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The Influence of a Transition on At-Risk Freshmen in a New Jersey Public Suburban High School

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THE INFLUENCE OF A TRANSITION PROGRAM ON AT-RISK FRESHMEN
IN A NEW JERSEY PUBLIC SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

by

Michele L. Pitts

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ABSTRACT

Background: Considerable research focuses on adolescents and transition to high school, but little with at-risk students in a suburban, affluent community in an academically competitive high school.

Purpose: To evaluate the influence of a ninth-grade transition project for at-risk students on achievement, attendance, behavior, and in-school involvement.

Setting: Public suburban school district in an affluent New Jersey community.

Subjects: Students deemed at-risk in the eighth grade due to one or more grades below a C-, 8 or more absences, and 3 or more discipline referrals during first semester. Random selection and random assignment determined placement of the 40 volunteer students into Transition Cohort 1 (n=20) that began in August 2004 or Transition Cohort 2 (n=20) that started after the first marking period.

Treatment: Transition Cohort 1 participated in a three-day Summer Freshman Academy (a physical activity, study skills, a Personal Plan for Progress, and assignment to a ninth-grade Personal Adult Advocate). Transition Cohort 2, the comparison group, had the option to begin Transition Program in November 2004 that included a Personal Adult Advocate and a weekly study skills class.

Research Design: Quasi-Experimental, Action Research Evaluation

Data Collection and Analysis: Quantitative analysis of grades, days absent, and discipline referrals during 2004-2005 school year using t-tests. Two focus groups provided qualitative data about students’ psychological sense of community (PSOC).

Findings: Both Cohorts had a significant improvement in grades and behavior in the ninth grade compared to eighth grade. Cohort 1 students averaged higher grades three
marking periods, fewer days absent one marking period, and fewer discipline referrals two marking periods compared to Cohort 2. A significant difference remained between Cohort students and the rest of the freshman class on grades, attendance, and discipline referrals. Focus group results suggested the Personal Adult Advocates supported students' engagement (PSOC).

Conclusions: Earlier intervention in transition is an effective strategy. The Personal Adult Advocates supported students' PSOC during transition to high school.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my late mother, Margaret Lill DiDonato, and my late father, Michael Patrick DiDonato. Their unwavering belief in my ability, unconditional love, and strong work ethic inspired me to make my dream a reality. I hope they know.
Acknowledgements

My appreciation and gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Achilles, whose passion for excellence, guidance, editing skills, and vast knowledge supported my mission.

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This study could not have been executed without the support and participation of the Personal Adult Advocates and the ninth-grade students and their parents in this study.

To all who have supported me during this study, I am truly grateful. Special thanks to Lynn, Chris, Gate and Roger who were always there when I needed them.

I'd like to recognize my Cohort VII members for their friendship and collegiality.

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The loving support of my children, Jaime and Jason, and my fiancé, Joe, enhanced the entire dissertation process for me. Perhaps most important was their immense faith in my abilities. Their love, encouragement, prodding, patience, and caring sustained me during this journey when my spirit sagged. I could not have completed my mission alone. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Kindergarten students are generally sweet and endearing in a way that makes most people want to assist them in every way possible, as they take their first tentative steps through the school doors early in September. Parents and educators carefully plan programs for the students’ adjustment and assimilation into the school milieu well in advance of September, in the hopes of a successful and happy first day of school.

Yet, as time goes on, these kindergarten children grow taller and become, in some cases, surly and apathetic rising freshmen. There certainly should be just as much careful attention paid to transition from middle school into the high school. This critical stage in a student’s education also deserves proactive planning. According to Alspaugh (1998), the first year of high school is the pivotal year in terms of a student’s achievement and adjustment to high school.

In addition to this major transition to another school setting, ninth-grade students are dealing with a myriad of physical changes, or lack of them as the case may be, as well as different stages of cognitive development. Indeed, few developmental periods contain so many changes as early adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993).

Students who have already been identified as at-risk will, in most cases, have more difficulty in negotiating this transition. Their low self-esteem, perceived lack of caring on the part of teachers, opinion that disciplinary practices are unfair and punitive,
and general alienation from the school community make a transition program seem a daunting task (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

In this age of accountability, educational leaders are mandated to meet the needs of each and every student in their charge. No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002 cited in NASSP, 2004) requires that educators assure that all students can perform at high ends of academic achievement. This act mandates that educators look at why some groups of students are having less success than others and address the issues. The message of Breaking Ranks II (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004) is about how well a school is meeting the needs of each and every student. It is about not being complacent about a good school, which could become even better. Each student needs to feel challenged, connected to community, and engaged in the learning to be successful (NASSP, 2004).

One out of five ninth-grade students has experienced increased feelings of isolation upon entering high school. At the same time, three out of four freshmen viewed the ninth grade as academically a great deal more challenging than the middle school. Between 15 and 30 percent of adolescents in the United States drop out before completing high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).

Ninth graders face a decreased sense of belonging, new rules and policies to follow, new teachers, and different instructional techniques (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Felner, Ginter, and Pinion (1982) found that ninth-grade students experienced a more diverse student body, a larger school, loss of social status, and a wide range of curricular and extracurricular choices in their transition to high school.
The goal of this research was to ascertain what the main problems ninth-grade at-risk students needed to negotiate during their transition into freshman year. Interventions and support structures were put into place to lend assistance to two transition cohorts of 20 students each in order to examine the influence of these intervention strategies and assess their effectiveness.

Context of the Problem

This study took place in a mid-size New Jersey suburban public school district, student population about 4500, which can be characterized as stable, conservative, and traditional. It is a "J" district factor group (DFG), and school budgets have always passed (see Definition of Terms). Parents are supportive and involved in this community and have high expectations and demands in terms of student outcomes.

There are five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school in the district. The schools are technically sound with a consistent record of good attendance and behavior demonstrated by the vast majority of the student population. In 2003-2004 the middle school had a student population of 1011 and the high school 1150. The population is growing in the community, and all the schools have either experienced building expansions, or there are immediate future plans to increase facility size to meet the expected growth rate. The projected population for the high school by 2010 is 1600 students. The researcher is one of two Vice Principals in the high school.

Sensitive to the need for personalization of students' educational experiences and aware of the dangers inherent in the growing student population, Millburn High School administrators have made every effort to maintain the small setting environment for
students, a recommendation of Breaking Ranks II (NASSP, 2004). Students are assigned
the same guidance counselor for their tenure at the high school, so that by the time
students are in their senior year, they, hopefully, have established a connection with their
counselor. In addition, each Vice Principal is assigned two classes of students to monitor
until they graduate. Thus, staff who have concerns about a student know which grade-
level administrator should be informed of any problems. Students are assigned to the
same homeroom and homeroom teacher for their 4-year stay in order to establish some
stability for the students from the time they arrive until the time they graduate.

The high school faculty has not ignored the needs of incoming ninth graders and
has conducted a number of orientation and transition strategies in place for the past 10
years. For example, each spring, the high school administrators present an informational
program to eighth-grade parents at the high school. At this initial meeting, high school
courses and credits are described, graduation requirements, scheduling and a timeline are
presented in terms of what parents and students need to be doing between the spring of
eighth grade until school resumes in the fall. During the same week, the high school
administrators go to the middle school to speak to the eighth-grade students and teachers.
Following this meeting, the high school counselors visit the middle school for 2 days in
order to meet their future counselees and note the courses in which they are interested. At
the end of the school year, eighth-grade students are mailed their freshman course
schedules and are able to communicate with the high school counselors during the
summer if any changes are needed.

On the opening day of school, the freshman class arrives two hours earlier than
the rest of the student body in order to have breakfast together, attend informational
meetings, and tour the school in small groups with assigned student leaders. At this time, if there are any problems or confusion in terms of their schedules, they are able to go to the guidance center and meet with their counselors before school begins.

In addition, since 1979, a Unified Studies course has been offered to interested ninth graders. This interdisciplinary course of study focuses on the strong connections between literature and history of the world. The course is team taught in two sequential periods with a limited class size of approximately 16 students. The course is designed for the ninth-grader who thrives in an interactive class, needs the additional teacher support provided, and could benefit from the note-taking, study skills, and test-taking tips presented during the course. Students are recommended for the course by eighth-grade teachers and counselors and must be willing participants.

Yet, some students will struggle in transition, as indicated by grade point average (GPA), attendance (ATT), and number of discipline referrals (DR). Thus, in 2004-2005 district leaders determined to attempt additional steps to assist these potentially at-risk students.

Significance

In this research and evaluation project, the researcher studied a sample of 40 at-risk eighth-grade students who were randomly selected from a group of at-risk students who had been identified by eighth-grade teachers, counselors, and the vice principal of the middle school in the spring of 2004 prior to their freshman year. Middle school personnel used readily available data collected and stored in the school’s computer system that included grades, attendance, and number of discipline referrals at the end of the first semester. Students needed to have experienced problems in at least two areas in
order to qualify for the program: attendance issues, academic problems, behavioral issues, and lack of involvement in the school community. The eighth-grade counselors provided information about school involvement to the researcher.

The researcher hopes to contribute to the research literature by studying the influence of a transition program on at-risk students in an affluent school district where nearly all the students do well. Most transition studies have focused on disadvantaged students in large, diverse urban high schools (Anderson & Keith, 1997; Corbett & Wilson, 2000; Kerr, 2002). In addition, this study should help administrators determine if the benefits to students outweighed the costs.

The researcher designed the transition program to maximize a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community, a condition consistent with Saason's (1974) concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC). According to Goodenow (1993), a decreased sense of school membership may contribute to misbehavior, low motivation, and lower academic achievement in high school. Because high school is a new environment, the feeling of belonging or membership may be lower for ninth graders who are entering the new environment than for students in upper grades who have been in the school for 1 or more years (Halkson & Jarvis, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

Empirical Statement

During the 2003-2004 school year, 16% of eighth-grade students received one or more grades below a "C", 5 or more absences, and 3 or more discipline referrals during
the first semester. Our district administrators, educators, and parents wish to support these pupils to become successful students.

Normative Statement

The school district needs to be responsive to the needs of all students. All students can be successful learners. Effective transition programs should support students at-risk during their transition from the eighth to the ninth grade in order to maximize success, and keep identified potentially "at-risk" students from ninth-grade difficulties (grades, attendance issues, and discipline referrals). District leaders needed to know if the time and money invested in this transition program were justified by the benefit to students. Data provided by this study were used for future programmatic decisions.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Research suggests that the first year of high school is the pivotal year in terms of a student's achievement and adjustment, which is more difficult for students who have experienced difficulties in the middle school. The school leadership was concerned about ninth graders' adjustment problems in the high school that, in the past, had been addressed later in the ninth-grade school year. Research suggests that it may already be too late to help these at-risk students once the freshman year is well under way (Wallace, 2002). Although it required added resources, the administration decided to attempt to help at-risk freshmen through early identification and early intervention before students enter the high school and continue this support throughout the freshman year, if parents and students agreed.
The purpose of this study was as follows: (a) To evaluate the influence of early intervention strategies to support the transition of at-risk ninth graders to the high school as measured by GPA, ATT, DR, and school involvement; (b) To determine the time and cost involved and weigh these in terms of benefits to the students in the transition program; (c) To make recommendations to the Board of Education regarding this program or one with modifications to it.

1. What, if any, are differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 when comparing eighth grade, end-of-first-semester results, to ninth grade, end-of-first-semester results on GPA, ATT, and DR?

2. What is the difference, if any, between all Cohort students in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end-of-first-semester, eighth grade, compared to end-of-first-semester, ninth grade?

3. What is the difference, if any, between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year?

4. What is the difference, if any, between the Transition Cohorts and the remainder of the freshman class (excluding special education students) in terms of GPA and ATT? (DR was not a part of the regularly collected data for each student, so it was not available for this analysis).

5. What were the benefits relative to costs to the district in terms of time and money?
6. What evidence did focus groups provide to support cohorts and that Personal Adult Advocates (PAA)s offered PSOC as shown by school and community involvement?

The research assistant facilitated two focus groups with adults of different ages. One focus group was composed of volunteer parents of students who were in either Transition Cohort 1 or 2. The other focus group was composed of the ninth-grade high school teachers who had volunteered to act as PAA's for the transition students during the 2004-2005 school year. There were six adults in each group, and the research assistant met with each group every other month beginning in September 2004 through the end of January 2005. Anecdotal information was collected in order to determine whether the cohort concept and PAA's positively impacted the freshmen's transition to high school especially in terms of the students' involvement in the school community.

Normally collected data regarding GPA and ATT were gathered by the middle school computer secretary at the end of the first semester of the 2003-2004 school year for the eighth graders and by the high school computer secretary at the end of the first, second (first semester), and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year for the two Cohorts. The vice principal kept discipline records for those students involved in infractions, in terms of numbers of clinic and suspensions, and this was readily available also. The data for Transition Cohort 1 and 2 (together and separately) were compared at the end-of-first-semester (second marking period), eighth grade, to the end-of-first-semester, ninth grade. The mean differences on GPA, ATT, and DR of Transition Cohort 1 students and Transition Cohort 2 students were compared at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods. The Transition Cohort students were compared to the rest of
the freshman class on GPA and ATIP at the end of each marking period to determine if the Cohort students were becoming less at-risk.

Three interventions were used for the 20 students in Transition Cohort 1. They included a Freshman Summer Academy, a PAA for each student during freshman year, and a Personal Plan for Progress. Transition Cohort 2 students, the comparison group, were offered support at the end of the first marking period. Some program components were different, because the students had already been in school for a marking period. A Study Skills class was offered which students attended during their study hall period in order to help them prepare for their first semester exams in January as well as other tests throughout the school year. In addition, students had the opportunity to have a PAA to mentor them for the remainder of the school year. The six PAAs were randomly assigned to those students who desired this support.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study was delimited to one middle and one high school in the same affluent, suburban school district. Special education students were excluded from the pool of at-risk students. Only ninth-grade teachers who volunteered were selected to act as PAAs for three or four students. There were only 40 eighth-grade students identified at-risk, according to grades, attendance, and discipline referrals, who participated in the Transition Program. No individuals were described, and only group data were reported. All data except those obtained in the adult focus groups were data normally collected in the district.
The researcher relied upon the identification of at-risk students by middle school personnel who used GPAs, ATT, and DR, as the criteria available to identify the students. Middle-school and high-school course levels and academic rigor are not equivalent which makes comparisons between the eighth and ninth grades less reliable. In addition, middle-school students take first and second-semester exams for the first time in their educational experience while at the high school, and these exam grades are calculated as part of their GPAs.

Another limitation involved using focus groups comprised of volunteer ninth-grade teachers and transition parents. There are inherent limitations working with focus groups involving control issues, difficulty in setting meeting dates and time, meeting locations, and data analysis (Rabie, 2002).

Definition of Terms

At-risk Students are students at-risk of not reaching their potential due to poor grades, attendance, discipline infractions, or lack of connection to the school community.

Attendance (ATT). In this study, attendance reflects average number of days absent during the time of the study.

Discipline Referrals (DR). Teachers refer students to the vice principal (the other vice principal is in charge of grade 9 discipline during the 2004-2005 school year) for class cutting, fighting, profanity, school suspension, thefts, and any other offenses as defined in the school’s Student/Parent Handbook.

District factor group (DFG) designates average socioeconomic status (SES) of residents in each district used to group school districts for comparative reporting on state
tests, etc. Six variables, related to SES, are used to compute the DFG for each school district: percent of adults without high school diplomas, percent of adults with some college education, unemployment rate, poverty rate, occupational status, and median family income. "A" represents the lowest socioeconomic group and "J" is the highest. However, even within the DFG classification, there can be small groups of students who, individually, are of a lower or higher socioeconomic status (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004).

*Drop Out* is the term applied to a student who exits school prior to graduation.

*First Semester* in terms of grades at the end-of-first-semester in late January, first marking period, second marking period, and midterm exam grades are weighted and averaged into a first-semester grade.

*Freshman Summer Academy* is a 3-day program for the first transition. Cohort during the summer of 2004. This will consist of a rope course (physical bonding experiences); skills refresher course (note-taking, study skills, test-taking tips), and a general orientation to the school with personal tours led by volunteer student leaders.

*Grade Point Average* (GPAs) is an average of grades earned in all classes and tabulated at the end of each semester and at the end of each year. The numerical equivalents are: A=4.00; B=3.00, and so forth.

*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) is a federal act signed in 2002 (PL 107-110); goal is to have all students achieving at grade level by 2014.

*Personal Adult Advocate* (PAA): One recommendation of *Breaking Ranks II*
(NASSP, 2004) was that each teacher work with a few students to personalize each student's educational experience.

**Personal Plan for Progress:** One recommendation of Breaking Ranks II (NASSP, 2004) was that each student develop and write, with the Advocate's help, a formulation of academic, social, and other goals for the school year.

**Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC)** is the feeling that one belongs to and can depend upon a supportive community (Sarason, 1974). The Cohort experience addressed the developing of PSOC.

**Transition** is the period when students leave the eighth grade at the middle school to enter ninth grade at the high school in the participating district.

**Transition Cohort 1** refers to the first group of 20 students randomly selected volunteers from the identified pool of at-risk students who were in the program beginning in the Summer 2004.

**Transition Cohort 2** refers to the second group of 20 students who received support at the end of the first marking period in terms of attending a Study Skills class once a week and selecting a Personal Adult Advocate.

**Researcher Position**

Credibility and biases of the researcher were addressed. The researcher was a member of the community being studied as an administrator in the high school.

Concerned about the at-risk ninth-graders' transition to the high school, the researcher believed that a transition program would help these students be more successful due
to a sense of belonging to the school they will gain from the interventions. The researcher worked closely with the teachers, and did not want this to affect the study.

