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Exploring a Rural School District's Freshman Academy Program through Parent and
Staff Member Perspectives

By
Dustin G. Morehead

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 Dustin G. Morehead 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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Abstract

Exploring a Rural School District's Freshman Academy Program through Student, Parent, and Staff Member Perspectives. Morehead, Dustin G., 2018: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Ninth Grade Transition/Freshman Academies/Teacher Collaboration/Educational Relationships

This study used a qualitative approach to explore a rural school district's freshman academy program through parent and staff member perspectives using Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model of program evaluation. Interviews and questionnaire data provided information to answer the following research questions.

1. Context: What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?
2. Input: What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?
3. Process: How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?
4. Product: What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?

Through qualitative research, the researcher examined parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program in the school district studied. Qualitative methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and interview groups involving a former secondary director, current school staff members, and parent stakeholders were used to collect data. Using qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gather data regarding the perspectives of freshman academy stakeholders. Each questionnaire was summarized by responses given to multiple choice responses, rank order questions, and free response questions. Data from the questionnaires are displayed in chart form in Chapter 4. Interview data were coded for common themes that surfaced in responses. Data from the interviews are displayed in narrative form in Chapter 4.

Based on data from the school staff member questionnaire and interview groups, respondents from each of the three schools in the school district studied provided varying responses with regard to the overall effectiveness of their school's freshman academy. The majority of respondents from School A and School B are either unsure or believe that the freshman academy at their respective schools does not promote student success beyond the ninth grade. Respondents from School C overwhelmingly believe their freshman academy promotes student success beyond the ninth grade, thus meeting their targeted need.

Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	2
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions	11
Significance of Study	12
Contextual Framework of Study	13
School A	13
School B.....	14
School C	15
Limitations and Delimitations	16
Organization of the Study	16
Terms and Definitions	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review	19
Logistical Structure of Freshman Academies	19
Freshman Academies and Student Achievement	23
Freshman Academies and Student Attendance	25
Freshman Academies and Student Behaviors	29
Freshman Academies and Student Relationships	33
Freshman Academies and Teacher Collaboration	37
Summary of Literature	40
Chapter 3: Methodology	42
Research Design	43
Context	48
Input	49
Process	50
Interview Groups	51
Product	52
Rationale/Display of Data	52
Limitations	54
Delimitations	55
Summary of Methodology	55
Chapter 4: Results and Findings	56
Context	56
Input	59
School A	59
School B	61
School C	63
Process	64
School A	65
School B	68
School C	71
Product	73
School A	74
School B	79

School C	82
Summary	86
Chapter 5: Conclusions	88
Summary of Results	88
Discussion of the Findings	93
Recommendations for Practice	96
Recommendation 1 – Ongoing Program Evaluation	96
Recommendation 2 – Peer Group Connections Program	98
Recommendation 3 – Collaboration	99
Recommendation 4 – Parent Involvement / Community Outreach	100
Recommendations for Future Research	102
Summary	103
References	105
Appendices	
A Interview Questions – Former Director of Secondary of Education	115
B Online Certified School Staff Member Questionnaire	117
C School Staff Member Interview Questions	122
D Parent Group Interview Questions	124
E Informed Consent Form	126
Tables	
1 School A Population Groups	14
2 School A Demographics	14
3 School B Population Groups	15
4 School B Demographics	15
5 School C Population Groups	16
6 School C Demographics	16
7 CIPP Framework	46
Figures	
1 High School Graduation Rates in Select OECD Countries	1
2 High School Graduation Rate By State	3
3 A Conceptual Framework for Supporting the Transition into High School	22
4 Freshman Academy Interventions, School A	60
5 Freshman Academy Interventions, School B	62
6 Freshman Academy Interventions, School C	63
7 Freshman Academy Purpose, School A	75
8 Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School A	76
9 Freshman Academy Purpose, School B	79
10 Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School B	80
11 Freshman Academy Purpose, School C	83
12 Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School C	84

Chapter 1: Introduction

“High school dropout students report that the one factor which might have prevented them from leaving school early was the feeling that there was one adult in the school who knew them well and cared for them” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 32). Studies have shown that if a student knows at least one adult at school, that relationship alone can help him or her improve his or her standing in school (Brigman & Campbell, 2003).

One of the most complex quandaries facing professional educators today is reducing the dropout rate and thus increasing the graduation rate. The high school graduation rate is one common display of the level of success of educational systems throughout the world. The United States, once held as an education leader in the industrialized world, has declined in recent years. According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2017a), the United States graduation rate currently ranks 19 of 25 OECD countries. Although the United States graduation rate has improved over the past few years, it is evident that other countries have improved at a much faster rate as shown in Figure 1 below (OECD, 2017a).

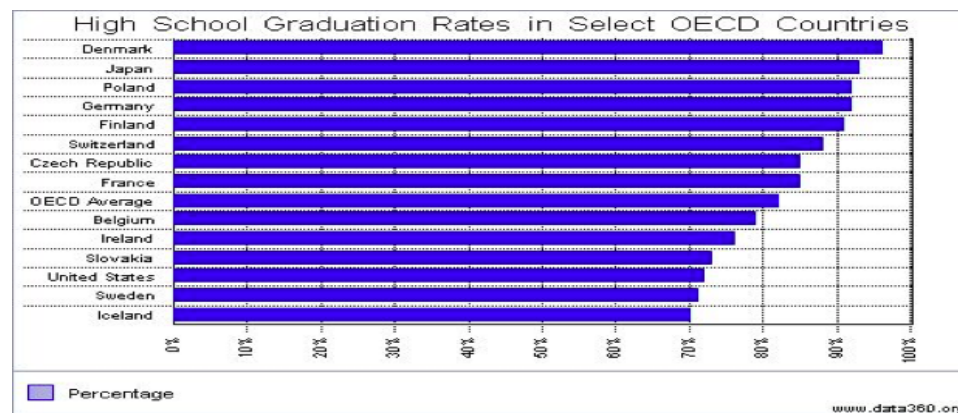


Figure 1. High School Graduation Rates in Select OECD Countries (OECD, 2017b).

Professional educators, community stakeholders, and parents all realize the importance of preparing students for future success by providing them with a rigorous and relevant high school experience. Both state and local educators continue to be creative in employing innovative strategies to address the academic challenges faced by ninth-grade students. One of the more popular strategies in addressing this quandary is the redesigning of high schools. Quint (2008) stated, “Most ninth grade courses retain the shape of former decades of outdated strategies and methods that is ineffective in today’s classrooms” (p. 64). In order to accomplish the goal of redesigning and preparing students for academic success, educators must elevate their level of expectation. Researchers state that in order to see real school reform, “schools must redesign because we are in a constant battle due to the gravitational pull of school as usual” (Donegan, 2008, p. 56).

Problem Statement

Students who are not successful in high school continue to be a national concern, despite the fact that the dropout and graduation rates have shown improvement each year since 2006 (Balfanz et al., 2014). Even with the higher modern-day graduation rates within the United States, the costs of high school dropouts are astonishing, both to the individuals and to the overall society (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout will earn an average of \$289,000 less than a high school graduate and almost \$950,000 less than a person who has graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Although high school graduation rates are higher than any other time in United States history, the expense of becoming a high school dropout is higher than it has been at any other point in history. The standard earnings of a family raised by a high school dropout in 2012 were 37% less than what

was earned by someone who was a high school dropout in 1973 (Baum et al., 2013).

North Carolina public high schools are constantly being pressured to be creative in finding ways to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates.

According to North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2018), all 50 states have signed the National Governors Association's Graduation Counts Compact on State High School Graduation Data. In the compact, governors agreed to take steps to implement a standard, 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. States agree to calculate the graduation rate by dividing the number of on-time graduates in a given year by the number of first-time ninth graders 4 years earlier. Graduates are defined as those receiving a high school diploma (NCDPI, 2018). NCDPI (2016) reported that North Carolina's 4-year cohort high school graduation rate rose to 85.8% in 2016. The rate has increased for 11 consecutive years and has risen almost 18% since the first year North Carolina reported a cohort rate, 2006 (NCDPI, 2016).

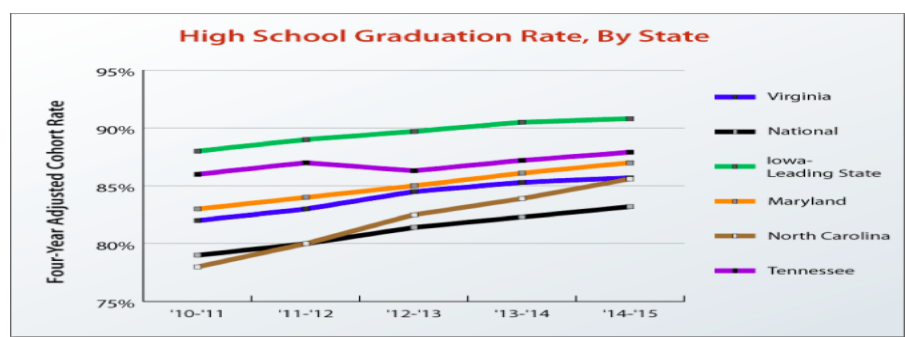


Figure 2. High School Graduation Rate By State (“High School Graduation Graph,” 2016.)

Nationally, former President Barrack Obama reported during a recent visit at a Washington High School that a record 83% of the members of the high school graduating class of 2015 received their diploma in 4 years. According to the National Center for

Education Statistics, every group, from race to low-income students to those with disabilities, had increases in graduation rates (Malloy, 2016). Despite the gains, President Obama proclaimed that gaps need to be closed and that the focus needs to continue to be on those who are contemplating dropping out of high school. Obama encouraged students at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School:

When we understand that no matter what you look like, where you come from, what faith you are, whether you're a boy or a girl, that you should have great opportunities to succeed and that requires you to put effort into it. (Malloy, 2016, p. 1)

Dedmond (2008) stated, “Whether or not students leave high school with a diploma and plans for postsecondary education or training often hinges on the attitudes they develop in the ninth grade about themselves and their education” (p. 16). Academic researchers consistently proclaim that the transition from middle school to high school is a pivotal point in the lives of students. Neild (2009) termed the ninth-grade transition as, “the place in the educational progression where students across the United States are at increased risk of getting ‘stuck’” (p. 56). Neild further stated that “students who manage the academic demands of the transition to high school have a high probability of graduating four years later, but those who do not face a substantially elevated risk of dropping out of high school” (p. 57). Students will make the decision during the first 3 weeks of their freshman year if they intend to continue their high school education (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999, p. 27). Approximately 30% of the students in the United States who drop out of high school were never promoted beyond the ninth grade (Neild, 2009). “More than 1.2 million United States high school student’s dropout every year; roughly 7,000 students each school day” (Wise, 2008, p. 8).

The transition from middle school to high school is a critical point in the educational lives of students, where students often find themselves lost and in survival mode (Fulk, 2003). High school freshman students have the lowest grade point average of any other high school class, according to Fritzer and Herbst (1996). According to Black (2004), 25% of students who fail their ninth-grade year are retained for another year. Due to the higher retention rate, the ninth grade has the highest student enrollment in high schools (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). John Hopkins University conducted a study of schools with high dropout rates and found that of the 40% of ninth-grade students who repeat the ninth grade, only 15% of those students complete graduation requirements (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Freshmen across the United States have been failing year after year due to their lack of preparation for the high school level (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Anfara and Schmid (2007) stated, “transitioning is about being caught in the vortex of changing demands and we need to create schools that can effectively address the academic and psychological development of young adolescents” (p. 65). The absence of effective transition programs in schools presents a problem as students prepare to enter high school, exacerbating this difficult time.

The ninth-grade year is significant in terms of providing the foundation for a student’s high school career (Clark, 2007). If students struggle with the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade, the outcome for students is likely to be negative (Ruiz, 2005). It is imperative that educators equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in a globally competitive workforce beyond high school graduation. High school educators must meet the demands of the globally competitive workforce by preparing students to be successful from the ninth grade on. “Young adolescence marks

the downward spiral in motivation and school-related behaviors; this downward spiral often leads to academic failure and dropping out of school” (Anfara & Schmid, 2007, p. 62).

Purpose of the Study

Research suggests that successful transition programs provide students with authentic learning experiences, personalization, and rigorous instruction (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008). Effective transition programs create excitement and thankfulness for the educational process and establish academic relevance, professional learning communities, and peer collaboration (Cook et al., 2008). The ninth-grade year is a particularly challenging year for students. Various studies document the significant role schools play in reaching out to ninth-grade students and their families (Black, 2004). Some of the common elements shared among these studies focus on key areas such as preparing students for the globally competitive workforce, creating a sense of belonging, providing support to students with academic disabilities, and stimulating lasting change (Quint, 2008). According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention, 2017) at Clemson University, students report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school. Reasons such as missing too many days of school, poor grades, apathy/dislike of school, and the perception that obtaining a GED is easier are reported by more than 40% of students surveyed; however, although reported less often, reasons such as caring for the family, pregnancy, lacking a sense of belonging, and not feeling safe also were reported. For educators and administrators, wide ranging rationales mean the solutions are multidimensional (Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention, 2017). The NDPC/N has identified several research-based strategies that have a positive impact on reducing school dropouts. The following strategies can be

implemented as stand-alone strategies or in conjunction with another (Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention, 2017).

School-within-a-school (SWAS). A SWAS operates within a larger host school. In an effort to support and encourage the SWAS movement, the United States Department of Education (2001) allotted \$125 million in grant funds during fiscal year 2001. The Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program supported schools that established smaller, safer learning environments at the high school level. The SLC program presented schools with the financial support to “help plan, develop, implement, or expand smaller, more personalized learning communities in large high schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, p. 3). The grants provided schools with the necessary funding to reorganize large schools into SLCs using systems such as academies, schools within schools, and magnet programs.

Graduation coach. High schools have found that when they identify at-risk students and give them alternatives to dropping out, their school’s graduation rate improves (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). One of those alternative resources used to help prevent students from dropping out is the graduation coach. Graduation coaches are directed to identify at-risk students and execute appropriate strategies that would allow for those students to earn a high school diploma. The state of Georgia was the first state to mandate that every middle school and high school use this intervention (Georgia Department of Education, 2009). Many other schools, in a variety of states, have since followed in their footsteps to utilize the graduation coach intervention.

Career and technical education (CTE) programs. CTE, also known as vocational education, has contemporarily received high praise for the impact it has on positively impacting the high school graduation rate (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2008).

CTE programs were initially designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to enter the workforce upon high school graduation. Supporters of the CTE program claim that it offers a much-needed attachment and relevance to school for students who do not excel in academics or athletics (Plank et al., 2008). Researchers claim that CTE programs play an essential role in improving student achievement and should be considered a necessary intervention put in place to lower the high school dropout rate (Harrison, 2004; Plank et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2001; Wonacott, 2002).

Career mentor support. Career mentoring is guided work-based learning in which a student is partnered with an adult mentor worker for guidance, exposure, and experience in a professional environment (Linnehan, 2001). In addition to providing real work experiences through mentoring, internships, and job shadowing, career mentoring emphasizes the relationships between students and adult professionals in a real-world work environment (Linnehan, 2001). Historically, mentoring has proven to be effective in establishing positive changes in the behaviors and attitudes of children (Herrera, Kauh, Cooney, Grossman, & McMaken, 2008; Porowski & Passa, 2011).

Freshman/ninth-grade academy. In order to provide support for students making the transition from middle school to high school, many school systems have established within their schools SLCs for ninth-grade students called freshman academies. The most common freshman academies are housed in separate wings or as a SWAS. Regardless of how they are housed, all freshman academies have the same goals: separate the freshmen from the upperclassman, help ease the transition to high school, and produce more successful ninth-grade students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Within the academy, students are placed on teams where teachers have common planning. The academy is self-contained on the traditional school campus as a SWAS

and has its own leadership team consisting of a combination of members including one or more directors, counselors, and administrators (David, 2008). The minimal change in classes helps establish student-teacher relationships and enhances students' sense of belonging. Quint (2008) stated, "Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in the Ninth Grade Success Academies feel close to their teachers and to one another" (p. 66). According to Marzano (2003), schools that are highly effective and positively impact student achievement are better equipped to help students overcome the effects of their backgrounds.

The freshman academy provides a distinctive blend of contextual and authentic learning while cultivating a culture of caring and community among students and teachers (Feller, 2003). The primary purpose of establishing a freshman academy is to create a small learning community within a larger high school to allow students and faculty greater opportunities to develop positive relationships. Modifying the learning environment and restructuring the high school curriculum to provide a social structure that allows students to understand themselves, each other, and the world has allowed the freshman academy to transform the ninth-grade year (Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

Students who are involved in a freshman academy have a better chance of familiarizing themselves with the challenge of the high school curriculum and maturing faster than those students who are not involved in a freshman academy (Reents, 2002). Consistent with the various studies to help engage students in school, there are several common interventions such as, but not limited to, smaller learning environments, mentorships, credit recovery, support for transition, and social services. Creating a positive culture can help foster a successful and effective freshman academy (Jerald,

2006). Jerald (2006) stated that when a person walks into an encouraging school environment, the stimulating and enthusiastic atmosphere can be felt immediately. When the school culture is affirmative, staff members feel less anxiety and gain more reverence from students. Jerald stated that a positive school culture develops a set of values to guide staff members and students to one collective purpose, student achievement.

Hertzog (2006) stated,

By implementing the academy concept, schools provide the transitioning students an opportunity to adjust to the new facility, acquire the skills to succeed in a competitive educational environment, and enjoy a feeling of security similar to what they experienced in middle school. (p. 61)

The freshman academy program is a place “where students who were identified as at-risk for failure could receive instruction in study skills and strategies for organization” (Fulk, 2003, p. 24). Within the freshman academy framework, schools are trying to create a community of learners among the teachers and students by adapting their school structure. Flexible scheduling, teaming, and establishing a SWAS are the main concepts of the program. One essential need of ninth-grade students is meaningful relationships. In the ninth grade, the typical student-teacher relationship is weak as a result of the fragmented organization of the school structure by content areas (Marshall, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the freshman academy program in a rural school district in North Carolina. Specifically, this study investigated and analyzed parent and staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program and to what degree they felt the program promotes student success beyond the ninth grade. Improved attendance, satisfactory behavior, passing courses, and promotion to the tenth grade are the quantifiable measures that document the success of the

freshman academy.

