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The Perception of the Freshman Transition: Taking a Closer Look at the Freshman Academy

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The Perception of the Freshman Transition:
Taking a Closer Look at the Freshman Academy

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school using a mixed-methods approach with a convergent design. Interviews were done with teachers that teach primarily freshman students, and perception surveys were used with teachers, students, and parents to answer the following research questions:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

The data was used to determine which supports participants believed were most effective in keeping students on track towards graduation at this Midwest high school. Summary statements focused on the importance of positive relationships between students and adults, and recommendations from the study focus on increased community building and building structures for increased student accountability.

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Finally, I want to thank my family. The past year after coursework has brought many challenges, but along the way the push was always that I complete despite hardships and emotional roller-coasters. I am glad that both my parents will see me complete this milestone.

Dedication

I am the granddaughter of an elementary principal; I dedicate this work to Adeline Lizar, who drove across town and taught in a school where she was the minority because it was the right thing to do. Everyone deserves an education. I am the granddaughter of a school custodian; I dedicate this work to Frank Stamey, who knew that his namesake would go to college, but completing my doctorate may have been beyond his imaginable dreams with his limited education.

I especially dedicate this work to my parents, Ron Lizar and Sharon Land. In this life, they have been my biggest supporters, and by doing so, have made it possible to lean on either of them when life provides struggles. I may be luckiest person in the world because I have them in my corner and as an influence in my life.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

On the first day of summer school, a male student was sitting at the principal's desk pleading to attend a summer weights program versus attending summer school. The student had four credits at the end of his freshman year of high school, he failed a semester of algebra and English, and he was already considered to be "off-track" for high school graduation because he had not earned the five credits needed to promote to his sophomore year. Summer school should have been a priority for this student, and he eventually agreed too. When the student left the office, questions emerged as to where the system had failed to prepare him to be a sophomore. I wondered what his perception was of his freshman experience in high school. I wondered what his mom thought the school could have done better. I pondered what professionals were doing that was working and what needed to be revisited and changed. In addition to being the secondary summer school principal, I was also the Freshman Academy principal, and this was a problem that I believed needed some solutions.

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school using a mixed-methods approach with a convergent design. The transition to high school referenced the transition from eighth-grade to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year of high school. The transition in this high school took place in a school-within-a-school concept, meaning it had its own administrator, counselor, teachers, and physical location within the high school building, and the administrator reported to the building principal. In addition, the teachers who taught the core subject areas of math, science, social studies, and English were assigned specifically to teach freshman students and assisted in the creation of procedures,

supports, and interventions to aid in the transition process. Freshman students were also assigned to take a course focused on developing Individual Plans of Study. The course curriculum explained to students the high school requirements and prepared the students to make goals in high school that could lead to post-secondary achievements. This study used interviews to capture the perceptions of teachers who spent their days teaching freshman students and perception surveys to capture the perceptions of all certified teaching staff in the building. In addition, perception surveys were also used with students and parents to obtain their perceptions on the procedures and interventions used within the Freshman Academy.

During the transition to high school, the academic, social, and emotional demands of students increase as the students begin transitioning from children into practicing adults, but little practice is involved. The first semester grade card begins a long-term record on a student's transcript as high schools make the transition to a cumulative grade point average system that calculates each course a student takes and the performance in that course. Having a successful transition that supports students in the first few months of high school and provides tools to help students lower the risk factors that place students at risk, should help with student success (Queen, 2009). Looking at the reason for education, Queen (2009) writes, "As educators, it is important to remember that it is the responsibility of the schools to educate students with the essential skills and strategies necessary for them to become informed, productive citizens in a democratic society" (p. 9). If a student is not successful in the transition year, that student may struggle to find a place in the world, but even more immediate, that student may not graduate from high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). By decoding the perceptions of the freshman transition from the viewpoint of teachers, students and parents, solutions to address the student needs in the community where this high school is located began to emerge and results and

findings were reported based on the voices of the teachers, students, and parents in the community where this Freshman Academy is located.

Problem Statement

The problem of practice that was addressed through this study focuses on the fact that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year. This trend data was taken from five years of intervention data supplied by the school from the student management system. When a student does not transition successfully to the second year of high school, the student is more likely to drop out of school or not graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). As described by Latta and Wunder (2012), “Problems of practice in education are multifaceted analyses of real-world problems facing students, teachers, and/or schools” (p. 130). Finding possible solutions to these problems through research studies enhances the resources available for schools to draw upon for answers for their settings.

Studies have been completed on the transition to high school, research based practices, dropout rates, graduation rates, and credit attainment (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011; Habeeb, 2013). This study examined the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents regarding the interventions used in the transition to high school in a Freshman Academy in one specific setting. The transition to high school is an important year as mapped out by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2007) who examined the freshman year and called it a “Make-it or Break-it Year.” To summarize, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2007) suggested that freshman students who maintain a lower than “C” average are more likely to drop out of school before reaching graduation. The Consortium further outlined the importance of attendance and the

relationship to grades by stating, “Freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school flunk, on average, at least two classes – no matter whether they arrive at high school with top test scores or below-average scores” (p. 1). This further demonstrated that the transition and first few months of engagement at the freshman level should address academic expectations and social and emotional supports to make a difference in student success.

By looking at the teacher, student, and parent perceptions, this study examined which supports teachers, students, and parents believed are most effective in addressing the needs of students. This study also asked teachers, students, and parents to provide insight into improvements that could be made during the transition process. As a problem of practice through the University of Arkansas School of Education, this research problem focused on instructional and systemic issues, was directly observable, was actionable, connected to a broader strategy of improvement, and was high leverage.

Focus on Instructional and Systemic Issues

When students start high school in their freshman year, they may bring with them learning experiences that started before high school. Some students are prepared for the challenges they will face in high school, but some students struggle to make the transition that will start their final four years towards a high school diploma (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The problem, student success in the first year of high school, was one that was systemic in that it often does not just impact students in their first year of high school, but it may also have consequences that impact the students and the school setting after they leave their freshman year. When credits are not earned to promote to the sophomore level, a student may need to start a credit recovery process that may challenge the ability to graduate on time or graduate at all. Schools may begin to be challenged to find ways to get students back on track towards earning a

high school diploma, and resources could be shifted from advancing students to higher academic levels to solving the problem of getting students the credits needed for the minimum requirements of a high school diploma.

The problem was instructional too; in that, students who do not perform well in courses at the freshman level are typically not able to complete the more rigorous coursework required in classes beyond the freshman level (Queen, 2009). For example, a student that does not pass an English class for freshmen might be enrolled in an English class for sophomores and be expected to complete this course work despite having gaps in his or her learning. In addition to the change in coursework requirements, Queen (2009) describes other high school changes, “Combined with environmental and social changes, students must adapt to rising educational standards. Grading, instructional practices, and departmentalization differ at the high school level. Often, expectations of the students are higher and maintaining former performance levels increases in difficulty” (p. 10). By considering the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents, recommendations were made based on the results and findings made during data collection.

Having a transition program that addresses the needs of students increases the effectiveness of students and the productivity of the school (Habeeb, Moore, & Siebert, 2008). In a school where students struggle academically during the first year of high school, many opportunities may dwindle as the master course schedule may focus more on remediation in grades 10-12 versus offering more challenging opportunities to prepare students for post-secondary success. DeWitt (2014) identified ten important elements when looking at systemic issues in education, and identified common core state standards, student learning, technology, social media, politics, high stakes testing, school leadership, pre-service teaching programs, school climate, and poverty as such issues. Transition encompasses many of these areas, and

because of the impact on students' academic achievements and abilities to be involved in activities in high school, a freshman transition program might address many areas that include academics, as well as, climate and cultural needs. In addition, school leadership teams might consider that all areas are being addressed to support teachers that support students during the transition period from middle to high school.

Directly Observable

The school district where this school was located has placed an importance on high school graduation rates through the district strategic plan, and when a student does struggle academically and does not pass classes, graduation may be in jeopardy. One of the components outlined for looking at a problem of practice was that the problem was directly observable, and educational researchers are encouraged to be able to step outside of their assigned roles and look at the observable dimensions of a problem from the viewpoint of various stakeholders (Labaree, 2003). This process could be likened to getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony; this mental imagery of stepping back from the action and asking the questions of what is going on in a situation allows the researcher to distinguish what needs to take place next (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). With this problem of practice, one should be aware of observations made as an administrator or instructional leader and the facts that can be proved as a researcher. In the role as an administrator or instructional leader, observing a problem from various vantage points provides a perspective that allows many possible solutions to a situation to surface, but more important, as the researcher, solutions surface based on questions and data.

As the Freshman Academy administrator and instructional leader working with a team of teachers in a professional learning community, time had been dedicated to improving the freshman transition process at this school. The team used early warning data to track student

needs. The early warning data tracked students' credits, grade point averages, courses failed, attendance, discipline referrals, and after school assistance. An early intervention team would meet bi-monthly to discuss students that were struggling with academics, social, and emotional challenges. This team worked each year to revise and implement revisions to interventions for individual students and to provide recommendations for the program.

In examining this high school's enrollment by graduation cohort, per data pulled from the student management system prior to summer school in May 2016, 817 students were enrolled in the 2019, 2018, and 2017 graduation cohorts at the end of the 2015-2016 school year. Of those 817 students, 173 students had not achieved enough credits to be promoted to the appropriate grade level classifications of sophomore, junior, or senior for the next school year. Many of these students started off-track at the end of their first year of high school. Thus, those 173 students took courses for a second time. This means that a teacher that could be teaching an elective course might be teaching a remedial course or students who have already taken the course previously. This could decrease opportunities for students as the master schedule focuses on students at the bottom quartile.

When the district put in place the Freshman Academy school-within-a-school model a decade ago, the freshman retention rate dropped to an average of 10% at the freshman level. As the administrator, I observed this number gradual increase as educational standards in the state moved to model the Common Core State Standards. In addition, fidelity to some interventions originally put in place a decade ago have been lost and additional intervention have been added. As the researcher, I made a shift from just observer to that of a researcher that worked with teachers, students, and parents to uncover perception-based data related to the Freshman Academy procedures and intervention.

Actionable

In 1983, the Department of Education, released *A Nation at Risk*, this report has been used as a call to action for multiple decades. Twenty-five years later, the follow-up to this report entitled, *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-five years After a Nation at Risk* (2008), states:

While we are no longer complacent or idle, we continue to face many challenges, several of which did not even exist in 1983. The standards and accountability movement has resulted in new transparency in student achievement—by grade, subgroup, and subject, and by school, district, and state. While we are finally capable of defining our difficulties, the full solutions to some of them have not yet been found. Where solutions have been found, they have not been put fully in place because not everyone is willing to accept and make the changes that are necessary. (p. 19)

The solution for eliminating retention for students has not been found; however, educational leaders continue to strive to find ways to reduce this rate so that students come out of high school either ready for post-secondary education or the career force (Camara, 2013). This study focused on addressing one element of the issue that impacts student success – the transitional time when students enter high school.

The problem of practice allowed for an evaluation of practices impacting the transition process and was actionable in that recommendation could be made to improve practice. Existing practices in the school-within-a-school Freshman Academy structure included a detailed enrollment process, back-to-school orientation, after school supports, positive incentive programs, course interventions, common classroom procedures, and peer mentoring. The professional learning community of teachers within the Freshman Academy would meet monthly during the school year and during a retreat each summer to revise practices based on student data; this study would provide in-depth perception data that would allow the team to make more targeted changes based on input from a larger sample of data than previously available.

Connections to a Broader Strategy of Improvement

As the Freshman Academy was a part of a larger organization, understanding the ongoing improvement strategies that impact the school system demonstrated the broader strategy of improvement that was working within the district. A five-year district strategic plan was drafted in the summer of 2015, and later adopted by the board of education with improved graduation rates as part of the plan (Hijaz, 2015). Having students successfully transition from the eighth-grade to their freshman year and from their freshman year to their sophomore year, might help improve graduation rates. The district mission of achieving success by expecting the best from everyone is a viable mission that had become more than just a poster on a wall as this statement was part of earning positive incentives for both employees and students in each building. Staff was often questioned on how they were living this mission within their daily activities. In addition, with the adoption of the new mission statement through the strategic plan, the district also adopted a new vision for the district that aligned with the mission.

The 2015-2020 district strategic plan developed targeted improvement areas in student achievement, employee support, community connection, positive learning environment, and operations. Each targeted area has a five-year goal that the board of education evaluated quarterly with action steps updated annually (Hijaz, 2015). The district was committed to increasing and recognizing the performance of every student as measured by district assessments, state assessments, and college readiness data; maximizing staff recognition, support, and increased compensation by enhancing public awareness; expanding recruitment efforts, validating employee performance and retaining highly qualified staff and developing a competitive benefit package; using multiple and appropriate methods of communication to reach all stakeholders and community members to gain meaningful input, participation, and shared

responsibilities for student success; building a climate and culture where students, staff, and community are challenged, supported, and valued in a safe learning environment; and striving to improve the educational environment through improved facilities, services, and infrastructure with tangible and measurable results (Hijaz, 2015).

The district also has continued to show financial support for the Freshman Academy school within-in-a-school model at the only traditional, comprehensive high school in the district. During the 2016 summer, the district invested finances during summer improvement projects and provided a more secluded location within the high school building to house freshman students, and the district provided an office within this location for the administrator and counselor to work with the teachers and students. The district was intentional in ensuring that for over a decade the Freshman Academy has been operational and provided supports for students, and this study examined teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program in the Freshman Academy to make recommendations for improvements based on the data from interviews and surveys. The district superintendent and board of education supported this improvement effort as it connected to the boarder strategy of improvement for the district (Dr. Jason Dandoy, personal communication, January 9, 2017).

High Leverage

Seven levers have been identified for executing quality instruction and culture. Four components are classified around instruction – data driven instruction, observation and feedback, instructional planning, and professional development. Three components are classified around culture – student culture, staff culture, and managing school leadership teams (Santoyo, Peiser, & Lemove, 2012). The process of impacting student achievement at the freshman level encompassed many discussions, observations, and reflections on the actionable steps that would

impact all students entering their freshman year. If students promote to the sophomore year, they have a higher chance of graduating on time (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

The study which focused on the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents on the transition process to high school could potentially impact the students at this school making it high leverage. A transition program that provides supports for incoming freshman students to be successful in high school provides the framework for student success in future courses, post-secondary planning, and overall climate (Habeeb, Moore, & Siebert, 2008). Completion of a program evaluation of the Freshman Academy procedures and interventions provided readily available data to impact discussions of change at this high school.

Research Questions

The problem of practice that was addressed through this study focused on the transition to high school. This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school and recommendations are based on the data from interviews and surveys. The research questions for this study were:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

Overview of Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach grounded in program evaluation theory to collect teacher, student, and parent perception data using interviews and surveys. The data was used to determine which supports participants believed were most effective in successfully transitioning students into high school. “A core assumption of this approach is that when an investigator combines statistical trends with stories and personal experiences, this collective strength provides a better understanding of the research problem than either form of data alone” (Creswell, 2015, p. 2). The data in interviews and surveys was examined through a critical lens to find common threads, themes, and recommendations that teachers, students, and parents believed to be successful and those in need of improvement. In addition, quantitative analysis was used to analyze survey data to find perceived strengths and weaknesses in the program.

Positionality

During the summer of 2012, I accepted a position as the administrator over the Freshman Academy at this urban high school. At that time, I had multiple years of teaching experience in a middle school setting and in a Freshman Academy in another district, three years of experience as an instructional coach, and one year as an assistant principal in a comprehensive high school with similar demographics. I have attained certification in the areas of English 7-12, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages PreK-12, and Building Administration PreK-12. I hold a bachelor’s degree in English from Washburn University, two master degrees in education from Emporia State University, and a specialist degree in educational leadership from Pittsburg State University.

During the fall of 2012, stakeholders of the Freshman Academy were consulted on the operations, interventions, supports, and procedures. I have continued to gather information from

many sources while operating the Freshman Academy at this high school. And I believe in the statement, “Full participation leads to acts of leadership; being fully engaged in meaning-making activates one’s drive toward purpose and community” (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Szabo, 2002, p. 61). In this study, I was not just a researcher, but a member of the organization with a personal stake in the performance of the team of teachers and the students and community they impact.

Researcher’s Role

This study examined teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program, and I have been a part of this program for multiple years working with teachers, students, and parents that are impacted by the transition process. My role as the researcher in this study was one of an insider. I am the administrator of the program, and I work with a counselor and team of teachers who work exclusively with first year high school students. As stated by Herr and Anderson (2015), “Insider researchers often collaborate with other insiders as a way to do research that not only might have a greater impact on the setting, but also has the potential to be more democratic” (p. 45). It was my responsibility to be transparent with the team on what I was doing and to report my findings ethically. As I have worked closely with the teachers in the Freshman Academy professional learning community, a level of trust and professional responsibility exists in the culture. Discussions have been framed around improvement efforts that impact student achievement. Professional learning communities question practice but also work to redefine the community to be more productive through inquiry based approaches (Herr & Anderson, 2015). I take a personal stake in each of my students and contact their homes frequently. I believe that a school is an important part of the community.

As an administrator and researcher, I continued to foster a collaborative environment of problem solving that allowed teachers during the interview process to be open to sharing their perceptions. As an administrator, I have developed an open-door policy; my articulated philosophy is that teachers run the Freshman Academy, and I am there to facilitate its operations. If a system is to operate when I am no longer part of the system, it must be fostered by the collective versus the individual. I carried this into my role as the researcher. While this research fulfilled my requirements for the doctoral degree, the work completed was to enhance shared leadership and student achievement.

Assumptions

As the journey of action research began, I believed the research and meaning-making process would make a positive impact on practices during the transition year in the Freshman Academy. By collaborating with teachers, students, and parents, as the researcher and administrator in charge of transition, I had a personal stake in the results of the study and at times stepped back and looked at the overall process through a critical lens. Herr and Anderson (2015) provide a basis for doing this in an example provided here:

... while principals, teachers, and counselors may collaborate to do inquiry as insiders in a school located in a low-income community, they may or may not view the students or community as a part of the collaboration. Unless they do, the results of their action research might benefit them at the expense of those excluded from the process. (p. 45)

This was not a journey of action research that could be done with just teachers; students and their parents had to be part of the process. The transition experience is the student experience. As adults in the school and at home, we were merely observers.

Since I am also an administrator and educational leader within the organization, I assumed that I would not be a researcher in a bubble but rather a combination of researcher and leader. As an instructional leader, I had the power to put in place changes, and I ensured that I

did this as I would have prior to the research and allowed those doing the work to do the work. I also took care to tend to my staff and reflect and determine their readiness for change; are they ready for the learning, resistance, frustration that change brings (Reeves, 2009). I assumed that when data was collected and coded, I would make the recommendations and the professional learning community would make final decisions as a collective on final implementation.

Finally, I had to also be comfortable with the fact that I did not have all the answers and I could be a piece of the puzzle that had to change. I often tell my staff that we cannot argue with data and our findings, and I could not argue with what the data revealed about my leadership in the transition process. The goal was student success, and I must always step back and take in the critical information to make decisions that impact this goal positively.

Definition of Key Terms

Behavior. Classified as elements that will remove a student from engagement in learning.

Certified Staff. Staff that has earned the licensing credentials to teach in the PreK-12 public education setting.

Chronic absenteeism. Identified as missing 10 percent of any school year for any reason (Allensworth and Easton, 2005; Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012).

Cohort. Students in high school are defined by their cohort year for graduation. The cohort year is determined by a student's entry into high school. For example, a student who entered high school in 2015 will have a cohort year that is four full years after the date of entry. With a student who enters high school in 2015, the cohort year will be 2019; the intended year for graduation.