Therefore, the research assistant, a licensed school counselor who worked in the high school, recruited the PAAs at a staff meeting with ninth-grade teachers. The assistant assigned the volunteer advocates to the students by alphabetically dividing them according to last name. In addition, the assistant facilitated both of the focus groups in the high school and took notes for the researcher. The research assistant assigned students to PAAs by alphabetical division according to last names. PAAs also touched base with her in terms of any problems they experienced with their students regarding scheduling meeting times, and so forth. If a student wished to opt out of the program at any time, he/she informed the PA who advised the research assistant.

At the middle school level, administrators and counselors identified the pool of at-risk students according to GPAs, attendance, and discipline referrals. The eighth-grade counselors met with the at-risk students individually to explain the program and answer any questions. All procedures are detailed in Chapter III.

Only data collected by the district were used except for the focus groups who provided anecdotal information regarding the transition program. The research assistant took notes during the focus group meetings.

Summary and Organization of the Study

Chapter I included the background of the problem and rationale for the study.

Chapter II presents a review of studies related to adolescent needs and development,
at-risk students, organizational structure, and psychological sense of community (PSOC). Chapter III describes the development and use of any instrument, data collection procedures, and statistical analysis employed. A detailed analysis of the results, interpretation, and summary is presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes a discussion and interpretation of the results and recommendations for practice, policy, and research.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to transition to high school, at-risk students, and psychological sense of community (PSOC). The researcher reviewed literature on adolescent needs and development and the organizational structure of secondary schools as they relate to the context of this study.

Adolescent Needs and Development

Adolescent students have six developmental needs: a need to belong, to experience success, express themselves, have choices or options, enjoy their freedom, and explore their imaginations (Clarke & Frazer, 2003). Unfortunately, the critical time period when many of these needs are making themselves known coincides with a youngster's entrance into the high school arena. It is a time when ninth graders experience many significant changes in their physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development during a major transition in their lives (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Physical developmental changes can occur during a student's entire high school tenure, and many ninth graders are still in the early stages of adolescent development. It can be difficult for both the early developer and the late-bloomer to adjust to high school.

Since school is where the adolescent spends many waking hours, a great many of these developmental tasks will necessarily take place in the school environment.
Eccles et al., (1993) suggested that the negative psychological changes associated with adolescent development are indicative of a mismatch between the students' needs and the offerings of the school environment. The researchers suggested that when there is a fit between the stage environment and the adolescents' needs and opportunities available, optimal growth and development should occur.

Seidman, Allee, Aber, Mitchell, and Feitman (1994) suggested that the developmental mismatch hypothesis is the most logical explanation for the problems associated with adolescents transitioning into the high school. Developmentally, it is a time when students need consistency in teachers, friendships, and routine the most. Upon their entrance into high school, it becomes a brand new game in all these arenas, and students have to scramble to form new relationships with peers and teachers, as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain.

Unresolved emotional, psychological, and social problems frequently result in academic underachievement, attendance problems, and behavioral issues (Finn, 1994). These problems are reflected in low GPAs, high absences and tardies, and frequent discipline referrals. Rather than becoming connected to the school community, struggling students do not have the motivation to become engaged in other activities when they are barely keeping their heads above water. Research shows that early adolescents may experience a decline in attitude and motivation during this period, which is exacerbated during times of transition (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). Hertzog and Morgan (1998) found that upon entrance into the ninth grade, many students had a significant drop in self-worth, competence, physical appeal and conduct. The researchers discovered that the only aspect of the ninth-
graders' lives that improved was close friendships probably due to the comfort the friendships provided.

At-Risk Students

The context of this study was an affluent, suburban community in which most of the students were academically competitive. Therefore, the term at-risk was not defined in the general sense of at-risk of school failure. Rather, in this context, at-risk students were in danger of not reaching their potential, which was reflected in poor grades, attendance, discipline infractions, or lack of connection to the school community. The researcher found in meeting with middle school personnel in 2003-2004 that although grades, attendance, and behavioral difficulties were reported, the one continued refrain was in describing the at-risk student as "isolated, alienated, and not participating in any school activities." "This was the student who ran out the door at 2:32 p.m. everyday", said one eighth-grade counselor.

Students' disengagement from school is often reflected in their misbehavior and disrespect toward school staff (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Research shows that at-risk students with attendance, discipline, and behavior problems are most likely to drop out of school (Ascher, 1999). Mayer and Mitchell (1995) pointed out that many at-risk youngsters have poor attendance records, because the punitive school environments actually drive them away. These researchers advocated for less punitive and more supportive school environments in which adults would offer a tutorial program focusing on English and Math available in the summer as well as ongoing test preparation, note-taking, and study skills assistance.
Bryk and Thum (1989) studied Catholic school organizations with their emphasis on academics, order, and discipline. The researchers showed that schools with more academic course work and homework had lower absenteeism and dropout rates than less academically rigorous schools. Interestingly enough, in the academically rigorous schools, staff absenteeism was lower, and students reported that teachers were interested in their success. Bryk and Thum contended that high expectations and rigorous academic work motivate students to persist or drop out.

Dry (2002) found that at-risk eighth graders were motivated to learn when they were engaged in authentic tasks in a technology lab, which involved cooperative learning. The students appeared to be challenged by the meaningful work and controlled their behavior while remaining on task. It is a disservice to at-risk students when teachers underestimate their capabilities and do not provide them with challenging tasks that involve critical thinking skills (Means & Knapp, 1991). DiCintio and Gee (1999) supported these findings on motivating at-risk students. Their study suggested that basic skills courses often employ instruction on lower-level skills. Students in these classes were academically deficient and had a negative attitude toward their teachers and classes.

Research conducted by Anderson and Keith (1997) indicated that the most powerful direct influence on determining academic achievement of an at-risk student is the student’s ability. The most important implications of their study focused on improving the quality of academic course work for at-risk students in order to increase their motivation to succeed.
There is a growing recognition that the key to a student's educational success appears to be the teacher-student relationship (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Eccles et al., 1993; Finn & Achilles, 1999). Finn and Achilles (1999) contended that engagement behaviors are essential for at-risk students in order for them to overcome obstacles and be successful in school. A study conducted by Croninger and Lee (2001) of social capital (defined as "attributes of students' relationships with their teachers"). p. 216) concluded that teachers could have a strong influence in the lives of at-risk students in helping them complete high school. Teachers can provide academic counseling, tutoring, and guidance as related to educational decisions. Therefore, these researchers suggested that social capital reduces the dropout rate.

Bryk and Thum (1989) claimed that some young adolescents have difficulty handling the independence they find in large high schools. These youngsters require a smaller, supportive community, which is personalized. Mayer and Mitchell (1993) supported this notion adding that smaller units increase personal attention and longer class periods help by limiting student movement and confusion. Students in schools with less than 1,500 students are less likely to be high school dropouts according to Lee and Burkham (2003).

The Tennessee STAR Study (1985-1989), in which researchers analyzed the effects of class-size on student achievement, demonstrated that both student behaviors and student achievement improved for those students in smaller classes rather than in the larger classes (Finn & Achilles, 1999). According to the researchers, "Class size is the number of students regularly in a teacher's room for whom that teacher is responsible each day of the school year" (p. 104).
Kagan (1990) asserted that schools and not students are the primary cause of at-risk status. The researcher found that "differential treatment by teachers, differential student cognition and mediation, and differential peer interaction within classrooms" (p. 114) could lead to student estrangement and alienation.

In summary, numerous theories regarding at-risk students, the nature of their problems, and what remedies to seek are available to guide educators. Many of the ideas cannot be separated from the organizational structure of the secondary school.

Organizational Structure

Ninth graders are facing a larger and more diverse population of students in high school compared to the middle school. They require more advanced skills and knowledge to meet the higher academic standards. Freshmen are not at the top of the class. They are the youngest, at the bottom, and have to start all over again. Many fear hazing and not being able to measure up to their peers. These changes cause greater feelings of isolation preventing the students from feeling like they belong to the school community (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1991). According to Jett and Pulling (1995), ninth graders have a difficult time adjusting to high school, because the usual organizational structure is a better fit for older adolescents. The introduction of the period-based school schedule and the change to seven or eight different teachers a day have been linked to lower levels of trust and less connection and engagement than middle school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandries, & Trickett, 1991; Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982). As middle-school students, eighth graders were used to interdisciplinary courses of study, the
same group of five or six teachers, and a more cooperative-type learning approach than in the high school setting. As freshmen, they are faced with seven or eight different teachers who teach all grade levels and use different instructional strategies.

Generally, the high school has a less supportive environment than the middle school. Many freshmen are confused and lost the first weeks of school getting used to their schedules, finding different rooms in a larger building, and trying to seek assistance from their guidance counselors. Many are reduced to tears when they realize they do not share a 22 minute lunch period with even one of their good friends or are in a physical education class with mostly upper-class students. Some ninth graders complain about feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anonymity (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Crockett, Peterson, Gruber, Schalenberg, & Ebat. 1989). Most organizational structures of large high schools are impersonal leading students to feel disconnected and alienated from the learning process (NAASP, 1996).

Sometimes school is the only safe harbor for students while things may be unraveling in the other parts of their lives. During those 6 hours of school, they seek the structure and support they might not otherwise have once they leave school. This situation can be true even in affluent, suburban communities. For these students, the hectic start of freshman year with its confusing and anxiety-provoking moments of the first several weeks can be enough to unshackle them. In a study of school effects, Edmonds (cited in Kagan, 1990, p. 107), argued that the coherent environment of an effective school can be the most critical element of a child’s life each day and can help students overcome many other obstacles in their lives.
For the first time in their school careers, freshmen are made aware that their academic work has serious implications for their future. Grades become part of their permanent record and will be on transcripts, which are sent to college. The competition is great to achieve good grades and remain in the high tiers of classes.

Ability grouping can make lower-performing youngsters lose confidence in their ability to handle the demands of high school. Comparing themselves to students in honors and advanced placement courses, they may feel hopeless in ever achieving this status. Some ninth-grade students who do achieve low grades during their first semester of high school might never recover and eventually become dropouts (Roderick & Camburn, 1999).

In order to feel connected to each other in a large school and lose their sense of anonymity, students must feel connected to a community. Bryk and Driscoll (1988) claimed that "schools as communities" have shared values, caring teacher-student relationships, and activities, which serve to promote social bonding of community members. Research shows that students in schools with community-type organizations report a sense of belonging and connectedness (Cotter, 2001; NASSP, 1996; Raywid, 1999).

Hertzog and Morgan (1998) argue that problems occur for freshmen because the organizational culture is so different between middle and high school. These researchers proposed a separate ninth-grade academy with a dedicated faculty. These are many arrangements and ways of making large schools "feel" and act like smaller ones. Small learning communities (SLCs) are separate within a designated area of the school. Some alternate schools are called a school-within-a-school (SWAS). Some
schools deal with at-risk students and have a separate program and staff, which may or may not be in the same building. These are house plans in which schools are divided by grades or alphabetical divisions. Each house has its own administrators, teachers, counselors, policies, and student leaders. They are similar to SLCs. There are academies, which are like SWASs but can be theme-based according to occupational interest, etc. Magnet schools generally are academically specialized, and students within the same school district apply for admission according to their own talents and interests (Cotton, 2001).

Corbett and Wilson (2000) studied 80 students who were part of the Talent Development High School Reform Model in Philadelphia. These students experienced a SWAS, which was separate from the rest of the school (Ninth Grade Success Academy). Block scheduling was implemented to provide for longer, continuous teaching periods. The researchers reported that students felt safe, more organized, and learned well within this type of organizational framework.

According to Finn and Achilles (1999), "The evidence indicates that the key to the benefits of small classes is increased student engagement in learning" (p. 103). Raywid (1999) posited that there are strong feelings of connectedness and belonging in smaller school structures, because students and teachers have the opportunity to get to know each other and become connected.

The combination of more rigorous academic demands than middle school and new social pressures with the organization of secondary schools may contribute to the stress level of adolescents (Felner & Adan, 1988). According to NASSP (1996; 2004), personalization is the key to keeping students connected to the school and
engaged in learning. The NASSP supports the notion that each teacher should act as a Personal Adult Advocate for several students and advise them throughout the school year. Further, each advocate will facilitate the formulation and implementation of a Personal Plan for Progress for each student. In essence, each student will have a personal mission statement to follow each year with goals to strive for and planned actions to help them reach these goals.

According to Raywid (1999), students in SLCs experience a better attendance rate, are less disruptive and are more engaged in the learning than they would be in a large high school. Research shows that students in small schools or in schools with community-type organizations achieve solid grades both in school and on standardized tests (Cotton, 2001). Battistich, Solomon, Watson and Schaps (1997) supported the notion that students' needs for belonging are better met in a caring school community. Ninth-grade academies and SLCs can better address adolescents' many needs by focusing exclusively on one grade (Reents, 2002).

The various configurations discussed here have the same goal; that is to forge a sense of belonging, connectedness, and engagement to an adult in the school building. The concept of Psychological Sense of Community or PSOC (Sarason, 1974) helps to clarify what is missing in large, impersonal school organizations.
Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC)

The concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC), as originally proposed by Sarason (1974), defined PSOC as "the sense that one is part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend" (p. 1). The model of PSOC closely associated with Sarason is the one proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) who defined four elements of PSOC: membership or belonging, mastering to the group, faith that members' needs would be met, and an emotional connection with group members.

Students entering the ninth grade in a large high school or a new setting will not have an immediate sense of belonging. They need time and support to establish relationships with both peers and teachers and to establish their own identity. The more stressors a student reported at the beginning of ninth grade, the lower the sense of school membership (Isaacs & Jarvis, 1999).

Bateman (1998) conducted a study of sixth-grade students examining the relationship between students' self-confidence, academic achievement, and social behavior to their sense of classroom community. The researcher compared traditional classrooms with classrooms in Schools for Thought (SFT). "SFT's concept of learning community refers to a community in which everyone is a teacher as well as a learner" (Bateman, 1998, p. 15). The researcher concluded that students in SFT had a greater sense of community than did students in traditional classroom because a student's PSOC reduces antisocial behavior through the development of social skills.

From a study of sixth and eighth-grade students by Ma (2003), the evidence suggests that a student's self-esteem was the most important predictor of a student's
sense of belonging followed by a student’s physical health. The indicators used to
define sense of belonging were a student’s friends in class, level of class
participation, and academic achievement. Ma (2003) posited that educators and
administrators have both the power and the position to influence students’ sense of
belonging to school.

Parents need to be as supportive of their ninth graders entering the high school as
when they were starting pre-school or kindergarten. Parents’ involvement and interest
in their children’s education and quality of life at school can increase students’
positive feelings about school. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) claimed that support from
parents was related to feelings of school belongingness in adolescence. A study
conducted by Ricaman, Rosenfeld, and Bowen (1998) of at-risk adolescents and
school social support suggested that students perceived their parents and teachers to
be their main source of support.

Since about 1990, research has demonstrated that small schools provide many
benefits to students and are superior to large ones on nearly all measures (Bryk &
Thum, 1989; Cotton, 2001; Finn & Achilles, 1999; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Mayer &
Mitchell, 1993; Raywid, 1999; Wédlage & Rutter, 1986). A student’s sense of
belonging has an opportunity to grow and develop in a school environment, and a
smaller school setting should be more conducive in fostering a sense of PSOC. The
connectedness of a student to the school community is the foundation for the
recommendation for a Personal Adult Advocate (PAA) by NASSP (1996; 2004).

Anderman (2002) reported that students’ perceptions of school varied across
schools for a variety of reasons. Students who were bused to school reported lower
levels of perceived belonging than those who were in walking distance. Suburban school students reported higher levels of perceived belonging compared to urban students.

Finn (1993) studied students at-risk for school failure and focused upon participation as a "behavioral risk factor" (p. 1). His research focused on participation in terms of belonging and connectedness to the school community shown by student participation in activities as it relates to a student's sense of PSOC.

According to Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), there are three categories of student engagement in school: behavioral engagement is evidenced by a pupil's involvement in school activities; emotional engagement encompasses a student's connection to teachers, peers and the school environment; finally, cognitive engagement describes the student's effort to master the learning.

Behavioral engagement can be quantified by examining the student's discipline record and number of referrals. Cognitive engagement is represented by a student's academic achievement as reflected in grades and grade point average. Emotional engagement is less readily identifiable but can be represented by a student's social life, quality and depth of relationships with teachers and involvement in the school community.

Peer groups/student cohorts are a critical component of students' engagement, motivation, and achievement (Ryan, 2000). It seems reasonable to view the peer group as a significant influence on the behaviors, values, and achievements of adolescents. They spend at least 6 hours a day together, and many form close and lasting friendships.
High school freshmen, in particular, feel isolated and anonymous when they first enter the ninth grade due to the reality that they only know and are known by a small group of classmates and feel the lack of support (Gelsher, Prima Vera & Cauce, 1981).

In a study conducted by O'Brien and Bierman (1988), students of all ages agreed peer group acceptance was important to their well being, and older adolescents reported that peer reactions were important to their feelings of personal and social worth.

Ninth graders who made a smooth transition into high school reported their friends had similar academic goals (Newmam, Lohman, Newman, Myers & Staith, 2000). Berndt (1999) reported that students with stable friendships were better adjusted to school, and students were influenced by both the academic achievement and disruptive behavior of their friends.

In a study of high-risk behavior of 7th to 12th graders, findings indicated that race, income, and family structure only explained 10% of the variance (Blum et al., 2000). However, activities of friends, school failure, and unstructured free time were identified as stronger predictors of high-risk behavior than race, income, and family structure.

Positive associations were found between participation in school sports, clubs, and other activities and academic achievement (Voelki, 1997). The study suggested that students' participatory behaviors were more indicative of students' feelings of belonging and membership than achievement scores.