Research Questions

This study used the CIPP model to evaluate the freshman academy program. The CIPP model of program evaluation is a comprehensive framework for guiding formative and summative evaluations of projects, programs, personnel, products, institutions, and systems (Stufflebeam, 2003). According to Stufflebeam (2003), “the model’s core concepts are denoted by the acronym CIPP, which stands for evaluations of an entity’s context, inputs, processes, and products” (p. 2). Context evaluation assesses needs, assets, and problems within a defined environment (Stufflebeam, 2003). This model was selected to evaluate the freshman academy program in this school district because it focuses on comprehensiveness in evaluation within a larger framework of organizational activities (Stufflebeam, 2003).

Context evaluation. The context of the study assesses needs, assets, and problems within a defined environment (Stufflebeam, 2003). It evaluates whether program goals are adequately responding to the assessed needs. This program evaluation analyzed the following research question regarding the context analysis: “What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?”

Input evaluation. Input evaluation assesses alternate approaches, competing action plans, staffing plans, and budgets to meet targeted needs and achieve goals (Stufflebeam, 2003). It examines what the program plans on doing and guides structuring decisions. This program evaluation analyzed the following research question regarding the input analysis: “What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?”

Process evaluation. Process evaluation assesses the implementation of the

application being evaluated (Stufflebeam, 2003). When considering the CIPP model matrix, the process part of the evaluation measures the extent to which actions and methods are implemented. Here, evaluators provide information about what is actually occurring in the program and making formative evaluation decisions. This program evaluation analyzed the following research question regarding the process analysis: “How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?”

Product evaluation. Product evaluations identify and assess outcomes to help staff members keep an organization focused on achieving important outcomes and help gauge the effort’s success in meeting targeted needs. They assess the merit of the program and help make summative evaluation decisions. This program evaluation analyzed the following research question regarding the product analysis: “What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?”

Significance of Study

The importance of determining the best practices for student transition from the eighth grade to the ninth grade cannot be undervalued. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, founded in 1986, has prompted researchers to study the importance of developing stronger relationships among schools, families, and communities as part of the education process. The transition from eighth grade to ninth grade is critical for adolescents, as some students are not ready for the challenges they will face academically and socially (Cauley & Jovanich, 2006).

While there is a plethora of research regarding the freshman academy program and the impact it has on promoting sustained student success, there has been little

research conducted to measure the program's success in the school district studied. The qualitative data derived from the research questions provided useful information to school district leaders in maintaining and improving the freshman academy program at each of the four traditional high schools studied.

Data collected from each of the questions provided information that is essential to continued program evaluation and program modification. Information gained from this study will allow district leaders to modify, strengthen, and add new components to the freshman academy transition program at each traditional high school. Results of this study will provide insight on the components that are effective and those that are not.

Contextual Framework of Study

For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the freshman academies that are housed at three traditional high schools within a large school district in the Piedmont of North Carolina. The freshman academies being measured are designed with the expectation that ninth-grade students in a smaller group setting, working closely with four academic teachers are more likely to thrive in the nurturing environment. The three traditional high schools in this study vary in population size and are demographically diverse. These schools stretch to all boundaries of the county and range in size from 800 students to over 1,200 students. The freshman academy program was implemented at each of the three schools in different years. School C was the first of the three traditional high schools in the district to implement the freshman academy. School C implemented the freshman academy in the 2007-2008 school year. School A and School B implemented the freshman academy in the 2008-2009 school year.

School A

School A, located at the northern end of the county, is made up of a largely rural

population. With just over 1,000 students, it is the third largest school in the district. Its student population is approximately 75% Caucasian and 17% African-American. School A has 61% of its student population on free and reduced lunch, and 20% of its population is academically intelligently gifted. Table 1 and Table 2 show the full demographics of School A.

Table 1

School A Population Groups

Subgroup	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
African-American	171	16.9
American Indian	1	0.1
Asian	3	0.3
Hispanic	49	4.8
Multi-racial	37	3.6
Caucasian	753	74.3

Table 2

School A Demographics

Other Subgroups	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
Academically Gifted	189	18.6
Limited English Proficient	7	0.7
Total Free / Reduced Lunch	619	61.0

School B

School B, located on the western side of the county, is also made up of a largely rural population. With almost 1,200 students, it is the second largest school in the district. Its student population is approximately 70% Caucasian and 22% African-American. School B has 51% of its student population on free and reduced lunch, and 28% of its population is academically intellectually gifted. Table 3 and Table 4 show the full demographics of School B.

Table 3

School B Population Groups

Subgroup	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
African-American	264	22.0
American Indian	0	0
Asian	1	0.1
Hispanic	38	3.2
Multi-racial	51	4.3
Caucasian	844	70.5

Table 4

School B Demographics

Other Subgroups	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
Academically Gifted	333	27.8
Limited English Proficient	3	0.3
Total Free / Reduced Lunch	611	51.0

School C

School C, located in the middle of county, is the school district's inner city high school. With almost 800 students, it is the smallest traditional high school in the district. Its student population is approximately 50% African-American and 40% Caucasian. School C has 66% of its student population on free and reduced lunch, and 28% of its population is academically intellectually gifted. Table 5 and Table 6 show the full demographics of School C.

Table 5

School C Population Groups

Subgroup	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
African-American	393	49.2
American Indian	0	0
Asian	11	1.4
Hispanic	26	3.3
Multi-racial	44	5.5
Caucasian	324	40.6

Table 6

School C Demographics

Other Subgroups	Number of Students	Percentage of School Population
Academically Gifted	220	27.6
Limited English Proficient	5	0.6
Total Free / Reduced Lunch	530	66.0

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to three traditional high schools in the piedmont of North Carolina that all have freshman academies. In addition, the study was limited to self-reporting by parents and school staff members of their perceptions of the freshman academy program within their individual schools. Individual transparency and honesty was considered a limitation.

Another limitation is the researcher serves as an administrator in the school district of the study. The researcher's school participated as a pilot to validate the research methods. Data uncovered through the pilot process were not included in the results of this study but were provided to the district for analyzation.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 includes the introduction, the problem statement, the purpose of the

study, the research questions, the significance of the study, the context, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 contains the review of related literature regarding freshman academy transition programs. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in the study, including specific information related to how this study was conducted and how results were measured. Chapter 4 includes the data collected in this study. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the data and their relation to the theoretical framework, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Terms and Definitions

The following terms were used expansively in this study and are defined primarily for the context of this research.

Accountability. Results in the classroom, such as student growth and achievement.

Adolescence. A period of time when a young person develops from a child into an adult.

At risk. A student who is likely to fail or dropout of high school based on academic failure or discipline problems. The term originated in psychological and medical research. Wang (1994) defined at risk in the education setting as students who face social, academic, and environmental variables which exist in the family, school, and community and place them in danger of academic failure.

Attendance. The presence of the student during regular school hours as set forth by laws and rules of a school board.

Dropout rate. The percentage of students who leave high school without earning a high school diploma or something equivalent.

Final exams. Summative assessments used to evaluate student learning, skill

acquisition, and academic achievement at the conclusion of a defined instructional period.

Freshman academy. Centers, separate wings, a SWAS, houses, or separate ninth-grade schools. Goals of the freshman academy are to separate the freshmen from the upperclassmen, to help ease the transition to high school, and to produce more successful ninth-grade students.

Graduation rate. The percentage of students who enter high school with their cohort group during the ninth grade and graduate from high school within 4 years with a regular high school diploma.

Retention. Processes of having a student repeat a grade because a student experienced developmental delays resulting in the student failing the grade level.

Teaming. Pairing a group of four teachers with a group of 60-80 students. Teaming allows teachers to discuss the needs of students they have in common and establish stronger teacher-student relationships.

Transition. When students move from middle school to high school. Transitioning students often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developmental changes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study used the CIPP model to evaluate the freshman academy program. The CIPP model of program evaluation is a comprehensive framework for guiding formative and summative evaluations of projects, programs, personnel, products, institutions, and systems (Stufflebeam, 2003). According to Stufflebeam (2003), “the model’s core concepts are denoted by the acronym CIPP, which stands for evaluations of an entity’s context, inputs, processes, and products” (p. 2). Context evaluation assesses needs, assets, and problems with a defined environment (Stufflebeam, 2003). This model was selected to evaluate the freshman academy program in this rural school district because it focuses on comprehensiveness in evaluation within a larger framework of organizational activities (Stufflebeam, 2003).

The review of literature for this study is organized into the following sections: (a) Logistical Structure of Freshman Academies, (b) Freshman Academies and Student Achievement, (c) Freshman Academies and Student Attendance, (d) Freshman Academies and Student Behaviors, (e) Freshman Academies and Student Relationships, and (f) Freshman Academies and Teacher Collaboration.

Logistical Structure of Freshman Academies

In an effort to bring more information to the education community about promising approaches to supporting students during middle to high school transition, the Academy for Educational Development studied the ninth-grade strategies and practices of six high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Researchers conducted the study by holding interviews, reviewing documents, and conducting informal observations of each school environment to determine their effectiveness. Their study showed that two thirds of the schools visited had not yet formed a systematic response to the

challenge of helping adolescents navigate the transition into high school (Fancsali, Fazekas, Rennie-Hill, Jaffe-Walters, & Warren, 2011).

As high schools in the United States focus their attention on preparing students for success at the postsecondary level, a successful entry into high school has become more important than ever. Students who remain on track to graduate throughout their ninth-grade year are more than three times as likely to complete high school as those who have failed courses or have missed significant amounts of school time (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

The effort to redesign the ninth grade, as part of a larger effort to transform secondary education empowers high schools to consider their purpose of existence. In recent years, the structure and environment of high schools has been the emphasis of substantial public and private investment, both to increase personalized support for students and to generate better conditions for teaching and learning. One such structure is the freshman academy, designed to support closer relationships between teachers and students, which has been linked to higher attendance and levels of course passing (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Research on the structure of freshman academies suggests that it is possible for high schools to plan in advance how to address the needs of students who are more likely to hit road blocks during their first year of high school (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). High schools need to set the conditions for ninth-grade success by making sure the curriculum and associated supports help fill gaps in mathematics and reading comprehension. Students need an age-appropriate curriculum that enables them to catch up on the intermediate skills high school courses assume students have (Neild et al., 2007).

Fancsali et al. (2011) created a conceptual framework for schools to use in building a coherent set of supports designed to facilitate student transition into high school. In their framework, efforts to support the transition begin well before students arrive in high school by identifying the students at high risk of early difficulty. The early efforts they have identified include advance orientation sessions for students to help ease the shock of going from relatively small and uncomplicated schools to large schools with many more students.

Fancsali et al. (2011) further stated that once students enter high school, transition support efforts should seek to change the overall ninth-grade experience for all incoming students. Efforts incorporate environmental changes to make the school more welcoming and responsive with academic changes to enhance the quality of instruction and increase student academic achievement. Environmental changes include structural changes such as providing a separate space for ninth-grade classes, scheduling of teachers to work in teams, and providing common planning periods. Fancsali et al. suggested these environmental changes should be accompanied by strategies designed to strengthen the ninth-grade instructional program, including strategies to strengthen high level literacy skills, improve student study skills, and utilize the use of data to monitor ninth-grade student progress for early signs of failure. As shown in the conceptual framework in Figure 3, school level strategies to enhance the transition into high school are reinforced by additional targeted academic supports for students who fall off track early in the ninth grade. The school level strategies include smaller class sizes, additional tutoring sessions, intervention classes, and credit recovery options.

A Conceptual Framework for Supporting the Transition into High School.

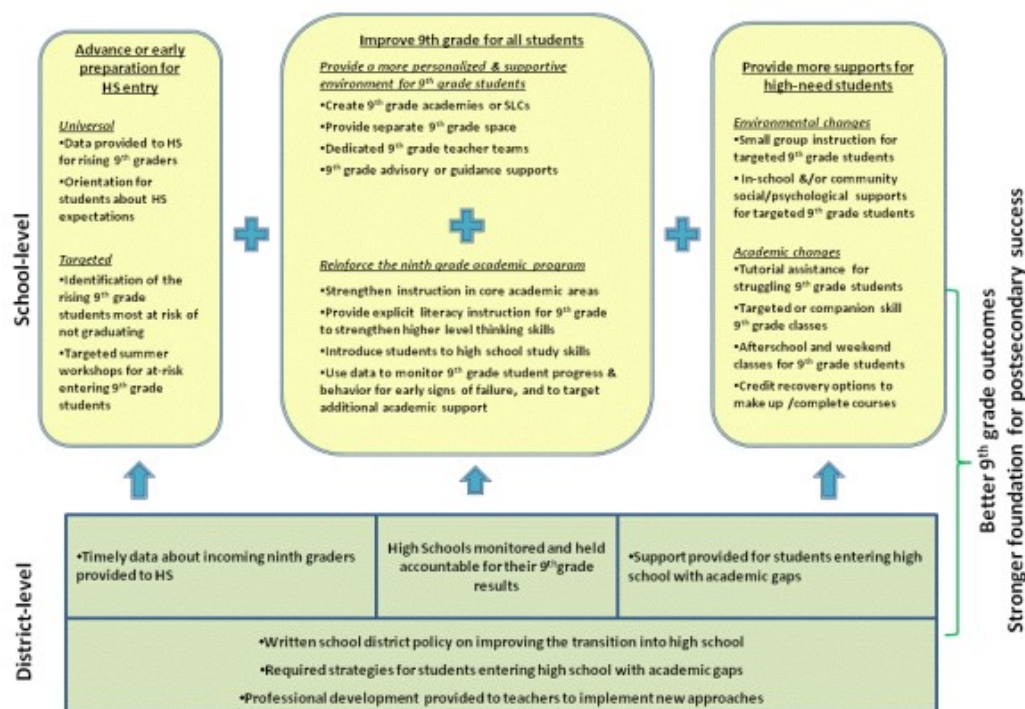


Figure 3. A Conceptual Framework for Supporting the Transition into High School
Fancsali et al. (2011, p. 10).

A freshman academy can be structured as an SWAS, a separate wing of a high school, or a separate building on the main high school campus. The foundational beliefs of this smaller learning community include students who are taught by the same team of teachers in a familiar designated place which has its own instructional program and culture (Chmelynski, 2004). Most freshman academies include a team of teachers who work with a core group of students and share a common planning period to collaborate regarding student academic performance and social/emotional behaviors (Black, 2004). Clark and Hunley (2007) stated, “A typical academy provides structure, a sense of belonging, and eases the transition into high school while integrating content and increasing communication between teachers and parents” (p. 41).

According to the George Washington University study Freshman Transition Initiative conducted by Dedmond (2005), the goal of a freshman academy is to improve student performance by creating autonomy from the freshman students to the educational process. The freshman academy must provide relevant themes for academic development, assist students with identity verification, and help students develop an educational plan for their future (Dedmond, 2005). Dedmond's (2005) research asserted that if an effective freshman academy is established, dropout rates would be reduced, enrollment in postsecondary programs would increase, recruitment into technical programs would increase, and the skills needed to successfully navigate life throughout work transitions would be attained.

Freshman Academies and Student Achievement

As students transition into a new school, they encounter a new school structure, new teachers and administrators, new school rules, and new classmates (Brown, 2004). Brown (2004) further stated that there is a degree of decline in student achievement that accompanies the transition. According to Stevenson, Schiller, and Schneider (1994), academic performance is one of the most important elements of a successful school transition. A student's academic performance in the first year of high school impacts the rest of their high school career. Weiss and Bearman (2007) stated that it is common for grade point averages to decline as students transition to high school, but the decline is often temporary for students who are not considered at risk.

Additionally, there is a relationship between student achievement of ninth graders and the dropout rate. A study on the correlation of student achievement in the ninth grade and the dropout rate by Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) found that student achievement in ninth grade and the probability a student would graduate are positively

correlated. Using data that looked closely at student performance in their coursework during freshman year, Allensworth and Easton (2005) researched how this coursework related to eventual graduation. They compared various performance indicators to discern how they could be used for measured targeting of students at risk of dropping out. This research indicated that 81% of students who were on track at the end of their ninth-grade year by earning the correct number of credits graduated from high school in 4 years. Conversely, only 22% of students who did not earn at least five credits in their freshman year graduated after 4 years. Research by Neild (2009) merged data from parent interviews taken before and after the ninth-grade year and individual-level student record data on grades, test scores, behavior, attendance, and other pertinent variables maintained by the School District of Philadelphia. Using these predictors of dropping out of high school, the logistical regression analysis supported that the academic achievement of ninth graders is a strong predictor of eventual dropout rates (Neild, 2009).

Freshman academies like ones in Scott County, Kentucky have also seen success academically. One high school's statistics showed that 45% of incoming freshmen were likely to fail at least one academic course. By moving freshmen to their own wing of campus and working to create an environment with focused attention on freshmen, Scott County saw student scores on national Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills rise by six points, above the state average. In turn, they also saw freshman failures decrease to just 6% (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Muhlenburg South, also in Kentucky, utilized the freshman academy model to increase academic success, especially in math. Muhlenberg South saw scores on Kentucky's math computation skills test rise by 19 percentage points after having freshmen attend their four core courses isolated with only freshmen and the same four teachers (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

A 2007 study conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform focused on 13 New York City high schools that achieved success with low-performing ninth graders (Ascher & McGuire, 2007). The authors noted four vital strategies in these “Beating the Odds” schools that appeared to help these students successfully complete high school:

Academic rigor and high standards for student work across the disciplines.

Networks of timely supports for students that included advisories and monitoring of student progress and provision of timely interventions to address areas of need.

College expectations that articulated for entering ninth graders a vision of high school education as a pathway to postsecondary education and training and access to postsecondary planning resources that helped students gain access to postsecondary institutions.

Effective use of data to track student progress, identify areas of need, and provide feedback on interventions (Ascher & McGuire, 2007).

Freshman Academies and Student Attendance

Allensworth and Easton (2007) reported that attendance is by far the largest predictor of student performance. Data from the Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins University and the National Governors Association have demonstrated that chronic absenteeism is one of the soundest predictors of dropping out of high school (Early Warning and Response Systems, 2018). Absenteeism is seen as more evident in predicting dropping out than suspensions, test scores, and previous retentions (Byrnes & Reyna, 2012).

Data collected by researchers at the University of Chicago show that nearly 90% of freshmen who miss less than a week of school graduate. Furthermore, students who are absent more than 2 weeks fail, on average, at least two classes regardless of test scores when entering high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Other data support that student attendance is directly correlated with academic success and graduation.