Credit. “One of the primary methods used to determine and document that students have met academic requirements, generally at the high school level. Credits are awarded upon completing and passing a course or required school program.” (Hidden Curriculum, 2013). Students at this high school earn .50 credit for each course, and students must earn 5.0 credits to promote to the sophomore grade level.

Early Intervention Team. A team of teachers, support staff, and administrators that track student data on students that are struggling in the academic environment.

Early Warning Data. At this school, this data focuses on the academic achievement, attendance rates, and behavior referrals of students.

Freshman Study Hall. An organized time after school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays when students are provided a structured time for completing assignments and tutoring on concepts.

Freshman Year. For this study, the freshman year will refer to the first year of high school in a traditional four-year high school. This term will also be used interchangeably as the transition year.

Future 101. A course taken by freshman students that is required by board of education policy. This course provides the framework for completing a plan of study, setting goals for post-secondary, and understanding the structures of high school.

Graduation Rates. This is data supplied by the state that focuses on high school completion rates of cohort groups based on four-years of high school attendance.

Interventions. Tools used by teachers to ensure student success.

Off-Track. Students who are off-track for high school are not progressing at the level expected for credit attainment each academic school year.

Professional Learning Community. “Is a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students” (Hidden Curriculum, 2013).

Retention. Refers to a student who does not promote to the next grade level. In this district, a student must have five full course credits to promote to the sophomore level and twenty-five approved graduation course credits to graduate from high school.

Procedures. The common protocols put in place by teachers to support students.

Staff. For this study, staff at the high school will reference certified teaching staff in the building.

School-within-a-School. A concept that implies an intense intervention for one grade level with a focus on student outcomes.

Transcript. A cumulative high school record that tracks students’ achievements in courses by grade and grade point average.

Transition. “Typically refers to the three major transitional points in the public-education system: when students move from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to college. While students experience other “transitions” during their educational journey—such as advancing from one grade level to the next—the three “major” transition points are a particular focus of educators and school reformers because transitioning students often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developmental changes that may adversely affect their educational performance” (Hidden Curriculum, 2013). At this high school, the transition takes place in the freshman year.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized in five chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the context of the study and outlines the problem being addressed within the study. Chapter two provides an overview of literature connected to the topic of freshman transition. For this study, the literature will focus on understanding the freshman student, understanding predictors and consequences students will face if this problem is not addressed, exploring the theories surrounding student achievement, and best practices for transition. Chapter three outlines the methodology and rationale for the methodology while also providing the context where the study was conducted. Chapter four highlights the research results and findings. Chapter five provides an overview of the study, limitations during the study, a summary of results and findings, recommendations and implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and the impact of the study on the scholar educator.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Each year, many high school freshmen entered this high school bringing suitcases of reasons why they may not graduate on time, but the school staff was charged with helping these students unpack these bags, sort through the messes, and provide the students with tools they might not have brought for the journey. At this high school, the freshman year marked the start of this journey, and making sure students were ready for the high school experience was placed in the hands of a freshman administrator, counselor, and team of teachers. This group could readily identify those students that would most likely be challenged to make the transition smoothly by looking at characteristics of this adolescent age group, past performance in school, attendance history, and behavior patterns. The Freshman Academy at this high school shared common procedures and a list of interventions; however, each year 60% of freshman students in this high school were earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students were not promoting to their sophomore year at this high school. The district looked at the high school graduation and dropout rates each year to determine the success of the high school and the graduation rate often reflected the freshman retention rate. A national report states, “The rising demands of our global economy, together with demographic shifts, require that we educate more students to higher levels than ever before” (*A Nation Accountable*, 2008, p. 1). This suggests that student success in school should be a priority.

This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school. The transition to high school referenced the transition from eighth-grade year to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year of high school. Research

showed that the transition from middle school to high school can be very traumatic for students, and transition programs must include substantial supports that focused on both the individual and the whole group (Allensworth & Easton 2005, Queen, 2002). If we do not find a way to prevent the lack of a high school diploma, the challenges students faced could be more severe than just not wearing a cap and gown and walking in a ceremonial display of pomp and circumstance, these students are far more likely to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Review of the Literature

To understand the significance of the study, a review of the literature within the context of the transition from middle school to high school was explored. In a study conducted at Northeastern University in Boston, Dudley (2012) outlined seven themes that freshman students experienced during the transition process. All students despite gender or race reported to some degree experiencing an anticipation regarding high school, an adjustment of their expectations, a navigation of the landscape of high school, an overcoming of academic difficulties, finding what to participate in the high school experience, moments of planning for the future, and a reflection on the year. Not all student experienced this process the same, and some students did not end their freshman year with the credits needed to be a sophomore.

Based on the identified seven themes (Dudley, 2012), literature was gathered from research reports, briefs, and books to better understand freshman students, support the importance of the transition to high school, understand theories that surround the challenges students faced as they prepared to navigate through their freshman year, and needed components in a freshman transition program. The first section “Understanding the Freshman Student” outlines the characteristics of students entering high school. “Falling off Track” focuses on the

importance of students adjusting their expectations and overcoming academic difficulties as they plan for their post-secondary experiences. Next, “Understanding the Struggle to Perform” outlines theories regarding why student may encounter struggles as they embark on the academics and social expectations of high school. Finally, “Best Practices for Transition” outlines the needed supports for students to be able to successfully transition to high school; therefore, helping them to adjust their expectations and to navigate the landscape of high school while being able to get involved, overcome challenges, and plan.

Understanding the Freshman Student

Freshman students enter high school generally at the age of 14 and may begin to experience a variety of personal transitions in addition to the transition to high school (Gill, 2007; Morin, 2017; Queen 2002). The non-profit organization, Understood, is a combination of 15 non-profit organizations that have joined forces to help families understand the changes students go through during early teenage years and listed on their website are six cognitive milestones that students may experience. Students may show an increasing ability to reason, make educated guesses and sort fact from fiction, start thinking more abstractly, comparing what is to what could be, think about and come up with ways to deal with hypothetical situations, begin to set their own goals for the future; take other opinions into account but make their own decisions, understand the consequence of actions, not just today, but also in a more far-reaching way, and develop a strong sense of right and wrong; make decisions based on following their consciences (Morin, 2017).

Piaget’s theory on developmental stages would place freshman students at the formal operation stage as they are somewhere between the ages on average of 13-16; this means that

students in this age group are capable of abstract reasoning (Phillips, 2014). Cherry (2016) wrote about the characteristics of Piaget's theory:

The formal operational stage is the fourth and final stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development. The emerging abstract thought and hypothetical reasoning mark this phase of development. At this point in development, thinking becomes much more sophisticated and advanced. Kids can think about abstract and theoretical concepts and use logic to come up with creative solutions to problems. (para. 1)

Cherry (2016) also pointed out that students in this age group are developing skills such as logical thought, deductive reasoning, and systematic planning. Students also often ponder possible scenarios and look for multiple ways to find solutions.

In a research study published through the Association for Middle Level Education, physical developmental characteristics, intellectual development, moral development, spiritual development, psychological development, and social-emotional development were all areas that were recommended to be considered when working with young adolescents between 10-15 years-old (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). Caskey and Anfara (2014) concluded:

Young adolescents warrant educational experiences and schools that are organized to address their physical, intellectual, emotional/psychological, moral/ethical, spiritual, and social developmental characteristics. Practitioners, parents, and others who work with young adolescents need to be aware of both subtle and obvious changes in developmental characteristics. Such changes can give adults insights into the challenges facing young adolescents and illuminate possible reasons for shifts in their abilities and behaviors. (para. 25)

When considering educational experiences Caskey and Anfara (2014) recommended that schools focus on, "Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so, curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory, organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning" (sidebar.)

When looking at freshman students in general, Gill (2007) points out that you will encounter ten different types of students in the classroom: the good kids, the rebels, the misfits,

the royalty, the manipulators, the victims, the extraordinary, the angry, the invisibles, and the perfectionist. Gill (2007) further points out the familiarity of school:

We have all been students at one time or another in our lives... We scan a room full of faces on the first day and try to avoid mistakes by making educated guesses as to which classroom techniques will work best with students we barely know. Sometimes we're right, and sometimes we're wrong, but it's essential to give the kids the impression on the very first day that we have an agenda, that the agenda is designed to help them reach their goals, and that we will do what is necessary to protect the positive learning atmosphere we've set up in our classrooms. (p. 128)

By knowing the developmental level of students, educators might be able to devise ways to keep students from falling off track, understand how to help them overcome struggles to perform, and develop transition programs using best practices for the students in the classroom.

Falling off Track

When students start the freshman year of high school, staff members are charged with graduating students in four years and meeting students at their academic, social, and emotional levels to prepare the students to persevere through the challenges that may occur. Falling off track during the freshman year might have consequences that include not graduating on time, attending all four years leaving without a diploma, and even dropping out of school before the four years are complete. Being able to predict student success in the transition to high school has been studied extensively at the Consortium on Chicago School Research. According to

Allensworth and Easton (2005):

Because a successful transition into high school is so important, in 1999 the Consortium developed an indicator to gauge whether students make sufficient progress in their first year of high school to be on-track to graduate within four years. On-track students have completed enough credits by the end of the school year to be promoted to tenth grade, and have failed no more than one semester of a core subject area. (p. 1)

The Consortium has been able to predict who will make the progression to graduation by looking at data points that include attendance rates, grade point averages, total credits earned, and failing

grades earned (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). The three elements that are often listed in the research for why students do not stay on track in high school include: academics, attendance, and behavior (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Fulk 2003).

Academics. As students enter their freshman year of high school, they sometimes do not have the skills needed to be successful. Students who were not challenged before entering high school might lack the knowledge and skills to do well in high school, and those students who struggle in math and reading are even more challenged by the academic demands of high school (Neild, 2009). Learning methods are also adapting as technology takes a forefront in the lives of students in the classroom. The Science Leadership Academy (SLA) in Philadelphia has created a framework for teachers to examine changes in education that require more inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection. This framework is sometimes a challenge for educators since students sometimes know more about the technology than the individuals teaching the class (Pahomov, 2014).

Extensive research has been conducted in academics and credit attainment connected with the transition from middle school to high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Allensworth & Easton 2007, Neild 2009). To summarize research conducted by Allensworth and Easton (2007), almost all students who drop out of high school do so when they are already behind in credits. Students who drop-out are rarely on-track for high school graduation and struggle in most of their classes. They further point out that the most accurate predictor for identifying non-graduates is the grade-point average (GPA); students that are on-track are four times more likely to graduate than students who are not, and almost all students with a “B” average or higher at the end of their freshman year graduate within 4 years. However, Allensworth and Easton (2007) also state, “Failure is not the only indicator; even students with a “C” average or lower during the

freshman year foreshadow problems with course failure in later years” (p. 10). This shows a need to find supports for students who are passing with lower grades so that these students can be high school completers.

When looking at failure as an indicator of being off-track, students who fail four or more semester courses need more intensive interventions since students who fail only one course each semester are more likely to be able to get back on track (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The downside to this intensive need is that school organization structures are set up for first time credit acquisition, and those students who need to get credits after failing a course are sometimes put back in the same class with the same instructional methods and curriculum pacing. Other ways that this school has used to get student back on track is by placing the student in computer credit recovery programs without teacher support during the school day, after school, or during summer school.

Academic achievement is an area that educators influence and can sometimes be troubling to teachers. In an introduction, Vatterott (2015) writes about this from the perspective of a teacher:

Grading. Its’ the hardest decision I must make in teaching. Every semester I agonize about what is right. Is the grade truly indicative of the student’s performance? Do I have the weighting right? Have I given students enough opportunities to improve? All this happens within the confines of the amount of time and energy I have available to determining grades. (p. 1)

As teachers look for ways to assist students academically, they could consider many factors that include meeting students where they are academically, teaching the aligned curriculum, and meeting standards outlined by both the district and the state. Students who find success in high school and are prepared to meet challenges in post-secondary share common characteristics as explained by Vatterott (2015):

Students who are college and career ready are motivated to learning independently of external rewards and punishments, are self-directed learners who know how to assess their own learning needs, are inclined to seek out and use resources to assist them in learning, and exhibit a willingness to try, persistence, and a belief that effort will pay off in eventual success (www.corestandards.com). (p. 24-25)

Students that are struggling often do not have these skills readily available, and a transition program might find ways to help students establish the tools to incorporate these skills into their lives to be successful in school.

Attendance. Another factor influencing the successful transition to high school is attendance. Findings show that chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and that students in poverty benefit most from being in school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Chronic absenteeism can be divided into three broad categories that include: students who cannot attend school due to personal reasons that range from illness, family concerns, housing instability, and involvement in the juvenile system; students who will not attend due to bullying or unsafe conditions at school; and students who do not value or come from families that do not value education (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Further, Kieffer, Marinell, and Neugebauer (2014), reported how attendance between grades 4 and 8 can be a predictor of high school graduation. Using a longitudinal study spanning 2000 to 2009, the researchers looked at attendance trends of students in grades 4 through 8 and how those trends might be a predictor for high school graduation. This research study suggested how trends in attendance across grades should be addressed to ensure students remain engaged and on-track for high school graduation with a focus on grade 8 when the most impactful attendance decline takes place.

The Consortium (2007) reported that 40 percent of freshman students miss more than four weeks of school. The Consortium also pointed out in the same research document that

several researchers have found that high absence rates are a strong predictor of dropping out. These students are largely disengaged from school – they remain enrolled, but have marginal attendance, and they have less than a 10 percent chance of graduating. Even moderate levels of absences are a cause for concern.

Furthermore, the Consortium (2007) reports that just one week of absence is associated with a much greater likelihood of failure regardless of achievement. However, it is also important to note that attendance alone does not predict failure – students who enter the freshman year in the bottom quartile from their 8th grade year, but miss nearly no school, were more than twice as likely to fail a course as students who suffered with attendance but were in the top quartile of performance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Due to the importance of student achievement and the link to attendance, many schools, including the one in this study, have policies that are punitive regarding attendance in hopes of motivating students to come to school. Reeves (2009) summarized the issue at one school:

The problem is that these “get tough” mandates have proven to be counterproductive, and student tardiness and truancy remain a major challenge for many schools. Although teachers and school leaders may be tempted to increase penalties for truant students, research from Dennis Peterson, superintendent of Minnetonka Public Schools in Minnesota, and his colleagues suggests a better alternative: disconnecting grades from attendance. (p. 103-104)

Reeves (2009) outlined how the district’s previous policy was focused on consequences versus uncovering reasons for absences and addressing ways to change the culture. Reeves further reported that the district put in place the right consequences that included collaborating with home, having students stay after school to focus on lost learning, and the building of relationships; when this occurred at this school, both attendance and grades increased.

Behavior. The final element to review tied to successful transition is behavior. McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Chochrane (2008), share that the relationship between academics

and behavior exists and is powerful, and problems in either area are a risk factor for problems in the other.

Students who struggle to behave in the learning environment are often removed from the learning environment and placed in a suspension room in the school or removed from school. The result of being removed can have an impact on learning as the student does not have the benefit of classroom instruction. Queen (2002) states, “Schools with good discipline and high success rates for ninth-grade transitions hold programs, strategies, and philosophies that support and value student responsibility and proper citizenship as fundamental components of good discipline” (p. 124). Queen (2002) recommends that freshman teams work with eighth-grade teachers to gather strategies for students that are already identified as struggling behaviorally and that schools need to find a way keep students in the learning environment for academic success. As Windram, Bollman and Johnson (2012) explain how to improve behavior, “To do this, teams must carefully define the behavior in observable terms and then design a data collection plan that includes frequency and location of data collection efforts” (p. 118).

Dealing with behaviors in the classroom can be a challenge for some educators. Souers and Hall (2016) summarized that many teacher education programs do not equip new teachers to deal with the challenging behaviors they face in the classroom, and those teachers will leave teaching within the first four years because of this challenge. Furthermore, the statistics as cited from Souers and Hall (2016) on student behavior issues and the impact on learning are as follows:

- The result of zero tolerance policies has been an increase in both behavior problems and dropout rates (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

- Public elementary and secondary schools in the United States assign 110,000 expulsions and 3 million suspensions each year, along with tens of millions of detentions (Children’s Defense Fund, 2010; Dignity in Schools Campaign, n.d.).
- More than 2,467 U.S. students drop out of school each day (Children’s Defense Fund, 2010). (p. 114)

These statistics illustrate a need to address behaviors in school and the impact that they have on the academics of students and their attendance. The literature demonstrated that classroom behaviors may have a negative impact on students and could be a precursor for why some students fall off track.

Understanding the Struggle to Perform

Determining why one student will be successful and another is not, can be likened to a complex experiment as one may need many tools and attempts uncover why the student struggles to perform. Students bring to school a set of patterns and learned behaviors, and getting students to rethink these patterns and behaviors might take some work. As Willingham (2009) states, “People are naturally curious, but they are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, people will avoid thinking” (p. 4). This thought goes for both students and the adults that work with them. Building relationships with students that struggle at school could be a challenge, and uncovering why a student does not appear to want to learn or be in the school environment could be even more challenging.

After a review of the theories on what motivates learners, it could be explained in three concepts presented by Covington (2000):

It is the interaction between (*a*) the kinds of social and academic goals that students bring to the classroom, (*b*) the motivating properties of these goals, and (*c*) the prevailing classroom reward structures that jointly influence the amount and quality of student learning, as well as the will to continue to learn. (p. 172)

However, when examining the literature on what caused students to struggle to perform, a focus on grades, attendance, and behavior were reviewed, and this demonstrated that one or a combination of issues could factor into poor performance. Since answers may not be simple, motivation, trauma, praise and self-worth were used as terms that served as a framework for a review on understanding the struggle to perform.

Motivation. Three summary statements can be made in regard to motivation: (1) individuals will determine what they can or cannot do based on what they think they can or cannot do; (2) families and school staff have an impact on what students think they are capable of doing; and (3) student interest in the activities taking place can hold a strong impact on whether the task will be completed at the highest level of achievement. (Covington, 2000; Escles & Wigfield, 2002; Simons, Irwin, & Drinnien, 1987) What students bring into school from home and the activities that are presented in the learning environment are related to whether a student will be successful. Escles and Wigfield (2002) reported, “By focusing on individuals’ beliefs, values, and goals, motivation researchers have learned much about the reasons why individuals chose to engage or disengage in different activities, and how individuals’ beliefs, values, and goals relate to their achievement behaviors” (p. 127).

When looking at the research, schools might take a one-size-fits all approach to the theories related to achievement, and some interventions might be targeted towards setting goals and students being challenged to meet those goals. A lesson is presented with an objective, the teacher teaches the objective, and students are assessed on the objective. Covington (2000) completed research on the achievement goal theory and the cognitive awareness of students on what they need to do with their learning to improve. Covington (2002) states, “Cognitive self-regulation refers to students being actively engaged in their own learning, including analyzing

the demands of school assignments, planning for and mobilizing their resources to meet these demands, and monitoring their progress towards completion of assignments” (p. 174). However, during the transition year, most students struggle with this concept, and they might struggle to monitor their own progress without a scaffold approach that supports them in task completion (Queen, 2002). Even if a child can complete the work, they may not have the skills to complete the task of doing the work.