McNeal (1999) found a strong relationship between a student's inclination to be involved in school activities and athletics and a safe school climate. Students in large schools with many discipline problems are not likely to engage in extracurricular
activities. At-risk youngsters who participated in extracurricular activities were able to forge positive relationships with peers and staff members in this area and were less likely to drop out of school (Masoney, 2000).

Certe, Cauley and Chafin (2003) studied student's level of engagement and belonging in the high school. Student responses indicated greater levels of engagement when teachers prepared authentic and challenging learning experiences and showed interest in their students' learning and in their lives. The study found that students with a greater sense of belonging evidenced higher academic engagement and achievement. Students are less likely to drop out of high schools in which positive teacher-student relationships are supported (Lee & Burkhan, 2003).

Because transitions are so difficult for adolescents, researchers have studied and identified a number of transition programs and practices to assist youngsters at this critical time. The researcher will now focus on transition studies, outcomes and recommendations for practice.

**Transition to High School**

The start of every school year is hectic. There are new students, new teachers, new schedules and many forms and papers to be completed during the first weeks of school. Transitions have been defined as movement from "one state of certainty to another with a period of uncertainty in between" (Scillings, Snow, & Schinke, 1988, p. 2).

School transition studies originated with Simmons, Blyth, and colleagues in 1979. Results suggested that transitions had negative effects on the self-esteem of pubescent
females. Different people react to transition in different ways according to age, gender, personality, life situations, and other factors.

The School Transition Environment Program (STEP), designed by Robert Felner and colleagues at Yale University, was a ninth-grade program for students transitioning to high school. The program targeted the general instability, which is present at school opening as contributing to the difficult transition of ninth graders. It is less stable and predictable than normal at a time when the students are the most anxious. The researchers arranged for students in their treatment group to stay together with the same homeroom teachers who facilitated activities with them and assisted them with scheduling problems, lost locker combinations, and so forth.

Positive short and long-term benefits of the program were represented in higher attendance rates and grade point averages in the ninth grade and significant positive improvements in the drop out rates, GPAs, and attendance rates throughout these students' high school years (Felner, Ginter & Primavera, 1982).

Other than for legitimate illness, absences and tardiness are important indicators that a student is avoiding attending school. Precursors of disengagement and dropping out of school are student absenteeism and truancy (Epstein, Joyce & Sheldon, 2002).

The researchers found that attendance awards and school counselor support were two effective strategies to support student attendance. According to Lamdis (1996), student absenteeism is one of the most important problems educators face. Parents should be made aware of this and work with the school before this becomes a habit or turns into full-blown school phobia. Maclver and Epstein (1991) found that when
parents became involved right from the beginning of a student's entrance into high school, they tended to stay involved and supported their children.

Students who score higher on achievement tests are in school more than their frequently absent schoolmates (Lamdin, 1996). This makes sense in that missing class time, quizzes, and tests equals missed learning experiences. A study of Ohio public school students in the 4th, 6th, 9th, and 12th grades found a statistically significant relationship between student attendance and achievement with the most significance in the ninth grade (Roby, 2004).

Roderick and Camburn (1999) studied ninth-grade students in Chicago. They found that first semester absences were an important predictor of course failure in the first semester of high school. There is also an increase in tardiness to school, which generally affects the first period of the day sometimes resulting in a loss of that course and credit. The researchers concluded that due to increased demands, new rules, new social structure, and decreased sense of belonging, students need a supportive school environment to navigate through all these obstacles. They suggested a community-type school organization as the most educationally beneficial and supportive program for ninth-graders.

Achievement loss was found to be larger for students coming from a middle to a high school than from a K-8 elementary school to high school (Adspauh, 1998). The implication seems to be that the more transitions a student has, the more academic jeopardy is increased. One critical time period for academic problems is during the first semester of freshman year. Eccles et al., (1991) found that children's vulnerability for academic failure is increased during the early period of school
transitions. Students require the most support at this time. Catterall (1998) contended that at-risk students might recover from an initial shaky performance if they have family support, a supportive school setting, and if they become involved in school and community activities.

Disruptive behavior, inattention, and withdrawal from class activities are signs of disengagement and alienation (Finn, 1993). These students have given up on themselves and, unfortunately, their acting out in class disrupts the learning atmosphere for the other students. In many cases, the teacher will refer those students to some administrator, which temporarily solves the problem in class but increases feelings of alienation for the disruptive student. Students who feel alienated display behavioral problems as well as lower achievement in school (Osterman, 2000).

There are many transition programs and activities in place for students entering the ninth grade. Hertzog and Morgan (1998) studied schools in Southern Georgia and found that the retention to graduation rate was higher in schools with extensive and ongoing transition programs. Transition needs to be considered as a process and not a one-time event.

In some cases, if students come to the transition with strong bonding experiences, their transition process will be smooth. In a study of students in grades six, seven and eight, Mizelle (1999) found that those middle school students (Delta students) who had integrated instruction and cooperative learning were more successful in high school transition than were those students in traditional middle school classes (Non-Delta). Wallace (2002) found that proactive transition interventions provided early in middle school were more effective for students' successful transition to the high
school than transition efforts started after the students had been in high school for
some time: prevention rather than remediation. It might be too late to help some
students once they have failed for one marking period at the high school.

Successful transition programs are multi-faceted in that they engage students,
staff, and parents in order to provide a comprehensive program of support for
incoming high school freshmen (Maclever & Epstein, 1991; Smith, 1997). High school
and middle school personnel should meet during the school year to articulate
programs, requirements, scheduling, and so forth. Student social support should be in
the form of attending programs at the high school, meeting a big brother or a big
sister, and so forth. Parent and student informational sessions should occur while
students are still in the middle school and once again during freshmen year in high
school.

Akos and Galassi (2004) recommended different types of transition programs in
appropriate sequences in order to support successful transitions. In their study of 320
ninth graders, the researchers found that transitions need to be successfully navigated
in three different domains: procedural, academic, and social. Procedural transitions
involve the freshmen being able to successfully follow their schedules, get to class on
time, open their lockers, and so forth and could be assisted through focused
orientations in September. Academic transitions to more difficult course work, higher
expectations, and more homework could be supported through an after-school
program, homework helpers, and a tutoring center. Finally, social transitions may
require counselor assistance and parental support in order to encourage students to
participate in athletics and other extracurricular activities at the high school.
According to Maclver and Epstein (1991), advisory groups can help students bond with a cohort of students and provide them with a teacher advocate. The teacher advocates stay with their assigned cohort students throughout the freshman year to assist with ongoing issues. Advisory programs afford students support in the transition to high school, a decline in the number of dropouts, improved academic achievement and better teacher-student relations (Ososky, Sinner & Wolk cited in NASSP, 2004, p. 10).

Advisories should not be problem-oriented but should provide social support and facilitate student engagement in the school community (MacLaury & Gratz, 2002). Although most ninth graders enjoy their new freedom at the high school level, they still need guidance and direction in the many choices they face. In a sound advisory program, teachers can provide a type of “guided freedom” by facilitating dialogue among students regarding important decisions they need to make during their high school years (Jett & Pelling, 1995).

Chapman and Sawyer (2001) advocated team-building activities, which involve physical dependence upon each other promoting group cohesion. Challenging programs like the “ropes course” require interpersonal cooperation of all team members, which strengthens team identity. Ideally, these programs would be in the summer prior to the opening of school.

Kerr (2002) conducted an extensive study of Maryland Public Schools and found that all the schools used a wide variety and combination of practices. The researcher "suggested a positive relationship between using a small learning community or
interdisciplinary teaming with ninth-grade students and improvements in school-wide dropout rates, ninth grade promotion rates, and passing rates on the Maryland Functional Math Test" (p.180).

Although transitions in the adolescent years are challenging, there are also opportunities to promote positive changes (Schilling, Snow & Schinke, 1988). According to Werner and Smith (1992), transitions for adolescents can be opportunities to develop effective coping skills, high expectations for success and caring adults are available as support structures.

Indeed, some youngsters look upon a major change in their lives as the perfect time to reinvent themselves. Weiss and Bearman (2004) found that marginalized eighth graders were sometimes able to create new personas in high school due to the increased number and variety of diverse student groups. Other positive aspects of transition reported by adolescent students were increased freedom, different teachers and rooms, new friends, and more extracurricular offerings (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Summary

Indeed, several of the same themes recur in the literature on successful transitions: small school communities, teacher-student relationships, and the components and timing of successful transition programs. Small school communities are crucial to the success of transition programs in order to facilitate continued face-to-face communication, increased student engagement, shared values, and PSOC (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Coston, 2001; Finn & Achilles, 1999; Sarason, 1974; Raywid, 1999; Sarason, 1974). According to Reyes, Gillock and Kobus (1994), educators can
facilitate adjustment during transition as a drop out preventative measure. A PAA and Personal Plan for Progress (NASSP, 1996; 2004) are two strategies that can support students on an ongoing basis, strengthen the teacher-student relationship, and provide the necessary environment for a PSOC to flourish.

Research shows that the caring teacher-student relationship is key to establishing the connection to the school community (Croninger, Lee & Eccles et al., 1993). These connections can help students overcome the initial feelings of isolation and anonymity that many freshmen experience (Blyth et al., 1983; Crockett et al., 1989; Felner et al., 1981).

Research supports comprehensive transition programs that are ongoing in order to support freshmen throughout their first year in high school (Certo et al., 2003; Hertzig & Morgan, 1998; Kerr, 2002; MacRae & Epstein, 1991; and Mizelle, 1999). Program components should include students, staff, and parents in order to engage everyone involved in students' transition (MacRae & Epstein, 1991; Smith, 1997). Other researchers considered three different domains of transition programs that need to be addressed. Akos and Galassi (2004) found that student needs could be divided into those that were procedural, academic, and social. Fredericks et al. (2004) noted three categories of student engagement in school: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. Both studies described students' need for engagement in the same domains: procedural/behavioral; academic/cognitive; and social/emotional.

Procedural/behavioral transitions can be supported through early orientations by students and faculty, ninth-grade homeroom meetings, and meetings with guidance counselors. Academic/cognitive transitions could be supported through an after-
school skills program and homework-tutoring center. Social/emotional engagement may require counselor assistance, parent support, advisory programs, and peer/PA groups mentoring.

Transition studies found that the timing of transition programs is critical to success. Interventions provided in middle school were more effective in terms of students' successful transition to the high school than transition efforts started after students had already begun freshman year (Mizelle, 1999; Wallace, 2002).

Chapter II has presented a review of the literature relevant to this study. Chapter III presents the research design, methods, procedure, and data analysis steps utilized in the freshman transition program implemented in this study.
Chapter III
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the researcher presents the design for the study and the procedures used to conduct the study. The study population and sample, research design, and treatment methods are reviewed, including quantitative and qualitative components of this dissertation.

Research Design

This study is quasi-experimental with the independent variable being the transition program (Campbell & Stanley, 1965). The dependent variables are student grade point average (GPA), attendance (ATT), discipline referrals (DR), and psychological sense of community (PSOC) as evidenced by involvement in the school community. There were two treatment groups for comparison: Transition Cohort 1 received the treatment beginning in August prior to the beginning of the freshman year and continuing throughout the ninth grade; Transition Cohort 2 students could elect to be in the program beginning at the end of the first marking period in November of the freshman year.

Using a mixed methods approach, the researcher was able to enhance the study with information that was not quantifiable (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative data consisted of GPAs, ATT, and DR collected once during the eighth grade and three times, at the end of each marking period, during the students'
freshman year, 2004-2005. Qualitative information, obtained from two focus groups, provided evidence in terms of students' sense of PSOC and engagement in the school community.

This is a program evaluation conducted on-site (action research) to provide information for program decisions to improve the educational enterprise (Bobbie, 2002). Cooley and Bickel (1986) described research designed to help educators improve educational systems as decision-oriented educational research (DOER).

The researcher's purpose was to determine whether a transition program for at-risk freshman had a positive influence on student performance in terms of GPA, ATT, DR, and PSOC as evidenced from analyses of quantitative data obtained from two Transition Cohorts and also when compared to the rest of the freshman class. The researcher was interested in determining whether or not the at-risk students' averages were more on a par with the rest of the freshman class as the year progressed. Data from two separate focus groups were analyzed to determine themes that would assist the researcher in understanding the processes and the results of the quantitative data analysis. This research is an example of a cross-sectional, explanatory study (Type 8) according to the research typology of Johnson (2001).

Population and Sample

The population for this study was the 2003-2004 eighth-grade class of students that included approximately 310 students. The purposive sample included 40 students from this class who demonstrated at-risk behaviors while in the eighth grade. Special
Education students were not included in the sample, nor were their grades used in any comparisons.

Middle school personnel identified at-risk eighth graders at the end of the first semester of the 2003-2004 school year using the following criteria: one or more grades below a "C-", 8 or more absences (AYT), and 3 or more discipline referrals (DR). Eighth-grade counselors provided information regarding students who were not involved in the school community. Students who met two or more of the four criteria were considered at-risk of not succeeding on the same level as other members of the freshman class.

Procedures and Methods

Following the identification of the at-risk students, the researchers invited parents of these students to a meeting in May of 2004 to present the program (see Appendix A). Participation was presented as purely voluntary, and should any student or parent not wish to participate, they were free to do so. More than 40 students were identified at-risk out of a class of 310 students. Parents of 40 students indicated they would like their students to be a part of the Transition Program.

Interested parents signed a permission form (see Appendix B), and eighth-grade counselors met with those students on an individual basis to explain the program (see Appendix C). After talking with their parents, those students who wished to be in the transition program signed the Letter of Assent (see Appendix D). Parents were sent a Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix E). Once Informed Consent Letters were returned, the researcher randomly selected 20 students to be in Transition Cohort 1 and 20 students to be in Transition Cohort 2 using a table of random numbers (Witte
& Witte, 2001). Transition Cohort 1 began at the end of August 2004, and Transition Cohort 2 was offered services at the end of the first marking period, the first week of November 2004. Eighth-grade counselors phoned parents regarding Transition Cohort placement of their children.

Eighth-grade counselors phoned parents from both Transition Cohorts to see if they wished to participate in a focus group that met at the high school every other month beginning in September 2004 (see Appendix F). Three parent names from Transition Cohort 1, and three parent names from the Transition Cohort 2 were blindly selected by the counselor secretary. Those selected were sent an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G).

The research assistant met with ninth-grade faculty in the high school library in order to explain the transition program and solicit volunteers to act as PAsAs to three or four transition freshmen during the 2004-2005 school year. The assistant explained that the advocates would meet three or four times each semester and would not have a collateral duty in order to allow for meeting time. The names of volunteers were put in a box, and the research assistant’s secretary blindly selected six names. The assistant made in-person contact and asked each volunteer to be part of a focus group (see Appendix H). Those who consented signed the required form (see Appendix I).

**Treatment**

The interventions explained to the parents and students were focused on support and teacher-student relationships. There were three distinct interventions and, although not assessed quantitatively, PSCC was reported during focus group
meetings as evidenced by involvement in the school community. Transition Cohort I
kicked off with the Freshman Summer Academy, which took place in August of
2004. Over a 3-day period the students experienced a variety of activities. Day one
was an off-campus activity called the “ropes course.” This challenging physical
activity promotes bonding and strengthens group cohesiveness as the students work
together to solve the physical challenges. The Transition Cohort I students were
paired with student leaders who were in the junior class at the high school during the
2004-2005 school year. The Student Assistance Advisor and co-advisor accompanied
the students. Day two was at the high school and consisted of academic skills
strengthening in terms of study skills, organizational methods, time management,
test-taking tips, note-taking strategies and many other sound educational practices
taught by a former teacher. Day three was also at the high school, and involved the
students meeting with peer leaders who took them on a guided tour of the high
school. Students had the opportunity to meet with administrators and guidance
counselors who reviewed the course curriculum, planning, and long-term goals. The
students had breakfast and lunch served every day with a 1:00 dismissal time on the
second and third days, and a 3:00 p.m. return time from the first day’s trip.

The second intervention was the regularly scheduled meetings with the students
and their PAs during the 2004-2005 school year. The expectation was that they
would meet at least three to four times a semester with each student individually or as
a group of three or four. Meetings took place at lunchtime or immediately after
school. Students were invited to seek out the advocate’s assistance when a problem
arose. The teacher’s incentive to volunteer for this service was the scheduling of a
"prep period" rather than a collateral duty such as hallway or cafeteria supervision. Thus the advocate had the opportunity to meet with a student during this period, if the student did not have an academic course scheduled at that time. The researcher provided the PAAs with discussion topics so they could become familiar with their advisees (see Appendix J).

The third intervention was the Personal Plan for Progress, which the student and advocate collaboratively planned, wrote, and periodically reviewed to reflect the student's goals and plans to meet those goals for the current school year. This plan was reviewed at each meeting by both the student and teacher in order to update and revise (see Appendix K).

Transition Cohort 2 students had the opportunity to receive support beginning the end of the first marking period in November 2004. Program components included a study skills class facilitated by volunteer senior students, which met once a week during marking period two to prepare students for semester exams and other tests. Students could opt to have a PAA work with them for the remainder of the school year. The six PAAs were randomly assigned to those students who desired this type of support.

Eight of the 20 Transition Cohort 2 students choose to participate in one or both options offered to them at the end of marking period one. Five students chose both the weekly Study Skills class and the PAA. Two students opted just to attend the weekly tutorial, and one student wanted to work with a PAA but not attend the class.
Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data consisted of data normally collected in the district such as GPAs, ATT, and DR. These aggregate data were used for initial identification of the at-risk pool of students while at the middle school and were compared with the results at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of freshman year at the high school during the 2004-2005 school year.

