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## School-Based Transition Strategies: Student-Identified Factors that Lead to their Success

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SCHOOL-BASED TRANSITION STRATEGIES: STUDENT-IDENTIFIED FACTORS  
THAT LEAD TO THEIR SUCCESS

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LEAD TO THEIR SUCCESS

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the  
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“SCHOOL-BASED TRANSITION STRATEGIES: STUDENT-IDENTIFIED FACTORS THAT LEAD TO THEIR SUCCESS,” a Doctoral research project prepared by MIKE ROBERTS in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the current educational focus on preparing all students to be college- and career-ready when they graduate from high school, supporting students with a smooth transition to high school and a successful high school experience has never been more important. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of seven tenth-grade students as they described their transition from junior high school to high school. Data were collected through personal interviews with high school students from a small rural community in California.

Five themes emerged from the data. They were related to informational meetings implemented at the junior high level, student-centered activities facilitated by peers and scheduled for the days preceding the start of school, after-school tutorials, teacher expectations that were clearly communicated to students, and student relationships with faculty and staff. As a result of the study, a number of strategies were identified that can be applied to high schools interested in students' successful transition to high school. Teachers and staff can be sent to junior high schools to hold informational meetings and begin building relationships with students. In addition, activities for incoming freshmen should be held a few days before high school begins in the fall, allowing students a chance to ask questions and give students an opportunity to get to know high school staff. When these practices are used, there is the potential for more successful transitions and increased student success during their freshman year of high school.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to thank Dr. Ginny Birky for helping me identify the topic and develop a proposal for this dissertation. I have appreciated conversations that I have had with her on multiple occasions about my progress in the program. She always encouraged me to continue toward my goals. Dr. Patrick Allen and Dr. Karen Buchanan generously agreed to serve on my committee for this dissertation. Their perspectives helped shape my research questions and my interview questions and bring clarity to the methods I would use for the research. Over the last 20 months I have worked very closely with Dr. Birky as my advisor and dissertation chair. I am extremely appreciative for her willingness to offer feedback, guidance, and encouragement throughout the process. She understood when I needed to focus on my day job, and she was available when I needed to talk or needed someone to read my work and point me in the right direction. Her continued support and patience helped me finish this enlightening task of a dissertation. I am extremely grateful for all of the time and energy she has given to this endeavor. All of the professors at George Fox University have helped me develop as a person, an educator, and a leader.

One of the most important things I learned while conducting this study is how valuable it can be to sit down with students who attend your school and ask them about their experience. All seven of the students helped me develop a more thorough understanding of

Dawn High School and what it is like for students to navigate their way through the challenges of transitioning to high school. I truly enjoyed meeting with each student, and I appreciated their willingness to share their perceptions and feelings with me. I feel that all administrators should find the time to do this periodically. After each interview I found myself thinking about the conversation for several days and mulling over important questions for policy and practice. For example, how do we change the students experience before they start high school? What activities can we do to help answer their questions and improve their chances of success? These types of questions have pushed me to search and create new approaches on my campus to accommodate the many needs of my students.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my wife, Christine. I love her and appreciate all of the times that she allowed me to focus on coursework and this dissertation while she took care of our boys, Carter, Ashton, and Hudson. We are fortunate to have Christine in our lives, and I could not have completed this journey without her. I would also like to thank my parents, Harold and Sheryl, for helping out whenever we needed extra support around the house and with the kids, and Debbie, my mother-in-law, for her continued support in helping out in any way possible. She made several trips to help us when we needed the extra support. The support of my family is why I was able to finish my doctorate and I will forever be grateful.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Hey, Mr. Roberts, high school is way harder than I thought. The homework is a lot, the teachers are strict, I don’t have too many friends, and I can barely keep my head above water.”

This was a comment made recently by one of my freshmen students. He is currently doing well in high school and is on track to go to college. How did this student survive the transition to high school when he thought it was so difficult and he didn’t seem to fit in?

The aforementioned comment is typical of statements I hear from students who struggle during their first year of high school. With the current educational focus on preparing all students to be college- and career-ready when they graduate from high school, supporting students with a smooth transition to high school and a successful high school experience has never been more important. In California, preparing students to go to college means they must meet UC/CSU a-g college entrance requirements, which are a set of high school courses that students must complete (with a grade of C- or better) to be minimally eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) system (University of California admissions, 2013). In addition, according to the Career Readiness Initiative 2015, preparing students to be career-ready means they need to learn career and technical skills that will prepare them for the workforce (California Department of Education, 2015). Both of these require that students experience success during their four years of high school as well as maintain their grades, attendance, behavior, and involvement in school activities to ensure their ability to graduate (Ross, 2016).

During my career in education, I have had many conversations with students who are seeking alternative educational settings or are being transferred to alternative education due to lack of credits, attendance issues, discipline issues, and not being connected to the school. Even

though they have challenges, many still have a desire to continue their education. There are a variety of programs that can be implemented to support these struggling students who are not experiencing success in a comprehensive high school. I began to wonder what Dawn High School could do to help such students. One approach mentioned frequently is that of transition strategies (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Blum, 2005; Ross, 2016); they became the focus of this study.

Transitions between grade levels can create struggles for students and can shape the way they handle their learning process. In particular, the transition from middle school to high school can be one of the most challenging and is an especially important milestone for many students (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The purpose of this study was to hear what strategies high school sophomore students identified that improved their freshmen experience when they transitioned from middle to high school.

More students fail the ninth grade than any other grade (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Wilkins & Bost, 2015), and advancement rates between ninth grade and tenth grade are much lower than rates for any other classes (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). According to one report, half of the school districts in the United States had a tenth-grade enrollment that was no greater than 95 percent of ninth-grade enrollment. In one-quarter of the districts, tenth-grade enrollment was no greater than 90 percent of that of ninth grade (Neild, 2009). In addition to the physical and emotional changes students experience during the middle to high school transition, it is a time when students begin to make significant academic and social decisions that eventually determine the likelihood of matriculating to college, going directly into the workforce, or dropping out of high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The social costs of dropping out of high school have never been higher (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, Muhlenbruck, & Borman, 2000). According to a recent report, the nearly 1.3 million students

who failed to graduate from high school in 2004 will result in more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity during their lifetimes (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Similarly, high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, on public assistance, in prison, or enrolled in adult education and training, thereby putting significant strain on funds earmarked for domestic programs (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). How students respond to challenges and approach their learning will factor into their future success.

Research has shown that when students are on track for graduation and make it to tenth grade, their chances of graduating increase dramatically (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). As a result, it is necessary to address students and their challenges during various stages of the transition, not just once they reach the ninth grade. This demands early intervention, rigorous courses in middle school, and a continuously supportive environment. The effect of this transition period is widespread and affects students' social, emotional, and academic identities in varied and seemingly unpredictable ways.

This research study examined strategies and activities that students identified as helping them be successful in the classroom, both socially and emotionally, after making the transition from middle school to high school. In this study, successful transition programs for freshmen were identified and evaluated by sophomore student participants as they looked back, along with an exploration of the role transition programs played in students' successful graduation from high school. Research in literature is limited from the students' perspective concerning their experiences with transition strategies, so this study gathered students' points of view in regards to their transition to high school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the needs of all students transitioning to high school. Over the past 20 years, the number of freshmen failing to make it past their freshmen year has increased every year. Students who make a successful transition into high school have an increased chance of graduating from high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The increased pressure to make all students college- and career-ready at my high school is the reason I chose to explore student perspectives on transition strategies.

As an administrator in the district, I am particularly interested in the success of my students and seeing them ready for life's challenges. I frequently reflect on my school's resources, current practices, and success of my students when we plan transition strategies each year for the following years' students. When students struggle with the transition to Dawn High School, they have a decreased chance of being successful and I want to make sure we are doing everything possible for them. When students struggle in transition, they are more likely to drop out of school, transfer to an alternative education school, or not feel connected to high school (Cooper et al., 2000). If I can discover what students identify as strategies that most helped them transfer to their new school, we can continue to provide those services to students. Similarly, if we identify an area of weakness from the student's perspective, we can attempt to incorporate a new strategy in order to help them in areas with which they struggle.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Although I have found considerable research on transition strategies to high school, I have not found much on student voice or their perspectives about the transition. The objective of this qualitative study was to use student voice to identify the strategies they felt helped them with transition to high school, and ultimately to use this information to increase the number of

students who successfully complete their freshmen year at my high school. I wanted to have sophomore students document the experiences of their freshmen year and self-identify what was helpful for their success in the transition to high school. I did not address the specific transition strategies at Dawn High School but the strategies in general that student's felt helped them make a successful transition. I used personal interviews of seven sophomore students to help me understand the challenges students faced along with some of the supports students believed had increased their chances of success in their first year of high school.

### **Research Questions**

For this research, I conducted a qualitative study to ascertain the factors students self-reported as programs, strategies, or other school activities that increased the chances of being successful in the classroom after making the transition from middle school to high school. Through personal interviews with sophomore students and an analysis of other site-based records such as attendance and discipline records, I investigated the school-based transition factors that contributed to students' success during their freshmen year (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). For this study, school-based factors are being defined as events that a school can control during the school day or strategies and activities that take place on campus around a student's education. Factors outside of school and not controlled by the school will not be considered for this review, such as number of parents a student has, education of parents and poverty factors. This qualitative approach was designed to provide a thorough, holistic description and analysis of a select group of students who attended Dawn High School, a comprehensive high school where they completed their freshmen year. One main research question and three sub-questions guided the data collection process. They were:

What school-based strategies do students self-report as contributing to their successful transition to high school?

- a. What school-based events and activities do students report most prepared them for their transition to high school?
- b. What school-based factors do students report most contributed to their academic success?
- c. How do students characterize their connections to school faculty/staff?

Personal interviews with seven tenth-grade students provided an opportunity to learn about students' transition experiences through their descriptions, and allowed enough flexibility to ask follow up questions aimed at clarifying or investigating a particular aspect of students' responses (Creswell, 2013).

### **Definition of Terms**

*a-g college entrance requirements:* The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) require entering freshmen to complete certain courses in high school. These courses are called the "a-g" courses because of the letter each subject area is assigned: "a" is for History/Social Science, "b" is for English, and so on (University of California, 2013).

*Alternative School:* A non-traditional educational setting designed to meet the academic, behavioral, and physical needs of students (Crawford, 2015).

*Comprehensive High School:* A traditional high school setting in the United States designed to meet the needs of all students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

*Interventions:* An intentional attempt to get someone help in an area of struggle for the student. This support for students could be provided within the school setting or with an agency approved by school district personnel (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).



*Linked Learning Pathway:* The Linked Learning approach integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track. For Linked Learning students, education is organized around industry-sector themes. The industry theme is woven into lessons taught by teachers who collaborate across subject areas with input from working professionals, and reinforced by work-based learning with real employers (Forbes, 2011).

*Transition:* The conversions students go through as they change schools throughout their lives. These transitions play a significant role in the development of young people's decisions and serve as a milestone, which can direct them in some ways. There are two main types of school transitions: students transferring schools between grade levels and students transferring schools because of moving to a new school during the middle of the school year (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). For the purposes of this study, only the first type of transition will be considered.

*Tutorial:* Dawn High School holds tutorial sessions after school three days a week in five core subjects. There are content-specific teachers that have a specific day available for students to ask questions and receive help related to that subject. Math has two teachers available all three days to help struggling students with the content and other subject are available one day a week. The tutorial session is available for an hour after school and we provide a late bus to take students home after tutorial ends.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was designed to gain a better understanding of the strategies students self-identified as factors leading to their successful transition to high school. One of the limitations of the study was that the sample of students was limited to a single school, which does not provide

a broad range of students from different settings. The small sample size of seven students limited the number of student perspectives, but my interview questions provided a great deal of information to help me understand the student's perspective (Creswell, 2013). Randomly choosing seven students and then making sure there was some diversity among them helped compensate for this limitation. Interviews ranged from 18-41 minutes in length, which was a small amount of time to dive into the student's perspectives, but I wanted to honor their time and not make the situation uncomfortable for them.

Another limitation of this study was because of my role as the principal of Dawn High School. My position may have influenced student participants' comments during the interviews. I was careful with my questioning strategies and tried to make the students comfortable during the process to keep them honest about their answers. I also assured students that whatever they shared would not be attached to their name in any way during the research. Limitations of this study included the accuracy of information gained through the student interview process. There were likely to be some inaccurate details recalled by individuals involved in the research, but looking at student records and existing documents on the student, I attempted to notice those inconsistencies and sought clarification during the interviews.

This study had a variety of delimitations. It was restricted to tenth-grade students who completed their ninth-grade year at Dawn High School and were currently enrolled at Dawn High School. The interviews were conducted with tenth-grade students so they would have the ability to recall the stories from their ninth-grade year better because of the proximity of time between ninth and tenth grade. Another delimitation was the narrow scope established in this study because I only interviewed students from one high school. Ideally, I would have liked to interview students at other high schools and get a broader perspective but with the desire to learn

from the research and make changes to Dawn High School, I chose all participants from my school. As a result of the limitations and delimitations in this qualitative study, the results of my research are not generalizable to other high schools. However, the study was informative to my educational staff and myself.

### **Summary**

Through participant interviews in this qualitative study, I attempted to understand the programs, strategies, and activities that students identify as helping them successfully transition into high school. Currently, the literature on student transitions lacks student voice and their own perceptions on what has helped them succeed in this transition. This research offers valuable student perspectives, which have the potential to help students succeed in my school and others.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many schools and site administrators feel pressure to prepare students to be college- or career-ready when they graduate from high school. To have students' college- and career-ready, they need to complete all four years of high school. Research has shown over time that student's transition to high school is one of the most difficult of their school experiences (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). If students can make it to their tenth-grade year their chances of completing high school increases their chances of graduating from high school (Ross, 2016). This review of the literature will examine transition strategies that influence attendance, grades, behavior, connectedness, and academic support.

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze the research regarding students' transitions from middle school to high school and to explain the types of programs and activities that are available to support students during this transition period. Transitions between grade levels and school campuses can present challenges for students. More students fail the ninth grade than any other grade (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Most high school dropouts have failed at least 25% of their ninth-grade courses, while 8% of high school completers experienced the same difficulty. Promotion rates between ninth grade and tenth grade are much lower than rates for any other grades (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that up to 40% of ninth-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only 10–15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004).

In addition to the physical and emotional challenges students experience during the middle to high school transition, it is a time when students begin to make significant academic

and social decisions that eventually determine the likelihood of matriculating to college, going directly into the workforce, or dropping out of high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The social costs of dropping out of high school have never been higher. According to one report, the nearly 1.3 million students who failed to graduate from high school in 2004 will result in more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity during their lifetimes (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). These numbers show us the need to provide students with support during their high school transition. How students respond to high school transitions and challenges will determine their future learning and future success. For some students the ninth-grade year is the most challenging; some researchers assert this is when they will learn to succeed or fail (Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens, & Lindstrom, 2015; McCallumore, Sparapani, 2010).

The term “transition” is defined as the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Transitions happen at multiple points during a student's educational journey. These transitions typically occur at designated times where districts have determined that students will transition from one school to another. Some districts have schools designed for kindergarten through third grade and fourth through sixth grade, requiring students to transition multiple times. Other school districts have kindergarten through fifth or sixth-grade schools, with students making their first transition at the middle school level (Brewin & Statham, 2011). Still, other districts have kindergarten through eighth-grade schools. Some students may transfer to different schools during their elementary and middle school years because of a family move or transfer for another reason (Bru, Stornes, Munthe, & Thuen, 2010). Finally, the last school transition that will take place for most students in the P-12 system is from eighth grade to high school (Brewin & Statham, 2011; Bru et al., 2010). Each school district's structure will determine the sequence of schools and number of transitions students will

experience during grades P-12. While students may transition multiple times through their P-12 educational experiences, this review and entire study focuses on the transition from eighth grade to high school.