Additional research, illustrates how theories encompass whether the student believes he or she can do the work. Eccles and Wigfield (2000) researched theories related to expectancy for success; their research looked at theories related to whether the students think they can do the work. Four theories from this research that relate best to the problem of practice and the study include the self-efficacy theory, control theories, self-determination theory, and interest theories. The common thread between all four theories is whether students think they can do the work, does someone else believe they can do the work, and are they interested in the work. Eccles and Wigfield (2000) point out:

Thus, some people have a strong sense of self-efficacy and others do not; some have efficacy beliefs that encompass many situations, whereas others have narrow efficacy beliefs; and some believe they are efficacious even on the most difficult task, whereas other belief they are efficacious only on easier tasks. (p. 110)

Summarized, if a student thinks they cannot complete a task, it is very likely that they will not be able to complete it.

Finally, when examining theories related to why a student may not have the motivation to perform, one could look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Simons, Irwin, & Drinnien, 1987). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs include: physiological needs, safety needs, needs of love, affection, and belongingness, needs for esteem, and needs for self-actualization. According to this theory, before a student can learn, their basic physiological and safety needs must be met; this might not

be true for every student that enters the door of a school. Sometimes community and family concerns impact the learning environment, and sometimes a student's basic needs and safety are at risk in his or her life outside of school or a student may not feel safe in school due to bullying or the other elements in the environment.

One way a high school can drive students to connect learning to the future is through a program like Career Cruising, an interactive internet-based program that uses surveys and inventories to better understand student interests and learning styles (Career Cruising, 2015). These inventories are explained in the program to help teachers better understand student interests and what motivates the learner in the classroom. In addition, the use of the personality assessments can also be used to help students to better understand themselves and what drives their motivation. "Without an understanding of the basic temperaments and the desires and needs of each, we tend to spend much of our time trying to get from other people responses that they just can't give" (Littauer, 1986 p. 39). By finding tools to better understand the learners in the classrooms, teachers could tailor the needs of each learner to fit the specific differentiated style of each.

Overall, why a student may struggle can encompass many elements that include anything from basic needs to how the student feels they will perform on a certain task. When looking at why students do not promote, all factors can be considered when evaluating a successful transition program from middle to high school. Helping motivate a student requires looking at the whole student, and the elements that student brings into the learning environment each day.

Trauma. According to the website, "Helping Traumatized Children Learn," starting in the mid-1990's a focus on trauma and the impact on student learning began to be noticed by

educators and researchers. Marcus (2014) interviewed lawyer, Spencer Churchill for the Harvard Law Bulletin:

On the outside, the 12-year-old girl, who went to an urban school near Boston, seemed well behaved and in control, but she was failing her classes. When Churchill started representing her to try to secure her special services as part of his work at the Education Law Clinic at Harvard Law School, he gradually discovered she was dealing on the inside with so many problems in her life, it was “almost more than you would believe could happen to one kid that age.

Taken from her single parent because of neglect, intermittently homeless and severely bullied at school, the girl put so much energy into trying to hide what was happening to her that she had little bandwidth left to focus on her work,” says Churchill. “And she fell through the cracks. Everybody felt she must not be smart because she wasn’t doing well. She wasn’t acting up, so she wasn’t getting help.” (para. 1 & 2)

Trauma was recognized for having an impact on the student’s ability to perform. As the article (Marcus, 2014) explains this behavior sometimes is simply witnessed as an inability to learn and other times in the student’s inability to be in control in the learning environment. Gregory and Kaufeldt (2015) further report the impact of trauma by stating, “Stress, excessive pressure, and perceived threat can temporarily shut down enthusiastic motivation as our brains go into a default reflect response” (p. 27).

Educating professionals about trauma might have a positive impact on learners. Souers and Hall (2016) outlined five fundamental truths about trauma:

1. Trauma is real.
2. Trauma is prevalent. In fact, it is likely more common than we care to admit.
3. Trauma is toxic to the brain and can affect development and learning in a multitude of ways.
4. In our schools, we need to be prepared to support students who have experienced trauma, even if we don’t know exactly who they are.

5. Children are resilient, and within positive learning environments can grow, learn, and succeed. (p. 10-11)

Through their research, Souers and Hall (2016) outlined ways to become more self-aware, to build effective relationships, challenge beliefs, and foster better ways for dealing with trauma. While trauma impacts students, educators being sensitive to the impact could help students overcome the struggles that face them in the learning environment.

Praise and self-worth. Malcolm Gladwell (2008), a writer and journalist, wrote “we overlook just how large a role we all play—and by ‘we’ I mean society—in determining who makes it and who doesn’t” (p. 33). When a struggling student enters a classroom, three things could occur; the student may master the curriculum, the student may grasp many key components of the curriculum, and the student may not do well with the curriculum at all. We can show those students who struggle to grasp curricular content that hard work will pay off (Gladwell, 2008). Willingham (2009) reports, “Recent research indicates that children do differ in intelligence, but intelligence can be changed through sustained hard work” (p. 10).

Willingham (2009) also mapped out six ways to persuade students to work harder that include: praising effort versus ability, being direct and telling the student that hard work does pay off, treating failure as a natural part of learning, teaching key study skills, demonstrating how catching up is a long-term goal, and showing student that you have confidence in them.

A strategy explored by Thompson (1997) involves how to deliver praise, and focuses specifically on students who perform poorly when they sense that the task will reveal low ability. He states, “As a consequence, withdrawing effort offers an effective way of blurring the link between performance and low ability and protects the individual against feelings of humiliation. Thereby, a sense of self-worth is preserved” (p. 50). This study went on to show that the type of

praise and feedback a teacher gives in relation to the task completed will drive the student to either perform better or worse on future tasks.

Best Practices for Transition

Having a successful transition program, that supports students and provides tools to help students lower risk factor, should help students earn credits and successfully transition to high school (Queen, 2009). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) state, “Eighth-graders are young, and have developed preconceived notions of what it will be like. They are about to be little fish in a big pond, and are looking for guidance and answers” (p. 449). The solutions put out by researchers include: additional academic supports, courses designed to help students ease into the transition, student and parent “field trips” at the buildings, and organizational educational structures geared towards student academic success (Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens & Lindstrom, 2015; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

However, in addition to transition activities, the everyday practices in the school can be built with some underlying principles in place. The National High School Center put out a policy brief that focuses on five key challenges that states, districts, and schools should address to support successful transition that include: establishing a data monitoring system used to identify and support struggling students, addressing the needs of students who enter already struggling, personalizing the learning environment to increase belonging, building capacity in staff to meet the needs of diverse learners and students, and creating connections in the community to show relevance to better engage students for post-secondary success (Kennelly & Monrad 2007).

Weiss and Bearman (2007), acknowledge that the transition to high school “is the natural progression of life course and adolescent development” (p. 339). They also acknowledge that it

is the responsibility of the schools to make this transition grounded in strong research. Further, Neild (2009) explains:

For policymakers and educators, then, the task of increasing high school graduation rates necessitates a serious look at which students experience trouble in ninth grade, the reasons for their difficulty, and what the research evidence reveals about how to help them stay on the pathway to graduation. (p. 55)

Habeeb (2013), wrote about the essential components that should be present to maximize the success of high school transition, and outlined nine essential components that include:

(1) Make the high school a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks; (2) Standardize expectations so that students know what they should do and teachers know what they should look for so that expectations can improve; (3) Equip students with belief systems they need to learn and succeed; (4) Create classroom cultures where excellence occurs; (5) Teach students organizational and time-management strategies; (6) Foster effective parent-teacher contact; (7) Ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology; (8) Recognize freshmen for their accomplishments and make them feel at home within high school; and (9) Preemptively and proactively provide support services for students who fall behind. (p. 20)

By doing an evaluation of the interventions, supports, and procedures in the Freshman Academy, the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents were examined to ensure that the transition program addressed the needs of students. Freshman year can be like a bottleneck – their performance can sometime be so poor that the student is unable to recover (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Finding supports to ensure that students advance forward and graduate prepared for post-secondary is the priority of this high school.

Conceptual Framework

Each August, on average, 300 students enter the Freshman Academy at a traditional 9-12 urban high school in the Midwest; past performance in the last four years shows that 15-19% of these students will not promote to the sophomore level due to not earning five full credits at the end of their freshman year and 60% will earn grades below a “C” on their report card. Factors

that could predict this outcome include social promotion in the middle and elementary years, previous retention in earlier grades, poor attendance history, lack of skills in core curriculum, minimal connection to school, multiple schools attended during the elementary and middle grades, and behavior issues. Despite these factors, these students are expected to graduate from high school in four years. This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at this high school. According to a study completed by Allensworth and Easton (2005), a student is counted as being on-track at the end of the freshman year when the student has accumulated five full course credits and has no more than one semester F in a core subject area. A similar type of system is used in the urban high school that is evaluated in this study.

The actual state of students not promoting in the freshman year results in consequences that go beyond the first year of high school. The first semester starts a four-year record on their transcript. The Consortium on Chicago School Research (2007) has looked at the freshman year and has called it a “Make-it or Break-it Year.” Students who are not successful at the end of their first year of high school have increased credit recovery needs and may drop out, and if they stay in school, they may struggle to graduate in the traditional four years. This alone could make the transition experience one of the most critical moments in a student’s academic portfolio.

As the researcher, I was an insider that starting to think retroductively (Saldaña, 2015). The system in place allows for many students to promote to the sophomore grade level but sometimes with a low level of achievement. As the researcher and administer over the freshman students, I questioned why the system was not working for all freshman students, and I questioned which procedures and interventions were most beneficial to student success. I believed the answers could be found through a program evaluation that looked at perspectives of

the teachers that work closely with the freshman students, the perspectives of all teachers who work with students in the building, the students who are experienced the procedures and interventions put in place during the transition year, and the parents of the freshman students.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

As part of the daily operations of the Freshman Academy, I was puzzled to figure out what was missing to help these students that may struggle in their high school transition.

Regarding the purpose of education, Queen (2009) states, "As educators, it is important to remember that it is the responsibility of the schools to educate students with the essential skills and strategies necessary for them to become informed, productive, citizens in a democratic society" (p. 9). However, if 15-19% of the students are at risk of not graduating from high school at the end of their freshman year and many are earning grades below a "C" on their report card or failing courses, finding the right interventions for these students who are predicted to struggle became imperative for success in post-secondary endeavors. If this problem of practice was not fully inspected and revised interventions are not put in place, these students could contribute to a dropout rate that could have severe consequences on the nation's economy. In a

report entitled, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools* (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011), it states that, “Unless high schools are able to graduate their students at higher rates, nearly 12 million students will likely drop out over the next decade, resulting in a loss to the nation of *\$1.5 trillion*” (p. 2).

One way the professional learning community tried to address the issue is through core interventions for all students entering their freshman year. Core interventions that were already in place in the school-within-a-school Freshman Academy included a detailed enrollment process, back-to-school orientation, after school supports, positive incentive programs, course interventions, common classroom procedures, and peer mentoring. These interventions allowed many students to promote to the sophomore grade level, and almost all those students were on a pathway that ends with graduation. As the researcher, I wanted to uncover what the perception was of these interventions while also looking for improvements that could be made to interventions, supports and procedures so that the Freshman Academy could help the students who are not transitioning successfully.

In addition to common procedures and interventions used with all students, data was used in this high school to track students during the freshman year that included grade point averages, courses failed, attendance, discipline referrals, and after school assistance. Starting in the 2015-2016 school year, data was used from the eighth-grade year to implement a transition class for students who were in the bottom quartile coming into the freshman year. During the incoming fall semester, the course was used as an additional study skills time to assist students in navigating the demands of the transition to high school and continued for some students into the spring semester. These same students also might also take part in Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), a state-based national non-profit organization dedicated to preventing drop outs among

young people who are most at-risk. After the first semester, data was used to start the credit recovery process through repeat remedial courses taught by content area teachers so that students do not get further behind in classes where they may not have the skill set to perform. Data was also used to do further intensive remediation and interventions for those students who failed all four core classes.

The question continued to remain at the end of each school year: Why do 15-19% of freshman students not promote to the sophomore year and 60% are earning grades below a “C” on their report card or failing courses? In this setting as the administrator, I was observing these learners as falling into two categories. The first being that students have the academic skills to promote, but lack the motivation and self-worth to be successful in the school environment. The second being that students do not have the academic skills, and lack the instructional framework needed to complete the curriculum required. Previous grades and assessment scores help distinguish the two groups and provided a framework for targeted interventions that would address both areas. By looking at perception data from teachers, students, and parents, additional targeted interventions could be identified and added to increase student achievement during the transition from middle school to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year.

The desired state would be that all students promote from the freshman year to the sophomore year, and the student cumulative GPA increases. The literature provided a framework for understanding the freshman student, the importance of the freshman transition, the factors that influence student success, and components needed within a successful transition program. When the Freshman Academy at this high school was developed during the 2006-2007 school year, research and implementation was intentional. As the years have progressed, staff has turned

over, student demographics have changed, and interventions have morphed. The curriculum has also changed to meet the requirements of the state defined curriculum a decade later. Students all have an electronic device that manages coursework. Taking a step back and evaluating the transition process could provide insight into the problem of practice that is addressed through this study that focused on the fact that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year at this high school.

Chapter Summary

The review of literature demonstrated a deeper understanding of the transition process and the need for additional research at this high school to evaluate current practices and to determine what additional interventions, supports, and procedures could be implemented to support students. Students who successfully transition to high school from middle school are more likely to graduate on time. At this high school, nearly one-fifth of students are failing to promote to the sophomore level, and a literature review of the elements impacting the freshman student and the freshman year was completed. Finding those answers was done in a comprehensive program evaluation using a mixed-methods approach to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program. The following chapters will outline the research and the results. The questions that framed this research are as follows:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students’ successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff’s perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?

- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

CHAPTER THREE: INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

As students transition into high school, the students undergo two types of transition. They experience the structural transition that students experience when they move to a new building and the developmental transition that students experience due to social and emotional changes (Queen, 2002). This study used a mixed-methods approach with a convergent design to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school. Students that transition from the middle school to high school in the district start this process in January of their eighth-grade year, and continue the transition process through the entire freshman year, which is the first year of high school. Using a mixed-methods approach, teacher, student, and parent perception data was collected using interviews and surveys. Interviews were done with teachers that teach primarily freshman students, and perception surveys were used with teachers, students, and parents. The data was used to determine which supports participants believed were most effective in keeping students on track towards graduation at this Midwest high school. Creswell (2015) states, “A core assumption of this approach is that when an investigator combines statistical trends with stories and personal experiences, this collective strength provides a better understanding of the research problem than either form of data alone” (p. 2).

Data were collected from four separate samples using four separate collection tools, the design of the study favored a convergent mixed-methods design. In addition, methodological triangulation, the use of multiple methods with each data set was used to interpret the data and report findings (Patton, 2015). As this is a real-world problem, simple solutions did not always naturally emerge, and the need to look at all angles came into consideration during the study.

Patton (2015) comments on mixing data, design, and analysis:

Measurement, design, and analysis alternatives can be mixed to create eclectic designs, like customizing an architectural plan to tastefully integrate modern, postmodern, and traditional elements or preparing an elegant dinner with a French appetizer, a Chinese entrée, and an American dessert – not to everyone’s taste, to be sure, but the possibilities are endless. (p. 317)

The study design, questions and information were collected and analyzed either qualitatively or quantitatively and the data sets were then merged and interpreted. Creswell’s (2015) convergent design adapted in Figure 3.1 provides an outline for the design of the study.

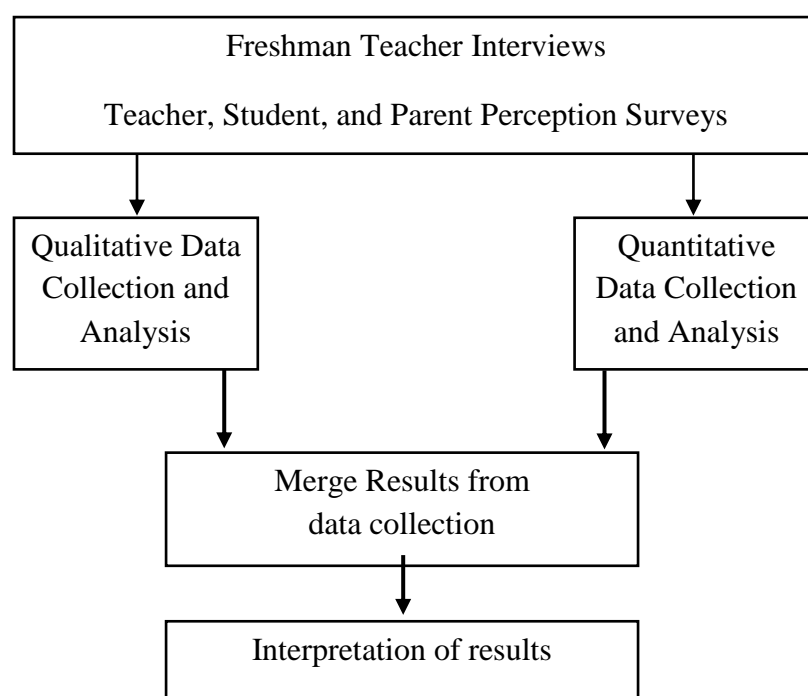


Figure 3.1. Convergent design showing the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed-methods approach

The problem of practice that is addressed through this study focused on the transition to high school and the consequences of a student not successfully transitioning into high school.

The study focused on data collection using the following four research questions:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students’ successful transition into high school?

- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

This chapter details the rationale for the research paradigm and methodology, provides context for the research setting, describes the data collection process and analysis, and provides ethical considerations made during the research process.

Rational

This study used a program evaluation approach. Patton (2015) describes this process, "Program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgements about the program, improve or further program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding" (p. 178). Program evaluation allowed for the process of inquiry and knowledge construction. Using a constructivist theory supported this process. The constructivist theory assumes that people form meaning from their own experiences and that knowledge exists within the learner (Lambert et al., 2002). As the researcher, I looked to uncover the knowledge base of teachers, students, and parents to find trends and data that was common and those outlying experiences that could offer solutions and modifications that would enhance the transition experience.

Its (constructivist learning) application to the field of education suggests that students make their own meaning and is based in part on Plato's contention that knowledge is formed within the learner and is brought to the surface by a skilled teacher through processes of inquiry and Socratic dialogue. (Lambert et al., 2002, p. 24)

It is through the program evaluation that those who experienced transition as either as teacher, student, or parent provided the data that resulted in recommendations.

Through an internal program evaluation using interviews and surveys, the Freshman Academy interventions and programs were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. The interview data was given meaning through a qualitative analysis and surveys used quantitative and qualitative analysis. Data collection, coding, and analysis resulted in findings and recommendations for program improvements. Finally, those recommendations were shared with the school staff after the study to adjust interventions, supports, and procedures. The results of this study may challenge how business is conducted and ultimately bring forth new ideas from staff members. Heifetz and Linksy (2002) comment on the impact of the change process, “Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one’s identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves” (p. 27).

As the evaluation was internal, advantages did exist for being an internal evaluator. The internal evaluator is, “more familiar with organization and program history, knows decision-making style of organization, is present to remind others of results now and in the future, and can communicate technical results more frequently and clearly” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011, p. 28). As the researcher and administrator, I continued working with the professional learning community that leads the transition process at this school.

Problem Setting/Context

Students need support academically, socially, and emotionally in the first year of high school; students who do not receive this support often struggle and do not progress academically (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Fulk 2003). The problem of practice is that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their

transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year at this high school. A program evaluation of transition supports at the freshman level was to assist in addressing needs in the program at this high school by looking at perception data of teachers, students, and parents. By identifying the setting of this study, a deeper context of the research study emerges which allows for an understanding of the data based on the framework of the high school where the study was conducted and the framework of the freshman transition program in this school.

