved using a timeline for comparable data; i.e., September of the previous year's data was compared with September of the current year's data. Comparisons were made monthly and shared at each "School Improvement Team meeting. During the meetings the best methods to handle the volume of referrals for repeat offenders was discussed along with ways to prevent/deter other students from becoming discipline issues. Viewing the data in the beginning of the year from the previous September to the current September, advisors and support personnel were able to identify repeated patterns of students and were able to collaborate and put in place specific plans of actions to assist both the students and parents to decrease the students referrals for the current year.

**Participant E3:**

We had the student write reflections pertaining to their poor behavior choice and discussed skills that would allow them to not repeat the same behavior. Holding the students accountable through a written self-reflection students were more critical of their own behavior and recognized their mistakes and were able to self-correct quicker because they had to think about their behavior infraction, what they did, what should they have done instead, and how to avoid making the same behavior infraction in the future.

Appendix I  
Course Performance Strand

## Course Performance Strand

### **Participant A1:**

Every student was assigned to one (1) or more teams. The teams, were made up of administrators, teacher team leaders, and counselors who meet during the summer for several days of intensive work to develop the schools' comprehensive set of interventions for incoming freshman.

### **Participant A2:**

Ninth grade students usually need more attention than other grades. There was a team for every student. Teams were developed for students who needed yearlong classes, students assigned to honors classes, students with attendance issues, students with behavioral issues, students with grade issues. Creating all the teams and following up with students worked well on behalf of the student's needs. It took a lot of time to go through the process.

The cohesive bonded team includes ninth grade administration, guidance counselors, and teachers who are aware of the important role they play in the life of the ninth grade the student. Providing opportunities to bond with ninth grade students is an impactful method that is needed for students who are immature and need nurturing. It is imperative that ninth graders understand the total impact their ninth-grade experience will have on their immediate and/or long-term future goals. The school promoted collaboration. To strengthen the success rate of ninth grade students, as a team, parents and schools must work together to promote intrinsic methods to build good study skills as a part of a daily routine. It is crucial for ninth grade at risk students to literally plan time to study and

complete multiple assignments in a timely manner. The students should know where to seek assistance in the school if they need it.

**Participant A3:**

Stakeholders continuously viewed and reviewed data as it applied to the individual students and their needs. If absenteeism was a problem for a student, it correlated with discipline issues and poor course performance.

Some students warrant being suspended! I'm not sure if there is anything to totally replace ISS or OSS, but we had students who failed core classes because they were suspended too many days. It's hard to get a student to consider their GPA when they know that they have no food at home or they must stay at home to watch a younger sibling who is sick while their parents go to work. Student in ninth grade who continuously missed the same class (es) found it easy to get off track to be promoted to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The ninth-grade teachers and staff try to assist students with students with catching up in classwork. Buffers are in place to keep the students from repeating a class or a year. Sometimes it was overwhelming for a student to remain on track due to extrinsically forces.

Multiple teams meet and use data on behalf of the students. Some data are used to analyze and develop Ninth Grade Student Teams to intercede on behalf of the students.

Teachers use other data to make recommendations for creating PEPs. Data findings were displayed between ninth grade students with high levels of absenteeism, multiple discipline referrals and poor coursework was highly prevalent.

**Participant B2:**

We used a "four-by-four block schedule that allowed only four classes a day for 90 minute periods for a portion of the school year instead of the more traditional schedule 6-

8 periods a day for 40-50 minutes each for the entire school year.

I know that students can graduate on time even if they get behind in ninth grade. Any student who failed a core ninth grade class can possibly graduate with their cohort. High schools provide a lab with access to core courses online for students to recover classes needed to graduate in a supervised setting. Many students work hard to recover classes online and complete high school on time with their cohort.

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**Participant B3:**

We accommodated as many students and teachers as we possibly could. The school tried to provide a schedule in which each teacher team has autonomy over a daily 4-hour block schedule of instructional time. There are hassles creating a block schedule for some ninth grade students while allowing for a traditional schedule for other ninth grade students. A student's freshman schedule can hurt them. Ninth grade students who miss three days consecutively are three-to-six hours behind in each class depending on being assigned a block schedule or traditional schedule. Once some students fall behind in core classes, ninth grade becomes a living nightmare for them.

For students who experience out-of-school suspension, the latter half of their suspension would be utilized to ease students back into regular class mode. Some of the advantages for the student include the fact that, upon request from a teacher, a student could return to class to learn new material, make up work was provided to the student in ISS. Teachers

can be contacted in a timely manner during the day to explain assignments. Students are provided assistance with getting back on track by making up the late assignments quickly. The individual student regains support and guidance to lead them back into the regularly scheduled classroom atmosphere.

**Participant B4:**

Some teachers were assigned mixed schedules that included some ninth-grade and some upper-grade classes resulting in fewer teachers exclusively teaching ninth graders.