Likewise, data analyzed in some states such as Georgia also illustrate a large correlation in eighth- and ninth-grade attendance rates and graduation rates. A study done by the Georgia Department of Education found,

moving from missing up to 5 days to missing 6 to 10 days was associated with 7 to 10 percentage-point drops in graduation rates. Moving from missing 6 to 10 days to missing 11 to 14 days resulted in 11 to 14 point declines in graduation rates. Finally, there was as much as a 50 percentage point difference in the graduation rates of students who missed 0 to 5 days of school compared to those who were absent 15 or more days. (Barge, 2011, p. 8)

Students are absent from school for a variety of reasons. Peer pressure, vacations, and even suspensions often exceed personal sickness and deaths in the family as reasons for student absenteeism. Additionally, the transition to high school overlaps with a decrease in parental supervision and an increase in peer influence (Ruth, 2009). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) stated that student absences can be divided into three main categories:

Students who *cannot attend school*: Illnesses, family responsibilities, housing instability, or involvement with juvenile justice can all cause students to be unable to attend school.

Students who *will not attend school*: These students do not attend school in an effort to avoid bullying, embarrassment, and unsafe conditions.

Students who *do not attend school*: These students and/or their families may see little value in education or place value in doing something else other than attending school.

The transition to high school often exacerbates attendance issues as students face changes in expectations academically and emotionally. Freshman academies seek to overcome these obstacles for ninth-grade students by focusing on the philosophy that students will be more successful if the school meets the individual needs of their freshman students (Clark & Hunley, 2007). Many times, students miss school with the intention to avoid some form of school work such as tests or projects. This avoidance behavior leads to students falling behind academically while absences accumulate. Together, these factors lead to an increase in the probability that a student will drop out. Work avoidance is most prevalent between the ages of 5-6 years old, 10-11 years old, and during adolescence (Davis, 2007).

Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that students on track to graduate at the end of their freshman year were “four times more likely to graduate than off-track students” (p. 2). Among the studied cohort of students, 87% of students who missed 1 week or less of school graduated in 4 years, compared with 63% who missed 5-9 days. A freshman academy’s ability to focus on a small cohort of freshman students allows them to know immediately which students are missing class. In conjunction, freshman academies can place emphasis on relationship building aiding staff in working with students and parents to determine what strategies may improve their attendance and what changes may need to take place in attendance policies (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

In schools such as Houston County High School in Georgia, a freshman academy has allowed educators to better concentrate on some of the issues that lead to

absenteeism. The academy allows the school to guide students through obstacles such as time management, decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, learning styles, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment. Since initiating the program, the school has seen retentions decrease by 46% (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Decreases in retentions prove important when looking at indicators for students to graduate in 4 years.

Data from a pilot freshman academy program in Ohio shows academy students, both boys and girls, have significantly fewer unexcused absences than did their peers in a control group (Patterson, 2007). Academy male students were absent an average of 2 days (unexcused), while the males in the control group were absent an average of 11 days (unexcused). Females in the groups were absent an average of 5 more days in the control group compared to the academy female students (Patterson, 2007). One Ohio student in an experimental study explained the connection between freshman academies and attendance:

You can't skip no more and I think it'll help dropout rates and all that, because if you skip one class and then go to the next, they're like, "Oh, where were you last period," and nobody likes to get put out like that, so they show up. (Patterson, 2007, p. 139)

John Hopkins University recently incorporated freshman academies as a component of its Talent Development High School reform effort in urban high schools. These freshman academies employ highly trained staff such as organizational facilitators and academic coaches who have the specific task of monitoring individual student needs. These staff members "check and connect" with students allowing for targeted problem-solving of issues such as overcoming barriers to waking up and getting to school. The

primary goal of freshman academies is to promote regular school participation and to keep education the prominent issue with the underlying hope that students perceive the presence of a caring adult who wants the student to learn, do the work, and attend class regularly. By maintaining a focus on student educational progress, freshman academies also serve to keep interventions tightly focused on those factors most amenable to change (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003).

Westinghouse, a talent school of 1,000 students in Brooklyn, averaged a ninth-grade attendance rate of 80% during the 2005-2006 school year. After implementing the freshman academy model, freshman attendance rose to 89.6%, the highest in school history (Maushard, 2007). Abraham Lincoln High School, also in New York City, surpassed attendance goals made when developing their academy model. They averaged 91% daily attendance, much higher than their original goal of 85% (Maushard, 2007).

School districts in Philadelphia have also followed the Johns Hopkins University model of talent development. The Philadelphia talent schools serve as an example of the freshman academy approach to apply such strategies. Students who attended Philadelphia Public Schools prior to the talent school development only had a 40-50% chance of graduating in 4 years. These academies were centered around developing an environment for students to grow academically and personally. To achieve this goal, the focus became increasing the attendance rate. After 2 years of implementing the academy model, Philadelphia talent schools saw attendance rise by 15 or more percentage points (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Freshman Academies and Student Behaviors

Traditionally, as students move into their freshman year, they must begin by learning a new building, becoming familiar with graduation requirements, fitting into

school culture, and forming new relationships with teachers and social groups. Research suggests that while being excited about new choices and freedoms, students fear getting picked on by older students, having more challenging work, making bad grades, and getting lost (Mizelle, 1999). According to Kmiec (2007), when at-risk students transition from middle school to high school, it is a particularly difficult task; and it often results in negative outcomes. These negative outcomes almost always result in the form of discipline referrals, suspensions, and unfortunately expulsions. Queen (2002) found that students report difficulties adjusting to high school life because their social networks are often disrupted. The disruption of adolescent social networks makes incoming ninth-grade students more susceptible to harmful peer influence (Queen, 2002). Sewell (2009) believes the disruption of social networks causes freshmen to be more likely to drop out of school for disciplinary reasons than upperclassmen.

Another study found that conflict with authority, including being sent to the vice principal and verbal arguments with teachers, was the source of the most stress (Newman, 2000). Schiller (1999) suggested that there is even greater pressure to fit into social systems when a number of schools “feed” into one high school. These new challenges can leave students feeling overwhelmed and alienated. Having a successful transition into ninth grade can set foundational behaviors that lead to graduation. Hertzog and Morgan (1999) conducted a study comparing student self-perceptions from the spring of eighth grade to the end of fall in ninth grade. Using the Harter Adolescent Self-Perception Inventory, Hertzog and Morgan found that “out of 10 domains, students going from grade 8 (spring) to grade 9 (fall) had a statistically significant drop in the following areas: physical appearance; job competence; romantic appeal; behavioral conduct; and here’s the scary one, global self-worth” (p. 29). In some cases, these perceptions cause

the negative behaviors ninth graders exhibit that lead to high discipline rates and retentions and often result in students dropping out (Chmelynski, 2004).

Freshman academies seek to surmount these feelings during transition. Contending with these issues often requires an alternate approach to student behaviors. One leader in the freshman academy at West High School in Bakersfield, California stated, “We know that the students most likely to act out are the ones that don’t have the skills” (Emmett & McGee, 2012, p. 75). Houston County High School in Georgia created a freshman academy when their data showed that of the 2,200 students enrolled, more than 60% of discipline referrals were for ninth graders (Chmelynski, 2004). Freshman academies allow teachers and administrators to focus on underprepared students and contemplate alternative procedures for dealing with student behavior. At West, these procedures include interventions that are implemented by administrators, counselors, and teachers to defuse conflict, respond to student needs, and ultimately keep students in the classroom where they can focus on instruction. The structure of freshman academies allow leadership within the school to respond to behaviors before they require administrative action (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

The data illustrate success regarding positive student behaviors when these strategies are implemented. At schools such as Dudley High School in Greensboro, North Carolina teachers received special training at a local university to handle the unique behavioral issues facing freshmen. They then met weekly to collaborate on possible student issues and discuss strategic plans to address the issues. Dudley ninth graders have also been separated from upperclassman to lessen social distractions, increase focus, and allow students as well as staff to get to know one another better (Chmelynski, 2004). Similarly, at Chattanooga High School, freshmen are housed in

their own wing of the school; and freshman academy teachers create environments that lessen the stress of transition. Freshman academy teachers work collaboratively to establish common sets of rules, expectations, and behaviors allowing students to feel an additional sense of security (Chmelynski, 2004). Chattanooga High School counselor Nancy Prince stated, “Ninth grade academies create a nurturing program that enable ninth-graders to acclimate to high school with less pressure from older students and provides opportunities for teachers to interact more with students to identify their needs and help them learn” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 63). In the first year of implementation, Chattanooga Central High school saw suspensions drop from 29.4% to 17.8%.

In addition to these same strategies, Houston County High School also incorporated an elective class called “High School 101” that covers topics such as time management, study skills, learning styles, and social tolerance (Chmelynski, 2004). Since beginning the program, Houston County High School has seen discipline incidents decrease 55% and grade retentions reduce by 46%. Similarly, Houston County has seen a 55% reduction in discipline incidents and a 46% decrease in retentions (Chmelynski, 2004).

Reents (2002) completed a study that showed the positive impacts of several freshman academies in Houston, Texas and Rochester, New York. School officials from each of the three districts studied, report lower dropout rates, a greater sense of school community, stronger student engagement, and more student involvement in school-related activities. Reents (2002) further stated that schools with full-blown transition programs had only an 8% dropout rate compared to a 24% dropout rate for those schools without freshman academies.

Freshman Academies and Student Relationships

Researchers have suggested that during the adolescence period, the need to establish meaningful, supportive relationships is of utmost importance (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Although the causes of student disengagement are numerous, students transitioning to high school benefit from reliable relationships with adults (Patterson, 2007). During the transition from middle school to high school, adolescents find many of their existing relationships with teachers and support staff coming to an end. This disconnection from relationships in conjunction with transition can lead to a considerable drop in school engagement. This drop is especially evident in low-performing students. High schools are typically more anonymous settings than middle schools. They are typically larger buildings with more students in larger classes; therefore, high school students often receive less attention that is tailored toward each individual student (Newman, 2000). According to Bottoms (2008), the new high school environment for an adolescent can lead to a decreased sense of connectedness due to the increased number of peers and lack of teacher attention. When students lack positive relationships with other students and staff members, they experience a lack of social capital. This lack of social capital has a direct negative effect on academic achievement and, in turn, the dropout rate (Becker & Luthar, 2002). In conjunction with this research, a 1993 U.S. Department of Education report (Woods, 1995) indicated that one in four students who drop out of school state they left school because they did not feel a sense of belonging. Similarly, Becker and Luthar (2002) found that the sense of belonging is adversely affected by negative academic experiences, and students who drop out of school are more likely to have experienced alienation from the school.

A study by Hirschfield and Gasper (2011) shows school engagement is highly

correlated with graduation rates and high academic success. Additional studies reinforce that students who do not feel engaged at their school are at higher risk of dropping out (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). Furthermore, when students feel supported and nurtured by school staff and have an active role in social environments, it positively affects school engagement and achievement. These findings illustrate that learning is a complex process that takes into consideration personal interactions and perceptions stemming from them (Walker & Greene, 2009). High levels of emotional and behavioral engagement predict a decrease in school guilt, a general sense of guilt, and lower the risk of substance abuse (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011).

The responsibility of educators in creating a sense of belonging and connectedness during student transition to high school is significant (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Educators who explicitly work to create positive school climates are able to ease this transition much more than those who lack flexibility and are perceived as intimidating. Butts and Cruziero (2005) found that ninth-grade students value a teacher's ability to be supportive, care about them, and maintain easy communication. They also found that principals, through effective leadership and applicable professional development, can create a school culture that is both supportive and compassionate. Juvonen's (2006) research illustrates a student's sense of belonging stems from their perceptions related to the social climate of the school. Furthermore, through social relationships, these students can have their belongingness needs met. In a longitudinal study of over 105,000 students in 188 schools, Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, and Dumas (2003) found that regardless of SES, student perceptions of their connectedness to school are strongly correlated with multiple adjustment levels. Their findings further showed that programs such as freshman academies aimed at improving social climates in

school are likely to improve students' sense of belonging (Brand et al., 2003).

In focus groups with Ohio high school dropouts, researchers found similar results. Patterson (2007) found that young adults in Ohio repeatedly noted the desire for more school personnel including teachers, administration, and guidance counselors to take an active interest in their lives. While the research pointed to the fact that the socialization function of high school was significant, negative interactions with teachers and/or administrators became the deciding factor for students dropping out of school. Although many students report they have fun and are accepted by their peers at school, their desire to stay in school and succeed is when they feel respected by their teachers (Beldon & Steward, 2004).

Patterson (2007) studied a pilot program that took place in a Midwestern school. Fifty incoming freshman students were randomly selected from the 197 first-year freshmen enrolled in Algebra I to participate in the freshman academy. The results indicated that freshman academy students were significantly less bored in classes, believed teachers were fair, and felt teachers treated them respectfully. Relationships between the teachers and students were stronger for the academy group. One student in the study commented,

I think it has helped me a lot, because we got to know our teachers better than most other students did, and we got a relationship with them, so we wouldn't want to miss school—we'd want to come to school, because we knew that our teachers cared about us and they expected more from us, and that made it more, like, you wanna get up, you wanna go, because you wanna see your teachers. (Patterson, 2007, p. 136)

Parents often noticed a positive shift in their children when they built relationships with

freshman academy educators. Parent comments in the study show that parents feel their children finally had some teachers they were actually getting to know and that the freshman academy teachers and students were coming together like a family (Patterson, 2007).

Holland and Mazzoli (2001) highlighted the challenges and successes of a Midwestern school district's establishment of a freshman academy. The academy their study focused on was founded on the premise that students would thrive in high school if they had closer relationships with teachers. Program Leader Janey Lewis stated that

the academy was to be “a place where everybody knows your name” – or more precisely, a place where everybody knows your business: who your friends are, how well you are performing in English class, and whether you ate supper the night before. (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 296)

This particular freshman academy seemed to accomplish just that in its pilot year: Part of the reason is that, with no more than 175 students in attendance, the freshman academy was small enough to feel close-knit. Absent students were noticed and missed... [and] teachers also moved beyond traditional classroom duties by calling students' parents, visiting students at home, working with them after school, and counseling them throughout the day, trying any strategy they could think of to overcome the indifference that drives students to dropout, or figuratively check out, of school. (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 298)

Holland and Mazzoli (2001) summarized that the students at the Midwestern school district's freshman academy felt a deeper connection with the school, had closer relationships with teachers, and perceived school in a more positive light than their counterparts at traditional comprehensive high schools.

Freshman Academies and Teacher Collaboration

Wald and Castleberry (2000) stated that collaboration engages teachers in a process of researching, experimenting, and reflection regarding student learning. The knowledge that is attained through collective inquiry contributes to improved teaching and student performance. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) explained collective inquiry as “the process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together” (p. 464). Freshman academies are structured in a way to promote collective inquiry among teachers. Through a process referred to as teaming, teachers in a freshman academy have the opportunity through common planning periods to meet and collectively address student concerns. The collaborative learning efforts by freshman teachers can contribute to improved student performance and school improvement. When teachers are dedicated to improving their skill set, students and the entire school community benefit. Collaborative learning is a shared focus, a shared responsibility, and a shared desire to reach a common goal related to the mission of the school (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).

As previously stated, DuFour et al. (2008) defined collaboration as a “systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team, and their school” (p. 16). The freshman academy structure fosters teachers to move from working and learning in isolation towards collaborating and learning together. Student achievement should be the number one focus in any educational setting. In order to ensure effective student achievement, teachers must work together to plan and learn (DuFour et al., 2008). Blankenstein (2004) stated that teachers who “work with their colleagues to improve their teaching strategies, better manage their classrooms” (p. 130).

One of the essential elements of collaboration is ensuring that all teachers are contributing members of a team and that the team is provided ample time to collaborate. Teams should work together to create guidelines that steer meetings and generate feedback to document the team's efforts. Collaborative teams are vital for improving student learning due to the fact that teachers learn from each other and with each other (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2006).

DuFour et al.'s (2008) four pillars of PLCs, Hord and Hirsch's (2008) five guiding principles for a professional learning community, and Blankenstein's (2004) recommended principles that guide student performance in high-performing schools contribute to research on teacher collaboration. Based on research of best practice models of PLCs, DuFour et al. (2008) shared a consistent message that teachers can collaborate as a community with a clear vision and purpose for their organization, collective commitments, and goals through PLCs. PLCs are communities of practice where learning takes place through social participation. DuFour et al. (2008) described a PLC as,

Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job embedded learning for educators. (p. 14)

DuFour et al. (2008) identified four pillars that serve as the basis for assisting teachers with functioning as a PLC. These four pillars are mission, vision, values, and goals. The mission is the purpose as to why an organization exists (DuFour et al., 2008); therefore, teachers in a freshman academy would need to know and believe in the fundamental priorities and focus of the freshman academy. The vision allows the teachers to

collaborate about a plan for the future (Blankenstein, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008; Hord & Hirsch, 2008). The values represent the behaviors that need to be shown by the teachers to transition their school towards their vision (Blankenstein, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008; Hord & Hirsch, 2008). Teachers in a freshman academy should have a set of common goals that all teachers strive to reach; those goals set benchmarks for performance at different stages of the improvement process (DuFour et al., 2008). Teachers in a freshman academy may collaborate to meet established benchmarks for student learning throughout the school year.

Beauchaine (2009) conducted a study to examine the impact that teacher collaboration had on improving math instruction. Through interviews, surveys, observations, and journals, he produced data that showed that successful instructional strategies for teaching math are a direct result of teaming collaboration. The study showed that when teachers collaborate with their peers, they may improve their practice in teaching all types of learners. Beauchaine suggested that sufficient time should be provided for teachers to meet, reflect, share, and improve their teaching strategies to provide adequate instruction that meets the needs of their students. Van Natter (2008) conducted research to discover if teachers and principals create collaborative PLCs based on research-based elements. His research determined that a PLC is an ongoing process that needs continuous upkeep with regard to administrative support, team relationship building, a shared vision for student success, and teacher collaboration. Van Natter further stated that collaboration included the use of common assessments, a focus on student learning, a practice of collective inquiry, and the development of positive relationships among teachers. Creating a collaborative culture where these elements are present is essential to improving student performance (Van Natter, 2008).

Summary of Literature

Research indicates the transition to high school can be a challenging time for adolescents. During this period, freshman students encounter stressors from various sources. They must often engage in a new physical environment that is much larger and that they are far less familiar navigating. Academically, they are faced with more rigorous demands, yet many are lacking strategies in organization, study skills, and other academic supports. Simultaneously, they can experience major changes in their relationships with parents, teachers, and social groups. Parents often become less engaged in the daily activities of students, and peer influence increases (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Students are no longer interacting with the adults from their middle grade education (Patterson, 2007) and may even feel a lack of social capital within their peer group (Becker & Luther, 2002). These changes can create patterns in a student's attendance, academics, and behavior that have a lasting impact on their entire high school experience. Additionally, research has shown that difficulty transitioning to high school can cause a decline in each of these factors, all of which can negatively affect high school failures and dropout rates.