High School

The high school in this study was a comprehensive high school with grades 9-12 (see Table 3.1). Located in an urban setting, the high school had approximately 1,100 students and was the only traditional, comprehensive high school in the district. Nested in a metropolitan area, the district had two larger, multi-high school districts that surrounded it. Despite being in a larger city, the high school's location could be characterized as a rural atmosphere meaning that open spaces and wooded areas surround the high school. Horses could be found in a pasture down the road. Families have lived in the community for generations. The community shared characteristics of a small town and a large metropolitan city. Two-lane streets lead into the high school, but blocks from the high school was an interstate highway that cuts through the metropolitan area and multiple states.

Table 3.1
 2015 School Demographics by Percentages (N = 1109)

Characteristics	%
Gender	
Male	51.0
Female	48.6
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	46.0
Black	10.8
Hispanic	36.5
Other	6.7

Note. School demographic percentages were retrieved from the KSDE building report card for the 2014-2015 school year.

To fully understand the context and setting of this high school, looking beyond gender and ethnicity portrays a better snapshot. A review of demographic data points (see Table 3.2) showed the economic status of students, attendance rates, and students who receive special education services and English-language supports.

Table 3.2
 2015 School Demographics Data Points by Percentages (N = 1109)

Characteristics	%
Economic Status	
Economic Disadvantage	72.6
Non-Economic Disadvantage	27.4
Attendance Rate	
2015	88.9
2014	89.6
Students who receive services/support	
Students who receive special education services	12.4
Students who receive English-language supports	13.9

Note. School demographic percentages were retrieved from the KSDE building report card for the 2014-2015 school year.

Additional information on academic history could be inferred by looking at ACT data (see Table 3.3) from a five-year pattern compared to the state average. This high school has a history of consistently performing below the state average, and during the 2013-2014 school year, the district started testing all junior students, which could account for the drop in the 2015 senior

class data. The high school's improvement efforts have focused on curriculum alignment and ACT improvement, and district staff continues to make scores a priority in district goals.

Table 3.3
ACT Data compared to State Average

Program Year	Building Average	State Average
2015	17.5	21.9
2014	19.6	22.0
2013	18.8	21.9
2012	18.9	21.8
2011	19.4	21.9

Note. School ACT scores are for the senior cohort and were retrieved from the KSDE building report card for the 2014-2015 school year.

Freshman Academy

The Freshman Academy in this Midwest high school was the focus of this study. The Freshman Academy has a school-within-a-school concept, meaning it has its own administrator, counselor, and physical location within the high school building. The high school was designed with academic areas for English, mathematics, science, social studies, and electives. The Freshman Academy was in a separate location in the lower academic wing towards the back of the building. The Freshman Academy was formed in the 2006-2007 school year in response to students who were struggling with the transition to high school. The original location for the Freshman Academy classrooms was in the upper academic hallway that serves as a main passing area for the entire building; in the 2016-2017 school year, building administration made the decision to move the Freshman Academy to better serve the students. The freshman classroom areas were moved to a more isolated area from the older students. During the 2016-2017 school year, the administrator and counselor were also relocated to an office area within the Freshman Academy classroom location; thus, making this intervention a true school-within-a-school

concept. Prior to the 2016-2017 school year, the administrator and counselor were departmentalized and located in the main office at the front of the building. The Freshman Academy has been managed by two different administrators since the inception, and only one of the original staff members from the 2006-2007 school year taught in the Freshman Academy in the 2016-2017 school year.

Program Overview

The Freshman Academy at this high school focused on using a variety of strategies to assist students with the transition process, but with these supports, some students still were unable to earn the credits to promote to the sophomore year. Some students eventually drop out of school. Trend data showed that students at this high school are retained at the freshman year at a rate of 15-19% each school year, meaning that students are not promoted to the sophomore year and remained a freshman student on the official high school transcript. Some students that did promote earned failing grades as students could earn 7 credits, but only needed 5 to promote. This means a student could fail 4 classes and still promote to the sophomore year.

The Freshman Academy at this high school has in place a set of core operating principles that include the following: an in-depth high school enrollment process, a peer mentoring program, career exploration, character education curriculum, after school supports, positive incentives that focus on academics, and a common set of beliefs and expectations. The program has morphed since its inception in the 2006-2007 school year; however, the program has retained many interventions that have been in place for multiple years.

Enrollment process. Students begin the transition process at this high school with a detailed enrollment process. In January of the eighth-grade year, administration goes to the middle school and conducts an assembly that includes highlights from the high school

experience and a student panel. Parents receive a mailing with information that welcomes the family to the high school experience and describes course offerings and programs; students receive the same information through district technology. All information is also located on the district website. The official enrollment process begins in early February when high school staff goes to the middle school for two days of enrollment for questions and the enrollment process. At the spring parent/teacher conferences, parents may review their student's selections and visit with high school staff about question they may have specific to their individual student. Finally, the eighth-grade year activities are completed with an assembly and tour at the high school. Throughout the process, both parents and students are encouraged to contact the Freshman Academy administrator and counselor with questions, and some take advantage of this open line of communication.

Back to school orientation. In August, incoming freshman families receive a mailing that outlines the freshman year. The mailing also includes details of the freshman first day; the freshman first day is organized by Link Crew, an upperclassman peer mentoring group dedicated to helping freshman students make the transition to high school. The day includes team building activities, detailed tours of the building, club information, and schedule information. Link Crew is a national program that is endorsed for the freshman transition process through the Boomerang Project, and the lead sponsor for the program is a freshman teacher and has been trained by the organization during a summer institute. In addition, students make a pledge to graduate from high school.

Freshman Study Hall. As students make the transition to high school, often academics struggle as students must adapt to meet the changes in expectations (Queen, 2002). Freshman Study Hall is a time after school where students can work on missing work, receive academic

support from core teachers, and complete homework. While students that are failing courses receive notifications that they should attend, all freshman students are welcome to attend. The district also provides bus services for all students that attend. Freshman teachers use a weekly list to notify parents when students are not attending and continue to encourage students who are not attending to use this time to improve academics.

Positive incentive programs. Freshman students are recognized for their contributions to themselves and others. “Students who feel as though they play a vital role in their school community succeed at a higher rate than those who feel ostracized” (Habeeb, Moore, & Siebert, 2008, p. 55). Recognition is provided for grades, behavior, and attendance through a student of the week program, quarterly incentive parties, honor role, and building awards ceremonies. The student of the week program includes a certificate with affirmations from the student’s teachers, a gift bag of spirit items, and a class t-shirt. Other parties and honors include field trips, certificates, and award ceremonies.

Future 101 course. In the 2016-2017 school year, by local board of education policy, a semester-long freshman elective course was required for all incoming freshman students. This action was in response to a change in the buildings bell structure from a 6-period day with a seminar period to a 7-period day without a seminar period. Many of the common transition lessons took place in freshman seminar course, and the staff expressed in a needs assessment a desire to continue the curriculum that included career exploration and character education curriculum. In addition to the basic framework, certain programming was a priority to maintain. This programming included Community Counts community service projects, Link Crew peer mentorship, and scheduled parent-teacher conferences. During this course, students also began creating independent plans of study that formulated a framework for the remaining years of high

school and post-secondary planning. This was in response to new requirements for school accreditation in the state.

Common classroom mission. The freshman teachers are a professional learning community that meets regularly. Freshman teachers operate under the mission statement that the Freshman Academy is a supportive community empowering students to transition academically, behaviorally, and socially into high school. The core group of teachers plans activities to embed in the core classroom that include behavioral expectations like how to enter a classroom or when to use technology. They also embed common curricular expectations like note-taking, assignment handling, and common academic language. Most recently, the team added lessons on how to use technology responsibly for learning as the district moved a common online platform and paperless model for educating students. In addition, the Freshman Academy team piloted the building expectation that would be implemented in the 2017-2018 school year as teachers in this professional learning community were part of the planning phase for the building.

The Freshman Academy in this Midwest high school that was the focus of this study was already a well-developed program with years of established growth. However, with a structural move and staff changes, the core freshman teachers have voiced to administration that more needs to be done to prepare students so that students transition successfully. Listening to the collective voices of teachers, students, and parents from this high school provides the framework for making decisions moving forward to ensure these supports and future supports continue to support students.

Research Sample and Data Sources

Participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling which aligns with the research design of program evaluation where the participants need to be experts in the content.

“Purposive sampling is not haphazard. Purposive sampling has a purpose; a subgroup has been identified and a rationale has been developed for studying them” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, p. 411). For this study, the participants had knowledge of the Freshman Academy and the interventions. All research participants gave consent to participate in the study, and their participation was voluntary. In addition, participants were selected based on their ability to provide information that would answer the research questions (see Table 3.4). Per Ravitch and Carl (2016), “Purposeful sampling allows you to deliberately select individuals and/or research settings that will help you to get the information needed to answer your research questions” (p. 128).

Table 3.4

Research Data Needed, Sample Population, Collection Methods

<i>RQ1: How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' transition into high school?</i>		
Type of Data Needed	Sample Population	Data Collection Method
Perception Data Descriptive Statistics Belief Statements	10 certified staff that teach freshman students, 2 SPED and 1 TESOL certified support staff	Semi-Structured Interviews
<i>RQ2: What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for high school?</i>		
Type of Data Needed	Sample Population	Data Collection Method
Perception Data Descriptive Statistics Belief Statements	75 certified teachers in grades 9-12	Electronic Survey
<i>RQ3: What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for high school?</i>		
Type of Data Needed	Sample Population	Data Collection Method
Perception Data Descriptive Statistics Belief Statements	600 students in the 2019 and 2020 graduation cohort	Electronic Survey
<i>RQ4: What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for high school?</i>		
Type of Data Needed	Sample Population	Data Collection Method
Perception Data Descriptive Statistics Belief Statements	300 households with students in the 2020 graduation cohort	Electronic Survey

Interview Participants

Interview participants were purposefully selected to participate in data collection based on their teaching assignment. The selected teachers were assigned to teach freshman students at least half time. This purposeful sampling allowed information to be gained about the freshman transition process and how the teachers perceived the process was assisting freshman students in transition. The Freshman Academy has eight teachers teaching one of the core subject areas of mathematics, English, science, and social studies, two special education teachers, one English language learner teacher, and two specialized transition teachers. As a school administrator and head of the professional learning team, I have worked with this group closely on school improvement efforts within the Freshman Academy. These teachers have been a resource in Freshman Academy operations. I believe the teachers being interviewed found their participation to be a valuable part of the study based on conversations.

The potential interview participants received an email explaining the study and benefits of participating in the study. In addition, the participants received information about the confidentiality of their answers as all answers were kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy. I see these respondents as collaborators, as these are staff that work with the students every day in the classroom and provide guidance on the overall goals for the transition process. Participants signed informed consent forms that outlined the description of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation information, confidentiality disclosure, and the right to withdraw. The participants' participation followed guidelines set by University of Arkansas policy and IRB approval.

Survey Participants

For this study, teachers employed at this high school, students in the 2019 and 2020 cohort at this high school, and parents of student in the 2020 cohort from this high school were invited to participate in a survey that shared their perceptions of how transition supports impact students during the freshman year. Survey participants were provided with the description of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation information, confidentiality disclosure, and the right to withdraw. Answers from surveys were anonymous and confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy. All surveys were done electronically with no identifying markers for identity of individual participants beyond being a member of the survey pool population. Teachers, students, and parents provided a triangulation of data that allowed for analysis based on the teacher perspective, the student perspective, and the home perspective. By looking at multiple perspectives, a deeper understanding could emerge so that recommendation could be available from all perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

The problem of practice that was addressed through this study focused on the fact that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year at this high school. The overarching goal of the Freshman Academy is to provide supports so that students transition from the middle school to high school successfully, and the structures that are in place have been to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. When doing practitioner research, the researcher’s key function is to extend knowledge, question practices, and start to shape a new reality (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After receiving district permission, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was requested and granted from the University of

Arkansas to conduct the study and data was collected using interviews of teachers and surveys of teachers, students, and parents.

Interviews

Thirteen participants were selected through purposeful sampling and provided an opportunity to consent to an 8-question interview (see Appendix B). Qualitative data that takes place through the interview process adds value to the program evaluation as it allows a meaningful exchange with teachers that allows for follow-up on questions.

Respondents' responses were kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy. Interviews took place in a setting that was mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher and allowed time for answers to be given freely with time to ask follow-up questions. In addition, participation validation strategies were used throughout the interview process. These strategies included restating answers to participants to ensure that I understood clearly the message that was communicated. Participants were also allowed to review a summary of their interview after the interview transcripts were transcribed.

Staff Surveys

Staff perception surveys (see Appendix C) were provided to the 78 certified staff members at this high school and included questions related to demographics of the respondent, questions gaining staff information regarding the transition procedures and interventions, perception questions using judgement responses, and open-ended responses. The delivery of the survey information and survey used the school email distribution list. An email was sent out to all certified staff at the school outlining the description of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation information, confidentiality disclosure, and the right to not complete the survey. Implied consent came from completing the survey. The survey was sent out the following day

and was open for one-week for completion. A reminder email was sent out 24-hours prior to the survey closing to gain additional responses. Teacher surveys are anonymous and confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy.

Student Surveys

Students in the 2019 and 2010 graduation cohort were invited to participate in a student perception survey (see Appendix D) and the survey included questions related to demographics of the respondent, questions regarding the transition procedures and interventions, perception questions rated using judgement responses, and open-ended responses. The survey sample pool included 525 students. To complete the survey, students were requested to provide assent and parents requested to provide consent by completing paper consent forms that included the description of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation information, confidentiality disclosure, and the right to not complete the survey. These forms were returned to the students' English teachers as the surveys were conducted during the English periods during the school day. Student surveys were administered through an email link during survey sessions after confirmation of assent and consent was completed. Parents can request access to summary results after the completion of the dissertation; this is in accordance with district policy. Student surveys are anonymous and confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy.

Parent Surveys

Parents of students in the 2020 cohort at the school were invited to participate in a parent perception survey (see Appendix E) and the survey included questions that are related to the household demographics, questions regarding the transition procedures and interventions, perception questions using judgement responses, and open-ended responses. Surveys were sent

to the approximate 300 households for this graduation cohort. Parents were provided a link to an electronic survey through the student information system and through a direct mailing outlining the description of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation information, confidentiality disclosure, and the right to not complete the survey. Implied consent came from completing the survey. A reminder message was sent 24-hours prior to the close of the survey to gain additional responses.

Data Analysis Methods

Researchers use a variety of techniques and participants to provide a richer source of information for a study. Ravitch and Carl (2016) report, “Given that data are both real and interpreted, it is important to provide enough information to provide enough context and other relevant features of the student and especially to transparently represent your processes so that your readers can determine the validity of you claims” (p. 287). By conducting interviews and surveys and including a population of teachers, students, and parents from the high school community, a better understanding of the perceptions of the Freshman Academy program successes and needs should be established.

Interviews

Interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were printed and coded using first and second cycle coding. As coding lends itself to biases, analytical memos were used during the coding process. Analytical memos allow for the researcher to reflect, make connections, and make notes on the data that is collected so that follow-up question can be asked during the interview process (Seidman, 2013). The first cycle coding focused on descriptive or theme-based coding and searched for themes that existed between participant responses. Seidman (2013) provides tools and strategies for coding and reminds researchers that “...multiple realities exist

because we each perceive and interpret social life from different points of view” (p. 8). The second cycle coding focused on themes that emerged throughout the interview sessions.

Surveys

Categorical demographic data was provided from the teacher, student, and parent perception surveys. Data was reported using quantitative descriptive statistics and qualitative statistics. Short answer data was coded for patterns and trends that emerged. As the surveys had a variety of question types, various types of reporting were conducted to provide a rich understanding of the data provided from the research tool. The survey data provided the largest body of data for looking at the perceptions of the Freshman Academy with the interviews supplementing those results and findings. The final combining of data used a narrative text which provided deeper information as depicted by Alreck and Settle (1995):

The researcher can often provide additional insights, ideas, and information quite aside from the purely tabular or graphic portrayal of results. By virtue of having worked so closely and intimately with the project, the researcher will inevitably acquire intuitive understanding or “gut feeling” for certain facts or relations. These insights can’t be expressed in numerical form, but they can and should be stated verbally in narrative text. (p. 351)

First, survey responses were analyzed using the quantitative results. Second, the responses were reported using the qualitative findings. Finally, both were put together for a summary overview.

Trustworthiness

As the researcher, I was an insider completing a program evaluation of the Freshman Academy in an urban, Midwest high school. Herr and Anderson (2015) state, “A common mistake in this type of research is to treat one’s personal and professional self as an outside observer rather than an insider committed to the success of the actions under study” (p. 42). I had to rely on the teachers, students, and parents to uncover how to improve conditions. A relational approach to the research as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016) aligned to the study.

A relational approach to research speaks to the need to allow yourself to become reflexively engaged in interactions with others. For example, this might mean admitting that you do not know the answer to a question and need to check or admitting that something you said or did reflects a bias that is pointed out to you and showing a willingness to hear more, engage in dialogue about it, reflect on yourself, and possibly make changes in your approach and the research itself. (p. 345)

The certified staff at this high school averages 75 certified staff, and perceptual information from this community was used to determine whether the supports that are provided can be improved to meet the needs of more students. As an administrator in this building, I was more than just a researcher, and I understood that relationships that I had built with teachers would be crucial in obtaining honest, trustworthy data that would impact the problem of practice in a meaningful way. The goal was to improve student.

Students and parents participated in the surveys have worked with me as an administrator. I worked to build relationships with students and their parents by being a presence in their lives. I attended school events and visited with families, talked to students in the hallways, and demonstrated daily at school that their voice matters by listening to them. Their voice in the perception survey was important to the results as it provided a baseline of data for moving forward with the Freshman Academy procedures and interventions.

The qualitative research process is a journey of making meaning, and sometimes what I thought I would find was not always the outcome. I had to trust in the respondents of the interviews and surveys to share a perception of the program that was honest. I had to follow-up through participant validity checks during the interview process to ensure a study that accurately represented participants' experiences. While looking at survey data, I had to consider the outliers on both ends of the data spectrum to ensure all voices were represented in the findings.

In addition, trustworthiness was increased in the program evaluation design by bringing together multiple data collection methods that included both interviews and surveys from

multiple samples. The perceptions of the Freshman Academy were viewed through the lens of multiple people. By using mixed methods of analysis, the results involved both qualitative and quantitative analysis. When completed, the study was provided for program improvement and decision making for staff and administration at the high school, and accurate reporting of results was the only way to make this happen. As the researcher, I journaled during the study to ensure that I was reflective in my biases during data collection.

Limitations and Delimitations

The problem of practice was a concern for me as researcher and administrator. Student achievement at the freshman level was not at a level where all students were experiencing success. Data pulled from the student management system showed that about one-third to half of all freshman students were failing at least one class at any given week during the school year. Other students were taking part in group and individual counseling. Some students were struggling academically, socially, and emotionally with the freshman transition to high school.

Limitation

The Freshman Academy is a school-within-a-school model, and the teachers and the program are impacted by changes being made in the Freshman Academy and in the high school. One external change that could have had an impact on data for freshman students naturally was a structural move where the freshman students were moved from one portion of the building to another during the 2016-2017 school year. A program evaluation of the Freshman Academy and the adopted interventions provide valuable insight moving forward from the 2016-2017 school year. Another external component that could have impacted the study was a shift in the overall building professional development. Multiple years of lower than expected student performance has caused a shift to a more focused approach on response to interventions. Professional

development in the 2016-2017 school year focused on those classroom interventions that relate to building culture and instructional models for the classroom. These changes could have had an impact on the Freshman Academy and student achievement. In addition, during the 2016-2017 school year, the entire school district moved to a paperless concept which impacted the way students, families, and staff received information; it is unclear whether this had an impact on data for the study but needed to be considered in respondents' answers.

