University of South Florida

Digital Commons @ University of South Florida

USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations   USF Graduate Theses and Dissertations

December 2020

A Case Study: School Professionals' Perspectives on Students Exiting Middle School Entering An Achievement High School

Joy Davis Lee
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons

A Case Study: School Professionals' Perspectives on Students Exiting Middle School

Entering An Achievement High School

by

Joy Davis Lee

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Program Development
with a concentration in Educational Innovation
Department of Teaching and Learning
College of Education
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: Elizabeth Shaunessy-Dedrick, Ph.D.
Co-Major Professor: Howard Johnston, Ph.D.
Joyce Haines, Ph.D.
John Mann, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
November 13, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me."- Philippians 4:13

First and foremost, I thank God for the strength to begin and continue on this journey, for the wisdom He provided along the way, and for blessing me with family and friends who saw the value in the journey and chose to support me along the way. Writing this dissertation was the most captivating, challenging, and rewarding experience and it was all a part of God's great plan. This journey has been physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, demanding.

I quit the process at least one 1,913 times but special thanks to my co-major professor, mentor, and cheerleading coach, Dr. Shaunessy-Dedrick, my co-major professor, Dr. Howard Johnston who never gave up on me, and Dr. Joyce Haines and Dr. John Mann who understood my passion for education; I prevailed.

The dissertation was the ultimate social distance experiment and I would like to thank my husband, Richard, for being there every step of the way. I owe you a huge thank you for your unconditional love and support as I finished this process. A huge thank you for tolerating months of distracted conversations, random venting sessions and for believing in me when I doubted myself. I love you and I am happy to share the rest of my life with you.

To my parents, Peabody and Bern, I know that you are proud of your baby girl and we would have an epic celebration. Reaching this level in education was a part of the lessons that you taught me as a little girl- *Get your education!*

To my evaluation classmates, you have helped and inspired me to reach for the stars. Thanks to my sisters Dr. Keisha Albritton, and Dr. Chantae Still, we will always be the office of Albritton, Lee & Still.

To my Pinellas 2016 cohort, thank you for your consistent and unyielding support. Big thanks to Dr. Rich Young who showed support from Afghanistan, Dr. Dodi Davenport and Dr. Cathie Mullins who I could always ask big, small and insignificant questions. The fellowships, discussions, and advice that we spent affirming, collaborating, and elevating one another helped me get to the finish line.

Finally, to my best friend since 3rd-grade, Dr. Renee McKinnon, thanks for being my friend, sister, and my biggest cheerleader. Thanks for all of the advice and encouragement, I think we made our 3rd-grade teacher, Mrs. Jones very proud.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Each year approximately 1.3 million students drop out of high school and an estimated 40% of minority students do not graduate on time (Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). In high school, 22% of students repeat 9th-grade classes because students fail to make a smooth transition. This gives the 9th-grade the highest enrollment rate and the highest dropout rate (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In an effort to increase high school graduation rates, the Peabody County Public School District created Achievement schools, an initiative to recruit highly effective administrators, teachers and staff members to support students with the highest academic and nonacademic needs. This study examined school administrators' perceptions of middle school students transitioning to Achievement high schools. The purpose of the case study was to examine how school administrators perceived an ideal 9th-grade transition, challenges 9th-grade students faced through transitioning and the vision of a successful 9th-grade transitioning to an Achievement High school. This study focused on a group of Achievement high school administrators and the middle school administrators at their respective feeder schools. I utilized qualitative methods to analyze the administrators' perceptions collected through individual interviews about their views of best practices for student transitioning. The findings of this study can contribute to the overall evaluation and aid in establishing policies and programs to assist with 9th-grade transitioning.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Situating Myself in the Research

The purpose of a case study research is to explore, examine and describe a real-life

phenomenon over a period of time (Yin, 2015; Creswell, 2012). The introduction of this proposal

provides my position, my personal experiences, and my intentions, which led me, as an educator

and as a research practitioner. According to Collins and Cooper (2014), the best methodological

writing in qualitative research comes from a researcher that links connections among natural,

social and human elements. Teaching, mentoring, leading, training, and coaching have shaped

my personal experiences, professional career and motives for this research.

Early in my life, my family set expectations for me to excel in school, develop strong

principles and establish sound work integrity. During my elementary and junior high school

days, I excelled academically by frequently making honor roll. By my senior year of high school,

my dream was to become a famed female attorney with practices along the southeastern coast of

the country. At the tender age of 17, I went four hours away from home to attend college. During

my freshman year, I failed many of my classes, and for the first time in my life, I was placed on

academic probation. For me to fail was embarrassing, and academically it was an humiliating

experience; personally, it was the an awakening encounter and spiritually, it was a turning point

in my life. This transformative situation changed my life and reshaped my goals.

Setting the Stage for a Career in Education. After failing out of college, I returned to

my hometown and enrolled in the local university where most of my family had graduated or

attended. For the first time, I was not accustomed to failure and I had been challenged. This

made me more dedicated and determined to graduate college and to compensate for the failed classes taken during my freshman year in college. My new school did not have a Criminal Justice department like my previous university, so I reluctantly switched my major to education. I had imagined that a degree in education would be easy, and it would help me get back to my plans for law school.

Life Change and Career in Education. While working on my undergraduate education degree, I became a substitute teacher. The experiences as a substitute teacher changed the trajectory of my entire life plan and I found my purpose. I substituted primarily at high schools because I was committed to helping and informing college-ready students about the college experience. Before graduating, I was offered my first teaching position as a 4th-grade elementary school teacher. After my first full-time teaching school year, I transferred from elementary school to middle school. Subsequently, I accepted a position as a high school Algebra teacher. After encouraging my students for years to further their education, I pursued a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. Subsequently I attained my Master's degree, I was married and relocated from North Carolina to South Carolina. I experienced a series of personal deaths and my family relocated to Florida. I had an administrator and an educator license in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida. My initial plan of becoming an attorney with offices along the Southeastern coastline had changed and I spent ten years in education. These accomplishments and experiences formed how I approached life and helped me pursue my mission and vision to help students become successful.

Self-Reflection Leading to Research. After graduate school, I started a college-readiness program to help students get into college and close the minority achievement gap. The college-readiness program supported first-generation, minority students by sharing college

access, promoting academic achievement and sharing college admission requirements. The program, First Opportunity Educational System, FOES, was extremely successful, as it exposed students and their families to colleges, post-secondary options and career opportunities. Students were grouped in a cohort during the school week and attended the college readiness program at the university on the weekends. Committed students who had participated in the program throughout middle and high school were awarded with a scholarship by the university.

As I began teaching, I was more aware of students' needs and the best ways to prepare them for college. Instructionally, I was charged with preparing students for college math, but I was compelled to expose students to the amount of effort and resolve necessary to be successful in college. My mission was to prepare at-promise students to persevere and strive to get into college. I wanted to prevent students from repeating my mishaps and mistakes.

Personal Purpose of Research. I was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, a college town located in the Piedmont triad area. I was raised in a close-knit community along with my parents and two brothers. We attended neighborhood schools from elementary school through high school and shared childhood memories in our neighborhood. My immediate and extended family attended the same high school, which at one time was the only school for African-American students. This type of pride and affection towards our high school built a rich high school legacy. Every summer, the high school commemorates the rich history, traditions and unity with a consolidated reunion. My interest in ensuring a successful transition into high school is connected to the relationships that are shared between my school, classmates and teachers. Within my family, neighborhood, school and community, higher education was the *only* life plan, as both of my parents were college graduates. My teachers reinforced and supported a

shared vision of attending college, which reflected the message of my household, thus my affirmation and affiliation to the study.

Introduction to the Problem

My position as a student success coach was to support and supervise at-risk students. Raquel, a student on my caseload, referred to me as her "school mom." She was a short, well-dressed African American female student who was bright, talented and more mature than her peers. She had several discipline referrals, a blemished reputation with the staff and faculty, and personal family drama. Regardless of Raquel's personal, social challenges, and conduct cuts, she managed to maintain exceptional grades, which made her consistently an A/B honor roll student. She became the student body president but removed from her position for fighting and being suspended. Nevertheless, she was voted as the 8th-grade prom queen. Despite her personal issues, social matters and tough reputation, academically she excelled. Raquel had the resilience, potential and aptitude to succeed in high school and beyond. One day while in her third-period math class she received a text that her father was shot and found lying in a ditch.

Unfortunately, Raquel transitioned unsuccessfully to high school and continued to fight, received suspensions, and failed academically by finishing her 9th grade year with a 1.4 grade point average. Raquel and students with similar obstacles need transitional support services and plans to ensure they transition successfully to the 9thgrade. Support systems and programs are necessary to assist students to make successful transitions into high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Being a middle school teacher for over 15 years, I have encountered many students like Raquel who need additional support to connect them with high school to make an easier transition. When high school personnel identify and connect with students, this increases

student engagement, reduces the high school dropout rate, and addresses student concerns (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Context of the Research

The purpose of the study was to explore the transitioning process from students exiting middle school and entering Achievement High Schools in the Peabody County Public School District (pseudonym). I analyzed 9^{th}grade student achievement, investigated high school freshmen transition policies and strategies, and identified trends, patterns, and themes that support student transitioning. Average-freshman-graduation rate is a percentage indicator that uses aggregated counts of students by grade and overall diploma count and provides a 4-year on-time graduation percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). By maximizing 9th-grade success rates, more freshmen will graduate from high school within four years (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). I interviewed school officials' perspectives, reported their ideas of best practices for successful high school transitional procedures, and researched what they believed was necessary for a 9th-grader to transition successfully from middle school to high school. The study findings can assist and guide district leaders, practitioners, and other stakeholders within the school district in strengthening their articulation process for high school freshmen, instituting policies to bridge middle and high school, strengthening and supporting student engagement, and increasing academic achievement.

The transition from middle school to the 9th-grade proves challenging for many students. High school courses are more rigorous, schools are more populous, and social interests are more complex (Neild, 2009). Eighth graders are transitioning from their middle school setting into a new and unfamiliar high school environment. Academic achievement rates may increase, decrease, or remain constant when students transition from middle to high school. This period of

transition has been considered a crucible for students (Sutton, Langenkamp, Muller & Schiller, 2018).

Ninth grade transition programs afford students the structure and support they need as they navigate high school where they have more freedom with fewer restrictions. Researchers agree that directing resources and creating programs to assist students with their first year in high school is a strategy to help student engagement and reduce high school dropouts (Shore & Shore, 2009). Incoming high school freshmen are faced with challenges, a new stage of human growth and development, peer and social adjustment, and a higher level of academic intensity. In addition to the developmental stages, parental relationships are often strained during the high school transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). In 2015-16, the graduation rate for public schools was 84%, the average dropout rate for public school students was 6.1%, and approximately 2.9 million students graduated on time (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Fox, & Drake, 2010). Despite the research that shows declines in graduation within the K-12 public education, developing preventative approaches to address 9th-grade promotion rates does not appear to be a priority in public schools (Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Our society's focus is on college and career readiness. Students who do not complete high school face significant job and financial challenges. Successful transitioning into high school is important because 9th-grade sets the trajectory for students to be successful academically or run the risk of dropping out. Thirty-six percent of high school dropouts occur during the 9th-grade year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).   Ninth grade academic standing provides a predictive indicator for high school graduation rates (Williamston, 2010). Freshmen who fail core courses have a higher probability of not graduating in four years

(Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007). Ninth grader students have more failed

classes, more suspensions, higher absenteeism rates and a significantly higher probability of

dropping out of high school than students in other high school grades (McCarter, 2017; Balfanz,

Byrnes, & Fox, 2015). Nationally, 40% of 9th-graders fail to reach the 12th-grade within four

years (Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr, & Morison, 2006). Each state has their own high school dropout

problem where an estimated one-third of high school freshmen fail to make the 10th grade. The

high school dropout rate affects our society in some very costly forms, so supporting and

assisting 9th-graders during a problematic time should be a major focus (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

One promising finding from previous research shows that extensive collaboration between

middle schools and high schools can improve students' potential for a successful transition

(Williamston, 2010).

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this study I explored school officials' perceptions of student transitions from middle

school to Achievement High Schools. In the fall of 2018, the PCPSD designated 50 schools as

Achievement schools. These schools have school grades of "D" or "F", have 75% or higher free-

reduced lunch rate, and graduation rates below 85%. The Achievement schools' mission was to

recruit highly effective administrators, teachers and staff to work with students who had the

highest academic needs and who are the most economically impoverished. The 50 Achievement

schools in PCPSD are grouped as follows:

- 3 - high schools
- 6 - middle schools
- 38 - elementary schools
- 3 - K-8 schools

The implementation of Achievement schools was a new initiative and this case study in relationship to students transitioning from middle school to high school sought to address gaps in the research. Data surrounding 9th-grade transitioning exposed a need to improve freshmen transitioning to high school; however, the research and literature is limited with respect to school officials' perceptions of specific needs for student achievement. Given the importance of a high school diploma in today's society, students should feel supported during their freshmen year of high school to ensure they are on the path of earning a diploma. There are state, district, and school guidelines that outline 9th-graders academic plans for entering high school; however, within the PCPSD, there was a lack of policies, programs, and activities to support students transitioning from 8th-grade to high school, which may contribute to the increase in the PCPSD dropout rate as observed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Table of Graduates and Dropouts in the PCPSD, retrieved October 25, 2020, from

http://www.fldoe.org/

This case study focuses on perceptions of school administrators and school officials regarding students' transition from middle school to high school. The information gleaned from this study provides insight for potential transitional programs that meet the needs of students transitioning to high school freshmen.

This study provides a deeper, detailed description of the challenges that school administrators believe that middle school students experience when entering an Achievement High School. The school officials' perceptions provide insight, ideas, and inspection on how students could successfully transition and ultimately graduate from high school within four years.

High school graduation rates are highly dependent upon students graduating within four years with their designated cohort. The successful transition of 9th-graders' experiences is directly connected to the school districts graduation rates and serve as guide to help school leaders plan and implement early intervention programs. Ninth graders fail at an alarming rate so schools that incorporate transitional programs have lower dropout rate of approximately 8%, whereas schools without these programs have a higher dropout rate of almost 25% (Kennelly, & Monrad, 2007; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014).

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to gather school administrators and officials' perceptions of student transitioning to high school. The research answered the following questions:

1) How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition?
2) What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement High School?

3) What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students to make a successful transition to an Achievement High School?

Theoretical Framework

There were two theories that supported this study. Bourdieu's (1985) social capital theory examined mechanisms, factors, and context, which outlined how students gather their knowledge, support, and skills for success in schools. Schools serve as a valuable arrangement for students' performance and are a forum for students to share social capital, networks, and systems (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Croninger and Lee (2001) explained how the social capital was a process that exists within individual relationships; teachers build social capital through trust with students and influence a students' decision to stay in school or drop out of school. Accordingly, high-quality connections between teachers and students and peer-to-peer relationships are invaluable to schools.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced grounded theory to allow researchers to collect primary data, develop and interrelate categories and subcategories, and use the information during consecutive stages of data gathering and inquiring. The purpose of grounded theory is to produce theoretical assertions based on each study's findings. According to Creswell (2015), grounded theory produces a mid-level substantive theory, describes an abstract phenomenon, and then connects a specific situation within an identifiable context. The grounded theory method enables the researcher to gather and examine information to look at trends, patterns, and themes.

Ninth graders transitioning to Achievement high schools is a unique and distinct situation, and includes abstract phenomena such as peer relationships, bullying, human development, and disengagement. These factors, mechanisms, and processes shape the development of students throughout 9th-grade. Use of grounded theory allowed me to synthesize

and examine data and identify trends, patterns, and themes from high schools and middle

schools. Further data analysis allowed me to identify major themes, subcategories, and interpret

findings to produce generalizations.