With this in mind, many schools are seeking ways to ease the transition to high school by creating smaller learning environments known as freshman academies. Freshman academies aid in meeting the transitional needs of freshmen by providing an environment that is not only smaller but separated physically from the rest of the school and offers its own instructional program and culture (Chmelynski, 2004). These academies can more effectively use data to track student needs and provide more individualized interventions (Ascher & McGuire, 2007). Fancsali et al. (2011) pointed to providing interventions such as smaller class sizes, credit recovery options, study skill

courses, and additional tutoring sessions to keep freshmen on track throughout the year. Additionally, freshman academies can improve freshman students' sense of belonging through focused attention of providing relationships that increase connectedness and feelings of school belonging (Brand et al., 2003).

This research sought to evaluate the current freshman academy program to determine strengths and weaknesses within the program, the purpose of which is to determine if changes need to be implemented in order to better meet the goals of increasing student success beyond ninth grade.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Evaluating programs is essential for educational organizations. Evaluating the quality and impact of an educational program can guide decision-making and lead to important management and program development focus (Villard, 2003).

For the purpose of this program evaluation on the freshman academy program in a rural school district in North Carolina, the researcher used a qualitative approach. Through qualitative research, the researcher examined parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program in the school district studied. This qualitative study used methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and interview groups involving school staff members and parent stakeholders to collect data. Malterud (2001) explained, “The findings from a qualitative study are not thought of as facts that are applicable to the population at large, but rather as descriptions, notions, or theories applicable within a specified setting” (p. 486). Using qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gather data regarding the perspectives of freshman academy stakeholders, thus allowing the district to further explore the direction of the freshman academy program.

This study is grounded in the CIPP model of program evaluation (Stufflebeam, 2003). This chapter is organized around the four research questions associated with the CIPP model in an effort to guide the reader on how each research question was evaluated. Included in this chapter are the research design of the study, a description of the participants, the methodology procedures that were used to answer each research question, rationale/display of data, limitations and delimitations of this evaluation, and a summary statement of the methodology.

Research Design

A comprehensive evaluation plan should contain both formative and summative evaluations. Formative evaluations collect data while a program is still in a development phase with the intent to improve its implementation. Formative evaluations also provide ongoing feedback regarding how the different components of the program are working, leading to decisions regarding what needs to be enhanced, deleted, and added. Summative evaluation is designed to gather conclusive data that indicate how effective the overall program is. Summative evaluation results in decisions to continue or not continue a program (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011).

Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model asks the following questions: "What needs to be done?" "How should it be done" "Is it being done" and "Did it succeed?" Each question corresponds with that of the CIPP model acronym (Context, Input, Process, and Product). Specifically, the four research questions of this study were

1. Context: What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?
2. Input: What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?
3. Process: How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?
4. Product: What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?

A foundational basis of the CIPP model is that the evaluation of a program should be a tool for making future decisions. Stufflebeam (2003) stated,

Corresponding to the letters in the acronym CIPP, this model's core concepts are

context, input, process, and product evaluation. By employing the four types of evaluation, the evaluator serves several important functions. Context evaluations assess needs, problems, and opportunities within a defined environment; they aid evaluation users to define and assess goals and later reference assessed needs of targeted beneficiaries to judge a school program, course of instruction, counseling service, teacher evaluation system, or other enterprise. Input evaluations assess competing strategies and the work plans and budgets of approaches chosen for implementation; they aid evaluation users to design improvement efforts, develop defensible funding proposals, detail action plans, record the alternative plans that were considered, and record the basis for choosing one approach over the others. Process evaluations monitor, document, and assess activities; they help evaluation users carry out improvement efforts and maintain accountability records of their execution of action plans. Product evaluations identify and assess short-term, long-term, intended, and unintended outcomes. They help evaluation users maintain their focus on meeting the needs of students or other beneficiaries; assess and record their level of success in reaching and meeting the beneficiaries' targeted needs; identify intended and unintended side effects; and make informed decisions to continue, stop, or improve the effort. (pp. 31-32)

There are four kinds of decisions in Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model—planning, structuring, implementing, and recycling—which respectively are served by context, input, process, and product evaluations. In particular, the question, “Did it succeed,” is central to the CIPP evaluation model. Stufflebeam emphasized that this aspect of the evaluation determines if the needs were met, if the gains were sustained, and if the process that produced the gains proved to be adaptable for effective use in other

settings.

The CIPP model is appropriate for this study as it provides a focused evaluation tool that examines a program's history, evaluates decisions made, and judges the effectiveness of those decisions on a targeted group. Using the CIPP model, a final synthesis report can provide evaluation findings to inform the audiences about what was attempted, completed, and accomplished in assessing the program (Stufflebeam, 1983). Table 7 shows a framework of how the researcher used the CIPP model to conduct the qualitative study.

Table 7

CIPP Concept	Research Questions	Data Sources	Methods
Context	What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?	Former school district official Existing institutional documents	Interview the former director of secondary education in the school district studied
Input	What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?	Program procedures from other institutions School staff members Existing organizational documents	Questionnaire sent to school staff members at each school Analyze organizational documents, strategic plans, and staff/faculty handbooks
Process	How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?	School staff members Parents	Interview group held with school staff members directly involved in freshman academy Interview group held with parents who have had a student go through the freshman academy
Product	What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?	School staff members & parents Individual/Self Report Data reviewed from existing sources of information	Questionnaire sent to school staff members at each school Interview group held with parents who have had a student go through the freshman academy

Defining sampling procedures is an important step in research because it indicates the quality of the inferences made by the researcher with regard to the research findings

(Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). For this study, the researcher administered a questionnaire to school staff members and conducted group interviews with school improvement team members and parents. The questionnaires and group interview questions used for this study were developed by University of Arkansas alumnus, Dr. Frankie Lizar (2017) in her study *The Perception of the Freshman Transition: Taking a Closer Look at the Freshman Academy*.

Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative methodology because the focus is more on understanding than it is on generalizability (Creswell, 2007). "Purposive sampling is not haphazard. Purposive sampling has a purpose; a subgroup has been identified and a rationale has been developed for studying them" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, p. 411). For this study, the identified participants all have knowledge of the freshman academy program. "Purposeful sampling allows you to deliberately select individuals and/or research settings that will help you to get the information needed to answer your research questions" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 128). Using this strategy added credibility to the sample, as the potential purposeful sample is large.

Staff questionnaires were sent to all certified staff members at each of the three schools in the study and completed through Survey Monkey.

Before surveying the selected sample, the researcher conducted an external pilot at the researcher's school. The researcher's school setting houses a freshman academy; and the pilot was used to validate the questionnaire and explore the need for any changes to instructions, questions, or any other issues that could impact results. Piloting the questionnaire aided the researcher in making sure the sample would understand the questions and understand them in the same way. The school staff member questionnaire was sent to 10 staff members at the researcher's school setting. The sample of staff

members represented all curricular areas as well as administrative staff. Pilot participants completed a series of feedback response questions immediately after they completed the questionnaire.

Prior to sending questionnaires to the sample population, the researcher obtained permission from the superintendent of the studied school district and from the university's Institutional Review Board. After district permission was granted, the researcher contacted administrators at each of the three high schools to be studied and requested support in sending out the survey to school staff members.

Interview group participants were systematically and purposefully selected. All certified staff members at each school were given the opportunity to participate in the interview group. Making sure all certified staff members of the interview group had the opportunity to participate allowed the researcher to gain insight about how all certified staff members in the school environment perceive the freshman academy. Parents were selected for group interview participation by the principal at each school site. Principals were asked to select a range of parents from various demographic backgrounds to participate in the interview groups.

Context

The research evaluation question for *context* was, "what is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?" This question sought to explore the district's reasoning for developing and implementing freshman academies. The objective of context evaluation in this research setting was to explore the district's context for the creation of the freshman academy.

This research question was answered by interviewing the former director of secondary education in the school district studied to provide background information as

to why the freshman academy program was established. The researcher sought to examine how the district chose to identify the target population and assess its needs. The researcher asked questions (Appendix A) that focused specifically on the needs assessed at the time the school district decided to put into practice the freshman academy program.

A thorough review of documents created during the implementation of freshman academies was conducted to accompany the interview process. Documents that were released for this study were freshman academy handbook, faculty handbooks from each school, and the district's freshman academy strategic plan.

Input

The research evaluation question for *input* was, "what alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?" This question aimed to identify and assess current system capabilities, examine potentially relevant approaches being used at each school, and explore alternative strategies being implemented in each school's freshman academy. The result of the input evaluation step is a project designed to meet the identified needs. Research Question 2 sought to investigate perceived differences in understanding of freshman academy goals, their role in supporting freshman transition, and which interventions are most successful in enhancing the freshman academy experience at each of the school settings.

This research question was answered by the following method: analyzing organizational documents, strategic plans, and staff/faculty handbooks from each school to gain a better understanding of the goals of the program at each site.

This question was also answered by using questionnaire research. Pfleeger and Kitchenham (2002) described questionnaire research as, "a comprehensive system for collecting information to describe, compare or explain knowledge, attitudes and behavior

over large populations” (slide 70). Pfleeger and Kitchenham further stated that questionnaire research is necessary for investigating the nature of a large population through sampling and testing theories where there is little control over the variables.

Survey Monkey, an online survey tool, was used to conduct the questionnaires. Using an online tool allowed teachers to complete the questionnaires at their convenience. Online questionnaire services make online research much easier and faster when compared to paper/pencil. Online questionnaire research has certain advantages such as access to individuals in distant locations, the ability to reach difficult-to-contact participants, and the convenience of having automated data collection that reduces researcher time and effort. Paper and pencil questionnaires require more time due to the fact that the researcher has to combine and organize the data, whereas web-based questionnaires export data to software packages for analysis (Wright, 2005). Questionnaires were given to every certified staff member at each school. Questionnaires included questions developed by Dr. Lizar to gauge perceived differences in the freshman academy programs within the researched district and can be found in Appendix B.

Process

The research evaluation question for *process* was, “how are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?” Objectives of process evaluation include documenting the process and providing feedback regarding (a) the extent to which the planned activities are carried out and (b) whether adjustments or revisions of the plan are necessary (Zhang, 2011). Additionally, process evaluation is used to assess the extent to which participants accept and carry out their roles and if it is done with fidelity.

In order to gain a better understanding of staff and parent perceptions regarding

the functionality of the freshman academy, two interview groups were conducted at each school. These interview groups aided the researcher in understanding staff member (Appendix C) and parent perceptions (Appendix D) of the strengths and weaknesses of the freshman academy programs regarding assessment of student needs, providing transitional support, support of academic instruction, and overall views of the freshman academy model.

Interview Groups

Interview groups are a qualitative research method that consists of a designed discussion that allows participants to express their opinions regarding common participation in a program. This research method can be an effective way to assess if a program is working.

The information gained from the interview groups was used to explore possibilities to problems, make decisions for initiatives, determine where change is possible, and adjust and refine plans mid-course. Uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of the program helped identify key human resources, physical resources, activities and processes, and past experiences internal to the freshman academy. Discovering the opportunities and threats revealed through discussion helped identify future trends; demographics; the physical environment; legislation; and local, national, or international events external to the community. Dyson (2004) explained that once these factors are identified, programs can build on positive aspects while still developing strategies to counter or even eliminate weak areas.

The interview groups were conducted with the selected groups of school staff members and parents separately at each school. The researcher acted as the facilitator. The interview groups were structured and recorded based on the work of Glesne (2006),

where she stated, “Group interviews are useful in evaluation research where participants can express multiple perspectives on a similar experience” (p. 102). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Checking and analysis of transcriptions from the audio recordings were reviewed by the facilitator in order to ensure the reliability of the data (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). Responses were coded for analysis of common themes.

Product

The research evaluation question for *product* was, “what are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?” The purpose of a product evaluation is to “measure, interpret, and judge a project’s outcomes by assessing their merit, worth, significance, and probity. Its main purpose is to ascertain the extent to which the needs of all the participants were met” (Zhang, 2011, p. 59). This research question evaluated, through collecting questionnaire responses and conducting interview groups, parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy and its impact on students’ overall success and preparedness as they continue their high school education.

To collect school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program’s impact, questionnaire research was used. Staff questionnaires were sent to all staff members at each of the three schools in the study and completed through Survey Monkey.

Rationale/Display of Data

The researcher sought to evaluate the current freshman academy program at each school in the selected school district of the study. Furthermore, the researcher sought to identify the strengths and weaknesses within each program, the purpose of which is to

determine if changes need to be implemented in order to better meet the goals of increasing student success beyond ninth grade. The qualitative data collected for this study through questionnaires and interview groups will help better assess each program. A random sampling of parents and school staff members from each school were provided the opportunity to share their beliefs regarding the positive and negative impacts of the program.

The qualitative findings of this study were analyzed by the researcher through thematic analysis and included viewing the data, reading manuscripts of interviews and interview groups, identifying common themes, and coding the data according to those themes (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006).

The quality of qualitative research rests on how the data are gathered and analyzed (Tracy, 2010). “Trustworthiness” is a common term in qualitative research and is closely related to the term “validity” in quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Trustworthiness refers to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and objectivity of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Schwandt, 2007). The researcher increased the validity of the data through triangulation of multiple data collection methods (questionnaires, interviews, interview groups).

The data collected from this study were displayed in a narrative form in Chapter 4. Each research question is listed in Chapter 4, and data to support the findings for each question is discussed. Charts accompany the narrative discussion of data in order to present common themes and compare participant experiences within the freshman academy.

Limitations

For the purpose of this evaluation, specific limitations may be present including questionnaire delivery, participation rate, research evaluator bias, school staff member bias, and student bias. One limitation could be questionnaire delivery due to a participant's lack of confidence in using technology. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire via a web-based survey instrument, Survey Monkey. For this reason, participants needed to be familiar with using technology.

Another limitation could be the number of participants who completed the questionnaire. Within the focus of this research, it was not possible to collect questionnaire data from every certified school staff member, nor was it possible to include every parent and staff member in the interview groups. While all certified school staff members were sent the questionnaire, their participation was strictly voluntary. For this reason, the research was dependent upon respondent participation completing the questionnaire and participating in an interview group.

One final limitation could be the level of researcher bias, school staff member bias, and parent bias that is present. As an administrator in the school district studied, it is important to take measures to minimize the level of researcher bias as much as possible. To help minimize researcher bias, the researcher's school participated as a pilot to validate the research methods. Data results from the pilot were made available to the school district studied but were not included in the study. Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) defined bias as any tendency that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question. Bias can occur at any phase of research, including study design or data collection, as well as in the process of data analysis and publication (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). If participants allow their feelings about the program to intervene with their true perceptions, the

feelings could contaminate their ratings, thus causing the results to become biased. To help minimize the level of school staff member and parent bias, the researcher provided each participant with an informed consent form (Appendix E) to explain the research and assure his or her anonymity.

Delimitations

The scope of the proposed study focuses on a specific program in secondary education, the freshman academy. This study sought to secure feedback directly relating to the freshman academy program's impact on promoting sustained student success. This research was constricted to the perceptions of parents and certified school staff members from a school district that employs the freshman academy program model. The school district studied is located in the western Piedmont of North Carolina.

Summary of Methodology

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine the overall effectiveness, determined through Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model, as it relates to the freshman academy program in the selected school district studied. Through the CIPP evaluation model, the context (C), inputs (I), processes (P), and product (P) of this program were evaluated.

This chapter is organized around the four key thematic areas of CIPP and four research questions that correlate with the four thematic areas of the CIPP. The research questions aligned with the CIPP model of program evaluation provide the framework of the research design methodology. Included in this chapter is a description of the participants, the methodology procedures that were used to answer each research question, rational/display of data, limitations and delimitations of this evaluation, and a summary statement of the methodology.

Chapter 4: Results and Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore a rural school district's freshman academy program through parent and staff member perspectives using Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model of program evaluation. During the spring 2018 semester, an interview with the former director of secondary education, teacher questionnaire data, and data from teacher and parent interviews provided information for answering the following research questions.

1. Context: What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?
2. Input: What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?
3. Process: How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?
4. Product: What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?

The framework for presenting the findings includes a narrative summary of the sample populations and the findings from the questionnaires collected and the interviews conducted. This chapter is divided into the following five sections: (a) Context, (b) Input, (c) Process, (d) Product, and (e) Summary.

Context

The research evaluation question for *context* was, "what is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?" This question sought to explore the district's reasoning for developing and implementing freshman academies at three traditional high schools in the district. This research question was

answered by interviewing the former director of secondary education in the school district studied to provide background information as to why the freshman academy program was established. The researcher asked a series of six questions to guide the interview. Furthermore, the researcher asked questions that focused specifically on the needs assessed at the time the school district decided to put into practice the freshman academy program.

Each of the three schools in this study implemented the freshman academy program in different years and at varying levels. School C was the pilot school in the district and implemented the academy concept in the 2007-2008 school year. School B implemented the academy in the 2008-2009 school year. School A was the last school in the district to fully implement the academy concept in the 2009-2010 school year. The researcher asked the former director how the district proposed the implementation to each of the schools. He responded by saying,

We didn't hand each school a sheet of paper that says, you will do these things, in this way. We allowed the schools to develop their own plan for implementation following the parameters that were set. Some principals did a really good job of selling it at their school, others did not.

One of the interview questions sought to discover the level of research that was conducted by the district to determine the model of the program that was going to be implemented. The former director of secondary education answered the question by stating that at the time of implementation (2007), "there was a lot of research about the failure of freshmen." He went on to say, "the district had data charts all over the place about freshman failures; they were failing left and right." He further stated, "I had no doubt that if we could decrease the number of freshmen failing, then we would have a lot

better chance of keeping them in school.” The question prompted the former director to mention the other intervention programs that evolve from the freshman academy, all of which are ultimately focused around increasing the graduation rate. He noted research on the structure of freshman academies, remedial interventions, and human resource allocation but stated that the district allowed each school to implement the freshman academy program at varying levels.

When asked what elements of the freshman academy were implemented to specifically address the findings of the research mentioned above, the former director stated that the district set four parameters for implementation. He stated, “each school’s freshman academy program was required to have a freshman academy director, freshman academy counselor, teachers would be teamed for collaboration purposes and ninth graders must be segregated on a portion of each school campus.” The researcher followed his response by asking if schools faced any resistance during implementation. The former director replied,

Yeah, teaming was a big issue and I suppose for somebody that’s never been at a lower school, they didn’t like that idea. I mean, that was a tough idea to sell.

Some teachers left because they didn’t like the idea of teaming. They wanted to be high school teachers and remain isolated to themselves.