Some teachers taught mixed/hybrid schedules. Hybrid schedules combine the 4x4 block semester schedule structure with the traditional single period schedule. With the hybrid schedules in the rural high school, classes are offered in varied lengths of time for a semester or an entire year for ninth graders. Many ninth grade students benefit from this type of a hybrid schedule. A student may need extra time in Math class, but excel in English class. Therefore, a hybrid schedule would be in the student's best interest.

We used ISS more to assist students than we had in the past. Some students were assigned dual suspensions; i.e., a student may be suspended for 10 days, five (5) days out-of-school suspension and five (5) days of in-school suspension. The five (5) days of in-school suspension allowed students to get their make-up work during their suspension, thereby minimizing the risk of dropping out or falling so far behind that they lose interest in school.

**Participant B5:**

For the teachers who taught a mixed schedule, a conflict developed with weekly scheduled team meetings. The student's success was the top priority. Mixed schedules made a unique situation. Including the non-traditional academy teachers in regularly scheduled PLC meetings during the school day was not an option. The academy teachers

were willing to hold meetings prior to school beginning to include the teachers and their invaluable input. The teachers proved that they want the best for the ninth grade students by continuously making adjustments to accommodate growth in the students that attend the Ninth Grade Academy (NGA).

**Participant C1:**

We understood that it would take more time for some ninth grade students to adjust in the classroom to become successful. The school identifies being able to choose schedules on behalf of students as a key resource to their ability to promote success. We try and give the students the best chance to be successful.

**Participant C4:**

Due to profound health issues, some students are not traditional students. Many ninth grade students are not allowed to classes on campus and they must receive their education at home for varying amounts of time. On behalf of homebound students, regular education teachers collaborate with the assigned homebound teacher and family members to ensure consistency in the coursework that went home to be returned completed.

For students who were homebound, regular classroom teachers and homebound teachers collaborated with the family to ensure consistency of academic work.

Due to profound health issues, some students are not traditional students. Many ninth grade students are not allowed to classes on campus and they must receive their education at home for varying amounts of time. On behalf of homebound students, regular education teachers collaborate with the assigned homebound teacher and family members to ensure consistency in the coursework that went home to be returned completed.

**Participant D2:**

We worked hard to decrease the number of students who repeated a class or grade.

Qualified teachers are representatives who assist students with making up/catching up coursework from their core classes. PEPs were used for all struggling students identified in a specific Cohort Group.

On behalf of student success, multiple agencies are available on campus after school to assist struggling students twice a week. Talent Search and Upward Bound representatives provide another opportunity to assist students with make up work and tutorial services on site. At-risk students were encouraged to sign up with Talent Search or Upward Bound for tutorial services. These programs are provided through our local community college to assist the students in middle and high school. It is another opportunity for students to progress in their classes, catch up or make up work to assist with remaining on schedule to advance to the tenth grade on time. Unfortunately, many of the students did not take advantage of the opportunity.

**Participant D3:**

We promote success in various ways with ninth graders. The students don't always understand their best interest is involved in these decisions. Students who needed yearlong classes were given this option. We try to motivate the students through ownership in the classroom. Teachers understand that every student is unique. Learning styles are taken into account as assignments are given to the students.

Every morning a stakeholder scanned data to determine if there was a student who needed an intervention for absenteeism. For students assigned to this group their "attendance data" was closely monitored by teachers, guidance counselors and the social worker. We diligently conferenced with students and parents to get work made up in an acceptable amount of time.

Students are allowed Administrations and teachers constantly reminded the students of the zero tolerance policies in place. Ninth grade functions best when teachers have time in their schedule to collaborate with students on a daily basis. On behalf of the students, schedules are long enough for teachers to cover the material in depth and provide time to critique the student's work before they get behind. Schedules also allow teachers time to build strong bonds with at risk students that also assists with keeping them on pace to successfully complete ninth grade with their cohort.

**Participant D4:**

In ninth grade, opportunities for diverse learners in the classroom are provided to allow them choices that promote excellence. When teachers allow students a choice, the students showcase their talents. Students have access to various resources to create projects from home for their classes. The students can choose to complete a project numerous ways. The students could create a story, make a project that includes the subject at hand or make a video using their cellphones. The opportunity can be personalized to fit the student. As students have a hand in making decisions about their education, we found they are more likely to commit to them.

**Participant E2:**

The advantages of a block schedule for ninth grade students include students being assigned to take four courses per semester for a total of eight courses per year instead of six. Students are provided an opportunity to earn more credits in one year towards graduation. Thus students have twice as many opportunities to complete the required courses if they fail a subject.

**Participant E3:**

Various positive changes were used to address keeping the students on point to graduate with their cohort. We had the student write reflections pertaining to their poor behavior choice and discussed skills that would allow them to not repeat the same behavior.

**Participant E4:**

As students were absent, they were allowed 5 days to complete make up work. Students were required to remain after school to finish work. Teachers were available during lunch and after school at least twice a week. Students were, also encouraged to contact teachers via email if they had questions. There were many ways for students to fail, but there were many interventions to keep them from failing, also.