Students making a transition often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developmental changes that may adversely affect their educational performance (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Geltner, Law, Forehand, & Miles, 2011). Often during transitions students move from a familiar school to an unfamiliar school where they encounter new teachers, peers, academic expectations, social issues, and school configurations (Geltner et al., 2011). These changes tend to increase the likelihood that students feel overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated, or insecure (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Research is limited on student perceptions of transition from middle school to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). What little research there is on student perceptions suggests that students approach normative school transitions with both concern and excitement as they are presented with challenges and opportunities (Akos, Creamer, & Masina, 2004). Literature reveals there are many types of transition programs and elements of school structures to help students navigate these sometimes-rocky periods (Geltner et al., 2011).

The review of literature for this research study was designed to explore topics related to transition programs between middle school and high school and to provide the reader with the knowledge base upon which this study was built. This review begins with some background on adolescent development, and specifically Hispanic or Latino culture as it relates to this population in school. The review also explores transition programs that focus on student connectedness, academic support, parent involvement, and communication between schools.

**Adolescent Development with a Focus on Hispanic Youth**

During the developmental period of adolescence, there is a strong need for intimacy, autonomy, cognitive challenge, and feelings of competence (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015). Adolescents become more knowledgeable and skillful, with a growing ability to use abstract reasoning and critical thinking. Their decision-making skills and processes become similar to that of most adults as they progress into the level of conventional reasoning (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015). Most of their moral thinking is centered on issues of group consensus and social contact rather than issues of reward and punishment (Kohlberg, 1975).

The changes in how adolescents think, reason, and understand can be even more dramatic than their obvious physical changes. They move from black-and-white thinkers one day, and rather suddenly it seems, adolescents become able to think abstractly and in shades of gray (Gentry & Campbell, 2002). This higher-level thinking allows them to think about the future, evaluate alternatives, and set personal goals. These new capacities allow adolescents to engage in the kind of introspection and mature decision-making that was previously beyond their cognitive capacity. This is the ability to reason effectively, problem solve, think abstractly, reflect, and plan for the future (Gentry & Campbell).

Adolescents desire control over their lives and the establishment of identities outside of their families. They attempt to clarify where they fit into society, what they believe, and who they are (Perry, 1995). Extreme self-consciousness and self-focus is expressed in concern about one's relationship with friends and adults outside of the home. There is a strong desire to form close and supportive relationship with non-family adults. As the focus of adolescents moves into the social realm, they strive to satisfy social needs, sometimes at the expense of academic concerns (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015).

In order to establish greater independence from their parents, adolescents must orient themselves toward their peers to a greater extent than they did in earlier stages of development. Peer groups support a number of important functions throughout adolescence, providing a temporary reference point for a developing sense of identity (Micucci, 1998). Through relationships with peers, teens begin to develop moral judgment and values and to define how they differ from their parents (Micucci, 1998). At the same time, it is important to note that teens also strive, often covertly, for ways to identify with their parents. Peer groups also provide adolescents with a source of information about the world outside of the family and about themselves. Peers also serve as powerful re-enforcers during adolescence as sources of popularity, status, prestige, and acceptance (Gentry & Campbell, 2002).

For most adolescents, school is a prominent part of their life. For some youth, it is also a source of safety and stability. Some of the same qualities that characterize families of adolescents who do well have a strong sense of attachment, bonding, and belonging and these traits also lead to positive relationships with their teachers and their schools. These factors, more than the size of the school, type of school, or teacher pupil ratio, have been found to be strongly associated with whether adolescents are successful or are involved with drugs or delinquency or drop out of schools (Resnick et al., 1997).

Latino and Hispanic adolescents experience many of the same things all youth do. However, their culture is unique and plays a role in student's expectations (National Center Brief, 2009) in the classroom. Latino and Hispanic are generic terms for persons of Latin American origin or descent living in the United States. Most U.S. government publications (including those produced by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey System) use the term Hispanic (National Center Brief, 2009). The culture traditionally values



maintaining good relations with family members, caring for infirm relatives, and placing family needs above individual needs.

The turbulent period of adolescence can be especially difficult for Latino parents, particularly for those who have recently arrived from another country, because of the language and institutional barriers that often make parents dependent on their children to intervene on their behalf. This role reversal, placing children in positions of power and in the role of interpreters of the American world, can have a disorganizing impact on Latino families (Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014).

Hispanic adolescents perceive that their parents believe doing well in school is important; adolescents tend to hold higher values and beliefs about the general importance of school than about the economic benefit of their education. The more Hispanic students perceive that their friends support them academically, follow school norms, and have high aspirations the more likely the student is to hold values and beliefs that school will be important and useful for their future (National Center Brief, 2009).

It is well documented that among Hispanic youth, girls outperform boys in academics (Colon & Sanchez, 2010). One explanation may be that ethnic minority boys have lower educational aspirations. Boys in Hispanic families are looked upon as providers for family and they are asked to work at a younger age and contribute wages to the family. Minority boys are also a target by gangs in many communities because of the lack of parental support as a result of the hours their parents are working in the fields and not providing guidance to their children (Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014). Another explanation for the reason Hispanic girls outperform Hispanic boys in school might be a difference in teacher expectations for boys and girls (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010). In addition, the cultural values and norms

that immigrant families hold for boys and girls may also help explain the “gender gap” in achievement. Immigrant parents place more restrictions on girls than boys and these restrictions may lead girls to treasure their time at school and hence be more academically engaged (Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014).

### **Models of Transition Programs**

A variety of transition program models have been created to help students as they transition into high school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Effective transition programs and interventions typically focus on improving student attendance, achievement, and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Transition programs should not be the sole responsibility of the receiving high school as studies have shown that middle schools can have a significant impact by helping students make a successful transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Roybal et al., 2014). As a result, many high schools partner with their feeder middle schools to build programs together that support the needs of their students and communities (Frasier, 2007).

Akos et al. (2004) gathered 320 ninth-grade students (approximately 71% of the ninth-grade class) in a single high school to compare their perceptions of transitioning to high school. Items for student questionnaires were developed based on previous transition research, local transition programming, and stakeholder feedback. Using a questionnaire, middle school students were asked in a checklist format what things they looked forward to and what things they were concerned about regarding the move to high school. The students also responded to a series of open-ended, short-answer questions. The top three concerns for students in this study revealed that students were worried about (a) amount of homework, (b) hard classes, and (c) getting lost. The top three student anticipations about going to high school were (a) more

freedom, (b) making new friends, and (c) attending school events. This study by Akos et al.

helped the school district develop their transition plan for students transitioning to high school.

Students who transition in urban school districts face a challenge students in rural school districts typically do not face. A challenge for urban students in their school system is where one middle school feeds three or four different high schools. This causes a more chaotic transition process for students because when they transfer, they might attend a new school where none of their friends attend. “The feeder patterns are shaped by districts’ school-assignment policies and students’ propensities to deviate from established patterns” (Schiller, 1999, p. 218). Middle and high schools in urban districts tend to have a more difficult time communicating with each other about the needs of incoming students because of the size of districts and multiple feeder schools to high schools. Suburban and rural school students tend to have fewer issues because most students are familiar with the community and the schools they will attend (Frasier, 2007).

Urban, suburban, and rural schools vary widely; a single approach to supporting students as they transition will not be effective. Many researchers have suggested that when schools explore options and adopt transition programs, they should focus on several approaches (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Roybal et al., 2014). In the study conducted by Roybal et al., (2014), the authors suggest that for a successful transition approach, it must be comprehensive and include a minimum of three unique transitional approaches. To best meet the needs of diverse students it is best to utilize no fewer than five different approaches to enable students to be successful in their transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Roybal et al.).

**Middle school transition activities.**

Programs or approaches that middle schools could adopt and use on their campuses include one-time informational assemblies or meetings, planning sessions between middle school and high school teachers, student shadowing programs, high school orientation nights, mentor programs with high school students, vertical articulation between teachers, and Linked Learning.

One-time informational meetings provide students with a variety of information to help them adjust to their new school. High school open houses or back-to-school activities typically take place a few days before school or early in the new school year (Libbey, 2004; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). Open House serves as an opportunity for students and their parents to meet teachers, visit classrooms, and receive their schedule (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). This also provides an opportunity for ninth graders to ask questions and make sure they are comfortable with the transition.

Another type of open house activity typically happens during the springtime of students' eighth-grade year and allows students and parents to visit the school for the first time. Students can investigate elective programs, tour the campus, and learn about special programs offered by the school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock et al., 2015). This activity is often scheduled around registration to allow students to ask specific questions before they register for high school courses. Middle school students want to know what high school is going to be like. Their parents want to learn about high school programs and procedures (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). These meetings could take place in middle school classrooms as well. Administrators, teachers, and students often run these meetings and cover topics like school policies, schedules, activities, clubs, course offerings, and campus tours (Akos & Galassi, 2004; J. S. Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008). Providing students and parents with answers to these questions should be a central

component of a high school transition program. Parents need to understand and be actively involved in the process and decision-making regarding their eighth-grade student. Campus tours provided by upperclassman provide a link to new students and give them a connection to someone at school (Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). On these tours, students are shown locations like the cafeteria, locker room, office, classrooms, and student commons.

Another effective practice is to have upperclassman from high school visit classrooms at the middle school and talk about their experiences in high school, answering any questions that incoming students might have. This provides an opportunity to dispel common myths and fears about high school, including a fear of older students that might "bully freshmen" or seniors "standing around laughing at them." It allows eighth graders to hear from other students instead of teachers. This is also a suitable venue for upperclassmen to share stories about their first few months of school (Ellerbrock et al., 2015). Upperclassman might tell stories that the school did not seem as large as they anticipated, they did not get lost on campus, or that they had positive experiences choosing electives and joining extracurricular activities. Eighth graders value input from older students because they know upperclassmen have already experienced the transition they are just beginning. These activities help incoming students develop an overall understanding of high school and processes involved within their high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Ellerbrock et al., 2015).

### **Vertical articulation between middle school and high school.**

Vertical articulation is a term used for planning sessions between middle school and high school administrators, counselors, and teachers (Forbes, 2011). It has shown to be a very valuable link to the success of students transitioning to high school. Schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided

students few articulation activities (Forbes, 2011; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). It is important that both eighth grade and ninth-grade teachers are in agreement with academic, social, and organizational school issues (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Having open communication between the middle school and high school allows open dialogue regarding high school expectations. School personnel learn about each other's curriculum and requirements. These activities create a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at both levels and inform middle school teachers how best to prepare their students for high school. High school settings typically have increased expectations and increased rigor in the classrooms as compared to students' middle school settings (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Libbey, 2004). Any work that can be done to close the achievement and expectation gap between eighth and ninth grade will help student transitions into high school.

Establishing a Linked Learning pathway is one of the more popular movements in education and many districts begin the process in middle school and continue it through high school and even college (Hunt, Lockwood-Cooke, & Kelley, 2010). These pathways are an approach that integrates rigorous academics with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track (Forbes, 2011). When a Linked Learning pathway begins at the middle school level, students are part of a cohort and are supported throughout their years in middle and high school (Hunt et al., 2010). When students enter high school, they are connected to their pathway, developing a sense of connection to others and belonging to their school (Kopp & Crichton, 2007; D. Smith & Garteig, 2003).

### **Parental involvement.**

Parent involvement is another key factor in the success of a student's transition from middle school to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Roybal et al., 2014). Schools and

teachers who reach out to parents and encourage participation tend to have decreased dropout rates and increased positive adjustment to high school campuses (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Input from students and parents at both levels are encouraged to support the needs of transitioning students. This allows the activities to be created with the contribution of the two schools, parents, and students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Parents have a significant impact on their child's success in school, even though the student's perception of needing their parents is limited because of the self-centered status of teenagers (Al-Alwan, 2014; Chen & Gregory, 2009; Crosnoe, 2009).

A primary reason parental involvement with schools is so important for at-risk children is that their home and school life often differ (Benson & Martin, 2003; Cote, Jones, Sparks, & Aldridge, 2012). Parents should be actively involved in the course selection process and work to understand the implications of these decisions (Benson & Martin, 2003). Student course selection can have long-term effects on student success rates as well as their path toward college or career (Al-Alwan, 2014; Cote et al., 2012). Parents who are involved in the transition process tend to remain involved as their student completes high school (Crosnoe, 2009; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). While parental involvement with their child's education tends to decrease once students reach high school, school districts need to inform parents about the transition activities offered and encourage them to participate (Borup, Stevens, & Waters, 2015). According to Benson and Martin (2003) the more parents are involved and understand their child's school, the more confidence they will have in the school (Crosnoe, 2009). They did observations on six very successful schools in Buffalo Public Schools over a seven-year period where staff designed strategies and consistently drew high numbers of parents to school. It was not unusual for a 1,000-student school to attract 350 or more visitors than other schools with proportionate

numbers. Schools with high socio-economic status reported that "most or all" parents attended school open house. This number is dramatically different for a school with a high-poverty concentration where only 28% of parents attend open houses (Benson & Martin).

Transitioning to high school poses challenges for students moving from eighth grade to ninth grade. The strategies, programs, and opportunities reviewed here reveal-promising practices that help students with their transition experiences. Implementing a variety of these strategies between the last semester of a student's eighth-grade year and the beginning of their ninth-grade year helps support students with a smoother transition (Fowler, 1986). While looking at support strategies for ninth graders, this review now turns to programs that support and increase student connectedness to their high school during their freshmen year and throughout their high school career.

### **Student Connectedness**

School connectedness refers to an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (Blum, 2005; Libbey, 2004). By their high school years, as many as 40 to 60 percent of all students—urban, suburban, and rural—are chronically disengaged from school (Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004). School bonding, school climate, teacher support, and student engagement are factors that contribute to the level of connectedness that students feel toward their school (Akos et al., 2004; Johnson, Simon, & Mun, 2014; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Although connecting students to school is important at all grade levels, it is especially crucial during adolescent years (Al-Alwan, 2014; Blum, 2005; Catterall, 1998). Students feeling connected to school helps with graduation success and enables them to fit into high school (Blum, 2005). This connectedness is important to counteract lack of interest.



Students can make a variety of connections to their campus and school when beginning their high school career. Possible links include clubs, activities, sports, and peer support groups (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015). Students who are connected feel like they are part of the school community. Research has shown that when students are academically on track for graduation and have made a connection to the school, their chances of graduating increases dramatically (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ross, 2016; Wagner et al., 2006).

Students who are disconnected or are not being successful in school need to find a way to become connected. A variety of approaches can be taken to create opportunities to connect and engage students on their school site. Students can become involved with peer support groups, small learning communities, or other school-created structures to help them become involved. This portion of the literature review discusses students' connectedness to their school campus, including factors that foster and increase student connectedness.

### **Peer mentoring programs.**

Similar to the many programs mentioned already in this review, a cross-age peer mentoring program is another increasingly popular choice for educators and youth development professionals hoping to create positive outcomes for youth (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). Peer mentoring refers to programs where an older youth (mentor) is matched with a younger student (mentee) for the purpose of guiding and supporting the mentee in many areas of academic, social and emotional development (Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015). Peer mentoring can be done one-on-one, in small groups consisting of one mentor up to ten mentees, or in larger groups such as one mentor to forty mentees.

Peer mentoring programs can positively impact a student's connectedness to school. They can improve student social skills, self-esteem, and academic achievement (Karcher, 2009). Both

mentors and mentees benefit from participation in the programs (Johnson et al., 2014; Roybal et al., 2014). Peer mentoring can produce a range of positive outcomes for both the older peer mentor and the younger mentee. For the mentees, these programs have shown a positive impact on student connectedness to the school and peers, improved grades, social behaviors with peers, attitudes toward school, feelings of competency, and self-efficacy (Karcher, 2009; Papay et al., 2015). The mentees respond well to the personal attention they receive from their mentors, which may lead to mentees working harder in their classes because they want to impress their mentor (Papay et al., 2015). For the mentors, there have been reported improvements in connectedness to their school, self-esteem, empathy and moral reasoning, communication, and conflict resolution skills (Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Roybal et al., 2014).