Not all of the implementation was seen in a negative light; the former director shared that there was some understanding of what was planned. He said,

It didn’t take long for staff members to understand that we were going to team, that we were going to have a director, that we were going to be isolated in the buildings and that we were going to set up programs of support for ninth grade students, monitor their progress and make sure we catch them before they fail--

that type of attitude.

The final question of the interview with the former director asked him to describe the overall vision for the freshman academy program. The researcher asked if you could say that you wanted it to accomplish one thing, what would that be? The former director responded by saying, “If I had one goal, I wanted to get more kids passing the ninth grade and promoted to be sophomores; for if we do that, we have a chance to keep them.” He further stated that the ninth-grade failure rate at the time of implementation was astonishing. He shared that each school had 60 or 70 second-year freshmen each year.

Input

The research evaluation question for *input* was, “what alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?” This question sought to discover the aspects of each freshman academy program designed to help make it successful. This research question was answered by sending a questionnaire to all certified staff members at each of the three high schools in the study. The questionnaire asked participants to answer a series of questions ranging from demographics to the overall effectiveness of the freshman academy program at their school. For the purpose of the *input* section, questionnaire results are divided by School A, School B, and School C.

School A

School A, located at the northern end of the county, is made up of a largely rural population. With just over 1,000 students, it is the third largest school in the district. Twenty-four of 70 certified staff members at School A completed the online questionnaire regarding their school’s freshman academy program. As shown in Figure 4, the designated freshman academy counselor is the intervention that staff members at

School A ranked as the most important.

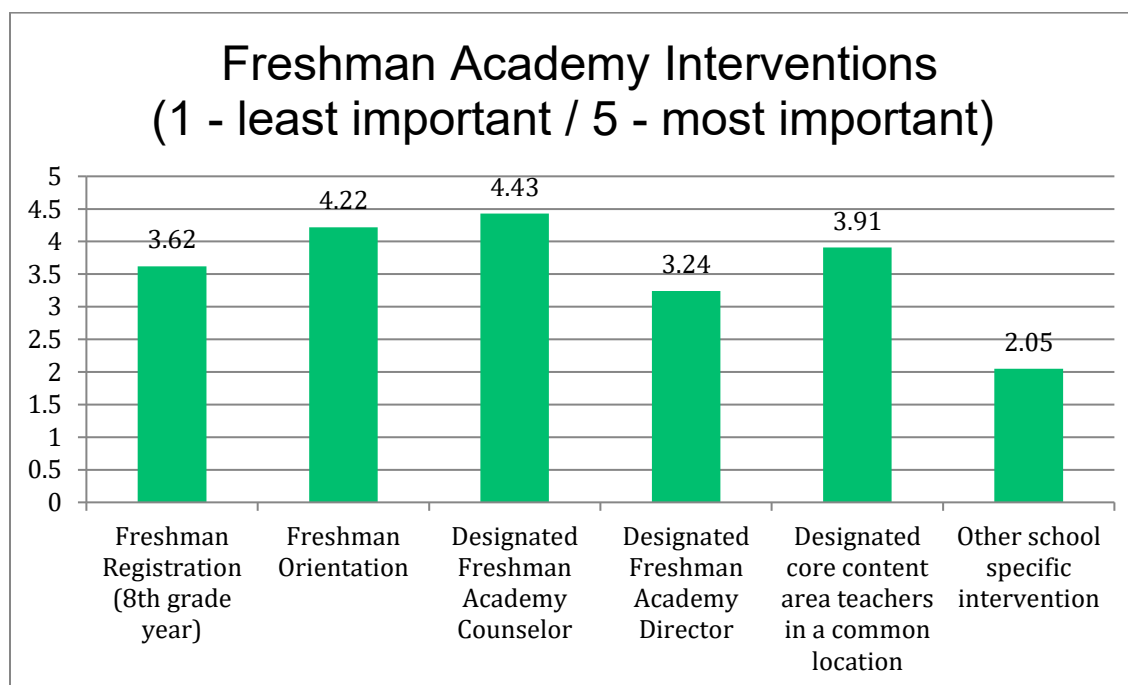


Figure 4. Freshman Academy Interventions, School A.

Of the 24 responses, the most commonly recorded open-ended response to the most beneficial resource or intervention that the freshman academy provides is the utilization of a designated freshman academy counselor. As a follow-up question to the ranking of interventions, when asked the open-ended question, “what do you think is the most beneficial resource and/or intervention available to students in the Freshman Academy,” one staff member responded,

Teachers/Freshman Academy Director... The personal relationships they can develop with this group of adults are very beneficial. Freshman academy, as a concept, is an excellent one. However, in my school, and I believe in most area schools, the model is not implemented properly. It is used mostly as a way to physically isolate freshman students, but even that is happening less and less.

Upperclassmen are now having classes on the academy hallway. The freshman academy director is given multiple administrative duties (registration, testing coordinator, discipline, etc.) which prevent them from doing their primary job as an academy director. Our director is never in her office or even on the hallway. Students do not identify her as part of the freshman academy. Teachers on the academy used to have common planning time with regular meetings to discuss individual students and to plan strategies/interventions to help those students. Now we do not even have academy meetings (it is Feb and we have met twice all year). To me, this is sad. I would be interested to know how many people who are part of a freshman academy truly feel like it is being implemented properly. Multiple responses indicated the importance of the freshman academy counselor being visible and available for student and teacher support. One staff member stated, “the freshman academy counselor is not only important for students, but teachers and families as well.” Other common responses to successful freshman academy interventions included small groups of teachers being able to work together with common planning time, the separation of the freshman academy physically, and how this approach allows for stronger relationship building. While no staff members mentioned freshman orientation or freshman registration in eighth grade as a successful school intervention in their open-ended response, both were ranked as important interventions when given as a choice.

School B

School B, located on the western side of the county, is also made up of a largely rural population. With almost 1,200 students, it is the second largest school in the district. Twenty-one of 90 certified staff members at School B completed the online

questionnaire regarding their school's freshman academy program. As shown in Figure 5, certified staff members at School B ranked the designated core content area teachers being located in a common area as the most important.

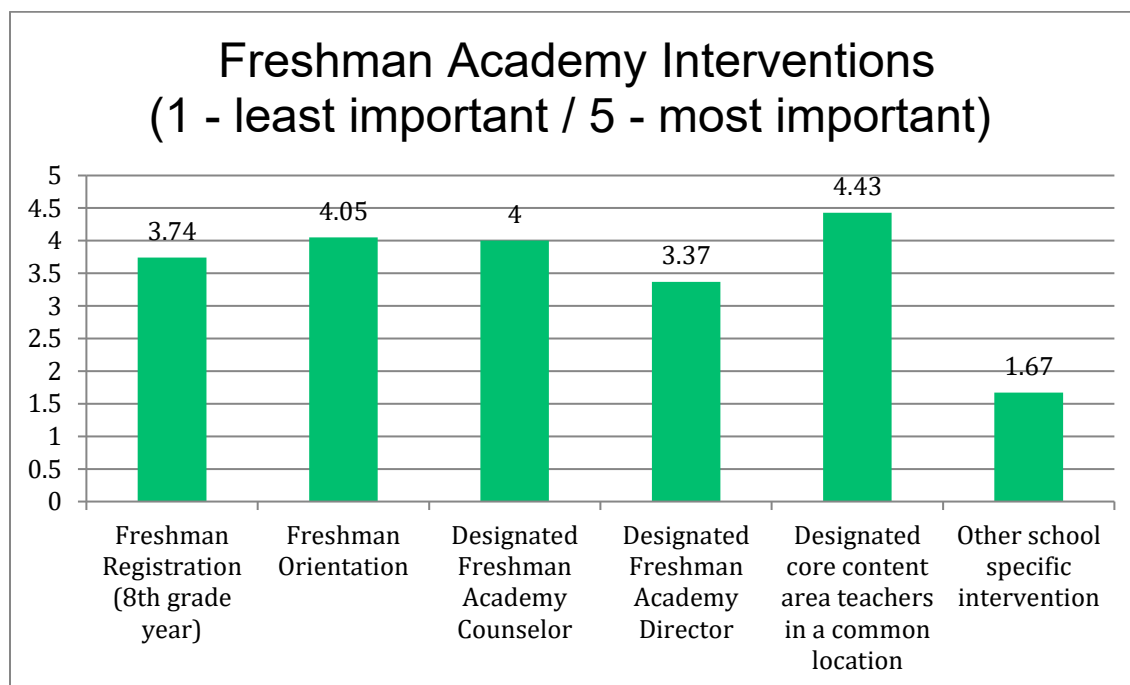


Figure 5. Freshman Academy Interventions, School B.

As a follow-up question to the ranking of interventions, when asked the open-ended question, “what do you think is the most beneficial resource and/or intervention available to students in the Freshman Academy,” almost all responders mentioned the freshman academy director and freshman academy counselor. A common theme in their responses was the immense amount of support both teachers and students receive from the staff in these positions.

Other beneficial interventions staff members mentioned included smaller class size and the freshman academy teachers' dedication to collaboration and relationship building with freshman students. Although few staff members mentioned the common

location of the freshman academy as a beneficial intervention in their open-ended response, staff members ranked it as the most beneficial intervention among the six choices given; and while no staff members mentioned freshman registration in eighth grade or freshman orientation as interventions that contributed to student success, they were both ranked as important interventions when given the choice.

School C

School C, located in the middle of the county, is the school district's inner city high school. With almost 800 students, it is the smallest traditional high school in the district. Thirty of 56 certified staff members at School C completed the online questionnaire regarding their school's freshman academy program. As shown in Figure 6, certified staff members at School C also ranked the designated core content area teachers being located in a common area as the most important.

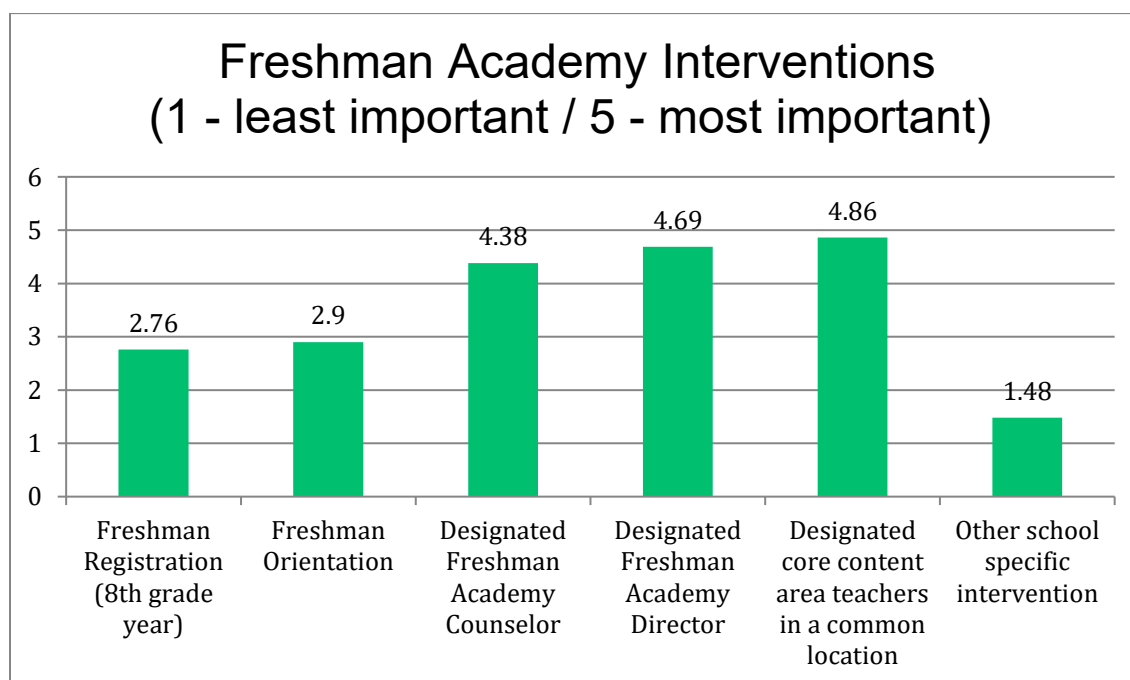


Figure 6. Freshman Academy Interventions, School C.

As a follow-up question to the ranking of interventions, when asked the open-ended question, “what do you think is the most beneficial resource and/or intervention available to students in the Freshman Academy,” multiple staff members stated that the structure of the freshman academy allowed for freshman academy teachers to collaborate and “act more as a team.” Several staff members also noted that the isolation from the other students increased the ability to build relationships with teachers, get to know other freshman students, and receive one-on-one assistance when needed. One staff member noted the structure allows “students to know what contacts are available and to encourage them to participate in activities within the school.” Numerous staff members also commented on the importance of the freshman academy director and counselor and their concentration on freshman students as beneficial to their freshman academy success. Staff member perceptions of the importance of these roles in overall student success also ranked high when given a choice.

Process

The research evaluation question for *process* was, “how are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?” The process portion of the evaluation measures the extent to which actions and methods are implemented. This research question was answered by conducting two interview groups at each school; one school staff member interview group and one parent interview group. The researcher asked a series of questions to guide both interview groups. The interview questions were focused specifically on the effectiveness of the freshman academy program and discovering how the program was aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion. For the purpose of the *process* section, interview results are divided by School A, School B,

and School C.

School A

When school staff members from School A were asked, “what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully,” many similarities surfaced in the responses. School staff member 1 responded,

Being a teacher in the academy myself, I feel like the academy students-- the ninth graders are like -- I want to say this politically correct -- caged off almost. It's almost like they're put on this hall so that the ninth-grade teachers can tell them that they need to grow up, and they need to get it together because it's high school, and we keep them away from all the older kids, and then some of them by spring or hope -- a lot of them by spring are a lot more mature, and a lot of them it happens over the summer, so by 10th grade they're more mature. But I don't really feel like it's anything that we do in the academy besides keeping them separated that helps them. It just like they're separated. You know what I'm saying?

School staff member 2 responded,

The freshman academy is a good idea in theory, but I don't know what the best way to carry it out is. I don't know if doing away with it's the answer, but I don't know if it's being executed in a way that helps students academically. I don't know.

School staff member 3 cited a lack of preparation from the middle school as a barrier for teachers and students to overcome in the freshman academy. School staff member 3 responded,

I think the biggest barrier for us in our freshman academy is the lack of expectations going on at middle school. What the middle school requires and then some of the freedom that we give them, it's difficult to handle when you come from a more controlled environment to something a little bit more -- I wouldn't say relaxed, but gives them the ability to, I guess, advocate for themselves a little more.

School staff member 4 referred to the same lack of preparation from the middle school as a daunting task in preparing students in the freshman academy for academic success.

School staff member 4 responded,

This is my opinion. So my child is in elementary -- I have a child in elementary school. And in elementary school, I mean, she has homework every night. I mean, to me, it's very rigorous in elementary. They're stressed on the tests. She's a little kid. And these kids that come up from the middle school -- into the 9th grade, I mean, they said they never had homework. I'm not at the middle school, but it seems like elementary school is so super structured and expectations are high. And then based on what they say, they never had homework in middle school so we face some resistance in setting rigorous standards.

When parents from School A were asked, "what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully," they provided a variety of responses.

Parent 1 cited the lack of academic behavioral support in her response:

I think the freshman academy does have that potential to be a good bridge between the middle school and high school. If I had any disappointments, it would have been that I would have hoped that there would have been more

emphasis on maybe working with students on study skills, working with students on not necessarily the academic piece, but the behaviors and so forth that support that academic piece into high school. I don't know if that was done. If it was, my daughter never spoke of it.

Parent 2 responded,

Well, when a student transitions from middle school to high school, that's a big transition in their lives. These students need to know that they have support here. Some students don't transition as well as others. Some students don't have the support at home that other students have. They need to know these -- the counselors, the Freshman Academy director, the administrators; they need to make themselves known. They need to make their presence known so that these students will know, you can come to us. You can count on us. We're here to help you. That's what needs to be done so that these kids will feel like they're supported, and they can be successful.

Parent 3 suggested that teachers need to collaborate more in his response:

I think the teachers need to collaborate. They need to have conversations about those students. At the middle school, as you're well aware, you have teams of teachers who work with particular cohorts of students. And those teachers meet frequently. They discuss student behavior. They discuss academic areas of weakness and strength, and they plan collaboratively. I think in order for the teachers to support the student transition, they have to continue that communication and that collaboration. Kind of on a note that she just stated, whether be it administration or teachers, I think that every student needs someone who's going to hold them accountable, someone who's going to build a positive

relationship with them and hold them accountable. And I think the Freshman Academy has that ability of building strong relationships with students, both by teachers and administrators, relationships that students are going to have for the duration of high school, and be able to go back to. And I like the accountability piece. I like the relationship piece that the academy offers.

Parent 4 cited a district problem with unstructured time in her response:

But I think as a district, we probably need to do more to help build the habits of mind that unstructured time is not play time. I do know from my daughters who were here in the past-- my oldest being here the past four years, that was one of the problems with the intervention period and its evolution is that you had a small population of the students who want it to study, and seek extra help, and do well. And you had others who just took advantage of the unstructured time as recreational time, and I know the intervention time has evolved over the years because of that. I wonder what the Freshman Academy could do to help build those expectations and thought processes within the freshmen. I think there's an opportunity there. I don't know that there's a concentrated effort to address that.

School B

When school staff members from School B were asked, "what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully," one response stood out from the others supporting the efforts of the program. School staff member 1 responded,

The freshman year is a transition period. We do a little bit more for students in the freshman academy than we might other students. I mean, ideally every teacher is calling for parents if their child's having problems or failing but we also

kind of have this added element of having a freshman director who is there to help us. She makes calls when we can't. She gathers a lot of data on who is failing, who seems to be having troubles with ninth grade so far and are they going to have those troubles through the rest of high school. But also, like I said, there's kind of this family of teachers, I guess, on this one hallway and we all know that we're trying to look out for these kids and help them, answer their questions. We have freshman orientation or even the first day of school and everybody is asking where do we go. So we're kind of these, like I said, these dedicated group that works together to try to make sure that they're successful even if it's just finding their class or making sure that they pass their classes.

School staff member 2 offered a contradicting response to the previous response:

Well, my experience is obviously very different since I'm not actually in the academy. I find that my seniors are just as clueless as my freshmen are at times. My feeling is that the freshman academy does not promote academic success beyond the ninth grade. Freshman students have all of that support to help them transition but then it is lost when they leave the ninth grade. It is my understanding that the reason why we have things like the freshman academy was because our freshmen were our biggest discipline problems, they were our biggest failure problems, and so we put this into place because they're too immature to handle being up here and have to do it all for themselves. So that we're supposed to be helping them get ready to do all of that for themselves. But then they get out of 9th grade and now they do have to do it for themselves and then they don't and can't and won't or whatever. I don't know if it's because they've had so much of it done for them as a ninth grader that now they're just as unprepared as

they were before we ever had the freshman academy or not.