Definition of Key Terms

- *At-Risk Students*. Students that have failed to meet graduation requirements, or failed two

  or more subject-area state assessments, or have repeated grade levels and age/grade

  discrepancy, or who have experienced an interruption in their education during the school

  year (U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Kayler & Sherman, 2009).

- *Dropout out.* An individual who was enrolled in high school but not enrolled in school at

  the beginning of the current school year (MDE, 2007).

- *Dropout Rate*. The percentage of dropouts in Grades 9-12 compared to the total

  percentage of students in Grades 9-12 enrolled for the full academic year.

- *Feeder school.* A school where the majority of students are drawn from for their school

  year (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; McIntosh & White, 2006).

- *Free and Reduced lunch*. (FRL) Students whose household income is less than 130% of

  the poverty line qualify for free lunch.

- *High school graduation rate*: Florida's graduation rate is based on the percentage of

  students who graduated with a standard diploma within four years of their first-full year

  of enrollment in 9th-grade in the state. Each student in the resulting adjusted cohort

  receives a final classification as a graduate, dropout, or non-graduate.

- *Socio-economic status.* (SES) This is the social standing or class of an individual or

  group and is measured by a combination of education, income and occupation

- *Reduced Lunch Price.* Students are eligible for reduced-price lunch whose household income is between 130% and 185% of the poverty line.

- *Transitioning.* An organized plan used to identify and develop goals based on students' needs to be accomplished during the current school year.

Assumptions

The PCPSD directed high schools to raise graduation rates to 90% by 2020. I assumed that high schools understood that successful 9th-grade transition provides the key to meeting the district's mandate. I assumed that the participants of the study would provide honest, candid and rich feedback. Another assumption was that school administrators would understand that collaboration between high schools and their feeder middle schools was necessary in order to improve 9th-grade transitioning. I assumed that this study will lead to professional development for teachers, trainings where high schools would share knowledge and skills and design their own transitional programs.

Limitations

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), hermeneutics allows qualitative researchers to analyze their interviews as texts and forecast situations related to the interview. Administrators, school leaders, and staff credited their strategies and acknowledged their strengths and weaknesses. Hermeneutic considerations intertwined qualitative research and influenced conclusions and outcomes. Although some interviews were conducted face-to-face and some via video conferencing, participants' privacy was maintained.

Patton (2015) allowed me to utilize hermeneutics and interpret the text, differing viewpoints, and shared beliefs to create a central theme. Hermeneutics does not have a specific systematic method, in fact, I was able to rely solely on the interviewers understanding and that

the interviewer had foreknowledge of the subject matter. My experience and training in education spans over 20 years; however, I do not profess to know every law, literature, or program of study.

Another limitation was my own personal biases, subjectivity, and motivation towards this research interjected with my passion and personal career. My main reason for enrolling in the Ed.D. in Educational Program Development was to use the knowledge gained through innovation and improvement to promote educational initiatives to benefit 9th-graders transitioning into high school. In addition, the purpose of the research was intended to benefit professionals, transitioning knowledge and develop programs for high schools without transitional programs.

Summary/Organization of the Remaining Chapters

How do 9th graders make a successful transition to Achievement high schools? What would a successful transition to an Achievement high school entail? According to Cooper and Liou, (2007), transitioning to high school should not be an event that happens at the beginning of the school year, instead include a process with several layers ensuring that each 9th-grader makes positive connections with peers, family support and adults. Students who fail to make a smooth transition to high school, eventually dropout at the end of the 9th-grade (Cooper & Liou, 2007), so transition programs for high schools, gives students a clear, outlined vision to support adjustment and prevent dropping out.

The next chapters detail how the research was conducted. In Chapter 2, a review of the current literature pertaining to the study is described. The review of the literature begins with a discussion of the challenges of transitioning to high school along with details of current efforts to close the middle school to high school academic gap. In Chapter 3, the methods that the study

used to collect the data are outlined, along with data collection methods and the data analysis process. In Chapter 4, the findings of the data collected are presented, while, in Chapter 5, a discussion of the relationship of the findings and the literature is provided along with a synopsis of key points and a summary of the issues.

CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the research on

transition from middle school to high school, including the transition from middle schools to

Achievement high schools. A review and discussion of the limited research about Title I

transitions will be addressed, as well as themes specific to larger transition to high school

literature.

The following literature review explores key themes associated with transitioning to high

school, a need for transitional programs, social promotion concerns, the stakeholders'

perspectives, and the 9th grade bulge. This review highlights promising studies, reviews current

data, and addresses concerns that relate to students adjusting to high school. Finally, in this

literature review I present research on Title I schools and student outcomes.

The Transition Problem

There is a national trend of failed high school transitions. The 9th grade has complex

challenges and issues associated with transitioning to high school, thus it creates problems for

many students, schools and districts. Studies shows that making a successful transition to high

school can help students form lasting attachments to school and increase students' likelihood of

graduating from high school.

Transitioning to high school is not amenable to a one-size-fits-all model (Pharris-Ciurej,

Hirschman & Willhoft, 2012). For students leaving the 8th-grade entering a new school, changes

in a routine, different social structures, and new peer relationships can overwhelm students, creating disengagement from the school and teachers (Carroll & Creamer, 2004; Conner, Miles & Pope, 2014). High school students are required to master new skills, cope with new experiences, and adjust to a new school building (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Lenz, 2001). High school transitioning disrupts pathways, reclassifies social status, and introduces social imbalances, which can potentially produce high levels of stress and probable failures (Benner, 2011). In order to compete in the 21st Century, high school freshmen need to graduate high school in order to establish a livelihood as adults. The 9th-grade year is critical for providing a foundation for high school students, whereas high schools should assist students who are not ready for the challenges that they will face academically and socially (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ruiz, 2005).

In the PCPSD, Achievement Schools were established in response to the Florida Statue 1008.33 mandated by the Florida Public School Improvement Office. Achievement schools, and/or Differentiated Accountability Schools, meet the following criteria:

- First school grade of a "D" or an "F" after a grade of a "C" school grade,

- First year of a "C" school grade or better, improved from a "D" or an "F",

- High Schools with three consecutive school grades of a "C" or lower,

- FRL population greater than 75%,

- A graduation rate below 85%.

There are 50 elementary, middle, high and K-8 Achievement schools designated in the PCPSD. The PCPSD's mission is to increase student achievement, reduce the number of Achievement schools to zero, bring school grades to a C or higher, increase graduation rates to 85% or higher, and become a model school by 2025. Notably, the current District mission does

not include transition language specific to Achievement High Schools, where dropout rates and graduation rates are of critical concern. For 8th-grade students leaving middle school entering an Achievement High School, there is not a transition policy or plan to prevent destructive and irreparable outcomes. In addition, Achievement schools will provide additional support systems, mandate student progress-monitoring reports and implement other interventions to improve Achievement schools' grades.

Figure 2. Achievement school organizational chart (2018) . Adapted from Peabody County Public School District website, retrieved October 25, 2020, from https://peabody.k12.ma.us/

Figure 2 shows the Achievement school-style structure model, which follows similar districts such as, Miami-Dade, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Chicago Public Schools. PCPSD has collaborated with several turnaround programs to implement this model. In addition to

supporting students with high-quality teachers, the schools will provide wrap-around services to meet the mental health, nutritional, and social services needs of the students.

Transition from Eighth Grade to Ninth Grade

A transition means to change relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles; it is an individual's ability to adapt to an event or non-event determined by factors related to the nature of the transition (Neild, 2009). The 9th-grade is classified as the make it or break it year for high school students, and student performance in that critical year often determines the outcomes of the entire high school experience (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). When freshman experience a successful transition, he or she reduces the risk or potential of not graduating and dropping out (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2011; Flowers, Luzynski & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Beginning high school is not just another transition; it is a major life change (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012).

The transition from middle school to high school is a multi-faceted, complex, involved process (Queen, 2013). Benner (2011) points out that the 9th-grade year is vital to students' success; given the complexity of transitioning to 9th-grade from middle school, she recommends that high schools should establish a plan to assist students with transitioning to the new environment. Regrettably, Benner (2011) also notes that many high schools lack the structure to meet the developmental needs of adolescents. Interestingly, researchers have documented that high school reform initiative that focus on transitioning prior to 9th-grade makes the transition to high school successful (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Often, middle schools are not aligned with 9th-grade experiences and expectations, so the high school policies and issues that freshmen face through transitioning may be bewildering and have negative outcomes, leaving many high school freshmen unable to handle the new rigorous

18

demands of high school (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). High school classroom expectations and structures are different from middle schools, so students must adapt to a variety of instructional styles by a number of different teachers as well as conform to a different system of rules and opportunities found in each classroom within a very short window of time (Emmer, Evertson & Worsham, 2009; Levy, 2008).

According to Smith, Akos, Lim and Wiley (2008), a successful transitional program involves collaboration between two school buildings and includes 8th and 9th-grade school personnel. The authors suggest that a successful school culture program should include information and resources on bridging the gap for middle school students, outlining high school expectations, and stressing the importance of family engagement and support.

When students transition to high school, academically, they become vulnerable and must build a sense of purpose and resilience (Langenkamp, 2010). The transition to high school is a critical stage in students' academic trajectory and studies show there is a decrease in academic achievement from middle school to high school, and academic achievement decline correlates directly with freshmen potential to graduate within the traditional four years (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Langenkamp, 2010).

In the two-year study by Hauser, Choate and Thomas (2009) on students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of 8th-grade transition to high school, the authors found significant differences among stakeholders' perceptions regarding positive aspects of transition, transitional concerns, and anticipated problems of transition. Eighth grade parents and teachers showed optimism about the high school experience during pre-transitioning because high school offered students a broader social scale, more options to network, and new opportunities to collaborate and socialize. However, parents were discouraged about the by the high school transitioning by

the end of the child's 9th-grade year, they reported that poor preparation and connections led to student disengagement. Eighth graders voiced concerns of feeling inadequately prepared about transitioning more than their teachers and parents. Conversely, teachers and parents underestimated the anxiety and concerns associated with students transitioning. Ninth grade teachers believed that students needed effective social and communication skills, and access and assistance to high school culture and opportunities to become successful in high school.

The Challenges of Transition to High School

Students enter high school at different levels; some are equipped academically, emotionally and socially than others (Simmons, 2017). Wentzel, Tomback, Williams and McNeish (2019), followed middle school students from 8th-grade through 10th-grade to determine stability of adolescent beliefs about competence, control, and social belonging. The researchers concluded that students' desire to feel competent was a necessary element and motivating factor necessary for a smooth transition. Students feeling competent directly correlated to their academic achievement and positive behaviors. Participants rated social belonging as a major concern and noted there should be a greater focus on social networks, a plan to develop friendships, and increased peer interactions during the first year of high school.

The Adjustment to Early Adolescent Transitioning to High School. Transitioning to high school brings increased stress levels, decreased self-esteem, declined academic performance, and risk of estrangement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In order to understand the increased expectations and requirements of high school, each school has to show the importance of the transition process for middle school students entering the adolescence period (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The period of adolescence is a bridge between childhood and adulthood; subsequently, the entire period considered as a series of discrete events of the

transition from childhood, to pre-adolescence, to adulthood (Spear, 2000). Adolescence to adulthood ranges from 12 – 18 years old in between the 7th and 12th grade whereas this period becomes convoluted (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Spear, 2000). Physically, students during this period appear mature but are often socially and educationally immature and unprepared to assume adult roles (Lenz, 2001).

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1976) identified formal cognitive development, which allows tends the ability to think abstractly and possess autonomy and self-identity occurs between 15 and 16 years of age (Oman, Vesely, Aspy & Tolma, 2015). Developing through early adulthood is a critical period and process for the stability and connectedness of high school students and family life (Lenz, 2001). From childhood to adulthood, teens have many physiological and socio-behavioral transitions that affect students' values (Spear, 2000). During high school, adolescents are physically faced with developmental changes, spend more time with peers and discover survival skills without advice from parents, and siblings (Shaffer & Kipp, 2013).

Developmentally Approaching High School Transition. Approaching transition brings instability and can have a negative impact on students' psychological well-being and academic achievement (Evans, Borriello, & Field, 2018). During transitioning, students' progress away from an established network of support into an unknown stage of development, the future adulthood stage (Lenz, 2001). According to Schlossberg, how students approach the type of transition can bring positive, negative or benign outcomes (Flowers et al., 2014), and the approach is a delicate balance between self-esteem versus self-image (Lenz, 2001).

Life events, markers, milestones, or transition points are key roles to adolescent development and shapes an individual life direction (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson,

21

2006). During the adolescent transition stage, students face numerous developmental changes, including puberty, nonacademic and personal influences. These challenges are associated with student success and increasingly become significant for students with inadequate academic and social skills (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Spear, 2000).

An individual's ability to adapt to an event or non-event is determined by factors related to the nature of the transition (Carroll & Creamer, 2004; Flowers et al., 2014). Research on successful student transition suggests the importance of understanding internal and external variables (Flowers et al., 2014). Schumacher and Meleis' (1994) model incorporates three stages of a positive transitional outcome. The transition includes a sense of well-being, mastering of new behaviors, and the well-being of interpersonal relationships (Lenz, 2001). When an individual feels a positive sense of well-being, then he or she is able to function in society and meet daily demands. As an individual masters new behaviors, he or she develops the ability to comfortably transition into new situations with ease. Finally, the developing close relationships to make a social connection allows for a positive transition (Lenz, 2001). The adolescent brain differs from an adult anatomically (physically) and neuro-chemically (chemical differences) as students transition from dependence to independence (Spears, 2000). Transitioning into adulthood brings questions for students about their future, their family, and employment opportunities (Lenz, 2001). In addition to the pre-adolescent stage to the adulthood stage during high school, students are faced with other challenges during their transition.

Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying. Forty years of research has concluded that bullying occurs in schools in the United States and internationally; however, it remains the biggest predictor of high school dropout (Hase, Goldberg, Smith, Stuck, & Campain, 2015; Cornell, Gregory, Huang & Fan, 2013). Traditional bullying involves aggression, intention,

22

repetition, and a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim with the intent to harm another repeatedly over time (Athanasiades, & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2010).

Cyberbullying is digital bothering or threatening someone online by sending unwanted messages to intentionally harass or embarrass someone. Cyberbullying occurs through email, instant messaging, cell phones, websites, and other forms of technological online platforms in cyberspace. Recent studies suggest that cyberbullying in school is a dominant problem (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016). Studies have found that 19-29% of students have been cyberbullied where 12% to 15% students cyberbully someone and 11% to 33% have been the subject of cyberbullying (Wade & Beran, 2011).

Cyberbullying and traditional bullying violates the rights of students to feel safe at school thus pressuring students to avoid behaviors, which create a decline in academic performance, loss of self-esteem and possible suicidal thoughts (Cornell et al., 2013). As Jimerson, Reschly and Hess (2008) concluded, school dropout is understood as a process of disengagement from school that appears to begin with the transition to high school rather than a sudden event. Peer victimization was associated with dropout because the experience of being teased and bullied leads to poor academic performance that in turn leads students to drop out (Cornell et al., 2013). Life events and family problems can be important factors in some cases, but school experiences appear to be the most consistent influence on high school completion (Cornell et al., 2013).

For example, authors of the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study involving 3,000 students attending 45 Philadelphia public schools found that academic difficulties in 9th grade contributed substantially to predicting dropping out (Jia, Konold & Cornell, 2016). Similarly, Howard's (2019) study of students' perceptions of school safety found that pervasive teasing and bullying in high school creates a toxic school climate and leads students to avoid, and disengage

23

from school, and these conditions contributed to students' decisions to leave school and forgo graduation. In such circumstances, a persistent climate of peer victimization can affect all students and cause a school wide impact on dropout rates (Cornell et al., 2013).