The collection of GPAs, ATT, and DR took place at four periods: during the end of the first semester of the 2003-2004 school year, at the end of the first marking period of the 2004-2005 school year, again at the end of the second marking period (first semester), and finally at the end of the third marking period. These data are regularly collected each year.

No student names were used. Transition Cohort 1 students were coded "1", Transition Cohort 2 students were coded "2", and the remainder of the freshmen students were coded "3". Special education ninth-graders were excluded.

There is variability in the instructional processes and in grades between the middle school and high school, which the researchers could not control. In the first place, in the middle school, students are ability-grouped in math and science and not in the other subjects. At the high school, all classes are academically grouped according to advanced placement courses (not applicable to ninth-graders), accelerated level, college prep A and college prep B. The at-risk students would most likely be placed in college prep A and B courses. Midterm and final exams are another difference between middle school and high school. Middle school students have not had to keep track of all their notes, tests, and so forth in order to study for an
exam of accumulated material of 5 months duration, which they have to do at the high school. Ninth-grade teachers work hard to prepare students for these exams, administered in January, but the students need a first-time experience to know what to expect. First-semester exam grades of freshmen are generally a grade or two lower than marking period grades but do count one-fifth of the first semester grade.

Attendance requirements are different between the schools. There is an attendance policy at the high school involving parent notification of the 7th, 9th and 11th absences. Should a student reach 12 unexcused absences in any class, a certified letter is sent home notifying parent and student that a student will be withdrawn from the class upon the 13th absence. Medical notes can excuse absences, and religious observances as well as school-related activities do not go into the total.

Discipline referrals at the high school are similar to those in the middle school except for greater consequences. The middle school has both an in-school suspension (ISS) and an out-of-school suspension (OSS) policy, while the high school has only out-of-school suspensions. Students who cut two classes at the high school lose the course and credit and have to repeat the course the following year if it is a graduation requirement. This is not a policy at the middle school.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were gathered from two focus groups: a Parent Focus Group, consisting of three volunteer parents of Transition Cohort 1 students plus three volunteer parents of Transition Cohort 2 students and a PAA Focus Group composed of six volunteer ninth-grade teachers at the high school.
The research assistant collected qualitative data during separate meetings with the two focus groups in September, November, and January of the 2004-2005 school year. Focus-group questions served to guide the meetings (see Appendix M). The purpose of these advisory meetings was to ascertain the transition needs of the students, plan strategies to support them, and follow up to see if the interventions were working. The PAA was in the best strategic position to provide feedback and implement supportive strategies. The data collected from these meetings informed the discourse in terms of students' transitional needs, cohort effects, and student involvement in the school community.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted for the three variables utilizing two independent samples t-tests: on GPAs, ATT, and DR to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the means of freshman in Transition Cohort 1 compared to those students in Transition Cohort 2. The eighth-grade first semester means were compared with the ninth-grade means on the three variables (GPAs, ATT, and DR) for the 40 Cohort students using a t-test for 2 matched samples. The means for both Transition Cohorts as a group were compared to the means of the rest of the freshman class, excluding special education students, on two variables, GPAs and ATT, at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods to determine whether the interventions seemed to help the Transition Cohort students perform close to the rest of the grade-nine students. The variable, DR, was not
included in this comparison as that information was not readily accessible for the entire freshman class. The SPSS Program 10.0 was used for the data analyses.

Effect Size

Effect size defined as the “degree to which a phenomenon exists” (p. 247) was calculated to provide an estimate of the educational importance of any difference in standard deviation units (Cohen, cited in Hinkle, Wiersma & Jurs, 2003, p. 247). The calculation for effect size used Equation 1:

\[
\text{Effect Size } (d) = \frac{\text{mean group 1 minus mean group 2}}{\text{standard deviation of group 2}}
\]

The guidelines for effect size (\(d\)) were: Small = .25; Medium = .50; and Large = 1.00 or greater (Cohen, cited in Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003, p. 248). In this study, effect size aided in the interpretation of student means for GPA, ATT, and DR indicating the practical and educational importance of the treatment. Effect sizes are reported in the text; calculations are in Appendix N.

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data in terms of repeated themes, similarities and differences among and between the two groups of participants that is reported in Chapter IV.

Summary

Chapter III presented the methodology in this study. The identification of the student population, selection of students, and formation of focus groups was
described. The research design and quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were identified.

Chapter IV presents data in answer to the research questions. SPSS outputs, and focus group themes are provided to summarize the results.
Chapter IV
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The researcher’s purpose for this study was to evaluate the influence of a transition program on at-risk students in an affluent school district where nearly all students do well. The school district leadership was concerned about ninth graders' adjustment problems in the high school that, in the past, had been addressed later in the ninth grade school year with remedial interventions once problems had surfaced. The district leaders decided to attempt to help at-risk freshmen through early identification and early intervention before students entered the high school, and with continuing services throughout the freshman year, if parents and students agreed.

Quantitative indicators were Grade Point Average (GPA), Attendance (ATT), and Discipline Referrals (DR). Professional observations and focus-group responses assisted the researcher in understanding and explaining results (quantitative). Two separate groups of students were subjects. Transition Cohort 1 received early intervention services, and Transition Cohort 2 received modified services after the first nine-week marking period.

Six questions were addressed in this study:

1. What, if any, are differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 when comparing eighth grade, end-of-first-semester, to ninth grade, end-of-first-semester, on GPA, ATT, and DR?

2. What is the difference, if any, between all Cohort students in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end-of-first-semester, eighth grade, compared to end-of-
first-semester, ninth grade?

3. What is the difference, if any, between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year?

4. What is the difference, if any, between the Transition Cohorts and the remainder of the freshman class (excluding special education students) in terms of GPA and ATT during the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year? (DR was not a part of the regularly collected data for each student, so it was not available for this analysis).

5. What were the benefits relative to costs to the district in terms of time and money?

6. What evidence did focus groups provide to support cohorts and that PAs offered PSOC as shown by school and community involvement?

The influence of the Transition Program on students was assessed by comparing GPA, ATT, and DR of Transition Cohort 1 and 2 to each other. In addition, GPA and ATT of the Cohorts and of the rest of the freshman class (excluding special education students) were compared at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods. Transition Cohort 1 began in August of 2004 prior to the opening of school, and Transition Cohort 2 became involved in early November at the end of the second marking period of the 2004-2005 school year.

The researcher sought to determine if early transition helped Transition 1 students in terms of improved GPA, ATT, and DR as compared to Transition 2 students. The
method was to analyze the data and see if any differences were statistically different and educationally important (Effect Size). The two focus groups provided feedback regarding the students’ PSOC as evidenced by school and community involvement. Study results combined with the time and cost involved in facilitating this Transition Program determined the recommendations made to the Board of Education in terms of continuing, expanding, or terminating the program.

The next section of this chapter encompasses the descriptive and context information, followed by the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The results are organized by providing answers to the six research questions.

Descriptive and Context Information

The population for this study included the 2003-2004 eighth-grade class of students that was comprised of approximately 310 students. The purposive sample included 40 students from this class who demonstrated at-risk behaviors while in the eighth grade. Special Education students were not included in the sample population. This study began in the spring of 2004 and was completed in the spring of 2005.

Student demographics of each Cohort were similar (see Table 1).

There were a total of 22 males and 18 females with a majority of Caucasian students in the study. None of the students qualified for free lunch. Special education students were not included in the study.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Demographics of Transition Cohorts 1 and 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Free Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context of the Study

This study took place in a mid-size affluent and traditional New Jersey suburban public school district with a student population of 4500. Expenditure per pupil is approximately $11,637 in the district’s five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The schools are academically competitive with a consistent record of good attendance and behavior demonstrated by the vast majority of the student population. The population of the high school in 2004-2005 was 1200 students. The projected population for the high school by 2010 is 1600 students. The researcher is one of two Vice Principals in the high school at the time of the study.
Quantitative Results

Research Question One

What, if any, are differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 when comparing eighth grade, end-of-first-semester results, to ninth grade, end-of-first semester results, on GPA, ATT, and DR? Independent t-tests were used to compare mean differences in GPA, ATT, and DR between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 at the end-of-the-first-semester in grades 8 and 9 (see Table 2).

Paired sample t-tests were used to compare mean differences in GPA, ATT, and DR of Transition Cohort 1 students in grade 8, end-of-first-semester, to grade 9, end-of-first-semester. The mean differences of Transition Cohort 2 students in grade 8, end-of-first-semester, were compared to grade 9, end-of-first-semester using paired sample t-tests (see Table 3). Table 3 shows the comparisons of each Cohort in Grade 8 to Grade 9 at the end-of-the-first-semester for the three variables (GPA, ATT, DR).

Table 2 shows no significant differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 for the three variables when comparing end-of-first-semester, grade 8, to end-of-first-semester, grade 9. Transition Cohorts 1 and 2 were similar on the variables for this study in grade 8 validating the selection and the random-selection procedures. Both cohorts remained about the same in grade 9 on the three variables, with similar changes in all three variables (as groups).
Table 2

t-tests Comparing Cohort 1 to Cohort 2 Variables in Grades 8 and 9 at End-of-

First-Semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Cohort 1 (N=20)</th>
<th>Cohort 2 (N=20)</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA (Grade Point Average)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.404</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.497</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD1</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT (Attendance as Average Days Absent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.28</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD1</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR (Discipline Referrals)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD1</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td></td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the comparisons of each Cohort in Grade 8 to Grade 9 at the end of the first semester each year on the three variables (GPA, ATT, DR).
Table 3

Paired Simple t-Tests Comparing Cohort 1 Students in Grade 8 to Grade 9 and Cohort 2 Students in Grade 8 to Grade 9, End of First Semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.53</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.497</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.566</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.873</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>3.59</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>3.47</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>-210</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.79</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-1.75</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>-421</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.009*</td>
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<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-05</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>-238</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.028*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paired Differences=Grade 9-Grade 8

Note. ATT=days absent

*Significant at p ≤ .05.
Significant differences were found for DR at the end of the first semester. Transition Cohort 1 students experienced fewer discipline referrals as ninth graders than they did as eighth graders. Transition Cohort 2 students also experienced fewer discipline referrals in the ninth grade compared to the eighth grade.

There were no statistically significant differences between Cohort 1 in the eighth and ninth grade and Cohort 2 in the eighth and ninth grade on GPA or ATT. However, examination of the means shows that the average GPAs of both Transition Cohorts were higher (better) in grade 9 than in grade 8. Examination of the attendance means shows that Transition Cohort 1 students had slightly better attendance in the eighth grade (7.10 days absent) than in the ninth grade (7.28 days absent). For attendance, a lower mean is the better mean indicating less absences. Transition Cohort 2 students showed slightly better attendance in the ninth grade (5.53 days absent) compared to the eighth grade (5.68 days absent). The DR mean for Transition Cohort 1 was 3.55 in grade 8 compared to 1.80 in grade 9 indicating an improvement in the number of behavioral incidents in the ninth grade. For DR, a lower mean is better indicating an improvement in behavior. Transition Cohort 2 students had a DR of 2.90 in the eighth grade compared to 2.05 in the ninth grade which indicated less behavioral referrals to the office in the ninth grade.

Research Question Two

What is the difference, if any, between all Cohort students in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end of the first semester, eighth grade, compared to the end-of-the-first-semester, ninth grade?
A matched pair-samples t-test was used to compare the GPAs, ATT, and DR of the 40 Cohort students at the end of the first semester, grade eight, to their statistics at the end of the first semester, grade nine. The results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.372</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.532</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>.602</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>.010*</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Differences</td>
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<td>-1.30</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>-4.64</td>
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<td>.000*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paired Differences (Grade 9 - Grade 8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at p ≤ .05.

With a mean of 2.75 GPA for both Cohorts in the ninth grade and a mean GPA of 2.49 for both Cohorts in the eighth grade, paired differences of means (t=2.7, df=39) p=
010 indicated a significant difference at \( p < .05 \). The positive differences between the means may be the influence of a Transition Program.

The differences between the means of 6.40 ATT for both Cohorts in the ninth grade and of 6.39 ATT for both Cohorts in the eighth grade were not statistically significant at the end-of-first semester. The Transition Program did not have a positive effect on ATT for the Cohorts by the end-of the first semester.

With a mean DR for both Cohorts of 1.93 in grade nine compared to a mean of 3.23 in grade eight, paired differences of means (\( t = -4.64, df=39 \)) \( p = .000 \) indicated a significant difference at \( p < .05 \). The improvement in DR may be a result of the influence of the Freshman Transition Program.

*Research Question Three*

What is the difference, if any, between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 freshman school year?

Independent samples \( t \)-tests were used to determine mean differences. The researcher sought to determine if early transition (Cohort 1) helped students earn better grades, improve attendance rates, and have fewer discipline referrals compared to those students who experienced a later transition program (Cohort 2). Table 5 presents the results of these analyses.
Table 5

Statistics Comparing Transition Cohorts 1 and 2 by Marking Period on Three Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking Pd</th>
<th>Cohort 1 (N=20)</th>
<th>Cohort 2 (N=20)</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA (Grade Point Average)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.317</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.497</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT (Attendance as Average Days Absent. Less is better)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR (Discipline Referrals). Less is better.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *significant at p≤.05

MD=Mean Difference, Cohort 1 minus Cohort 2 ATT= days absent.

Significant difference was found for DR in the third marking period. The mean for Transition Cohort 1 was .65 DR compared to 2.0 DR for Transition Cohort 2 which was statistically significant at p≤.05. No statistically significant differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 on GPA, ATT, and DR were found in the first and second marking periods.
Transition Cohort 1 students earned higher GPAs each marking period than Cohort 2 students for marking periods one, two, and three. This improvement could be attributed to the Freshman Transition Program.

For the first marking period, Transition Cohort 1 students experienced fewer days absent than Cohort 2 students. Cohort 2 students had fewer days absent during the second and third marking periods compared to Cohort 1. The Freshman Transition Program did not appear to help Cohort 1 students with their attendance rate overall.

During the first and third marking periods, Cohort 1 students had fewer referrals for behavior than Cohort 2 students. There was a significant mean difference for DR in marking period 3. Cohort 1 students had fewer behavioral issues that may have been influenced by the Freshman Transition Program.

Research Question Four

What is the difference, if any, between the Transition Cohorts and the remainder of the freshman class (excluding special education students) in terms of GPA and ATT?

The researcher compared the GPAs and ATT of Transition Cohort 1 to the rest of the freshman class (see Table 6), and Transition 2 to the freshman class at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year using independent t-tests (see Table 7).

The researcher compared the GPAs and ATT of all cohort students to the entire freshman class (excluding the special education population) at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods using independent t-test of differences of means. The summary is in Table 8.
**Table 6**

**Independent t-Tests Comparing Transition Cohort 1 vs Freshman Class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking Pd.</th>
<th>Cohort 1=20</th>
<th>Freshman Class=258</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD  t  df  Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GPA=Grade Point Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.99  .317</td>
<td>3.36  .487  -4.74  276  .000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2.77  .497</td>
<td>3.27  .480  -4.43  276  .000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2.61  .491</td>
<td>3.36  .478  -6.77  276  .000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ATT=Attendance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.23  2.47</td>
<td>2.59  2.10  -6.27  276  .531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>8.50  7.28</td>
<td>3.54  2.40  3.04  276  .007*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>4.98  3.88</td>
<td>3.32  2.44  1.89  276  .074</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent t-tests were used to compare Cohort 1 to the rest of the freshman class at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods on GPA and ATT. Significant differences in GPA were found between Cohort 1 with a mean of 2.99 and a freshman class mean of 3.36 for the first marking period, a Cohort 1 mean of 2.77 and a freshman class mean of 3.27 for the second marking period, and a Cohort 1 mean of 2.61 and a freshman class mean of 3.36 for the third marking period. The freshman class students had higher average GPAs than did the Cohort 1 students. The Transition Program did not help the Cohort 1 students in achieving par with the remainder of the freshman class.
In terms of ATT (average days absent), results were not statistically significant when comparing ATT means for Cohort 1 students to ATT means of the freshman class during the first and third marking periods. For the second marking period, there was a statistically significant difference between Cohort 1 students with an ATT mean of 8.50 compared to a freshman class mean of 3.54. There were three students in Cohort 1 who experienced more than 10 days absent due to flu season. The Transition Program did not influence the Cohort 1 students' ATT during the second marking period.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking Pd.</th>
<th>Cohort 2=20</th>
<th>Freshman Class=258</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA=Grade Point Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>.691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT=Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>7.22</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent t-tests were used to compare Cohort 2 students to the rest of the freshman class at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods on GPA and
ATT. Statistically significant differences on GPA were found between Cohort 2 students with a mean of 2.87 and freshman class mean of 3.36 for the first marking period, a Cohort 2 GPA mean of 2.72 and freshman class GPA mean of 3.27 for the second marking period, and a Cohort 2 GPA mean of 2.39 and freshman class GPA mean of 3.36 for the third marking period. The freshman class had higher GPAs each marking period than the Cohort 2 students. The Transition Program did not positively impact the Cohort 2 students’ GPAs.

In terms of ATT, there was a statistically significant difference between Cohort 2 students with an ATT mean of 3.05 compared to a freshman class ATT mean of 2.56 for the first marking period, and a Cohort 2 ATT mean of 7.22 compared to a freshman class ATT mean of 3.54 for the second marking period. Two students experienced more than ten days absent due to flu season during the second marking period. Results were not statistically significant when comparing ATT means for Cohort 2 to the freshman class for the third marking period. The freshman class experienced fewer average absences than did Cohort 2 students for all three marking periods.