The design of the study included interviews and surveys. Interviews can be beneficial in a study as they provide data-rich answers from participants that provide great insight into answering research questions. As I am an insider, I already had a rapport with the population that I was interviewed. Consideration was given to the well-being of participants to know that they could provide honest answers. I remained neutral in my verbal responses and body language. Patton (2015) states, "I cannot be shocked; I cannot be angered; I cannot be embarrassed; I cannot be saddened. Nothing the person tells me will make me think more or less of her or him" (p. 457). My intention was to follow this motto during the interview process. Since the participants of the interviews were those teachers that I worked closest with daily, the interview process did not start when I asked the first question. The rapport I had built with them prior to the interview was present in the room. The study was limited by the honesty of respondent's answers, and respondent's belief that his or her answers were confidential and would not cause harm to him or her. I anticipated that all core teachers in the Freshman Academy would want to consent to the interview process, but consent could be a limitation of interview participant data due to circumstances that were beyond control.

Surveys were conducted with teachers, students, and parents. Since surveys can be done anonymously and can provide valuable information for outcome evaluations, this method of data

collection was used to increase the validity of the study. A limitation of surveys is the information is not typically as data-rich as the interview process. In addition, response rates could be limited. Since the survey was anonymous, it was my expectation that at least 50% of teachers, students, and parents would consent to participate. I did have a concern regarding parent participation. During a survey in the spring 2016, the high school response rate was at 20% for parents, and in the spring 2017, the high school response rate was 11%. I did try to overcome this limitation by adding an option to contact a bilingual representative within the high school to translate the survey for those parents that would like to provide feedback but are unable to do so in English. It was my intention that this could increase participation for a subgroup of parents. Also, in addition to contacting parents electronically, a mailing of the information was also sent to each home.

Delimitations

This was a program evaluation of a Freshman Academy program in the high school where I work. The interventions that were evaluated were specific to the context of this setting; however, that did not mean that this data would not be impactful to those that are also working with freshman students and looking for ways to evaluate and improve processes at other high schools. Strong interventions that are impactful provide a framework for all to learn, and learning what is working or what needs to improve can be beneficial to others with the same struggles that are related to successful transition to high school in the freshman year.

Summary

A mixed-methods approach, with purposefully sampling, provided a framework for answering the research questions:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

The perception data that was gathered and coded provided an outline for making program recommendations and changes. If student performance fails to reach a level of success, the job of the professionals is to question what we are doing, evaluate it, and work to improve. When completed, the study results will be provided for program improvement and decision making for staff and administration at the high school.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school using a mixed-methods approach with a convergent design. The transition to high school referenced the transition from eighth-grade to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year of high school. During the spring 2017 semester, teacher interviews and teacher, student, and parent surveys provided data for answering the research questions:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

The framework for presenting the findings for the interviews includes a narrative summary of the sample population and the findings from the interviews conducted. The framework for presenting the results and findings for the surveys includes a description of the sample followed by a summary of results and findings. As the study was grounded in program evaluation, data analysis trends were considered to develop themes that emerged from the four unique sample groups to answer the research questions and provide insight into interventions that participants believed were working well and possible improvements that could be made within the Freshman Academy.

Results and Findings

Research Question 1

Sample. Freshman Academy teachers that work directly with freshman students participated in interviews during the spring 2017 semester. Eight teachers who taught students in the subjects of either math, English, social studies, or science were interviewed. In addition, five support certified staff who work with freshman students and focused on either transition, special education, or teaching English to second language learners were also interviewed. Teaching experience varied from participants with just a few years of teaching experience to over twenty years of teaching experience. Two participants were teacher of the year candidates in the past five years representing the district, and two teachers earned recognition from the district for their teaching during the 2016-2017 school year. The participants were members of the Freshman Academy professional learning community and provide ongoing feedback on interventions and procedures during the school year. The interview sessions were audio recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. Participants agreed on the location of the interview and signed consent forms prior to participation.

Findings. The framework for the interview sessions included eight questions and allowed time for follow up on answers. Participants were also allowed to provide additional responses after interviews were transcribed. The interview questions included:

1. “Describe your experience working with freshman students.”
2. “How do you feel that the Freshman Academy prepares students for their high school experience?”
3. “What does administration need to do to support student transition?”
4. “What do teachers need to do to support student transition?”

5. “Why do you think that some students do not transition successfully?”
6. “What additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed to ensure more students transition successfully?”
7. “How has relocating the Freshman Academy in this school year impacted the overall program?”
8. “What does it mean to be a teacher in the Freshman Academy?”

Analysis was conducted by looking at each individual question from the perspective of all participants. First cycle-coding looked for themes to emerge from the participants. Second cycle-coding was used to find common themes that emerged in all answers and summarize findings.

Describe your experience working with freshman students. Participants often shared the age groups they have taught. Of the teachers that participated, some had taught older, some had taught younger, and some had only taught freshman students. As they described their experiences working with freshman students, the overarching theme that emerged was developing the student. Teachers talked about different structures to support students both academically and socially, and how these supports were changed as the year progressed from the first semester to the second semester. Many participants saw their responsibility was to get students on the right path and to assist them in making the right choices for their individual futures. Many of the teachers also commented on how great this age group was to teach. One respondent stated:

They are an incredible group of kids with an amazing amount of potential, that I think they don't realize quite yet. I love their curiosity and their desire for independence and their struggle to try and balance being a kid and being adult. They're just really cool. I think part of why I really like working with freshmen is that there is always something different going on every day and they have no problem going wherever you ask them to go. If you say, "I want to try this cool new thing." They say, "Sure, let's do it." And they're into it. Even if they have a bad day, the next day is always better. So, I just think

that they have a unique place in our building because they think differently and they operate differently and they're just cool to be around.

The experience of working with freshman was a positive for all respondents. When asked what it takes the students to grow, one teacher responded, "Conversations and relationships with other people. I think actually trying to get them to think and trying to get them to process that there's a real world, and they're closer to being part of that world."

How do you feel that the Freshman Academy prepares students for their high school experience? As teachers reflected on this question, the responses focused beyond the interventions and procedures to bigger concepts and summarized that the Freshman Academy at this high school:

- Provides an understanding of high school structures
- Allows for a place to learn how to develop community;
- Establishes a framework of supports for students to succeed.

One teacher said:

I think that when our supports are implemented correctly, that they do work. I don't know that they work for every single student, but I think we're good at reaching some of the more at-risk kids that maybe would've fallen through the cracks without the supports.

Teachers made comments on how the freshman students are closely monitored and the gradual release of control should take place as student matured from the beginning of the year to the end of the school year. One teacher described how to teach freshman students:

I think that part of our job as freshmen teachers is not only to teach them our content but to teach them how to learn our content and how to learn the school game; how to be successful in the class, but also how to get what they want out of a class; how to respond appropriately in social situations; how to be a good person. And I think that the Freshman Academy does a really good job of building in some systemic things to help kids do that, to learn how to learn. I think that's our job here – To teach them how to learn in all aspects, not just the school part.

Almost all responses focused on building a community that expanded beyond just the teacher

and student relationship, and they included that they had conversations with students about how to make good choices in and out of school and the resources available to reach success.

What does administration need to do to support student transition? When asking this question, teachers were commenting on how I needed to support transition as I am both the researcher and administrator of the program. Almost all participants made a comment on the importance of administration being moved during the 2016-2017 school year to a location within the Freshman Academy versus a more remote location. Teachers noted this as being important because students could see administration's presence. One teacher summarized this by stating, "I think one of the things this year in particular that has been important to our kids is the administrator just being present and being available." Another teacher said, "I like that you're down here with the 9th graders."

The move of the Freshman Academy in physical location in the building was executed at the start of the 2016-2017 school year, and with the move of the Freshman Academy, an office housing both the administrator and counselor was within proximity to the freshman classrooms. In the past, the administrator and counselor were housed in an area that did not allow teachers to walk students to the office or to see the dynamics of the office on an hourly basis. Teachers also believed this move supported them. One teacher commented, "I think this helped make sure that you realized that teachers don't just send kids out for no reason. It was a big thing."

In addition to the physical presence, teachers also expressed ways that administration could better assist in the transition process. Responses included more transition support for teachers and to involve the teachers in the transition process from eighth grade to the freshman year. One teacher commented that going down to the middle school to meet with students would be helpful, and another teacher wanted to meet with eighth grade teachers to develop plans for

students who might struggle the following year. In addition, one teacher requested expanded offerings of outside speakers and field trips related to college and career readiness.

Teachers also talked about discipline and administration. One teacher talked about consequences:

I think a lot of people think that administration should be tougher, but I also think the real thing is that consequence must play themselves out, the freshmen years has to play itself out. I think if things were stricter, discipline consequences, I'm not sure that it would lead to any different outcomes.

Another teacher commented that the discipline was there, but seemed to be more consistent at the end of the school year as administration and teachers learn what works and does not work.

Another teacher said:

At times I think administration is almost, I won't say too easy, but that's what I'm going to say because I think that students need to find out what the real consequence is going to be, because when they do move on or even into life, there are consequences for those poor choices.

When questioned on ways this could be established, teachers were unable to provide a framework for improving the procedures, and some moved onto the importance of communication between teachers and administration so that teachers could better understand the process. One teacher said, "I'm not sure. I just think that in some cases, I think that the kids are doing things to see what the consequence's going to be."

What do teachers need to do to support student transition? When asked about what teachers need to do support transition the prominent response was the building of relationships with students, parents, and other teachers. When talking about students, teachers discussed that they needed to continue to improve and be more consistent with holding students more accountable, providing more organizational structures, conducting required grade checks, and adapting to the culture of the class. Teachers also talked about relying on one another to make

improvements and talking about ideas within the professional learning community.

Why do you think that some students do not transition successfully? Teachers provided several reasons for why they think that some students do not transition successfully in the freshman year. These answers focused on the following:

- Pressures outside of school
- Habits and attitudes associated with school
- Past school performance
- Inability to balance the demand of school

As responses were given, teachers also commented on ways they were helping students transition. One teacher stated:

There's a million different reasons I think. I think some kids have a hard time finding the motivation to be successful. I hate to say they probably don't see it at home because I'm sure parents are doing their best to make sure that they're kids are successful, but I really think the important thing is to help them tune in and find that thing at school that makes them get up and come here every day. I truly think that's why some kids don't do well here, they haven't found their thing.

Connecting to school was often a solution to successful transition, and teachers believed that if students could build relationships and get involved transition would be easier. They also believed that it was easy to get behind and struggle to balance the demands of school. A teacher summarized this by stating:

It's really easy to miss a day of school in the first month and then decide, "Wait, this is a lot of work," and quit on it. If teachers aren't there with the right kinds of supports, it's easy to fall through the cracks because if you miss a day and don't turn in a worksheet, it's a heck of a lot easier to not turn in the big project that's coming up or the large essay. I think they get very, very overwhelmed. I think it's stressful to be in 9th grade.

Teachers also stated that students do not see the long-term consequences of their actions. As spoken many times throughout the interview, students are experiencing growth and maturity

during this year, and learning that their actions have consequences that they may not have had previously in their schooling.

What additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed to ensure more students transition successfully? As teachers answered this question, many teachers started with a reflection on what is already being done in the Freshman Academy to help students transition successfully. They would talk about the importance of continuing to reflect and build upon what has been established and implementing interventions, resources, and supports with fidelity. When pressed on what could be done in addition to those resources, interventions, or supports already in place, some teacher focused on social skills and community building. One teacher spoke about the overall community and how implementing more time to building community could help students:

More community building. I think that would be great for these kids because, you know, there's always cliques, they're always things like that. I think especially in this school most of these kids have known each other for a long time and just reestablishing that community, especially when it comes to high school politics and all the stuff that they're interested in socially, just getting them back together and finding some common bond between them, may strengthen relationships. I won't say it's going to fix everything but I think just fostering that community could benefit them.

Another teacher spoke about how involvement in sports and activities would help improve student outcomes based on experience as a coach:

I think, and this is my bias for being a coach, I think we need more involvement in our activities. If you took data on the kids that play multiple sports, their GPA would be higher compared to kids that play no sports, and we can throw more activities in there. That's an additional adult building a relationship. That's an additional adult keeping them on task or checking in on them. I think the more positive adult relationship these kids have, the better it is. When I see so many of the kids, especially freshmen, they don't get their paper work filled out because they're irresponsible. They ask their parents to help them out. The parents don't help them out. Now, they can't play a sport. Then their grades drop. They have no academic eligibility. So now they're not playing another sport. Their freshmen year, done. I can name 10 kids off the top of my head if they would've played sports, five of them, in my own opinion, would've had better grades.

To compete in activities in the state, students must pass five class each semester to maintain eligibility. Students who do compete may have higher grade point averages because of this mandate on grades for eligibility.

Other ideas that were presented include the following resources, interventions and supports:

- More qualified staff in the classroom
- Peer tutors in the classroom
- Parent nights

The common theme between all additional resources was relationship building – people making a difference in students’ lives.

How has relocating the Freshman Academy in this school year impacted the overall program? Many teachers commented on this relocation during the question regarding what administration should do to support student transition. Responses remained positive about the overall impact on the program. Teachers also said that the biggest impact came from the move of the administrator and counselor to a location within the Freshman Academy and made the following comments about this change:

- “Incredibly positively. I don’t know if it is the location, in that it is away from the rest of the building as much as it is having principal and counselor in the vicinity.”
- “I think the teachers feel more supported by principal, you, if I can say that. I think that you understand or got to know the teachers even better and you get to know the students even better. You see them with interactions in the hall because you’re there a lot more...both the positive and the negative.”
- “I kind of thinks it's the fact that the counselor and the administrator are in amongst them

makes a difference. I think that even the most successful students now know the administrator and counselor where often they didn't beforehand. Also, it just seems to be a better situation.”

The only drawback that was made by one staff member was that other staff in the building were not as familiar with the freshman students so when freshman students traveled outside of the Freshman Academy accountability could easily decline as teacher did not know these students.

What does it mean to be a teacher in the Freshman Academy? This question brought many approaches to answers, but the consistency remained that the teachers in the Freshman Academy are part of a team that holds each other accountable. The teachers in the Freshman Academy are the first impression students have of high school, and the teachers should establish a foundation and make a difference. Some of the comments included:

- “I think it means you get support to give support. I think all of us here understand that for kids to be successful, we cannot go it alone, that we have to work as a team...I think to be a freshmen teacher means that you have to be open minded and you have to be willing to still learn some stuff because I'm learning new things every day, but also that my role is not just a teacher of kids; my role is to help other teachers too.”
- “I do believe you have to have really, really strong teachers for the Freshman Academy to retain your students. That's the make or break year for them, you know? That's their first impression of high school.”
- “I just love the freshman, I do. They're like my world because they're just fun kids. They just need the guidance. They haven't figured it out yet. And I look forward every day to coming in and working with them. They're just like my highlight. I worry about them just like they're my own children.”

Teachers remarked that teaching was a responsibility to both each other and the students. They saw working in the freshman academy as a family, “It’s like we have our own special little thing...it’s got a family oriented kind of situation.”

Summary of Results and Findings for Research Question 1. The research question for this section was “How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students’ successful transition into high school?” In summary, teachers believed that the interventions that are in place were having a positive influence on students’ successful transition into high school, and made comments on teaching in the Freshman Academy, the influences that impacted the Freshman Academy, and how additional interventions could help students. Summary statements from the sessions include:

- Students experience growth in both academics and social skills during the freshman year.
- Students need an environment that provides an understanding of high school structures, allows for a place to learn how to develop community, and establishes scaffolded supports for students to succeed.
- Students and teachers need to be supported by administration.
- Teachers need to improve and be more consistent with holding students more accountable, providing more organizational structures, conducting required grade checks, and adapting to the culture of the class within the support of a professional learning community.
- Students may struggle to perform due to pressures outside of school, habits and attitudes associated with school, past school performance, and the inability to balance the demand of school.
- Students may benefit from enhanced community building and social curriculum,

additional support from qualified staff and peer tutors in the classroom, more involvement in activities and athletics, and additional community building between school and home.

- Students and teachers benefit from increased support from the administrator and counselor when they are located within a proximity to the freshman classrooms.
- Freshman teachers provide a foundation for students' high school experiences.

Research Question 2

Sample. During the spring 2017 semester, 78 certified staff members at this high school were provided an opportunity to respond to a survey (see Appendix B) based on their perceptions of the Freshman Academy. While the survey was open, 48 certified staff or 62% of the total certified staff population in the comprehensive high school responded (see Table 4.1).

Responding staff had various levels of experience in the building (See Table 4.2) and worked with students in the fields of Mathematics/English/Science/Social Studies, Career and Technical Education, and other elective subject areas (See Table 4.3).

Table 4.1
Research Question 2: Sample Overview

As a teacher, I work primarily with the following students:	n	%
Who are in their first year of high school	9	18.75
Who have completed their freshman year and are in year 2-4 of high school	14	29.17
Both	25	52.08

Note. $N = 48$.

Table 4.2
Research Question 2: Teaching Experience in this High School

I have worked in this high school (including this year):	n	%
1-5 years	25	52.08
6-10 years	7	14.58
11-15 years	10	20.83
16+ years	6	12.50

Note. N = 48. Total of percentages is not 100 because of rounding.

Table 4.3
Research Question 2: Teaching Area of Respondents

I primarily teach the following subject areas:	n	%
Mathematics/English/Science/Social Studies	23	47.92
Career and Technical Education	6	12.50
Other Elective Area	19	39.58

Note. N = 48.

Results. Certified staff perception questions focused on both quantitative and qualitative responses. In this section, quantitative results are reported based on the direct survey questions (See Appendix B) that required answers be given through multiple-choice responses, rank order, and judgment responses. Questions were designed to gather perception information on topics such as the purpose of the Freshman Academy, the interventions implemented within the Freshman Academy, the opinion on the effectiveness of the Freshman Academy, and involvement and ability for change within the Freshman Academy.

After demographic responses, the survey started with a multiple-choice question regarding the purpose of the Freshman Academy (See Table 4.4) with most respondents answering that the purpose of the Freshman Academy is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.

Table 4.4
Research Question 2: The Purpose of the Freshman Academy

The purpose of the Freshman Academy:	n	%
To prepare students academically and socially for high school.	35	72.92
To prepare students for academic success	7	14.58
To ensure students promote to their sophomore year.	2	4.17
To isolate students until they are mature enough for high school.	4	8.33

Note. $N = 48$.

Those that answered to isolate students until they are mature enough for high school were teachers that taught either a career and technical education course or elective course. The answer of preparing students for academic success or ensuring students promote to their sophomore year are clustered under goals of the Freshman Academy. This question also provided a benchmark to ensure answers moving forward were valid as an assumption was then made that the certified teachers understood the purpose of the Freshman Academy.

Two questions directly addressed the interventions within the Freshman Academy that include the freshman enrollment process: January assembly, enrollment days, THS spring tour; link crew mentoring program; freshman first day orientation; freshman study hall; student of the week; quarterly incentives for students who earn “C” or better in all classes; future 101 course; common grade level expectations and procedures; designated administrator and counselor; and designated core content area teachers in a common location. Teachers were first asked to rank order the interventions followed by using a scaled rating of very important, important, not important, or neither important or not important. When ranked, 13 responses ranked common grade level expectations and procedures as the top intervention, 11 responses ranked the designated administrator and counselor as the top intervention, and 6 responses ranked the core content area teachers in a common location as the top intervention. These 30 responses make up

62.5% of the responses for the top interventions. The breakdown of rankings (See Table 4.5) showed that no one ranked the student incentive programs as top interventions for preparing students for high school success. However, when the shift was made to mark interventions as very important, important, not important, or neither important or not important, most of the responses marked these interventions as important or even very important (See Table 4.6).