Cornell et al.'s (2013) statewide investigation of Virginia's public high schools, students reported incidents of victimization by bullying, and high school teachers reported that teasing and bullying were common. Cornell et al. surveyed 9[th]graders and teachers to measure school safety and school climate; 9th graders reported stress associated with transitioning from middle school to high school, emotional challenges of maturation, and adolescent social development. The authors suggest further transition planning to ease the adverse emotional effects associated with this event and create a positive social environment for first year students, while also preventing high school dropout.

Social Promotion Achievement Gap from Middle to High school. High school students face challenges trying to balance freedom, imposing self-monitoring, and processing rigorous coursework (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). High school grading standards are higher than middle schools and grade point average scores are more competitive (Herlihy, 2007). High school core courses are some of the toughest and most rigorous academic classes, whereas nationally 22% of 9th-graders repeat core courses (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Middle school students receive quarterly grades. If the student passes the class, he or she moves to the next grade. Alternatively, if the student does not pass, he or she must attend summer school. However, based on mitigating factors, such as an overage student, the middle school's administrative team reserves the decision to either socially promote or retain a student (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

High school students who pass their courses earn credits towards their diploma, which leads to graduation. However, if a high school student fails a course, he or she does not receive credit, and must re-take and pass the course in order to fulfill graduation requirements. Many 9[th]graders fail to realize the importance of passing courses until after they become credit deficient and are in danger of delaying their graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Research suggest that neither grade retention nor social promotion provides a successful strategy for educational success. However, research reveals that prevention and intervention strategies promote social and academic competence (Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson & Kundert, 2006). The education community and many in the public defend social or merit promotion and do not believe in the reliance on a single test performance. Some educators do not believe that retention is beneficial and carries long-term educational consequences (Martin, 2011). Social promotion does not require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points and proponents believe with extended time students become proficient, develop self-confidence, and resolve school failure (Martin, 2011). Conversely, grade retention is a key predictor of school dropout, poor academic achievement and lower post-secondary educational participation. Kariuki and Page (2001) reported a significant negative correlation between social promotion and high school achievement. The authors found socially promoting students without mastery places students at a disadvantage academically and directly impacts poor and minority students.

In 2010, Florida banned social promotion for passing students. Students are required to pass the 3rd-grade reading FCAT before being promoted to the 4th-grade. Although the plan has had some progress, it has been met with opposition. The Nation's Report Card indicates that America's high school seniors were less than half-proficient in core classes. According to

Balkcom (2014) the percentage of U. S. high school students are graduating but are not proficient and are unprepared for post-secondary education.

In 2015, Peabody County Public Schools responded to the growing population of students who were being retained as a result the third grade FCAT score. The STEP UP program or Student Trajectory Enhancement Program's purpose is to decrease the number of failing students or potential dropouts and get students on track for high school graduation. When retained students enter middle school as a sixth grader, these students are identified as participants for the STEP UP program. STEP UP students attend a mandatory summer program and upon completion, "step over" the 7th grade, and begin the following school year as an 8th-grader. STEP UP students become a part of the critical 9th-grade class transitioning into high school. A designated intervention, policy, plan or program would assist this population of students and other incoming 9th-graders with the challenges students face in high school (Ladner & Burke, 2010).

Ninth Grade Bulge – Ninth Grade Studies

Hazel, Vazirabadi, Albanes and Gallagher (2014) note the largest decrease in student promotion is between the 9th-grade and 10th-grade, indicating that failing 9th-grade is the precursor to dropping out of school. Ninth grade enrollment is increased with incoming 9th-grade students along with repeating 9th-grade students, thus creating the 9th-grade bulge which brings major consequences (Miao & Wheelock, 2005). Ninth graders who experience academic difficulties have a higher risk of being retained, become disengaged, and ultimately drop out of school. According to The Nation's Report Card (2015), America's high school students are being allowed to graduate without proficiency in Math and Science, in addition, less than half of high

school seniors are below proficiency in Reading and Writing (National Center for Education

Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

Transition and adjustment issues account for a higher enrollment in the 9th-grade and in

the subsequent years. The national high school grade level enrollment represent a trend when

compared to other high schools around the county (National Center for Education Statistics, Fall

2018). There is a pattern repeated in school districts around the nation, in particularly within

impoverished or segregated communities.

Figure 3. United States public secondary school enrollment for grades 9-12.

Reprinted from the National Center for Education Statistics, Fall 2018.

The Figure 3 shows the national high school enrollment data for the academic year 2018, which

is similar to Florida's Public school enrollment data as represented in Figure 4. When 9th-graders

fail courses, often he or she fails to get back on track, and eventually drops out of school, thus

this impact creates profound consequences on society (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). An 18-year-old

dropout earnings are approximately $260,000 less over a lifetime and contributes $60,000 less

towards federal and state income taxes when compared to a high school graduate. The class of 2010 high school dropouts will cost the nation more than $337 billion in lost wages over their lifetimes (Anderson, Harper & Bridges, 2017). High school dropouts account for an estimated 70% of the incarcerated population in the United States (McBrady & Williamson, 2010).

Figure 4. United States public secondary school enrollment for grades 9-12. Reprinted from the National Center for Education Statistics, Fall 2018.

Need for Student-Teacher Relationships.

A study conducted by Brinkworth, McIntyre, Juraschek and Gehlbach (2018) sought to assist school leaders with Teacher Student Relationship (TSR) by measuring the academic, behavior, and motivation produced when schools promote TSR relationships and connections. Evidence showed that the strength of TSRs at the high school level led to better student outcomes when adults connects with students at the secondary level, especially 9th-graders (Brinkworth, et. al, 2018). The researchers used surveys from students and teachers from four schools who volunteered to participate. The study tracked the effects on behavior, academics,

28

and motivation developed through TSRs. Freshmen students suggested that schools should include an advisory or mentoring program to strengthen TSRs, expand interactive teacher-student opportunities, and design cultural events to support positive, long-term TSRs for a smooth student transition. Positive teacher-student relationships were ranked at the heart of the high school learning environment. Students with a secure family attachment developed quicker and more positive teacher–student relationships (Brinkworth et. al., 2018). Brinkworth et al. (2018) found that engaging families in the high school transition was an essential part of student success as families and school staff members were able to coordinate home and school issues.

The Seattle Public Schools (SPS) district found that when school leaders used staff and faculty members actively to embrace and engage families, 9th graders were positively affected by family engagement. The study concluded a very strong and positive correlation between family ties and a smooth transition to high school. The school district's messaging played a crucial role for schools on how to implement family engagement and share experiences to raise and create better student outcomes.

School engagement and student-teacher relationships were influential factors for shaping student outcomes and reducing the chances for dropping out of high school. In a study by Allen, Gregory, Mikami, Lun, Hamre and Pianta (2013), the authors found effective teacher–student interactions at the secondary school classroom level predicted an increase in student achievement. The study used the Classroom Learning Assessment Scoring System, (CLASS), which was developed for secondary schools to include critical domains and dimensions of classroom interactions: emotional, classroom, and instructional support based on specific needs for secondary students. The study found that strong relationships between teachers and students produced lasting effects and consistent long-term academic success. Students with supportive

school, staff, and teacher relationships are motivated to succeed, more successful, and perform better than those who do not perceive such support (Aldrup, Klusmann, Lüdtke, Göllner & Trautwein, 2018).

Roles of Schools and Teachers. Positive and affective student–teacher relationships played an important role in students' adaptation to the school environment, essential element for school integration, favoring both academic achievement and adaptive behaviors (Pharris & Ciurej, 2012). Middle school teachers had less of an influence in high school, however, students who shared a close middle school teacher bond were able to duplicate that skill and make connections with their high school teachers (Emmer, Evertson & Worsham, 2009).

Pharris and Ciurej (2012) point out that high school teachers tend to show less personal interest, appear to be impersonal, bureaucratic, and distant to students when compared to middle school teachers while at the same time holding higher expectations on performance than middle school teachers. For lower-performing or academically insecure 9th-graders, this tends to be a callous combination. Student relationships with teachers may be the most important educational intervention for success in school and when students change schools social ties are disrupted and inverted (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004).

Langenkamp (2010) studied schools where social ties maintained during the transition to high school and were able to protect students from academic risk in their first crucial year of high school. The study used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a school-based survey, in-school questionnaires, and in-home interviews. This study concluded that middle school teachers had less of an influence in high school, but students who shared a close teacher–student bond with their middle school teachers were able to duplicate that skill and make connections with their high school teachers. Teacher bonding for low-achieving students

was not a factor; however, average or high-achieving popular students were sheltered and showed successful student-relationships during the transition.

Tinto (2006) developed a Student Retention and Dropout model addressed students who transition from one institution to another institution. Tinto (2006) designed his around the anthropological culture in which groups separate from their associates, endure a transition period and incorporate new standards and behaviors, later embrace new group behaviors. His theory offers a rationale that students need to academically develop with competence and integrate socially into the established norms, which students make a commitment to the institution and will more likely graduate (Tinto, 2006). He suggested that institution must deliberately implement academic, social and intellectual interactions to promote the culture of the new institution. Extra-curricular activities are necessary for peer-to-peer interactions, and faculty-to-student interactions (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair & Lehr, 2004). In Figure 5, the model reflects different phases of student departures from an institution and integration to a new institution.

Initially, when students' experience academic difficulties, it determines whether a student chooses to remain or leave an organization. Students need academic formal coaching to perform successfully. Next, if students are able to set educational and occupational goals then becoming more likely to associate with the institution. If students consider there is a purpose or rationale and bond with the organization, then students are more likely to stay than separate. Lastly, students need to feel connected to the institution so when students join social systems, individuals choose to remain with an institution.

To promote school improvement, assessing the value of interventions helps freshmen become successful (Brinkworth et al., 2018). Smith et al. (2008) studied how students, parents,

and school staff members perceive transitioning from middle school to high school. The research

surveyed a Midwest public school district, which had a separate school for 9th-graders, A

Freshman Center. Prior to freshmen transition, students considered their 8th-grade counselor,

their parents, and then their 8th-grade teachers as their strongest supporters and in that order.

Students expressed special interest with having better lunch selections and attending a separate

and larger school. Operationally, students expressed difficulty moving around their new school

and socially, students were concerned about bullying, rejection, security, and peer pressure.

Students suggested that schools should address academic, social, and organizational transition

activities to offer bonding opportunities for the students, the families, and the community (Smith,
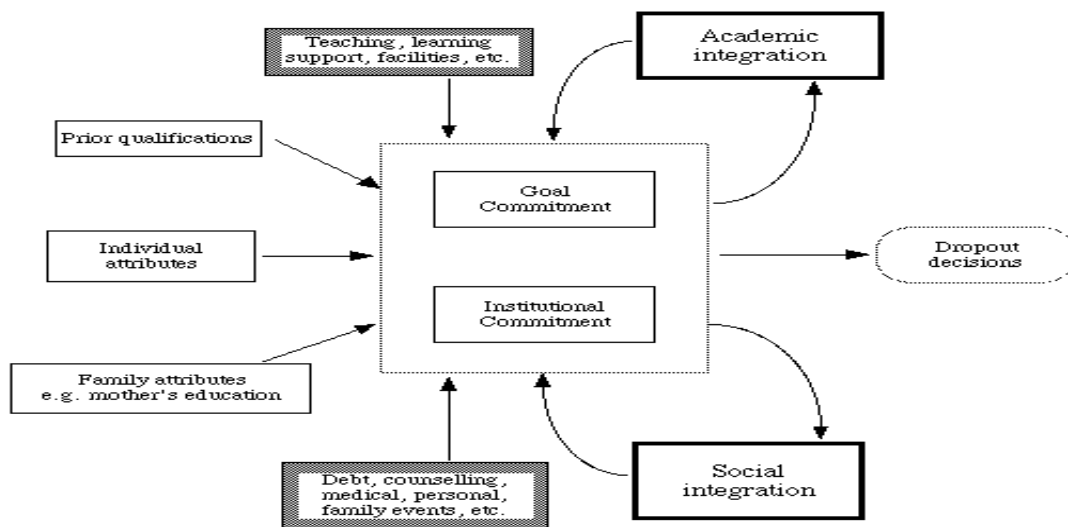
et al., 2008).

Figure 5. Model reflecting different phases of student departures from an institution and

integration into a new institution as adapted from Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher

Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational*

Research, *45*(1), 89–125. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089

No Child Left Behind

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act, (NCLB) (P.L. 107-110) was passed to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged students, close the achievement gap between high and low-performing children, close the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and disadvantaged children from their more advantaged peers (Kim & Sunderman, 2005). NCLB legislation intended to increase rigor using high-stakes assessments and accountability. However, without proper resources, schools became overcrowded, diverse without cultural competence, and saturated with novice unskilled teachers (McCarter, 2017).

Florida merged aspects of the NCLB act along with Florida's school accountability system and created the Differentiated Accountability Model. In response to the Differentiated Accountability Model, Florida grouped schools, Category I, schools with an A, B, C school grade, and Category II, schools with school grade of D and F. Category II schools, or Differentiated Schools are Title I schools in needs of improvement where more resources, specific interventions, progress monitoring roles, and measurable benchmarks are defined to close the achievement gap. Florida is the fourth largest state and has the highest average elementary and secondary student enrollment along with a large non-English population.

In response to Differentiated Accountability Model, the PCPSD developed Achievement schools, a comprehensive intervention and support plan for their Category II schools. PCPSD has identified three high schools that meet the Differentiated Accountability Model and these Achievement high schools are Alaska High School #1, California High School #2, and South Carolina High School #3. These schools have an incoming freshmen population that are faced with critical complex changes, such as, puberty, social and emotional development, peer relationships which shapes student experiences, academic achievements, and connections to

33

school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Barber and Olsen (2004) found there was a decline in self-esteem and increase feelings of depression associated with high school transition. Benner and Graham's (2009) research found when high school students transition to an urban high school, ethnic incongruence was an additional challenge students faced when they moved from middle school to high school. In addition, African American students experience a decline of school belongingness when there was ethnic incongruence, so Achievement schools with high populations of minority students need social action and concentrated adaptation systems. Achievement Schools are comprised of high populations of minority students and students who entered high school with less same ethnicity classmates were sensitive and concerned about being target of prejudice. Because the first year of high school is so important for a student's future success, the aforementioned data are factors for Achievement school schools to develop supports and interventions designed specifically for the unique developmental needs of 9th-graders and their unique academic and social features (Legters, Parise & Rappaport, 2013).

Summary

This study does not directly challenge broader policy issues. The inquiry process is transferable to other school districts that could benefit from examining stakeholder perceptions areas of disconnection from middle school to high school transition. High schools have a shared responsibility to assist students making a smooth transition due to the severity of poor and mediocre 9th-grade data. Bridging the gap from middle school to high school is paramount to the lives of pre-adolescent students and their future adulthood stage. The nation's educational debt is a combination of inequalities of economic, social and political advantages (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo & Pollock, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Creating a transition team with high school and middle school representatives facilitates and addresses gaps in student transitioning

problems and issues. When schools design solutions and interventions for 9th-graders, student

engagement, motivation, and other issues promote student progress and success.

<center>**CHAPTER THREE:**</center>

<center>**METHODS**</center>

The purpose of the study was to examine school officials' perspectives on middle school students transitioning to high schools in the PCPSD. Specifically, this study examined middle and high school administrators' responses, ideas and concerns from students leaving middle school and entering high school. The overarching goal of this case study was to examine school officials' perspective on 9th-graders transitioning to Achievement High Schools and review the district's perspective on supporting students transitioning efforts. The case study analyzed trends, patterns, and themes, which were interconnected within the 9th-grade transitioning research. This chapter highlights the following research questions, the design of the research, limitations, the data collection procedures, and the validation process.

Research Questions

1) How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition?

2) What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement High School?

3) What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students to make a successful transition to an Achievement High School?