Table 8 shows the GPAs and ATT of both Cohorts compared to the entire freshman class (excluding the special education population) at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods.
Table 8

*Independent t-Tests Comparing Cohort Students to Freshman Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking Pd.</th>
<th>Cohort Students=40</th>
<th>Freshman Class=258</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at p≤.05

For the first marking period, ninth grade, the Cohort students had a mean GPA of 2.93 compared to the rest of the freshman class (excluding special education students) with a mean GPA of 3.36. A 2-tailed t-test of means \( t=-5.38, df=296 \) \( p=.000 \) indicated that the difference was significant at \( p<.05 \). For the second marking period, the Cohort students had a mean GPA of 2.75 compared to a freshman class mean of 3.27. A 2-tailed t-test of means \( t=-6.27, df=296 \) \( p=.000 \) indicated that the difference was significant at \( p<.05 \). For the third marking period, the Cohort students had a mean GPA of 2.50.
compared to a freshman class mean of 3.36. A 2-tailed t-test of means (t=10.2, df=296) 
p= .000 indicated that the difference was significant at p<.05.

The results indicate that the freshman students had a significantly higher mean 
GPA for marking periods one, two, and three compared to the Cohort students. It appears 
that the Transition Program did not have a positive influence on GPA.

For the first marking period, ninth grade, the difference in ATT means for the 
Cohort students and the rest of the freshman class was not statistically significant. For 
the second marking period, the Cohort students had a mean ATT of 7.86 compared to a 
mean ATT of 3.54 for the rest of the freshman class. A 2-tailed t-test of means (t=7.71, 
df=296) p=.000 indicated that the difference was significant at p<.05. For the third 
marking period, the Cohort students had a mean ATT of 4.48 compared to a mean ATT 
of 3.31 for the rest of the freshman class. A 2-tailed t-test of means (t=2.05, df=296) p=.047 
indicated that the difference was significant at p<.05.

The results suggest that the difference between the Cohort students and the rest of 
the freshman class was not significant for the first marking period for ATT. However, for 
the second and third marking periods, the difference in mean ATT was significantly 
different between the Cohort students and the freshman class. The Cohort students had a 
significantly higher rate of absenteeism than the freshman class. It appears that the 
Transition Program did not have a positive influence on ATT when comparing Cohort 
students to the rest of the freshman class.
Effect Sizes

The researcher calculated and reported the effect size for means of the three dependent variables in the study, GPA, ATT, and DR, for all the data analyses. Effect sizes were included for practical application and interpretation of student scores. The information and computations are in Appendix N.

The effect sizes for Transition Cohorts 1 and 2 on GPA were small to medium (.09 to .58). The Cohort comparison, separately and together, with the rest of the freshman class had large effect sizes ranging from a negative .88 to negative 2.0, with the freshman class demonstrating higher GPA means at every comparison. The effect sizes for Transition Cohorts 1 and 2 on ATT were small to medium (.00 to .50). There were several large effect sizes for ATT (1.5 to 2.1) comparing the means of the Cohorts to the freshman class. The effect sizes for Transition Cohorts 1 and 2 on DR were small to medium (.06 to .84).

Research Question Five

What were the benefits relative to costs to the district in terms of time and money?

Transition Program components involving remuneration included the Ropes Course during the August 2004 Summow Academy as well as transportation, lunch, and personnel costs involved in Transition Cohort 1. There were no additional direct costs involved with those students in Transition Cohort 2 who opted to participate in the program beginning in early November. The Study Skills class was already in place, and the PAAs were not remunerated from the inception of the program, as they did not get
assigned to other collateral duties so they could be available to meet with their advisees.

Table 9 includes a summary of the line items and costs associated with the Transition Program in this study. Time involved in the planning and implementation of the school-wide Freshman Orientation Program is summarized in Table 10. Table 11 includes the events and time involved in the Transition Program for the 2004-2005 school year.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item(s)</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Breakfast</td>
<td>$30.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>$54.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$54.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus Transportation</td>
<td>$340.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$340.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ropes Course</td>
<td>$55.00</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>$1100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Skills Teacher</td>
<td>$600.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaperones for Trip</td>
<td>$425.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$850.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost</strong></td>
<td>approx $150.00 per student</td>
<td><strong>$3004.00</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students (n=20)

Per Student $150.00

The biggest cost for the Transition Program was for the Freshman Summer Academy, which included the Ropes Course, the two teachers who accompanied the students, the bus, and the lunch expenditures. These costs represented 78% of the total expenditure for the Transition Program.
### Table 10

*Time for Planning and Implementing School-Wide Traditional Orientation Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Number of Times</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Informational Program</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with eighth-grade students</td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors Scheduling</td>
<td>3 hrs.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Day Orientation</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Hours</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11 hrs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The events in Table 10 occur during the spring of the students' eighth grade and early in the fall of the freshman year during the context of the regular school day. In the past, an end-of-the-year day was planned at the high school for the incoming eighth graders but was eliminated because discipline problems increased as the population did. It would be difficult to make a cost estimate for these events in that they occurred during normal contract working hours for the professional staff involved. This Orientation Program was implemented for the entire freshman class in addition to the Transition Program for the 2004-2005 school year.

Table 11 includes the events and the time involving in implementing the Transition Program in this study. The major amount of time was used for the PAAN meetings with their advisees, which represented 59% of the time spent by personnel on the Transition Program. The 12 hours invested in the Freshman Summer Academy
represented 14% of program time. According to both focus groups, the time invested by the PAAs was the most worthwhile component of the Transition Program.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Number of Times</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with 8th Grade Personnel</td>
<td>4 hrs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 8th Grade Parents</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with Assistant</td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant’s Focus Groups</td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAA Meetings w/Students</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
<td>8 hrs. x 6 PAAs</td>
<td>48 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>1 hr.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Academy hrs.</td>
<td>4 hrs.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>81 hrs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Results

Research Question Six

What evidence did focus groups provide to support cohorts and that PAAs offered PSOC as shown by school and community involvement?

The research assistant facilitated two focus groups: one with six volunteer parents of students either in the first or second Transition Cohorts; the second focus group was comprised of the six PAAs. The assistant met three times with each group, once each in September, November, and January. During these meetings, the assistant used the Focus
Group Questions (see Appendix M) to guide the meetings and transcribed participant's comments. The focus groups enriched the study by identifying strengths, weaknesses, problematic issues, and transitional problems. Focus group discussions also addressed the fourth index of at-risk students, involvement in the school community which is a less quantifiable component compared to other dependent variables in this study (GPAs, ATT, and DR). These data enabled the researcher to learn more about the transition students' PSOC during their freshman year.

Focus Group Question 1: What are students' greatest needs, concerns, and challenges in the transition to high school?

The Parent Focus group was primarily concerned about academic matters and GPAs. Most were worried that if their children were unhappy, they would not "feel like doing their homework." A few parents voiced concerns that the middle school was not rigorous enough to prepare their students for the academic rigor of the high school. Parents hoped that their children would like the teachers they had, because it seemed that they were more motivated to work in classes with teachers they liked.

The PAA's perceived the students' greatest needs revolved around social concerns including meeting new people, being in the "right" clique, not having gym or lunch alone. Group members also agreed that the academics and homework were very challenging for these at-risk ninth graders. Three of the PAA's noted that the girls in their groups expressed more concern about being accepted at the high school and were very sensitive to their peers' remarks about their looks, clothes, and so forth. Boys, on the other hand, did not express concern over others' opinions but most wanted to participate in sports and make the cut for a team. Several students expressed annoyance at their
parents' high level of anxiety regarding their academic performance in high school and felt too pressured by them.

Focus Group Question 2: Which issues are most challenging for you (as a parent, teacher, Personal Adult Advocate) in providing support?

Communicating with their youngsters is a challenge for the majority of the parents in the Parent Focus Group. They found it difficult to find out the correct information regarding homework assignments, tests, and other course requirements. Parents expressed frustration in trying to contact the teachers in the school in order to communicate with them about their children. Most parents expressed a desire to help their children with their homework, but met with refusal on the part of their students. They also tried to assist their youngsters with time management and prioritization of assignments, but most of the students resisted the suggestions and considered it interference. One parent expressed that her daughter called the nightly conversations an "inquisition" and an "invasion of her privacy." Another parent noted that it was much easier to help her child in the middle school than in the high school due to her student's new "air of maturity."

The other frustrating issue that was repeated by the majority of the transition parents was getting the students to see their teachers to discuss problems in class and get extra help. They said the most frequent response from their children was that they didn’t like the teacher to begin with and did not want to seek extra help for that reason. Parents resorted to hiring tutors to help their students understand some of the class material and get ready for tests.
PAAs expressed frustration with the parents involved in the Transition Program. One Advocate voiced his opinion, "It seems I am talking to the parents more than their children, and I definitely prefer to talk with the students." It appears that the PAAs experienced parental pressure to help their students in all aspects of their lives. PAAs had to remind parents that they still needed to communicate with their students' guidance counselors and other teachers.

The other theme that continually emerged from the PAA meetings was the challenge of not only getting their advisees to meet with them but helping them talk to their other teachers when they were experiencing problems. PAAs used role-playing in supporting their students to articulate with their teachers. Several PAAs noted that the girls, in general, were more communicative than the boys with the PAAs and their classroom teachers.

Focus Group Question 3: What kind of activities promote sense of community, connectedness?

The Parent Focus Group members praised the PAAs for their support in channeling their students into various school activities. They felt without the PAAs' involvement, their children might eventually have found their way, but at a much later date. One parent noted that his student's demeanor changed to a positive one as soon as he became involved in the fall drama production. Three parents felt their students became more connected to the school community after they volunteered their time to work on the Tsunami Fund Drive. A few noted that when their students were involved in a seasonal sport, although they were tired, they seemed to manage their time better all the way around.
The PAAs found that the students became connected to the community the more they participated in various activities. However, the PAAs reported that the students needed help in finding what appealed to them in terms of their own talents, likes, and dislikes. For example, one student joined Winter Track because his parents wanted him to be "well-rounded" despite the fact that they knew he hated to run. The student only participated for three weeks before quitting. Clearly, these have to be student preferences and not parent choices. Perhaps these misunderstandings between parents and their children indicate a need for better communication, so that they are not at cross-purposes. A few PAAs noted that those students who became involved in a few activities in different venues quickly became invested in the school community more so than a student who was solely an athlete, thespian, and so forth.

Focus Group Question 4: What academic skills are critical to successful school adjustment?

The Parent Focus Group members all agreed that study skills would be at the top of the list, and although study skills were included in the program for the first Transition Cohort, they believed that what was offered was too little, and that ninth graders need some type of ongoing program in this arena. Time management and prioritizing assignments were also mentioned. The ability to communicate well and express themselves clearly was on the wish lists of parents for their children. As one parent succinctly expressed it, "If she can't speak in a clear and coherent manner, her writing is only going to be worse." A few parents expressed a desire for their students to have more written assignments in all their classes than they appeared to be assigned. One parent expressed it this way: "I was a horrible writer in high school. However, in my senior
year, I had an English teacher who assigned numerous essays and reports, and I eventually learned the mechanics of writing through trial and error."

The PAA Focus Group placed the ability to write and study skills at the top of the list of academic skills critical to successful school adjustment. They raised the necessity of students being able to articulate their needs to their teachers and ask for help if they need it. One PAA speculated that the team concept at the Middle School is a more supportive atmosphere in which students might not have to advocate as much for themselves. However, as freshmen, they have to learn skills of independence quickly in order to fend for themselves. One PAA noted that those ninth graders with older siblings definitely seemed to have an advantage in terms of how to survive at the high school, possibly from just listening to the conversations of their sisters and brothers.

Focus Group Question 5: Which intervention do you think was the most beneficial to students' successful transition to high school? Least helpful?

Both focus groups were firm in their support of the PAAs as the most powerful intervention for transitioning freshmen into high school. The Parent Focus Group members stated the PAAs provided the students with an established support person who would seek out their students and help them on an as needed basis (NASSP, 2004). Parents realize that the Guidance Counselors are busy with seniors at the beginning of the school year and do not have a great deal of time for freshmen which made the PAAs a valuable resource.

Parents expressed appreciation for how the PAAs helped their students communicate with teachers. The majority of the Parent Focus Group members
perceived the Personal Plans for Progress to be the least beneficial intervention in that students just were not ready at the beginning of the ninth grade to formulate goals. They commented that this might possibly be a more viable strategy at the end of the freshman year.

The PAA's commented that their relationships with the students helped to connect these freshmen to the school community especially when they were able to direct them to activities in which the students developed a vested interest. The PAA's noted that the Personal Plans for Progress were very difficult for the students, and when some did write goals, they were very global such as, "To survive freshman year; to make new friends; and improve my grades." They commented that the students lacked the maturity, experience, and cognitive ability to plan goals at this point in their career. The PAA's suggested that the Personal Plans for Progress be documents that the students begin in their freshman year, at the end of the first semester, and revise throughout their senior year. All agreed that this would be best monitored by each student's guidance counselor and revisited at annual student conferences. With the permission of the student, it could also be shared at Parent Conferences.

Neither focus group mentioned the Summer Academy, which included the Ropes Course, Study Skills Course, tour of the building, and meeting key personnel. Perhaps the effects of these interventions were not long lasting or were easily forgotten once the school year ensued. At a cost of $150.00 per student, it appears that the cost of the Freshman Summer Academy did not seem to outweigh the benefits.

Focus Question 6: What else should we do to successfully support students in their transition?
Parent Focus Group members included parents of students in the First and Second Transition Cohorts. All parents expressed their belief that transition programs absolutely have to start well before the Fall of freshman year in order to support the students. A parent of a Second Transition student remarked that she would have liked her student to work with a PAA, but the student was not interested by early November. Other group members commented that whether it was rough or smooth, by the end of the fall of freshman year, most students have navigated through many of the bumps of transition, and the transition has already colored their experience. Parents expressed a need for more arenas providing parental involvement in the high school. One parent noted, “There were so many opportunities for parents to become involved in the middle school, and it radically drops off when our children enter the high school.”

PAA Focus Group members expressed different concerns regarding academic rigor. They commented that freshmen would be better prepared if courses were more rigorous in the eighth grade, and if midterm and final exam experiences were included at that level. They suggested that skills tutoring in mathematics and reading be provided in the summer before at-risk eighth-grade students begin their freshman year. Other group members suggested a homework or tutoring center possibly located in the Guidance Center that would be open to students for at least a half hour after school everyday. This could be a great resource for students who find it challenging and painful to approach a teacher for help. This support service could be staffed by teachers, on a rotating basis, or by senior students volunteering as part of their community service.

Focus Question 7: Do you think this program is critical for at-risk students only, or should it be expanded to include all freshmen?
Parent Focus Group members perceived that the general school population is sophisticated and bright enough to transition smoothly with the basic transition orientation that Millburn High School has always provided. However, they expressed that the program should be expanded to include more support for their at-risk youngsters than the original program provided. Most were not sure what they meant by more support. One parent expressed a desire for an on-going tutoring/homework center open to all students to eliminate any stigma attached if it were available just for at-risk students. Two other parents commented that it might be an exercise in frustration for parents to attempt to "push" their students to seek more help, when it was difficult enough to get them to participate in this new program.

Unlike the Parent Focus Group, the PAA's stated that all freshman students should have the opportunity to be assigned a mentor during their freshman year. They commented that most faculty members would be open to this experience, which is not difficult to fit into one's day even with a collateral duty. However, because incoming freshman classes are now 300 plus, all teachers would have to be involved, not just ninth-grade teachers. PAA Focus Group members also repeated a previous concern regarding some type of skills or tutoring program instituted in the summer before ninth grade for students at-risk because of their lack of critical academic skills. All agreed that these students suffer the most difficult transitions, because they cannot successfully negotiate the academic rigor at the high school.

Focus Question 8: What are the positive aspects of the transition to the high school?
Members of the Parent Focus Group, for the most part, agreed that increases in course offerings, sports, and extracurricular options were very attractive to their students. One member said that her daughter was initially overwhelmed by the wide array of choices, until she came to terms with the fact that she did not have to become involved in everything during her freshman year. This same parent noted that her student's PAA helped guide her daughter toward two or three activities that suited her well. Other parents mentioned that their students liked the opportunity to be around the upper-grade students and were not intimidated, as they had feared they would be.

PAA Focus Group members' responses supported the positive aspects of transition noted by the parents. They commented that many at-risk freshmen they had worked with this year were helped, both academically and socially, by their new friendships with some of the older students. Once students were over the initial transitional adjustment hurdles of the first 2 months or so, they became enthusiastic about many of the different freedoms in the high school that were not available at the middle school: the opportunity to sit where they wanted in the cafeteria and in some of their classes, seven or eight different teachers instead of two or three, many new students to meet, sports and club options, and an increase in the course offerings. One PAA said her advisee noted, "All the choices, at first, were scary and overwhelming, but eventually they made me feel like I was older, more mature, and capable of dealing with these choices." Two PAA's mentioned that they each had one student who "reinvented" themselves during the transition: One became more popular because of his success on a junior varsity sports team, and one gained self-confidence because of her academic improvement as compared to the middle school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Parent Focus Group</th>
<th>PAA Focus Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student concerns</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Social-making friends</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liking their teachers</td>
<td>Homework</td>
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<td>Gender differences</td>
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<td>2. Support issues</td>
<td>Communication problems</td>
<td>Parental interference</td>
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<td>Student resentment</td>
<td>Articulation skills</td>
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<td>Not seeking help</td>
<td>Not seeking help</td>
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<td>3. PSOC support</td>
<td>Clubs, plays, sports</td>
<td>Student interest</td>
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<td>Volunteer activities</td>
<td>Diversified activities</td>
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<td>4. Academic skills</td>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>Reading &amp; Writing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Articulation ability</td>
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<td>Reading &amp; Writing</td>
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<td>5. Most helpful</td>
<td>PAAAs</td>
<td>PAAAs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Least Helpful</td>
<td>Personal Plan for Progress</td>
<td>Personal Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Suggestions</td>
<td>Start program in 9th grade</td>
<td>More academic rigor</td>
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<td>More parental involvement</td>
<td>Summer tutoring</td>
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<td>Homework Center</td>
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<td>7. All students?</td>
<td>Only at-risk freshmen</td>
<td>PAA for all 9th</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Increased courses</td>
<td>New friends</td>
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<td>of Transition</td>
<td>Extracurricular options</td>
<td>More freedom</td>
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Table 12 summarizes information from the two focus groups based on the eight questions posed at the meetings.