During the 2005-2006 school year a group of 268 ninth-grade students (135 young men and 133 young women) from a low-income Mid-Atlantic, urban high school were selected to be part of a study focusing on peer mentoring. This study was ranked by the Brookings Institute as one of the top 100 most economically depressed localities in the United States. The study, conducted by Johnson et al. (2014), was trying to determine if students in the peer-mentoring group were more likely to graduate from high school on time compared to students who did not participate. In examining the graduation outcome measure for male students, the researchers found that young men who exhibited a low propensity to graduate but became part of the peer group program, had a better chance of graduating (60%), compared with their control group counterparts (30%).

The females in both study groups in the Johnson report graduated with the same percentage (72%). Therefore the study focused on the results of males because of the large difference in the student's graduation success. Overall, the study results demonstrate that

graduation rates among male students improved when they participated in the peer-led program.

By intervening early in high school with a high-dosage, multifaceted program, the probability of a high school diploma increased the most by students who needed it the most (Johnson et al., 2014). This study showed a greater benefit for males than females who participated in peer mentoring programs. History has shown that male students tend to drop out of school and do not connect with school as much as females.

With the importance of establishing relationships, mentors and mentees need to understand the program and their roles and responsibilities entirely, and they need to have supportive teachers and adults available to help when questions arise. Mentors may not have the life experience or understand the challenges their mentees may be facing on a daily basis. Providing strong training for the mentors and mentees will greatly benefit students as they work together. High school mentors can be very influential figures in the life of a mentee. The behavior of these mentors could have either a negative or positive influence on the mentees, depending on their specific actions.

While peer mentoring and support programs have shown positive results, there are risks. These include mentors and mentees not fully understanding their roles, peers as negative role models, and inconsistent or poor quality peer relationships (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). The impact of a mentor can be potentially positive or negative for the mentee, so mentors must understand the significance and impact of their work with mentees. If mentors do not show up to meetings, treat the mentees poorly, or show little respect toward their mentee, mentees may feel rejected, causing them to disconnect from school (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007; Garringer & MacRae, 2008). In other words, a poor mentoring relationship can have more harm than good.

One of the ways to increase the quality of a mentoring program is to choose the right combination of mentor and mentee. The selection process for peer mentoring programs has a significant impact on the success of the program (Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Lindstrom et al., 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). Volunteers should go through a screening and selection process, an initial training program, and then receive continuing education to ensure they will be successful in their role. The program needs to be integrated into the school day, have a set duration, and the stakeholders need to go through similar training as the mentors (Johnson et al., 2014). The last piece is having a solid curriculum, regular supervision, and support for the peers (Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Johnson et al., 2014).

One of the benefits of a peer mentorship program is the ongoing supply of new potential mentors from which to draw for the next year's class of students, creating a system where former mentees become prospective mentors and allowing it to continue a cycle of support for years to come. The need to establish selection criteria for student mentors is critical if they are to have positive interactions with the mentees. Once mentors are selected, the training process for mentors should be accomplished through a variety of activities and approaches (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). The amount of time needed to train mentors will vary, and there is no ideal number of days or particular length of time for the training mentioned in the literature that is ideal for most situations. On-going training should be provided to students throughout the school year. The mentors can use these training opportunities to further develop their skills and to receive support to meet the needs of their mentees. Meetings with stakeholders (administration, teachers, students, and parents) should occur on a regular basis to troubleshoot obstacles, provide support and ensure long-term growth (Johnson et al., 2014; Roybal et al., 2014).

The curriculum for peer-mentoring programs could be designed around three fundamentals: attachment, achievement, and awareness (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). These three areas are essential for supporting students in transition. Attachment activities focus on getting students connected. Involvement could focus on participation in clubs, activities, or athletics. Supporting student achievement emphasizes the importance of study skills, test-taking skills, time management, reading strategies, and note-taking skills. A focus on awareness helps students build positive self-perceptions and make healthy life decisions (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007; Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Roybal et al., 2014). A critical factor in the support of student mentors is to provide them with curriculum, as well as ongoing support in their role. Teachers and administrators can support these students throughout the year by monitoring the peer support groups' success in helping students' transition to ninth grade.

Link Crew is another peer-mentoring transition program that welcomes freshmen and makes them feel comfortable throughout the first year of their high school experience. Built on the belief that students can help students succeed, Link Crew is a transition program that trains mentors from the junior and senior classes to be Link Crew Leaders. As positive role models, Link Crew leaders are mentors and student leaders who guide the freshmen to discover what it takes to be successful during the transition to high school and help facilitate freshman success (Boomerang, 2011).

### **Small learning communities.**

The size of the student body can be a challenge for increasing student connectedness. Research has shown that many ninth-graders fail because they can easily get lost in large secondary school settings (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). One approach to supporting students during this change is through the use of Small Learning Communities (Felner,

Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007). Small Learning Communities (SLCs) are a way to organize high schools into smaller more personal units. The most common SLC includes an interdisciplinary team of teachers who share a few hundred or smaller group of students in common during the instructional day (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). Other possible types of SLCs include physical formats which include centers, wings, and houses, set up to physically separate freshman from upperclassman. These arrangements help ease the transition to high school and increase the number of successful ninth-grade students (Barber & Olsen, 2004; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). Creating SLCs can allow ninth-grade students to become better acquainted with the rigors of a high school curriculum and support them through the transition.

The teacher selection process can vary between different models of SLCs. One of the more traditional models of teacher selection is creating teams of four content teachers and one physical education teacher (Roybal et al., 2014). These groups of teachers might have a common prep to discuss student issues, plan for academic areas of need, provide teacher support, offer student tutorials, and discuss how to involve students in school activities. Having a small community of shared teachers allows students to form closer relationships with their teachers and receive more personalized attention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Roybal et al., 2014).

A benefit of SCLs for teachers is the opportunity to work with a smaller, shared group of students. SLCs empower teachers and encourage their active and continued participation in the development, implementation, and improvement of student learning. Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis (2007) studied a pilot SLC program that took place in a Midwestern school. From the 197 first-year freshmen enrolled in Algebra I, fifty were randomly selected to

participate in the SLC. Students in the community had all of their classes with members of the cohort and shared four content area teachers and one physical education teacher. The balance of ninth-grade students served as a comparison group. The results indicated that students in SLCs were significantly less bored in classes, believed their teachers were fair, and felt that teachers treated them respectfully. Students discussed the importance of having the opportunity to get to know their teachers:

I think it has helped me a lot, because we got to know our teachers better than most other students did, and we got a relationship with them, so we wouldn't want to miss school—we'd want to come to school, because we knew that our teachers cared about us and they expected more from us, and that made it more, like, you wanna get up, you wanna go, because you wanna see your teachers. (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007, p. 17)

With teacher teams able to collectively focus on a smaller group of students and their needs, they can better support student achievement and increase the students' sense of supporting discipline. One teacher in the Patterson et al. (2007) study described the change she experienced in these terms:

My normal way of starting out the year was to get trouble-makers out of the classroom—throw them out, get it over and done with—but I didn't do that with Freshman Academy kids because we were working together and we were close. I'm not saying that we don't have problems ever. I think there's much more [of] an attitude of "help each one," rather than in big groups, you know. After the Academy, I think more like, if there's a problem, solve it with this individual. (p. 20)

This provides an example of how a teacher changed her mindset and approach with her students. Students identified a feeling of support by teachers as a key factor in connecting to their new campus (Blum, 2005; Patterson et al., 2007). This teacher was helping her students with their transition.

Research has shown that many SLCs are successful in improving key indicators of student success: attendance, behavior, morale, and parent connectedness (Felner et al., 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Students in this study shared they had a stable group of classmates that acted as a support network and allowed them to make better connections with their teachers (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). When the students were in SLCs the schools created additional activities that included recognition programs for students, additional interventions from outside groups (e.g., drug and alcohol awareness programs), transition meetings with eighth graders, and academic study halls (Blum, 2005; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). A reported disadvantage of SLCs was the feeling of two freshman years, each with transition challenges. Students participated in their SLC as freshmen and then when they entered tenth grade, they went through some of the same transition experiences as a beginning ninth grader (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Another complaint from students was the lack of ability to meet students because they spent the whole day within their SLC (Roybal et al., 2014). Finally, staff buy-in both initially and over time plays a significant role in the success of the program; the lack of staff buy-in will present challenges that could slow down the initiative (Felner et al., 2007). These reported disadvantages are outweighed by the benefits of SLCs, causing researchers to recommend implementing them in large schools (Roybal et al., 2014).



**Student participation.**

Student participation in school and classroom activities is an important element of a school's climate as students connect with their new campus (Akos et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Some strategies identified as potentially effective incentive programs for students' connectedness could include school transition plans, celebrations of student successes, incentive programs for attendance, grades, citizenship, activities, sports, and clubs (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cramer & Bennett, 2015; Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Johnson et al., 2014; Libbey, 2004).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture that are needed for all students to achieve social, emotional and academic success (Cramer & Bennett, 2015; Freeman et al., 2015). PBIS approaches involve activities that can include incentives and recognition programs to encourage regular attendance at school. Award ceremonies are focused on students who achieved a milestone set by the school. Examples include rewarding students for exceeding 90 percent attendance and recognizing student academic achievement by grade point average (Blum, 2005; Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Libbey, 2004).

Another type of activity supported by PBIS is a chance to provide support focused on social development for incoming students. Activities could include a BBQ during lunch, tail-gating event at a football game, club rush, rallies, and dances; these are all examples of activities geared toward helping students connect to their new campus. These activities give students the opportunity to get to know others and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Fischer & Theis, 2014; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Extracurricular activities are another way to help students become connected to school. Examples of these types of activities include sports, drama, student council, clubs, and music.

Students making connections with other students in these activities give them a sense of belonging to a group and lowers the anxiety of transitioning to a new campus (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Extracurricular participation affects motivation and school attachment by providing more opportunities to learn and develop competencies, as well as to connect with other high school students (Fischer & Theis, 2014). Extracurricular participation at school can protect against declines in student motivation. If a student stays motivated and connected with a group or club their chances of failing decreases (Fischer & Theis, 2014). Students who have a connection to campus through extracurricular activities have higher grades and sense of belonging because of the connection with students, school, and community (Fischer & Theis, 2014).

The ideas around student connectedness offer many potential ways to support students' transition to high school and provide opportunities for a student to feel like they are part of their new campus. Peer support programs, small learning communities, and student participation are all a part of how students get connected to their new school. The last area discussed in this review is academic support strategies for students. Academic support classes are an important part of a student's success in transitioning to high school, as well as the type of courses and programs available to students.

### **Academic Support**

Some students need academic support to ensure success during their high school experience. Many students enter high school on grade level, but some of their classmates are academically several grades behind and will require additional support to be successful. One approach to helping students academically is to provide an academic skills class (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015; Shoffner & Williamson, 2015). A variety of programs designed to meet the educational needs of students can be implemented to help the transition process. Students need to

feel teachers are involved with them and that adults in school know and care about their learning (Klem & Connell, 2004). Some effective programs that focus on academics include summer programs, tutoring, assistance for students with homework (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009), and freshmen seminar/support classes (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Jordan, 2012; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014; Vera et al., 2016).

Not only do transition programs help students navigate their new experiences, but they also help with high school retention. Recent literature on dropout prevention emphasizes the importance of academic support for freshmen and how successful programs improve the reduction of freshmen dropout (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Vera et al., 2016). The next portion of the review focuses on programs which have had an impact on improving student success rates in their transition to high school (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Jenkins & Demaray, 2015).

### **Summer programs.**

Incoming ninth-grade students participate in programs such as *Summer Bridge* and *Jump Start*; these are examples of programs implemented in counties and cities across the United States. They provide incoming ninth-grade students with summer activities that offer academic support, advancement, and motivation to excel in high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Cooper et al., 2000; Vera et al., 2016). Although many of these programs have not been extensively evaluated for their efficacy, providing general summer courses as a mechanism to prevent dropout has been a successful strategy for lowering course failures and dropout rates (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Vera et al., 2016).

In a 2000 monograph, Cooper, Charton, Valentine, and Muhlenbruck conducted a meta-analysis of summer school programs, which included Summer Bridge. They found that overall,

summer school programs improve student performance on academic achievement in that the average child who attends a summer school program will outperform between 55% and 60% of comparable students who did not participate in the program. Although these meta-analytic results are important to understand the potential impact of summer school programs, they are not necessarily accurate enough to speak to the direct effects of ninth-grade Summer Bridge programs, nor do they reveal the process by which Summer Bridge programs may yield positive outcomes.

Students in the study described above reported that their experience during the summer was more enjoyable than during the regular school year (Cooper et al., 2000; Vera et al., 2016). They appreciated the exposure to new content, increased attention from teachers, and an improved classroom climate that helped in the mastery of materials (Vera et al., 2016). Students in the study also needed to show significant growth from the summer program before they were allowed to enter high school. For students in one study, this requirement added a lot of pressure for those who were trying to move on to high school (Cooper et al., 2000; Vera et al., 2016).

Another option during the summer is to provide students with a four-week course that focuses on academic content area, such as math or language arts. While students who participate typically experience learning gains, there is little rigorous evidence evaluating the effects of the programs on math achievement or readiness for reading (Snipes, Huang, Jaquet, & Finkelstein, 2015). The positive news is that during these courses the students get a feel for the school, use lockers, and experience sample high school lessons before the actual school year starts (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

**Tutoring.**

There are multiple forms of tutoring that exist in education, but two categories show up in multiple sources as supportive of the eighth- to ninth-grade transition. Peer tutoring (not to be confused with peer support) and teacher tutoring are the two sets of supports that will be discussed in this review. Peer tutoring is the process whereby a student, with guidance from a teacher, helps one or more other students learn a skill or concept (Ayvazo & Aljadeff-Abergel, 2014; Jordan, 2012; McKinstery & Topping, 2003; Walker, 2007).

Although peer tutoring encompasses a varied range of classroom organizational typographies, this review will focus on the two aspects of peer tutoring that frequently appeared in the literature. The first type is when the tutor and tutee pair together to become reading partners or support for a math class (Duran, 2010; Katz & Albacete, 2013). The tutor supports the learning needs of the tutee by reading with them and modeling appropriate reading strategies or providing needed assistance when working on difficult math problems (Duran, 2010; Walker, 2007). Research over two decades has confirmed the effectiveness of peer tutoring for improving learning outcomes (reading progress) for students of all ages (Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Jordan, 2012; McKinstery & Topping, 2003). Another example is when students help physically challenged students in PE classes by providing them assistance and one-to-one modeling (Ayvazo & Aljadeff-Abergel, 2014). The tutors also build their knowledge by tutoring someone in their favorite subject (Jordan, 2012).

Teacher tutoring is the other option available to support students' learning process. Teachers can be available during lunchtime, after school, or have a Saturday option (Wagner et al., 2006). Tutor availability is emphasized, and freshmen are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this additional academic support (Vera et al., 2016). Some studies report that

offering snacks, providing transportation, and in some cases child care, can help remove barriers and increase student participation because students may not understand the importance of tutoring and schools want to remove any barriers from the students who attend (Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Vera et al., 2016).

#### **Academic seminar/support classes.**

High schools throughout the country report that students are missing the academic skills needed to be successful in high school (Roybal et al., 2014). To counter the lack of academic skills for incoming freshmen, high schools have sometimes created academic seminars or academic support classes (Austin, 2006; Simpson, 2014). For the purpose of this review, “academic seminar” will be referenced to discuss this strategy. In academic seminars, students are taught essential high school survival skills such as time management, decision-making, study skills, test-taking strategies, social tolerance, computer research, and career alignment (Austin, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal et al., 2014). These classes have been designed to be yearlong or semester-long courses. The needs of the student determine the length of the course.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID; [www.avid.org](http://www.avid.org)) is a popular form of academic seminar that emphasizes rigor while balancing it with support (Watt, Butcher, & Ramirez, 2013). Students are trained with a curriculum that teaches them strategies to help classmates with tutoring that supports students in their most rigorous classes. Students in AVID typically take the course all four years of high school and in some cases they even take the course starting in middle school. AVID strategies have been shown to increase the chances of student eligibility to attend college (Watt et al., 2013).