School staff member 3 responded,

It may be that the freshman academy has helped what it was supposed to in the sense of maybe our freshmen don't have as many discipline problems and maybe they don't have as many failure problems but if it's just fixed it for the ninth grade and they can't take care of themselves when they get out of the ninth grade then I don't know that the interventions in the freshman academy have done what they were supposed to do. It would be nice for those students to have the same level of assistance in all grade levels.

When parents from School B were asked, "what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully," they provided varying opinions. Parent 1 responded in support of the program:

I think what my students got was sufficient. They got information and were informed concerning their academics. I think they were guided to some direction as far as, "This is what you need to be taking," and things like that. Kind of got them ready to start in the mindset of thinking, "Okay. This stuff matters." I know for one of my kids, it kind of clicked with them when they were a freshman. And it kind of started paving their way and looking at what they needed to do academically.

Parents 2 and 3 provided a less convincing response. Parent 2 responded,

I hate to say it but I can't really pinpoint or name one certain thing that I can really say that it made a difference so I don't really have any other ideas to offer. I don't know for me, if it's just because my daughter, who was in advanced

classes anyway -- I mean, even though she was in the freshman academy, she wasn't really in it a lot because of other classes that she was involved in which brought her out. I mean she wasn't really in class with a lot of freshmen.

Parent 3 responded,

In my opinion, I mean, we've got a person over the freshman academy that helps with the communication. We've got a guidance counselor who, I'm sure she deals with the freshmen that need her. But as far as that, I mean, everything else, they're just in the school. But it really isn't their fault as much as it is a lot of other stuff that goes down. The way the building is set up, I mean, it just never really seemed to be feasible. I mean, they've moved it around -- I think that's about the third place it's been, so. I mean, I think they've tried as best they can, but they're just limited on what extra they can do considering that it's right in the middle of the building with everybody else. To be able to isolate the freshmen in a different location would be helpful.

School C

When school staff members from School C were asked, "what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully," all responders provided answers in support of the academy's current efforts. School staff member 1 responded,

I would have to say that teaching in the freshman academy has its difficulties because they are not ready for our level of expectation. They don't always have the organization skills. They don't have the work ethic maybe. And I feel like our purpose is to build those skills in the academy so they can be successful academically. I feel like we do that well.

School staff member 2 echoed that response by responding,

I feel like it's our job as the Ninth Grade Academy to provide students a solid academic background, to enhance their educational skills. I feel that we do that in an effective way. I also enjoy it, though, because they are fresh and they're sweet and still impressionable.

School staff member 3 responded,

Freshmen already come in ill-prepared academically, behaviorally, and so on and so forth. But because they're fresh and impressionable, you have the ability to set good habits early. And I think that's what we do in the academy. I can't really identify anything we should be doing differently. I would generally say we're stricter on the freshman hall than they are in the rest of the school. I feel like we help freshmen build the skills necessary for academic success.

When parents from School C were asked, "what additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully," they provided overwhelmingly supportive opinions of the current academy's offerings. Parent 1 responded in support of the program:

So my son is a part of the new Peer Group Connections program, and I think it helps that the older students relate with the younger students, the ninth graders, and kind of lead them, and show them what's expected of them, to give them an idea of what high school is like. It always helps to talk with someone that's already been there, I feel. My other sons did not have the Peer Group Connections program while they were in the freshman academy. I think it's a great intervention within the freshman academy. So they're not alone when they

come. It's not like, "Okay. We're coming over here from the middle school. We don't know anybody." So they're paired up with someone in the Peer Group to help ease the transition.

Parent 2 also responded in support of the program:

One of the most beneficial things for me having a freshman student was parent pride night hosted by the freshman academy. Parent pride night is one evening for an hour and a half devoted to curriculum. You have three sessions you can choose from. They'll give you a list of sessions. So depending on what is an interest that your student or your family might have, it's anywhere from explaining the different technical classes to talking about AP classes, to understanding what the progress is in a math curriculum throughout the four years. So it's whatever is relevant to your child and your family.

Parent 3 echoed the same response by responding in support of the parent pride night:

Like she mentioned, the school does a good job of communicating expectations from the very beginning. As eighth-grade parents we were invited to attend the parent pride night. They give you an overview of what high school's like. And then in the gym, they have tables for each department: Social Studies Department, English Department, Math Department, and you can ask questions. If it's an area that's not of interest to your child, but this one is, you go to that. So already, in eighth grade, you're feeling welcomed over here at things like that. And you're able to come over and start to meet people at the high school, and ask questions, and start to get a little bit involved in what's going on over here.

Product

The research evaluation question for *product* was, "what are the perceptions of

parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?” Product evaluations identify and assess outcomes to help staff members keep an organization focused on achieving important outcomes and help gauge the effort’s success in meeting targeted needs. They assess the merit of the program and help make summative evaluation decisions. This question sought to discover to what extent parents and school staff members believe the freshman academy at their school promotes student success. This research question was answered by analyzing the responses from the aforementioned questionnaire and interview groups administered at each of the three schools studied. For the purpose of the *product* section, questionnaire and interview group results are divided by School A, School B, and School C.

School A

School A was the last school in the district to fully implement the academy concept in the 2009-2010 school year. As shown in Figure 7, staff members at School A believe that the purpose of the freshman academy at their school is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.

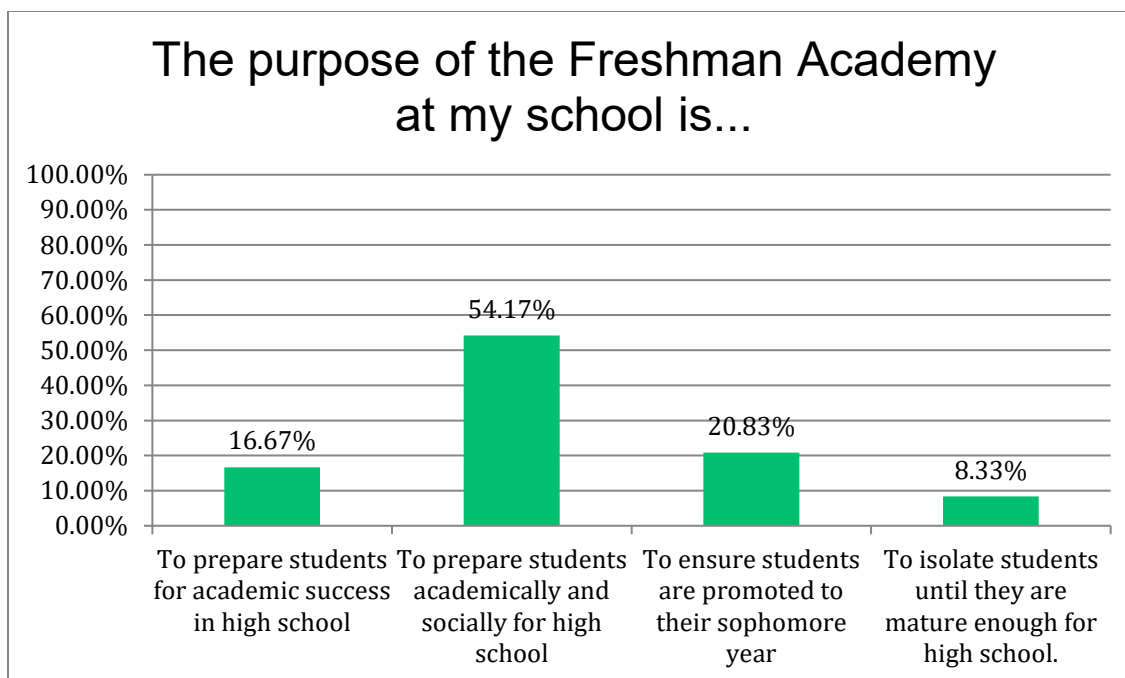


Figure 7. Freshman Academy Purpose, School A.

Over half of the responding staff members have worked at School A for the entire tenure of the freshman academy program; yet as shown in Figure 8, over 40% of the responders are still undecided about the freshman academy program preparing students to be successful in Grades 10-12.

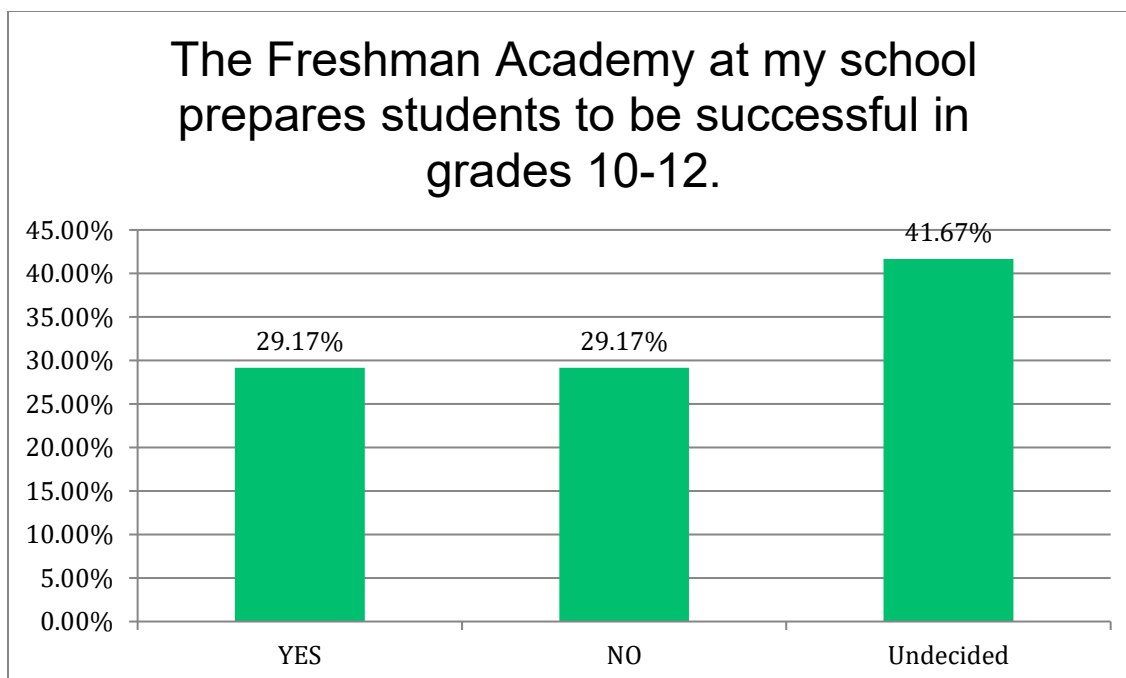


Figure 8. Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School A.

Responses recorded from the staff member and parent interview groups show a positive depiction of the impact of the freshman academy program. When school staff members from School A were asked, “how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience,” all responders provided answers in support of the academy’s efforts. School staff member 1 responded,

I taught freshmen at my former school and we weren’t in an academy, and I felt like it didn’t really offer the kids much support, where this academy kind of builds like a community and a social network on a lot of different levels, and I feel like that helps the kids transition between middle school and high school. So from an outsider’s perspective, being in a place that didn’t have one versus a place that has one, I feel like they’re much more prepared and kind of know the expectations of the school since it’s sort of uniform throughout what they have to

do.

School staff member 2 responded,

As a Freshman Academy Teacher to hear an upperclassmen teacher say that it's working is refreshing because it can be kind of monotonous, day in, day out. You often question yourself, am I getting through to these kids? And so I guess the positives outweigh the negatives.

School staff member 3 responded,

I mean, from an outsider's perspective, and kind of seeing both ends of it, and working with ninth graders at a school that didn't have it, I didn't feel like they were supported in some of their needs. A lot of times they wouldn't ask for help because they were afraid to ask for support. Here students have resources that they can go to in the director, counselor and teachers. So I think being more streamlined in the academy concept helps prepare them later on.

When parents from School A were asked, "how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience," all responders provided answers in support of the academy's efforts. Parent 1 responded,

Well, now, for my family it's been beneficial. We have two older girls also and that came through, and there was not an intervention. So when they first started high school, they were just put out there. They didn't have a hallway they knew that they were going to be on. They really didn't know where they were going to be. They were all over the building. So that left them a little uneasy at first starting in the school year, whereas with our youngest daughter who is in the Freshman Academy, she knew. She knew coming in. She knew from orientation, this is where I'm going. This is where I'm going to be. I'm not going to be off

this academy hall unless I'm at my one of other-- my advanced classes. That's made the transition really good for her. It's made it good for the parents because we know. I can't say anything but good things about the Freshman Academy and the teachers that she's had because the first day of school she was given a syllabus of every class. This is what we expect from you. This is what we're going to go over. This is what we're studying. We were also, as parents, given; this is exactly what you're going to have to buy for our class for the entire semester. There will be no hidden surprises. There will be nothing. I like that because I like to know what's going to go on, whereas I can't say that that's always been the case. Even in middle school or wherever else, that's not always been the case. So we've known upfront about field trips that they were going to take, or we've known about what it's going to cost us if there's an extra cost for this class. So I like that. It's been very beneficial to our family and to my child. Like I said, she loves school, she thrives on school, and she does very well, and we're very proud of her. But I think the Freshman Academy has helped her.

Parent 2 responded,

I think that it has been beneficial. Honestly, I would say it's more beneficial to my second daughter. My oldest daughter is my nerd. She spent very little time in the Freshman Academy because she was already in accelerated classes, and she did very well. She's done very well. I've been very blessed with her. My second daughter, she's done well also, but she spent more time in the Freshman Academy, so I think for her it was maybe a little more beneficial. Just based off their comments, I think the greatest benefits probably are for the students who are academically struggling.

School B

School B implemented the academy in the 2008-2009 school year. As shown in Figure 9, staff members at School B, similar to School A, believe that the purpose of the freshman academy at their school is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.

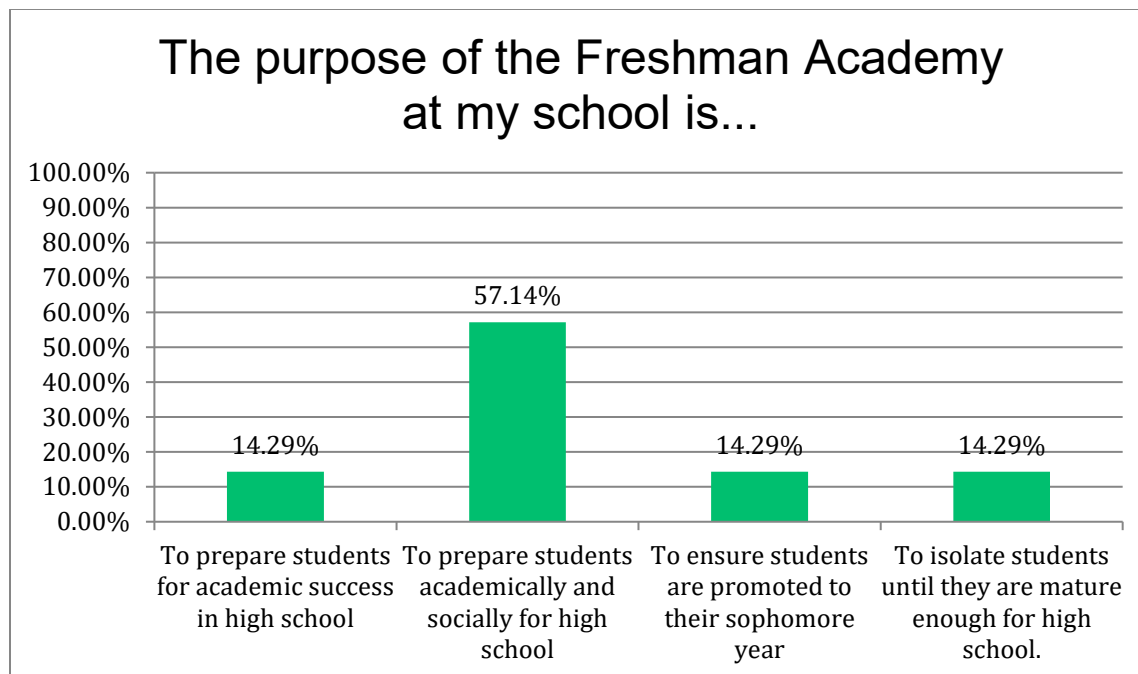


Figure 9. Freshman Academy Purpose, School B.

The majority of the responding staff members at School B have worked for less than 5 years or for more than 15 years. The tenure difference could possibly explain the mixed reviews as shown in Figure 10 regarding the extent in which the freshman academy program prepares students to be successful in Grades 10-12.

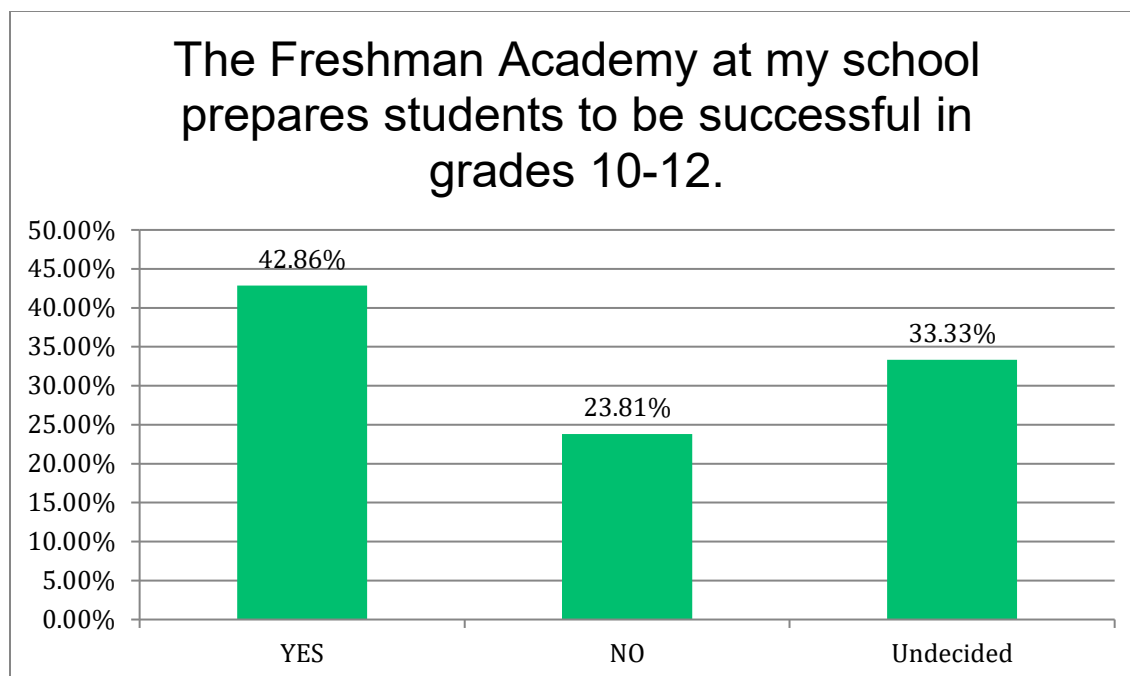


Figure 10. Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School B.