Table 4.5

Research Question 2: Average Ranking of Freshman Academy Interventions

Intervention	Score
Common Grade Level Expectations and Procedures	7.67
Designated Administrator and Counselor	7.13
Designated Core Content Area Teachers in a Common Location	7.08
Freshman Study Hall	6.04
Freshman First Day Orientation	5.96
Future 101 Course	5.58
Link Crew Mentoring Program	5.46
Freshman Enrollment Process: January Assembly, enrollment days, spring tour	4.29
Quarterly Incentives for Students who earn “C” or better in all classes	2.94
Student of the Week	2.85

Note. Rankings were done 1-10.

Table 4.6
Research Question 2: Average Rating of Freshman Academy Interventions

Intervention	M	SD
Designated Administrator and Counselor	1.29	.54
Common Grade Level Expectations and Procedures	1.41	.57
Freshman Study Hall	1.45	.50
Freshman First Day Orientation	1.46	.50
Designated Core Content Area Teachers in a Common Location	1.50	.54
Future 101 Course	1.74	.75
Link Crew Mentoring Program	1.76	.67
Freshman Enrollment Process: January Assembly, enrollment days, spring tour	1.82	.68
Student of the Week	2.09	.60
Quarterly Incentives for Students who earn “C” or better in all classes	2.14	.62

Note. Rankings were done with a value of 1 for very important, 2 for important and 3 for not important.

Other questions asked focused on whether the Freshman Academy prepared students to be successful in grades 10-12 (See Table 4.7) and whether students benefited from the resources and interventions in the Freshman Academy (See Table 4.8). Certified staff was questioned if they believed that changing the location of the Freshman Academy in the 2016-2017 school year influenced student success during the freshman year (See Table 4.9).

Table 4.7
Research Question 2: High School Preparedness

The Freshman Academy prepares students to be successful in grades 10-12	n	%
Yes	25	53.19
No	6	12.77
Undecided	16	34.04

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Table 4.8
Research Question 2: Benefits for At-Risk Students

At-risk students benefit from the resources and interventions in the Freshman Academy.	n	%
Yes	32	68.09
No	4	8.57
Undecided	11	23.40

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Table 4.9
Research Question 2: Location

Do you believe that changing the location of the Freshman Academy in the 2016-2017 school year had an effect on the success of students in their freshman year?	n	%
Positive effect	37	78.72
Negative effect	1	2.13
No Effect	9	19.15

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Certified staff was also asked for their perceptions on the administration (See Table 4.10), teachers (See Table 4.11), and parents (See Table 4.12). The responses focused on listening to new ideas and support for students during the freshman year.

Table 4.10
Research Question 2: Perception on Administration

Is administration in the Freshman Academy open to listening to new ideas to support students who struggle with the transition to high school?	n	%
Yes	29	61.70
No	1	2.13
Undecided	17	36.17

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Table 4.11
Research Question 2: Perception on Teacher Support

Are teachers supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students so that those students are successful transitioning to high school?	n	%
Yes – Most or all are supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students	19	40.43
Yes – Some are supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students	24	51.06
No	1	2.13
Undecided	3	6.38

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Table 4.12
Research Question 2: Perception on Parental Support

Are teachers supportive of trying interventions for at-risk students so that those students are successful transitioning to high school?	n	%
Yes – Most or all are supportive	1	2.13
Yes – Some are supportive	35	74.47
No	3	6.38
Undecided	8	17.02

Note. N=47 – one respondent skipped response.

Findings. The results for the survey provided an overview that the teaching staff in the high school understand the Freshman Academy and the value in providing this support for students. While just a snapshot of numbers to questions asked, the qualitative data provided in short answer responses provided their perceptions in a more holistic snapshot. Certified staff was asked their perceptions through the following short answer questions:

- “What do students need to do to help themselves during the transition to high school?”
(36 responses)
- “What should parents do to support their student during the transition to high school?”
(36 responses)

- “What should teachers do to support students transitioning to high school?” (32 responses)
- “What should the counselor in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school?” (33 responses)
- “What should administration in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school?” (35 responses)
- “Why do you think some students do not do well in their first year of high school?” (38 responses)
- “What resources, interventions and supports do you believe are most important for student success?” (36 responses)

The short answer responses were first coded separately for content. Second cycle-coding was used to find common themes that emerged in all answers.

What do students need to do to help themselves during the transition to high school? The common themes that emerged from the 32 respondents were for freshman students to be responsible and self-aware, build relationships with people in the building, use the resources available, and be involved. More than half of respondents built in responsibility and self-awareness into their responses. Those responses included some of the following responses:

- “Take responsibility for their own learning by asking questions when needed, making the choice to stay after school for study hall, and being organized”
- “Take accountability for their actions and accept the consequences for those actions. Be open to the idea of growth and development as human-beings.”
- “Get enough sleep at night, be on time to class, put away phones and other distractions, pay attention, take notes, study for exams, complete assignments, check Canvas to stay

up-to-date on assignments and grades, and ask questions if they do not understand something.”

- “Students need to learn to advocate for themselves. They also need to have a better understanding of time management and self-discipline.”

Most short answers followed the patterns of these four responses and suggested that students should learn to be organized, self-reliant, and advocate for services.

Other responses expanded the theme of responsibility and included the building of relationships, use of resources, and the importance of being involved. Those that suggested the building of relationship had answers like the following:

- “Understand that the entire staff of the school is here for them”
- “Follow good role models”

Resources that were suggested to students included Freshman Study Hall, teachers, technology tools, and extracurricular activities. The extracurricular activities responses included the importance of getting involved, embracing the high school experience, and the realization that school happens year-round and to be involved in summer activities at the library or through athletics and clubs.

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

With 36 of the respondents responding, the two themes that emerged from this question was increased communication with the school with oversight of student progress combined with stressing the importance of school. One response summarized all others by writing, “Parents should emphasize the importance of attending school and completing assignments in a timely manner. They should also be active their student’s schooling – checking Canvas, communicating with teachers, attending conferences, etc.” Other respondents had variations that included

ensuring that the student is involved in school, has a set schedule and routine, and knows that school is important. One respondent offered how this could be done with parents, “Parents need consistent communication from the high school. Weekly newsletters during the school year, parent camp in the summer.” In addition to how parents could support students during the transition to high school, respondents also often stated how parents could support the four themes that emerged in the question about what students need to do to help themselves transition to high school – be responsible, build relationships, use resources, and be involved.

What should teachers do to support students transitioning to high school? The role of the teacher was described by 32 respondents, and themes emerged that included a gradual release of support so that students would be prepared for expectations in grades 10-12, the building of relationships between teachers and students, the development of high expectations, and communication with home. Responses were intertwined with those responses on what students needed to be successful and what parents needed to do to support their students during the transition to high school. Almost all responses were based on the expectations of students to be successful in high school. Responses included some of the following responses supporting these themes:

- “Help students learn study skills, organization, and time management skills. Break assignments down into small tasks. Start the year being flexible and gradually increase expectations and responsibilities.”
- “Provide opportunities and information; a listening ear as needed; support each student’s unique situation. Teachers should always have high expectations for all students but it is essential for students to learn how to communicate with adults including teachers when things are going well or poorly. Everyone has days that are difficult and it is okay to tell a

teacher you are having a bad day; however, it doesn't mean the teacher is going to expect less."

- "Help students understand what is expected of them and help them problem solve if they are having trouble meeting expectations."
- "Inform parents of the rigor that their child shall be undertaking."
- "Stay in contact with parents; be encouraging and kind, and create engaging lessons to increase chances of success."

With 41% of the certified staff responding, each person shared tools that teachers could use to help students transition to high school. The phrase "high expectations" was found multiple times, and the need for teachers to collaborate for common expectations and course content was also frequently recorded.

What should the counselor in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school? As the 33 respondents answered this question, the answers were not as robust as previous questions, and one respondents simply answered, "Nothing, she's been great," and another answered, "I don't feel like I can accurately answer this." Those that did supply a response related to what the counselor should do to support students transitioning to high school centered the answers around the themes of providing emotional support and providing academic support. Answers included ensuring that students had a place to work through challenges; one response summarized this by responding, "The counselor is there to hear any issues students are having, mediate, and help students resolve problems that are keeping them from learning." Other responses that focused on academic support included ensuring students understood the high school credit system, stressing the importance of high school and post-secondary success, and making sure students were enrolled in the appropriate classes based on abilities.

What should administration in the Freshman Academy do to support students transitioning to high school? The answers in this section from 35 respondents bounced between ensuring students took responsibility for their actions and providing supports so that more students were successful; however, one respondent at the end simply said, “I think the administration does a wonderful job. All of the resources and interventions help students transition.”

Those respondents that wanted to ensure students took responsibility for their actions had some of the following responses:

- “Let them be part of high school; don’t delay the maturing process; let them learn responsibility of their actions.”
- “Continue to give clear and consistent consequences for misbehavior, aligned those consequences give to grades 10-12.”
- “I believe administration needs to be more consistent with the students in the Freshman Academy. I believe administration should have the same set of guidelines for all students and that special treatment of those considered ‘at-risk’ or ‘on the edge’ should not happen. It sets a tone that is unfair and ultimately hinders those students from performing after they move on from the Freshman Academy. I also believe the Freshman Academy administrator should 100% back the teachers.”
- “Continue to work with all students and middle school teachers to help students understand expectations. High school should not be about coddling or only rewards; all choices both good and bad have consequences and the sooner student understand and recognize this the better.”

- “Continue to stress the big picture: why graduating from high school is important, how their grades/transcript follows them (grades count for something now) ...etc.”
- “Do not coddle them academically or in regard to behavior.”

Other respondents focused on administration providing supports for students and teachers, and some of their responses included:

- “Lead the staff in setting high expectations, both behaviorally and academically, for incoming freshman.”
- “Gradually raise expectations as the year progresses so that by the end of 9th grade they are at least ready to enter 10th grade.”
- “Everything about 9th grade is a learning process – administration should support academics and social skills, as a learning process.”
- “Be proactive instead of reactive. Be attentive and focused on all students.”
- “Continue common expectations for 9th grade teachers. Try to transition interventions to the rest of building teachers.”

The common thread that was throughout the section answers focused on ensuring students were ready for the challenges that they would face as high schoolers, while the method on how to do this differed on response. As this answer focused directly on what I do each day, I was very reflective while reading each of the 35 responses and looking for ways to support teachers and students with the transition process and considered reflected back on answers as to what students, teachers, parents, and the counselor needed to do to also help students transition and how to support in those endeavors.

Why do you think some students do not do well in their first year of high school?

Overwhelmingly, the 38 respondents to this question focused on poor academic performance and

expectations in past academic settings followed by maturity and social reasons. One respondent summarized it by saying:

They are experiencing a ton of change and do not have the necessary tools to do it gracefully. They have never been held accountable for their actions in the way high school students are. Ultimately, I believe middle school does not prepare students for high school because they treat them as elementary students instead of students transitioning from children to young adults. So, all that change and transition happens their freshman year and a majority of immature students can't handle it so behavior or academic problems arise. I also think the students don't believe they will have to retake courses if they fail them. This is the first time where they have to truly earn a passing grade to move on in high school.

Other respondents hit on one or all the identified areas in the following responses:

- “Students are not willing to do work outside of the classroom. Students are not held to deadlines so they feel a due date does not matter. Some students feel they know how to study and/or prepare for formal assessments, but in reality, they don't know how to prepare.”
- “Not motivated, still immature, wrong friends/influences.”
- “Lack or unwilling to adapt to new demands of high school. Lack the understanding that expectations in high school are much different than previous schools.”
- “High school can be intimidating. In a diverse setting, there are so many paths a student can take. A good kid can make friends with no-so-good influences and take an unsavory life path.”

One respondent identified both the reasons why a student might not transition successful and how to intervene in the response, “They don't understand the long term need to do well...they don't have a vision for their life. We need to create consistent language/talk and infuse it into daily interactions.”

What resources, interventions and supports do you believe are most important for student success? The 36 respondents in this section often responded with resources, interventions, and supports that are in place within the Freshman Academy at this school, and those most listed included: freshman study hall, mentoring programs, school extracurricular activities, freshman first day, future 101 course, and common expectations. However, people were intertwined into the most answers provided. Here are some of those responses:

- “A true, complete circle of family, school, and child surrounding the academic or career success of the child.”
- “Encouragement from parents, teachers, peers, and other staff.”
- “Having people there to listen that know what it’s like to be in high school.”
- “More speakers, exposure to life after high school; career readiness; expect more than just minimum wage.”
- “Caring teachers and supportive families.”
- “All adults in the building must be encouraging and kind to students. As much one-on-one time students can get with adults will be beneficial.”
- “Caring adults, remediation if students are academically behind. Challenging activities for high achieving students.”

The common theme that emerged from this section is that people make a difference in students’ lives. Those outlier answers included interventions such as smaller class sizes, increased accountability for students, and more career exploration – all meaning more interaction with adults.

Summary of Results and Findings for Research Question 2. The research question for this section was “What are staff’s perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students

for success in high school?” The question focused on both quantitative and qualitative reporting to find possible answers to understand the problem of practice that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year at this high school. Summaries from 62% of certified staff included the use of multiple-choice responses, rank order, judgment responses, and short answers.

In the quantitative results, certified staff provided responses that demonstrated an understanding of the Freshman Academy and expressed the importance of interventions within the Freshman Academy. Respondents placed the highest importance on common grade level expectations and procedures, a designated administrator and counselor, and the core content area teachers in a common location as the top intervention. In addition, most certified staff perceived that the Freshman Academy was preparing students to be successful in grades 10-12, and the interventions in place had a positive effect on at-risk students. In addition, 78.72% of certified staff believed that moving the Freshman Academy in 2016-2017 school year had a positive effect on the success of students in their freshman year. Finally, certified staff also reported that they believed that administration was open to listening to new ideas, that all or some teachers were supportive of trying new interventions so that at-risk students are successful transition to high school, and most or some parents are supportive of their students during the transition to high school.

The qualitative data uncovered in the short answer questions was coded for common themes. The first four questions focused on what students, parents, teachers, counselor, and administration could do to support students with the transition:

- The themes that emerged when asked what students needed to do to help themselves during the transition to high school included to be responsible and self-aware, build relationships with people in the building, use the resources available, and be involved.
- The themes that emerged when questioned about what parents could do to support their children during the transition to high school centered on increased communication with the school with oversight of student progress combined with stressing the importance of school.
- The themes that emerged when questioned about what teachers could do to support students with the transition to high school included a gradual release of support so that students would be prepared for expectations in grades 10-12, the building of relationships between teachers and students, the development of high expectations, and communication with home.
- The themes that emerged when questioned about what the counselor could do to support student transition to high school included providing emotional support and providing academic support.
- The themes that emerged when questioned about what the administrator could do to support student transition to high school included ensuring students took responsibility for their actions and providing supports so that more students were successful.

Another short answer question focused on why some students may not transition successfully to high school, and the themes that emerged included poor academic performance and expectations in past academic settings followed by maturity and social reasons. Certified staff was then asked what resources, interventions and supports they believed are most important for student success,

and while answers listed those resources, interventions, and supports already in place, the answers were intertwined with people making the biggest difference in student success.

Research Question 3

Sample. Students in the 2019 and 2020 cohort provided perception data on the Freshman Academy through a survey to answer the research question: What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? The survey population was the 525 students enrolled in the English 9 and English 10 courses during the spring 2017 semester. Of the population, the sample that participated by providing assent and parental consent was 51.8% or 272 of the 525 students (See Table 4.13).

Table 4.13

Research Question 3: Sample Student Population

Graduation Cohort Year	N	n	%
Class of 2019	251	127	51.4
Class of 2020	274	143	52.2

Note. $N = 525$.

In the actual population that took the survey responses showed a difference between graduation class and grade classification as some of the students had not earned enough credits as freshmen to promote to the classification of sophomore (See Table 4.14). In addition, students provided demographic information based on their schooling history (See Table 4.15) and academic performance (See Table 4.16).

Table 4.14

Research Question 3: Sample Student Population Grade Classification

Grade Classification	n	%
Grade 10	121	45.32
Grade 9	146	54.68

Note. $N=272$ – five respondents skipped response.

Table 4.15
Research Question 3: Sample Student Population Schooling History

Descriptor Statement	n	%
I have always attended school in this school district.	113	41.54
I have moved in and out of this school district.	26	9.56
I started attending this school district in elementary school.	56	20.59
I started attending this school district in middle school.	51	18.75
I started attending this school district in high school.	26	9.56

Note. N=272

Table 4.16
Research Question 3: Sample Student Population Academic Performance Description

Descriptor Statement	n	%
I maintain an “A” or “B” grade in all my classes.	88	32.35
I never get anything below a “C” grade in all my classes.	57	20.96
I sometimes get a “D” in a class but I always pass my classes.	73	26.84
I have received an “F” grade, but most of my classes are passing a “D” or better.	51	18.75
I struggle in all my classes, and I usually have more than one “F” grade in a class.	9	3.31

Note. N=272

Results. Student survey questions focused on both quantitative and qualitative responses. In this section, quantitative results are reported based on the direct survey questions (See Appendix B) that required answers be given through multiple-choice responses, rank order, and judgment responses. Questions were designed to gather perception information on topics such as the interventions implemented within the Freshman Academy, the events and people that helped the most during the freshman year, and the overall perception of high school during the freshman year. Students were first asked about 12 events and people and if these events and people helped them during their freshman year (See Table 4.17). The highest response rate was coupled between teachers and parents; of the respondents, 85.02% responded that a teacher helped them

and 82.02% responded that a parent helped them. The lowest response rate was from the possibility of being student of the week, and only 27.99% responded that this helped them.

Table 4.17
Research Question 3: Events or People that Helped During the Freshman Year

Descriptor	Yes %	No %	Unsure %	N/A %	n
Freshman First Day Orientation	64.55	15.30	14.18	5.95	268
Freshman Enrollment during 8 th Grade	60.30	17.60	14.98	7.12	267
Link Crew Peer Mentors	66.30	17.04	12.59	4.07	270
Freshman Study Hall	61.80	14.98	8.24	14.98	267
The Opportunity to Attend Quarterly Incentive	52.43	21.72	19.48	6.37	267
The Possibility of Being Student of the Week	27.99	45.90	17.91	8.21	268
Future 101 or Advocacy	64.93	20.90	9.70	4.48	268
Activities or Athletics	63.67	20.97	8.99	6.37	267
A Teacher	85.02	9.74	4.12	1.12	267
A Counselor	54.14	28.03	13.26	4.55	264
An Administrator	44.49	30.80	19.77	4.94	263
My Parent(s)	82.02	9.74	4.49	3.75	267

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

Students were then asked to mark what was the most helpful event or person during their freshman year with a short answer spot allowed for “other” to be marked (See Table 4.18). Of the 271 respondents to this question, 22.51% responded that a teacher was the most important person that helped them during their freshman year. The answers dropped about 10% from this point and included parents, freshman study hall, and activities or athletics. In addition, 240 respondents did indicate that they attended the Freshman First Day Orientation and 193 attended Freshman Study Hall during their freshman year.

Table 4.18
Research Question 3: Most Important Events or People that Helped During the Freshman Year

Descriptor	%	n
Freshman First Day Orientation	9.23	25
Freshman Enrollment during 8 th Grade	0.74	2
Link Crew Peer Mentors	8.12	22
Freshman Study Hall	12.55	34
The Opportunity to Attend Quarterly Incentive	1.85	5
The Possibility of Being Student of the Week	1.11	3
Future 101 or Advocacy	9.96	27
Activities or Athletics	11.81	32
A Teacher	22.51	61
A Counselor	4.06	11
An Administrator	2.21	6
My Parent(s)	12.55	34
Other	3.32	9

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

The students that responded “other” to this answer most often responded with a “friend” or “self” as the response; with one student naming a paraprofessional that works in the Freshman Academy.

The Freshman Academy structure does have in place both academic supports and social and emotional supports. When asked about these, students perceived that they were supported in both areas (See Table 4.19 and 4.20) as most students felt supported with a response of “yes” and others with a response of “sometimes.” In addition, 89.30% of students responded that as a freshman student that someone asked what he or she wanted to do upon graduating from high school. Furthermore, student respondents also had favorable responses (See Table 4.21) when asked if they felt safe at school, had an adult they could trust at school, felt they could be successful at school, knew what to expect behaviorally, and if they liked school.

Table 4.19

Research Question 3: The Following People are Supportive of Students Academically

Staff Member	Yes %	Sometimes %	No %	Unsure %	n
Freshman Academy Teachers	65.06	31.23	1.86	1.86	269
Freshman Academy Counselor	61.48	22.22	5.19	11.11	270
Freshman Academy Principal	57.99	20.45	8.92	12.64	269

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

Table 4.20

Research Question 3: The Following People are Supportive of Students Socially and Emotionally

Staff Member	Yes %	Sometimes %	No %	Unsure %	n
Freshman Academy Teachers	46.49	40.22	8.86	4.43	271
Freshman Academy Counselor	63.60	18.75	6.62	11.03	272
Freshman Academy Principal	39.48	29.15	13.65	17.71	271

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

Table 4.21

Research Question 3: Overall School Questions

Question	Yes %	Sometimes %	No %	Unsure %	n
Do you feel safe at school?	59.04	34.69	4.06	2.21	271
Do you have an adult at school you trust?	67.65	14.71	6.25	11.40	272
Did you feel that you could be successful?	66.67	24.44	4.81	4.07	270
Did you know what was expected of you behaviorally?	88.56	7.75	2.21	1.48	271
Did you like school?	35.29	44.12	6.99	13.60	272

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

The quantitative data provided a set of numbers that represented that students had supports during the freshman year of high school and people that they believed were supportive academically, socially, and emotionally. As the researcher and Freshman Academy principal, I was reflective of answers and saw room for improvement in myself, but overall, student data

shows that the Freshman Academy is a safe, productive place for students to learn. A deeper dive into the short answers will provide additional insight beyond the statistically analysis.

Findings. In the short answer section of the survey, student respondents were asked questions to expand on their perceptions of the Freshman Academy. The following questions were asked:

- “Why do you think this event or person was most helpful?” (269 responses) follow up to the question “What was the most helpful event or person during your freshman year of high school?”
- “What was the most important thing about the Freshman Academy?” (269 responses)
- “In a perfect world, what needs to happen during the freshman year at school?” (271 responses)
- “Please share anything else you would like someone to know about the freshman year.” (244 responses)

The short answer responses were first coded separately for content. Second cycle-coding was used to find common themes that emerged in all answers.

Why do you think this event or person was most helpful? When responding to this question in the results section, student respondents selected most often that a teacher was the most helpful person. The common thread that emerged when asked why this person was the most helpful they commented on the individual relationship built between a student and teacher.

Student responses were centered on how teachers provided them encouragement, accountability, and guidance. Some respondents answered by stating the following:

- “They would always put me in a better mood and make sure that I left school happy and understanding what I needed to know.”

- “The teacher was really behind me 100% telling me not to give up.”
- “She understood my position and slowed down to receive and accept my presence.”
- “The teachers here have always helped me with everything I needed. They showed me where all my classes were.”
- “They helped me a lot with assignments, and when I was going downhill, they made me feel like there was still hope.”
- “They didn't give up even when I did.”
- “This person was not only a teacher but someone I could depend on. He never gave up on me, no matter the circumstances. Not only did he help me in the classroom, he also continued to help me outside of the classroom with a very bad situation in my life. There is nothing I could do to repay him.”
- “Because she always talked things out with me event when I didn't have a great attitude.”

After teachers, students most often selected parents as a support that was most helpful during their freshman year. Students who selected the parent listed reasons like the students that selected a teacher and included responses about encouragement, accountability, and guidance. In addition, students also made comments that a parent would help them understand the importance of high school. One students responded by providing information about the education level in the home, “My dad always tells me he didn’t graduate so I have to.” Another responded by writing about her mom, “She talked to me about my future and made me realize I need to try in high school.”

After teacher and parent, two events were listed most frequently as something that was most helpful during the freshman year – freshman study hall and activities and athletics. Students who listed freshman study hall as the most important event made comments on how this time

provided “a chance to fix mistakes” or “get help on work.” One student wrote, “It was helpful because it supported me to stay with all A’s in all my classes.” While many others commented on needing the additional time to keep up in classes. Students who listed activities or athletics as the most important event had two ideas that emerged – the importance of the coaches that supported them and the need to maintain good grades to stay eligible to compete.

One student who responded “other” added three people – best friend, mom, and big brother, and then wrote, “My best friend keeps me on track and helps with makeup work sometimes; my mom and big brother reminded me of my dreams and helped me with my work and got me motivated.” In summary, when looking at why an event or person was most helpful, the common themes of encouragement, accountability, and guidance were listed as reasons people of events were most important for students, and students who listed other things as their top answer stayed focused on these themes in their responses.

What was the most important thing about the Freshman Academy? Student responses for this question centered around three areas that included the structures provided during the transition year, the location of the Freshman Academy within the building, and the community within the Freshman Academy. Structures mentioned included freshman study hall, curriculum focused on transition, and link crew mentorship. The location of the Freshman Academy focused on the importance of having a place that was “theirs” and having all the classes so close together. One student responded, “I was surrounded by people that I’ve known, so I didn’t feel too out of place.” Both responses were overshadowed by the number of respondents that referenced the community made the largest difference. Students listed students, teachers, counselor, and administrator as the most important part of the Freshman Academy. Some of the responses related to people included:

- “The most important thing about the Freshman Academy is that there is always someone around who can help you whether the person is a teacher or a student.”
- “I liked how they payed special attention to us and cared if we failed instead of just throwing us into to high school without any further knowledge of our school system.”
- “I think the most important thing was just the teachers in general. They took time out of their day to teach us and I enjoyed learning from them. Of course, not all teachers were my favorite, but I still respected them.”
- “I feel like the most important thing about the Freshmen Academy was the connection between students and students with teachers. This makes it to where the learning environment is very calm and it also makes it to where student can enjoy lessons and ask questions.”

Of the 269 responses, one student responded by writing, “The most important thing is preparing for the rest of our high school career and just getting the gist of everything. Freshman year is where we try to adapt and learn the best we can.” Students readily identified structures, location, and community as the difference makers.

In a perfect world, what needs to happen during the Freshman Year at school?

Responses in this section were broad. Some students made comments about wanting more interaction with upperclassmen, desiring drinks and food in the classrooms, and more field trips. Others focused on less drama and respect. Most of answers could be categorized into three areas: motivation, passing classes, and future planning. Motivation focused on both extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation. Students suggested more rewards for doing well, but also commented on how they needed to be more motivated to do well. One respondent wrote, “You need to overachieve.” Those that wrote about passing classes recommended that students do their

work, stay after school, learn how to study. They also made comments that the Freshman Academy needed more people to support students and to increase the accountability of students versus “babying” students through their freshman year. When writing about future planning, students were clear that students needed to know where they were going when they graduated and that the Freshman Academy should provide resources and experiences that would foster this process.

Please share anything else you would like someone to know about the freshman year.

When asked to share additional information, student answers continued to focus on the importance of the people who are available to assist students and the importance of doing well in your freshman year. Respondents were students in the last month of their freshmen year and students in the last month of their sophomore year, answers did not vary. Some of the responses included the following:

- “Freshman year is hard and tiring. Don't slack off, learn as much as you can, ask questions and most importantly work hard.”
- “I think you should know that all the teachers and principals are going to be there when you have a problem and need help.”

Other respondents commented on a need for more community building. Responses focused on learning to find friends that would push you to do positive things and to avoid conflict. One student broke down into three steps what students needed to know:

1. Don't worry about the boys or girls because they will distract you from school and focusing on your future needs.
2. Always stay on task and pay attention in class.
3. Try not to miss a lot of school days because you will get behind on school work.

Another student's recommendation was as follows, "Freshman year is the year you step into a whole new opportunity in life. You have many choices of going far in life, or getting dragged down into something bad. If you are a freshman remember to choose your friend group wisely. Even if they are nice to you, they may not have the best intentions for you."

Summary of Results and Findings for Research Question 3. Student survey results and findings focused primarily on the difference that a person can make in the educational process of a student, but also on the need to have a framework that provided the right structures to encourage and motivate students to do well in classes and foster future planning. Most students believed that they had a school that was safe where they were expected to do well. Not all students had favorable responses and when they did not have a favorable response, the students craved elements of this framework. Most students knew that they were expected to do well, and answers in both sections reflected this, and the ability for people to be the biggest difference maker continued to be a theme in this responses that answered the research question for this section.

Research Question 4

Sample. During the spring 2017 semester, households were contacted for the 314 students enrolled at the end of April in the 2020 cohort. The first attempt to reach parents and guardians was done using the student management electronic communication resources located through the student management system. Through this system, 245 portal notifications were sent, 314 emails were sent, and 124 text messages were sent. Information detailed the survey and included the survey link. Parents and guardians also received a call notification to check devices for this information. Due to low response rates, a direct mailing was sent out to 327 homes. After these multiple attempts, 23 surveys were completed. Despite a low response rate, results were

still used to answer the research question: What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

All parents that responded had a student in the Freshman Academy during the 2016-2017 school year with various children dynamics in the household (See Table 4.22). This data was to ensure respondents were both representative of parents who had first time freshman students and those that have students who have been through the transition.

Table 4.22
Research Question 4: Family Description

The following statement best describes our family:	%	n
My freshman student is my only child.	13.04	3
I have children that are both older and younger than my freshman student.	17.39	4
I have a child(ren) older than my freshman student.	30.43	7
I have a child(ren) younger than my freshman student.	39.13	9

Note. Totals of percentages are not 100 for every descriptor because of rounding.

Results. After general household information was supplied by the sample, parents were provided questions that would answer the research question. Parents were polled about the contact they had received from the school from administration and teachers (See Table 4.23) to determine the levels of communication. Parents were also polled on whether they followed social media for the high school (See Table 4.24). As the district has moved paperless in the 2016-2017 school year, uncovering how parents were communicated with would also provide a framework for how they may have shaped their perceptions.

Table 4.23
Research Question 4: Parent Contact

Level of Contact	Administration n	Teachers n
Yes – for something positive	7	4
Yes – for a behavior concern	5	5
Yes – for an academic concern	9	12
I have not been contacted.	10	8

Note. N = 23.

Table 4.24
Research Question 4: Social Media

I follow the school social media on:	n
Facebook and Twitter	3
Facebook	11
Twitter	0
No	9

Note. N = 23.

Parents were also polled regarding Freshman Academy supports and procedures to determine how well they felt they knew these supports (See Table 4.25). Often parents reported that they knew about supports, but wish they knew more, or reported that they did not know about supports. The supports and procedures that they knew the most about were freshman first day, school behavior expectations, and enrollment for the freshman year. Parents knew the least about incentive programs for grades and behaviors.

Table 4.25
Research Question 4: Freshman Academy Supports and Procedures

Support or Procedure	Yes – And I feel that they are well communicated	Yes – But I wish I knew more	No
	n	n	n
Enrollment for Freshman Year	13	9	1
Freshman First Day	15	5	3
Link Crew Peer Mentors	10	5	8
Freshman Study Hall	8	8	7
Quarterly Incentive Grade Celebrations	3	11	9
Student of the Week	4	9	10
Future 101 Class	9	9	5
School Behavior Expectations	14	7	2

Note. $N = 23$.

When asked to rank statements about the school setting, parent respondents responded favorable or neutral across the board in all areas except in a few areas (See Table 4.26). These results show that parents believe the school is doing a good job and believe they were welcome in the school and partner in their child's educational process.

Table 4.26
Research Question 4: Overall School Questions

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	n	n	n	n	n
My child is supported academically at school.	7	11	4	0	1
My child is safe at school.	6	7	8	2	0
My child is being prepared academically at school.	7	8	6	0	2
I feel welcome in my child's school.	10	11	2	0	0
I believe I am a partner in my child's education	11	8	3	0	1

Note. $N = 23$.

The final judgement response on the survey referenced the school district’s mission of achieving success by expecting the best from everyone, and the survey asked parents to respond to the question, “Do you believe that the school is expecting the best from your freshman student?” The responses were recorded and most respondents replied that they did believe that the school is expecting the best (See Figure 4.1).

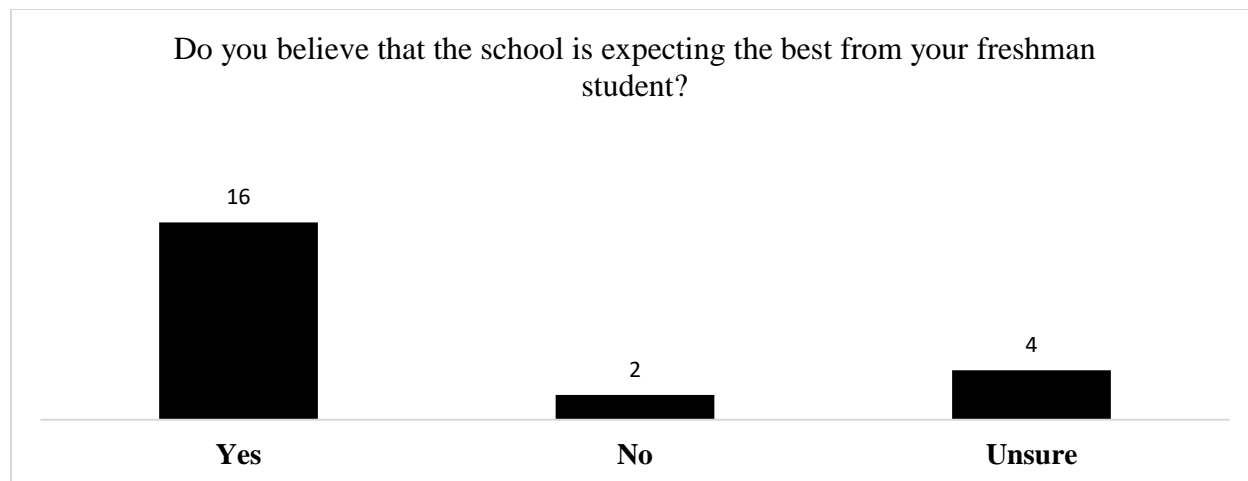


Figure 4.1. Research Question 4: Focus Mission Statement – Do parents believe that the school is expecting the best from their student?

Note. N = 22 – one respondent skipped response.

A space for additional comments was left after this question, and one parent respondent wrote, “I think they have great expectations, but not sure that academically or behaviorally the expectations are the BEST or high enough.”

Findings. Parents were asked two open ended question during the survey. The first question presented asked parents to describe what they wanted for their child at school. The most common answers from the 17 responses that emerged from this question were that they wanted a great education for their child and they wanted their children to be successful. Other responses included the following responses:

- “Approachable teachers who acknowledge both the parents as well as the student regarding the positive things about your child rather than teachers who continue to point out negatives. More encouragement from staff to ensure student feels included.”
- “To continue to have the army that she has and to ensure that she always feels safe and has someone to go to when she doesn't. The school has not failed in this area.”
- “Encouraging, challenging teachers that will be willing to help him even when his attitude makes him want to give up.”
- “I want my child to feel like they can go to the teachers when my child does not understand work especially math which has been a real struggle this year. There is not enough teaching going on. I want my child to feel safe. I feel that the school does not punish bullying behavior at all. I want my child to feel they are in a supportive environment and that bad behavior is not tolerated.”
- “Continued learning in a safe place with exceptional teachers who teach her about more than school. Life lessons!”

Parents were clear on the fact that they want a safe learning environment where their children are supported and challenged. Parents were also asked to use one word to describe their child's freshman year. Responses varied from the 20 respondents and included the following words: busy, exciting, challenging, good, uneventful, discouraging, calm, declining, productive, trying, stressful, super, and possible. The data demonstrated that each home had a different experience, and not every experience had a positive connotation reflected.

Summary of Results and Findings for Research Question 4. Parent response rate was not high enough to be able to reflect the characteristics of the entire population (Creswell, 2015). However, the results do provide insight into the research question: What are parents' perceptions

of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school? The common theme that emerged is more could be done to bridge the communication between the school and home to provide a more supportive learning environment for students. While results reflected that parents trust that the school is doing the best for their student, data showed that the communication could be enhanced to improve the overall learning for students.

Chapter Summary

This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school. The transition to high school referenced the transition from eighth-grade year to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year of high school. Interviews and data were used to answer the four research questions:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students' successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff's perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents' perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

A separate tool was used for each research question, and common themes emerged from the data:

- High school staff knows that the purpose of the Freshman Academy is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.

- Students benefit from resources, supports, and interventions already in place in the Freshman Academy.
- The Freshman Academy has a culture that is open to listening to ideas and implementing interventions to help students.
- Students experience increased responsibility when entering high school.
- Students struggle for many reasons.
- Relationships with students, teachers, and community make the biggest difference in student success.
- Assisting students in getting involved in school activities and athletics may lead to improvement in school.
- Proximity of administrator, counselor, and core teachers has a positive impact on students.
- Participation of teachers in a professional learning community benefits student success.
- Students believe that they had resources for being successful.

In addition, participants in the interviews and surveys provided data on improvements that could be made in the Freshman Academy that included:

- Enhance existing interventions so that students can improve skills related to accountability, building relationships, and guidance.
- Increase accountability for students.
- Increase experiences for freshman students to include outside speakers and field trips related to college and career readiness.
- Implement social skills and community building curriculum.
- Increase classroom “people” – more qualified staff and peer tutors in the classroom.

- Increase community within the school so that staff know more students.
- Involving 9th grade teachers more in the transition process.
- Improved consistency with discipline procedures and communication between administration and teachers.
- Increase communication between school and home including face-to-face contact.

By looking at themes that emerged and suggested recommendations, implication for practice can be explored in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Study Overview

The problem of practice that was addressed through this study focused on the fact that 60% of freshman students in this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year. This study used a mixed-methods approach with a convergent design to examine teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a Freshman Academy at one Midwest high school. Students that transition from the middle school to high school in the district start this process in January of their eighth-grade year, and continue the transition process through their entire freshman year, which is the first year of high school. Teacher, student, and parent perception data was collected using interviews and surveys. Perception data was collected during interview sessions with the staff that teach freshman students and by using surveys with the certified staff in the building, students in the 2019 and 2020 graduation cohort, and parents of the 2020 graduating cohort. The research questions for this study were:

- a) How do freshman teachers believe the Freshman Academy interventions influence students’ successful transition into high school?
- b) What are staff’s perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing students for success in high school?
- c) What are students’ perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing them for success in high school? and,
- d) What are parents’ perceptions of the Freshman Academy in preparing their students for success in high school?