The Talent Development High School model is a high-recognized comprehensive reform initiative designed to help transform the structure and curriculum of large high schools in urban districts (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Neild, 2009). The model was initiated in 1994 in five large, nonselective, comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia where many students faced significant challenges, including poverty. The study ended in the 2003-2004 school year. One of the five areas of study from the report was centered on supports and incentives for students to attend school regularly and achieve academically.

Using the Talent model, specialized catch-up courses were implemented at the five Philadelphia high schools. “Transition to Advanced Mathematics” and “Strategic Reading” were examples of courses to help students below grade level during their first semester of high school. Both of these courses were designed to enhance the skills of incoming freshmen and enable them to succeed in traditional ninth-grade algebra and English (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The Talent Development model produced substantial gains in academic course credits earned. For a typical class of 500 students entering ninth grade, Talent Development helped an additional 125 students pass algebra and helped another 40 students be promoted to tenth grade on time (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The substantial improvements in credits earned and promotion rates were sustained as first-time ninth graders moved through high school.

Some of the reported challenges by students at the Talent Development schools were the requirements to double block courses. This resulted in students’ inability to take electives (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Roybal et al., 2014). On the positive side, academic seminar courses equipped students with skills that had increased student success rates (Simpson, 2014). Students at Talent Development schools gained the relevant skills needed to succeed in order to graduate from high school. The academic skills classes provided students with the knowledge and

understanding they needed to be successful and competent in the core subject area (Austin, 2006; Roybal et al., 2014).

In addition to the programs and activities cited above, there are numerous other opportunities in which freshmen can participate, depending on their school. Some schools offer reading intervention programs such as *Read Right*, *Read 180* or *Jostens* to get students caught up to grade level reading. Some schools offer a variety of math intervention programs to help build basic foundational math skills. These programs include *I CAN*, *Envision MATH*, *DreamBox Learning*, and *Do The Math*. Goals from the math classes are to support their current math class with re-teaching, foundational support, or homework help. Another approach is to build advisory groups that are created when students start to show they are not meeting academic benchmarks their freshmen year. These students are either given after-school tutorial help or credit recovery options to make up missing assignments.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review covered three key areas that affect student transition to high school: types of transitions, student connectedness, and academic support. Each one of these factors has the potential to play a role in students' successful transition to high school. All of the strategies mentioned are examples with the potential to help students succeed. These three areas all connect to each other and provide some type of support for students. Each middle school student will have a different need when they make their switch to high school, and a variety of these strategies at any given school will help students make their transition. Not every one of these factors is needed for a student to be successful in the transition, but these are all influences available to schools when developing a plan for student success and ultimate graduation from



high school. In addition, success at the high school level also contributes to college and career readiness.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The rigor of Common Core State Standards and the changing demands of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce have increased the challenge of preparing students to be college- and career-ready when they graduate from high school. It has also created the need to provide students with a variety of opportunities in order to gain the knowledge and skills they need to meet this challenge. Currently, there are many possibilities available for students to gain the experiences they need in order to transition successfully. It is essential to student success that they make a smooth transition to high school and stay through graduation (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore transition strategies students identify as factors that supported their success when transitioning from middle school to high school. Through personal student interviews of seven tenth-grade students and an analysis of site-based records for these students, I investigated the school-based factors that students identified as helping them succeed. As a guide, one main research question and three sub-questions helped facilitate the research in this study:

What school-based strategies do students self-report as contributing to their successful transition to high school?

- a. What school-based events and activities do students report most prepared them for their transition to high school?
- b. What school-based factors do students report most contributed to their academic success?
- c. How do students characterize their connections to school faculty/staff?

The student interviews provided an opportunity to learn about students' experiences during their high school transition times. The interviews were semi-structured conversations with

the purpose of gathering student perceptions of what made their transition to high school successful. Open-ended questions were asked during the interview and as a result the interviews allowed flexibility to ask follow-up questions aimed at clarifying or investigating specific aspects of the students responses (Creswell, 2013).

### **Setting**

The high school, referred to as Dawn High School (pseudonym) in this study, is located in a small agricultural-based town in the central valley region of California. The student population for this study includes students who attend a comprehensive public high school of approximately 2000 students; the sophomore class has approximately 550 students. Dawn High School is comprised of approximately 92% Hispanic students, 6% White, and the other 2% include Black, Native Americans, Asian, and Filipino. 97% of the student population at Dawn High School is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 17% of the student population are identified as English language learners. Currently 49% of the students graduating from the high school meet UC/CSU a-g admission requirements. The district graduation rate for Dawn High School is 94.49% compared to the state average of 81%. The district serves approximately 6500 students and is composed of six elementary schools, one junior high school, one comprehensive high school and one alternative high school. During the 2016-17 school year, the district provided 100% free and reduced lunch.

Students at DHS have a reputation in the community for being polite students. When we attend functions in town, are at events or performances, or are on school trips, we are always told how polite and courteous our students are. In their families, many of the students at DHS are second and third generation students. I was a second-generation DHS student when I attended

the high school. The community supports the high school and it is a true family tradition to attend.

The community, however, has changed over the last 20 years. In that time, the high school has doubled in size and the city has doubled as well. Many of those families arrived from out of the area and settled here to make this their home. There is a small transient portion of the population that moves in and out throughout the school year because they are following agriculture work up and down the state. Some of these families share houses with other families to split the cost of rent, and others live in small apartments. The community has a large frozen Mexican food processing plant that employs over 2,500 personnel. A majority of the people working at this company live in the community and their kids attend our schools. This company opened in conjunction with the population spike in the community. The school district is currently second when it comes to employed personnel next to the frozen food processing plant.

Dawn High School has approximately 140 staff members. The administrative team consists of a principal, four assistant principals, a college- and career-coordinator, five counselors, and an athletic director. There are 98 full-time teachers, 12 full-time classified office staff, and four instructional aides. The rest of the staff is made up of custodians, food services, grounds, and maintenance staff. There is a large proportion of teachers and staff who graduated from Dawn High School and returned to work at their alma mater. In addition to me, three assistant principals, one counselor, athletic director, activities director, 15 teachers, and most of the classified staff all graduated from DHS. The majority of the remaining teachers are from local communities and about 15% of the teachers are from outside the area. There is a lot of school pride amongst the staff because of ties to the school. Currently about 40% of the staff live

in the community, 40% have about a 15-minute drive, and the other 20% drive around 40 minutes one way to school each day.

Dawn High School offers a wide variety of courses for students to take during their four years in high school. The students at Dawn have a variety of advanced placement courses they can take during the school year. In addition to general required courses, AP courses available include AP World History, AP European History, AP Statistics, AP Calculus, AP Spanish, AP French, AP English Literature, AP Physics, AP Biology and several other courses. The high school has a strong music program, which includes choir and band programs that compete at a high level in state competitions. There is a strong agricultural program, which also competes at the state level. A strong athletic program has almost 40% of the student body involved during the school year.

Currently, there are approximately 950 students taking at least one Career Technical Education (CTE) course. Approximately 31% of graduating seniors complete a CTE pathway at Dawn High School. Students who take a series of CTE courses can complete a career pathway at DHS. Examples of CTE pathways at Dawn High School include Automotive, Business-Accounting, Construction, Drafting, Early Childhood, Food Services, Performing Arts, Small Engines, Social Services and Welding. Dual enrollment with the local community college is available for many of these courses. In addition, Dawn High School has a Medical Academy and an Engineering/Construction Management Academy. These are two Linked Learning academies, which incorporate rigorous core subjects and real world experiences with job shadowing. Each year approximately 50 students graduate from each academy.

**Participants**

Since the transition from middle to high school is difficult for some students, this study was designed to identify the contributing factors students recognize as transition strategies or supports that helped them complete their freshmen year. I selected seven students from the sophomore class to participate in this research. The study was designed so that these seven students could share their varied freshmen experiences and identify strategies, challenges, and factors that led to their success in their transition to high school.

This study was a qualitative research project with an emphasis on student voice in the identification of successful transition strategies to high school. The students selected attended Dawn High School during their freshmen year and were enrolled the entire school year. I used a random number generator to select 25 students who were currently tenth graders at Dawn High School. I then used site-based records to help me select seven diverse participants from the sophomore class. In order to work with a varied population, I looked specifically for diversity of gender, race, GPA's, and feeder schools.

The random sample provided me with a group of students to begin the selection process. I sorted the 25 students into three categories based on the feeder schools they attended. To try and match the population on campus, I selected one student each from the two K-8 feeder schools and five students from the main feeder school. The majority of students at DHS attended the main feeder school and the entering population represents 80% of the population. Each K-8 feeder school represents 10% of the population entering Dawn High School. The school population is approximately 49% female and 51% male so I tried to balance my female and male population. The participants consisted of four female students and three male students. The last factor in consideration was ethnicity. Six out of the seven students were Hispanic to most closely

match the school population. As much as is possible with the small number of participants, the goal of the selection process was to have a diverse population that mimicked the overall school population of the campus.

A criterion for participation in this study was that participants were willing to engage in dialogue and could answer research questions as adequately as possible. After I selected a diverse group of students, they were then notified and asked if they would be willing to participate in the interview. All seven students who were initially contacted agreed to participate in the study.

### **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative research project with an emphasis on student voice in identification of strategies that helped participant's transition successfully to high school. I was interested in learning about experiences students share in relation to their transition from middle school to high school. This exploratory research provided an opportunity to gain insight into what students identified as helping them most with their transition.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place via a personal interview with each of the seven participants. The interviews were informal and I used open-ended questions that allowed me to ask follow-up questions (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between 18-41 minutes. These interviews took place in my office with the door open, a location agreed upon by the participant and myself. I conducted the personal interviews when school was not in session so that it would not affect the student's time in class. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed so the data could be analyzed and coded.

The interview questions (see Appendix A) were centered on school-based strategies that related to student transition experiences and how these strategies helped lead to their successful transition to high school. I asked some additional follow-up questions when I needed to seek further clarification or understanding about the student's responses. To begin, I asked the participants to tell me a little about themselves. I used this information to create a profile of each student. The rest of the questions were focused around four main topics. The first series was related to student's overall thoughts and experiences during their freshmen year of high school. What were their general feelings about attending high school? The second series of questions helped me discover how well students felt they were prepared when coming to high school. Did they feel like they knew what to expect entering high school and did they participate in the events that prepared them to make the transition? The next series of questions was focused on gaining an understanding of students' perceptions about their academic competence and self-confidence about school. These questions were an attempt to help me understand what classes they succeeded in and struggled with, and to find areas they felt could be improved in regards to academics. The final set of questions was related to faculty and staff and the extent to which students felt a connection to them when making the transition to DHS. These four categories of questions guided me in my interview with the participants about their overall transition and success during their freshmen year in high school.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing the interviews, I organized and analyzed the data. First I transcribed it, and after reading through the transcripts several times, I started analyzing the data. I looked for common themes and patterns between the students as they identified the school-based factors that led to their success.



I analyzed the data by coding it in three steps: initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. Coding was a step-by-step process in which I moved from sorting through the data and forming initial observations to developing and defining specific categories and themes (Creswell, 2013).

To implement initial coding, I read and reviewed all the transcripts and field notes with the objective to identify the ideas and patterns in the response of the participants (Huffman, 2016). The goal of initial coding was to engage the data, which is why it was necessary to read the transcripts a number of times and make notes and headings in the text while reading. I focused on identifying key words or phrases in each interview. While searching for keywords, contradicting or repeating ideas, and main topics, it led me into the process of categorizing.

The goal of focused coding is to develop a number of significant categories or themes, taking responses from each interview that had similar characteristics and grouping them together into categories. Creswell (2013) suggests that beginning researchers start with a lean list of five or six categories with shorthand labels or in vivo codes. In vivo codes are names that are the exact words used by participants (Creswell). After the codes were created, I expanded the categories as I continued to review and re-review my database. I then compared the categories and connections, which helped me create themes from the emerging data. When I started making connections, it was important to identify which of the initial codes deserved their own category and which codes were a subset within a larger category (Creswell, 2013).

The themes or categories formed the basis of the final coding process, called thematic coding. Themes are rich, encompassing ideas that are formed by several codes (Creswell, 2013). The identification of emergent themes and the process of thematic coding involves the analyses of data in an attempt to identify connections between the themes (Creswell, 2013). The goal from

the beginning of thematic coding was to move from a tentative list of 25-30 in vivo codes to five to seven major themes (Creswell). I ended up with five major themes from my data.

### **Research Ethics**

The first step in starting my research was to receive approval from the George Fox University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of the students and staff. Next I received written approval from the school district superintendent (see Appendix B) so that he was aware and supportive of the research being completed in the district. The district superintendent, the director of curriculum, and the assistant superintendent had verbally given their full support to the study. There was a consensus around the school site and district for the continued need to support students during transitional years.

Next I gained student and parent approval (see Appendix C). The parent approval form was in English and translated into Spanish so that parents could read if English was not their first language. To protect the anonymity of students, the research process and protection of the student were outlined and reviewed with each participant and with their parent/guardian before they signed the consent form; signed forms are stored in a secure location. If a student was under age 18, I required the consent of a parent or guardian on the agreement as well. When I selected the students, I made sure they understood the process because it is an important part of the interview process. Once agreed upon, I scheduled the interview date with the student. The research study does not use the names of the students or the real name of the high school they attend. I did not include in the study any information that could be used to identify the student; I used pseudonyms for all individuals involved in this study.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants and reduce risks, I will keep all research materials (i.e. audio recordings, transcripts, artifacts, consent forms) in a locked location for

three years after publication. No one will have access to the information except me. After three years, I will shred all paper material. All other materials, including audio recordings, will be destroyed.

I am aware that conducting this study at my school produces some possible opportunities for biased results. One of the challenges was to set up parameters with the students to create an environment where they could share answers truthfully and not try to please me because I was their principal. In addition, I made every effort to be objective when analyzing the data from my study. I was aware in particular that as a Caucasian, many of the Hispanic students likely had a different experience than I had when I went to high school here. I wanted to hear their story because I knew it was different than my story and I desired to understand their experiences.

The reason I wanted to conduct this study at my campus was to gain insight from my current students so we could continue to refine programs we have now and look for additional strategies, which could potentially improve the success rates for completion of the freshman year. If I did this study at a different high school, the answers participants gave would not apply to the school, population, context, and transition strategies I can influence. As a result, it would not have informed my team and me on how to improve our own students' transitions to high school.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am a graduate student completing a doctoral degree and this research is my final project. I am also a principal in the school district where I collected the data. As a result, I had a vested interest in the research so that I could improve the opportunities for my students to transition successfully, graduate, and be college- and career-ready. I grew up in the community, and I have many connections with students and families. I had a desire to understand the differences and

potential mis-interpretations of what they said in their interviews and connect them to my understanding of the community and school site. The ultimate goal is to provide the best learning environment for students attending Dawn High School. I am aware that my position could have had an influence on what participants said and I tried to take the necessary steps to make sure they felt comfortable and could share honest answers. I informed the students that this was part of my doctoral program, but because I wanted to focus on a positive outcome for the students, their honesty and openness was important for possible future improvements of Dawn High School.

### **Timeline**

The timeline for this research project started with an initial paper during the summer of 2016. My précis was written and approved in early fall and the proposal meeting was held in December 2016. After the proposal was accepted, I gained IRB approval from George Fox University and from my school district superintendent. Shortly after the written approval from the IRB on December 1, 2016 (see Appendix D), I conducted student interviews in December and the first part of January 2017. After interviewing five participants, I started analyzing the data, but to make sure I could accurately answer my research questions, I randomly selected two more students and interviewed them to bring my total to seven participants. After the interviews, I immediately started analysis of the data. Data analysis was completed at the end of January 2017. I revised chapters one through three and began to write chapters four and five in January and February. With the completion of chapters four and five, I submitted my dissertation in March for review by my committee and I prepared to defend my dissertation in April 2017.