When school staff members from School B were asked, “how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience,” responders offered varying responses in terms of how effective the academy is in promoting sustained success. School staff member 1 responded in support of the academy:

We’re definitely a family in the freshman academy who’s trying to kind of watch out for these ninth grade kids. Where I can’t always turn to my entire department for something I know that I can probably go to any one of my fellow academy teachers and because we are such a range of different teachers from social studies to math to English you do find out occasionally some things about kids. So and so is like this in this class but not mine or you do find out things from those other teachers who might know those students better. So that’s definitely helpful in order to serve the kids as best as possible.

School staff member 2 responded,

I feel like we work as a team to help our students build the skills necessary for success. Our freshman academy director supplies us with this is how many kids are failing right now. This is how many are failing two or more classes or she might be like, “Hey, have you called so and so? If not I’ll call them for you today.” Things like that. And she is a good resource. She does a great job of collecting phone numbers because kids sometimes slip through on that power school bringing their parents’ phones on those forms and stuff. On that freshman open house night she makes sure that we all give out these information cards and the parents who do come we get those extra phone numbers and stuff. So that’s actually some pretty valuable stuff we get. We get a working phone number where normally we might not.

School staff member 3 responded by stating a concern:

Yeah. The only thing I would say is just-- and I just thought about this as you were just talking. It was we were talking about earlier about how the kids they get all this support and guidance in the 9th grade and then it’s not there after that. Well, the rest of the faculty doesn’t have any of that either. We don’t have somebody who’s doing what our freshman academy director is doing and so in a sense we don’t have support that that group of faculty has. I think that’s a problem for our 10th-12th grade students and staff.

When parents from School B were asked, “how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience,” all three responders provided answers in support of the academy’s efforts. Parent 1 responded,

It was good to have a freshman academy. It helped with the transition from

middle school to high school. It eased a lot of their minds. The freshman academy director and counselor were great avenues of support for my children.

Parent 2 responded,

I have a son here now and I have a daughter that graduated a couple of years ago. The freshman academy has been a positive experience. It was a good experience for my children. The freshman academy person here was very beneficial, very attentive about sending out emails, letting parents be aware of what was going on.

Parent 3 responded,

I think the school has done what it can to help freshmen with the transition but the way the building is set up, I mean, it just never really seemed to be feasible. I mean, they've moved it around-- I think that's about the third place it's been, so. I mean, I think they've tried as best they can, but they're just limited on what extra they can do considering that it's right in the middle of the building with everybody else.

School C

School C was the pilot school in the district and implemented the academy concept in the 2007-2008 school year. As shown in Figure 11, staff members at School C overwhelmingly believe that the purpose of the freshman academy at their school is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.

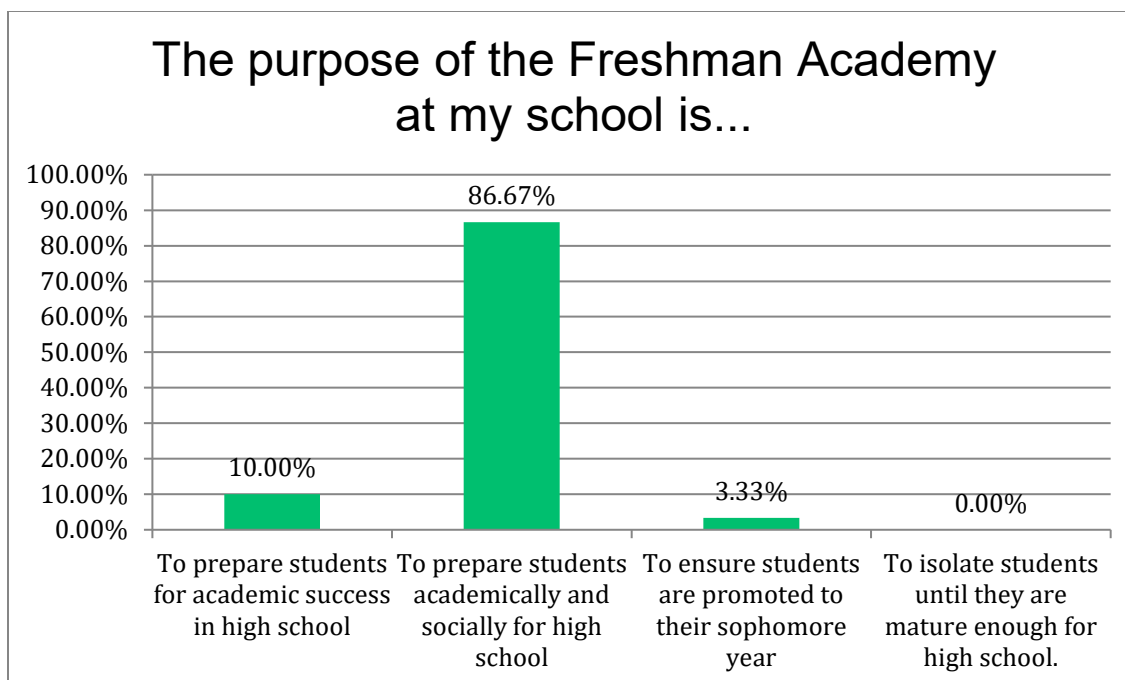


Figure 11. Freshman Academy Purpose, School C.

Staff members representing a wide range of years of experience completed the questionnaire at School C. As shown in Figure 12, responders from School C also overwhelmingly believe that the freshman academy program at their school effectively prepares students for success beyond the ninth grade.

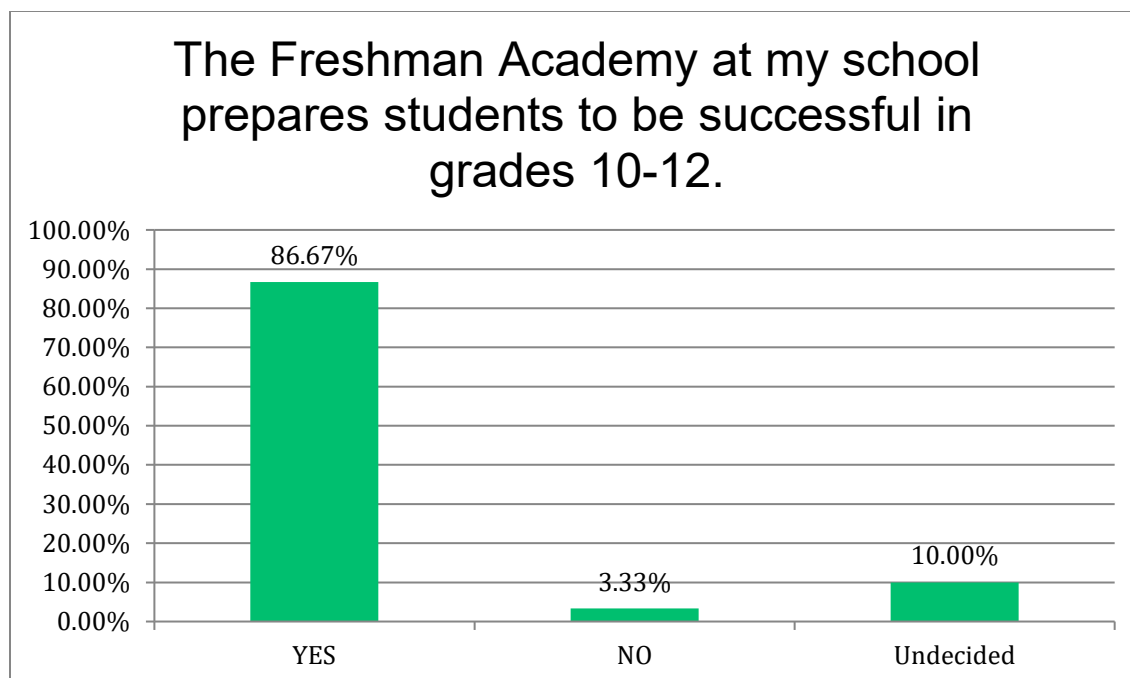


Figure 12. Freshman Academy Measure of Success, School C.

When school staff members from School C were asked, “how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience,” all responders provided answers in support of the academy’s efforts. School staff member 1 responded,

I have the pleasure of teaching students in the ninth grade and then teaching them again in the twelfth grade. And so some of them do come back and tell me that they appreciate or those they remember or -- “I didn’t believe you in the ninth grade, but now I know you were right.” I do think it prepares them. I think middle school is just not as serious.

School staff member 2 responded by stating, “I do think that students are reasonably well prepared coming out of the freshman academy, behaviorally, I hope academically.”

School staff member 3 responded,

Yeah. They do a fairly good job supporting student transition. They have a

couple of assemblies every year just for freshmen. They do the Freshman Fusion videos that they have at the beginning of the year in homeroom that help as well.

When parents from School C were asked, “how do you feel that the freshman academy prepares students for their high school experience,” all responders provided answers that spoke highly of the academy’s effort in assisting with student transition.

Parent 1 provided the following thankful response:

I think a lot of it is the time and effort and really understanding how to explain what high school is like to the families before they get here and once they’re here. And that to me has been the biggest benefit, is to feel like I’m not just on my own as a parent and my kids aren’t just on their own as students. They have helped them along the way through the transition very well.

Parent 2 shared thoughts about the academy helping both students and parents:

I know here I feel like they do a really good job of bringing the freshmen in in a way that combines the responsibility and trying to get them to be responsible for themselves as a high school student should emotionally and academically. But at the same time, they’re not just being thrown into the deep end. And as a parent, I feel like parents are kind of treated the same way. They are very good at helping you understand how everything works over here so that when you’re trying to help your child you can understand what’s going on. As a parent, I feel that what is in place is effective.

Parent 3 noted the design of the academy in their response:

I think the thing that helped my child the most was the logistical design on the freshman academy. Most all of the freshman classes are grouped physically on the freshman hall. I think that helps a lot. The fact that the administrations put all

those teachers kind of together in one little area. So the freshmen kind of know exactly where to go, and most of the going on in that hallway are other freshmen. I think that's helpful because physically the building and the space is a little less overwhelming when most of your classes are concentrated in a certain area. The logistical design has helped my children with the transition so I would say it is effective.

Parent 4 responded by also complimenting the school's freshman academy program: "I really believe our school has done a good job actually supporting freshman students. It's just a matter of whether or not the parents and the students want to be a part of it because the opportunity is there."

Summary

This study used a qualitative approach to explore a rural school district's freshman academy program through parent and staff member perspectives using Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model of program evaluation. The transition to high school referenced throughout the findings of Chapter 4 refers to the transition from the eighth-grade year to the ninth-grade year. Interviews and questionnaire data provided information to answer the following research questions.

1. Context: What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?
2. Input: What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?
3. Process: How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?
4. Product: What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members

regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?

As referenced in the methodology chapter of this study, a separate research method was used to help answer each research question. Through analyzing the data, the following common themes emerged:

- The effects of a student's transition to the ninth grade have a tremendous impact on student success beyond the ninth grade.
- Parents and school staff members believe that relationships between teachers, students, and parents make a substantive difference in student success.
- School staff members know that the purpose of the freshman academy program is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.
- Ninth-grade students benefit from the supports, resources, and interventions that are already in place at each school's freshman academy.
- Having a designated freshman academy director and freshman academy counselor has a positive impact on students.
- Rising ninth-grade students have a hard time adjusting to the freedoms of high school due to the increase in responsibility.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The transition from middle school to high school is a critical point in the educational lives of students, where students often find themselves lost and in survival mode (Fulk, 2003). The ninth-grade year is significant in terms of providing the foundation for a student's high school career (Clark, 2007). If students struggle with the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade, the outcome for students is likely to be negative (Ruiz, 2005). This study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the freshman academy program in overcoming the barriers of the daunting ninth-grade transition. This study focused on three traditional high schools in a rural school district in North Carolina. Employing the use of qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gather data regarding the perspectives of freshman academy stakeholders representing each school in the study. Parent and staff member perception data were collected using questionnaires and interview groups. The data collected from this study were provided to the district to guide further exploration of the direction of the freshman academy program.

This study used the CIPP model of program evaluation to evaluate the freshman academy program. The CIPP model of program evaluation is a comprehensive framework for guiding formative and summative evaluations of projects, programs, personnel, products, institutions, and systems (Stufflebeam, 2003). This model was selected to evaluate the freshman academy program in this school district because it focuses on comprehensiveness in evaluation within a larger framework of organizational activities (Stufflebeam, 2003).

Summary of Results

Data analysis in Chapter 4 was completed to answer the four research questions aligned with the CIPP model of program evaluation. Through qualitative research, the

researcher examined parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program in the school district studied. Qualitative methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and interview groups involving a former secondary director, current school staff members, and parent stakeholders were used to collect data. Using qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gather data regarding the perspectives of freshman academy stakeholders. Each questionnaire was summarized by responses given to multiple choice responses, rank order questions, and free response questions. Data from the questionnaires were displayed in chart form in Chapter 4. Interview data were coded for common themes that surfaced in responses. Data from the interviews were displayed in narrative form in Chapter 4.

Context evaluation. The context of the study assesses needs, assets, and problems within a defined environment (Stufflebeam, 2003). It evaluates whether program goals are adequately responding to the assessed needs. This program evaluation answered the following research question regarding the context analysis by interviewing the former director of secondary education for the school district studied: “What is the context within which the freshman academy program was developed and implemented?”

Based on data from the interview with the former director of secondary education in the school district studied, the freshman academy program was implemented to address the number of freshman failures the district consistently encountered. He noted research on the structure of freshman academies, remedial interventions, and human resource allocation but stated that the district allowed each school to implement the freshman academy program at varying levels. The former director indicated that each academy must abide by four parameters: have a freshman academy director, have a freshman academy counselor, teachers would be teamed for collaboration purposes, and ninth

graders must be segregated on a portion of each school campus.

Input evaluation. Input evaluation assesses alternate approaches, completing action plans, staffing plans, and budgets to meet targeted needs and achieve goals (Stufflebeam, 2003). It helps identify the objectives of the program and guides structuring decisions. This program evaluation answered the following research question regarding the input analysis by collecting data from a questionnaire sent to all certified staff members at each school studied: “What alternative resources are available to enhance the structure of the freshman academy program?”

Based on data from the school staff member questionnaire results, respondents believe that human resources in the form of a freshman academy director and freshman academy counselor help them meet the targeted need. Another common theme that emerged in the input portion of the program evaluation is the logistical structure of the freshman academies fostering teacher collaboration. Two of the three schools studied ranked designated core content area teachers being located in a common area as the most important intervention in place.

Process evaluation. Process evaluation assesses the implementation of the application being evaluated (Stufflebeam, 2003). When considering the CIPP model matrix, the process part of the evaluation measures the extent to which actions and methods are implemented. Here, evaluators provide information about what is actually occurring in the program and making formative evaluation decisions. This program evaluation answered the following research question regarding the process analysis by collecting data through parent and school staff member interview groups held at each school: “How are the objectives of the freshman academy program aligned with improving student attendance, academic performance, and promotion?”

Based on data from the parent and school staff member interview groups held at each school, respondents from each of the three schools painted a different picture of their academy's ability to improve student attendance, academic performance, and promotion.

School staff member and parent respondents from School A cited a lack of preparedness from the middle school when students come in to the ninth grade. School A respondents suggested that more needs to be done to increase the rigor in middle school to help minimize the shock students face in the ninth grade, thus giving them the best chance to succeed.

School staff member and parent respondents from School B were unsure about their freshman academy's actions and methods designed to help ninth graders. Respondents questioned whether or not their academy built the skills necessary for students to succeed beyond the ninth grade.

School staff member and parent respondents from School C provided overwhelmingly supportive opinions of their school's current freshman academy's offerings. School staff member respondents shared that the mission of the freshman academy was walked and talked by staff members and students alike. Parent respondents referenced a new intervention known as "peer group connections" as another way their school was reaching out to ease the transition for ninth-grade students and promote student success.

Product evaluation. Product evaluations identify and assess outcomes to help staff members keep an organization focused on achieving important outcomes and help gauge the effort's success in meeting targeted needs. They assess the merit of the program and help make summative evaluation decisions. This program evaluation

answered the following research question regarding the product analysis by collecting data from the aforementioned questionnaire and interview groups: “What are the perceptions of parents and school staff members regarding the impact of the freshman academy on student success?”

Based on data from the school staff member questionnaire and interview groups, respondents from each of the three schools in the school district studied provided varying responses with regard to the overall effectiveness of their school’s freshman academy. The majority of respondents from School A and School B are either unsure or believe that the freshman academy at their respective schools does not promote student success beyond the ninth grade. Respondents from School C overwhelmingly believe their freshman academy promotes student success beyond the ninth grade, thus meeting their targeted need.

The following statements were used in Chapter 4 to summarize the overall results of the data analysis.

- The effects of a student’s transition to the ninth grade have a tremendous impact on student success beyond the ninth grade.
- Parents and school staff members believe that relationships between teachers, students, and parents make a substantive difference in student success.
- School staff members know that the purpose of the freshman academy program is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.
- Ninth-grade students benefit from the supports, resources, and interventions that are already in place at each school’s freshman academy.
- Having a designated freshman academy director and freshman academy

counselor has a positive impact on students.

- Rising ninth-grade students have a hard time adjusting to the freedoms of high school due to the increase in responsibility.

Discussion of the Findings

During data analysis, the impact a successful transition, or lack thereof, has on student success continued to be a common theme that consistently emerged. The former director of secondary education noted that the overall purpose of the freshman academy program was to provide the transitional support for students to ultimately be successful beyond the ninth grade. The purpose of the freshman academy program in the school district studied is aligned with research conducted by Dedmond (2005), where she stated that the goal of a freshman academy is to improve student performance by creating autonomy from the freshman students to the educational process. The former director of secondary education echoed the findings of Dedmond (2005) by sharing that the freshman academy program was implemented to provide students with the interventions necessary for academic development, assist students with social identity verification, and help students develop a plan for postsecondary success.