Parents expressed greater concerns about their students' academics than the students actually expressed to the PAAAs. The students worried more about friendships, social acceptance, and an increase in homework. PAAAs noted that females were more concerned about not being accepted in the right cliques while males wanted to be able to play a sport. Perhaps parents might be talking more about these concerns for their students, while the PAAAs might be accurately reflecting students' concerns.

Both focus groups noted communication problems and difficulty in the students just approaching a teacher for extra help. Parents realized that students resented too much questioning and this was confirmed by the PAAAs. However, the PAAAs were equally frustrated as the parents in encouraging the students to seek help from their teachers.

In terms of increasing PSOC, the parents definitely saw the benefit to their students' involvement in school activities. One parent reported: "My daughter is eager to come to school now, has made new friends, and does not rush to come home every day since her involvement in the school play." PAAAs cautioned that activities must be of primary interest to the students and not just what their parents wanted to see their children pursue. Parent Focus Group members also stated that students felt more connected to the school community when the activities were diversified. One parent reported her son was happy to be playing football, volunteering at a hospital on the weekend, and a member of the high school's Environmental Club.

Both focus groups prioritized the academic skills they believed were critical to a student's success. The Parent Focus Group members placed study skills first followed by
time management, ability to prioritize, communication skills, and reading and writing acumen. The PAAs ranked reading and writing skills at the top of their list followed by the ability to communicate and articulate their needs to their teachers.

Focus group members agreed that the PAAs had been the most helpful in their students' transition to the high school, and the Personal Plans for Progress were ranked as the least helpful. The PAAs suggested that guidance counselors might work with the students on their Personal Plans for Progress on an ongoing basis every year, as the students' needs and goals change.

Suggestions for improvement to the transition program invoked quite different responses from the focus groups. The parents stated that all at-risk eighth graders should have the opportunity to begin the program in the eighth grade in order to provide the fullest benefit. Parents also wanted more venues for parent participation once their students came to the high school. Parents expressed the need for improved communication with the high school but did not offer specific ideas.

The PAAs commented that more rigor in the academic courses in the eighth grade would better prepare incoming freshmen for high school academics. They also suggested skills tutoring in the summer for those students identified at-risk while in the eighth grade. They proposed a homework tutoring center in the high school in order to support all students throughout the year, especially in view of the problems their advisees evidenced in approaching their teachers for help. PAAs suggested that this tutoring center be located in the study halls in the cafeteria and be offered every period with the exception of lunchtime. Perhaps academically talented students would volunteer their tutorial assistance one period once or twice a week.
Both focus groups commented that only the at-risk freshmen need a full transition program. However, the PAAs suggested that all incoming ninth graders have the benefit of being assigned to a PAA to help make a positive transition to the high school. One PAA suggested that all teachers be assigned as PAAs for at least two or three freshman students each year in an effort to support students’ PSOC.

Finally, the Parent Focus Group and PAA Focus Group found many positive benefits to transition experienced by some of these at-risk students. Both groups mentioned an increase in course offerings and extracurricular options. Parents noted that their students enjoyed mingling with the upper class students, while PAAs noted their advisees enjoyed new friendships, more freedom, and even the opportunity to create new identities.

Summary

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in this study to help the researcher analyze the influence of a transition program for at-risk freshmen on GPA, ATT, DR, and PSOC. The quantitative data provided a comparison of means of three variables: GPA, ATT, and DR between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 as well as the success of transition efforts in getting the at-risk students closer to the average performance on GPA and ATT of the rest of the freshman class (excluding special education students) at different points of the 2004-2005 school year. The qualitative data provided insight into the research question regarding PSOC as evidenced by school involvement. In addition, data from the focus groups enriched the study by providing
additional information on differences between males and females during school transitions, positive aspects of transition, and recommendations for improvements.

The primary cost of the Transition Program involved the Freshman Summer Academy. Both the PAAs and parents commented that they did not believe this was a particularly valuable intervention in terms of student engagement in the school community. The Transition Program is cost effective with the removal of the Academy in that existing staff members and students can support the program during the school year in both the middle school and the high school. Focus groups also reported that the Personal Plans for Progress might be more effective at the end of the freshman year when students had a better grasp of the high school and their future goals.

Chapter V includes a summary of findings, conclusions, and suggested recommendations for future research.
Chapter V
SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary
This chapter presents a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for policy and future research on freshman transition programs. Investigating research on adolescent needs and development, at-risk students, organizational structure, psychological sense of community (PSOC), and transition to high school, the researcher studied the influence of a transition program on grade point average (GPA), attendance (ATT), discipline referrals (DR), and school involvement of two groups of at-risk rising freshmen in an academically competitive New Jersey suburban public high school located in an affluent community.

There is considerable research and theory regarding the stressful nature of transitions in the lives of adolescents (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alsbaugh, 1998; Eccles et al., 1991; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Kerr, 2002; Maclver & Epstein, 1991; Mizelle, 1999; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Schilling et al., 1988; Simmons et al., 1979). In this study the researcher attempted to enrich research in this area by providing data relevant to the context of a high-performing school district, an important consideration when interpreting the data. For the purpose of this study, at-risk students were defined as not students likely to drop out but those who might not reach their potential due to poor grades, attendance, discipline infractions, or lack of involvement in the school community, and were identified by grades, attendance issues, and discipline referrals in the eighth grade by middle school personnel.
This 2004-2005 study utilized a mixed methods research approach in order to respond to the research questions posed for study. According to Viadero (2005), interest has grown in scientific based research (SBR) since NCLB, and mixed methods offer the opportunity for a deeper comprehension of educational issues.

Six questions guided this study. Independent 2-tailed t-tests and matched pair t-tests were performed on the data collected to compare the means of Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 for the three dependent variables: GPA, ATT, and DR. In addition, the means for the Cohort students on two variables (GPA, ATT) were compared to those of the rest of the freshman class. Data collected onsite at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods were the basis for making quantitative comparisons.

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups conducted by the researcher’s assistant. During focus group sessions, the same eight open-ended questions were posed to the two focus groups: a Parent Focus Group and a Personal Adult Advocate (PAA) Group. The focus groups met three times during the 2004-2005 school year. Focus group data was analyzed by the researcher for common themes in terms of students’ PSOC and involvement in the school community.

The treatment for the two Transition groups consisted of a Freshman Summer Academy, a PAA, and a Personal Plan for Progress for the first Transition Cohort of 20 students that began in August of 2004. The second Transition Cohort of 20 students were offered the option of a once-a-week study skills class and choosing a PAA beginning at the end of the first marking period in November of 2004.
The researcher also kept track of the cost and time involved in the Transition Program in order to be able to apprise the Superintendent and Board of Education about costs weighed against benefits to the students.

Findings

Research Question One. What, if any, are differences between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 when comparing eighth grade, end-of-first-semester results, to ninth grade, end-of-first-semester results, on GPA, ATT, and DR?

There were no significant differences found between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 on the three variables when comparing eighth to ninth-grade data. The Cohorts were similar validating the selection processes.

Within each Cohort, there were significant differences found for DR. Transition 1 and Transition 2 students experienced fewer referrals in the ninth grade than they did in the eighth grade. The differences in DR between the eighth and ninth grade could be attributed to differences between the high school and middle school's administrative discipline policies, support provided by the Freshman Transition Program, or factors outside of the study's focus including student maturation, student motivation, and parental support. The discipline policy at the middle school is not as severe as the one at the high school. There is no "cut" policy in the middle school as there is in the high school. The fact that 2 unexcused class absences can result in being removed from the class may serve as a deterrent to high school students. The middle school also uses in-school suspension prior to an out-of-school suspension as compared to the high school where there is only an out-of-school suspension. Students do not want suspensions as part
of their permanent records so this high school policy might also serve as a deterrent for bad behaviors.

Research Question Two. What is the difference, if any, between all Cohort students in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end-of-the-first-semester, eighth grade, compared to the end-of-the-first-semester, ninth grade?

Paired-differences statistics were used to determine if differences for all Cohort students in eighth grade compared to ninth grade on both GPA and DR were significant. As a group, the average Cohort students’ academic performance was better in the ninth grade as compared to the eighth grade, and as ninth graders, they experienced fewer referrals to the office compared to the eighth grade.

The higher GPAs of the Cohort students in the ninth grade could be attributed to the Transition Program, which included the support of the PAAs. Improved GPAs, in the first marking period, might also be attributable to freshman teachers’ practice of spending the first several weeks in the fall reviewing prior curriculum before teaching new and more difficult skills. Other factors including student maturation, differences in curriculum and instruction, school climate, student motivation, and parent support might account for the improved GPAs. The improved DR may be attributed to different discipline policies between the middle school and the high school, maturation, and the Transition Program. The ATT means for the Cohort students as a group did not show a statistically significant difference between the eighth and the ninth grade. The Transition Program did not appear to influence attendance.
Research Question Three. What is the difference, if any, between Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 in terms of GPA, ATT, and DR at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year?

The purpose of the third research question was to determine differences in the means of the two Transition Cohorts that received different treatments at different times. Transition Cohort 1 began the Freshman Summer Academy in August of 2004, met their PAA at that time, and began working on a Personal Plan for Progress. Transition Cohort 2 students were given the option of attending a study skills class once a week and choosing a PAA at the end of the first marking period which was in November of 2004. Eight of the 20 Transition Cohort 2 students choose to participate in one or both options offered to them at the end of marking period one. Five students chose both the weekly Study Skills class and the PAA. Two students opted just to attend the weekly tutorial, and one student wanted to work with a PAA but not attend the class.

The results suggest that, although the mean differences between the Cohorts for GPA are not statistically significant, the GPAs of Cohort 1 are higher each marking period compared to Transition Cohort 2 GPAs. The comparisons of Transition 1 to Transition 2 on GPA indicated that 9 out of 9 comparisons (100%) were in favor of Transition Cohort 1. The higher GPAs of Cohort 1 may be attributable to beginning the Transition Freshman Program in the summer prior to the start of Freshman year. Intervention in this study, although not significant, offers support for the prior research that intervention is more effective when it is begun early (Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Wallace, 2002).
In terms of ATT, there were no significant mean differences, and Transition Cohort 2 students had fewer absences than Cohort 1 students for both marking periods 2 and 3. Comparisons of Transition Cohort 1 to Transition Cohort 2 on ATT indicated 3 out of 9 comparisons (33%) were in favor of Cohort 2. The results might suggest that the Freshman Transition Program did not have a positive influence on students' attendance rates. An additional consideration is that three of the students in Cohort 1 and two of the students in Cohort 2 each had absences from school of more than 10 days. The researcher removed the statistics of the students with more than 10 days absent, and the average number of days absent for Cohort 1 students was 3.89 (compared to 8.50), and the average number of days absent for Cohort 2 students was 3.36 (compared to 7.22) which are more in line with marking periods one and three.

A significant mean difference was found for DR in the third marking period between Transition Cohorts 1 and 2. Transition Cohort 1 students had fewer referrals for discipline than did Cohort 2 students. Comparisons of Transition Cohort 1 to Transition Cohort 2 on DR indicated that 7 out of 9 comparisons (78%) were in favor of Transition Cohort 1. The mean difference for DR may be credited to the influence of the Freshman Transition Program, student maturation, parental support, and student motivation.

Research Question Four. What is the difference, if any, between the Transition Cohorts and the remainder of the freshman class (excluding special education students) in terms of GPA and ATT during the first, second, and third marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year?
Independent *t*-tests were used to compare Cohort 1 to the rest of the freshman class at the end of the first, second, and third marking periods on GPA and ATT. Significant differences were found between the Cohort 1 GPA means and the freshman class means for marking periods one, two, and three. Independent *t*-tests compared Cohort 2 GPA means to the rest of the freshman class for the three marking periods of the 2004-2005 school year, and significant differences were found for each marking period. There were strong effect sizes when comparing the Cohort means to the freshman class means on GPAs. The Transition Program did not positively influence the Cohort students' GPAs.

There was a significant difference between the ATT means of Cohort 1 students compared to the freshman class during the second marking period. Significant differences between Cohort 2 students and the freshman class were found during marking periods one and two. The effect sizes were very strong when comparing ATT of Cohort students to the freshman class indicating practical significance. The freshman class had fewer absences than the Transition Cohorts in all instances. The Transition Program might not have positively influenced the Cohort students on ATT. During marking period two, five Cohort students experienced a substantial number of days absent which skewed the average number of days absent for the comparisons of each Cohort to the freshman class as well as the comparison of the combined Cohorts to the freshman class.

There were statistically significant mean differences between all 40 Cohort students in comparison to the rest of the freshman class on GPA for marking periods one, two, and three. There were strong negative effect sizes associated with these comparisons. The freshman class had higher GPAs than both sets of Cohort students.
For the second and third marking periods, there were significant mean differences on ATT between the 40 Cohort students compared to the freshman class with two large effect sizes. The Cohort students had a significantly higher rate of absenteeism than the Freshman Class. The Transition Program did not help the 40 Cohort students reach the average GPAs or average ATT of the rest of the freshman class (DR data not available for all freshman students for these comparisons).

Eighth-grade personnel are able to identify students in need of early intervention using the four indicators (GPAs, ATT, DR, and PSCC) as shown by Transition Cohort 1 and Transition Cohort 2 separately and together being lower than the freshman class on GPA and higher than the freshman class on number of days absent.

Research Question Five: What were the benefits to students relative to costs to the district in terms of time and money?

The major portion of time involved in the Transition Program was attributed to the PAAs mentoring their students. Members of both focus groups indicated that the PAAs were the most valuable part of the program. Both Cohorts had improved grade point averages and fewer discipline referrals in the ninth grade compared to their performance in the eighth grade. Transition Cohort 1 students had higher grade point averages and fewer discipline referrals than Cohort 2, although the mean differences were not significant. The time invested in the Transition Program was worthwhile in terms of student benefits.

The largest expenditure for the Transition Program was for the Freshman Summer Academy that represented 78% of the total cost for the program. Focus group members stated that these 3 days were the most worthwhile and long lasting in terms of supporting
freshmen in their transition to high school. The researcher recommended that the Transition Program be continued for at-risk ninth graders without the Summer Academy component in that it did not prove to be cost effective.

**Research Question Six.** What evidence did the focus groups provide to support cohorts and that PAAs offered PSOC as evidenced by school and community involvement?

The research assistant met with each focus group separately three times during the 2004-2005 school year. Both the Parent Focus Group and the Personal Adult Advocate Group supported the positive effect of the PAAs in terms of channeling the students into various school activities in which they had expressed an interest or evidenced a skill or talent. It appeared that the more the students participated in activities, the more they became involved in the school community. In addition, a variety of activities helped the students to become more invested in the school as they connected with different student populations.

In addition to supporting the students in becoming involved in the school community, both focus groups expressed the positive outcome of the PAAs in terms of helping the students learn how to communicate with their teachers in order to seek help when they needed it. The PAAs found that the boys were less reluctant to speak to their teachers than the girls. They worked with all the Transition students assigned to them in order to help the students be more comfortable in approaching their teachers. The Parent Focus Group found this to be a huge benefit to their students, as they considered access to teachers at the high school more difficult than at the middle school.
The Freshman Summer Academy and the Personal Plans for Progress were the two program components deemed as less helpful to students in transition. Focus groups suggested that the Personal Plans for Progress begin later in the freshman year and goals be reviewed and revised on an annual basis when students met with their counselors.

The PAA Focus Group members noted that the females had more concerns about their social acceptance into the “right” clique, whether they were in the “right” classes, and if they were wearing the “right” clothes. The females were sensitive to these issues, and their self-esteem on any given day was a barometer of their perception of peer acceptance. On the other hand, the males appeared to be more invested in “making the right sports team.” In their transition study, Akos and Galassi (2004) found that males reported feeling more connected than did females following the transition to high school. Clearly, there were gender differences in terms of students’ concerns and self-esteem issues.

The Parent Focus Group members stated that transition programs have to begin before the start of the freshman year in order to support students and catch their interest. Only 8 out of 20 Transition Cohort 2 students opted to be in the second Transition program beginning after the first marking period. It is possible that once students have navigated through the procedural logistics of a transition, they do not feel as needy.

PAA members did not think that the students experienced enough academic rigor white in the eighth grade. They recommended midterm and final exams for eighth grade students. At the high school, PAAAs and parents suggested a homework or tutoring center that would be open to students for at least a half hour after school everyday.
PAAs suggested that all freshman students be assigned a mentor, while parents noted that only at-risk students might need that type of support. At-risk students would gain the most from mentor connections, but also have the most at-risk to lose (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Perhaps the stigma of being “at-risk” would be reduced if all students were assigned a PAA freshman year and a homework/tutoring center was open to the entire high school population.

Focus group members reported positive aspects for their students as a result of their transition to the high school. School transitions posed both opportunities and challenges for students (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students enjoyed new freedoms, increased options, and the opportunity to make new friends.