### **Potential Contributions to the Field of Education**

Through the process of this qualitative study, I will use what has been learned through my research to discover school-based factors that are related to student's successful transition from their middle school to Dawn High School. At my school we will use the information gained and highlight successful programs, revamp existing programs in need of restructuring, and seek new programs or strategies in areas where students identified needs. As an educator, it is easy to say what we think is the solution to a problem, but to have the opportunity to hear from students and get their full perspective is an entirely different approach. The literature was lacking in student perspectives on middle to high school transitions. As a result, I hope to also add to the literature base on the topic.

The ultimate goal of this research is to increase the numbers of students being successful during their ninth-grade school year at the high school in which I am the principal. When students complete ninth grade on track, it has the potential to decrease the number of students who drop out of school, increase the number of students who graduate, and support more students in meeting their a-g eligibility requirement in California. Successfully transitioning to high school can open many doors for students, and we need to do the best possible job we can to help them succeed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to emphasize student voice in the identification of strategies that helped them transition successfully to high school. I selected seven students from the sophomore class at Dawn High School to participate in this study. I met with each of the students at the beginning of the second term of their tenth-grade year. The interviews took place in the principal's office at Dawn High School. The office is filled with windows open to the front of the school and connects to the secretary's office. The doors to the office remained open and the secretary was in the room next door during the interviews. This setting allowed the interview to be held in a public setting while still offering the participants a level of privacy. The conversations were casual and pleasant, and all students seemed comfortable sharing their experiences that took place between eighth and ninth grade and during their ninth-grade school year.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of each student's educational pathway to their tenth-grade school year. Each profile outlines relevant details from their life before attending Dawn High School. After introducing the seven students, the chapter examines students' experiences along the five thematic categories. These five themes emerged from the data as student-identified factors that led to their success, and were apparent in each of the seven cases for this study. Quotes from the interviews of the students highlight some of the perceptions that result in the student's success.

### **Profiles of Participants in the Study**

The seven students in this study all came from the same high school. The participants had different backgrounds regarding previous educational experiences in junior high. Five of the

participants attended a 7-8 junior high, which is the primary feeder school to Dawn High School. One participant attended a K-8 school from a neighboring district, and another student attended a different K-8 school. These K-8 schools are feeder schools to Dawn High School. The breakdown of participants represents the average number of students coming from each feeder school as they enter Dawn High School. I selected five students from the 7-8 junior high to try and match the 80% of students entering the high school and one student from each of the two other feeder schools. It is the closest representation I could reach with the number of students interviewed. Six of the students were Hispanic and the other student was White. The group of students also represented four females and three male students. The students selected for the interview was the closest match that I could do to represent the breakdown of students entering Dawn High School.

**Student one: Nathaniel**

Nathaniel is a 15-year-old male Hispanic student who was born in Mexico and started attending United States schools in Kindergarten. Nathaniel attended four different elementary schools before attending Ridgeview Junior High (pseudonym), which is the main feeder school to Dawn High School. Nathaniel is the oldest sibling in his family, and he is the first child in his family to attend high school. He has a younger sister who is 12 and a younger brother who is four. Nathaniel's father was in the military, which caused Nathaniel to move a couple of times during his elementary school years. Nathaniel's father is now retired from the military and is currently a supervisor at a local building supply company. Nathaniel's mother takes care of his siblings and picks up small jobs to help out the family. His parents are still married and provide a comfortable living for him and siblings.

Nathaniel participated in the school marching band and also competed in track and field during his freshmen year. When Nathaniel was asked why he joined the band during his freshmen year, he responded with "I looked forward to the competitions because we're putting ourselves out there and we get trophies and stuff" (Nathaniel, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

**Student two: Kyle**

Kyle is a 15-year old white male student who has attended school in the Dawn Unified School District since Kindergarten. He attended Ridgeview Junior High before attending Dawn High. Kyle lives with both of his parents. His father is a manager at a restaurant chain, and his stepmother is a probation officer. Kyle has a 22-year-old half-brother that also graduated from Dawn High School. Kyle participated in the Engineering Academy his freshmen year, but withdrew from the program at the end of his freshmen year. Kyle also participated in baseball during the fall and spring semesters of his freshmen year.

Kyle said that he felt comfortable coming to Dawn High School because of having an older brother attend and knowing a lot of older kids in the community. Here is Kyle's description of growing up:

Cause growing up I knew a lot of people that were older than me, so I knew when I came here that I wasn't gonna get picked on or anything. I knew that I was gonna be able to hang out with them and not have any worries of being the stupid freshman or anything. Just able to hang out with people and don't have to worry about that (Kyle, personal interview, January 19, 2017).



Before he started, Kyle was very excited to get to high school. He was looking forward to all the activities that high school offered and to playing baseball. That is what helped him be so comfortable at high school.

**Student three: Anabel**

Anabel is a 15-year old female Hispanic student who grew up in the Dawn Unified School District. She attended three different elementary schools before attending Ridgeview Junior High. Anabel is the oldest in her family, and she has three siblings. She has a brother who is 10, a sister who is two, and one on the way. Both of her parents are still together, and both parents work to support the family. Her father is a supervisor at a local food production company and her mom works in a fruit-packing house. Her parents are both very supportive of Anabel and encourage her to work hard.

Anabel participated in choir and the Medical Academy during her freshmen year. During our discussion, Anabel mentioned that last year she didn't want to participate in dress-up days, unlike this year. When asked why, she responded, "I was a freshman. You don't want to be noticed a lot. You're just kinda hiding in the corner" (Anabel, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

**Student four: Audrey**

Audrey is a 15-year old female Hispanic student. She attended elementary school in another district until her fourth-grade year and then she transferred and started in the Dawn Unified School District in fifth-grade. She went to Ridgeview Junior High before starting at Dawn High School. Audrey is the oldest sibling in her family. She has an 11-year old brother, four-year-old half-sister, and a two-year-old half-sister. Audrey's parents are divorced, and her mom has remarried. Audrey currently lives with her mother and stepfather. She visits her

biological dad on the weekends. Her mother is currently a teacher at Dawn High School, and her stepdad is a clinical lab scientist at a local medical clinic. Both sets of parents are very supportive of Audrey, and her parents are seen attending her school events.

Audrey participated in choir, a special school project, water polo, and swimming during her freshmen year. Audrey had her mom for a photography class during her freshmen year. She also participated in a special school project that included students from 7-11<sup>th</sup> grade and multiple school districts. This opportunity was in collaboration with a local doctor who set up a special visit to present ideas to a very large Internet search engine. The students selected for this opportunity had to write a paper stating why they should be part of this experience and only a small amount of students were selected. These students practiced their pitches and are currently working with the Internet search engine firm on some local projects. She shared how that experience transformed her freshmen year. She said:

So, when we had all of the exercises that would get me to think, they would just have me participate and meet new people. I think that having a situation like that my freshman year was very, very, very important. And, something that I wouldn't change for anything (Audrey, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

#### **Student five: Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a 16-year-old female Hispanic student. Elizabeth was born in Mexico, and started attending school in the United States in first grade. She attended first through fifth grade in a school district near the Mexico border. Her parents separated in 2011, and then she moved to the Dawn High School area shortly after the divorce with her mom. Her mom remarried in 2013, and she has a younger stepbrother that is nine years old. Elizabeth's mother and stepdad are both currently unemployed. Her stepdad recently lost his job, and her mom is a stay-at-home mom.

Elizabeth attended a K-8 feeder school called Mission Valley (pseudonym) from fifth grade through eighth grade. Elizabeth is a Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (R-FEP) student, and her cumulative GPA is a 1.36 at the end of the first semester of her sophomore year. A student receiving R-FEP status means they were previously an English Language Learner and became reclassified as proficient in English according to a series of tests and writing samples. Elizabeth participated in AVID and wants to attend college after high school. She discussed the challenges of coming from a small K-8 school where she only had 30 students in her class. She said:

I didn't get to see my friends that much and I feel like – I don't know, like my eighth grade teacher told me that we were in a little pond and then going to a bigger pond, like to the ocean; ... she said the high school was like the ocean. And then like in my classes I didn't have anyone to talk to and then like I only spoke to the teacher about my notes and my grades ... That's pretty much it (Elizabeth, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

**Student six: Jessica**

Jessica is a 15-year-old female Hispanic student. Her family moved to the United States nine years ago. She entered the U.S. school system in second grade. Jessica said the move was hard when she was younger, but she was glad they moved when they did. She said it was a little easier to learn the language at a young age. I asked Jessica why they moved to the U.S. and she said: "Well, cause, like, over there, there's a lot of – I don't know how to explain – like, a lot of robbers and stuff are taking over the places and killing people, so we moved" (Jessica, personal interview, January 10, 2017).

Jessica attended elementary schools in the same district as Dawn High School. She then attended Ridgeview Junior High, but the family moved around following available work. Jessica

is currently an English Language Learner (ELL) and now a former migrant student. She lives with both of her parents and her older sister who is 16 years old and also attends Dawn High School as a junior. Both her parents are employed and both are very supportive of her at school and try to provide the essential needs for her to be successful.

Jessica enrolled in the Medical Academy as a freshman because of the prestige of the academy. Many of the students in this academy do well in school, and she wanted those opportunities for herself. I asked Jessica how she felt going to the high school and she said:

A lot of people say that you lose your friends when you come here, and that is true, you don't talk to those friends anymore. And, like, the teachers are stricter, 'cause they expect more from you. And, well, when you're a freshman, they kind of don't like you, 'cause you're a freshman, and they don't really care what you do. And I don't know, just thinking about coming to a bigger school scared me, 'cause it was gonna be harder.

Jessica has stretched herself being in the Medical Academy and at times struggles with academics because of the language barrier.

#### **Student seven: Henry**

Henry is a 15-year-old male Hispanic student who grew up in the Dawn High School community. Henry attended another K-8 feeder school called St. Johns (pseudonym), which feeds into Dawn High School. Henry attended St. Johns starting in Kindergarten until he arrived at Dawn High School. Henry is the oldest of three children, and he has two younger sisters. One is eight, and the other is two. His eight-year-old sister currently attends St. Johns. Both of his parents are still married to each other, and both are currently field workers that move from job to job depending on the fruit season and work needed. His parents are supportive and want him to do well in school.

Henry is an R-FEP student who participated in the Engineering Academy and in track during his freshmen year. During the interview, he said he was very eager and excited to get to the high school. He was looking forward to the high school experience and when I asked him what he was specifically interested in, he said, "meeting new people and I like having different classes, like choosing my own classes" (Henry, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

### **Thematic Overview**

The seven students included in this study shared a variety of stories that examined their transition to high school. Their stories illuminated struggles, successes, and suggestions on ways to improve the transition for future students. Each of the following five themes emerged from the data and will be used to describe the stories of the seven students: (a) informational meetings implemented at the junior high level helped students understand what to expect in high school, (b) student-centered activities facilitated by peers and scheduled for the days preceding the start of school helped students develop early relationships, (c) after-school tutorials were critical in giving students resources for learning, (d) teacher expectations that were clearly communicated to students increased student success, and (e) student relationships with faculty and staff build a bond that enhances student well-being and academic achievement. The goal of this section is to allow the participants' own words to tell the story of their transition and to illustrate the themes that emerged.

#### **Theme One: Informational meetings implemented at the junior high level helped students understand what to expect in high school.**

When hearing students talk about their eighth-grade year and getting ready for high school, the participants mentioned that classroom discussions during their eighth-grade year had the biggest impact on them in preparing for high school. Staff members from the high school

typically go to the feeder schools and present information to students about high school requirements, activities, clubs, and classes. Many of the students shared stories recalling these visits to their classes and said they helped them make important decisions before heading to the high school. Several of the students also shared that their junior high teachers would talk to them all year about going to high school. The students appreciated the small classroom environment over bigger settings that didn't feel as intimate. Elizabeth shared:

My teacher, she used to talk about high school every day; what path they had, and sometimes, the principal, he used to come and talk to us about that too, ... at first, I was excited, but then I got nervous again, Like, they talked about AVID. That's when I got more interested in that program.

During our interview, Elizabeth shared her desire to want to go to college now because of discussions with her teachers and the potential of getting into the AVID program. Those discussions with her teacher helped her choose AVID because she was excited about the opportunity to go away to college and she realized AVID could help her meet that goal.

Anabel had a similar story when she described why she choose one of the academies after having a high school teacher talk to her class. During the teacher's presentation about the possibilities at Dawn High, Anabel said, "For me, it was MED Academy because that was always an option for me due to my grandma and her experience at the hospital... So, I thought that – I found that really interesting." Anabel spent a lot of time visiting her grandmother in the hospital and really appreciated the service the hospital provided. When she heard about the MED Academy, she wanted to join the academy to learn more and one day in the future help our people as well.

Jessica was very similar to Anabel when she heard the teacher discuss different options at the high school. Jessica shared, "Well, I really liked what they told us about the MED Academy, ... I wanna be a veterinarian when I grow up – I thought it was gonna be pretty cool to go in the academy, instead of taking Agriculture classes." Jessica had to make a decision between the MED Academy and possibly taking classes in the Agriculture department. She wanted to hear and learn about all the potential avenues available in the medical field.

Kyle too looked forward to high school and recalled hearing stories about high school from his older brother. When I asked Kyle if he could recall any specific meetings at Ridgeview Junior High that helped with his transition to Dawn High School, he said he remembered a counselor coming to his class and giving advice and suggestions about high school. Kyle said, "The counselor just talked about the school. The first time he came he just talked about all the regular guidelines that we're gonna have to follow and how similar they are and how we shouldn't be worried about a big transition from middle school to high school." When I asked him if that made him feel more comfortable, Kyle said, "Yeah, definitely. Cause I knew it wasn't gonna be that big of a transition. I was just basically moving schools and being with kids that are older than me." The in-class discussion helped him mentally prepare for high school.

Henry shared a different story about his eighth-grade experience. He came from one of the K-8 feeder schools, and one of his biggest fears was going from a class of 30 students to almost 600 students in the freshmen class at Dawn High School. He shared the activity that helped prepare him for high school. It was the college- and career-expo held at Ridgeview Junior High. He said, "It was fun and more interesting to see all the other people instead of just your 30 classmates, but instead you get to see all these other kids from other schools." When I asked him

how this helped with his transition, Henry replied "Yeah, cause like we got to talk to other students."

Audrey and Nathaniel had similar experiences in eighth grade and didn't recall too much information from big events or discussions in class. Nathaniel shared that there were too many people at the Expo and the music was too loud. He felt that he couldn't understand what the groups were talking about and so nothing stood out to him. Nathaniel didn't sign up for an Academy but was impressed when the band played at the expo. He mentioned that helped in his decision to want to join the band. Audrey was similar to Nathaniel and didn't join an academy or AVID, and she admitted "I wasn't necessarily worried at the end of my eighth-grade year. I was like, "I got this in the bag.' And then I realized ... that I did not necessarily have it." Audrey said she didn't pay much attention to the classroom discussion by teachers or the expo. She felt like she already knew everything she needed to know. Part of that is because her mother is a teacher at Dawn High School. Audrey admitted that having her mom there made her pay less attention because she could just ask her mom if needed. Both Audrey and Nathaniel connected at the high school, but not in academies or any other areas that were promoted at the Expo or in the classroom. They both participated in sports, and that could have possibly changed their thought process.

**Theme Two: Student-centered activities facilitated by peers and scheduled for the days preceding the start of school helped students develop early relationships.**

Many of the students discussed being nervous or scared to start high school. Their biggest concerns were not being prepared to walk around campus, find their classrooms, and wondering how they would fit in on such a big campus. The students shared their fears, and possible transition strategies they wished we had available to them before starting high school.



Elizabeth remembered the day before high school very vividly. "I was so nervous that day. I didn't want to come. Like, I was begging my mom to put me back to the other school that I used to go." Elizabeth was nervous because she was coming from a much smaller school and didn't know many students at the high school. I asked her what would have helped in the transition; she mentioned activities to "help us get to know each other before the first day of school." She went on to say that before the first day of school, she was, "so nervous ... what if I don't get to my classes early, or I don't know anyone." The concern about where to go and wondering if she would know anybody was the same concerns Audrey, Nathaniel, Kyle, and Jessica each shared.