Research Design

A case study approach and design frames the research and allows an in-depth view of the problem, and investigative research within a real-life context (Yin, 2013). According to Stake (1995), case study research tends to extract descriptions of situations and generate interpretations, provides a deeper understanding and offers a rationale for other research

<center>36</center>

practitioners. Furthermore, Thomas (2015) asserts that case study research is the most appropriate research method to describe a specific situation, and in this case, the creation of Achievement Schools in the PCPSD to address minority student achievement. Achievement schools are defined as schools that require additional support and resources in order to sustain and serve the most vulnerable students within the PCPSD.

The district labeled three high schools as Achievement High Schools and nine middle schools as Achievement Middle Schools. This case study focused on the three Achievement High Schools and their respective feeder middle schools that were identified as an Achievement school, or a Title I school. In an effort to provide insight, in this case study I collected and analyzed information from current administrators who have been employed for the PCPSD for at least 10 years. In addition, this case study provided a comprehensive review of high school freshmen transitional programs at each school, including specific data regarding the 9th-grade transition experiences to Achievement high schools, reviewed school officials' perspectives on 9th-grade developmental needs and concerns, and analyzed school administrators' insights and concerns on students transitioning to an Achievement High School. From interviews, field notes, and facts listed on Florida's Department of Education website (FLDOE), I collected and utilized current trends, data and patterns as key components in the research.

Setting

I piloted this study in PSPCD, a large, public school district with more than 130 elementary schools, 40 middle schools and 25 high schools. The PSPCD is located in the Southeastern region of the United States and has more than 200,000 students, approximately 15,000 teachers, and more than 25,000 staff members. The superintendent and the local school board manage a budget that is in excess of $3 billion.

Achievement Schools were created as the school district's school improvement intervention to address student achievement for its high-needs schools. The intervention was designed to provide a centralized support system, align school and district resources in an equitable way, improve teacher turnover rates, and confront student disciplinary issues. Achievement schools were designed to increase student achievement scores, develop the school's climate, conditions, and culture and to improve school grades from a D or an F. Ultimately, this intervention was designed to decrease the number of identified Achievement schools within five years. PCPSD was granted a $9 million grant to support school improvement and sustainability, which was used to support Achievement schools. The PCPSD proposed a turnaround for each Achievement school in 3-5 years after the implementation. In this study, I reviewed, analyzed and evaluated PCPSD's 9th-grade transitioning interventions.

Each school's performance and data determined how Achievement schools were grouped. The level of need and resources of each school determined which group the schools were placed within the tiers. Tier 3, or (T3) schools received the most intensive support and had the lowest test scores and the lowest achievement data. Tier 2, or (T2) schools were low performing schools however; these schools had higher test scores and achievement data compared to (T3) schools. Tier 1, or (T1) schools were high-needs schools but their test scores and achievement data was higher than (T3) and (T2) schools. There are 16 (T3) schools, 22 (T2) schools, and 12 (T1) schools, which are divided within 5 learning communities.

Reflexivity Statement and Researcher Bias

I have worked for PCPSD for four years, specifically with college-ready 8th-graders. As an AVID Coordinator, I advocate and focus on 9th-grade transitioning. The AVID program endorses college-ready students, promotes graduation from high school and advocates for post-

secondary education. Thus, my affinity towards ensuring students make a successful transition from middle school to high school. PCPSD has limited transition plans, programs and procedures that assist students to make a smooth transition to high school. I created a quasi-plan with area high schools in order to promote and ensure a positive, smooth and efficient transition for my 9th-grade students. I asked myself, why am I doing this particular case study, why is the research necessary, and am I ready for this study? My answer is simply: I lived, managed and overcame an unsuccessful transition. I had a support system, resolve, and goals to forge ahead, so I pledged to help others. I have taught for over 20+ years and witnessed students make successful and unsuccessful transitions, so this research was extremely personal. For almost two decades, I watched students matriculate through middle school with varying levels of success, and become distracted, disengaged, and discouraged once they transitioned to high school. In some rare cases, I witnessed students' progress through middle school then transition to high school and become focused, dedicated, and committed to graduating around high school. However, the number of failed observations far outweigh the successful, and those unsuccessful transitions inspired me to pursue this study to explore and examine post-middle school perspectives. Students who are faced with poor academics, absenteeism, and low test scores need additional transitional support with high school challenges such as, goal setting, time-management skills, and social, emotional and relationship skills.

I did not attend a summer college orientation experience, and by the second semester of my freshman year, I was placed on academic probation. My personal biases include contact with current student, former students, and incarcerated students. I am able to give these students advice, guidance, and advocate for them to seek opportunities and promote post-secondary options.

39

Each interview was recorded and the references and notes were recorded in my personal case study journal. Through an interpretative lens, the research served as a deeper understanding and helped to grasp the totality of the concepts on high school transitioning (Tracy, 2010). Through self-awareness and introspection, I made judgments using my strengths and shortcomings, to make the research authentic and logical. Case studies allow the researcher to be transparent and encourages a deeper level of participation, descriptive field notes, and comprehensive transcriptions (Tracy, 2010); therefore, I was able to share all expected and unexpected situations and encounters.

Data Collection and Development

According to Stake (1995), when using a case study as a research method, the researcher should continuously cycle through the data collection and data analysis during the research process. Field-based methods such as interviews served as a major role in the (Creswell, 2015). Primary sources included one-on-one interviews, field notes, and artifact data while secondary sources included 8th-grade records (i.e. 8th-grade attendance records, 8th-grade achievement data, and 8th-grade behavior records). Yin (2012) stated that case study research starts from a desire to derive an up-close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases, set in their real-world contexts.

Interviews

Creswell (2012) stated that by understanding individuals' lives and connecting with others' experiences, interviews uncover the authentic, genuine and distinct phenomena, specifically associated with high school transitioning. I utilized semi-structured questions, which allowed participants to elaborate, conceptualize and review each research question (See Appendix C).

Participants. The case study used a small but purposeful sample of participants to capture the elements of the research, which are reflected in the table below. The research design was to email each participant, schedule a time to interview, and capture their perspective based on their responses. Within the email, each participant was sent a questionnaire in order to collect background information. Background information collected directed participants to indicate their current title and position, number of years teaching, number of years as an administrator and the number of years participants worked at their current site (See Appendix B).

Interview Protocol. Dilley (2000) stated interviewers limit dialogue to 20%, and reserve 80% of the interview for listening intently in order to mentally and visually process questioning. Listening skills are an essential skill and increases the interpersonal effectiveness of interviewing (Dilley, 2000). Utilizing this interview procedure, allowed me to comprehend and detect what was implied. Semi-structured questions were used to investigate responses and follow-up questions were used when necessary (See Appendix C). Achievement school are high needs and school administrator have lots of demands so each interview was limited to 30 minutes to respect the participants time and schedule.

Some interviews were conducted face-to-face and others using the video conferencing application. Questions centered on middle and high school students transitioning, challenges, and student needs.

I used a video recording application to record conversations and a transcription application to provide participants with a written copy. The semi-structured questions probed participants for honest, authentic responses but avoided leading or prompting participants' responses. Each interview was a key element of this research inquiry and was transcribed and analyzed for accuracy, validity, and reliability.

41

Before each interview, I read a brief prepared confidential statement (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) to outline the purpose of the study, acknowledge the use of the audio recording device, and discuss the consent process and the voluntary nature of their participation. I provided an opportunity for the participants to ask any questions.

Maximum variation allowed a purposeful sampling that aimed to capture and describe central themes and outcomes (Patton, 2015), which are similar within the various schools. The case study used maximum variation sampling to identify common patterns and variations between middle and high schools. Patton (2015) expressed that maximum sampling produces detailed descriptions, which gives each school uniqueness and adds significance when documenting or sharing important patterns. School administrators were the intended primary participants; however, school assistant administrators' perspectives were synonymous.

Table 1. List of achievements in high schools and middle schools.

List of Schools	Title/Position	Years of Experience	Years at School
Alabama Achievement Middle School #1	School official	n	n
Alaska Achievement High School #1	School official	n	n
Brooksville Achievement Middle School #2	School official	n	n
California High School #2	School official	n	n
Delaware Achievement Middle School #3	School official	n	n
Georgia Achievement Middle School #4	School official	n	n
Jacksonville Achievement Middle School #5	School official	n	n
Maryland Achievement Middle School #6	School official	n	n
South Carolina Achievement High School #3	School official	n	n

Field Notes

      Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggest there are two types of field notes that guide research are descriptive and reflective. Descriptive field notes describe what the researcher sees, hears and experiences. Descriptive field notes detail the facts, dates, times, and settings. Reflective field notes help reflect personal accounts and experiences. Field notes are documents that capture written records, which were essential to the study and provided additional data for recording the field experiences. In addition to my field note's journal, I planned to document the schools' culture, designs of the school and details of each school.

      The data collected included descriptive and reflexive data observed while in the field. Yin (2015) suggested that the researcher must observe the subject within the environment; therefore, whenever possible, I visited each school to situate myself within the school environment and culture. Field notes provide supportive documentation, communication and lend insight to the research (Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2008). During each school visit, I made notations to become a part of the field notes. The field notes included a description of the setting and the environment, and the school's surroundings. The field notes include descriptions of the hallways, students that I encountered, and descriptions of other rooms observed during the school tour (i.e. library, cafeteria, offices).

      Minimizing Field Issues. I ensured that the responses are anonymous, participants names are listed as aliases, and written transcripts are shared with the involved participants. Due to the community and political awareness, surrounding the schools, Achievement school officials were reluctant to participate; however, I focused and phrased each question in an appreciative inquiry to gain consent. I attempted to mitigate any discrepancies or inconsistencies in the transcripts by providing participants with a transcribed copy of their interview.

Existing Archival Data. Johnston (2017) noted that existing data helps advance the research and helps the research produce in a timely manner. This case study relied on existing data, which was collected from students currently in the 8th-grade and 9th-grade. Using purposeful sampling, I used the documents that was relative to 9th-grade students transitioning to high school.

Archived data included attendance records, FSA Reading and Math scores. This data allowed me to have a clear picture of the background information on the incoming freshmen class. This archived information was public record and accessible by the school's data processor, the school's improvement plans, or the state's education website.

1. **Phase One – Artifacts data**: I collected evidence and data on the three identified Achievement High Schools and their respective feeder middle schools in the PCPSD as tabulated in Table 1. I collected the 8th-grade student achievement scores (FSA data), the 9th-grade promotion rates, and 9th-grade documentation.

2. **Phase Two - Interviews**: I interviewed school administrators, or the assistant school administrators for the respective Achievement High School and their feeder middle schools. Prior to each interview, each participant completed a demographic background survey. This online survey collected data to provide descriptions of the participants' background and helped schedule meeting times and dates.

3. **Phase Three – Observation and field notes data**: I collected 8th-grade and 9th-grade scores, records, rates and other pertinent data from each schools' data processor, school's website, counseling department, and student success department. I utilized a personal field note journal to note specific details and describe the schools, culture, environment and setting.

Data Analysis

This case study used three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Moghaddam, 2006). I coded and analyzed emerging trends, patterns, and themes (Stake, 1995).

Open Coding. Open coding examines the data and compares parts of the data to create categories. Based on the responses from the participants, I sorted the data into categories that shared similar themes, patterns, or trends. After transcribing the data, I used the written documents to complete the interpretive inquiry. Using the research questions, I used participants' responses to tentatively code and make subject headings. The frequency of the codes established a hierarchy of explanations and answered each research questions based on their meaningfulness.

Axial Coding. Using the data from open coding, the categories connected and identified relationships within the responses. I used axial coding to arrange, manage and label the open coding headings into categories through stronger relationships.

Selective Coding. Coded and categorized themes synthesized into statements are best expressed a case study's structure (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Main headings established selective coding throughout the coding process, which correlated major categories and themes, validated data relationships, and refined the information given to create a thematic map. I sorted the data to establish headings, and then grouped the data into subcategories; finally, I analyzed the data for emerging and repeating themes. I color-coded and disaggregated major themes when subsequent codes were developed. For additional review, I categorized and arranged data responses by the accuracy of the words or phrases retrieved in the data. I will use a professional

transcription service. I relied on my field notes data to capture nuances, intonations and body language during the responses.

Managing and organizing the data. Patton (2015) stated that gathering data techniques such as notes from documents, interviews, observations, and reflections are essential to case study research. Furthermore, White, Oelke and Friesen (2012), noted that organizing the data systematically generates credible qualitative research and managing qualitative data ensures rigor in data collection, data analysis and interpretation. Data collected was stored on a USB flash drive with an encrypted code for security. Passwords were used security and confidentiality in order to protect the data and documents.

Quality, Credibility and Validity of Research

The goal of a case study is to describe a specific case and its key issues, which employs multiple strategies for validation. Tracy (2010) suggests there are eight elements that bring validation to a qualitative case study research which have represented in Figure 7. These elements offer an informative tool for the qualitative research community, encourage a platform for qualitative scholars to unify, and stimulate dialogue from qualitative methodologist. The eight "big-tent" standards are a) a worthy topic; b) rich rigor; c) sincerity; d) credibility; e) resonance; f) significant contribution; g) ethical; and h) meaningful coherence. Although qualitative researchers debate the need for guidelines as unnecessary, the criteria provides a path to expertise, credibility, and quality and sets rules, serves as guidelines for learning, and contributes to the practice (Tracy, 2010).

Transitioning from 8th-grade to 9th-grade at an Achievement High School provides a relevant, significant, and interesting subject matter based on the goals of the PCPSD. The raised graduation rate of 90% of students to graduate by 2020 was the district's benchmark. The

significant quantitative standard was interesting to study if the district's plan included 9th-grade transitioning strategies.

Tracy (2010) noted that qualitative research expresses rich rigor that incorporates essentials and relies on concepts such as thick descriptions, theoretical constructs, and data sources. Achievement Schools were a new district intervention with notable goals, and made a provocative, unique and valuable case study of the PCPSD school district. Qualitative researchers use dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability as a trustworthiness guide to ensure rigor, and as a researcher (Anney, 2014). I used pseudonyms for participants' privacy and aliases as the schools' names to remain anonymous and confidential. I made judgments regarding my strengths and shortcomings. With over 20 years of educational experience from coaching, teaching, and training, and a master's degree, my experiences regarding this research allowed me to incorporate my roles, my identity, and my purpose.

Triangulation. Triangulation uses multiple data sources to assist in determining the reality of a case or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). This exploratory case study research used interviews, archival documents, and field notes to collect data, which enabled triangulation of the findings as a method to analyze the research. As directed by Creswell (2012), to review for accuracy and validity, each participant received a copy of their transcribed interview. Documents, observations, and interviews lend credibility in a case study, and data was assimilated as per Figure 6, as I analyzed for major themes, patterns, and trends and coded unique evidence of the study. I established credibility by producing a sound research plan, disclosing my personal values, biases, and experiences and my limitations as I analyzed the data.

Figure 6. Assimilation and integration of research techniques for data collection.

Limitations

There are three key limitations to this study. First, I am a current PSCD District employee, which can provide valuable insight with cons and pros on as a researcher. In addition, I work directly with 8th-graders transitioning to high school so my background, biases and preconceptions, are entangled within the research. It is impossible to separate my numerous years of teaching experiences from the research; however, a clear understanding of my own prejudices and opinions brings integrity to the data collection process and data analysis of the study.

Second, the Achievement schools are highly publicized and politicized, so school officials' apprehension to participating in the study was factored. Although I stressed the confidentiality and anonymity, school officials' perceptions regarding sharing information in detail may have been problematic.

Last, Achievement schools are new and popular so there is limited research regarding their context as well as their effectiveness. The district's piloted intervention was an optimistic model that with significant deadlines and benchmarks. In addition, Achievement schools share similarities but have different and unique characteristics so the results are varied.

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically

Figure 7. The various means, practices, and methods to achieve superior qualitative research. Source: Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(10), 837–851.

Summary

This chapter described Achievement schools' mission for school improvement and outlined the study's design, research method, and data analysis process. The research plan detailed the data collection methods, the data analysis processes and the organization and security of the research. Validation strategies, along with limitations to the study were outlined

and recognized in the nature of the research. Finally, research strategies best practices were

described to maintain and secure data, maintain credibility and ensure trust.

CHAPTER FOUR:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The Findings

This chapter provides a brief description of participants, research methodology, and analysis and summary of the findings. In this case study, I examined the 9th-grade-transitioning process within the Peabody County Public School District and explored how middle and high school administrators perceived 9th-grade transitioning. From individual interviews, middle and high school administrators' responses were synthesized to express their views.

Purpose Restated

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of how school administrators perceive the transition process experienced by middle school students transitioning to Achievement high schools in the Peabody County Public School District, PCPSD. Studies suggest that when students do not transition successfully, they become detached from high school, influenced negatively by their peers and withdrawn from educational opportunities (Blount, 2012). Awareness of these issues is essential in order to operate and manage systems specified for 9th-grade achievement.

My driving force for this research was to examine the support systems that help middle school students successfully transition to an Achievement high school. When there is an emphasis placed on transitioning to high school, high schools reduce the 9th-grade failure rate, truancy rate, and dropout rate.

Additionally, I wanted to explore how school administrators perceive their handling of middle school students transitioning to an Achievement high school. Ninth grade failure rate being a national problem, I wanted to examine how school administrators' influence and management systems address and solve the district's failure rate. In the next section, I will

Table 2.

Qualitative demographic data enlisting participants' background information.

Participating Schools	Gender	Title	Years in Education/ Years at Current School	Education
Alabama Achievement Middle School	Female	Principal	15/1	M.Ed.
Alaska Achievement High School	Female	Assistant Principal	11/1	M.Ed.
Brooksville Achievement Middle School	Female	Principal	25/2	M.Ed.
Gainesville Middle School	Male	Principal	20/1.5	Ed.D.
Georgia Achievement Middle School	Female	Principal	25/1.5	M.Ed.
Jacksonville Achievement Middle School	Female	Principal	15/2	Ed.S.
Sarasota Achievement Middle school	Male	Principal	20/1	M.Ed.
South Carolina Achievement High School	Male	Principal	20/1.5	Ed.D.
Washington High School	Female	Assistant Principal	12/1	Ed.S.

discuss specific information on the 9th-grade transition, the demographics of the participants' backgrounds, research questions, and a thorough analysis of the respondents' interviews.

Demographic Data

Through purposeful sampling, I recruited participants who would provide comprehensive information in order to investigate the phenomenon of transition to Achievement schools within this school district. I collected qualitative data from nine participants: five participants were

school principals and 4 were assistant principals. Among them, three participants of the 9 were male and 6 were female. The school administrators represented 2 Achievement high schools, 4 Achievement middle schools, and 3 Title I schools. All participants were former classroom teachers and had previous or current experience working in Achievement schools. However, each participant had less than 2 years of experience in their current role at their school.

I conducted three interviews face-to-face and six via individual video conference call. In Table 2, the participants and participating schools', pseudonyms are listed with each administrator's sex, current position, and educational accomplishments.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1) How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition?

2) What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement High School?

3) What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students to make a successful transition to an Achievement High School?

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

In this study, I applied two case study methodologies. I used Stake's (1995) case study approach to gather the data and to collect meaningful information, and then I combined Thomas' (2015) constant comparative method to analyze the qualitative data. Stake's (1995) case study approach allowed me to use a constructivist view, to validate the respondents' perspective and give depth to the participants' knowledge and experiences. The constructivist approach allowed me to study the truths, relate the themes to the data, and recognize the importance of human social constructs (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Through school administrators', lenses, views, and

stories, I was able to capture intimate perspectives on 9th-graders' transitions to the most challenging schools within the PCPSD.

I tried to extract meaningful information while remaining neutral throughout interviews and data analysis process. Using the Otter.ai web application, live dialogues were converted and transcribed. Finally, I was able to generate transcriptions of the interviews. After reviewing the transcriptions for accuracy and editing personal information, I provided each participant with a written copy. Administrators were given the opportunity to review and correct the transcript for accuracy and certainty.

Thomas (2015) recommends using thematic analysis to analyze qualitative narratives. The thematic analysis helped me to identify significant responses, and to analyze and interpret patterns as data was collected. This method was used throughout the study as I processed, established, and compared responses with codes, themes, and theories. Open coding allowed me to organize the data and form categories; it permitted me to connect the categories, and through selective coding, I developed themes to form a narrative. Through open coding, axial, and selective coding, I assigned values to the data, identified similar properties, and refined concepts.

Summary of Findings

Three research questions guided this study. Below each research question and its findings are explained, defined and examined. Additionally, direct quotations, examples, and descriptions are linked to the research to support the data. The section will conclude with an overall summary of the findings. Figure 8 displays a visual representation of the frequency of terms and thoughts shared by participants tracked throughout the interviews.

Figure 8. Code cloud representing frequencies of codes recorded in participant interviews relating to challenges in 9th-grade transitioning.

    Research Question #1. How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition?

A central theme that school administrators perceived that would institute a successful 9th-grade transition involves early engagement, elaborate preparation and substantial supports between the middle and high schools, their families and their communities. Due to the nature of Achievement High schools, respondents alleged that if students were pre-exposed to high school's expectations, were paired with a coach or a mentor, families were connected to transitioning, and wraparound services were available, 9th-graders would have a smoother transition from middle school to high school. School leaders responded that instituting a stronger articulation process between the participating schools would serve the schools, students, and the community. An articulation process, which would coordinate middle schools and high school's needs so that the two educational entities would share resources, supports, and strategies to assist

9th-grade students as they navigate the pitfalls associated with transitioning to an Achievement high school.

Exposure to expectations

Respondents described 9th-grade students as being underexposed to high schools' expectations, which leads to critical transitioning issues. School administrators described the critical transitioning issues using several idioms to describe the complex, life-changing experience.

School administrators expressed that students are not "aware of the moment," and that the "clock starts ticking," which meant that every high school day counts. These expressions signaled the urgency with transitioning to an Achievement high school and the demands associated, which far outweigh any previous transition and influences in the students' upcoming plans. Unlike the 6th-grade transition to middle school, the 9th-grade transition was described as the path to your future and transformation into becoming a young adult.

School leaders stated that there are so "many moving pieces" involved in high school, that it can be overwhelming for a 9th-grader to transition to high school. "Many moving pieces" were referenced, as situation is complex with different departments, personnel and components within a high school. Unlike middle school, subjects are departmentalized high school and teachers operate independently. This organizational change can present challenges for students to maneuver and manage high school affairs.

School leaders expressed concerns that 9th-graders were unaware of high school expectations and that acclimating 9th-graders before high school began would benefit students, staff, faculty and the community. Successful transition to 9th-grade includes exposing middle

school students to high school's expectations, rules, and procedures. Ninth graders who are aware of the rules of conduct have a better understanding of the high school's parameters.

School administrators shared the ideas of setting up programs to help 9th-graders transition. South Carolina's high school administrator proposed a summer bridge program, and another Washington's high school administrator recommended a freshman orientation course. Both programs targeted towards introducing high school requirements to middle schoolers, and the suggested programs would increase awareness and attention to the complexities of high school. The summer bridge program introduces 9th-graders to Achievement high school's expectations through an informal and interactive summer course. The intended high school "introductory summer bridge program" introduces skills and procedures that the administrators had considered necessary for high school success.

The mandatory freshman orientation course was similar to the summer bridge program, but it would instead function as a formal course taken during their freshman year. The course design would acclimate students to high school's requirements, similar to a college freshman 101 course, which is an introductory course to ease transitioning of students into post-secondary education.

Another school leader preferred a small learning community, a separate wing within the high school just for 9th-graders. Ninth graders would be isolated from upper-level students and managed separately within the school. The 9th-grade separation would serve two purposes: 1) it would allow freshmen some exposure to high school and the high school concepts, and 2) it would lend reprieve from high school's pressures and stress. The small learning community concept was highly recommended for 9th-graders transitioning as it resembles middle school but enforces high schools' values, rules, and expectations. Leaders wanted to expose 9th-graders to

the importance of high school by transitioning their mindset, social-awareness and the physical effects during their freshman year.

Coaching and mentoring

School leaders expressed that many 9th-graders are timid, lack confidence and struggle to fit-in. Middle school students transferring to high school have a desire to fit-in, assimilate and adapt to their new school. Administrators explained that some students need additional support and guidance from a mentor or a coach. Achievement schools have many academically and vulnerable students; participants explained that coaches and mentors were necessary to support, affirm, and strengthen doubts, plans, and progress associated with 9th-grade.

Coaching programs are recommended as best practices to support students; hence, two schools are implementing coaching and mentoring programs in the fall. Georgia Achievement Middle school was granted a federally funded mentoring program, and Washington High School will launch a school-based mentorship program aimed to help students transfer to high school. Georgia's Achievement Middle School mentoring program will match college students to middle school students and serve as their mentor from middle school throughout high school. Washington High school's mentorship program will assign high school juniors and seniors to mentor incoming 9th-grade students as well as become mentors to elementary students. Ninth graders are accustomed to the nurturing atmosphere that middle school offers, so supplying an adult to mentor 9th-graders increases a successful transition.

Parental involvement

High school administrators reported that parents often do not support students at the high school level as compared to other elementary and middle school levels. Parental involvement was discussed as the key to a successful 9th-grade transition. Achievement high school leaders

indicated that many of their students' parents work multiple jobs and are unavailable to attend school functions. They also stated that in some situations, the parents and students are both working and unable to attend school activities, functions, or conferences.

Middle school leaders indicated that they lacked strong parental support at their schools and that their initial interaction with parents/guardians were often due to a behavior or discipline issue. The Parent-Teacher Association program, or PTA, is a popular school-based group that allows families to connect and engage with the school. A school leader expressed that their school PTA was nonexistent. They shared that parents would casually support students' at their sporting events, musical performances, and honors programs but would shun parent-teacher conferences. Each quarter, PCPSD sanctioned parent-teacher conferences in an effort to allow parents to discuss their child's academic achievement with each teacher.

School leaders alleged that if families were more involved with school business and the student's academic progress, the number of discipline incidents would decrease and family support would promote student achievement, confidence, and determination. Administrators believe that parental involvement plays a significant role to assist 9th-graders in transitioning successfully, and parents who are active in their school's functions and activities ease the transition for their child.

Wraparound services

Participants expressed that wraparound services would help facilitate and encourage learning and reduce some challenges 9th-graders face transitioning to an Achievement high school. School administrators explained that Achievement high school students have many challenges due to their family life, their community and their social-economic status. Wraparound services, such as therapy, childcare services, tutoring services, etc., undergird

students, the school, and their communities. Wraparound services are designed to support the complexities associated with impoverished communities and would extend beyond the schools, adjoining agencies that specialize in the needs of their families, community and neighborhoods. The Georgia Achievement Middle School principal stressed that ensuring wraparound services was a essential need for students to transition successfully in 9th-grade and become a successful high school student.

In Figure 9, the graph shows the 2018-19 free and reduced lunch rate of the participating schools. The free and reduced lunch, FRL, rate is the number of students whose household income is less than 130% of the poverty line. Sarasota Achievement Middle School had almost 100% free and reduced lunch rate, FRL, which was highest out of the participating schools. Washington High School had slightly over 50% FRL; it was the lowest rate in the study.

Figure 9. Florida Department of Education. (2018-19).

Most of the schools have a 70% or higher FRL, and wraparound services benefit students' non-academic needs so that students can concentrate on their academic assignments.

Research Question 2. What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement high school?

This research question triggered the most responses from the school administrators' perspectives. The participants responded with explanations, clarifications, and personal examples. A theme emerged that school administrators believed students transitioning to Achievement high schools are faced with high academic demands and responsibilities and need strong support services to transition successfully. Three major topics developed as a result such as culture shock, academic workload, and support services.

Culture shock

Respondents indicated that students transitioning to an Achievement high school are in for "culture shock". The "Culture shock" was explained, as students will be absorbed by the differences from middle school to high school. High school is a time where schooling becomes increasingly more complex in terms of the sheer number of people (both students and teachers), student responsibility, and complexity in scheduling, makes for a highly complicated situation. These difficulties, the school leaders indicate, can become overwhelming for 9th-graders and lead to poor decisions.

Alaska's Achievement high school administrator replied, "Students will be distressed just by the number of students who are enrolled in high school." The largest high school in the study has nine times as many students as the smallest middle school. High school freshmen challenges are not limited to academic adjustments, but the pressures are demanding, imposing and at times perplexing.

Academic workload

The academic workload in high school differs greatly from middle school coursework. Washington High School's administrator stated that all 9th-graders preregister for Honors Freshman English class and are required to complete summer reading assignments. Required summer reading increases rigor significantly more than the expectations during middle school within this community.

Figure 10 shows the 8th-grade Florida State Assessment (FSA) for the participating middle schools. The 2018-19 Math and English Language Arts (ELA) scores are highlighted with the number of students that scored a level 3. *Graph 1* shows that Brooksville Middle School had over 35% of their students to score a level 3 on the ELA FSA. Sarasota Achievement Middle school had the lowest number of students to score a level 3 on the ELA FSA within the middle schools w Alabama Achievement Middle School, Georgia Achievement School and Gainesville Middle School had slightly over 30% of their students to score a level 3 in math. Sarasota Achievement Middle school had less than 10% of their students to score a level 3 on math FSA, which was the lowest number within the middle schools.

Figure 11 shows the number of level 4 scores on the 8th-grade 2018-19 Florida State Assessment (FSA) in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) for the participating schools. Graph 2 shows Alabama Achievement Middle School and Brooksville Middle School had slightly over 10% of their students to score a level 4 on the FSA in ELA. Sarasota Achievement Middle School had the lowest number of students to score a level 4 on the ELA FSA with less than 1% and they did not have any students to score a level 4 on math on the FSA. Alabama Achievement Middle School had the highest number of students to score a level 4 on the Math FSA with slightly over 10% of their students. ith slightly below 15%.

Figure 10. 2018-19 Participating Middle Schools FSA Scores

Collectively, the participating middle schools had under 15% of students to score a level 4 on FSA in ELA and in math. The 8th-grade proficiency rates indicate that the academic workload in high school will pose a challenge for 9th-grade students. High school students are expected to score proficiency on standardized tests such as the end-of-course assessments, PSAT, etc. Based on the 2018-19 8th-grade ELA and Math scores, the academic workload in middle school was challenging and shows their inability to pass standardized test with efficiency. Developing functional support services such as tutoring, mentoring, and coaching for will support 9th-graders transitioning into Achievement high schools.

Alaska's Achievement High School administrator noted that there were a significant amount of 9th-grade failures and they were forced to come to school early or stay after school in order to retake classes online in their credit recovery labs. She described the credit recovery labs as "cut throat" since the credit recovery lab teacher did not tolerate unproductive students; the

Figure 11. Florida Department of Educations 2018-19.

lab spots were crucial, and unproductive students were dismissed without hesitation. She noted that 9th- grade failures were a result of a lack of academic performance and the higher academic demands in high school. She also responded that 9th-grade students often lacked the diligence and relentlessness necessary to complete assignments while they were in the credit recovery labs.

Support services

Respondents stated that a structured support system would supplement the school's faculty and staff, by monitoring attendance, grades, and other students' needs. Structured support service is a model used as a safety net, to catch students, so they do not fall through the cracks. School administrators stated that an essential for 9th-grade transitioning is the structured support system that tracks students, so the most vulnerable students feel a part of the school.

Alaska's Achievement High School administrator stated that many students suffer from undiagnosed mental health problems, and the school lacks proper staffing to meet their needs. Leaders stressed that to meet the needs of Achievement high school 9th-grade students; schools should employ full-time psychologists, counselors, nurses, social workers, and coaches. Support services benefit and accommodate the high needs associated with students who live in

impoverished areas. Many of the school administrators shared Alaska's school administrator concerns.

Research Question 3. What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students to make a successful transition to an Achievement high school?

As a theme, school officials discussed essential needs for 9th-graders included services from the school that were more non-academic, centered on supporting social development, motivation and extended learning opportunities. Leaders believed that in order for 9th-graders to transition successfully, Achievement high school leaders had to plan to ensure maximum student engagement and support systems to address students' social and emotional needs.

Student engagement

Transitioning to an Achievement high school requires the school to engage potential students before the school year begins. Athletics, arts, clubs and other extra-curricular activities were recommended to connect and engage students. Schoolwide club programs were suggested as being the most effective and inclusive for all students. Schoolwide clubs are able to assign students to their personal interests, with peers who share a common interest along with a sponsor/teacher who will support the club's activities. Administrators stressed that connecting 9th-graders with an adult and like-minded peers in an informal way was a practical method to engage students and to increase enthusiasm.

Respondents advised that 9th-graders did not really understand their "why" once they transition to high school, so an incentive program would assist them with establishing their "why." School leaders advised to increase student engagement; Achievement high schools should start an incentive program for the 9th-graders. Incentive programs provide freshmen with goals, motivate school participation, and encourage student performance. Schoolwide incentive

programs would include students, staff, and faculty members and give 8-grade students'

motivation, a connection and a purpose.

Leaders also discussed instituting PBIS—positive behavioral interventions and supports

system, which is a reputable behavior practice that can be used schoolwide and within individual

classrooms. Student engagement was essential for student productivity because students are

confronted with so many issues. School administrators noted that they were successful when they

used PBIS as it offered incentives for engaging students. School leaders recommend skills and

strategies that teach students how to channel their emotions healthily.

Social-emotional learning

School administrators responded that access to SEL supports positive student behavior,

communication skills, and problem-solving skills. Social-emotional learning, or SEL classes,

were highly recommended as essential by administrators to support 9th-grade transitioning.

Administrators responded that an essential need for freshmen entering Achievement high schools

was to support students mentally and emotionally as they transform into young adults. Alaska's

Achievement high school administrator stated 9th-graders had more discipline referrals compared

with the other grade levels, and that many of those referrals were due to their inability to control

emotions. Participants recommended that Achievement high schools' freshman receive lessons,

curriculum, skills and practice to teach students how to control and express their feelings. School

leaders expressed that 9th-graders need skills such as resilience, resolve and resourcefulness to

meet the epic high school transitioning process.

Washington's high school administrator explained that it was essential for freshmen to

develop good communication skills, learn to self-advocate and to express their emotions

healthily. South Carolina's Achievement administrator stated that social-emotional learning

curriculum improves students' attitudes, helps students developmentally, and builds relationships and connections for a successful transition. Participants replied transitioning to high school influences 9th-grade self-confidence and their educational learning opportunities and outcomes. SEL curriculum allows schools to model the expected behaviors and establish a behavioral standard.

Summary

The PCPSD utilizes informal practices to support middle school students transitioning to Achievement and traditional high schools. While most of the school administrators were recently appointed to their positions, there is no formal transitioning policy or plan to help rising 9th-grade students to transition to high school. Many of the recommendations suggested for 9th-graders transitioning to Achievement high schools were non-academic interventions, target middle schoolers, and an early transitioning approach. When the Achievement high schools and feeder middle schools align and collaborate their efforts, it will facilitate 9th-grade transitioning and improve student achievement across the Peabody County Public School District.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this case study was to determine how school administrators perceive the transitioning process experienced by middle school students transitioning to Achievement high schools in the PCPSD. Over the last 30 years, high schools have experienced a decline in grade enrollments when students transition from middle to high school, particularly students that are from impoverished neighborhoods (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Higher graduation qualifications and insecure transitions are factors that lead to high school students dropping out (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Ninth grade is a critical year for students academically and high schools should provide 9th-graders with as much guidance and direction to create a smooth transition from middle school which can potentially reduce high school dropout outs (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). High school 9th-graders have the highest dropout rates, which reflects a social crisis in society, however lower high school dropout rates show the strength of our society (McKee & Calderella, 2016).

Summary of Study Design and Research Questions

Empirical data from one-on-one interviews with current, Title I, and Achievement school administrators was analyzed using a grounded theory method to answer three research questions:

1) How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition?

2) What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement High School?

3) What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students to make a successful transition to an Achievement High School?

Summary of Major Findings

Education is viewed as the ultimate alignment between all races, and schools have been charged with providing an equal learning opportunity to the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups (Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009). Within the PCPSD, Achievement high schools have the lowest graduation rates and a sizable high-needs population. At-risk students start disengaging before they get to high school, and consequences create severe repercussions for the economy and society (Rumberger, 2017). Ninth grade is the most vulnerable grade, so early interventions before high school are recommended as an extremely powerful strategy to prevent truancy, failure, and dropping out (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Blount, 2012).

In Florida, the high school dropout rate between Black and Latino students is more than 50% *(*Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009*)*. In addition to the challenges associated with high needs Achievement high schools, participants reported that other obstacles prevent them from establishing quality comprehensive programs. Such obstacles as a nonexistent district transitioning policy, lack of personnel, and miscommunication between the middle and high schools obstruct schools from supporting 9th-grade transitioning. Appendix A outlines a Call to Action, which list innovations for school districts to address 9th-grade transitioning and prevent 9th-grade dropouts and Appendix B, explores helpful tips for schools to implement during the pandemic.

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) examined 9th-grade issues and found that transitioning was the one overarching problem students faced from leaving 8th-grade and entering 9th-grade. Participants admitted that freshmen were underexposed to high school's

expectations. Forty percent of students suffer significantly from the challenges associated with middle to high school transitioning, as many experience loneliness, isolation, and disconnection (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). At Achievement schools, participants described that such obstacles are intensified within impoverished neighborhoods and schools must work to undergird their freshmen students.

All of the study participants have or have had experiences with Achievement schools, schools in high-needs areas, and impoverished communities. Study participants were screened by the PCPSD through their rigorous administrative selection process. Participants have completed the district's Leaders Academy, and have a Masters, Specialist or Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. In addition, all research participants were former classroom teachers and have experiences working at the elementary and secondary levels.

The first research question explored how school administrators perceived a successful 9th-grade transition. Hertzog (2006) determined that schools must design a transitional approach for students entering high school because their transfer is fundamental to the high school graduation rate. In describing a successful transition, participants listed a variety of plans, middle school administrators had similar concepts, whereas high school administrators presented comparable viewpoints. Middle school administrators replied that a successful transition to high school is a strategic, intentional collaboration between the two schools. High school administrators preferred to establish a summer bridge program, or offer a freshman course, or organize a peer mentor program. There was a general agreement that school administrators should plan and collaborate for transitioning students.

Roybal, Thornton and Usinger (2014) recommended that schools design a comprehensive transitioning program with three to five strategies for a successful intervention.

Many school administrators indicated that middle and high schools should collaborate using best practices to expose and assist student transitioning. Participants suggested findings that were similar to strategies proposed by Roybal et al., (2014), such as parental involvement, homework assistance, attendance incentive programs, credit recovery options, block scheduling, small learning communities, and student success celebrations.

For example, Sarasota's administrator responded that his students entering Achievement high school "will feel like they are in a twilight zone", and they would experience grave challenges without intentional assistance to support their transition. Roybal et al., (2014) recommended that at-risk students need additional supports and guidance for transitioning.

Study participants acknowledged that transitioning programs and a district policy to support students' high school experiences would help 9th-grade students. Roybal (2011) concluded that when freshman programs are implemented with at least five transitional strategies, high schools facilitate a smooth transition, promote academic success, and encourage graduation. In addition, these strategies led to significant improvement in the high school's culture and climate and freshman reported improved self-awareness, increased self-confidence, and a sense of belongingness (Roybal, 2011).

After examining the perception of an ideal 9th-grade transition, this led me to inquire what challenges school administrators believed students would face once enrolled in an Achievement high school. Supporting students' transitions to high school should be a top priority for urban high school administrators to reduce dropout rates (Neild et al., 2008). School administrators described that students transitioning to Achievement high schools were academically unprepared for high school's rigor and demands. Eighth grade middle school academic data collected from the FLDOE website showed low student proficiency as students

71

were narrowly promoted to the 9th-grade. Johnston and Williamson (2013) noted that students

drop out of ninth grade for three reasons: poor academic performance, low attendance, and a lack

of engagement. Fifty percent of 8th-grade students scored below levels III and IV for ELA and

Math; however, once in high school in order to graduate, they are required to successfully pass

standardized test. In the middle-to-high school transition period, students experience academic

loss with test scores dropping and struggling middle-school students do not receive critical

thinking instruction skills required for high school success (Queen, 2013; Slater & Horstman,

2002). Middle schools 8th-grade ELA and Math level III scores were slightly under 35%, and

ELA and Math level IV scores were below 15%. Ninth grade students transitioning to high

school experience overwhelming challenges as they shift from middle school to high school and

those that lack the academic preparedness for high school often repeat the ninth grade or drop out

of high school (Blount, 2012). Study participants proposed Achievement high schools provide

credit recovery, peer tutoring and block scheduling to support the academic gaps experienced by

freshmen.

Transitioning entails moving from one state or situation for another, often bringing

uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety, and the move from middle to high school is one of the most

difficult transitions in education (Queen, 2013; Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2014). Over the past

decades, public schools have maintained a purely academic focus; as society has evolved,

schools must now detect and screen for academic, behavioral, and psychological problems,

specifically among at-risk students, in order to provide a supportive learning environment

(Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007). Participants discussed that

9th-grade students experience emotional, mental, and physical concerns, including bullying and

cyberbullying when transitioning to Achievement high schools. Schools must manage and

commit to meeting these needs for students to be successful. School administrators suggested 9th-graders need support systems because their roles switch as they leave as middle school as leaders, enter high school, and become marginalized. Many rising 9th-grade students lack skills to create personal relationships with teachers and coping strategies necessary for transitioning from adolescent behaviors to developing into adulthood (Coffey, 2013). Thus, as echoed by the many middle school participants, "They become lost and slip away without anyone noticing". Rodríguez and Conchas (2009) reported youth are empowered when they realize their strengths and have the proper support to build on them.

What could students do to avoid becoming lost and unnoticed? This inquiry led me to ask participants my third research question, what essentials are necessary for 9th-graders to grasp as they transition to an Achievement high school. Participants responded that students needed knowledge of social-emotional skills. Alabama's administrator replied, "Students will have so many things coming at them all at once." Freshman must mentally shift from the typical nurturing environment found in middle schools, to gathering and acquiring SEL skills to understand and control their behaviors to become successful. Dealing with peer relationship, challenging interactions, and making wise decisions, students need social-emotional competencies. Atwell and Bridgeland's (2019) five-core skills self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and sensible decision-making are necessary to effectively manage emotions. These traits correlated with both middle and high school administrators' perceptions of what students need to be successful when transitioning to high school. According to Atwell and Bridgeland (2019), principals understand the value of social-emotional skills and believe that social-emotional skills positively affects students' in-school experiences. In addition,

principals believe that nurturing social-emotional skills predict high school graduation and position students to obtain post-secondary educational opportunities.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are situational or conditional circumstances that may affect the results and findings (Creswell, 2013). There were three notable limitations to this study. The first limitation was the number of participants in this study. Nine school administrators who currently or have previously worked in Achievement, high-needs, and Title I schools were invited to participate. Although I sought to include an administrator from one other Achievement high school, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and leadership changes, I was unable to do so. One limitation of qualitative research is that results are not transferable beyond the study population. Diversity and gender were not representative of the overarching population of school administrators at Achievement schools. Six of the nine participants were currently working in a middle-school setting; thus, adding additional high school leaders to the participant population would have provided greater in-depth knowledge of best practices practiced for student transition. By including the original California high school administrator, as his representation would have allowed a deeper understanding of practices other participants have used to support middle school students transitioning to high school.

The second limitation was relying on interviews to obtain participants' perceptions. A survey might have captured more attributes, including strengths and weaknesses of current practices. Open-ended questions allowed me to control the flow of the interviews and pose follow-up queries, as needed, based on participants' responses.

The third limitation was the accuracy of capturing participants' perceptions. Three interviews took place face-to-face before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the others administered

via online conferencing software. Conducting interviews in different environments might have affected the degree of openness with which participants responded. The setting of the interviews prevented the essence from capturing participants' body language, which could cause an altered or skewed representation through the online platform. In addition, participants responded during the end of the 2019-2020 school year, which was interrupted by the coronavirus. School administrators' provided assertions and observations based on students who had attended schools face-to-face for slightly under an eight-month period.

Implication and Recommendation for the Future

Chau (2009) found two conditions to predict 9th-grade dropout: poor attendance and failing English and/or math. Educational strategists can use this data to guide, direct, and legislate opportunities to mitigate these predictors, thus setting up 9th-graders for success. Without districts taking action, the average daily high school dropout rate will increase by 7,000 students and for minority and low-income students less than 50 percent of high school students may graduate (Chau, 2009). School districts must address this national crisis and the PCPSD has taken a step towards to focus on minority and low-income students. However, there is overwhelming evidence to provide and direct support towards 9th-grade transitioning.

This case study was a means to explore school administrators' visions, ideas, and insights on 9th-graders transitioning in the PCPSD. Achievement high school administrators and their respective feeder schools should schedule quarterly briefings to share their concerns, questions, and solutions for supporting 9th-grade transitioning. These briefings would improve collaboration, corroboration, and communication between the schools, facilitating school-based decisions that benefit students and teachers while working in conjunction with other schools, resulting in innovative ideas, resources, and practices to implement.

The PCPSD needs additional human resources to help students prepare to transition to an Achievement high school. The PCPSD has made many personnel cuts, requiring employees to take on more responsibilities. With an emphasis on increasing graduation rates, the district should allocate funds for employing staff to help 9th-graders transition to high school, thus allowing administrators to manage transitioning programs for their school.

In 2000, Florida had the highest attrition rate in the United States, with more than 20% of 9th-graders leaving school before graduation (Stanley, 2007). The PCPSD needs a 9th-grade transition policy in an effort to ease transition from middle school to high school, which predicts high school graduation rates. Student advancement rates from ninth to 10th-grade are the lowest compared with other high school students (Johnston & Williamson, 2013). The National Governors Association ordered school districts to improve their graduation rates, thus remaining competitive in a thriving global economy and closing the achievement gap (Jerald, 2008). In response, the PCPSD adopted a "90 by 2020" initiative, which meant achieving a 90% graduation rate by the 2020 school year. Due to Achievement high schools' low graduation, the PCSD should initiate a transition policy with parameters for supporting 8th-grade students, successfully guiding them to Achievement high schools.

The PCPSD might also consider allocating funding for Achievement high schools' transition plans, such as summer bridge programs, 9th-grade academies, and mentorship programs. Based on the findings of this study, instituting a transitioning policy would promote and support student graduation rates. High school leaders should be given autonomy for which program would best serve their school, students, staff and community.

Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the data collected students need critical thinking and implicit and explicit instruction. I recommend reciprocal teaching to influence middle school teachers and high school teachers. This implication of this teaching will influence students as examined by Queen (2013), she found in the middle-to-high school transition period, academic loss with test scores dropping was linked to a range of factors. Struggling middle-school students do not receive instruction in critical thinking and self-learning, skills required for high school success (Slater & Horstman, 2002). As indicated by test scores in this study, 8th-grade students are underprepared for the rigors of high-school coursework. As a result, 9th-graders struggle with challenging high school-level courses without having the necessary academic skills. A student intending to learn and master information will have different motivation strategies than students who do not have a purpose, do not understand, and are unmotivated (Conley, 2011; Heller & Cassady, 2016). With reciprocal teaching, teachers can help middle and high school students improve their understanding, intellect, and comprehension (Joseph, 2009). The four supporting strategies that define reciprocal teaching are questioning, clarifying issues, summarizing, and predicting (Slater & Horstman, 2002). With this self-reflecting teaching approach, students would be able to grow their insight, perception, and aptitude. A self-reflecting teaching approach that is articulated from middle to high school improves instruction, provides clarity, and expands on knowledge, encouraging freshmen to achieve (Joseph, 2009).

Summary

Participants reported that middle-school students' experiences did not adequately prepare youth for the complexities of high school, especially for Achievement high schools. Semi-structured interviews showed school leaders were well informed of the challenges students

encounter when transitioning from middle to high school. The participants were aware of the academic benefits of targeting middle schoolers early, establishing programs to motivate students, and providing mental and emotional supports. However, PCPSD had no formal policies to address students' needs in transitioning to Achievement high schools. The data collected showed that middle and high schools should collaborate, innovate, and operate as an extension of educational services. Middle and high schools need to bridge the connection gap with resources and practices to accommodate the most vulnerable students on campus. The data further indicated that Achievement high schools should provide nonacademic services to prepare and support students in transitioning to high school. Finally, the study showed that the PCPSD should address middle school students transitioning to Achievement high schools to increase the graduation rate.

REFERENCES

Aldrup, K., Klusmann, U., Lüdtke, O., Göllner, R., & Trautwein, U. (2018). Student misbehavior and teacher well-being: Testing the mediating role of the teacher-student relationship. Learning and Instruction, 58, 126-136.

Allen, J., Gregory, A., Mikami, A., Lun, J., Hamre, B., & Pianta, R. (2013). Observations of effective teacher–student interactions in secondary school classrooms: Predicting student achievement with the classroom assessment scoring system—secondary. *School Psychology Review*, *42*(1), 76.

Allensworth, E., Nomi, T., Montgomery, N., & Lee, V. E. (2009). College preparatory curriculum for all: Academic consequences of requiring algebra and English I for 9th-graders in Chicago. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *31*(4), 367-391.

Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Check & Connect: The importance of relationships for promoting engagement with school. *Journal of School Psychology*, *42*(2), 95-113.

Anderson, M. B., Harper, C., & Bridges, B. K. (2017). Lift Every Voice and Lead: African American Leaders' Perceptions of K-12 Education Reform. *Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF*.

Anderson, M., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Schlossberg, Theory with Practice in a Diverse World. Springer Publishing Company.

Anney, V. N. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria.

Athanasiades, C., & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, V. (2010). The experience of bullying among

    secondary school students. *Psychology in the Schools*, *47*(4), 328-341.

Atwell, M. N., & Bridgeland, J. M. (2019). Ready to Lead: A 2019 Update of Principals'

    Perspectives on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and

    Transform Schools. A Report for CASEL. *Civic*.

Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M. A., & Drake, L. (2010). The

    Condition of Education 2010. NCES 2010-028. *National Center for Education Statistics*.

Balfanz, R., Byrnes, V., & Fox, J. H. (2015). Sent home and put off track. *Closing the school

    discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*, 17-30.

Balkcom, K. (2014). Bringing sunshine to third-grade readers: How Florida's third-grade

    retention policy has worked and is a good model for other states considering reading

    laws. *JL & Educ.*, *43*, 443.

Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). Assessing the transitions to middle and high

    school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *19*(1), 3-30.

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and

    implementation for novice researchers. *The qualitative report*, *13*(4), 544-559.

Benner, A. D. (2011). The transition to high school: Current knowledge, future

    directions. *Educational psychology review*, *23*(3), 299.

Benner, A. D., & Graham, S. (2009). The transition to high school as a developmental process

    among multiethnic urban youth. *Child development*, *80*(2), 356-376.

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data

    and processes. *Journal of research in nursing*, *13*(1), 68-75.

Blount, T. (2012). Dropout prevention: Recommendations for school counselors. *Journal of School Counseling*, *10*(16), n16.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). Methods of Social Research.

Boothe, D. (2020). Redefining Education during a Global Pandemic.

Bourdieu, P. (1985). The social space and the genesis of groups. *Information (International Social Science Council)*, *24*(2), 195-220.

Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio Jr, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts. Civic Enterprises.

Brinkworth, M. E., McIntyre, J., Juraschek, A. D., & Gehlbach, H. (2018). Teacher-student relationships: The positives and negatives of assessing both perspectives. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *55*, 24-38.

Carroll T & Creamer D. (2004). *The significance of an orientation program: Addressing the problem of retention*.

Carter, P. L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M. I., & Pollock, M. (2017). You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities. *Urban Education*, *52*(2), 207-235

Cauley, K. M., & Jovanovich, D. (2006). Developing an effective transition program for students entering middle school or high school. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *80*(1), 15-25.

Chau, Y. (2009). A State Policy Model to Address the Nation's Dropout Crisis. *State Education Standard*, *10*(1), 17-23.

Coffey, A. (2013). Relationships: The key to successful transition from primary to secondary school?. *Improving Schools*, *16*(3), 261-271.

81

Cohen, J. S., & Smerdon, B. A. (2009). Tightening the dropout tourniquet: Easing the transition from middle to high school. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *53*(3), 177-184.

Collins, C. S., & Cooper, J. E. (2014). Emotional intelligence and the qualitative researcher. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *13*(1), 88-103.

Compas, B. E., Connor-Smith, J. K., Saltzman, H., Thomsen, A. H., & Wadsworth, M. E. (2001). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence: problems, progress, and potential in theory and research. *Psychological bulletin*, *127*(1), 87.

Cooper, K. (2014). Eliciting Engagement in the High School Classroom: A Mixed-Methods Examination of Teaching Practices. American Educational Research Journal, (2). 363.

Cornell, D., Gregory, A., Huang, F., & Fan, X. (2013). Perceived prevalence of teasing and bullying predicts high school dropout rates. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *105*(1), 138.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). Educational research: planning. *Conducting, and Evaluating*.

Creswell, J. W. (2015). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers college record*.

Deschamps, R., & McNutt, K. (2016). Cyberbullying: What's the problem?. *Canadian Public Administration*, *59*(1), 45-71.

Dilley, P. (2000). Conducting successful interviews: Tips for intrepid research. *Theory into practice*, *39*(3), 131-137.

Domitrovich, C. E., Durlak, J. A., Staley, K. C., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in schoolchildren. *Child development*, *88*(2), 408-416.

Ellerbrock, C. R., & Kiefer, S. M. (2014). Supporting Young Adolescents' Middle-to-High-School Transition by Creating a Ninth Grade Community of Care: Implications for Middle Grades Educators: Authors Discuss the Importance of Middle-to-High School Transitions and Highlight the Importance of Collaboration between Middle and High School Teachers as Essential for Healthy Adolescent Development beyond the Middle Grades. *Middle School Journal*, *45*(3), 3-10.

Emmer, E. T., Evertson, C. M., & Worsham, M. E. (2009). Classroom management for middle and high school teachers.

Evans, D., Borriello, G. A., & Field, A. P. (2018). A review of the academic and psychological impact of the transition to secondary education. *Frontiers in psychology*, *9*.

Flowers, R. D., Luzynski, C., & Zamani-Gallaher, E. M. (2014). Male transfer student athletes and Schlossberg's transition theory. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, *8*(2), 99-120.

Fowler, P. R., & Boylan, H. R. (2010). Increasing Student Success and Retention: A Multidimensional Approach. *Journal of Developmental Education*, *34*(2), 2.

Freeman, J., & Simonsen, B. (2015). Examining the impact of policy and practice interventions on high school dropout and school completion rates: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *85*(2), 205-248.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. 1967. *Weidenfield & Nicolson, London*, 1-19.

Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. (2006). Counseling adults in transition: Linking theory to practice.

Graff, N. (2011). "An effective and agonizing way to learn": backwards design and new teachers' preparation for planning curriculum. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *38*(3), 151-168.

Hase, C. N., Goldberg, S. B., Smith, D., Stuck, A., & Campain, J. (2015). Impacts of traditional bullying and cyberbullying on the mental health of middle school and high school students. *Psychology in the Schools*, *52*(6), 607-617.

Hauser, G. M., Choate, K., & Thomas, T. P. (2009). A Two-Year Study of Stakeholder Perceptions Associated with the Transition from Eighth Grade to High School. International Journal of learning, 16(3).

Hazel, C. E., Vazirabadi, G. E., Albanes, J., & Gallagher, J. (2014). Evidence of convergent and discriminant validity of the Student School Engagement Measure. *Psychological Assessment*, *26*(3), 806.

Herlihy, C. (2007). Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition into High School. Issue Brief. *National High School Center*.

Herlihy, C. M., & Quint, J. (2006). Emerging Evidence on Improving High School Student Achievement and Graduation Rates: The Effects of Four Popular Improvement Programs. Issue Brief. *National High School Center*.

Hertzog, J. (2006). Planning for the transition to high school. *PRINCIPAL-ARLINGTON-*, *86*(2), 60.

Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2007). Transitioning to high school: Issues and challenges for African American students. *Professional School Counseling*, *10*(3), 2156759X0701000306.

Jerald, C. D. (2008). Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring US Students Receive a World-Class Education. *National Governors Association*.

Jia, Y., Konold, T. R., & Cornell, D. (2016). Authoritative school climate and high school dropout rates. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *31*(2), 289.

Jimerson, S. R., Pletcher, S. M., Graydon, K., Schnurr, B. L., Nickerson, A. B., & Kundert, D. K. (2006). Beyond grade retention and social promotion: Promoting the social and academic competence of students. *Psychology in the Schools*, *43*(1), 85-97.

Jimerson, S. R., Reschly, A. L., & Hess, R. S. (2008). Best practices in increasing the likelihood of high school completion. *Best practices in school psychology*, *5*, 1085-1097.

Johnson, V. L., Holt, L. J., Bry, B. H., & Powell, S. R. (2008). Effects of an integrated prevention program on urban youth transitioning into high school. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *24*(2), 225-246.

Johnston, H., & Williamson, R. (2013). The critical 9th-grade year: More on student success. *Research into Practice*.

Johnston, M. P. (2017). Secondary data analysis: A method of which the time has come. *Qualitative and quantitative methods in libraries*, *3*(3), 619-626.

Joseph, N. (2009). Metacognition needed: Teaching middle and high school students to develop strategic learning skills. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *54*(2), 99-103.

Kariuki, P., & Page, L. (2001). The Relationship between Social Promotion in the Middle School and Academic Achievement in a High School Math Class.

Kayler, H., & Sherman, J. (2009). At-risk ninth-grade students: A psychoeducational group

    approach to increase study skills and grade point averages. *Professional School*

    Counseling, *12*(6), 2156759X0901200608.

Kennelly, L., & Monrad, M. (2007). Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning

    Signs with Appropriate Interventions. *American Institutes for Research*.

Kim, J. S., & Sunderman, G. L. (2005). Measuring academic proficiency under the No Child

    Left Behind Act: Implications for educational equity. *Educational researcher*, *34*(8), 3-

    13.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research*

    interviewing. Sage.

Ladner, M., & Burke, L. M. (2010). Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from

    Florida's Reforms. Backgrounder. No. 2468. *Heritage Foundation*.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding

    achievement in US schools. *Educational researcher*, *35*(7), 3-12.

Langenkamp, A. G. (2010). Academic vulnerability and resilience during the transition to high

    school: The role of social relationships and district context. *Sociology of*

    Education, *83*(1), 1-19.

Legters, N., Parise, L., & Rappaport, S. (2013). Implementing Ninth Grade Academies in

    Broward County, Florida. *MDRC*.

Lenz, B. (2001). The transition from adolescence to young adulthood: a theoretical perspective.

    The Journal of School Nursing, 17(6), 300-306.

Levy, H. M. (2008). Meeting the needs of all students through differentiated instruction: Helping

    every child reach and exceed standards. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational*

    Strategies, Issues and Ideas, *81*(4), 161-164.

Martin, A. J. (2011). Holding back and holding behind: grade retention and students' non-

    academic and academic outcomes. *British Educational Research Journal*, *37*(5), 739-

    763.

McBrady, S., & Williamson, R. (2010). Proven Strategies for Personalizing America's High

    Schools. *Education Partnerships, Inc.*

McCallumore, K. M., & Sparapani, E. F. (2010). The Importance of the Ninth Grade on High

    School Graduation Rates and Student Success in High School. *Education*, *130*(3), 447–

    456.

McCarter, S. (2017). The school-to-prison pipeline: A primer for social workers. *Social*

    work, *62*(1), 53-61.

McIntosh, J., & White, S. H. (2006). Building for freshman success: High schools working as

    professional learning communities. *American Secondary Education*, 40-49.

McKee, M. T., & Caldarella, P. (2016). Middle school predictors of high school performance: A

    case study of dropout risk indicators. *Education*, *136*(4), 515-529.

Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (Eds.). (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for*

    discussion and analysis. Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2009). Qualitative research: A guide to design and

    implementation. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley& Sons.

Miao, J., & Wheelock, A. (2005). The 9th-grade bottleneck: An enrollment bulge in a transition

    year that demands careful attention and action. School Administrator, 62(3).

Moghaddam, A. (2006). Coding issues in grounded theory. *Issues in educational research*, *16*(1),

    52-66.

Murat, M., & Bonacini, L. (2020). *Coronavirus pandemic, remote learning and education*

    inequalities (No. 679). GLO Discussion Paper.

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Neild, R. C. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: What we know and

    what can be done. *The Future of Children*, *19*(1), 53-76.

Neild, R. C., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2008). Connecting entrance and departure: The

    transition to ninth grade and high school dropout. *Education and Urban Society*, *40*(5),

    543-569.

Oman, R. F., Vesely, S. K., Aspy, C. B., & Tolma, E. L. (2015). Prospective associations among

    assets and successful transition to early adulthood. *American journal of public*

    health, *105*(1), e51-e56.

Patterson, N. C., Beltyukova, S. A., Berman, K., & Francis, A. (2007). The making of

    sophomores: Student, parent, and teacher reactions in the context of systemic urban high

    school reform. *Urban Education*, *42*(2), 124-144.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks,

    CA: Sage.

Pharris-Ciurej, N., Hirschman, C., & Willhoft, J. (2012). The 9th-grade shock and the high school

    dropout crisis. Social science research, 41(3), 709-730.

Piaget, J. (1976). Piaget's theory. In *Piaget and his school* (pp. 11-23). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

Queen, J. A. (2013). *Student transitions from middle to high school*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Reich, J., Buttimer, C. J., Coleman, D., Colwell, R. D., Faruqi, F., & Larke, L. R. (2020). What's Lost, What's Left, What's Next: Lessons Learned from the Lived Experiences of Teachers During the 2020 Novel Coronavirus Pandemic

Rodríguez, L. F., & Conchas, G. Q. (2009). Preventing truancy and dropout among urban middle school youth: Understanding community-based action from the student's perspective. *Education and urban society*, *41*(2), 216-247.

Roybal, V. M. (2011). *A summative program evaluation of a comprehensive 9th-grade transition program*. University of Nevada, Reno.

Roybal, V., Thornton, B., & Usinger, J. (2014). Effective ninth-grade transition programs can promote student success. *Education*, *134*(4), 475-487.

Ruiz, G. V. (2005). The effect of a ninth-grade academy on the achievement, attendance, and retention rate of mainstreamed, learning-disabled, first-time, Hispanic, freshman students.

Rumberger, R. W. (2017). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it*. Kbh.: Nota.

Sahlberg, P. (2020). Will the pandemic change schools?. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*.

Schumacher, K. L., & Meleis, A. L. (1994). Transitions: A central concept in nursing. *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, *26*(2), 119-127.

Severson, H. H., Walker, H. M., Hope-Doolittle, J., Kratochwill, T. R., & Gresham, F. M. (2007). Proactive, early screening to detect behaviorally at-risk students: Issues, approaches, emerging innovations, and professional practices. *Journal of School Psychology*, *45*(2), 193-223.

Shaffer, D. R., & Kipp, K. (2013). *Developmental psychology: Childhood and adolescence*. Cengage Learning.