Conclusions

Focus group interview results suggest that the PAAs provided Cohort students with PSOC as shown by their involvement in the school community. The PAAs supported students in communicating with their teachers in order to get the help they needed. At the beginning of the school year, counselors are busy with seniors and college applications, and there is limited time for freshmen. PAAs are critical in terms of personalizing the school environment for brand-new freshmen. Student engagement is a critical component of student adjustment to school and was supported in this study by the PAAs.

Comparisons of Transition Cohort 1 to Transition Cohort 2 on GPAs and DR indicated 16 of 18 comparisons (89%) favored Transition Cohort 1. Early intervention supported Transition Cohort 1 students in better performance in their grades and
behavior. By the end of the first marking period, only 8 of the 20 Transition Cohort 2 students were motivated to participate in the program. These students did not have the same need or level of interest to participate by the beginning of November of the freshman year (Pitts, 2005). In contrast, the Transition Cohort 1 students, who started the program in the summer of 2004, stayed connected to their PAAs throughout the three marking periods of their freshman year.

Both groups of Cohort students experienced better academic performance and behavior in the ninth grade as compared to the eighth grade. Despite the transition, they did not suffer a “freshman slump.” There are a number of variables that might account for the differences in Cohort students’ performance in the eighth grade compared to the ninth grade including school climate, parent involvement, teacher efficacy, and student motivation. Perhaps Cohort students’ relationships with the PAAs kept the students engaged in the school community. Relationships with teachers and other caring adults strengthen school engagement and act as a buffer against transitional problems (Certo, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993; Osterman, 2000).

Cohort students may have shown improvements in the ninth grade as compared to the eighth grade due to positive aspects of school transitions (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Weiss & Bearman, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992). Focus group members reported that their students enjoyed the new freedoms, moving around more, different teachers, meeting new peers, and having more options in both courses and extracurricular activities.

Neither Cohort, separately or together, approached the level of academic achievement of the rest of the freshman class as evidenced by the comparison of GPAs
during the first, second, and third marking periods. Cohort students also experienced more days absent than the rest of the freshman class. Although, their PSOC improved as evidenced by their participation in the school community, their grades and attendance would still define the Cohort students as at-risk. Perhaps Cohort students’ performance would have been worse in the ninth grade without the support of the Transition Program.

It is important to keep in mind that 8 of the 20 Transition Cohort 2 students chose one or both interventions (PAA; Study Skills) at the end of the first marking period, and 12 students did not want to participate at that time. If all students in Cohort 2 had participated, they might have experienced improved GPAs and ATT.

The process of using a mixed methods approach to this study proved to be a valuable one and led to a deeper understanding of the quantitative results. The qualitative analyses of focus group data revealed findings that were not significant or apparent in the quantitative analyses (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Both focus groups reported subtle findings in terms of the needs of the students, gender differences, importance of the PAAs, their help in connecting students with the right activities, and some positive benefits of school transitions.

It is important to interpret the data in the context of a high-performing affluent school district. Parents have more resources, are less burdened in affluent communities, and are able to provide more support to their students (Richman, Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1998). Parents in these districts comprehend the importance and benefits attached to their children’s participation in extracurricular activities (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). Parent Focus Group members were most positive about the PAAs because they
supported and directed their youngsters toward activities that would connect both students' interests and talents.

Implications

Perhaps no one particular transition program can address all the needs of a rising freshman. Programs need to be developed that are particular to the context of the school culture and community, individual and group needs, and are in accord with different levels of financial and time commitment. Findings from this study indicate several areas to target in designing transition programs. Early intervention is critical in terms of support and interest level of the student. An ongoing program throughout the student's entire freshman year provides the maximum amount of transition support.

The researcher studied two Cohorts of at-risk students. Transition Cohort 1 students achieved higher GPAs than Transition Cohort 2 students, although the differences were not statistically significant. Effect size is not dependent on number and significance is. There were large effect sizes when comparing both Cohorts (n=40) with the rest of the freshman class that validates the educational importance of a Transition Program.

Perhaps a Transition Program will not provide the support necessary to overcome K-8 deficiencies. The academic component addressed by the study skills may not have been rigorous enough to meet the needs of these students in order to improve skills. An academic summer program combined with an ongoing tutoring/homework center might help students overcome academic deficiencies. There is the possibility that without Transition support, the at-risk students might have slipped below their performance in
eighth grade. The motivation of at-risk students could be increased by improving the quality and quantity of academic course work (Anderson & Keith, 1997). Unfortunately, these at-risk students are usually in the lower level courses and are less pressured to perform. Research shows when teachers’ expectations and demands are higher, there is more pressure to perform well, and students rise to the occasion (Isakson & Jarvis, 1989).

Transition programs should include an academic component that meets the needs of that particular school population. The staffing of the program should include the participation of all the stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, and administrators. They should address students’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains (Fredrick et al., 2004).

There are positive benefits to school transitions that educational administrators can address in the planning of transition programs and orientations. They can find ways to highlight clubs, sports, and educational opportunities in their initial presentations to students during the early weeks of the school year. Unless students have the benefit of an older sibling in the school, it often takes a good year or more for students to know enough about the ways things operate in a building in order to navigate through it. The PAs in this study helped students connect quickly to activities because they had the requisite knowledge to help the students.

Transition programs might need to be planned with gender differences in mind. Findings from this study showed that girls are more communicative but have more concerns in general than boys and appear to be more vulnerable to environmental changes (Maute, 1991; Simmons, 1987). Guidance counselors and school psychologists could be helpful in addressing this aspect of transition programs.
There are implications for parents. Although the opportunities are not as frequent, it is important for them to become involved with the high school in order to support their students’ involvement. They can volunteer to chaperone, run activities, speak in classes about their vocations, and serve the school community in a number of helpful ways. The Comer School Development Model (1980) supports collaboration between all stakeholders in the educational enterprise: students, teachers, administrators and parents work together on activities and projects which, in turn, builds trust and strengthens relationships. Research supports the home/school connection in solving problems and making decisions in order to improve students’ achievement, attendance, and behavior (Comer, 1980).

It is possible that the initial Parent Meeting with the researcher afforded parents the opportunity to support their high school freshmen in a manner that was acceptable to their students. Parent involvement might have served as a motivator for students to be successful which would encourage continued parental support.

This study supports the notion that students need a PAA in order to effect a successful transition to high school. PAA’s support the Comer School Model and serve students, parents, and teachers throughout transition. Perhaps all teachers can become involved in a program supporting a number of students during the school year. Meeting times could be organized during student lunch periods, study halls, or health periods.

The primary cost of the Transition Program involved the Freshman Summer Academy. It would be difficult for the researcher to support this part of the program, because it did not appear to help students connect with the school or each other in any long-term fashion. School policymakers should be heartened by this finding. Schools
with limited monies should consider options within the school itself as a cost-effective strategy (Baker & Sansone, 1990). The PAAs used in this study are a good example. It is often not necessary to go outside the district to find the expertise one seeks to implement programs and support students.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

The findings from this study target several areas to consider in designing transition programs. The researcher recommends that transition programs, first and foremost, address students’ need to belong. The PAAs were found to be the most supportive component of the Transition Program. School districts should investigate ways to get all high school teachers involved with freshman students (NASSP, 1996, 2004). According to Finn (1989), students begin to disengage from school unless they feel they belong to and are valued by the school community.

This study reveals that more alignment is needed between the eighth and ninth grades in terms of academic rigor, curriculum, and assessment. Articulation between the middle school and high school teachers could go a long way toward a smoother academic transition for students. The teachers could meet once in the fall and again in the spring during two of the district’s staff development days in order to share information and ideas regarding current eighth grade needs as compared to the current ninth grade and what worked and did not in terms of the transition interventions to date. More attention needs to be paid to the skills’ deficiencies that students bring with them to the high school.

Negative academic experiences have a major impact on students’ self-concept and their feelings of rejection within the school community (Kaplan, Peck & Kaplan, 1997). Day
(2002) found that at-risk students were motivated by authentic tasks that helped them to connect the learning.

An academic summer academy and yearlong homework-tutoring center at the high school could help students with their academic needs. Students who begin high school already many years below grade level need an accelerated program in skills development in both math and reading (Balfanz, Legters & Jordan, 2004). This is the type of support that can help improve at-risk students' grades approach the level of the rest of the class.

Transition programs should begin in the eighth-grade to build in supports early for the students as well as appeal to the students before they learn how to navigate the new building and lose interest in any support. Parental anxiety prior to the beginning of freshman year contributes to parental support of a Transition Program early on in the school year. Transition programs should be ongoing throughout the freshman year. The ideal context would be a Freshman Academy or a SWAS with small class size to support student engagement and a community-type environment to support PSOC (Battistich, et al., 1997; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Cotton, 2001; Finn & Achilles, 1999; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; NASSP, 1996; 2004; Raywid, 1999; Reents, 2002; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Sarason, 1974). Students at-risk should be in academic skills' programs prior to their transition to the high school.

It may be beneficial to attend to gender differences in planning transition programs. Programs that include peer mentoring, using student guides during transition orientations, and building supportive communities help girls feel more connected (Akos & Galassi, 2004).
Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers wishing to replicate this study may want to use a larger sample so results may be more generalizable. They may choose a longitudinal study over the course of the students' high school tenure in order to determine whether a transition program can exert a continuing influence over a student's high school career. Researchers might wish to study transition programs in rural communities.

Differences between males and females deserve further study. Research may need to attend to gender differences in regard to specific programmatic needs including the fields of math, science, and technology.

Research could focus upon the long-term effects on students if the same PAAs are working with students throughout their high school tenure. Student GPAs, ATT, and DR could be analyzed for the four years to determine if the benefits to students outweigh the costs to the district in terms of time and money.

Another area of further study might focus upon analyzing the impact of a significant academic support service on freshman grades. Programs might include a tutoring component or homework assistance center which students could access both during and after school hours to address skill deficiencies. This support could be provided by academically talented high school students who wish to tutor.

Final Notes

It may be beneficial to focus upon the opportunities involved in school transitions as well as the risks and challenges. More effort is needed in planning transition programs
that go beyond successfully negotiating the new school environment. They should include a positive and exciting presentation of all the options open to incoming freshmen with the necessary support system in place for long-term planning of goals and objectives for a successful high school career. Students, parents, educators, and administrators all should be a part of the planning process in order to meet the needs of all the stakeholders in planning a comprehensive transition program.
References


Cotton, K. (2001). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature.* Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. (Creating Communities of Learning and Excellence.)


Appendix A

Letter of Solicitation
Ours Parents:

The Millburn Township Public School District is supporting a Freshman Transition Program for selected incoming freshman students during the 2004-2005 school year. Your student has been recommended as a candidate for this program based upon performance during the 2003-2004 school year.

I am enrolled in the College of Education and Human Services Executive Ed.D. program pursuing a Doctorate in the Department of Educational Administration and Supervision at Seton Hall University. I will be conducting a formal research study on transition to the high school for at-risk freshmen and the impact of three program strategies as part of my dissertation. Although I am one of the Vice Principals in the high school, I will not be working with your students or with the focus groups. Neither student names nor the district name will be a part of my dissertation study. This is purely a volunteer program, and you and your child may or may not wish to participate.

Transition to high school is a critical time for sixth graders, and research indicates that support provided early on is vital to a student's adjustment and success in high school. To that end, we have created a program that provides group bonding activities, an organizational and study skills seminar, and a personalized tour of the high school. This Freshman Summer Academy is scheduled for August 25, 26, and 27, 2004. August 25th will be a half day off campus for the entire day. The 26th and 27th will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 12 noon, and breakfast will be provided for the students.

In addition, to this kickoff program, students will be assigned to a Personal Adult Advocate (teacher) for their freshman year who will personalize each student's educational experience by providing ongoing support through regular meetings. Your student will work with the teacher mentor to formulate a Personal Plan for Progress for the 2004-2005 school year. Our ultimate goal is to have your student engaged in both the academic learning and the school community right from the beginning of the school year.

Because there is a great deal of individualized attention and planning involved, this pilot program is limited to 20 freshmen in the first cohort who will be randomly selected from those who are interested. However, the other 20 students who will serve as an internal control group for the first semester will have the opportunity to be in the second Transition Cohort beginning at the end of the first marking period in November of 2004.

A meeting for parents will be held in the Middle School Library on May 12, 2004, at 8:45 a.m. We hope you can attend.

Sincerely,

Michele L. Pitts
Appendix B

Parent Permission Form
PARENT PERMISSION FORM

My son/daughter ___________________________ has my permission to participate in the 2004-2005 Transition Cohort Program at Millburn High School.

_____________________________  ______________________
Parent signature                      Date

Please return no later than August 5, 2004
Mail to: Mrs. Christine Gardella
        Administrative Assistant
        Millburn High School
        462 Millburn Avenue
        Millburn, New Jersey 07041
Appendix C

Oral Script for Eighth-Grade Counselors to Students
Explanation of Research and Duration of Student Participation:

There is a transition program being offered at the high school this year in order to help support freshmen. You have been identified according to your grade point average, attendance record, and discipline referrals, as a student who might benefit from this program.

There are going to be 20 eighth-grade students chosen for the first Transition Cohort which will begin at the end of August 2004 and 20 eighth-grade students will begin at the beginning of the second marking period in November. Names will be randomly selected for the first Cohort, and if you don't get selected for the second Cohort, you will be eligible to be in the second Cohort, if you wish.

The first Transition Cohort of students will have a 3-day summer academy at the end of August of 2004. On the first day, there will be an off-campus "Ropes Course" program that will consist of physical activities during which you need to use teamwork to be successful. On the second day, you will work with a teacher on academic skills including note taking and test taking tips, study skills, time management, etc. On the third day, you will be given a tour of the school according to your own schedule and will have the opportunity to meet with your counselor. The first day is a full day, and breakfast and lunch will be served. The second and third day are half days, and breakfast will be served.

During the school year, you will meet with your Personal Adult Advocate, who is a volunteer ninth-grade counselor to discuss your courses, involvement in school activities, and any other concerns you might have. In addition, you and your Personal Adult Advocate will write two or three goals you would like to achieve during your freshman year.

If you are in the second Transition Cohort, you will have a study skills class once a week, during your drop-day gym, and you may have a Personal Adult Advocate assigned to work with you, if you choose. You will also write Personal Goals you wish to achieve.

You may have these services during your entire freshman year, or choose not to continue.
Participation is Voluntary:

Although your parents have indicated they would like you to be a part of this program, it's important for you to know that you do not have to participate if you don't want to. It's totally up to you. Even if you start and then decide you don't want to continue, that is perfectly fine.

Benefits and Compensation for Participating:

If you are in the first Transition Cohort, you will have the opportunity to become familiar with the high school prior to starting your classes. Both Cohorts will have the opportunity to brush up on your academic skills and receive the support of a ninth grade teacher during your freshman year.

What Happens if I Don't Participate:

There will be no consequences if you choose not to participate in this study, or if you start and then quit. You can still receive help from all your teachers and enroll in a basic skills course if you wish.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

No one will know you are in the program except the other students who are in it, your Personal Adult Advocate, your parents, and the researcher. Your name will not be on any of the data. A coding system of numbers will be used. The results of this study will be locked up in the researcher's filing cabinet in her home, and they will be destroyed after three (3) years.

Assent Letter:

Please bring home this Assent Letter and discuss this program with your parents. You and your parents will sign and return one copy, and keep one copy, if you wish to participate in the program.

Please direct any questions to Lynn Belvedere, researcher's assistant and certified counselor at the high school. She can be reached at (973) 564-7130, ext. 308.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix D

Student Assent Form
Michele Pitts, a Doctoral Candidate at Seton Hall University, is doing a study on supporting freshman students in their freshman year at high school. She is also one of the Vice Principals at the high school.

However, in order for you to feel comfortable, you will not be working directly with Michele Pitts. You will be working with a Personal Adult Advocate who will be a ninth-grade teacher who volunteers to work with you.

Purpose of Research:

The purpose of this research is to find a way to support eighth-grade students in their transition to the high school. The research will be comparing my grade point average, attendance, and disciplinary concerns during the eighth grade with my performance in freshman year at high school. By the end of the first and third marking periods, I will be in this program at least once per marking period, if I wish. I may stay in the program all year, if I wish to remain. I will have a Personal Adult Advocate who will meet with me three or four times a semester for 30 minutes in order to help me plan and reach my Personal Plan for Progress. If I am in the First Transition Cohort Group, I will be in school three days at the end of August at 2004 to participate in an outdoor "Ropes Course," a study skills course, and have peer leaders give me a tour of the school and meet my high school guidance counselor. If I am picked to be in the Second Transition Cohort Group, I will start at the beginning of the first marking period. By the end of the first marking period, I will have a study skills class once a week, and a Personal Adult Advocate will meet with me, if I wish.

Participation:

I know that I do not have to participate if I don't want to. Even if I start this study and then change my mind, it is okay for me to stop.

What I Will Gain by Participating:

As a part of this study, I will have the opportunity to learn more about the high school before actually entering it. I will have the ability to build important study skills such as test-taking, time management, and note-taking. I will have the opportunity to work individually with a high school teacher who can advise me or help me with my courses, setting goals, and adapting to the school.
What Will Happen if I Don't Participate:

There will be no consequences if I choose not to participate in this study, or if I start the study, and then quit. I know that I can still receive help from all my teachers and my counselor. If I need help with basic skills, I can sign up for that course also.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

No one will know I am in this program except the other students who are with me, my Personal Adult Advocate, my parents, and the researcher. I know that no one will know how well I did or did not do except for these people. My name will not be on any of the data. A coding system of numbers will be used. I know that the results of this study will be locked up in the researcher's filing cabinet in her home, and they will be destroyed after three (3) years.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached at (973) 275-2977 or 313-6314.

I Want to Participate:

By signing below, I am saying that I understand everything written above and have listened to my counselor explain this study thoroughly and that I agree to participate.