Audrey shared her story of the night before school started and how nervous she was about not knowing enough people at school:

I was looking forward to it, definitely, but the night before my first day of high school I was up all night, freaking out. Wondering who I was gonna be in classes with, who my teachers were gonna be, and although I was looking forward to it a little bit, I was definitely more afraid that things wouldn't go as planned. Cause I planned everything out in my head.

Leading up to high school, Audrey felt she had it all figured out and knew everything that was going to happen. She shared an experience from her freshmen year that she wished she had experienced earlier because it might have helped with her transition to high school. Audrey was selected to participate in a special school event where freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were selected from Dawn High School, a neighboring high school, and a couple seventh and eighth graders from one of our feeder schools. This group was going on a special trip to visit a prominent technology-based company in Silicon Valley. She shared that the most beneficial part

of being selected by this group was the team building activities they performed together. Audrey described her experience:

I wouldn't necessarily say I'm socially awkward but social situations are definitely an issue for me. So, when we had all of the exercises that would get me to talk, they would just have me participate and meet new people. I think that having a situation like that my freshman year was very, very, very important. And, something that I wouldn't change for anything.

I asked Audrey how often students should have that opportunity and she said around once a semester would be great. This would provide opportunities for students to meet new people that could become lifelong friends.

Nathaniel was not as worried about having friends as Audrey, but he was more apprehensive about being able to find his way around campus. Nathaniel said he was a little nervous about attending high school because he was afraid of not being able to locate his classes and how the schedule changed on a daily basis. The schedule at Dawn High School rotated a couple times a week. The schedule on Monday, Thursday, and Friday was the same, but Tuesday was a block schedule with students getting out for early release and Wednesday was a full day on block schedule. I asked him if he was afraid of walking into the wrong class and he said he was. I asked him if he ever walked into the wrong class. He chuckled and said "yes." I reassured him that he wasn't the first and would not be the last.

Kyle shared that he felt pretty comfortable going to school the first couple of days of high school because he was able to talk to other players from the baseball team. He knew a lot of baseball players, so he asked them questions before school started about the little things he didn't know yet. These conversations helped him navigate the campus and his classes. Kyle mentioned,

"I was a little lost – I didn't know where to go and stuff, so that's where the people that were older than me came in and showed me where to go and all that." Kyle also mentioned that he thought it would be good to have a day or two before school started for incoming freshmen to meet and get to know each other. I asked him why he thought that and he said, "That would make freshmen feel more welcome here at DHS coming into the start of the year." Kyle said he felt lucky to have older friends to connect with but realized not all students had that opportunity.

Jessica shared several of the same concerns as other students had in their interviews. She expressed a hope that having an older sister would help her with the transition, but her sister didn't want to help her. Her sister wanted her to figure it out for herself. Jessica described her experience entering high school when she said, "At first I was scared, cause it was a bigger school from what I had come from, ... so I thought I was gonna get lost." She had the same concerns as Audrey did about attending the new high school and losing her friends. Jessica had heard stories about losing friends and she didn't know if that would be true. She described her experience about her friends when she started high school: "A lot of people say that you lose your friends when you come here, and that is true, you don't talk to those friends anymore." Jessica shared how she handled the transition leading up to the start of high school. During the interview, she shared how registration really helped to calm her nerves and settle her down. I asked what helped at registration and Jessica said, "The leadership students gave us a tour around the school. So I kind of saw where all my classes were – that's why I didn't have questions." Registration helped her relax because she felt the time spent walking around campus helped make her feel better about the upcoming days.

**Theme Three: After-school tutorials were critical in giving students resources for learning.**

Many of the students had different expectations when entering high school. Some of them immediately started thinking about college because they had done very well in school, some thought they were prepared for high school and didn't need any help, and some were nervous about high school because they knew they had struggled leading up to high school. The one thing in common for all these students was the need for some type of extra support in coursework no matter how successful they were in school before their freshmen year. Some of the students needed help in science, some needed English support, and all of them needed support in math. During my interviews with students, the overwhelming type of additional support the students sought out was what we call after-school tutorial. This resource is available after school for students to receive extra help in course-specific classes such as Biology, World History, and Integrated Math. Many of the students identified after-school tutorial as a key to their success. Some of them attended tutorial during the first semester of high school, and that usually depended on if their teacher offered tutorial after school. Many of the students didn't know about after-school tutorial until the second semester when they wanted to improve their grades. At Dawn High School there is a set tutorial schedule and it is advertised for anyone needing help in their classes; students could attend any of the times listed. The students said that during the first semester they would only ask their teacher for help.

Henry shared that the hardest part of his freshmen year was keeping his grades up. I asked him what were the challenges he faced in getting good grades and he said, "Just asking for help cause like there was a lot of people asking the teacher for help and the teacher couldn't answer all different questions at one time." He talked about the teacher always being busy in

class, so he felt he needed to attend after school to get help. He felt like he could get more attention and help after school compared to during class. He said the two classes for which he had to attend tutorial were math and science. He needed help understanding the structure in math and needed help in science to understand the vocabulary because there was a lot of information to memorize. After-school tutorial helped him with the clarification he needed to get better grades.

Elizabeth had a slightly different story than Henry. Like Henry, she had a difficult time understanding the concepts in math and needed extra support. Elizabeth and Jessica both shared that their math teacher missed a lot of class because of being sick. Elizabeth said this made it difficult to understand the concepts. Elizabeth shared that she was frustrated with trying to learn math, but knew she needed to understand it because she wanted to be a teacher. Elizabeth shared her difficulties about math and why she felt like she needed to attend math tutorial: “They have like rules and all of that stuff ... I have to practice at length to remember it ... I’ve been staying sometimes after school for math so that I can get it.”

Audrey and Anabel were both similar in their responses and talked about their need for after-school tutorial. Both students work extremely hard and have high expectations for themselves in the classroom. They shared their struggle in class despite all the hard work and perseverance to maintain good grades in their classes. Audrey shared that she frequently stayed after school to try and be successful in math. Even though she had a good passing grade, she decided against taking honors math this year and instead to take a regular math class to try and improve her GPA. Audrey said, “Math tutorial definitely helped me out ... without math tutorial, I would be in a much different spot I believe. Very glad that it was there.” Anabel, being a strong student, also said, “Math was the only subject I really felt I needed to go to tutorial for.”

Kyle was a student who recognized early on that if he worked hard in class, he would do well in his classes. "Last year I did good. I did really good in the first semester, and then second semester I kind of slacked off, but it's not gonna happen again." When I asked him about slacking off, he said it was due to baseball, and by the time he realized it, it was too late. I asked him if the lessons he learned would carry on and he said, "When I work harder I'm even better. When I work hard, I get more stuff done than I do if I wouldn't work hard."

I asked Kyle what particularly helped him in school and his response was tutorial. He said, "I went to tutorial a lot last year. In the first semester, I went a lot." I asked him what happened to tutorials in the second semester and he said that baseball prevented him from going after school. He discussed how the failure to go to tutorials hurt his grades a little bit because he needed the help, especially in math. When I asked him about attending tutorial, he said, "I went to math a lot. I went to English a couple of times... I went to science a couple of times." Kyle knew that he needed help in tutorial but in his eyes, playing baseball was more important than going to tutorial.

**Theme Four: Teacher expectations that were clearly communicated to students increased student success.**

Teacher expectations in the classroom encompassed many different characteristics and each student shared insights on how getting to know the teachers played a role in their success. Many students reported that one of the biggest struggles of their freshmen year was getting to know teacher's expectations for their classrooms. The students believed that the second semester was a lot easier than the first and when students started the second semester, they felt more confident about school and had the sense they could do better than they did the first semester. All of the students in this study found value in the after-school tutorial and all the students had a

desire to want to be successful in school. Here are some of their stories as they describe the teacher's expectations in school and in the classroom.

Elizabeth shared her story of having to adapt to multiple new teachers in contrast to having one or two at her previous school. Elizabeth attended Mission Valley School, one of the K-8 schools. She shared that at Dawn High School: "it took me the entire first semester to feel comfortable with all of my classes and teachers." After time had passed in the semester she started to feel relaxed around her teachers and that is when she finally felt she could ask them questions. When she started to build a relationship with her teachers, Elizabeth stated, "Most of them were – yeah, really nice. They didn't give up on us." Elizabeth had a much better second semester regarding grades as compared to her first semester. She felt the relationship with her teachers helped close the achievement gap in class.

Audrey had a unique connection to the staff at Dawn High School. Her mom is currently a teacher at Dawn High School, so Audrey was always around the school at events, which helped her feel comfortable at school because she knew a lot of teachers from attending events with her mother. Her freshmen year ended up being a bit of a challenge because she didn't know a lot of her teachers and she wasn't mentally prepared for that. She anticipated having a relationship with all of her teachers and not knowing them caused her anxiety. She admitted this was a challenge because it wasn't something she thought about before starting school. When she talked about not knowing the teachers, Audrey said, "I felt as though we didn't know each other at the beginning of the first semester. So, it's always rocky trying to make first impressions when you're in the new situation, and you're trying to keep you grades up." Audrey shared about a particular teacher and how she had a difficult time meeting his expectations because he constantly mentioned he would contact her mom. Audrey said:

When I connect with my teachers I learn the best. And, I don't think me and my math teacher connected very well because I was living in constant fear that he would e-mail my mom that I'm the worst student he's ever had. Which didn't happen luckily ...

Instead of being in a situation where me and my teacher were just me and my teacher, my teacher was my mom's coworker, which I felt as though came before my student-teacher relationship.

In this case, Audrey was afraid of getting to know her teacher too well because she was always afraid of what the teacher would say to her mom. As a result, she stayed away from trying to make a connection with him.

Audrey shared that her overall feeling of the staff was their approach of "Let's get this kid a higher education and let's build a life for the students." Audrey excelled in the second semester of her freshmen year. Her GPA increased, she felt like she was in a groove in her classes, and at the same time she participated on the swim team. She felt her coaches pushed her to be successful in the classroom because that work ethic would transition to the pool.

Nathaniel gave a different perspective about staff and their consistency with classroom discipline procedures and how that helped him during his freshmen year. He said the regularity in expectations helped him succeed and stay on task in class. "They were very consistent. They stuck to the rules." When asked if he liked stability he said: "Yeah, I don't mind it cause if it's consistent, it's going to get annoying so it's better to just stop all the messing around, and it caused the problems in class to stop that other students were instigating." I asked him if he thought his teachers were cruel for being strict and if that changed his perspective on the teachers and he said: "They weren't mean they were, you know, kind of strict but not like in a bad way like they had to do that." Nathaniel appreciated that teachers didn't show favoritism but held their



ground in the class. He said their style provided a more conducive learning environment for students.

Jessica expressed different thoughts about her teachers' expectations during her freshmen year. Jessica liked her teachers. She said that they were all great and they made her year fun. When I asked her to describe what she liked about the teachers in a little more detail, Jessica said:

Getting to know, like, the teachers, it was kind of hard, cause a lot of them don't like the freshman, cause they say that they act like children. And that's true, they do. And they don't like talking to us, just our teachers that are forced to, basically.

Even though Jessica felt her teachers didn't like freshmen students, she herself still liked her teachers.

Since Jessica was part of the MED Academy, she knew of the increased teacher expectations in that academy because it was laid out for the students well in advance. The students were required to sign a contract, which described the teacher's expectations in order to be successful in class. Jessica said teachers were very clear with students about program expectations. Jessica struggled academically her freshmen year and failed a couple of classes. She admitted having good relationships with the teachers whose classes she failed. Jessica had two teachers her freshmen year that missed a significant amount of time during the school year. She felt the teachers' frequent absences led to confusion about classroom expectations and created difficulty in building a relationship with the teachers. When asked about the difference in teacher expectations this year, she said she knows them a lot better because all of her teachers are there on a regular basis and she is not a freshman anymore.

**Theme Five: Student relationships with faculty and staff build a bond that enhances student well-being and academic achievement.**

During interviews with students, a majority of them had specific stories they could share about their freshmen year. They felt that staff relationships helped them feel welcomed and part of the campus. This section will discuss the relationships students had with staff and how the staff motivated them to be successful in school and life. These connections helped guide them through their freshmen year.

When he entered high school, Henry didn't know a lot about Dawn High School because of coming from a small feeder school and not stepping on the high school campus very often. Henry joined the Engineering Academy because he liked to use his hands and wanted to build things. Henry stated, "At first I thought the teachers didn't care, but then I found out that they did." Because he tried to fit into school and get to know his teachers, he listened to stories the staff shared, and tried to connect them to his life. Henry told a story about his PE teacher: "My PE teacher said that he actually cared about us all and wanted to share stories about friends who ended up in jail and wanted us to make better decisions." Henry talked about how he appreciated hearing personal stories from his PE teacher because he could tell that this teacher wanted things to be better for them.

Henry also had a similar story about his engineering teacher who shared similar stories with students and constantly discussed how much he cared about the students in his classes. Henry started to feel like he belonged at Dawn High School because he sensed the teachers truly did care about him. Henry shared that since these teachers opened up to students and he knew that they cared, he felt like he could approach teachers more and ask questions if needed. He felt like they were there to help him be successful.

Elizabeth recalled a story about the Internet Essentials class she took as an elective course. She shared that the course was tough because she had a hard time understanding the terminology and trying to make connections. It was a new world to her because the class was so different than anything she had taken before. She loved using computers, which is why she chose to take the class. She shared that her teacher said, "Try your best to pass this class and don't give up" and because of his encouragement she said, "I felt comfortable in his class." Because of this encouragement she gave her best and tried to do well in this class. She said that was the most difficult class she had ever taken but appreciated the support she had from her teacher.

Audrey stated that she knew a lot of the teachers at Dawn High School because her mom was a teacher at the school. She admitted that during her freshmen year she struggled early because she didn't know her classroom teachers. She admitted that she wasn't planning on not knowing her teachers. She needed to regroup and make a plan to get to know her teachers.

Audrey shared:

Typically, I feel comfortable talking to adults more than I do students. So, that always has helped me because I could carry a conversation with my teachers thus learning more in the class. And, I feel as though that helped me through it, academics have always come naturally to me.

Audrey made a vast attempt to reach out to staff and tried to get to know them because she wanted to be successful in class and she knew it would help her in the long run. During the interview, she shared that her favorite teacher from her freshmen year was her English teacher. She discussed that this year she visits this teacher almost daily because she still wants to talk English with her. Audrey said, "I do my best in reading and writing and things, I felt as though we bonded quite quickly." Audrey took the extra steps to make the connection with her teacher,

but these steps helped her be successful. Audrey finished strong the second semester, and she was really happy with her grades. The connections she made in building relationships with teachers helped her out a lot.

Many of the students wanted to finish out the second semester strong and the persistence to succeed was a result of the connection they had built with teachers. Anabel was no exception to that rule. She shared a story about her English teacher. It was the end of the year and during finals week. She was stressing out and trying to make sure all of her work was complete because she wanted to do well. She had an assignment to finish in English and went to her English class after school to try and finish the assignment. When she showed up to the classroom, the teacher asked her what she needed, and she told him she needed to finish an assignment. He told her that she has been working hard in class and he noticed her effort. The teacher told her that the work completed was perfectly fine and because she came in, he would give her full credit on that assignment. Anabel said:

I just couldn't believe it. I went back into that class to finish the semester strong, and he kinda just gave it to me, and I appreciated that. So, every time I see him, I'm excited to say good morning or 'hi.'

In her mind, Anabel's connection with her teacher had paid off. She had worked hard and felt like the teacher recognized it. She said she continues to work hard on getting to know her teachers and make that connection with them.