Limitations

Doing this research, I was an insider completing a study at the Freshman Academy where I am the administrator. Participants knew me personally, and they knew the responses they were providing would be given directly to me either through the interview or through a survey. I took care during the study to be reflective of my role and influence. As Herr and Anderson (2015) state, “Some of the worst action research studies are done by researchers who are insiders.” I wanted to ensure that I did not fall prey to poor research, and I looked for ways that I could improve as an administrator through data. As the Freshman Academy administrator, my belief has been that the program success comes from my ability to improve and to lead the staff and students to better outcomes.

Having the surveys be anonymous helped the validity of the surveys, as those that were sharing their opinion could do so freely. I have no way of tracking respondents. This makes the only limitation my interpretation of their responses. Although having the option to participate in the surveys, the teachers in the Freshman Academy also participated in interview sessions. All teachers in the Freshman Academy were invited and participated in an interview session; this included one teacher who participated the day before leaving for maternity leave and another teacher who took a leave of absence and returned only to participate. The Freshman Academy teachers expressed support the day I announced that my topic would be to evaluate the supports in the Freshman Academy because I was concerned about student success. I was also clear that while I was completing the requirements of my doctoral degree that this was “our” journey, and I was open to changing the way I was doing my job too. I worked not to treat them as a means to an end, but rather as valuable participants in a journey of making meaning. We were doing something together that could benefit our students. Seidman (2013) writes:

Yes, we as interviewers are interested in understanding how participants' stories inform the topic of our research. But we can also make an effort to appreciate the complexities of participants experiences, the struggles they face, the way they experience life, and the meaning they make of it. (p. 142)

As a researcher and insider during the interview sessions, I had a personal stake in the outcome, but as a person, I believe we can always find better ways of conducting business.

Another limitation of the study was a low participation rate in the parent survey. Parent surveys were completed by 23 individuals from 327 potential households. A low response rate can have different meanings. To summarize the Fluid Survey Team (2014) wrote that a low response could mean a higher level of error and reliability in results, demonstrate an uninterested sample group, or be an indication of nonresponse bias. Throughout the teacher surveys and teacher interviews, increased contact with home was recommended as an area of improvement and parents that did respond to the parent survey indicated a desire for more information on practices taking place at the school. It is my interpretation that this is an area that should continue to be addressed moving forward, and that the data collected had meaning and relevance to the study.

Summary of Results and Findings

During the last chapter, data analysis was completed to answer the four research questions. Interviews from freshman teachers and surveys completed by certified teachers in the building, students in the 2019 and 2020 graduation cohorts, and parents of students in the 2020 graduation cohort were used as data tools to answer the research questions (See Table 3.4). Interview data was first coded for common themes that emerged in responses and then second cycle coding was used to summarize themes that emerged during the interview sessions. Different surveys were used with each participant group. Each survey was first summarized by responses given to multiple-choice responses, rank order, and judgment responses and then short

answers were coded for common themes that emerged in responses. Each survey was then summarized based on themes that emerged during the entire survey. Ten statements were used to summarize the results and findings:

- High school staff knows that the purpose of the Freshman Academy is to prepare students academically and socially for high school.
- Students benefit from resources, supports, and interventions already in place in the Freshman Academy.
- The Freshman Academy has a culture that is open to listening to ideas and implementing interventions to help students.
- Students experience increased responsibility when entering high school.
- Students struggle for many reasons.
- Relationships with students, teachers, and community make the biggest difference in student success.
- Assisting students in getting involved in school activities and athletics may lead to improvement in school.
- Proximity of administrator, counselor, and core teachers has a positive impact on students.
- Participation of teachers in a professional learning community benefits student success.
- Students believe they have resources for being successful.

During data analysis, the impact that relationships have on student success continued to be a common theme that frequently emerged. Teachers reported the importance of the teacher/student relationship, students reported that teachers and parents were one of the single most important

influencers of success during their freshman years, and parents believed that their child was being academically supported.

In addition, participants in the interviews and surveys provided data on improvements that could be made in the Freshman Academy that included:

- Enhance existing interventions so that students can improve skills related to accountability, building relationships, and guidance.
- Increase experiences for freshman students to include outside speakers and field trips related to college and career readiness.
- Implement social skills and community building curriculum.
- Increase classroom “people” – more qualified staff and peer tutors in the classroom.
- Increase community within the school so that staff know more students.
- Involving 9th grade teachers more in the transition process.
- Improved consistency with discipline procedures and communication between administration and teachers.
- Increase communication between school and home including face-to-face contact.

As these are recommendations directly from stakeholders, their voices were considered when constructing recommendations for practice.

Recommendations for Practice

This study provided the first systematic program evaluation for the Freshman Academy in this Midwest high school since its inception in the 2006-2007 school year. A recommendation was made to continue the practice of program evaluation each year to ensure that that interventions, supports, and resources are in place that reach learners to increase student success. During the review of literature, best practices in transition were reviewed, and Habeeb (2013)

identified nine essential components for a successful transition program:

(1) Make the high school a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks; (2) Standardize expectations so that students know what they should do and teachers know what they should look for so that expectations can improve; (3) Equip students with belief systems they need to learn and succeed; (4) Create classroom cultures where excellence occurs; (5) Teach students organizational and time-management strategies; (6) Foster effective parent-teacher contact; (7) Ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology; (8) Recognize freshmen for their accomplishments and make them feel at home within high school; and (9) Preemptively and proactively provide support services for students who fall behind. (p. 20)

These nine areas serve as the framework for recommendations for practice, and recommendations are outlined to increase community building and to build supports for student accountability.

Increase Community Building

Data from the interviews and surveys indicated that the biggest difference maker in the classroom was the relationships students have with trusted adults. By increasing community building, students will be provided a more nurturing environment where it is more difficult for students to slip through the cracks (Habeb, 2013). Community can go beyond building the relationships between the student and teacher to improve student success. The data in this study, referenced the importance of the administrator, counselor, teacher, support staff, peers, parents, and others who have an impact on student success, and fostering the community within the school should include student relationships with each and the web of relationships that exists between those that support a student. Increasing community building includes recommendations for increased collaboration between staff, enhanced parent contact, and implementation of peer-to-peer supports. Those recommendations are as follows:

- Increase involvement of freshman teachers in the transition process from eighth grade to the freshman year by having freshman teachers participate in the enrollment process,

through teacher meetings with eighth grade and freshman teachers, and by collaborating on class placement decisions for incoming freshman students.

- Build in opportunities for student discussions on departmental 9-12 professional learning community collaborations to find resources for freshman students that need additional assistance in reaching their full potential so that teachers outside of the Freshman Academy support efforts within the Freshman Academy.
- Invite elective teachers and sophomore teachers into the freshman classrooms prior to spring enrollment for freshman students to learn about opportunities available during grades 10-12.
- Implement a peer tutoring program in the freshman classrooms that allows older students to assist in instructional supports in the classroom.
- Increase freshman students' exposures to post-secondary opportunities through guest speakers, field trips, and community outreach programs.
- Imbed a social skills curriculum within the general education curriculum to provide students with skills for building relationships, problem solving, and self-advocacy.
- Provide parents with a monthly newsletter of upcoming events, expectations, and programs available for students with input from teachers.
- Implement parent nights in collaboration with the Freshman Academy professional learning community where students are recognized and/or parents can learn about high school programs, technology tools, and supports available to them and their students.

Build Structures for Increased Student Accountability

The established structure of the Freshman Academy was noted as positive by staff and students; having the administrator, counselor, and teachers in proximity to one another was a

benefit to students. In addition, having common grade level expectations and procedures was also important. Teachers also recognized that the relationship must come first. Landsman and Lewis (2006) recommend that school personnel show respect, avoid stereotypes, learn about student interests, recognize the cultural differences that exist, and establish high standards. When building structures for increased student accountability, one cannot just establish high standards and expectations and expect them to be met without considering the other recommendations for building relationships. Recommendations for increasing student accountability includes:

- Implement weekly goal setting in core classes based on grade checks and assignment schedules to increase assignment completion and success.
- Promote incentive programs for grades and attendance through contact with home, classroom presentations, and class celebrations.
- Improve behavior procedures, expectations, and communication between the administrator, parents, and teachers.
- Implement a tiered-intervention for support system that includes academics, social, and behavior expectations.
- Continue development of common classroom expectations and procedures through the Freshman Academy professional learning community.
- Explore ways to expand accountability for Freshman Study Hall attendance and participation by collaborating with teachers, parents, and students.
- Expand and build upon the Future 101 curriculum.

Implications of the Study

The data collected for this study provided information that what is in place is “good enough” for most students. However, the problem remained that 60% of freshman students in

this high school are earning grades below a “C” on their transcripts during their freshman year and 15-19% of students are not promoting to their sophomore year. Perceptions on the interventions, supports, and resources was overall positive. The following were reported to help student success during the freshman year:

- Freshman enrollment process during the eighth-grade year
- Freshman first day orientation
- Link Crew peer mentors
- Freshman Study Hall
- The opportunity to attend quarterly incentives
- Future 101
- Activities and/or athletics
- Teachers, counselors, administrator, and parents

This study opened possibilities to enhance these interventions, supports, and resources; the study data also made recommendations to add to these interventions, supports, and resources to perhaps reach more students. The overarching theme was that it can be done through collaboration of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents. In addition, this study also provided an approach for future program evaluation of the Freshman Academy and opened conversations with administration and staff to embark on the improvement process collaboratively.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study addressed the teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the freshman transition process in the Freshman Academy in one Midwest high school, and results and recommendations were limited to this setting and the interventions, supports, and resources

available in this setting. As research was conducted future research ideas evolved and consideration for future research could include:

- Exploring specific case studies of students who have struggled with the transition from middle school to the freshman year and from the freshman year to the sophomore year.
- Examining in depth factors that prevent students from performing well during their freshman year.
- Completing a comparative study between this freshman setting and other similar schools with similar demographics to find trends for high school transition success.
- Investigating parental involvement and student success in the freshman year of high school.
- Implementing a longitudinal study on student success after the freshman year.
- Continuing program evaluation of interventions, supports, and resources established in this Freshman Academy.

The study created both recommendations and additional ways of looking at the problem of practice, and as recommendations are put in place additional research will need to be conducted and continued evaluation of practice will remain a priority for student success during the transition process.

Impact of the Study on the Scholar Educator

When starting on the path to complete the study, coursework focused on the importance of the scholar-practitioner. In classes, articles, research studies, and books were assigned on the transformation from merely an administrator to researcher and scholar. The growth that was needed seemed to be theoretical at the time, and I highlighted in one of the books:

Skillful teachers for contemporary circumstances need to know how to lead in authentic, generative ways that empower as they lead. The need to know how to collaborate in

smart ways that distribute the knowledge and expertise of themselves and their colleagues. They need to understand not only student learning, but self-and-peer learning. They need to know how to make decisions from data they collect, create, or consume. And they need to know how to act on those decisions. (Latta & Wunder, 2012, p. 127)

Next to the passage, the words, “don’t I already do this?” were scribbled in blue pen. After completing the study, that comment in blue pen seemed overly confident. The educational doctorate is about practitioner’s research (Latta & Wunder, 2012; Perry & Carlson, 2013). A philosophy began to emerge in a line written by Perry and Carlson (2013), “Whether working with teachers, students, parents, or other administrators, the mark of a successful practitioner is most evident when others around her are successful” (p. 64). The impact of this study was one that was humbling; conducting research as an insider means that occasionally the researcher is part of the data that needs change. Through this process, enhanced characteristics of scholarship, knowledge, and leadership occurred, but so did patience, understanding, and compassion.

The scholar educator collaborates with critical friends; while working on this study, colleagues, professors, and family have provided balance and support while learning skills needed to be a better inquiry practitioner. I have learned to think through situations prior to acting to ensure that inquiry is complete. Latta and Wunder (2012) provide skills that inquiry practitioners could do:

- Move beyond making decisions about practice based on intuitions and educated speculation.
- Resist working only on intuition or gut feelings.
- Discover that some phenomena are what they seem and that intuitions can be confirmed.
- Discover that intuitions concerning the source of a problem, or presumed solutions of a problem, are often wrong or skewed.
- Realize that who or what they “thought was problem really is a problem or it is not.”

- “Reach new clarity” on a problem.
- Acquire new perspective on and appreciation for the complexity of a problem and any sort of “fix” for the problem.
- Learn that certain kinds of data offer little information for certain kinds of problems.
- Appreciate the kinds of data that might be needed to gain insight on a problem.
- Recognize that the broader need to inform the work of other stakeholders is of secondary value to the needs of the practitioner.
- Learn to focus their practices on their clients to gain insight.
- Achieve insight into their own practices, specifically the consequences of particular decisions and moves they make. (p. 94)

Skills should always be practiced, and these skills will be fundamental in continued growth as a scholar-practitioner. This study marks the end of journey, but the path of scholar-practitioner continues.

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Appendix A – Institutional Review Board Approval



UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

March 23, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Frankie Lizar
Ed Bengtson

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 17-02-468

Protocol Title: *The Perception of the Freshman Transition: Taking a Closer Look at the Freshman Academy*

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 03/22/2017 Expiration Date: 03/05/2018

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 1,550 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

Appendix B – Teacher Interview Protocol

1. “Describe your experience working with freshman students.”
2. “How do you feel that the Freshman Academy prepares students for their high school experience?”
3. “What does administration need to do to support student transition?”
4. “What do teachers need to do to support student transition?”
5. “Why do you think that some students do not transition successfully?”
6. “What additional resources, interventions, or supports do you believe will be needed to ensure more students transition successfully?”
7. “How has relocating the Freshman Academy in this school year impacted the overall program?”
8. “What does it mean to be a teacher in the Freshman Academy?”

Appendix C – Teacher Perception Survey

Teacher Perception Survey

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. The purpose of the Freshman Academy is...

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

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

<input type="text"/>	Freshman Enrollment Process: January assembly, enrollment days, THS spring tour
<input type="text"/>	Link Crew Mentoring Program
<input type="text"/>	Freshman First Day Orientation
<input type="text"/>	Freshman Study Hall
<input type="text"/>	Student of the Week
<input type="text"/>	Quarterly Incentives for students who earn "C" or better in all classes
<input type="text"/>	Future 101 Course
<input type="text"/>	Common Grade Level Expectations and Procedures
<input type="text"/>	Designated administrator and counselor
<input type="text"/>	Designated core content area teachers in a common location

6. The following are interventions in the Freshman Academy. Please rate each intervention in relationship to your perception in the importance for preparing students for high school success:

	Very important	Important	Not important	N/A - Neither important or not important
Freshman Enrollment Process: January assembly, enrollment days, THS spring tour	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Link Crew Mentoring Program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman First Day Orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Study Hall	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student of the Week	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quarterly incentives for students who earn "C" or better in all classes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Future 101 Course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Common Grade Level Expectations and Procedures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Designated administrator and counselor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Designated core content area teachers in a common location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. The Freshman Academy prepares students to be successful in grades 10-12.

- Yes
 No
 Undecided

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

- Yes
 No
 Undecided

9. Do you believe that changing the location of the Freshman Academy in the 2016-2017 school year had a positive, negative or no effect on the success of students in their freshman year?

- Positive effect
- Negative effect
- No effect

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

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

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18. Why do you think some students do not do well in their first year of high school?

19. What resources, interventions and supports do you believe are most important for student success?

20. Any additional comments on the transition to high school:

Appendix D – Student Perception Survey

Student Perception Survey
<p>1. I am a member of the following graduation class:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Class of 2019</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Class of 2020</p>
<p>2. My grade classification on my official record is:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Grade 9</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Grade 10</p>
<p>3. I attended the 9th grade in the Freshman Academy at this school.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>4. The following statement describes my schooling:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I have always attended school in this school district.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I have moved in out and out of this school district.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I started attending this school district in elementary school.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I started attending this school district in middle school.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I started attending this school district in high school.</p>
<p>5. The following statement describes my academic performance as a freshman student:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I maintain an "A" or "B" grade in all my classes.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I never get anything below a "C" grade in all my classes.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I sometimes get a "D" in a class but I always pass my classes.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I have received an "F" grade, but most of my classes are passing with a "D" or better.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I struggle in all my classes, and I usually have more than one "F" grade in a class.</p>

6. The following events or people helped me during my freshman year of high school.

	Yes	No	Unsure	N/A
Freshman First Day Orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Enrollment during 8th Grade	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Link Crew Peer Mentors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Study Hall	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Opportunity to Attend Quarterly Incentive Parties	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Possibility of Being Student of the Week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Future 101 or Advocacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Activities or Athletics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A Teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A Counselor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
An Administrator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My Parent(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. What was the most helpful event or person during your freshman year of high school?

8. Why do you think this event or person was most helpful?

9. I attended Freshman Orientation on the first day of my freshman year.

- Yes
- No

10. As a freshman, I attended Freshman Study Hall:

- 10+ times during the school year.
- 1-9 times during the school year.
- I never attended Freshman Study Hall.

11. I think students should have to attend Freshman Study Hall if they are failing classes.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

12. The following people are supportive of students academically:

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Unsure
Freshman Academy Teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Academy Counselor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Academy Principal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. The following people are supportive of students socially and emotionally:

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Unsure
Freshman Academy Teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Academy Counselor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Academy Principal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. As a freshman student, I was asked what I wanted to do when I graduate from high school.

- Yes
- No

15. Answer the following in regards to the freshman year:

	Yes	Sometimes	Unsure	No
Did you feel safe at school?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did you have an adult at school you trusted?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did you feel that you could be successful?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did you know what was expected of you behaviorally?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did you like school?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. What was the most important thing about the Freshman Academy?

17. In a perfect world, what needs to happen during the Freshman Year at school?

18. Please share anything else you would like someone to know about the freshman year:

Appendix E – Parent Perception Survey

Parent Perception Survey			
1. I have a freshman in high school this school year (2016-2017):			
<input type="radio"/> Yes			
<input type="radio"/> No			
2. Please select the sentence that best describes your family:			
<input type="radio"/> My freshman student is my only child.			
<input type="radio"/> I have children that are both older and younger than my freshman student.			
<input type="radio"/> I have a child(ren) older than my freshman student.			
<input type="radio"/> I have a child(ren) younger than my freshman student.			
3. As a parent, I know about these supports or events:			
	Yes - And I feel that they are well communicated.	Yes - But I wish I knew more.	No
Enrollment for the Freshman Year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman First Day	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Link Crew Peer Mentors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freshman Study Hall	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quarterly Incentive Grade Celebrations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student of the Week	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Future 101 Class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School Behavior Expectations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional Comment			
<input type="text"/>			

4. Please rank the following statements in relationship to the freshman school year:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My child is supported academically at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child is safe at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child is being prepared academically at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel welcome in my child's school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe I am a partner in my child's education.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. As a parent, I have been contacted this school year by an assistant principal or principal in the building - Please check all that apply:

- Yes - for something positive
- Yes - for a behavior concern
- Yes - for an academic concern
- I have never been contacted by my child's principal

6. As a parent, I have been contacted this school year by a teacher in the building - Please check all that apply:

- Yes - for something positive
- Yes - for a behavior concern
- Yes - for an academic concern
- I have never been contacted by my child's principal

7. I follow the social media posts (Twitter or Facebook) for the high school:

- Yes - Facebook and Twitter
- Yes - Facebook
- Yes - Twitter
- No

8. What do you want for your child at school?

9. What is one word you would use to describe your child's freshman year?

10. Do you believe that the school is expecting the best from your freshman student?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Additional Comment