Shore, R., & Shore, B. (2009). Reducing the High School Dropout Rate. KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief. *Annie E. Casey Foundation*.

Simmons, R. G. (2017). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and school context*. Routledge.

Slater, W. H., & Horstman, F. R. (2002). Teaching reading and writing to struggling middle school and high school students: The case for reciprocal teaching. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *46*(4), 163-166.

Smith, J. S., Akos, P., Lim, S., & Wiley, S. (2008). Student and stakeholder perceptions of the transition to high school. The High School Journal, 32-42.

Spear, L. P. (2000). The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, *24*(4), 417-463.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Stanley, L. A. (2007). Florida high stakes testing and graduation success.

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of US-Mexican youth*. Teachers College Press.

Sutton, A., Langenkamp, A. G., Muller, C., & Schiller, K. S. (2018). Who Gets Ahead and Who

    Falls Behind During the Transition to High School? Academic Performance at the

    Intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Gender. *Social problems*, *65*(2), 154-173.

Thomas, G. (2015). *How to do your case study*. Sage.

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next?. *Journal of College

    Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *8*(1), 1-19.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative

    research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *16*(10), 837-851.

Wade, A., & Beran, T. (2011). Cyberbullying: The new era of bullying. *Canadian Journal of

    School Psychology*, *26*(1), 44-61.

Wentzel, K. R., Tomback, R., Williams, A., & McNeish, D. (2019). Perceptions of competence,

    control, and belongingness over the transition to high school: A mixed-method study.

    Contemporary Educational Psychology, 56, 55-66.

Wheelock, A., & Miao, J. (2005). The Ninth-Grade Bottleneck: An Enrollment Bulge in a

    Transition Year that Demands Careful Attention and Action. *School

    Administrator*, *62*(3), 36.

White, D. E., Oelke, N. D., & Friesen, S. (2012). Management of a large qualitative data set:

    Establishing trustworthiness of the data. *International Journal of Qualitative

    Methods*, *11*(3), 244-258.

Williamston, R. (2010). Transition from Middle School to High School. Research

    Brief. Education Partnerships, Inc.

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Publications.

Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2010). Schools, families, and communities affecting the dropout rate:

Implications and strategies for family counselors. *The Family Journal*, *18*(4), 377-385.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Call to Action Recommendation for High Schools

      Increase student engagement. During the first year of high school, students have higher rates of academic failure, nonattendance, and truancy compared to any other grade (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The key to supporting student transitioning is to engage students early, in genuine and intentional ways. Engaged students have better attendance rates, better academic achievement, and more social connections (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). To encourage students for success, Achievement high school administrators should connect each incoming 9th-grade student to an extracurricular activity such as a sport, club, or special interest. Freshmen need an introduction to high school offerings if they are to participate, engage, and become involved. School activities should serve as enticements to increase student engagement, in part by encouraging peer mentoring.

      To prepare incoming 9th-graders for the challenges of high school, administers should consider offering a summer bridge course, introducing each student to the high school culture, rules, and expectations. Currently, PCPSD does not provide any guidelines or policies to mitigate 9th-grade transitioning issues. Allowing upper-level students to produce, lead, and deliver summer programs could be beneficial for both the incoming 9th-graders and the upperclassmen, as their peers provide initial exposure to the high school context. The upperclassmen would help to strengthen 9th-graders' leadership skills, independence, and self-confidence. Although teachers introduce middle school students to high schools' characteristics, Cushman (2012) found that 9th-graders preferred hearing about experiences and expectations from other high school students.

      Achievement high schools have lower graduation rates, test scores and higher dropout rates when compared to other PCPSD high schools. Accordingly, students need interaction and

direction to avoid becoming disconnected from high schools' demands and responsibilities. PCPSD does not offer a standard preparatory class to help 9th-graders prepare for high school. I recommend that students identified with two or more early warning indicators for failure enroll in a freshman study hall course. This course would assist students in the academic area or areas, in which they are struggling, orient them to high school and guide them towards their goals.

Coaching and mentoring. Mentorship programs provide guidance and stability for students; as such, the programs are a beneficial resource to help students transition to high schools, especially high-needs institutions (Johnson, Holt, Bry, & Powell, 2008). High school teachers often expect 9th-graders to instantly assimilate to high school, unaware of the depth of their immaturity and their need for scaffolding, guidance, and support (Coffey, 2013). By becoming students' personal cheerleaders, coaches and mentors strengthen learners' resolve, helping them to navigate high school pitfalls (Coffey, 2013). Mentorship programs have shown to benefit high-risk students by mitigating psychological and social risk factors (Johnson et al., 2008). High-needs students have shown greater academic achievement when mentored by a caring and close adult (Johnson et al., 2008). Lastly, PCPSD school leaders reported that coaching and mentoring connects students to their purpose, helping them to cultivate and establish intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to fulfill their goals and plan for their futures.

Mock ninth grade graduation. The backward design approach is a framework used by teachers to present horizontal and vertical curriculum to students (Graff, 2011). This framework provides a structure focused on the *why*, by allowing students to start with the end in mind or the desired outcome (Graff, 2011). Through a mock 9th-grade graduation, students would be given visual, practical and a realistic goal for graduating. Achievement high schools should organize mock graduations for 9th-graders, helping students understand the magnitude of graduation, thus

providing a frame of reference and an answer to the question "why?" To mitigate the high

number of students entering high school unprepared, a mock 9th-grade graduation ceremony

would serve as motivation, inspiration, and a representation to engage students to work towards

getting a high school diploma. Many students' first graduation was in kindergarten; accordingly,

a mock graduation event would function as a long-term goal and a new perspective of the

transition to high school.

Appendix B

Call to Action Recommendation for High Schools During COVID-19

Devices and the internet. In April 2020 the beginning of the pandemic, globally an estimated 1.5 billion students were out of schools, or no longer receiving face-to-face instruction, as schools were forced to offer a distance/remote learning style education (Murat & Bonacini, 2020). Teachers reported that disadvantaged students were particularly affected by the lack of universal access to the internet and inoperable digital devices (Murat & Bonacini, 2020; Sahlberg, 2020). Technological inequities within impoverished communities existed before the global pandemic but in April 2020, when many schools closed to face-to-face instruction, these disparities were exposed (Reich, Buttimer, Coleman, Colwell, Faruqi & Larke, 2020). Students without operable digital devices were without direct instruction, virtual discussions and social and academic interactions.

The PCPSD collaborated with the local servicing provider to offer free internet access to low-income families. Achievement high schools should create a system that will account that each household was receiving free internet access and these high schools should lend operable devices to each family. The Achievement high school should establish a system to document each 9th grade students' internet access capability as well as their school-loaned digital device. By providing this basic technological assistance, students could connect to their classrooms virtually, receive direct instruction from their teachers, and participate with their counterparts.

Virtual School/Club Tours. An estimated 2 to 9 percent of high-school students will drop out due to the coronavirus and school closures (Boothe, 2020). Ninth graders reportedly have the highest dropout rate and 9th-grade students transitioning to Achievement high schools in

the middle of the pandemic are faced with economic and educational challenges. Achievement high schools should engage and connect with 9th-grade students, families, and their community as early as possible. A safe, quick and inexpensive plan to engage students, parents, and the community is to conduct a video conferencing building tour. During the virtual tour, parents and students would meet their teachers, the staff and faculty and learn the safety precautions and protocol at their school. The schools' clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities could create breakout rooms to attract 9th-grade students' interest. For a successful 9th-grade transition, Achievement high schools keep a database to track web attendance and ensure that each student is assigned to a club, sport or school activity.

Innovative Technological Ideas for Specific Populations

English Language Learners (ELL). By March 2020, 49 states closed their schools to face-to face instruction and schools were compelled to deliver instruction in a remote style format. One of the most vulnerable populations, English Language Learners (ELLs) were subject to two educational challenges: translating assignments from their native language to English and learning how to navigate their digital devices (Boothe, 2020). An innovative idea for Achievement high schools is to sponsor ELL webinars for students, their families and the community base. Using the webinars, the ELL department would teach the basics of online instruction and introduce student applications. Hosting ELL webinars at the beginning of school year, supports 9th grade students, parents/guardians, includes the community and unites freshman students to their new high school for a successful transition. Making monthly connections with the ELL population through webinars gives 9th grade students, parents, and the community more opportunities to connect with the school. Achievement high schools that would commit to teach

a different web applications/software each month to familiarize the students, parents, and community would support successful 9th-grade transitioning.

   Exceptional Student Education population (ESE). Similar to the ELL webinars, the special education webinars would host IEP meetings, hearings, and conferences. By using video conferencing to connect and network with parents/guardians, faculty and staff, the ESE department would meet the needs of transitioning 9th-grade students. Students with disabilities that live within low-income households face the greatest challenges and the Achievement High school's willingness to use technology would reduce the pressures that the families face (Boothe, 2020).

Appendix C

Participants

Schools	Administrative Role	Years as an Administrator	Years as an Administrator at current school	Level of Education
Alabama Achievement Middle School	**Principal**	**15**	Less than 1 year	**M Ed.**
Alaska Achievement High School	*Assistant Principal*	**11**	Less than 1 year	**M Ed.**
Brooksville Achievement Middle School	**Principal**	**25**	Less than 1 year	**M Ed.**
Gainesville Middle School	*Principal*	20	Less than 1 year	Ed. d
Georgia Achievement Middle School	**Principal**	**25**	Less than 1 year	**M Ed.**
Jacksonville Achievement Middle School	**Principal**	**15**	Less than 2 year	**M Ed.**
Sarasota Middle School	**Principal**	**20**	Less than 1 year	**M Ed.**
South Carolina Achievement High School	**Principal**	**20**	Less than 1 year	**Ed. d**
Washington High School	*Assistant Principal*	12	Less than 1 year	**Ed. S.**

Appendix D

Research Question Matrix

Research Question #1	Research Question #2	Research Question #3	Research Question #4
How do school administrators perceive a successful 9th-grade transition to an Achievement High School?	*What are the major challenges associated with 9th-graders transitioning to an Achievement High School?*	*What do school administrators perceive as essential for 9th-grade students need to be successful at an Achievement High School?*	*How do students successes, challenges, and resources (i.e. personnel, tools, mindsets), align with 9th-grade transition policies and strategies in Achievement High Schools?*
What trends, patterns, and themes represent successful 9th-grade transition policies and strategies?	What do you feel is the high schools' role in helping students transition from middle school to Achievement high school?	How would you describe a successful student transition to high school?	In what ways does the school district transition plans support 9th-graders?
1.   How do school officials create a culture for a transition successful?

2.   Do you know of any programs with your school aimed at supporting and transitioning 8th-graders to high school? | 3.   What do you think are the greatest social challenges for students transitioning to the high school?
4.   Do you think students perceive there will be a difference in the type or the amount of homework assigned from middle school to high school?
5.   What do you think students think about earning grades and credits at the high school level? | 6.   What do you feel is the middle schools' role for helping students transition from middle school to high school?
7.   What do you think students think about the workload in high school?
8.   How do you think students feel in terms of academic readiness for high school? | 9.   How are resources at the district used at the school to implement a successful transition plan?
10.   What do you think concerns 9th-grade students most with regard to the procedural or organizational structure in high school?
11.   Do you feel the current transition program for 8th-graders benefits students at your school? Why or why not? |
| **General follow up questions to be used to elicit further information:** | | | |
| Question#1
How are school officials used in the transition process? | Question #2
What do you feel the district can do to help create developmentally responsive school environments that will support students in their transition from middle to high school? | Question #3
In what ways are resources utilized to accomplish a successful transition plan for 9th-graders? How are school officials used in the transition process? | Question #5
In what ways are resources utilized to accomplish a successful transition plan for 8th-graders? |

• How do you think students feel about being the youngest student on campus? • How do you think students' self-concept affects their transition from middle school to Achievement High School?	• Describe any opportunities that you have participated in to assist you as a rising freshman with transition. • How do you think students' relationships with significant adults (parents/teachers) change as they transition from middle school to Achievement High School?	• Describe your idea transition process for rising 9th-grade students entering Achievement High School. • What can or should 9th-grade teachers do to help students with the academic aspect of the transition?	•

Appendix E Research Study Consent Form

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

Script for Obtaining Verbal Informed Consent

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Title: A Case Study: School Professionals' Perspectives on Students on Existing Middle School and Entering An Achievement High School

Study # ___350_____

Overview: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. Information that is more detailed is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Joy Davis Lee who is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida. I am the Principal Investigator and Dr. Elizabeth Shaunessy-Dedrick is guiding me in this research. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: This study is being conducted in the Hillsborough County Public School District and is supported/sponsored by Gregory Basham. The purpose of the study is to explore school officials' perceptions of student transitions from middle school to Achievement High Schools. Through individual interviews, school building administrators will share their ideas, successes and challenges associated with 9th-grade transitioning. Interviews are scheduled for 25-30 minutes and are centered on participants' availability. The findings of this study may contribute to the district's overall evaluation on student's transitioning and inform district efforts to improve 9th-grade student achievement and success.

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you share the vision for the school to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates. Based on your expertise, position, and leadership, I want to know what your perceptions are on the 9th-grade transitioning process.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Alternatives to participating in the study include: written answers to the interview questions. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if you will receive any benefit from your participation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as

the risks you face in daily life.

       <u>Confidentiality</u>: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Joy Davis Lee principal investigator at (813)336-1772. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact the IRB by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu, or Joylee@mail.usf.edu

Would you like to participate in this study?

Appendix F

Recruitment Flyer

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR
A RESEARCH STUDY!

You are being asked to take part in a case study research project because you have experience in a high-needs school with an at-risk population and at an Achievement High School and/or a Title I middle school.

About the Study

This study, School Professionals' Perspectives on Students Exiting Middle School Entering An Achievement High School, is conducted in the school district with Achievement school and Title I administrators to gather insights and perceptions from school officials. As a school official who has worked with at-risk populations, your perceptions are important to consider when making decisions about transitioning strategies and any additional considerations.

About the Interview

- Completely voluntary and anonymous
- 25-30 minutes minimum
- Remote/online interview
- Approximately 12 questions related to your experiences at the Achievement school and/or Title I school working with at-risk populations.
- Scheduled at your convenience and at your convenience.
- All information kept confidential – even if the results of the study are published, your information will remain private.
- There is no compensation for participation and the interview is considered minimal risk, which means that the study risks are the same as the risks that you face in daily life.

To schedule an interview, please click here by May 3, 2020, to enter your scheduling preferences.

You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities.

JOY DAVIS LEE/DOCTORAL STUDENT
joylee@mail.usf.edu| (813)336-1772 |

UNIVERSITY of
SOUTH FLORIDA

Appendix G

Recruitment Email

 February 18, 2020

Dear High school and Middle school principals,

My name is Joy Davis Lee and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida. There is an exciting opportunity for you to participate in a relevant case study research project. I am conducting research on school administrators' perceptions of ninth graders transitioning into high school with an emphasis at Title I and/or Achievement Schools. The interview is voluntary and your responses will be confidential. I understand your time is extremely valuable, so my goal is to conduct the interview for no more than 25-30 minutes. The flyer attached to this email has an embedded link that will gather information and coordinate the best time and day to meet. I will send a follow-up email to confirm our appointment. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Joy Davis Lee, M. Ed.

USF Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H

IRB Approval Letter

<div align="center">EXEMPT DETERMINATION</div>

April 27, 2020

Joy Lee
1844 RAVENRIDGE STREET
WESLEY CHAPEL, FL 33543

Dear Mrs. Joy Lee:

On 4/26/2020, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY000350
Review Type:	Exempt 2
Title:	A Case Study: School Professionals' Perspectives on Students Exiting Middle School Entering An Achievement High School
Funding:	None
Protocol:	Study 350 Social-Behavioral Protocol Template Joy Lee 00021633.docx

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Walker
IRB Research Compliance Administrator