Nathaniel had a much different experience to share than any other student I interviewed. He was in class one day when his band teacher passed out in front of the class, and all the students had to watch their teacher be picked up by the ambulance and taken to the hospital. Nathaniel didn't realize how much he had really appreciated that teacher until that event

occurred. He said, "My band teacher really pushes us to be successful, and when that happened, we were scared, wondering if he would still be there for us." The band teacher later returned to class after his stint out the classroom, and this changed Nathaniel's approach at school. He saw his teacher in a different view and this pushed him to work harder in his classes.

Kyle recollected having two teachers who made the extra effort to get to know him, and that really helped him throughout the whole school year. When he first walked on campus, he felt welcomed right away. Kyle described the teachers:

Comforting, and they were really hands-on with us and that we're gonna be fine and stuff like that. And they really calmed us down, cause there was a lot of jitters, obviously, coming into high school, and they just really calmed us down.

He said that his English and math teacher were both really good at doing that. He shared that he became closer and closer to those teachers as the school year went on. He valued their input and in return he worked really hard in their classes. Kyle knew that having the support from these teachers helped him a lot. Anytime he needed advice he knew he could go to one of these teachers.

One of the participants started off the school year having a very negative attitude towards one of the teachers and in return, was getting into trouble in a class this teacher taught. Jessica shared with me that the rest of her classmates were just messing around and so she joined them. She later discussed how that negative relationship changed in class after she started to get to know her teacher. Jessica said:

I don't know why, like, I don't know why I would do those things, but I realized that I was disrespectful, cause she didn't deserve it. Cause she's a really good teacher. From that point on I started to talk to her more and really started to get to know her.

Jessica said that at the end of the year, her teacher asked her if she would like to be her teacher assistant in a couple of years. Jessica really appreciated that affirmation and now feels a connection to the school.

### **Summary**

The students in my study had a variety of experiences before going to Dawn High School as well as during their freshman year. Student connections to the staff during both junior high and high school played a major role in how the students experienced their freshmen year. Informational meetings and school activities created opportunities for building relationships. When students connected with the staff earlier, they tended to have better grades because they were more willing to ask questions in class. After-school tutorials played a key role in student success and students felt like the tutorials helped them achieve success in their classes. Finally, many of the students shared stories of how they felt prepared to come to high school, and why they felt prepared. Some gave suggestions on how to improve the experience of future students. Chapter five provides further discussion of the results of this study as well as implications and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative research study was conducted to investigate the school-based strategies that students self-report as contributing to their successful transition from middle school to high school. From the data that emerged from my coding, I identified five themes: (a) informational meetings implemented at the junior high level helped students understand what to expect in high school, (b) student-centered activities facilitated by peers and scheduled for the days preceding the start of school helped students develop early relationships, (c) after-school tutorials were critical in giving students resources for learning, (d) teacher expectations that were clearly communicated to students increased student success, and (e) student relationships with faculty and staff build a bond that enhances student well-being and academic achievement. These themes provided the comprehensive organizational framework of the study. This chapter will answer the research questions, explore insights I had as I analyzed the data, share some of my questions prompted by the data, offer some conclusions, suggest implications for policy and practice, and identify some avenues for future research.

### Discussion of the Findings

#### Research question one.

*What school-based events and activities do students report most prepared them for their transition to high school?* The students in this study shared a variety of experiences they participated in during their eighth-grade year and how some of the events, classroom discussions, and group activities helped them in their transition to high school. This data aligns with the literature which stated that school systems need to have a minimum of three events and ideally have around five (Roybal et al., 2014). The students in my study especially recalled three different activities on their campuses before attending high school (Libbey, 2004).

The most beneficial of the three activities was the classroom visits by counselors and teachers. The students recalled more information from those visits because of the smaller settings of the classrooms. The students were able to feel a connection to the high school staff member, and high school seemed to be a lot more important to them after meeting high school staff (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015).

The second event that occurred was the *College- and Career-Expo* at Ridge View Junior High. The students reported the Expo was a lot of fun and they liked seeing the many different activities and events the high school had to offer. While students said the Expo was helpful, they liked the event more because they got to hang out with their friends from the junior high and meet new friends from the other feeder schools. This is consistent with Cauley and Jovanovich's (2006) premise when they shared that students need to connect with friends. The students at the Expo enjoyed the companionship and opportunity to meet new friends. The students who attended the smaller feeder schools appreciated the event too because they had the opportunity to see other students who would become their classmates in high school. These students were more interested in making new friends instead of seeing the student groups from the high school (Resnick et al., 1997). Making new friends was not the intention of the school activity, but hearing students share the importance of new friendships changes the lens with which we will approach this activity in the future. Helping students make friends and connect with each other is an important part of connecting to a school (Shoffner & Williamson, 2015). Students shared that during their eighth-grade year they didn't focus on high school because they were fixated on eighth grade and their friends (Gentry & Campbell, 2002). This would explain why they liked the College- and Career-Expo event: they were able to hang out with old and new friends.



Student participants mentioned one other event that helped them transition to high school: registration night. Sometime during their last semester in junior high, students come to campus and register for the classes they will take the following year as freshman. Registration night events were discussed several times by Libbey (2004), and Mizelle and Irvin (2000) as being a crucial strategy in students making successful transitions to high school. Four of the seven students in the study were interested in joining an academy because of that night. Two of the participants are currently in the Medical Academy, and two of the boys joined the Engineering Academy but dropped out after their freshmen year. Shoffner and Williamson (2015) shared that students make decisions based on friends' beliefs, and at times these decisions do not match up to their beliefs. The two boys found out quickly that the academy wasn't for them and needed to make a decision based on their own needs at the time. The academies are top programs on campus and typically have a strong draw for students. Further conversations with the students could inform us how to learn from students who drop out of the programs. Did they drop because they had no friends? Was it different than what they thought it would be? Did they change their mind after they were able to analyze all their options on campus?

Currently, my school district offers a couple other events that students didn't mention in our interviews: open house and freshmen orientation. This leads me to ponder if we need to change the way these events are advertised or change how the students perceive these events. Or is it possible these events are not meaningful and we don't need to offer them? For one, we have an open house for the parents and students in the spring. This event goes into more depth on classes offered and what the students and parents can expect from high school (Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Roybal et al., 2014). Did the student not recall this event as much because they

came with their parents or did they even come? We will need to investigate these activities and the validity of their purpose on campus.

**Research question two.**

*What school-based factors do students report most contributed to their academic success?* The students in the study had GPAs that varied from 4.14 GPA to 1.8 GPA, and all of them shared that at one point or another they needed help with their classes. Students needed extra support from teachers in many subjects but overwhelmingly they needed help in math. The tremendous need for support in math was not a shock as our district has had a history of students struggling in math, especially in the last couple of years. Students shared they had difficulty following the teacher's instructions and that they just wanted to be told what to do and how to do it. The students in this study illustrated their need for teacher support in their coursework. Ellerbrock (2015) stressed the importance of student/teacher connections for student success. I might be able to assume that if students have a good relationship with their teacher, they would be more comfortable to ask for help with the potential to be more successful. Thus one answer to this research question is a positive connection between the student and teacher.

The students shared a desire to go back to the old testing system and how they understood multiple-choice tests and felt like they were successful taking these tests in the past. The students who are currently being taught by teachers using new content standards and approaches have struggled with the new approaches and this has increased the number of students with lower grades in both junior high and high school. Students desire to go back to old teaching methods of memorizing facts instead of thinking critically. This area will be addressed more fully in the implications section later in this chapter.

One of the interesting commonalities shared by the student participants was the struggle of keeping up with their work during the first semester and trying to maintain good grades. This was similar to what Austin (2006) stated when he said students need some type of academic support during ninth grade. When DHS students' grades fell behind, they didn't know how to catch up. When students started out in high school, there were a lot of activities, events, sports, and freedoms that many had never experienced before. All of these new adventures for students made the first semester a challenge.

When I interviewed students, they shared that it took them a long time to understand their teacher's expectations in regards to homework and classroom expectations (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Many teachers had 150 students, and it typically takes them a while to get to know all their students. On the other hand, students were trying to get to know seven new teachers and all the new students around them. The first semester for freshmen was overwhelming with all their new expectations. On top of that, many students played sports, joined clubs, and participated in extra events for the academies, so much so that it was a struggle to learn how to maintain their grades (Wagner et al., 2006). A couple of students said they had to learn how to balance all their activities (Akos et al., 2004). One participant realized quickly that he had to manage his time. He said, "Instead of practicing for band one night, I would get a paper done for English because I didn't have enough time to do all of it because of having practice after school and getting home too late" (Nathaniel, personal interview, December 26, 2016).

Some students started to realize half way through their freshman year that they had to prioritize and make changes in order to be successful. One of the things that participants started to realize was the need for extra help (Duran, 2010). All of the students interviewed shared that they attended tutorial sessions multiple times during their freshman year. Dawn High School

offers a variety of tutorials after school. Each main core area (English, math, science and history) has a specific tutorial offered four days a week. Some of these departments offer multiple grade levels of support because the content is different. An example is World History vs. US History or Biology vs. Chemistry. The tutorials are scheduled for an entire semester and advertised so the students know where to go.

The participants attended a variety of these tutorials, but the one in common was math. When I looked at my school-wide tutorial numbers, I was shocked to see the rate that students were attending tutorials because those numbers don't reflect our tutorial numbers on campus. In reality, the number of students attending tutorial varies between 10-20 students a day going to each specific tutorial. Given the frequency that participants said they went to tutorials, I thought the numbers of students attending tutorials on a daily basis would be higher. Apparently, the students are going to tutorial with their regular classroom teacher, yet these students don't show up in overall numbers for after-school tutorials. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) shared similar data, stating that students typically attended tutorial with the teachers they had the best connection with at school. I now wonder if the tutorial teachers (hired as such) who stay after school Monday-Thursday for all of the core areas have low numbers because students are going to their regular teacher rather than to the after-school tutorial teacher. Why don't the students go to the scheduled tutorials? Could it be because they have a relationship with their core content teachers already, like Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) would state? Or could it be because they have more confidence in their teacher of record, assuming they have the knowledge and the tutorial teachers do not? Do they only go to their teacher of record? Do we need to advertise our tutorials better in order for the students to find them? These are questions I would ask in a follow-up interview with students if I had that opportunity.

Student participants said they started the second semester with a mission to try and do better than they did their first semester. They located additional tutorials and made sure to stay on top of their homework. Many of them shared that they felt like they had it figured out midway through the school year. They started to balance out school, friends, and family, and this led to their willingness to seek additional school support. Students like Audrey didn't need as much additional support the second semester, but she asked for help from teachers when they had exams or finals. Elizabeth, on the other hand, needed to attend tutorial on almost a daily basis to try and figure things out. She frequently struggled with vocabulary and some language because of being an English Language Learner. The extra work she is putting into her studies is helping her survive academically (Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014). She also emphasized that the relationship with her teachers in the second semester helped motivate her to do well in class.

**Research question three.**

*How do students characterize their connections to school faculty/staff?* The students in this research study were all looking forward to attending Dawn High School. Some of the students were nervous about attending, and some felt pretty comfortable going to high school. The main consistency in perception among all the students was with the personal connections they made at school. Some students connected with sports or clubs early in high school, and some linked to a staff member quickly (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). When they made those connections, they felt a lot more comfortable at school and felt like they were part of it.

The connections students made at Dawn High School had a big effect on student success. Some felt like they knew a lot of the staff before they attended and they seemed to make a quick and easy transition to high school. A few of the students participated in either a sport or a club,

and they seemed to settle in a bit quicker as well (Fischer & Theis, 2014). On the other hand, the students who struggled to make connections with staff at the beginning seemed to struggle later in the year as well. Did the connection to a sport play that big of a role in the student or did it just allow them time to get to know more people at Dawn High School more quickly?

Some of the students who came from the smaller feeder schools tended to take a longer time in making connections with the staff at Dawn High School. A couple of factors could play into that perception. One possibility is that the students from the smaller feeder schools are typically not within walking distance of the high school, so they need transportation. If they don't live next to the school, their chances of being on campus for any event are much smaller. The second explanation is that students from a distance have the possibility of knowing fewer students at the new school, and therefore it takes them longer to get to know all the new students (Blum, 2005). Many of them are coming from a class size of 30 and knowing all of their classmates, to now needing to know seven classes of 30 students. This can be overwhelming to some students. A couple of them said it took almost the whole year to feel comfortable talking to other students, even if it was just to ask them to borrow class notes.

Students in this study easily shared about a teacher that had an impact on them during their first year in high school. Some students made immediate connections, and some of the relationships took the whole year to develop. Two teachers at my site stood out to me as having the ability to build relationships with these students quickly. One was an English teacher who is typically our go-to teacher for students who might struggle or have discipline issues. This teacher makes quick connections with students but still holds them accountable for their behavior. Many students shared how he made a big impact on them and they appreciated his approach to teaching.

We have a similar teacher in the math department, and she approaches students in the same manner. She can relate well to them, and students usually behave in her class. This teacher spends time getting to know her students, and in turn, they work hard in her class. She typically has the lowest-performing students in math, and she works hard to get them to grade level. Participant comments solidified my thoughts about these two teachers and how they have worked hard at making connections with our incoming freshmen students.

These types of positive relationships were shown to help students be successful all across campus. One of the students I interviewed said her favorite staff member was a substitute teacher. She believed the substitute helped her learn while her teacher was out sick. The power of connecting with students is critically important (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007). When students finally felt like they could connect to a staff member, they became comfortable and were able to ask questions. I plan to share some of these success stories with staff to help motivate them and remind them of the importance of building those relationships with students. As I interview for new staff members, I will keep this in mind as I make my selections.

### **Implications**

During the interviews with students, many things came to my mind about how to improve our practice, based on the perceptions of our student participants. The students shared suggestions on some of these ideas and research from the literature provided other possible solutions. This process has been very helpful in gaining an understanding of transition strategies from the student's perspective instead of what administration might have envisioned. In this section, I will share some ideas that surfaced for me as a result of the student interviews.

According to my seven participants, getting high school staff into eighth-grade classrooms has a bigger impact than I previously thought. Setting aside time for counselors and

administration to go to the junior high schools seem to be critical for incoming freshmen transitions. During the interviews with students, I learned these visits were the only time they recall focusing on high school during their entire eighth-grade year. The smaller classroom setting of only having 30 students to get to know makes a significant impact. At times we have tried to have a bigger presentation to save time, but in the long run, it doesn't seem to outweigh the positives of working with smaller groups. Our next steps are to meet with stakeholders and develop a plan on how to reach all students in their junior high classrooms to provide them with the information they need to get started on their journey to high school (Forbes, 2011; Libbey, 2004).

Some of the students in this study shared the desire to have some support in the days right before school starts, especially after they have had all summer to think about high school and what might happen when they get there. Or maybe students just have the need for someone to answer all the questions they had been thinking about. With this in mind, I came across a program called "Link Crew." This program is designed to train a group of upperclassman with strategies that are best practices for helping students get connected to school (Karcher, 2009). These upperclassman and teachers lead the students through activities on the days leading up to school, and then multiple times throughout the school year. This program provides opportunities for incoming students to ask questions and meet some of their new classmates (Johnson et al., 2014). This kind of program could help several students who shared with me their difficulty in getting to know other students. It would provide a perfect opportunity for students to connect with each other. I have started the process with my staff, and we have already signed up for Link Crew training. A couple of my teachers will attend the training soon and begin training my upperclassman. We plan on implementing this program summer of 2017.



Tutorial sessions played a big role in many of the student's successes during their freshmen year, and when the success carried over, they felt a lot more confident in their abilities at school. Students in this study highlighted a couple of factors. The first was the need to advertise tutorial to students early on in their freshmen year. Ideas that have been discussed include teachers sharing the information with students, Link Crew members trying to be aware of who might benefit, a revised advertisement system to look at how we get the information out to our students (flyers, posters, banners, etc.), and meeting with students early in the semester so they still feel confident that they have a chance to succeed (Vera et al., 2016). The key is helping students stay caught up and not fail their classes the very first semester of high school.

The second need is to look at funding for after-school tutorials. Since students shared the importance it played in their success, I need to make sure this is a priority in my site budget plan. We have started discussions on campus as to how we can provide possible tutors on campus later in the day to help students who participate in sports after school. Two of the students in the study shared that when they played sports, grades dropped because they didn't have access to tutoring and managing their time became difficult. Currently, we are discussing options to hire college students to be tutors after school and to be available later in the evening for the athletes who need help. My school site had this option several years ago, but it went away because of funding. This idea is becoming a much bigger priority because of the needs these students shared in my research. If students from a random sample shared the importance of tutorial sessions, then many other students probably need that support as well.

Connections to staff played another significant role in student transitions to high school. Participants shared the need to understand teacher expectations and develop relationships so they feel comfortable asking teachers questions about the content. The question I need to answer is

how to get staff involved in some activities in order to help them get to know their students more quickly, and also allow the students to get to know their teachers earlier as well. One of the ideas I've brainstormed is to have staff available to meet the incoming freshmen before school starts, and possibly have lunch with them during the time they have Link Crew training. This would be an informal time just to be together and talk to new students. Providing these opportunities for staff to meet and greet students outside of class could have a significant impact on them. Several students shared that they made connections with employees quickly when they were involved in a sport or club. How do we create those types of conversations with staff and students in an environment that is welcoming to both employees and students? These discussions will continue with staff as we move forward in our planning for next school year.

The last area that changed my perspective of planning for the upcoming years has been the interviews with students. Their comments have changed my thoughts and viewpoints on planning activities for students. Since I have learned so much from students, I want to make this a yearly or semester event where I randomly pick students and ask them to talk to me about our school and look for their feedback on how to improve. During my interviews with students, they shared some fairly simple ideas that we can incorporate right away. Some suggestions made by the students were ideas that my staff had not ever thought about before these interviews. For example, one student shared that we should have our messages pop up on student Chromebooks to share our daily bulletin. We have used that function for something else once before, but we never thought about doing it for our bulletin. Such a simple process and idea could change how we share information with students in the future and make information more easily accessible to all students. I just need to think about a series of simple questions to spark our discussion and begin to learn from them again.

**Personal Reflections**

The process of writing a dissertation provided me with many growth opportunities and topics to reflect upon. Answering my research questions was a great experience, but in addition, there were so many other things I learned about my students, my teachers, my school, and myself. The interviews with students were one of the highlights I had during the process. I learned so much from the interview process and can't believe the discussions they have led to on my campus. So far we have started reflecting on curriculum for ninth-grade students, started the process of implementing a new program called "Link Crew," are revisiting the process of how we inform students of the student events on campus, and discussing how we should prioritize the events leading up to the start of high school for our incoming ninth graders.

During the course of my 15-year career in education, I have always had an interest in student transitions to high school. I have spent eight years in a junior high setting and seven years in a high school setting. I have had the unique opportunity to be able to see both sides of the journey for students entering high school. Before this study, I envisioned that a majority of the work was the high school's responsibility in what they do for students. Through this process I learned that students valued all the conversations they had with staff in small settings at the junior high. Typically the students are nervous and they have several questions, but they need the right environment to ask those questions.

Student and teacher relationships played a much bigger role in this process than I had ever imagined. I knew that relationships were a key to student success in the classroom and in extracurricular activities but what I had never realized was why students struggled making those connections and building those relationships. I was impressed that many students shared about connecting with staff, and how difficult it was because they had so many teachers. Getting to

know each other was a challenge because they didn't feel like they had time in the day to build those personal relationships.

Speaking of relationships, I too have built relationships as a result of this study. Ever since I conducted the interviews on campus, the students I interviewed walk by and frequently say "hi" to me. They feel like they can approach me more easily, ask questions, and greet me. We had a small 30-minute conversation that opened the door to our relationships on campus. I started to understand what they meant about the struggle to get to know teachers. I have realized that as principal, it is much harder to build relationships with students compared to when I was a teacher. I don't have the time to talk to students and get to know them as I once did. Reflecting on this reminds me of how much I miss those relationships with students and how important they are to the student and staff member. It is why many of us got into education.

Dawn High School has many great qualities and like almost all schools, it has areas for improvement. As principal, I know many of the areas that need improvement because of testing, observations, reports, and accreditation processes, but it was the interviews with students that enlightened other areas for improvements on campus. I learned so much from students that I am now working on different ways to set up student interviews and surveys so I can collect data from them. In fact, recently we created elective walkthroughs for next year's freshmen students before registration because of the information I gathered from the student interviews. As the students completed the elective walkthroughs we asked them a couple simple questions to seek feedback on the walkthroughs. The early collection of data shows that walkthroughs were a big success with the students. Many of them shared they had no idea these classes were on campus and that they were available for them to take as electives. If it were not for the dissertation process, this opportunity would not have happened this year.

The dissertation process has changed my mindset and approach to many different things in my life and in my career. Working on a doctorate while maintaining a full time job, managing friends and family, and being a husband and father are significant obstacles in themselves. This process made me a better leader on my campus. Over the course of my doctoral program I have changed the way I approach many new tasks. For example there have been several times in the last couple of years that I logged into the library account to do quick research on a particular question I had for my campus. I wanted to see what the literature said or what research had been done, and then use that information to share with my staff and make recommendations for change. Having the research behind my decisions makes them that much stronger. Before beginning this program I wouldn't have researched the questions, but instead I would have made the choice based on the information I had at the time. I feel more confident in my decisions because of the data I have to back up my choices.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

If I had the opportunity to conduct another study on school-based transition strategies from the student's perspective, I would construct a quantitative study using a large sample population so I could determine if the theme of relationships would generalize to a larger population, and across multiple districts and states. After examining this topic on a small scale, I would like to add to the depth of knowledge across the whole school site. A follow-up to my research in a year or two could include a study of student perspectives on how the new events/strategies (discovered in this study) helped them in their transition to high school.

The next possible step with this research would be to take it to a few local high schools and interview students at those schools with the same questions I asked DHS students. This would allow me to hear student perspectives in another context and find out what has worked for

them in relation to transitioning from junior high to high school, and then compare the school's different processes. Talking to these students would provide a different outlook on their school and would allow me to learn more about other schools' best practices.

Another factor that I would like to keep in mind is time. Some student participants shared that it was difficult thinking back to their eighth-grade year. Possible suggestions for future research would be to interview students right after they complete their freshmen year to discuss the activities and how they impacted them while it is still fresh on their minds. This could be a quantitative or qualitative study. A lot happens to students at this time in their life and reducing the amount of time in between could help with their responses. Another option would be to interview students right after they start their freshmen year and ask them to reflect on the strategies that occurred during their eighth-grade year. This would give me a little more detail on those events because of reducing the amount of time between the events and interviews.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore student perceptions on their transition from junior high-to-high school. It was my goal to understand student perspectives on strategies that helped them be successful when they got to high school. Through the data collection and analysis process, I gained insight into the challenges that students faced moving from middle school to high school, which has allowed me to improve the processes at my school. This information will enable me to change some current practices and incorporate new practices at my site to help more students be successful in high school.

Based upon the findings of this research project, it is apparent that students can learn and adapt to their new environments pretty quickly. They just need to be provided with opportunities to make connections to staff early in the school year. We also need to bring in some new

programs to help us with some areas of need. In addition, we need high school staff to make connections with eighth graders to help them be familiar with high school and all the opportunities that are in store for them.

This project has made a significant impact on how I will move forward at DHS with transition strategies and programs for students during their freshmen year. I will continue to try and provide strategic opportunities during students' eighth- and ninth-grade school years that help lead students to a successful transition into high school. In the end, I believe this success will help them with one of the ultimate goals of high school, that of being college- and career-ready.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your family.
2. General thoughts about high school.
  - a. In general, tell me about the experiences you had during your freshmen year of high school.
    - i. What worked for you (what were the best parts?)
    - ii. What didn't work so well for you? (What were the hardest parts?)
  - b. What kinds of things would have made school better for you? Why? Explain.
  - c. Were you afraid to come to high school or were you looking forward to it? Tell me more.
3. Events and activities
  - a. What events or activities did you participate in at the end of eighth grade that helped prepare you for the transition to high school?
    - i. Which one (or ones) was your favorite?
    - ii. Which one (or ones) did you least enjoy?
  - b. What kinds of things did you participate in when you came to high school?
    - i. What was your favorite event last year?
    - ii. What was your least favorite event last year?
  - c. What clubs, sports, or activities did you participate in beside your classes?
    - i. How did you find out about these activities?
    - ii. Are there some activities you wish had been available to you last year?
4. Academic competence/self-perception

- a. Tell me about how you did academically during your freshmen year.
    - i. (If student did well) Do you feel it was because you tried hard, or do academics come naturally for you, or both? Explain.
    - ii. (If student didn't do well) Do you know why?
  - b. In what classes did you do well? Do you know why?
  - c. In what classes did you not do well? Do you know why?
  - d. Was there any academic support that helped you during your freshmen year?
  - e. Is there any additional academic support you wish had been available to you?
5. Connection with faculty and staff
- a. Talk about your connections to faculty and staff when you first arrived on campus last year.
  - b. Talk about your connections to faculty and staff as the year progressed.
    - i. Is there a positive experience with a staff member that really sticks out in your mind?
    - ii. Is there a negative experience with a staff member that really sticks out in your mind?
  - c. Does this campus make you feel welcome or do you sometimes feel no one cares?
  - d. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your transition to high school?

**APPENDIX B**

**[NAME OF SCHOOL DISTRICT] APPROVAL  
For Research**

December 16, 2016

Dr. Ginny Birky  
Professor  
George Fox University  
414 N Meridian Street, V124  
Newberg, OR 97132

This is to inform you that the [Name of school district] has reviewed the project proposal, interview questions, and letter of consent that Michael Roberts has designed and submitted for his research project. We trust that the confidentiality of teachers, staff and students who will be involved in this study will be maintained and the findings will maintain the anonymity of all participants. We look forward to learning the outcome of Michael's study and anticipate that the information will help inform our staff of productive transition strategies that will help our freshmen succeed.

The [Name of school district] approves Michael Roberts to work on this project as outlined in his project proposal.

Sincerely,

[Name of Superintendent], Ed.D  
Superintendent  
[Name of school district]

## APPENDIX C

### Participant Informed Consent Form: SCHOOL-BASED TRANSITION STRATEGIES: STUDENT-IDENTIFIED FACTORS THAT LEAD TO THEIR SUCCESS

#### **Purpose**

I am a doctoral student at George Fox University and my dissertation involves research designed to help school administrators understand transition strategies and how they play a role in the success of students making it through their freshmen year. I would like to invite you to participate in a private personal interview so that I can learn more about your experience during your freshmen year while attending this school, and gain insight on what helped you make a successful transition to your tenth-grade year.

#### **Procedure**

If you are willing to participate, we will schedule a private personal interview that will take approximately 30-75 minutes. The interview will be held either in our school library or at a local coffee shop – you may choose the location. The questions will be focused on your experience at this school.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

You will be asked about your experiences during your transition to high school. We will keep the conversation focused on the school setting and you can decline to answer questions if you do not feel comfortable sharing some aspects of your experience. Although this study may or may not provide any benefit for you personally since you have successfully completed your freshmen year, I believe your story will help our school improve the services we offer students in the future.

#### **Anonymity**

The research study will not use your name or the name of the school. I will not include in this study any information that could be used to identify you. I will use pseudonyms for all of the individuals involved in this study and as I construct a profile of your experience that will be used to complete my dissertation. If any data divulges the identity of a participant or the school, but is very important for the story, it will be adjusted so that the story is accurate but the data does not sacrifice the anonymity of the individual or the school. All data associated with this study will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet and password protected computer files. All of these records will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact, Dr. Ginny Birky, Professor of Educational Leadership at George Fox University by calling 503-554-2854 or emailing her at [gbirky@georgefox.edu](mailto:gbirky@georgefox.edu).

By signing below you are indicating that you:

- ☐ are informed about the research that is being conducted,
- ☐ have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study,
- ☐ agree to allow your anonymous profile to be included in the research project.

**Participant**

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Guardian of Participant (if Participant is under age 18)**

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Formulario de Consentimiento del Informado: ESTRATEGIAS DE TRANSICIÓN BASADA EN LA ESCUELA: FACTORES IDENTIFICADOS POR EL ESTUDIANTE QUE CONDUCEN A SU ÉXITO

**Objetivo**

Soy un estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad de George Fox y mi tesis se trata de investigación diseñada para ayudar a los administradores a entender las estrategias de transición escolar y cómo juegan un papel en el éxito de los estudiantes a través de sus matriculación en la preparatoria. Me gustaría invitarte a participar en una entrevista personal privada a fin de que yo pueda aprender más acerca de tu experiencia durante tu año del grado 9 mientras asistías a esta escuela, y obtener información acerca de lo que te ayudó a realizar una transición exitosa al grado diez.

**Procedimiento**

Si estás dispuesto a participar, vamos a programar una entrevista personal privada que toma aproximadamente 30-75 minutos. La entrevista se llevará a cabo en nuestra biblioteca o en la cafetería - puedes elegir la ubicación. Las preguntas se centrarán en tu experiencia en esta escuela.

**Riesgos y Beneficios**

Te preguntare acerca de tus experiencias durante tu transición a la escuela preparatoria. Vamos a mantener la conversación centrada en el entorno escolar y puedes negarte a responder a preguntas si no se sientes cómodo compartiendo algunos aspectos de tu experiencia. Aunque este estudio puede o no proporcionar ningún beneficio para ti personalmente ya que has completado con éxito tu año del grado nueve, creo que tu historia ayudará a nuestra escuela a mejorar los servicios que ofrecemos a los estudiantes en el futuro.

**El anonimato**

El estudio de investigación no utilizará tu nombre o el nombre de la escuela. No voy a incluir en este estudio cualquier información que podría ser utilizada para identificarte. Voy a utilizar seudónimos para todas las personas que han participado en este estudio y como puedo construir un perfil de tu experiencia que se utilizará para completar mi tesis. Si alguno de los datos de divulgar la identidad de un participante o a la escuela, pero es muy importante para la historia, será ajustada de modo que la historia es exacta, pero los datos no pondrán en riesgo el anonimato del individuo o de la escuela. Todos los datos relacionados con este estudio se almacenan de forma segura en un archivador cerrado y protegido por contraseña los archivos del ordenador. Todos estos registros se destruirán tres años después de la terminación del estudio.

**Participación voluntaria**

Tu participación en este estudio es completamente voluntario y puedes elegir finalizar tu participación en cualquier momento.

### **Preguntas**

Si tiene cualquier pregunta acerca de este estudio, puedes ponerte en contacto con el Dr. Ginny Birky, Profesor de Liderazgo Educativo en la Universidad de George Fox llamando al 503-554-2854 o comunicarte por correo electrónico con ella en [Gbirky@georgefox.edu](mailto:Gbirky@georgefox.edu).

Al firmar a continuación indicas que:

- estas informado acerca de la investigación que se está llevando a cabo,
- has tenido la oportunidad de hacer preguntas acerca del estudio,
- estás de acuerdo en permitir que tu perfil anónimo sea incluido en el proyecto de investigación.

### **Participante**

Firma\_\_\_\_\_

Fecha\_\_\_\_\_

Nombre en letra Molde\_\_\_\_\_

### **Guardián of Participante (si el participante es menor de 18)**

Firma\_\_\_\_\_

Fecha\_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX D



College of Education  
414 N. Meridian St., V 124, Newberg, OR 97132  
503.538.8383 | Fax 503.554.2868 | [soe.georgefox.edu](mailto:soe.georgefox.edu)

Dec. 16, 2016

Mr. Mike Roberts  
Ed.D. Candidate  
George Fox University

Dear Mr. Roberts,

This letter is to inform you that as a representative of the GFU Institutional Review Board I have reviewed your proposal for research investigation entitled "School-based Transition Strategies: Student-identified Factors that Lead to Their Success." The proposed study meets all ethical requirements for research with human participants. The proposal is approved.

Best wishes as you complete your research investigation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terry Huffman", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Terry Huffman, Ph.D.  
Professor of Education