One common theme that emerged through data analysis was the transitional challenge that students face in making up ground from the lack of academic and social preparedness brought in from the middle school. Consistent with the findings of Queen's (2002) study, respondents in this study reported students having difficulties adjusting to high school life because their social networks are often disrupted. The disruption of adolescent social networks makes incoming ninth-grade students more susceptible to harmful peer influence (Queen, 2002).

Staff members and parents consistently referenced the challenge of student

transition in their interview and questionnaire responses. Participant responses (positive, negative, or neutral) all referenced the effects transition has on students. As referenced in the review of literature, a 2007 study conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform focused on 13 New York City high schools that achieved success with low-performing ninth graders (Ascher & McGuire, 2007). The authors identified four vital strategies to help students conquer the transition to the ninth grade:

Academic rigor and high standards for student work across the disciplines.

Networks of timely supports for students that included advisories and monitoring of student progress and provision of timely interventions to address areas of need.

College expectations that articulated for entering ninth graders a vision of high school education as a pathway to postsecondary education and training and access to postsecondary planning resources that helped students gain access to postsecondary institutions.

Effective use of data to track student progress, identify areas of need, and provide feedback on interventions (Ascher & McGuire, 2007).

Analyzing data from each school's respondents shows that not all three schools in this study incorporate these four strategies to aid students. Respondents from School A believed that the academic rigor was present in the ninth grade, but the use of timely interventions was scarce. Respondents from School B were unsure about their freshman academy's actions and methods designed to help ninth graders. Respondents from School C shared that their school's academy set high expectations, helped students prepare for their future, and provided numerous interventions along the way to help aid

student transition.

Another common theme that emerged through data analysis was the logistical structure of the freshman academy program at each school. During the review of literature, the logistical structure of the freshman academy was researched. Fancsali et al. (2011) created a conceptual framework for schools to use in building a coherent set of supports designed to facilitate student transition into high school. In their framework, efforts to support the transition begin well before students arrive in high school. The early efforts they have identified include advance orientation sessions for students to help ease the shock of going from relatively small and uncomplicated schools to large schools with many more students. Analyzing the data from respondents representing the three different schools studied showed distinct differences in terms of how that framework has been modeled. Respondents from School A and School B noted a lack of interaction with students and parents at the middle school regarding the upcoming transition to the ninth grade. Respondents from School C consistently referenced the inviting nature of orientations that eighth-grade students and parents are allowed to attend as well as the informative lines of communication that are established between the middle and high schools. Another difference in responses surfaced with the actual physical location of the academies. School C is the only school of the three studied that actually separates ninth graders from the upperclassmen. Respondents from Schools A and B cited a more assimilated approach with upperclassmen in terms of physical location.

School staff member and parent responders from School A, School B, and School C all referenced the value of their ninth graders having access to a designated freshman academy counselor and freshman academy director. Consistent with the findings of Bottoms (2008), respondents in this study noted that the new high school environment is

challenging for students and can lead to a decreased sense of connectedness due to the increased number of peers and lack of staff member attention. When students lack positive relationships with other students and staff members, they experience a lack of social capital. This lack of social capital has a direct negative effect on academic achievement and, in turn, the dropout rate (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Respondents in this study verified the importance of positive student to staff member relationships in helping students successfully navigate the ninth-grade transition.

Recommendations for Practice

Research suggests that successful transition programs provide students with authentic learning experiences, personalization, and rigorous instruction (Cook et al., 2008). Effective transition programs create excitement and thankfulness for the educational process and establish academic relevance, professional learning communities, and peer collaboration (Cook et al., 2008). Educators should consistently examine the transition program in place at their school to see if freshmen are being equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful beyond their ninth-grade year. This study revealed several recommendations for improvements to the freshman academy program. The following recommendations were made by parent and school staff member participants in their interview and questionnaire responses.

Recommendation 1 – Ongoing Program Evaluation

This program evaluation provided the first systematic evaluation for the freshman academy program in this rural school district in North Carolina since original implementation at School C in the 2007-2008 school year. Through data analysis, it is evident that all three schools studied have attempted to implement the findings of Clark and Hunley (2007), by providing an academy program that “provides structure, a sense of

belonging, and eases the transition into high school while integrating content and increasing communication between teachers and parents” (p. 41). The extent to which each of the three schools has implemented and operates the academy program varies by school. A recommendation was made to evaluate the program at each school each year to ensure that the interventions, supports, and resources are in place and effective in promoting student success. For example, one parent responder in this study suggested that through program evaluation, district officials should take a closer look at the intervention period currently in place and explore ways the freshman academy can help ninth-grade students manage their time:

But I think as a district, we probably need to do more to help build the habits of mind that unstructured time is not play time. I do know from my daughters who were here in the past-- my oldest being here the past four years, that was one of the problems with the intervention period and its evolution is that you had a small population of the students who want it to study, and seek extra help, and do well. And you had others who just took advantage of the unstructured time as recreational time, and I know the intervention time has evolved over the years because of that. I wonder what the Freshman Academy could do to help build those expectations and thought processes within the freshmen. I think there's an opportunity there. I don't know that there's a concentrated effort to address that.

In order for ongoing program evaluation to be effective, procedures must be in place to collect and analyze data, evaluate interventions, and provide networking opportunities. Results from this study show that ongoing program evaluation of the freshman academy has been minimal to nonexistent at the district level. Quarterly meetings among freshman academy directors and district-level personnel would provide

an arena for ongoing program evaluation to take place and new ideas to be shared.

Recommendation 2 – Peer Group Connections Program

As stated in the literature review of Chapter 2, the responsibility of educators in creating a sense of belonging and connectedness during student transition to high school is significant (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Educators who explicitly work to create positive school climates are able to ease this transition much more than those who lack flexibility and are perceived as intimidating. Respondents from School C echoed this statement by suggesting that the school district explore the possibility of creating a peer group connections program at each of the other three traditional high schools. The peer group connections program is designed to establish positive peer-to-peer relationships between upperclassmen and freshmen. One parent responder from School C provided her positive account of the peer group connections program:

So my son is a part of the new Peer Group Connections program, and I think it helps that the older students relate with the younger students, the ninth graders, and kind of lead them, and show them what's expected of them, to give them an idea of what high school is like. It always helps to talk with someone that's already been there, I feel. My other sons did not have the Peer Group Connections program while they were in the freshman academy. I think it's a great intervention within the freshman academy. So they're not alone when they come. It's not like, "Okay. We're coming over here from the middle school. We don't know anybody." So they're paired up with someone in the Peer Group to help ease the transition.

It is evident through data analysis that the peer group connections program at School C is having a positive impact on student transition. More research should be

conducted to analyze programs similar to the peer group connections program, with the hope of establishing a similar program at each school. Establishing a peer group connections program at each school could help create the sense of belonging and connectedness for transitioning students that Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) referred to.

Recommendation 3 – Collaboration

Wald and Castleberry (2000) stated that collaboration engages teachers in a process of researching, experimenting, and reflecting regarding student learning. The knowledge that is attained through collective inquiry contributes to improved teaching and student performance. DuFour et al. (2008) explained collective inquiry as, “the process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together” (p. 464). In conducting this study, it became apparent that collaboration is taking place on varying levels in each school’s freshman academy. One staff member from School B confirmed the level of collaboration that exists at her school. She provided the following response:

We’re definitely a family in the freshman academy who’s trying to kind of watch out for these ninth-grade kids. Where I can’t always turn to my entire department for something I know that I can probably go to any one of my fellow academy teachers and because we are such a range of different teachers from social studies to math to English you do find out occasionally some things about kids. So and so is like this in this class but not mine or you do find out things from those other teachers who might know those students better. So that’s definitely helpful in order to serve the kids as best as possible.

Collaboration is not as prevalent among teachers in the freshman academy at School A. One staff member from School A made the recommendation that more

collaboration should exist among freshman academy teachers:

I think the teachers need to collaborate. They need to have conversations about those students. At the middle school, as you're well aware, you have teams of teachers who work with particular cohorts of students. And those teachers meet frequently. They discuss student behavior. They discuss academic areas of weakness and strength, and they plan collaboratively. I think in order for the teachers to support the student transition, they have to continue that communication and that collaboration like they do at the middle school.

As previously stated, DuFour et al. (2008) defined collaboration as a “systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team, and their school” (p. 16). The freshman academy structure fosters teachers to move from working and learning in isolation towards collaborating and learning together. In order to ensure effective student achievement, teachers must work together to plan and learn (DuFour et al., 2008). Based on the findings of Dufour et al. (2008), a more devoted effort to teacher collaboration in the freshman academy would improve student achievement. More focused collaboration could take place during common PLC sessions, designated team meetings or planned intervention periods.

Recommendation 4 – Parent Involvement / Community Outreach

As previously stated, Fancsali et al. (2011) created a conceptual framework for schools to use in building a coherent set of supports designed to facilitate student transition into high school. In their framework, efforts to support the transition begin well before students arrive in high school. One of the early efforts they have identified is providing advance orientation sessions for students to help ease the shock of going from

relatively small and uncomplicated schools to large schools with many more students. Consistent with the beliefs of Fancsali et al., respondents from School A and School B made the recommendation that schools should implement more parent nights throughout the school year for eighth- and ninth-grade parents to better prepare families for the ninth-grade transition. Parent responders from School C provided the following responses in support of the community outreach offered to them.

Parent responder 1 from School C:

I think a lot of it is the time and effort and really understanding how to explain what high school is like to the families before they get here and once they're here. And that to me has been the biggest benefit, is to feel like I'm not just on my own as a parent and my kids aren't just on their own as students. They have helped them along the way through the transition very well.

Parent responder 2 from School C:

One of the most beneficial things for me having a freshman student was parent pride night hosted by the freshman academy. Parent pride night is one evening for an hour and a half devoted to curriculum. You have three sessions you can choose from. They'll give you a list of sessions. So depending on what is an interest that your student or your family might have, it's anywhere from explaining the different technical classes to talking about AP classes, to understanding what the progress is in a math curriculum throughout the four years. So it's whatever is relevant to your child and your family.

Parent responder 3 from School C:

Like she mentioned, the school does a good job of communicating expectations from the very beginning. As eighth grade parents we were invited to attend the

parent pride night. They give you an overview of what high school's like. And then in the gym, they have tables for each department: Social Studies Department, English Department, Math Department, and you can ask questions. If it's an area that's not of interest to your child, but this one is, you go to that. So already, in eighth grade, you're feeling welcomed over here at things like that. And you're able to come over and start to meet people at the high school, and ask questions, and start to get a little bit involved in what's going on over here.

Rising ninth grade orientation nights are often held for current eighth-grade students in the spring semester each school year or at the end of summer before students begin high school. Based on the findings of this study, schools should make a more conscious effort to include eighth-grade students and parents in the events held throughout the school year for ninth-grade families. Providing multiple advance orientation sessions, as referenced by Fancsali et al. (2011), would help students and parents better prepare for the ninth-grade transition by meeting school staff members, getting familiar with the school setting, identifying resources available, and understanding expectations.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to discover school staff member and parent perceptions of the ninth-grade transition process in the freshman academy program of one rural school district in North Carolina. Data results and recommendations were limited to this setting and the human resources, interventions, and supports available in this setting. As research was conducted and data were analyzed, future research ideas evolved. One future research idea is to conduct a comparative study of the student transition from the fifth grade to the sixth grade with the same cohort of students and their transition from

the eighth grade to the ninth grade. The researcher could look at trends in levels of support offered and decide whether or not a similar program is needed for sixth graders.

Another research idea is to study the effectiveness of intermediate schools, as they are designed to bridge the same gap of transition as the freshman academy program. Several interview responders referenced their junior high school experience and how it helped them transition to high school. It would be interesting to see if a study on intermediate schools showed positive results in terms of student preparedness for the seventh and eighth grades. A study could be conducted comparing the junior high model to the middle school model regarding transitioning.

Summary

This study used a qualitative approach to explore a rural school district's freshman academy program through parent and staff member perspectives using Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model of program evaluation. Chapter 1 included the introduction, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, the context, and the definition of terms. Chapter 2 contained the review of related literature regarding freshman academy transition programs. Chapter 3 discussed the methodology used in the study, including specific information related to how this study was conducted and how the results were measured. Chapter 4 included the data collected in this study. Chapter 5 provided an analysis of the data and their relation to the theoretical framework, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research. The transition to high school referenced throughout the study refers to the transition from the eighth-grade year to the ninth-grade year.

Evaluating programs is essential for educational organizations. Evaluating the

quality and impact of an educational program can guide decision-making and lead to important management and program development focus (Villard, 2003). This program evaluation sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the freshman academy program in overcoming the barriers of the daunting ninth-grade transition. This study focused on three traditional high schools in a rural school district in North Carolina. Employing the use of qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gather data regarding the perspectives of freshman academy stakeholders representing each school in the study. The data collected were provided to the district to guide further exploration of the direction of the freshman academy program.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions – Former Director of Secondary of Education

1. “What is your title and position?”
2. “What role did you play in the designing / implementation of the Freshman Academy?”
3. “What research was completed to determine the model for the program?”
4. “What elements of freshman academy were implemented to specifically address the findings of that research?”
5. “What was your vision for Freshman Academy during the designing phase?”
6. “How have the Freshman Academy programs that are offered in the schools fit into your original vision?”

Appendix B

Online Certified School Staff Member Questionnaire

School Staff Member Perception Survey - Freshman Academy

1. As a teacher, I work primarily with the following grade level students:

- ☐ Students who are in their first year of high school.
- ☐ Students who have completed their freshman year and are in years 2-4 of high school.
- ☐ Both

2. I have worked in this high school (including this year):

- ☐ 1-5 years
- ☐ 6-10 years
- ☐ 11-15 years
- ☐ 16+ years

3. At this high school, I primarily teach the following subject area:

- ☐ Mathematics, English, Science, Social Studies
- ☐ Career and Tech Ed
- ☐ Other Elective Area

4. The purpose of the Freshman Academy at my school is...

- ☐ To prepare students for academic success in high school
- ☐ To prepare students academically and socially for high school
- ☐ To ensure students are promoted to their sophomore year
- ☐ To isolate students until they are mature enough for high school.

5. The following are interventions in the Freshman Academy. Please rank them numerically with 1 being the most important intervention for preparing students for high school success.

<input type="text"/>	Freshman Registration (8th grade year)
<input type="text"/>	Freshman Orientation
<input type="text"/>	Designated Freshman Academy Counselor
<input type="text"/>	Designated Freshman Academy Director
<input type="text"/>	Designated core content area teachers in a common location
<input type="text"/>	Other school specific intervention

6. The Freshman Academy at my school prepares students to be successful in grades 10-12.

- ☐ YES
☐ NO
☐ Undecided

7. At-risk students benefit from the resources and interventions in the Freshman Academy.

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Undecided

8. What should administration in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school?

9. Is administration in the Freshman Academy open to listening to new ideas to support students who struggle with the transition to high school?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Unsure

10. What should the counselor in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school?

11. What should teachers do to support students transitioning to high school?

12. Are teachers supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students so that those students are successful transitioning to high school?

- ☐ Yes - Most or all are supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students
- ☐ Yes - Some are supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

13. What do students need to do to help themselves during the transition to high school?

14. What should parents do to support their student during the transition to high school?

15. Are parents supportive of their students during the transition to high school?

- ☐ Yes - Most or all are supportive
- ☐ Yes - Some are supportive
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

16. Why do you think some students are not successful in their first year of high school?

17. What do you think is the most beneficial resource and/or intervention available to students in the Freshman Academy?

18. To what extent do you believe the Freshman Academy prepares students to be successful in grades 10-12.

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Very little
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Significantly

19. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group to further discuss your thoughts about the freshman academy?

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

Appendix C

School Staff Member Interview Questions

1. “Describe your experience working with freshman students.”
2. “How do you feel that the Freshman Academy prepares students for their high school experience?”
3. “What does administration need to do to support student transition?”
4. “Why do you think that some students do not transition successfully?”
5. “What additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully?”
6. “What does it mean to be a teacher in the Freshman Academy?”
7. “Is there anything else you would like to add?”

Appendix D

Parent Group Interview Questions

1. "Describe your experience having a student in the Freshman Academy."
2. "How do you feel that the Freshman Academy prepares students for their high school experience?"
3. "What does administration need to do to support student transition?"
4. "What do teachers need to do to support student transition?"
5. "What additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed in the freshman academy to ensure more students transition successfully?"
6. "Overall, do you feel the Freshman Academy was beneficial to your student? Explain."
7. "Is there anything else you would like to add?"

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form

Title of Study

Exploring a Rural School District's Freshman Academy Program
Through Parent and Staff Member Perspectives

Researcher

Dustin Morehead / student / School of Education

Purpose

The purpose of the research study is to investigate and analyze parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program, and to what degree they feel the program promotes student success beyond the ninth grade. For the purpose of this study, the research will focus on the Freshman Academies that are housed at three traditional high schools within a large school district in the Piedmont of North Carolina.

Procedure

For the purpose of this program evaluation on the freshman academy program in a rural school district in North Carolina, the researcher will use a qualitative approach. Through qualitative research, the researcher will examine parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program in the school district studied. This qualitative study will use methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and interview groups involving school staff members and parent stakeholders to collect data. To explore the school district's reasoning for developing and implementing freshman academies, interview research will be used. To collect school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program's impact, questionnaire research will be used. To collect parent and school staff member perceptions of the freshman academy program's impact, two interview groups will be held at each school (one school staff member group and one parent group).

Time Required

It is anticipated that the study will require less than 1 hour 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 which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

Confidentiality

Questionnaire data will be collected through surveymonkey, which protects the confidentiality of the participants. Online questionnaire results will be held in a password

protected website (survey monkey) and deleted after coding. The researcher will use a digital recorder during interview groups. Digital recordings will be deleted after transcription. All information gathered from questionnaires and interview groups will be deleted and destroyed after it is entered in chapter 4 of the dissertation.

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.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand the strengths and weaknesses within each program to determine if changes need to be implemented in order to better meet the goals of increasing student success beyond the 9th grade. 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 (or video) tape will be destroyed.

How to Withdraw From the Study

- If you want to withdraw from the study, *tell the researcher and leave the room.*
- There is no penalty for withdrawing.
- If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Dustin Morehead at dmorehead@gardner-webb.edu

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

Dustin Morehead
School of Education
Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, NC 28017

Stephen Laws
School of Education
Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, NC 28017

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

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 questionnaire.
 _____ I do not agree to participate in the confidential questionnaire.
 _____ 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).

_____ Date: _____
 Participant Printed Name

_____ Date: _____
 Participant Signature

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