Sincerely,
[Student's Name (Please Print)]

[Student's Signature (Please Sign Below)]

[Parent's Name (Please Print)]

[Parent's Signature (Please Sign Below)]

[Date]

Questions? Please contact the research team, your Personal Adult Advocate, the counselor, or call Seton Hall University Research Office (973) 564-3300, ext. 3600.

[Collge of Education and Human Services]
[Department of Education]

[Signature]
[Date]
Appendix E
Informed Consent Form
Informed Consent

TO: Parents in 2003-2004 8th Grade Class
FROM: Michele Pitts
SUBJECT: Research Project

Researcher
I am a graduate student at Seton Hall University in the College of Education and Human Services. I am conducting a study beginning this summer through the end of the third marking period of the 2004-2005 school year. This study is part of my work in the Executive Doctoral Program.

Purpose of Research
The purpose of this research project is to examine and compare the effects of three intervention strategies on the transition of at-risk eighth-grade students to the high school. The impact of these student support structures will be measured by grade point averages, attendance records, and discipline referrals, which will be collected at the end of students’ eighth-grade year and compared to the end of the first and third marking periods of freshman year.

Description of Procedures
There will be three interventions with students: a three-day Freshman Summer Academy, engaging a physical education activity, academic skills support, and a high school orientation with peer leaders. A Personal Adult Advocate (ninth-grade high school student) will meet with each student individually six to eight times over the next school year in order to support academic, emotional, and social support, as well as to monitor progress for the 2004-2005 school year which each student in the Freshman cohort will formulate, collaborate, and implement with the assistance of his/her Personal Adult Advocate.

There will be three activity groups of volunteers, each consisting of students, teachers, and volunteers. Personal Adult Advocates, who will meet as a group, share useful insights, suggestions, and any issues associated with this program to the group. These groups will provide the researcher with a greater understanding of the impact of this program and clarify the quantitative results.

APPROVED

College of Education and Human Services
Executive Ed.D. Program
Tel: 973-762-8200
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
Anonymity

Student baseline data will be collected using the district’s computer system. No student will be identified by name nor will the district be identified in the research project.

Confidentiality and Security

As the researcher, I will have access to the information, but at no time will anyone know or trace individual students in the program. Materials associated with the project will be kept in the researcher’s home in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed three (3) years after completion of the project.

Risks & Benefits

Participation in this study poses no anticipated risks and may or may not provide expected benefits. Only aggregate data will be reported with no names attached.

*** The following is required by the IRB to appear, verbatim in this letter:

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject’s privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairman of the IRB may be reached at (973) 275-2977 or 313-6314.

Consent

Consent for your son or daughter to participate in this program is indicated by your signature and return of this page to the guidance office in the middle school.

*All volunteer students will be in the transition program during the 2004-2005 school year. The first 20 students randomly selected will begin the program during the first marking periods, and those not selected will be part of an internal control group and into the control group will be in the second transition program, if they and /or selected. The program will begin in the second quarter of the first marking period during the school year.

If parents or parents-in-law are participants in the program, please contact the researcher’s assistant at the high school (973) 567-6979.

Thank you for your cooperation in this endeavor.

Michelle Watts
Doctoral Candidate

College of Education and Human Services
Department of Education/Leadership and Special Education
400 S. Orange Ave., Room G107
South Orange, NJ 07079
I have read the material above, and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree my child may participate in this program, realizing he or she may withdraw without prejudice at any time.

Student Name __________________________

Parent Signature __________________________ Date __________

Please sign and return to Lynn Belvedere at the high school one copy and keep one copy for yourself. Thank you.

APPROVED
JUL 28, 2001
IHHS
SE lanes HALL UNIVERSITY
Appendix F

Oral Recruitment Script for Parent Focus Group
Oral Recruitment Script for Parent Focus Group

To be delivered by eighth grade middle school counselors via phone calls home to parents of students who were randomly selected for the first and second Transition Cohorts.

Introduction:

Hello, this is __________ your son/daughter’s guidance counselor. I have received your student’s Assent Form as well as your Informed Consent Form back. Thank you for your promptness in returning them.

I’m calling today to ask if you are willing to volunteer some of your time to be in a Parent Focus Group. Parents of students in both the first and second Transition Cohorts will be randomly selected from the applicant pool.

Explanation of Process and Duration of Participation:

Mrs. Lynn Belvedere, research assistant to Michele Pitts and a licensed counselor at the high school, will be facilitating the focus groups in her office at the high school. She will meet with each focus group three or four times between September and March of the 2004-2005 school year.

The researcher’s assistant will be asking the following questions regarding program evaluation. Approximately 2-3 questions will be covered during each meeting:

1. What are the greatest challenges for entering freshmen?
2. Which issues are the most challenging for you in providing support?
3. What kinds of activities promote a sense of community, connectedness?
4. Did the cohort concept or Personal Advocate promote a sense of community?
5. Which program strategies were the most successful for students’ transitions?
6. Which program strategies were the least successful for students’ transitions?
7. Are there any program modifications you would suggest?
8. Do you think this program is critical for at-risk students only, or should it be expanded to include all freshmen?

Participation:

Participation is strictly voluntary. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of any kind.
Benefits of Participation:

It will be an opportunity to meet in a small group and voice your experiences, concerns, and suggestions concerning students' transition to the high school.

Confidentiality and Security:

The researcher will have access to the information, but at no time will your name or the name of your son or daughter be attached to any of the data. Materials associated with the project will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home and destroyed three (3) years after completion of the project.

Risks & Benefits:

Participation in this study poses no anticipated risks and may or may not provide expected benefits. Only aggregate data will be reported with no names attached.

Informed Consent Form:

If you indicate that you are interested in being a part of the applicant pool, I will include your name. If your name is selected as one of the six members, I will send you an Informed Consent Form to be in the Parent Focus Group.

Thank you for your time.

If you have any questions, please call Mrs. Lynn Belvedere at the high school: (973) 564-7130, ext. 308.
Appendix G

Informed Consent for Parent Focus Group
Informed Consent for Parent Focus Group

TO: Parents of Transition Students in the Parent Focus Group

FROM: Michele Pitts

SUBJECT: Participation in Focus Group for 2004-2005 School Year

Researcher

As a graduate student at Seton Hall University in the College of Education and Human Services, I am conducting a study on freshman transition beginning the end of August through the third marking period of the 2004-2005 school year. This study is part of my work in the Executive Doctoral Program. However, my role as one of the Vice Principals at the high school is one of a supervisory and evaluative nature. Therefore, I have asked Mrs. Lynn Belvedere, a licensed counselor at the high school, to act as my assistant and facilitate the focus groups.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research project is to examine the effects of three intervention strategies on the transition of at-risk eighth-grade students to the high school. The impact of these student support structures will be measured by grade point averages, attendance records, and discipline referrals which will be collected at the end of students’ eighth-grade year and compared to the end of the first and third marking periods of freshman year.

A Parent Focus Group and a Personal Adult Advocate Group are part of the means in order for the researcher to learn more about how well the program is working.

Description of Procedures

The eighth-grade guidance counselors explained to you that the focus group would meet once a month when they asked if you wished to volunteer to be part of the group. Lynn Belvedere will schedule the three or four meetings between September and March to meet in her counseling office at the high school during the school day.

Participation

This is strictly voluntary. Should you choose not to continue, you may withdraw at any time with no penalty.

College of Education and Human Services
Executive Ed.D. Program
490 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART, THE SPIRIT

APPROVED

[Stamp]
Although the researcher's assistant will take notes during the focus group meetings, your name will not be recorded on any of the data.

Confidentiality and Security

As the researcher, I will have access to the information, but at no time will anyone know or trace individual students in the program. Materials associated with the project will be kept in the researcher's home in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed three (3) years after completion of the project.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in this study poses no anticipated risks and may or may not provide expected benefits. Only aggregate data will be used with complete anonymity and confidentiality maintained.

*** The following is required by the IRB to appear, verbatim in this letter:

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject’s privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached at (973) 275-2977 or 313-6314.

Consent

Your consent to participate in this program is indicated by your signature and return of this copy to Lynn Belvedere’s office. Please keep one copy for yourself.

If you have any questions about this program, please contact Lynn Belvedere at the high school (973) 664-7190, ext. 308.

Thank you for your cooperation in this study.

Michele Pits
Doctoral Candidate

Please Print Below:

Name __________________________  Date __________________________

Signature __________________________

College of Education and Human Services
Executive Ed. Program
Tel. 973.275.3728
400 South Orange Avenue South Orange, New Jersey 07079

ENRICHING THE MIND. THE HEART.
Appendix H

Oral Recruitment Script for PAA Focus Group
Oral Recruitment Script for Personal Adult Advocate Focus Group

Upon entering the room, the researcher’s assistant will introduce herself and explain why she is present. She will do this by reading the following script.

**Introduction:**

Hello, my name is Lynn Belvedere, and I’m a counselor at Millburn High School. I am the research assistant to Michele Pitts, a Doctoral Candidate at Seton Hall University, who is conducting this study on at-risk freshmen transition to the high school.

**Explanation of Research and Duration of Participation:**

Following the staff meeting of ninth-grade teachers at which I asked for volunteers to serve as Personal Adult Advocates, you were randomly selected from those who volunteered.

You will be working with either three or four students for one marking period at the least and possibly the entire year, if both you and the students choose to continue in the program.

You will meet with your assigned students during the school day possibly three to four times a semester. During these meetings, you will help the students in formulating and meeting their Personal Plans for Progress, assisting them with any problems they might be experiencing, and encouraging them to become involved in the school community by explaining activities and events.

As part of your role, I would like to meet with you at least three times in order to find out how the program is working, problems in transition, modifications that you have found helpful, etc. These questions will be spread out over three or four sessions in the order presented.

**Description of Procedure:**

The following focus group questions regarding the transition program will frame the discussion:

1. What are students’ greatest needs, concerns, challenges in the transition to high school?
2. Which issues are the most challenging for you in providing support?
3. What kinds of activities promote sense of community, connectedness?
4. Which academic skills are critical to successful school adjustment?
5. Which program strategies were the most successful to students’ transition?
6. Which program strategies were the least successful to students’ transition?
7. Are there any program modifications you would suggest?
8. Do you think this program is critical for at-risk students only, or should it be expanded to include all freshmen?

Participation:

Participation is strictly voluntary. If you choose not to continue to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of any kind.

Benefits of Participation:

You will not have a collateral duty assigned in order to allow time during the day to schedule meetings with your students as well as focus group meetings.

Confidentiality and Security

The researcher will have access to the information, but at no time will anyone know or trace individual students in the program. Your name will be kept confidential with the PI as a Personal Adult Advocate and member of a focus group. Materials associated with the project will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home and destroyed three (3) years after completion of the project.

Risks & Benefits

Participation in this study poses no anticipated risks and may or may not provide expected benefits.

Informed Consent Form:

I will give you two copies of an Informed Consent Form. Please sign and return if you wish to participate in the Personal Adult Advocate Focus Group. Keep one copy for yourself.
Appendix 1

Informed Consent for PAA Focus Group
Informed Consent for Personal Adult Advocate Focus Group

TO: Personal Adult Advocates

FROM: Michele Pitts

SUBJECT: Participation in Focus Group for 2004-2005 School Year

Researcher

As a graduate student at Seton Hall University in the College of Education and Human Services, I am conducting a study on freshman transition beginning the end of August through the third marking period of the 2004-2005 school year. This study is part of my work in the Executive Doctoral Program. Since my role as Vice Principal at the high school is of a supervisory nature, I have asked Lynn Belvedere, counselor to facilitate the focus groups.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research project is to examine the effects of three intervention strategies on the transition of at risk eighth grade students to the high school. The impact of these student support structures will be measured by grade point averages, attendance records, and discipline referrals which will be collected at the end of students' eighth grade year and compared to the end of the first and third marking periods of freshman year.

A Parent Focus Group and a Personal Adult Advocate Focus Group are part of an efficacy study in order for the researchers to learn more about how well the program is working.

Description of Procedures

In accordance with the research, participants will meet with you for three meetings. The number of meetings, and the focus questions to be discussed, will take place in her counseling office in the high school during the school day.

Participation

This is strictly voluntary. Should you choose not to continue, there will be no penalty of any kind.

Anonymity

Although the researcher's assistant will take notes during the meetings, your name will not be recorded on any of the data.

College of Education and Human Services
Executive Ed D Program
Tel. 973.275.3775
400 South Orange Avenue - South Orange, NJ 07079

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART, THE LIFE
Confidentiality and Security

As the researcher, I will have access to the information, but at no time will anyone know or trace individual students in the program. Materials associated with the project will be kept in the researcher’s house in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed three (3) years after completion of the project.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in this study poses no anticipated risks and may or may not provide expected benefits. No one, except the researcher, will have access to the results of this study.

The following is required by the IRB and must be verbatim in this letter:

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject’s privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached at (973) 275-2977 or 913-6314.

Consent

Your consent to participate in this program is indicated by your signature and return of this copy to Lynn Belvedere’s office. Please keep one copy for yourself.

If you have any questions about this program, please contact Lynn Belvedere at the high school (973) 564-7130, ext. 308.

Thank you for your cooperation in this endeavor.

[Signature]

Please print name below:

[Name]

[Date]

[Signature]

College of Education and Human Services
Instructional Services
400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, New Jersey 07079

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
Appendix J

PAA Topics for Discussion
PERSONAL ADULT ADVOCATE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What activities has the student participated in in the past?
2. How does student view him/herself academically?
3. How does the student feel about himself?
4. Does the student have a desire to improve or is he/she satisfied with the status quo?
5. How does the student self-report school behavior?
6. How does student report attendance in school?
7. How does student feel about relationships with friends?
8. How does student describe relationships with family members?
9. How does student feel about his/her teachers?
10. Does student feel his/her parents are involved in student’s school life?
11. How does student report study conditions at home?
12. How much time does student report spending on homework on a regular basis?
13. Does student seek teacher’s help if he/she is having difficulty in a subject?
14. Does student feel he/she needs tutoring assistance in any subject?
Appendix K

Personal Plan for Progress
MY PERSONAL PLAN FOR PROGRESS

STUDENT NAME: _______________________

DATE: ___________

1ST GOAL:

STEPS TO GOAL

1. ___________

2. ___________

3. ___________

REVIEW DATES:

2ND GOAL:

STEPS TO GOAL

1. ___________

2. ___________

3. ___________

REVIEW DATES:

3RD GOAL:

STEPS TO GOAL

1. ___________

2. ___________

3. ___________

REVIEW DATES:
Appendix L

District Permission Letter
TO: Michele Pitts  

FROM: Dr. Richard L. Brodow  

RE: Dissertation Request  

DATE: April 29, 2004  

Your request to access Millburn Public Schools student data pursuant to your doctoral dissertation is hereby approved.  

Best of luck as you pursue this most worthwhile endeavor.

RLB: nbro  
C: Personnel File
Appendix M

Focus Group Questions
Focus Group Questions

1) What are students' greatest needs, concerns, challenges in the transition to high school?

2) Which issues are the most challenging for you (as a parent, teacher, Personal Adult Advocate) in providing support?

3) What kind of activities promote sense of community, connectedness?

4) What academic skills are critical to successful school adjustment?

5) Which intervention do you think was the most beneficial to students' successful transition to high school? Least helpful?

6) What else should we do to successfully support students in their transition?

7) Do you think this program is critical for at-risk students only, or should it be expanded to include all freshmen students?

8) What are the positive aspects of the transition to the high school?
Appendix N

Table of Effect Sizes
Table of Effect Sizes

Summary of Cell Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Related Effect Sizes*.  

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**DR=Discipline Referrals**

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* M.P.=Marking Period  *Sem.=Semester  ES=Effect Size

**Effect Size Calculation:**

\[
(d) = \frac{\text{mean group 1 minus mean group 2}}{\text{standard deviation of group 2}}
\]
Appendix O

Institutional Review Board Approval
Dear Ms. Pitts,

Re: "The Impact of a Transition Program on At-risk Freshmen in a New Jersey Public Suburban High School"

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) are required by Federal regulations to conduct continuing reviews of research already approved. Once initial IRB approval is granted for one calendar year only, continuing review is mandated to take place at least 12 months after the initial approval. It can be sooner in certain situations. The purpose of the continuing review is for the IRB to reassure themselves, investigators, research subjects, and the public that appropriate measures are being taken to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects.

Federal regulations do not provide for extensions to this requirement for continuing review. Therefore, failure by the Principal Investigator to ensure timely IRB review is a serious matter that may lead to suspension or termination of the protocol. Resubmission of the study would then require a submission of a new protocol to the IRB.

The Principal Investigator is responsible for timely submission of a Continuing Review Application to the IRB. Under IRB guidelines, research needs continuation of approval until all research related activities are completed, including data analysis and write-up, and a final defense, if applicable and the study is closed.

If your research has been included, please complete the enclosed form and return it to the Office of Institutional Review Board within 30 days prior to the expiration of the initial IRB approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruszicka, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc  Dr. Charles Achilles  Office of Institutional Review Board
    President's Hall
    400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-7641

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT
July 28, 2004

Michele L. Pizzit
38 University Avenue
Chatham, NJ 07928

Dear Ms. Pizzit:

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the information you have submitted addressing the concepts for your proposal entitled "Impact of a Transition Program on At-risk Freshmen in a New Jersey Public Suburban High School". Your research protocol is hereby approved as amended.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval forms and the stamped original Consent Forms. Make copies only of these stamped Consent Forms.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Remicks, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

C.c. Charles Achilles, Ph.D.

Office of Institutional Review Board
President's Hall
Tel: 973-313-6314 • Fax: 973-313-2278
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2641

ENRICHING THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT