Is There a Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and At-Risk Student Achievement?

Susan Marie Stoddard

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IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NINTH GRADE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS AND AT-RISK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

by

Susan Marie Stoddard

Abstract of a Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School of The University of Southern Mississippi in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2012
ABSTRACT

IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NINTH GRADE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS AND AT-RISK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

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December 2012

Transition into the ninth grade has long been a critical juncture for students as they make the move to a larger environment with less personal support and a more rigorous academic challenge. In an effort to help make the move from middle-to-high-school transition as smooth as possible, school districts are using Ninth Grade Academies, or innovative transitional strategies designed to address the key factors contributing to students dropping out: poor academic achievement, disengagement, and poor attendance. The purpose of the study was to determine if a statistically significant relationship existed between the type of ninth grade transitional program and at-risk student achievement. This study also explored the impact of student attendance and discipline factors on student achievement. The measures of student achievement analyzed included the students’ weighted grade point average (GPA), End of Course Test (EOCT) scores, and promotion to tenth grade. Results showed statistically significant findings related to attendance, student achievement, and discipline and the type of transitional program. Conducting a longitudinal study would show the improvement for student achievement, attendance, and discipline in the Ninth Grade Academy schools prior to the implementation of the separate buildings. The schools with embedded or no transitional program continued to perform higher than the Ninth Grade Academy in most areas; however, the gap is narrowing.
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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

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Dean of the Graduate School

December 2012
DEDICATION

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and dedicate this dissertation to my mother, my nephew, and my good friends. To my mother, Mary Catherine Stites Stoddard, I would like to say thank you and I am glad I provided you one more graduation to attend. You continually supported me throughout this process and I am so grateful to be able to share this moment with you. A very special thank you must be given to two dear friends, Dr. Elizabeth Rein and Deanna Majeski, who provided love, support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this entire process. Without you, it would have been extremely difficult for me to have reached my personal goal of achieving a doctorate degree. I hope you both know the depth of my gratitude and how much I appreciate your belief in me during those times when I struggled to believe. I would also like to thank Suzanne O’Brien and Sharla Holder for their friendship and encouragement. Providing lodging and the best home cooked meals during my trips to Mississippi were priceless. I am eternally grateful for the friendship and support of Dr. Suzann Lawry. You entered my life at the end of this journey and provided insight, advice, and encouragement as I prepared for the defense and made the final revisions. To my nephew, Dr. Paul Stoddard, I am glad to join you with the title of Doctor but wish I would have beaten you to it.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Recent debate and educational reform has been centered on the number of students who drop out of high school without a diploma or lacking the minimum skills needed for entry into the global economy. Transition into the ninth grade has long been a critical juncture for students as they make the move to a larger environment with less personal support and a more rigorous academic challenge (Smith, 2007). “A majority of the students who eventually fail to graduate fall through the cracks during this transition period.” (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008, p. 1). In October 2008, in the United States, there were approximately three million non-institutionalized 16 through 24 year-old young people who were not enrolled in a high school and had not attained a high school diploma or an alternative credential (NCES, 2012). According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB, 2005), failure in ninth grade was the foremost predictor that students will not finish high school. In an effort to help make the transition from middle school to high school as smooth as possible, school districts are using Ninth Grade Academies—innovative transitional program strategies designed to address the key factors contributing to students dropping out of school: poor academic achievement, disengagement, and poor attendance.

The components of transitional programs are based on the social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1986). He established a framework for learning called the social cognitive learning theory which proposes that human development is shaped by reciprocal interactions of behavior, personal factors, cognition, and environmental factors. This model is referred to as triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986).
Bandura’s (1977, 1986) philosophy of learning is based on the premise that through observing others and by recognizing the consequences of their own actions, learning takes place. Although he believes that reinforcement helps in learning, he argued that people can learn in the absence of reinforcement and even the absence of a response (Bandura, 1986). The basic principles of cognitive theories are defined as,

A theory in which the behavior of individuals is assumed to be directed not only by the occurrence of social events and an individual's own feelings, but also by an individual's thoughts and interpretations of those feelings. It assumes that people think about the results and future consequences of their behavior, and do not react mindlessly to other people, problems, or situations (Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science and Medicine, 2007)

Transition programs are based on the core concepts presented in the social cognitive theory by developing small learning communities, where teacher-to-student ratios are smaller; positive relationships between teachers and students are developed, and achievement is monitored in an effort to encourage students to learn how to self-monitor their progress and take ownership of their success (Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine, 2007).

Educational reform has taken on new meaning in response to the current Presidential administration, establishing goals for school districts to graduate all students within four years. Not only are students expected to graduate within four years but they are required to possess the necessary skills and knowledge as outlined in the No Child Left Behind legislation that delineated accountable factors for all schools to achieve by 2014 (NCLB, 2001). To meet these standards, many school districts in the United States
are developing Ninth Grade Academies or implementing transitional programs as strategies to qualify for funding from another educational reform program, Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2012) website states,

The Race to the Top program, a $4.35 billion fund created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), is the largest competitive education grant program in U.S. history, warranting unprecedented transparency and participation to ensure the best possible results. The $4 billion for the Race to the Top State competition is designed to provide incentives to States to implement large-scale, system-changing reforms that improve student achievement, close achievement gaps, and increase graduation and college enrollment rates. (para.1)

This incentive was created to challenge states and school districts to restructure current practices to address the growing number of students ill-prepared for college course work or entry level skills in the global market (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

In regard to student achievement, Bandura (1977, 1997) suggested a teacher’s self-efficacy has an impact on student achievement. Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as the teacher’s belief that a student possesses the capabilities to organize and execute courses of action necessary to attain a certain performance level or goal. According to Bandura (1986), students with positive self-efficacy have better academic success and the ability to handle academic failure or obstacles. Students who have positive self-efficacy are more likely to believe their goal or performance level is attainable and realistic but will also have the persistence and conviction to achieve it.
The transition to high school can be challenging as stated by Butts and Cruzeiro (2005),

In terms of adjustment and achievement, the transition to and through ninth grade is a critical point in a student’s life, particularly students who are already struggling … as 60% of middle school students at risk do not graduate on time. (p. 3)

Neild (2009) contended that the ability of students to earn as many credits as they should in the ninth grade has a high correlation with the probability of a student graduating in four years (Neild, 2009). Research conducted by the Gates Foundation (2010) indicated 25% of the students who eventually dropout of school start ninth grade on track for a diploma, but eventually lose ground, negates the assumption that ninth grade students are coming from middle school already behind. The accumulation of course credits was reported as a better predictor of students dropping out of school than other at-risk factors. (Gates Foundation, 2010).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) suggested that students can be identified as early as sixth grade as potential drop outs if they are demonstrating the key indicators of absenteeism and failing grades. These students are referred to as at-risk or remedial by the school district that is the subject of this study (CCSD, 2012b). The requirement for students to be identified to receive remedial services for dropout prevention is for them to meet two of the following criteria: having teacher recommendation, being retained, receiving Response to Intervention support, ranking below the 25th percentile on state achievement tests, or scoring Does Not Meet (fail) on any required state assessment (CCSD, 2012b). The Gates Foundation’s (2010) research
on dropout prevention and intervention indicated the dropout predictors for ninth graders include:

1. Age 15 or older entering ninth grade,
2. Absent more than 10 days of fall semester of ninth grade,
3. Failed two or more courses fall semester of ninth grade,
4. Attained fewer than five credits, and
5. Failed two or more courses spring semester of ninth grade. (p. 4)

School engagement encompasses all the aspects of a learner and is the interaction between behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Srofe, 2009). Studies have traced a gradual disengagement process beginning in elementary school to falling behind and retention, both of which have been connected to the dropping out before tenth grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild, 2009). In terms of adjustments and achievement, studies show that students most likely to leave school before graduating were not academically and socially integrated into their high schools. A key component of transitional programs is the fostering of interpersonal relationships and the reduction of class sizes for an optimal student to teacher ratio (Quint, 2006). Many studies indicate students should have a team or interdisciplinary group of teachers who have a common planning (Kemple, 2004; Kemple & Herlihy, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

The ninth grade year is pivotal in a students’ educational career. Research conducted by a transitional company, Career Choices (2009), suggests that many ninth graders have decided by November of their freshman year if they will stay in school or
will drop out. Up to one third of all dropouts are lost in ninth grade with academic success in the ninth grade being highly parallel with eventual graduation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Our current administration developed Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) as educational reform movements and legislation encouraging school districts and local schools to think of unconventional strategies for solutions to the growing number of ill-prepared graduates as well as the declining graduation rate.

School districts have committed funds to construct separate buildings for ninth graders and local schools have developed Ninth Grade Academies or transitional programs as attempts to help ninth grade students and specifically at-risk high school freshman make a successful transition from middle school to high school. Ninth grade transitional programs are usually focused on developing small learning communities where student-teacher ratios are lower, allowing relationships to develop, attendance to be closely monitored, and academic achievement to increase which correlates to key predictors of students who drop out. Transitional academies and programs help increase student attendance, increase student achievement, and decrease discipline referrals for at-risk students. Ultimately, the programs are designed to increase the graduation rate, thus reducing the rate of dropouts from high school (Black, 2004; Quint, 2006).

The costs of dropping out of high school not only cause the individual hardship during their lifetime but they also have significant social and economic ramifications for the nation. Over the course of a high school dropouts’ lifetime, he or she will earn on the average about $260,000 less than a high school graduate (Rouse, 2005). Dropouts from the class of 2010 will cost the nation more than $337 billion in lost wages over the course
of their lifetime, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008). More than seven thousand students drop out every school day which significantly impedes their chances of securing a good job (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). United States public schools awarded 2.7 million diplomas in the 2002-2003 school year and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) calculated the graduation rate to be 73.9%. With over three-quarters of state prison inmates being dropouts, 59% of federal inmates are dropouts, and the probability of a dropout is 3.5 times more likely than a high school graduate to be incarcerated in their lifetime, speaks to the urgency of our nation to find a solution to reduce the number of students who do not receive their high school diploma (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship of ninth grade transitional programs on student achievement for at-risk students. The research also examined if correlations existed between a student’s perception of positive relationships and grade point average (GPA). Ninth Grade Academies or embedded transitional programs use key components to address the critical areas of student attendance, student achievement, and the number of referrals for ninth grade students. These programs are ultimately designed to help reduce the number of students who drop out before attaining a high school diploma.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study explored the relationship of Ninth Grade Transitional Programs on student achievement, attendance and behavior. The research also determined if there was
a correlation between a student’s perception of positive relationships and grade point average (GPA).

*RQ1:* Did Ninth Grade Transitional programs influence attendance, student achievement, promotion rate, and the number of referrals for at-risk students?

*H01:* There will be no difference between the number of days absent for ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

*H02:* There will be no difference in the GPA for ninth grade at-risk students in a ninth grade, academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

*H03:* There will be no difference between the EOCT scores of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

*H04:* There will be no difference between the number of discipline referrals of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

*H05:* There will be no difference between the number of students promoted to tenth grade of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

*RQ2:* Is there a relationship between the perception of positive student-teacher relationship and student achievement as measured by GPA?

*H06:* There will be no relationship in the GPA of students and their perception of a positive student-teacher relationship
Definitions of Terms

The following key terms are found throughout the study. Definitions for each term are provided to help readers better understand the usage of key terms in the study.

*Academic Achievement* - In this study, academic achievement will be measured by promotion to the tenth grade and grade point average (GPA), an average of grades in all classes reported on a 4.0 scale.

*Annual Measureable Objective (AMO)* - Each school, or system, as a whole and all student groups with at least 40 members, must have a participation rate of 95% or above on selected state assessments in Reading/English Language Arts and Mathematics. Each school, or system, as a whole and each student group with at least 40 members must meet or exceed the State’s Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) regarding the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on selected state assessments in Reading/English Language Arts and Mathematics. Each school, or system, as a whole must meet the standard or show progress on an additional indicator such as attendance rate, graduation rate, and percentage scoring proficient or advanced on selected state assessments in Reading/English Language Arts and Mathematics. Furthermore, any student group with at least 40 members that used Safe Harbor to demonstrate Academic Performance must also meet the standard or show progress on the additional indicator (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

*Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)* - One of the cornerstones of the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It is a measure of year-to-year student achievement on statewide assessments. Adequate yearly progress is a series of annual performance goals set by the state for each school district and school as well as for the state as a
whole. To meet AYP, each system and the state must meet the following criteria: 95% Participation, Academic Performance (Annual Measurable Objective), and Second Indicator (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

At Risk Students - Students are at risk if they fall into any two of the following criteria: below grade level skills in reading, writing, or mathematical ability; missing more than 10 days of school; retained; scoring below the 25th percentile on the Criterion Referenced Curriculum Test (CRCT); failing grades; or more than 3 discipline referrals (CCSD, 2012b).

Attendance - In this study, attendance will be measured by the total number of days present in relation to the total number of days of instruction during a semester and for the entire school year. A reported day of absence is where the student missed more than 50% of the instructional day (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

Behavioral Engagement – The ability to follow rules; the absence of disruptive behaviors; the use of motivation, persistence, and effort in academic task; and the participation in school-related activities, clubs or sports (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Cognitive Engagement - The ability to learn and master material, use strategies effectively to attain new knowledge, and having the intrinsic motivation to learn (Bandura, 1986).

Dropout - In this study a dropout is defined as a student who was enrolled at any time during the previous school year who is not enrolled at the beginning of the current year and who has not successfully completed school. Students who have transferred to another school, died, moved to another country, or who are out of school due to illness are not considered dropouts (Stillwell, 2010).
**Emotional Engagement** - Student’s emotional responses and psychological sense of connectedness or bonding to teachers, classmates, academics, and school (Fredricks et al., 2004).

**Grade Point Average (GPA)** - The student’s grades received in classes are averaged using a 4.0 scale (A = 4.0, B = 3.0, C = 2.0, D = 1.0, and F = 0).

**High School Transition** - This is a period of acclimation when students leave eighth grade in the middle school and enter ninth grade at the high school (Srofe, 2009).

**Ninth Grade Academy** - School districts are implementing the use of separate buildings for ninth grade students with separate administration and flexible scheduling (Srofe, 2009).

**Ninth Grade Transitional Programs** - These interventions are being implemented as school reform models used for ninth grade students to provide support and structure for academic achievement (Quint, 2006).


**Self-efficacy** - The belief concerning a student’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action necessary to attain a certain performance level or goal (Bandura, 1986).

**School Engagement** - A student’s relationship with school within three areas: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; National Center School Engagement [NCSE], 2006).

**Small Learning Communities (SLC)** - These are any individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Schedules allow students and teachers to meet together
often. Frequently a SLC shares a specific location within the school. The creation of small learning communities with teacher teams who share responsibility together for a group of students (California DOE, 2012).

*Transitional Programs* - Curriculum or support to help make students make a move from eighth grade to ninth grade with academic success (Career Choices, 2009).

**Delimitations**

1. The study was delimited to six schools in a large suburban school district located in northwestern Georgia.
2. The subjects of the study were delimited to all at-risk ninth grade students as identified by the criteria set by the local school district that were eighth grade students in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. The students responding to the surveys were delimited to the randomly chosen at-risk ninth grade students in the six schools chosen for the study.

**Assumptions**

In order to conduct this study, the following assumptions were made:

1. There were external variables that influenced student achievement, attendance, and discipline that were outside the school sphere of influence.
2. The quality of the survey responses was dependent on the honesty of the respondents.

**Justification**

The ninth grade has the highest failure rate and creates a larger number of students enrolled in ninth grade compared to the 10th, 11th or 12th (Black, 2004). This fact alone significantly increases the probability that students will not graduate high
school. Dropouts will earn significantly less over the course of their lifetime in contrast to a high school graduate. If United States high schools and colleges would raise the graduation rates of minority students to the same rate as white students by the year 2020, the economic impact for each class of graduates would be $310 billion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The Ninth Grade Academies or programs are designed to ease the transition from middle school to high school by creating smaller learning communities (SLC) where teacher to student ratios are reduced, relationships are developed between the teachers and the students, and student achievement is monitored closely. SLCs establish positive school environments where student-teacher relationships can be developed and academically students are offered rigorous, authentic learning experiences which help promote engagement and improve attendance. When students feel a connection to their school and learning, they are more apt to develop strategies for persistence and effort regarding academic challenges as well as developing self-efficacy towards performance outcomes (Bandura, 1989).

All of these components will lead to more ninth grade students successfully transitioning from middle school to high school and being promoted to the tenth grade without retention. Students who stay on track have a higher probability of graduating within the allotted four years. The end goal or desired result is to reduce the number of students falling off track during their first year of high school and increasing the number of students being promoted to tenth grade. Ideally, the graduation rate would increase and the dropout rate would decline. The challenges of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Annual Yearly Progress Annual Measureable Objectives (AMO) have increased the pressure on school districts to address the growing number of dropouts from high school.
According to NCLB (2001), the goal for all schools by 2014 is to have 100% graduation rate and for all subgroups within the school meeting the AMOs at 100%.

Summary

The global economy and competitive college entrance requirements are making it necessary for high school students to graduate with a diploma. In a democratic society, preparing the next generation to make contributions to their communities and our nation is the ultimate goal. The United States, facing an increase in the number of dropouts and educational reform, is focused on rewarding states and school districts for implementing programs and alternative options to increase the graduation rate and reduce the number of dropouts. Additionally, the transition from middle school to high school is a critical juncture in a student’s academic career. Faced with a larger environment, less personal support, and a more rigorous curriculum, over one-third of all dropouts leave school in ninth grade (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007). An initiative that is gaining strength is the development and implementation of Ninth Grade Academies or transitional programs to create a small learning community specifically for ninth graders. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported over 128 separate ninth-grade-only schools in operation in 2000 (Black, 2004). The smaller school setting offers the opportunity for students and teachers to collaborate, remediate, and develop positive relationships. These new schools have helped increase student achievement, increase attendance, improve behavior, increase the number of students promoted to 10th grade, and ultimately reduce the number of dropouts (Black, 2004).
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The nation is realizing the substantial financial and social costs each class of student dropouts places on their communities, states, and our nation as a whole (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). If the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students increased in the United States by just 5%, a combined savings and revenue of almost $8 billion would be reduced on crime-related costs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Educational reform through initiatives such as Race To The Top is awarding money as an incentive for states and local school districts to use innovative techniques to help increase the graduation rate and ensure high school graduates are prepared for college and entry into the global market workforce.

Research has indicated the ninth grade year as the pivotal year in a student’s academic career (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Smith, 2007). As students move from the eighth to ninth grade, there are several factors that can disrupt and interfere with a student’s academic achievement. Moving into a larger school building, the loss of personal support, and more rigorous academic challenges are often unmanageable for many students, especially for at-risk students (Smith, 2007). Heck and Mahoe (2006) reported that 60% of at-risk middle school students do not graduate on time within four years. Additional, they found students start the process of disengagement as early as elementary school. Falling behind and retention only exacerbates the probability these students will dropout before tenth grade (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Consequently, transitional academies and similar programs have grown in number in the United States as ways to offer support
during this critical time in a student’s academic life. School districts are budgeting for construction of separate buildings to house the ninth grade classes, and the buildings are staffed with administrators and teachers who work collaboratively with each other and create positive relationships with the students. A Ninth Grade Academy is an example of a small learning community (SLC) where one key component is smaller student-to-teacher ratios. SLCs help create a personalized educational environment which correlates with high achievement for all students according to the study Breaking Ranks II (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2004). According to Heck and Mahoe (2006), a student’s opportunity for normal academic progress was increased by 59% in schools with transition support programs when compared to students in schools without these programs.

In this chapter the recent literature concerning several theories and aspects of student learning and achievement in the ninth grade will be discussed. The major theory associated with learning that served as the foundation for this study was from the research of Bandura (1977), social cognitive learning theory. The central component of this theory is self-efficacy, which contributes to the understanding of student achievement, motivation, and learning. The review of literature addresses several topics to include the following: (a) theoretical framework, (b) school reform, (c) school engagement, (d) student achievement, (e) at-risk students, (f) effects of dropout prevention, (g) ninth grade transition, (h) transitional programs, (i) implementation of transition programs, and (j) effects on student achievement.
Theoretical Framework

The Social Cognitive Learning Theory is the work of Alfred Bandura. While completing his doctorate work at The University of Iowa he developed his theory from observations of children. He was working with Richard Walters with research on social learning and aggression in children. This research led to the crucial role in modeling behavior simply by observation from his famous experiment known as the Bobo doll experiment that led to the theory that is most commonly used to explain learning and behavior.

Alfred Bandura’s (1977, 1989) social cognitive theory sparked changes in educational psychology changing the way practitioners approached teaching and learning. Bandura (1986) believed three factors influence learning are cognitive (personal experiences), behavior, and external environment. This is called the Triadic Reciprocal Causal Model, as illustrated in Figure 1. These three factors continuously influence a student’s ability to learn. A child must have the thought processes or physical ability to acquire new learning. Other components of physical experiences include the self-belief of having the ability to learn and perform the behavior being observed (Bandura, 1989). The second factor is a child’s behavior patterns. These behaviors will influence the ability to model new behavior and the perception of the consequences of the behavior, whether good or bad. The reward or outcome of repeating a behavior has to be positive or beneficial to the learner. The third factor is the external environment. This includes social influences, family, and the physical setting. Bandura (1977, 1997) suggested that not only is behavior affected by a person’s belief in themselves or self-efficacy and the situation, but that self-efficacy and expectation of the situation are affected by behavior.
Bandura (1977) insisted that as a person performs a given behavior repeatedly, that person learns what outcomes can be expected and, as a consequence, alters or confirms beliefs about the ability to perform the behavior.

In the social cognitive learning theory, there are four phases which involve attention, retention, production, and motivation. The attention phase is where a student must be intrigued or drawn in for continued observation. A person must notice what behavior is being modeled. During the retention phase, new patterns of behavior are being developed in a student’s memory. This takes the form of visual or verbal symbols. The student moves to the production phase of learning as the behavior is practiced, repeated, and refined according to outcomes and consequences. The last phase is motivation. The simple pleasure or pain of performing a new behavior will guide the learner’s motivation to continue or discontinue the action. Bandura’s (1986) theory proposes cognitive factors filter what events in the environment will be influential, the meaning will be given to them, the lasting effects they will have, the emotional impact they will have, any motivating power they will possess, and how this information will be used in the future (Bandura, 1986).
In the Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura (1989) asserted there are five basic capabilities which allow humans the means to cognitively determine behavior:

1. **Symbolizing Capability**: Verbal, pictorial, and other symbols provide humans a way to understand and navigate their environment. Mental pictures or words give meaning to experiences and allow individuals to store memories to be used later or in other situations (Pajares, 2002).

2. **Vicarious Capability**: Individuals learn quicker when they are able to observe behaviors without having to perform the behavior. Skills and concepts can be learned through direct experience or learning through action. Another avenue for knowledge acquisition is by observational learning. This is in the form of modeling or imitation where the individual can watch the actions or behavior as well as the outcomes (Pajares, 2002).

3. **Forethought Capability**: This is the ability of an individual to motivate themselves and set goals. Purposeful action and cognitive processes enable an
individual to use future outcomes as a motivator to employ certain behaviors to achieve a desired outcome (Pajares, 2002).

4. **Self-Regulatory Capability**: Individuals use self-regulatory influences and these influences are not automatic but operate only if activated (Pajares, 2002). People react differently in different situations, depending on their evaluation of the situation. Motivation is a guide for behavior through goal setting and attainment. Motivation to perform a behavior derives from the feedback from the environment. Disengagement of internal control means that people are capable of separating themselves from the negative consequences of their behavior (Pajares, 2002).

5. **Self-reflective Capability**: By using reflective thought, humans can manipulate their environments and produce consequences of their actions, giving some ability to regulate their own behavior. Bandura (1989) believes that behavior stems from a reciprocal influence of external and internal factors. External factors affect self-regulation by providing people with levels for evaluating their own behavior. Internal factors used to evaluate behavior are self-observing, judging or evaluating the observation, and reacting to the observation by rewards or punishment. Internalized self-sanctions prevent people from violating their own moral standards either through engagement or disengagement of inner control (Pajares, 2002).

Cognitive achievement within this model encompasses learning, motivation, and academic performance with self-efficacy being the central component which is believed to be one of the most important contributions to the study of learning (Pajares, 1996,
2004; Schunk, 1987, 1991). In social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to a student’s belief concerning his/her capabilities to organize and execute courses of action necessary to attain designated performance levels (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy leads students to utilize the skills and belief they can successfully attain the goal they have set for themselves. It is not enough just to possess the necessary knowledge or skill to perform a task but one must have the conviction that the task is attainable and realistic (Artino, 2006). In social cognitive theory, a positive self-efficacy leads to better academic success which Bandura (1977, 1989) describes in two ways. Students who perceive their academic ability as an overestimate of true capabilities actually handle academic difficulties and obstacles with more positive outcomes than students who underestimate their abilities (Artino, 2006; Bandura, 1986, 1997; Pajares, 1996). The second area identified in Bandura’s (1977, 1989) definition of self-efficacy is the attainment of designated performance levels or goals. Self-efficacy leads students to utilize the skills and belief that they can successfully attain the goal they have set for themselves.

In regard to student achievement, Bandura (1977, 1997) hypothesized self-efficacy affects an individual’s choice of activities, effort, and persistence. Students with low self-efficacy may avoid a specific task where those students who believe they are capable of accomplishing the task will participate (Artino, 2006). This tends to lead to the effort and persistence applied to the task as well. Efficacious students will expend more effort and persist longer in the face of difficulties or obstacles which are applied in the classroom as well as in life. The less efficacious students will be self-limiting and not allow themselves the chance to persist or expend too much effort since they do not
believe they have the capabilities to achieve or succeed in overcoming the challenge (Bandura, 1977, 1997).

An interesting aspect of self-efficacy is the impact of success and failure upon performance for student success. Past successes and failures can influence student success; however, if a “strong efficacy has been developed through repeated successes, the negative impact of occasional failures is likely to be reduced” (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). The phrase *success breeds success* comes to mind, but a well-developed sense of efficacy can withstand failure as long as the failures come after efficacy has been established. Self-efficacy is directly linked to performance outcomes and “simply possessing skills does not ensure that students will be motivated to apply them” (Schunk, 1991, p. 227). Efficacy experts propose teachers focus instructional strategies on providing students with opportunities for authentic mastery experiences to help develop not only the necessary skills but the belief they are capable of accomplishing the task at hand. One caution the experts point out is to avoid overemphasizing verbal persuasion since it is short-lived and can be construed negatively regarding efficacy. Students can perceive the teacher’s comments regarding their performance as a signal of low ability depending upon the context (Artino, 2006).

The second theory rooted in learning and student achievement is the work of Lev Vygotsky. As an educational psychologist, often referred to as a *social constructivist*, his theory of self-regulation and mastery learning has been closely associated with Bandura’s work. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory proposes that cognitive development occurs through three main elements. The first element is culture and is deemed as the most important. The second is language and it serves as a facilitator of social interaction. The third
element is social interaction. This interaction is the way through which culture helps promote cognitive development (Louis, 2009). The most recognized aspect of his theory is the zone of proximal development which is defined as, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). There is an illustration of the Zone of Proximal Learning in Figure 2. Vygotsky views interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies. He suggests that teachers use cooperative learning exercises where children who are less competent in a skill can develop a particular skill with the help from more skillful peers. The belief of what students can do with the guidance of others is more predictive of their cognitive development than what they can accomplish on their own (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) believed that when a student is at the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing enough guidance scaffolding will give the student the necessary support to achieve the task. With the benefit of scaffolding, the student masters the task, then the scaffolding can be removed and the student will be able to complete the task on his own repeatedly (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers provide students with information, but the student has to build their own connections to have meaningful learning. Vygotsky’s theory has three major themes:

1. Social Interaction. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) felt social learning precedes development. He believes in the child’s cultural development every function appears twice. The first is on the social level and then
secondly on the individual level. The social interaction between people (interpsychological) comes first and then again inside the child (intrapsychological) (Learning Theories, 2012).

2. More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner. This can be in relation to a concept, process, or particular task. The MKO is normally thought of as being an adult in some type of role to the student, but the MKO could also be a computer or peers (Learning Theories, 2012).

3. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Figure 2). The ZPD is the distance between a student’s ability to perform a task with guidance and/or collaboration and the student’s ability to solve the problem independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This zone is where learning occurs (Learning Theories, 2012).
Another theory influencing student achievement and associated with the work of Vygotsky is the *Choice Theory* from William Glasser (1998). He is a psychologist and author working in the school system and with students since 1956 (Louis, 2009).

Glasser’s (1998) theory explains why people behave the way they do and how they learn in school. All behaviors are chosen consciously and specifically to satisfy one or more of our five basic needs (Glasser, 1998). These needs are listed in no particular order or ranking as survival, love/belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998). Most of these needs require other people to be accomplished or met. When individuals experience these needs, a behavior is utilized to help meet those needs. The need of fun and freedom can be met alone but most individuals prefer to be with others when they have fun or experience freedom.
After examining the theories presented by Glasser (1998) and Vygotsky (1978), a critical component is how social interaction plays a significant role in cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) believed cognitive development was dependent on effective relationships through guidance and support while learning. Glasser (1998) suggested that effective relationships are the reason behaviors are chosen and utilized to allow basic needs to be met. By teaching students how to establish acceptable social interactions, they will be able to use these relationships to promote learning through collaboration. According to Vygotsky (1978), students who develop positive relationships have the opportunity to experience cognitive development with the guidance of adults and will achieve a higher level of mastery than they could possibly attain on their own. School leaders have recognized the importance of collaboration for professional development and offering students the opportunities to enrich their educational experiences. Through school reform, local school districts are being rewarded for developing initiatives to allow for professional growth and improved student achievement.

*School Reform*

School reform efforts have helped to identify the changing need in students compared to the factory model of the 20th century. The goal was to push through a large number of students while sorting out a few select higher achieving students for post-secondary education through accelerated courses, while the rest of the students completed course work in basic skills for jobs in manufacturing (Srofe, 2009). The President of the United States, Barack Obama, and his current administration established new goals to improve schools with the broad overhaul of No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB, 2001).
The new national target for high schools became all students will graduate from high school prepared for college and a career by the 2014 school year. The majority of the well-paying jobs in the United States require some sort of post-secondary schooling. To address these concerns, school districts were enticed with federal funding to think of innovative strategies to address the growing problems that faced public education, to solve the dropout crisis, and to reduce the number of students who were graduating but ill-equipped for college course work or entry into the work force (United States Department of Labor, 2006).

School achievement and school status are measured by the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as established by NCLB (2001). AYP was tied to test scores by subgroups, attendance, and graduation rates (NCLB, 2001). Subgroups consist of students identified by ethnicity, special student who receive services (special education students and English language learners), and economic status (those who receive free and/or reduced lunch). Subgroups are determined by a minimum number of 40 students in a group or 10% of the junior class enrollment. Schools were expected to implement practices to identify at-risk students transitioning from middle school to high school with the creation of support positions for personnel to work with these students one-on-one. Georgia created graduation coaches to “help connect students to mentoring, tutoring, and life skills programming as well as credit recovery efforts and attendance interventions” (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, p. 26). Unfortunately, these positions were the first to be cut during recent economic downturns. School reform efforts have addressed improving academic achievement in public education for forty years. In the beginning, policy makers thought the problem could be solved by allocating more money to failing schools;
administrators would simply allocate funds to improve instruction and results in student achievement would be achieved (Rowan, Correnti, Miller, & Camburn, 2009). After a decade, those strategies were not yielding the results in student achievement that policy makers had envisioned, so Congress and individual states worked to establish raising academic standards for students (Rowan et al., 2009). Schools were being held accountable for student test scores and strategies were developed and implemented to increase parental involvement (Rowan et al., 2009). As a result, academic achievement did improve over this time period, especially for minority and economically disadvantaged students (Rowan et al., 2009). Another decade passed and the standards of NCLB (2001) that measured the progress of public schools were not as successful as anticipated; nearly one-fourth of the schools in the United States were still considered failing or not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (Rowan et al., 2009).

As a result of schools still considered failing and the national dropout rate increasing, new companies are marketing curriculum focused on addressing the needs of at-risk students and ninth graders. A national study conducted by one such company, Career Choices (2009), indicated that a freshman has already made the decision whether to drop out by November of their first year in high school. Consequently, many school districts have developed Ninth Grade Academies or transitional programs to provide a smaller learning community to increase the likelihood that more ninth grade students would remain in school, as a result of extra personal support from teachers, added structure for students, and more opportunities for the teachers to collaborate in teams (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (Black, 2004) reported a growing number of ninth-grade-only
schools being used to reduce the population of larger high schools. During the 2000 school-year, 128 ninth-grade-only schools were operating (Black, 2004). With more students failing ninth grade than other grades, the transition between middle and high school could be a defining moment for students. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) concluded the patterns of academic failure in high school clearly indicate that failing to identify at-risk students could lead to less assistance and ultimately, the student falling through the cracks and failing to graduate.

Srofe (2009) reported that an increasing amount of high school reform has focused on improving instruction and making structural changes to help raise student achievement and keep students in school. Some of the more well-known initiatives that have been used to restructure high schools and specifically address ninth grade students, include the Talent Development Model (Quint, 2006), First Things First (Quint, 2006), and High Schools That Work (Quint, 2006). In an effort to ease the transition of at-risk ninth graders to high school and provide the necessary support academically, socially, and environmentally, these models have common components as well as specific strategies which make them unique from each other. These models will be discussed later in this chapter.

School Engagement

Bandura’s social cognitive theory is a framework used to understand school engagement. In the social cognitive view, Bandura (1977) surmises people use a continually reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants which influences cognitive functioning. According to this theory, the driving force for people is neither environmental factors nor inner motivation, but rather the combination of all
determinants and the rewards that result from specific behaviors (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1989). School engagement encompasses all the components of Bandura’s (1977, 1986) theory dealing with the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the learner.

The framework for school engagement is drawn from research on motivation, school culture, and self-regulated learning. Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) used the three domains to express the forces at work in relation to engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in both academic and social activities, including extra-curricular activities (Srofe, 2009). Srofe (2009) described cognitive engagement as student ownership of learning, and emotional engagement involving positive or negative connections to teachers, peers, academic achievement, and the school. Other components of emotional engagement include a sense of belonging, or connectedness, the value of an education, and the ultimate goal of school. Srofe (2009), Bandura (1986), Glasser (1998), and Vygotsky (1978) held that the social interactions of students and the ability to meet their needs can motivate and promote learning through the reciprocity of environmental and cognitive determinants upon behavior. These theorists, also explained that students will rely on guidance from adults and their peers to move from the inability to perform a task to mastery. Behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement of students influence the level of self-efficacy an individual can attain and allow the student to overcome obstacles or failure with persistence to reach their desired goal (Bandura, 1989; Glasser, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Strofe (2009) supported the suggestion that the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement components overlap and are dependent upon each other. In the classroom, these factors can be supported by incorporating cognitive tasks that are authentic and challenging
where students are involved in the planning and implementing of the learning goals. When the students value what is being learned, they are absent less (behavioral engagement) and form relationships with teachers (emotional engagement) through interaction in the classroom (Srofe, 2009).

*Behavioral engagement* has a strong correlation to attendance and disruptive behavior (Srofe, 2009). Absenteeism and increased discipline referrals can affect a student’s ability to gain the necessary skills, knowledge, and concepts to successfully complete coursework which leads to promotion to the next grade level. The Gates Foundation (2010) and Neild (2009) reported that absenteeism is a strong predictor for students. As stated on the Cobb County School District (2012a) website regarding attendance:

State Law stresses the importance of school attendance and behavior. The school system is required by law to report non-compliant students to the Department of Education. The Department of Education will notify the Department of Driver Services (DDS). A parent’s / guardian’s permission for the student to withdraw from school will no longer be an acceptable reason to rescind suspension of the permit or license. Detailed Information may be found in Georgia Code Section 40-5-22, the Teenage and Adult Driver Responsibility Act (TAADRA). (para.6)

State mandates have required schools to identify students with ten or more days of absence and to notify the parents with a letter from the local school (CCSD, 2012a).

The state of Georgia has implemented strict laws for obtaining a driver’s license in an attempt to entice students to stay in school. Acquisition for a driver’s license in the
state of Georgia is now tied to school attendance as seen in the following law and requirements retrieved from the Department of Driver Services (DDS) website (2012):

Any applicant who is younger than 18 years of age must be enrolled in and not under expulsion from a public or private school and has satisfied the attendance requirements listed in #1 and #2 below for a period of one academic year prior to application for an instruction permit or driver's license. This suspension is mandated by O.C.G.A. 40-5-22(a.1)(2). (Department of Driver Services, 2012)

The DDS (2012) will suspend the license of a minor who:

1. Has dropped out of school without graduating and has remained out of school for ten consecutive school days;
2. Has ten or more school days of unexcused absences in the current academic year or ten or more school days of unexcused absences in the previous academic year; or
3. Has been found in violation by a hearing officer, panel, or tribunal of one of the following offenses, or has waived his or her right to a hearing and pleaded guilty to one of the following offenses:
   i. Threatening, striking, or causing bodily harm to a teacher or other school personnel.
   ii. Possession or use of a weapon on school property or at a school sponsored event.
   iii. Any sexual offense prohibited under Chapter 6 of Title 16.
   iv. Causing substantial physical or visible bodily harm to or seriously disfiguring another person, including another student.
v. Possession or sale of drugs or alcohol on school property or at a school
sponsored event. (para., 1-3)

Additionally, any infraction of the above conduct offenses will be a one-year suspension,
or the minor shall be suspended until his or her eighteenth birthday, whichever comes
first.

School disengagement is a process or cycle that can start as early as the sixth
grade (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The more days a student misses
instruction, the further the student falls behind and begins of falter academically.

Students become discouraged about their ability to catch up or successfully complete a
course and may become truant or drop out (Neild, 2009). The Gates Foundation (2010)
suggested in the report, *This School Works For Me: Creating choices to boost
achievement*, school districts should devise and implement data systems to help identify
at-risk students. Using predictors such as absenteeism (absent more than 10 days of the
fall semester of ninth grade), schools can formulate a plan to intervene and reduce the
number drop outs by addressing the issue of student absences (Gates Foundation,
2010).

Results from a study on attendance and achievement in Ohio found a statistically
significant relationship between student achievement and student attendance (Roby,
2004). The study examined the relationship of achievement on the Ohio Proficiency Test
given in the 4th, 6th, 9th, and 12th grades and attendance. In the conclusion, Roby
(2004) stated “the correlation of student attendance and student achievement is moderate
to strong, with the most significant relationship occurring at the ninth grade level, when
comparing attendance and achievement rates” (p. 12).
Disruptive behavior is associated with absenteeism and juvenile delinquency (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Students who have discipline referrals and are not compliant in the classroom experience challenges to acquire the knowledge and coping skills necessary to navigate school successfully. According to the Fact Sheet from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2010), research shows that not only academic engagement, but also social engagement, are essential for students to be successful. A lack of student engagement was reported to be predictive of dropping out. Students who are behaviorally engaged, not only participate in the classroom environment, they also become involved in clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities associated with the school (Srofe, 2009) Fredricks et al. (2004) found that participation in extracurricular activities was more positively correlated with higher academic achievement than for students who did not participate. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) reported that participation in school activities, the quality of instruction, and student abilities were closely aligned with successful student performance, which can lead to an increased identification with the school and continued participation in school activities. Students identified as at-risk tended to have lower levels of participation in school activities and lower levels of academic achievement (Appleton et al., 2008). As recommended in the study conducted by Appleton et al. (2008), it could be beneficial for local schools to intervene with the early identification of students at-risk due to high absenteeism and behavior problems. Many students who become disengaged also tend to have an increased amount of school related discipline problems, this magnifies lost instructional time and falling further behind. Finding opportunities to build positive relationships
increases the chance for students to feel connected or a sense of belonging to their school (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Srofe, 2009).

The ability to learn and master material, using strategies effectively to attain new knowledge, and having the intrinsic motivation to learn are referred to as cognitive engagement (Bandura, 1989). The concept of self-efficacy is the perceived belief in one’s ability to use academic skills to successfully complete performance goals. Bandura (1997) held that the level of self-efficacy a student develops directly affects the amount of failure or academic obstacles a student can withstand and still persist towards attaining goals. The effort and persistence an individual expends towards goal attainment and the choice of activities is based on the amount of efficaciousness an individual possesses (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Schunk, 1987). The cognitive engagement of students is derived from the successes or failures a student encounters while in a skill learning situation. Schunk (1987) supported the finding that lower self-efficacy can inhibit a student from attempting to perform new skills and lowers the motivation to participate.

Vygotsky (1978) believed cognitive development was complex and individuals changed their thinking by developing mastery of their cognitive processes and higher forms of thinking. Gredler (2009) added the concept of mastery through self-regulation as essential to accomplishing new cognitive operations not possible through natural processes. Glasser (1998) held that the effective use of social skills was an important vehicle for students to attain new knowledge and skills. A student will move from being unable to perform a task to independent functioning with the guidance or scaffolding from an adult or peer and gain more self-confidence (Vygotsky, 1978). Students who use meaningful strategies, set goals, employ basic learning strategies and make meaningful
connection to what they are learning have a higher cognitive engagement than students who do not (Fredricks et al., 2004).

*Emotional engagement* is the students’ feelings of connection to school, relationships to others, positive and negative reactions to others, and feelings about the school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Research demonstrates behavioral and affective components are critical for high rates of student engagement (Christenson et al., 2008). Appleton et al., (2008) examined the empirical evidence from a study by Baumeister and Leary (1995) on the importance of affective connections to others considering the *need to belong* as a fundamental human motivation. The conclusions drawn from the study indicated people need positive interactions with people and the interactions need to be consistent, long-term, and caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As one can surmise from these studies, the relationship of school climate and gains in student achievement are strong, in regards to promoting emotional engagement.

A survey conducted by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reported fewer course failures for ninth graders at schools where there was a high level of trust between teachers and students than at schools where the levels of teacher-student trust was low (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The relationship between school climate and student achievement can be difficult to analyze with the varying factors that must be considered. The strength of these relationships from the CPS survey indicated schools that enrolled higher achieving students are more likely to report fewer disciplinary problems, a feeling of belonging, and a safer school environment (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The overall conclusion of CPS, after the results of their survey were analyzed, was “course performance is better in schools with strong teacher-student relationships and where
students see high school as relevant for their future … and these relationships also impact student attendance” (Allensworth & Easton, 2007, p. 40).

One common component of Ninth Grade Academies and transitional programs focuses on strengthening the relationship between teachers and students through smaller class sizes, common planning, and establishing interdisciplinary teams (Ringstaff, 2008; Srofe, 2009; Vandewiele, 2008). The Gates Foundation (2010) has produced a series of guides to help school district leaders address the challenges of reducing the dropout rate. The research presented in the guides indicated having smaller, theme-based schools, offers student’s choices to be successful and to engage in their learning (Gates Foundation, 2010). Ringstaff (2008), Srofe (2009), and Vandewiele (2008) recommended that creating schools with smaller populations can help promote stronger relationships between students and teachers by increasing the opportunity for students to receive the support and personal attention necessary for student achievement to improve.

School engagement is one of the predictors of at-risk students and a key component of dropout prevention. The four major indicators of students who drop out of school are academic failure, disinterest in school, problematic behavior, and life events (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Teachers are faced with the task of structuring learning activities which motivate students to participate, promote acquisition of skills, build self-efficacy, reinforce positive reactions, and create a sense of belonging in order to address all three components of engagement (Fredrick et al., 2004).

At-Risk Students

Ensuring that more students graduate means developing a reliable data system with the ability to track student progress and evaluate the results. Not only does the
system need to have the capabilities to collect comprehensive data, but they should also have the analytical ability to translate the data into useful information to help educators in their decision-making. These data tools can serve as an early warning system to determine which students are more likely to dropout (Gates Foundation, 2010). School districts are working diligently to solve the dropout crisis by monitoring student progress in credits earned and implementing strategies to help offer students alternative school and program settings. The Gates Foundation (2010) reported that students can be identified as at-risk, or in danger of not attaining a high school diploma as early as middle school. “An individual’s educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of their life chances in terms of employment, income, health status, housing, and many other amenities” (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007, p. 2). At-risk, or off-track, students can be identified by their school performance, behavior, and demographic characteristics. The Gates Foundation (2010) published a guide to help school district leaders address the dropout challenge in American education and identified eight characteristics of students who are at risk of dropping out:

1. Low to failing grades in core courses in 8th grade;
2. Poor standardized test scores in 8th grade;
3. Low number of credits earned in first year of high school;
4. Course failures in first year of high school (fewer than 5 credits);
5. Consistent absenteeism (more than 10 days);
6. Special education placement;
7. English language learner identification (ELL); and
8. Age at entry of high school (15 or older). (p. 4)
The Gates Foundation (2010) also found the risk of dropping out can be exacerbated by other factors as well. Students frustrated by a lack of academic progress can often result in an increase of discipline referrals. When students are retained or lack the proper number of credits and courses necessary to be promoted, often they lose hope in their ability to catch up or to graduate on time.

Current legislation has placed accountability for student achievement and failure to graduate on the local high school. In Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) researched the nature of identifying at-risk students by the on-track predictor as well other factors: ninth grade year grade point average (GPA), number of semester course failures, and freshman year absences. Nearly half of the CPS students failed to graduate and the research indicated the one factor most directly related to graduation was student performance in their courses (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). During the 2004-2005 school year, 53% of CPS freshman had one or more failing grades in the first semester, 75% had five or more absences per semester, and 58% had a GPA of 2.0 or lower through the spring semester (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). By using these as indicators for graduation, CPS was able to identify at-risk students with 80% accuracy. In a research brief, Supporting Successful Transitions to High School represented 66 of the nation’s largest urban public school districts (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). The report made the following recommendations to the Governors who were in attendance:

Pursue a system-wide approach to equipping students with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed at the high school level. Districts should also build on their ability to track student progress and transform teaching and learning in high schools through high quality curriculum and instruction, intensive
orientation programs, and a combination of structural reforms and targeted
curricular supports. (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008, p. 9)

According to Levin et al. (2007), states were making preparations to compete for federated stimulus packages to compensate for one of the worst fiscal environments in the past 25 years. It was estimated U.S. taxpayers could save $45 billion annually if the number of high school dropouts were cut in half, as each high school graduate can contribute on average $209,100 of lifetime economic benefit for the public sector (Levin et al., 2007). As a result of the economic downturn, National Educational guidelines were revamped to promote graduation for all students with the competencies to attend college and to be prepared for the competitive job market (NASSP, 2004).

Also, school districts across the country were urged to start targeting youth at risk for dropping out in the ninth grade, where the highest number of dropouts occurs. Recommendations for reducing the number of dropouts included (a) establishing positive school environments with small learning communities; (b) developing positive student-teacher relationships; (c) offer rigorous, authentic learning experiences; (d) promoting student engagement; and (e) improving student attendance (NASSP, 2004). Artino (2006) explained when students feel a connection to their school and learning, they are more apt to develop strategies for persistence and effort regarding academic challenges as well as developing self-efficacy towards performance outcomes. All of these components can lead to more ninth grade students successfully transitioning from middle school to high school and being promoted to the tenth grade on time, thus reducing the number of dropouts across the United States. If life chances depend so heavily on education, it is important that educational inequalities are equalized for opportunities in a
democratic society (Levin et al., 2007). These inequalities can create costly consequences for society in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of public services such as health care, criminal justice, and public assistance (Levin et al., 2007). Improving the educational outcomes for at-risk populations is an investment that can yield benefits that outweigh the investment costs (Levin et al., 2007).

Entrance to ninth grade marks a critical juncture in a student’s education and for 80% of ninth graders attending public school in the United States, it is a literal move involving a new building and new social marker (Neild, 2009). School transitions can be a moment of peril for students who do not successfully navigate the academic responsibilities and fall off track for promotion and graduation (Neild, 2009). Students must navigate a larger environment, more rigorous academics, and the social pressures of adolescence simultaneously. The ability to succeed academically sets the path for many students to graduate in four years, and it starts in ninth grade.

*Ninth Grade Transition*

Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education, recently made a statement about our nation’s schools when asked how they were measuring up to guidelines established by NCLB (2001). He reportedly said 82% of schools would fail to make AYP (as cited in Ravitch, 2012). The Center for Education Policy reported this was an overstatement and only half the nation’s schools would be considered failing (Ravitch, 2012). Either way, these statistics indicate our schools are producing graduates who are required to take remedial classes in college, are low academically achieving students, and dropout rates remain alarmingly high (Quint, 2006). High school is the culminating
event in a student’s compulsory education. As students make the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade, they must navigate larger environments, adjust to a rigorous curriculum, and face new social demands (Legters & Kerr, 2001).

The myriad of difficulties facing ninth graders is magnified by the pressures of becoming part of a new community. If the transition is difficult, students can lose their way resulting in lower grades, discipline problems, and failure for promotion (Letgers & Kerr, 2001). Horwitz & Snipes (2008) stated, “the patterns of academic failure in high school clearly indicate that the transition between middle and high school is a defining moment for students” (p. 1). Unfortunately, these early missteps are rarely able to be recovered, for most students. Nearly 70% to 80% of students who fail in the ninth grade will not graduate from high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The National Association of Secondary School Principals commissioned John Lounsbury and J. Howard Johnston, both middle school experts, to conduct a comprehensive study of ninth graders in 48 states and the District of Columbia in 1985 (Black, 2004). The results showed disconnection between school policies and the developmental needs of 14-year-olds. Instructional time was too short, teacher-centered, and lacked engaging activities (Black, 2004). Lounsbury and Johnston found students were grouped according to ability and most high schools offered little or no academic and social guidance (Black, 2004). Now almost 30 years later, similar problems still exist and plague students in ninth grade (Black, 2004).

Another component for successful transition for ninth graders is providing adequate academic skills for mastery of rigorous curriculum (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) surveyed 495 ninth grade students entering a high
school with a student population of approximately 2,300. The students attended one of three middle schools which served as a feeder program for the high school. Results of the survey indicated the greatest positive influence for transition was “interesting classes” and “going to class everyday” (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005, p. 4). Students need to be challenged and presented with engaging lessons with varying methods of delivery to motivate students to be ready to learn when they come to class (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (as cited in Oakes & Waite, 2009) compiled research from several organizations and created a list of the components of effective transition programs (Oakes & Waite, 2009). Some of the components from the National Middle School Association (as cited in Oakes & Waite, 2006) and the Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (as cited in Oakes & Waite, 2009) are listed below:

1. Ensuring collaboration between eighth and ninth grade;
2. Aligning the eighth grade curriculum standards for high school curriculum;
3. Providing support for early intervention for academic support;
4. Communicating consistently about academic, social and organizational expectations at the high school level; and
5. Providing students and parents guidance and advice to plan for long-term goals of postsecondary options as well as high school. (p.2)

Quint (2006) identified five critical challenges to high school reform from research on three reform models: Career Academies, First Things First, Talent Development. Each model had several components, but all components were required to
be implemented to improve low-performing urban and rural schools. After Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization studied the various components of these models, conclusions were drawn about which aspects were effective and if the program as a whole was effective (Quint, 2006). The major areas of challenge included (a) creating a personalized and orderly learning environment; (b) assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills; (c) improving instructional content and practice; (d) preparing students for the world beyond high school; and (e) stimulating change (Quint, 2006). With all the available research, school districts were encouraged to pursue a system-wide approach to preparing students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed at the high school level. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) stressed these practices must be more than just a remediation of the problem but rather a thorough investment of resources to ensure improvement in student outcomes that are sustainable.

Challenges of Ninth Grade Transitional Programs

Several school districts have undertaken the specific problem of identifying at-risk ninth graders for early intervention. By combining structural reform with curricular strategies that address the academic needs of the at-risk ninth graders, school districts are creating small learning communities (SLC), or schools-within-a-school, to provide the personalized attention and support necessary for improved student achievement. High school reform was one of the top priorities for the federal government, state education departments, local school superintendents, major corporations, and all citizens (Quint, 2006). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) reported approximately 2,000 high schools, about 12%, produce nearly half of the nation’s dropouts. The number of seniors
enrolled in these schools was 60% or less than the number of freshman who were enrolled three years prior (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). There were also a disproportionate number of all the African American students (58%) who drop out from these low-performing high schools compared to 22% of all white dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

There are three comprehensive reform initiatives that have been implemented in more than 2,500 high schools across the nation (Quint, 2006). These high school models are Talent Development, First Things First, and Career Academies. A multitude of the components comprising these initiatives are also incorporated in thousands of more schools around the country (Quint, 2006). Each program has a philosophy or theory basis that correlates to the components that comprise the intervention.

Talent Development. The first school reform model to be reviewed is Talent Development High School. The Talent Development High School model was designed for schools that face major problems with achievement scores, student attendance, discipline, and dropout rates. The use of this model helped to make changes structurally, instructionally, and comprehensively, across all grades and departments. The Talent Development model uses organizational and curricular changes to “establish a strong, positive school climate for learning, promote high standards for English and mathematics coursework for all students, and provide professional development systems to support implementation of the recommended reforms” (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004, p. 21). The model, developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University in 1994, was a trend in educational reform to improve student performance and engagement. By 2004, the model expanded to 33 high
schools in 12 states across the country (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004). The larger goals to be achieved through this initiative were to increase students’ attendance, improve student achievement, and keep students moving toward high school graduation (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004). There were four key program features for Talent Development: (a) Ninth Grade Success Academy, (b) Career Academies for students tenth through twelfth, (c) extended block schedule, and (d) catch-up courses in reading and math for ninth graders with low skills (Quint, 2006).

**Ninth Grade Success Academy.** The Ninth Grade Success Academy was designed as a separate transitional program for students entering their first year of high school. The students were grouped in small interdisciplinary teams of four or five teachers who shared the same 150 to 180 students. A block schedule was used with common planning time for the team of teachers to collaborate (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004). The Success Academy was self-sufficient with a separate administrative team, a clearly labeled entrance of its own, and labs to support the classrooms (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004).

**First Things First.** The next high school reform initiative to be reviewed is First Things First (IRRE, 2003). Developed by The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), seven critical features of school reform have been identified. The first four features (provide continuity of care, increase instructional time for math and English, set clear goals for academics and conduct, and provide opportunities to be recognized) focused on relationships and teaching and achievement. The other three features (equip and expect a shared vision of improved instruction, allow flexible use of resources to fit student needs, and provide incentives for improved student achievement) focused on adult responsibilities (IRRE, 2003). First Things First was based on the seven
components as necessary factors for schools to gain improvements in student achievement (IRRE, 2003). The three key program features developed over four-years of duration include (a) theme-based small learning communities, (b) Family Advocate System (faculty and advisory program), and (c) instructional improvement efforts (Quint, 2006).

For the First Things First program, continuity of care was provided by no more than 10 to 12 of the same professionals within each school level for no more than 150-325 of the same students for extended periods (IRRE, 2003). Other program goals include:

1. An increase in instructional time will be provided in English and math by doubling class periods and lowering the student to adult ratios during English and math instruction;

2. Academic and conduct expectations will be at a high standard;

3. Program goals must clearly define what skills students must master and what tasks students will perform by the time they leave high school;

4. Students will be provided opportunities to learn, to perform, and to be recognized;

5. Adults in the program will be empowered by a shared vision of improved instructions and a high quality of learning promoted in the classroom;

6. Schools will allow for flexible use of resources whether it is for personnel or instruction, to meet the needs of the whole student); and

7. Collective responsibility will be achieved through the use of incentives and consequences for SLCs and central office staff. (IRRE, 2003)
First Things First has been implemented in several states across the country including Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas (Quint, 2006).

Career Academies. The third school reform initiative was established more than 30 years ago, Career Academies. This is a widely-used high school reform initiative that “aims to keep students engaged in school and prepare them for successful transitions to post-secondary education and employment” (Kemple, 2004, p.3). Career Academies have three key features using a school-within-a-school structure, integrated academic and occupational curriculum, and employer partnerships providing career awareness activities and work internships (Quint, 2006).

As outlined by Kemple (2004), most Career Academies are located in large city and urban areas. The high schools typically serve low-income students in Grades 9 through 12. Academies serve a cross-section of 150 to 200 students from these schools. A growing number of Academies have been established in suburban and rural communities. There are estimated to be more than 2,500 Career Academies across the country. Kemple (2004) outlined the key features of the school-within-a-school organization:

1. A small learning community is formed within the larger high school by clustering 3 to 5 teachers and 50 to 75 students per grade for grades 9 through 12 or grades 10 through 12;
2. Teachers are drawn from various academic and career-related disciplines and remain with students from year to year;
3. One teacher assumes lead responsibility for administrative tasks and serves as liaison with school and district administrators and employer partners;
4. Students take 2 to 4 courses per year in the Academy and their remaining courses in the regular high school;

5. Block scheduling of the Academy-oriented classes in the morning is followed by regularly scheduled classes in the afternoon; and

6. Efforts are made to encourage parental involvement. (p. 23)

The integrated curriculum allows students to take “three or more academic courses and at least one career- or occupation-related course per year” (Kemple, 2004, p. 24). A range of areas are addressed through the occupational classes in a career field instead of specific job skills. Local employment needs and demands drive the career themes chosen for the Academy with careers in health professions, business and finance, electronics, travel and tourism, and information technology offered as examples. Forging employer partnerships, Career Academies establish working relationships with local businesses and corporations who in turn provide materials and funding for the occupational classes. Activities centered on career awareness and development are used to improve students’ understanding of the work environment and occupations associated in a program’s field. Through work-based learning programs, students are placed in jobs that expose them to various occupations. With the job placements, collaboration between the Career Academies and the employers is crucial for proper placement and efficient use of opportunities (Kemple, 2004).

Challenges of Implementation of Transitional Programs

Each school reform initiative discussed in the previous section is implemented with the focus of improving academic achievement, increasing attendance, and preparing students for future challenges. School districts use student achievement data to identify
at-risk students entering the ninth grade to eradicate or dramatically reduce the dropout rate by providing intervention programs for at-risk students to keep them on track for graduation (Black, 2004; Quint, 2006; Srofe, 2009). The effects of the three school reform initiatives are presented through the five challenges Quint (2006) identified through her research for MDRC.

According to Quint’s (2006) five challenges for implementing an effective school reform, the first challenge is creating a personalized and orderly environment. Student survey data indicate small learning communities help the students feel cared about and known by their teacher. The *First Things First* and *Talent Development* programs include small learning communities’ components for ninth grade only and across all four grade levels in high school. Both experiences play a role in increasing attendance and reducing dropout rates (Quint, 2006). The *Talent Development* model showed attendance rates improved by 15% and the number of students with 90% attendance rate or better doubled (Neild, 2009). Quint (2006) and Neild (2009) have reported that small learning communities will likely have a positive effect on school climate, but prior studies have not shown evidence that small learning communities have an impact on student achievement.

Quint (2006) suggested the second challenge for implementing an effective transition program is assisting students who enter high school without the prerequisite skills or poor academic performance. The *Talent Development* model addressed this with scheduling flexibility and doubling up students in English and math (Smith, 2007). The model offered catch-up courses to help students stay on track and not fall behind their peers academically. By using block scheduling, *Talent Development* provided the
students an opportunity to accumulate eight credits at the end of the year (Quint, 2006). Block scheduling is when courses meet for 90 minutes and students take four classes during one semester. At the end of a school year, students have had the opportunity for eight courses. Approximately 73% of the Academy group graduated from high school on time, compared with only 64% of similar students from similar school districts nationally (Kemple, 2004).

The third challenge presented by Quint (2006) for transition programs is improving instructional content and practice. In the First Things First model, teachers were to develop a curriculum integrating their small learning community theme into the classroom. Not having the time or correct training to do this were obstacles most teachers felt that hindered their ability to complete these tasks (Quint, 2006). Providing support and training are essential elements to help teachers use existing curriculum and make them better (Quint, 2006). First Things First provided professional development for their teachers at one site who met regularly to discuss pedagogy and positive impacts on reading achievement were reported (Quint, 2006).

The fourth challenge for school reform initiatives to be successful is preparing students for the future (Quint, 2006). Whether high school graduates transition into postsecondary options or the work force, the skills they possess after high school will impact their earning power and career choices (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The Career Academies were clearly oriented towards preparing students with prerequisite skills for a broad array of jobs within an occupational field or theme (Kemple, 2004). Earning power for young men was impacted by career awareness and work internships. Members of the Career Academies earned more than $10,000 over the four year period
following graduation than students who did not attend Career Academies (Quint, 2006).

The focus for Talent Development and First Things First was on improving academic achievement and graduation rates which in turn should improve career choices and earning power (IRRE, 2003; Kemple, 2004; Quint, 2006).

The last challenge Quint (2006) addressed was stimulating change. Implementing school reform initiatives takes research, planning, resources, guidelines and well-established goals (IRRE, 2003). Utilizing data to drive the vision and mission for implementation of any successful program and pinpointing the desired outcomes are critical to program success (Gates Foundation, 2010). Personnel also play a major role in the successful implementation of school reform. Effective use of human capital requires putting people in the right place to make the most impact on student learning (Quint, 2006). The fewer number of reform elements in existence and the constraints a school district may be facing can be deterrents for implementing successful comprehensive school reform models (Quint, 2006).

Summary

The research clearly indicates the number of dropouts in the United States is creating an economic strain as the nation is allowing much of our human capital to go to waste. To prepare the next generation for competition in the global market either by direct entrance into the work force after graduation or transitioning to a postsecondary option, is our democratic responsibility. Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory is one framework used to understand school engagement. A student’s perception of his or her ability to attain goals is related to self-efficacy. Glasser’s (1998) Choice Theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory identify causal relationships between
social interaction and cognitive development. Developing positive relationships with adults and peers is essential to mastery of higher cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

School reform identifies the changing needs in our students compared to the factory model of the 20th century. The new national target for high schools will be all students should graduate from high school prepared for college and a career (NCLB, 2001). Instruction has to take on a new element to help provide students with meaningful learning. School engagement encompasses all the components of Bandura’s (1977, 1986) theory dealing with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the learner (Fredricks et al., 2004). The framework for school engagement is drawn from research on motivation, self-regulating learning, and school climate (Fredricks et al., 2004).

The transition from eighth to ninth grade is the most critical and predictive of future graduation. As students enter a larger, less personalized environment they may falter academically and never recover from falling off-track (Neild, 2009). The Ninth Grade Academies or transitional programs provide a small learning community, extra personal support from teachers, added structure, and opportunities for the teachers to collaborate in teams. With more students failing ninth grade than any other grade, the transition between middle and high school is a defining moment for students. The patterns of academic failure in high school clearly indicate that not to identifying at-risk students can lead to them falling through the cracks and not graduating (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). The costs and benefits of students graduating with a high school diploma significantly increase the economic and societal contribution each individual can make to their community, state, and nation. School districts are implementing school reform initiatives, which have specific components targeting at-risk ninth graders, to improve
academic achievement, increase attendance, and increase the graduation rate. Transition programs should be chosen to address needs assessed through data collected by the local school or school district (Gates Foundation, 2010). Successful implementation of transitional programs can help increase student achievement, promote positive relationships between students and teachers, provide engaging curriculum for students to experience success, and decrease the dropout rate as students stay on track for graduation.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship of ninth grade transitional programs on student achievement for at-risk students. A second component of the study was to examine the relationship of student perception of positive relationship to a student’s grade point average (GPA). To conduct this study, six high schools were chosen from a northwestern county in the state of Georgia. The schools were selected based on availability of a transition model or program offered or nonexistent, the principal’s consent, and convenience to the researcher. Two schools chosen for the study have a separate building on the high school campus for the freshman class and use a team approach for collaboration. Two schools chosen for the study have transition programs which are embedded in the curriculum for all students including the ninth grade students. Two schools chosen for the study did not have any structured transitional program or support for their ninth grade students. The researcher referred to the six high schools as School A, B, C, D, E and F to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The study was causal comparative design for the most part; however, the student perception of positive relationships to student grade point average was a correlational component. Student achievement data was retrieved using an archival database and analyzed for the different type of transition program to achievement data. Students completed a survey and data was analyzed for a correlation between student perception of positive relationship and grade point average (GPA).
After consent was obtained from The University of Southern Mississippi’s International Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A) and the school district (see Appendix B), six schools were chosen for transitional models or programs being used or absent from use during the 2011-2012 school year. The researcher obtained consent from the Area Superintendents to conduct the study in the high schools in their area. The Principal’s consent (see Appendix C) was obtained to distribute the parent and student consent forms (see Appendix D) and the Student Survey on School Engagement (see Appendix E) to the randomly selected students in their school from the targeted population. Approximately 3,600 ninth grade students are enrolled in the six high schools and 1,500 of those ninth grade students have been identified as at-risk, or remedial, according to the school district criteria. These students were identified by the school district’s remedial indicators from their eighth grade year in 2010-2011. The independent variable for this study was the type of transition program (Ninth Grade Academy, a ninth grade embedded transition program, or no program) being implemented. The dependent variables for this study were student achievement (GPA, EOCT scores, promotion rate), attendance, and the number of discipline referrals.

The quantitative data collected for the purpose of this study was archival and collected from the local schools for individual student scores and the Georgia Department of Education website for the remedial subgroup. Individual student scores were comprised of grade point average (GPA), End of Course Test (EOCT) scores, number of discipline referrals, and attendance for the first and second semester of the 2011-2012 school year. The promotion rate was collected as a percentage for the remedial group. A
student’s GPA is the average of their grades for all classes taken during the school year. In the state of Georgia, the state mandates the specific courses to administer an End of Course Test as the final for the course. In the ninth grade, the courses with EOCTs are Ninth Literature and Composition, Biology, and Math. The EOCT scores are reported as a grade percentage on the student’s transcript and to the Georgia Department of Education on the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) Report Card as Does Not Meet (fail), Meets (pass), and Exceeds (pass plus). The promotion rate was calculated using the cohort of students who entered the ninth grade year as of August 11, 2011, divided by the number of students in this cohort who were promoted to the 10th grade year. The number of discipline referrals was recorded in the school district’s County Student Information System (CSIS). Reports can be generated for the number of incidents per student or for a subgroup of students in a semester or for an entire year for each school. A student’s attendance was the total number of days the student was absent during the semester/school year. Reports were run from the school district’s Academic Portal/Attendance Manager database for each individual student’s attendance. The data was retrieved through the archival databases of the school district (Academic Portal) and the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) using the individual’s student identification numbers or remedial subgroup status at the conclusion of the 2011-2012 school year.

The other set of data used for the purpose of this study was from a survey instrument, Student Survey on School Engagement from the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE). The surveys were distributed to the randomly selected students from the 500 first-time ninth grade at-risk students in the targeted population for this study at the conclusion of the spring semester of the 2011-2012 school year. Consent
forms were distributed to the randomly selected students for student and parental signatures. Teachers were selected from the six schools to distribute and collect the consent forms. The surveys were distributed only to the students who returned signed consent forms. Students received the survey from their teacher and return the completed survey to the same teacher during the same class period. Students were identified by individual student identification numbers from targeted population of at-risk ninth grade students. The researcher collected the completed surveys from the six schools. Data was analyzed for correlation of student perception of positive relationship to a student’s GPA.

Participants

School District

The six schools chosen for the study are from a northwestern county in Georgia. There are 114 schools within the district with 69 elementary schools, 25 middle schools, 16 high schools, two special education centers, one adult education center and one performance learning center (CCSD, 2011). This school district is the 26th largest school district in the country with a budget of $1.5 billion to support over 100,000 students and 15,000 employees. The county covers more than 340 square miles and has six municipalities comprised of a diverse and international population of students. The schools chosen to participate in the study were relatively close in enrollment for the ninth grade class of 2010-2011. The school with the largest total enrollment for the ninth grade class was 832 for School A, and the smallest enrollment was 540 ninth grade students at School F (see Table 1).
Table 1

*Fall and Spring Enrollment 2010-2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Fall Enrollment</th>
<th>Spring Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The major ethnic categories for the district are Caucasian 44.5%, African American 31.2%, Hispanic 16.5%, Asian American 4.8%, multi-racial 2.7%, and American Indian 0.1% (CCSD, 2011). Over the course of a ten year period, the ethnicity distribution has shifted from predominately Caucasian to a more diverse cross-section of the world’s population. There has been an increase in the African American population of 12,475 more students from 1999 to 2008. The Hispanic population has also seen a dramatic increase of 11,000 more students in the system as of 2009 (CCSD, 2011). Another statistic which has an impact upon schools is the transient rate of the students in a district. As of 2009-10, the transient rate for the district was 24.2%. There were 43% of the students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL) during the 2010-2011 school year in this district (CCSD, 2011) (see Tables 2 and 3).
Table 2

*Percentage of Enrollment: Students by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Category</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>School F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi Racial</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Percentage of Enrollment: Students by Other Subgroups 2010-2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYP Subgroups</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>School F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SWD</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* SWD = students with disabilities; ELL = English language learners; FRL = free and reduced lunch.

Schools A and B have a separate building on the high school campus for the freshman classes and separate administrators to deal with all discipline problems within
the Ninth Grade Academy. Schools C and D have transition programs providing support for all on-level ninth grade students. These two schools use either an embedded curriculum or an advisory model for support for students entering the ninth grade in 2011-2012. Schools E and F do not have a separate building or structured transitional program or support for their ninth grade students.

Study Participants

For the purpose of this study, students were identified at each of the six schools as at-risk during their ninth grade year using the remedial criteria outlined by the school district. Any ninth grade student would be identified as at-risk if they qualify in any two of the following categories: failed any of the required state assessments (CRCT), achieved below the 25th percentile on ITBS assessment, retained but socially promoted to the ninth grade, failure in any academic classes, or poor school attendance (10 or more days).

Approximately 3,600 students were enrolled in the ninth grade at these six high schools in a Northwestern county of Georgia during the 2010-2011 school year. Approximately 500 students were identified as first-time ninth graders and remedial or at-risk during the 2011-2012 school year and will be the participants in this study. There was a wide range of at-risk populations in the six high schools. During the 2010-2011 school year, the largest remedial population was School A with 649 (25.2%) of the total enrollment for the school. The smallest at-risk population was at School F with 19 (.9%) of the total number of students enrolled at the school (see Table 4). There were 10% of the first-time at-risk ninth grade students randomly selected to complete the School Engagement Survey from each high school at the end of the spring semester of the 2011-
2012 school year for a total of approximately 50 surveys. Only student identification numbers were used for the survey selection to preserve anonymity.

Table 4

*Enrollment of Students in Compensatory Program 2010-2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Remedial Enrollment</th>
<th>% Remedial of Student Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instrumentation

The survey used in this study was developed by the National Center for Student Engagement (NCES) in order to assess whether interventions had an effect on student engagement and to measure students’ engagement in school (NCSE, 2006). The questions were related to the three types of school engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; NCSE, 2006). The Student Survey on School Engagement was tested for validity and reliability. A valid instrument is one that measures what it is supposed to measure. The developers chose convergent validity, which establishes constructs similar to the instrument and then determines if a relationship exists between existing valid data sources and the instrument. Behavioral engagement was more significantly correlated to attendance than academic
achievement. Cognitive engagement was more consistently related to academic achievement. Emotional engagement was correlated with academic achievement. All the scales were correlated with one another. That the correlations ranged from significant to .93 reveals they are related but not measuring identical concepts within engagement (NCSE, 2006). Content validity is based on Fredricks et al’s. (2004) theory, which is important since the construct of school engagement is multifaceted as well as integrated.

A reliable instrument produces the same measure when used with the same population repeatedly. The typical acceptable Cronbach’s alpha reliability test in social sciences is 0.70. All the scales are clearly reliable, as all results were above .70 with the exception of one test site for behavior engagement (NCSE, 2006).

This survey on school engagement has responses which include questions on the following: academic achievement, attitudes towards school attendance and discipline, perception of student-teacher relationships, perception of student-peer relationships, school climate, school connectedness, and student perception towards learning and studying. The survey responses were developed for consistency of response scales and/or to make questions more clear to the students (NCSE, 2006). The emotional engagement scale includes responses on questions 22c, 22d, 22f, 22m, 22o, 22p, 22r, 22s, and 22v. The cognitive engagement scale includes responses from 21a, 21b, 21c, 21f, 22h, 22j, 22k, 22n, 22p, and 22q. Student responses were higher the more they agree on the Likert scales. For the purpose of this study, the responses directly linked to the Research Questions and Hypotheses were analyzed.

Selected survey responses are linked to Research Question 2 and hypothesis 1 proposed in this study. Research Question 2 was addressed in 11 responses on the survey
from questions 21 and 22. Hypothesis 6 regarding perception of positive student-teacher relationships and student achievement is addressed in questions 21 and 22.

**Procedures**

The researcher submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. In addition, the researcher submitted an application to conduct research to the Cobb County School District in Marietta, Georgia and to The University of Southern Mississippi. The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) was contacted for consent to use the Student Survey on School Engagement (see Appendix F).

For the purpose of this study, the data were collected through the use of student identification numbers from the targeted population of at-risk ninth graders as identified by the school district criteria. Archival data was used for GPA, EOCT scores, promotion rate, attendance, and number of referrals. The archival data was for the approximately 500 students who were identified as first-time at-risk ninth graders enrolled at six different high schools selected for the study. The archival records were accessed using only student identification numbers to preserve anonymity.

Once written consent was obtained from all respective parties, a survey on school engagement was distributed to randomly selected first-time at-risk ninth grade students from the six high schools who returned a parental consent form. Students were selected by their student identification numbers to preserve anonymity. The surveys were distributed and collected during one class period by selected classroom teachers at the six high schools chosen to participate in the study. The completed surveys were picked up by the researcher from each of the schools where they were returned.
Data Analysis

The independent variable in this study was the transitional program implemented at six high schools in a northwestern county in the state of Georgia. The dependent variables in this study were academic achievement data, attendance, and disciplinary referrals. Academic achievement was measured by GPA, EOCT scores, and promotion to the 10th grade. The GPA was for the ninth grade year for students in the targeted population of at-risk students to be measured. The EOCT scores for the ninth grade year for the students in the targeted population group was measured in terms of individual performance and scores on the EOCT tests given in the ninth grade. In the state of Georgia, the courses with state mandated End of Course Tests in the ninth grade are Ninth Literature and Composition, Biology, and Math. Also, the attendance for the ninth grade year for the targeted population group was measured by the total number of days absent for each individual and by the subgroup of at-risk students. Discipline referrals for the ninth grade students in the targeted population only were measured by total number of incidents reported for the school year for each individual and subgroup. The quantitative data was analyzed by SPSS statistical software using a one-way ANOVA to establish if the type of transition program or model affected the GPA, EOCT scores, attendance, and number of discipline referrals.

Student engagement is characterized as a meta-construct consisting of the following domains: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The survey responses were scaled to correlate with one of the constructs in school engagement. The data from the responses related to student perception of positive relationship was entered using SPSS statistical software
and analyzed using a Pearson correlation to see if there was a relationship between the student perception of positive relationship and GPA.

Summary

The study was conducted as causal comparative research to determine the relationship between the type of ninth grade transitional program implemented and at-risk student achievement. Also, the study had qualitative measures as a secondary perspective, which was transformed and incorporated into the quantitative data set to determine if there was a correlation between the student perception of positive relationship and GPA. Through analysis of the data collected, the relationship between ninth grade transitional programs and student achievement was determined and whether there was a relationship between student perception of positive relationships and GPA was determined, as well.
CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The ninth grade year is an important juncture in a student’s academic career. By making adequate credit accumulation, students have a better chance of graduating in four years (Gates Foundation, 2010). Our current administration has developed Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) as educational reform movements and legislation encouraging school districts and local schools to think of unconventional strategies for solutions to the growing number of ill-prepared graduates, as well as the declining graduation rate. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship of ninth grade transitional programs on student achievement for at-risk students. By using either Ninth Grade Academies or embedded transitional programs were student attendance, student achievement, and the number of referrals affected? Did these programs ultimately help reduce the number of students who drop out before attaining a high school diploma? For the purpose of this study, students were identified at each of the six schools as at-risk during their first time in ninth grade using the remedial criteria outlined by the school district. Any ninth grade student would be identified as at-risk if they qualified in any two of the following categories: failed any of the required state assessments (CRCT), achieved below the 25th percentile on ITBS assessment, retained but socially promoted to the ninth grade, failure in any academic classes, or poor school attendance (10 or more days). Chapter IV will include the results of the study and present the information in charts.
Discussion of the Results

**RQ1**: Did Ninth Grade Transitional programs influence attendance, student achievement, promotion rate, and the number of referrals for at-risk students?

**H01**: There will be no difference between the number of days absent for ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

The number of days absent for first-time ninth grade at-risk students was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA by the type of transitional program being implemented. The six high schools were grouped according to the transitional program utilized during the 2011-2012 school year. Schools A and B had a Ninth Grade Academy (9th Academy), Schools C and D had an embedded transitional program (Transition), and Schools E and F did not use any structured program for at-risk ninth graders (No Program). The total number of first-time at-risk ninth grade students for each program (n) was analyzed for the average number of days absent (M) with the standard deviation (SD) for each program. The minimum and maximum number of days absent for all three types of programs was reported. The results for the H01 are included (see Table 5).
Table 5

Number of Days Absent for At-risk Ninth grade Students 2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>14.07</td>
<td>16.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>9.06</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 1 showed a statistically significant difference between the number of days a first-time at-risk ninth grade student was absent and the type of transitional program being implemented, $F(2, 521) = 15.055, p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analyses for multiple comparisons indicate the average number of days absent for the 9th Academy ($M = 14.07$), was higher than Transition ($M = 9.067$), or No Program ($M = 6.76$).

$H_{02}$: There will be no difference in the GPA for ninth grade at-risk students in a ninth grade, academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

The total number of first-time at-risk ninth grade students for each program (n) was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA for the Grade Point Average (GPA) at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. The GPA is reported as a weighted GPA, including any quality points (.5 for Honors and 1 for Advanced Placement classes) earned during the school year. Descriptive statistics include the average GPA (M), the standard deviation (SD), and the minimum and maximum GPA for each program. The results for the $H_{02}$ are included (see Table 6).
The results for Hypothesis 2 showed a statistically significant difference between the GPA for first-time at-risk ninth grade students and the type of transitional program being implemented, $F(2, 521) = 18.459, p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analyses for multiple comparisons indicate the average weighted GPA for the schools with No Program ($M = 2.58$) was higher than the weighted GPA for the schools with an embedded transitional program ($M = 2.26$) or the 9th Academies ($M = 1.85$).

$H_{03}$: There will be no difference between the EOCT scores of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

The total number of at-risk ninth grade students for each program (n) was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA for the End of Course Test (EOCT) scores for the Ninth Literature and Composition, Biology, and Math courses during the 2011-2012 school year. The EOCT scores are reported numerically out of a possible 100 points. Descriptive statistics include the average score (M), the standard deviation (SD), and the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
minimum and maximum grade for each test and for each program. The results for the
H<sub>03</sub> are included (see Tables 7, 8, and 9).

Table 7

*End of Course Test (EOCT) Scores for At-risk Ninth Grade Students in Ninth Literature and Composition 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 3 showed a statistically significant difference between
the EOCT scores for at-risk ninth grade students on the 9th Literature and Composition
test and the type of transitional program being implemented, \( F(2, 492) = 29.375, p<.001 \).

Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analyses for
multiple comparisons indicate the Ninth Literature and Composition EOCT average
scores for the schools with 9<sup>th</sup> Academies (M = 74) was lower than the EOCT scores for
the schools with an embedded Transitional program (M = 81) and the schools with No
Program (M = 81). The highest EOCT score for the Ninth Literature and Composition
(93) and the lowest EOCT score for the Ninth Literature and Composition (48) was
indicated.
Table 8

*End of Course Test (EOCT) Scores for At-risk Ninth Grade Students in Biology 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>9.90</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>9.87</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>10.76</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 3 showed a statistically significant difference between the EOCT scores for at-risk ninth grade students on the Biology test and the type of transitional program being implemented, $F(2, 486) = 26.596, p<.001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analyses for multiple comparisons indicate the Biology EOCT average scores for the schools with 9th Academies (M = 71) was lower than the EOCT scores for the schools with an embedded Transitional program (M = 78) and the schools with No Program (M = 77). The highest EOCT score for Biology (93) and the lowest EOCT score for Biology (41) was indicated.
Table 9

*End of Course Test (EOCT) Scores for At-risk Ninth Grade Students in Math 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 3 showed a statistically significant difference between the EOCT scores for first-time at-risk ninth grade students on the Math test and the type of transitional program being implemented, $F(2, 486) = 11.333, p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analyses for multiple comparisons indicate the Math EOCT average scores for the schools with 9th Academies ($M = 69$) was lower than the EOCT scores for the schools with an embedded Transitional program ($M = 72$) and the schools with No Program ($M = 74$). The highest EOCT score for Math (92) and the lowest EOCT score for Math (47) was indicated.

$H_{04}$: There will be no difference between the number of discipline referrals of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

The total number of first-time at-risk ninth grade students for each program (n) was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA for the total number of discipline referrals during the 2011-2012 school year. Descriptive statistics include the average score (M), the standard deviation (SD), and the minimum and maximum grade for each test and for each program. The results for the $H_{04}$ are included (see Table 10).
Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Academy</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 4 showed a statistically significant difference between the number of discipline referrals for first-time at-risk ninth grade students and the type of transitional program being implemented, $F(2, 521) = 28.433, p<.001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Post Hoc Tukey HSD analysis for multiple comparisons indicate the number of discipline referrals for the 9th Academy was higher ($M = 3.85$) than the number of discipline referrals for the Transitional ($M = 1.70$) or No Program (.78). The highest number of discipline referrals for one individual student (21) occurred within the 9th Academy and the lowest number of discipline referrals was zero for all three types of programs.

$H_{05}$: There will be no difference between the number of students promoted to tenth grade of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

The total number of students promoted to the tenth grade was analyzed using a Pearson Chi-Square test. The number of students promoted and retained within a transitional program type was totaled (Count) and reported as a percentage (%). Students
who transferred and did not complete the school year (Transfer) were indicated. The results for \( H_{05} \) are included (See Table 11).

Table 11

*Percentage of At-risk Ninth Grade Students Promoted and Retained 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>9th Academy</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>No Program</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for Hypothesis 5 showed a statistically significant difference between the number of first-time at-risk ninth grade students promoted to the tenth grade and the type of transitional program being implemented, \( \chi^2(N = 524, df = 4) = 23.245, p<.001. \)

Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The Pearson analysis indicated the promotion rate for first-time at-risk ninth grade students with No Program (77.4%) was greater than the promotion rate for students in the 9th Academies (52.9%) or Transitional
programs (52.7%). The number of students retained in the ninth grade was greater for the Transitional programs (43.2%) than the retention rate for the students with No Program (20.9%) or 9th Academies (41.2%).

RQ2: Is there a relationship between the perception of positive student-teacher relationship and student achievement as measured by GPA?

$H_{06}$: There will be no relationship in the GPA of students and their perception of a positive student-teacher relationship.

The instrument used in this research project was broken into four sections: demographic information, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. Using the scale scores established by NCSE, the statements are grouped according to the specific construct of engagement. Ten of the responses were designed on a five-point Likert scale but the scores were reversed for consistency of higher agreement or positive responses resulting in a higher number. The responses scaled for cognitive engagement from question 21 ranged from Very Important to Not at all Important. For question 22, the design used a four-point Likert scale which ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Selected responses were analyzed from the scale for emotional engagement. The results from each question can be found in Figure 3 through Figure 8, all of which are illustrated below. The first set of responses was for the behavioral construct.
Figure 3. Behavioral Scale Q1: Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting along with your teachers? The answers for each student are in the blue column representing the composite results. The red column represents the responses for the students with a passing (4.0 – 1.0) grade point average (GPA) and the green column represents the responses for students with a failing (below 1.0) grade point average. The responses to Behavioral Scale Q1 range from Daily (1) to Never (5).

One hundred percent of the students with failing GPAs indicate they have had trouble getting along with their teachers daily or almost daily yet the 62% (5 out of 8) students with passing GPAs indicate they are only in trouble with their teacher a few times or never.
Figure 4. Behavioral Scale Q2: Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble paying attention in school? The answers for each student are in the blue column representing the composite results. The red column represents the responses for the students with a passing (4.0 – 1.0) grade point average (GPA), and the green column represents the responses for students with a failing (below 1.0) grade point average. The responses to Behavioral Scale Q2 range from Daily (1) to Never (5).

The responses for students with passing GPAs indicate 63% (5/8) have trouble paying attention either a few times or never, and only 38% (3/8) have trouble paying attention either almost daily or daily. The responses for students with failing GPAs indicate 67% (2/3) have trouble paying attention either almost daily or daily, and 33% (1/3) have trouble paying attention a few times.
Figure 5. Behavioral Scale Q3: Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting your homework done? The answers for each student are in the blue column representing the composite results. The red column represents the responses for the students with a passing (4.0 – 1.0) grade point average (GPA), and the green column represents the responses for students with a failing (below 1.0) grade point average. The responses to Behavioral Scale Q3 range from Daily (1) to Never (5).

The responses for students with passing GPAs indicate 63% (5/8) have trouble getting their homework done either a few times or never, and only 38% (3/8) have trouble getting their homework done either almost daily or daily. The responses for students with failing GPAs indicate 67% (2/3) have trouble getting their homework done either almost daily or daily, and 33% (1/3) have trouble getting their homework done a few times.
Figure 6. Behavioral Scale Q4: Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting along with other students? The answers for each student are in the blue column representing the composite results. The red column represents the responses for the students with a passing (4.0 – 1.0) grade point average (GPA), and the green column represents the responses for students with a failing (below 1.0) grade point average. The responses to Behavioral Scale Q4 range from Daily (1) to Never (5).

The responses for students with passing GPAs indicate 75% (6/8) have trouble getting along with other students either a few times or never, and only 25% (2/8) have trouble getting along with other students daily. The responses for students with failing GPAs indicate 67% (2/3) have trouble getting along with other students daily, and 33% (1/3) never have trouble getting along with other students.

The Cognitive Engagement Scale Scores and Emotional Engagement Scale Scores were not analyzed for statistical significance due the low return rate; however, descriptive statistics were studied for patterns or trends (see Tables 12 and 13).
Table 12

*Cognitive Engagement Scale Score from Student Survey for School

Engagement 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>39.45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing GPA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>39.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing GPA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the low response rate of surveys, descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the Cognitive Engagement Scale. The combined total of responses for all students had a $M = 39.45$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of five. The responses for students with a passing GPA had a $M = 39.63$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of five. The responses for students with a failing GPA had a $M = 39$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of five.
Table 13

*Emotional Engagement Scale Score from Student Survey for School Engagement 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>30.09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing GPA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>29.75</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing GPA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, due to the low response rate of 11 surveys, descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the Emotional Engagement Scale. The combined total for all students had a $M = 30.09$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of four. Students with a passing GPA had a $M = 29.75$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of four. Students with a failing GPA had a $M = 31$ with a minimum of one and a maximum of four.

**Summary**

There were two Research Questions that resulted in six Hypotheses to examine if there was a relationship between transitional programs and at-risk student achievement. There were significant findings in the Hypotheses related to attendance, student achievement, and discipline and the type of transitional program. Statistical significance using the Pearson correlation could not be reached due to the poor return rate for the survey. There were two different collections for the student surveys to increase the sample size. The first distribution was in the summer of 2012 immediately following the completion of the school year. Students voluntarily attended a credit recovery program, and the consent forms were handed out to the first-time at-risk ninth graders in attendance.
at the six different high schools. The second collection occurred during the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year to the at-risk students who were first-time ninth graders during the previous school year. The return rate was still too low and lacked the minimum number established in the power analysis prior to the study for the Research Question and Hypothesis addressing the relationship between the perception of positive student-teacher relationships and a student’s GPA to be analyzed for statistical significance. However, descriptive analysis was useful for identifying trends or patterns for school engagement.

The first Research Question studied the affect transitional program models or lack of a structured program had on student achievement. In regards to student attendance, the schools with no structured program were found to be lower in student absences than the schools with a separate Ninth Grade Academy or an embedded transitional program. One variable analyzed in terms of student achievement was the GPA for the first-time at-risk ninth graders at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. The schools with no structured program had the highest average GPA with the Ninth Grade Academy schools having the lowest average GPA of the three types of programs. Another variable of student achievement used for analysis was the EOCT scores for the first-time at-risk ninth graders from Ninth Literature and Composition, Biology, and Math tests. The schools with an embedded transitional program had higher average EOCT scores for Ninth Literature and Composition and Biology than the schools with no structured program or a Ninth Grade Academy. However, the schools with no structured program had a higher average EOCT score on the Math test than the schools with a Ninth Grade Academy or embedded transitional program. The schools with the ninth grade academies had the lowest average scores for all three EOCT administered. The number of discipline
referrals for first-time at-risk ninth graders was analyzed, and the schools with no structured program had the fewest average number of referrals with the ninth grade academies having the highest average number. In terms of promotion from ninth grade to tenth grade, the highest percentage to be promoted was in the schools with no structured program. The embedded transitional program schools and the Ninth Grade Academy schools had the highest amount of first-time at-risk ninth grade students retained at the conclusion of the 2011-2012 school year.

The second Research Question focused on whether there was a relationship between the perception of a positive student-teacher relationship and a student’s GPA. Statistical significance could not be determined using a Pearson correlation due to the poor return rate for the survey instrument from the schools chosen to participate in the research. The sample size (N = 13) was too small, thus reducing the power of analysis. However, the descriptive analysis from the survey instrument was analyzed and useful in identifying patterns or trends associated with school engagement and student achievement. Chapter V will discuss these findings.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship of ninth grade transitional programs on student achievement for at-risk students and if a correlation exists between the perception of positive relationships and grade point average (GPA). Transitional programs are based on key components to help increase student attendance, increase student achievement, increase the promotion rate and reduce the number of discipline referrals through building positive relationships in a smaller classroom environment. In Chapter V the researcher will discuss the summary of the study, conclusions, limitations, recommendations for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

As part of the Race to the Top initiative, Georgia applied for a request for Educational Secondary and Elementary Act (ESEA) flexibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). Georgia has developed the College-and Career-Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) to replace Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Several of the measures include promotion, credit accumulation, attendance rate and graduation rate. The new educational reform movements and legislation are encouraging school districts and local schools to think of unconventional strategies for solutions to the growing number of ill-prepared graduates as well as the declining graduation rate. To address this problem the following Research Questions guided this study.

*RQ1:* Did Ninth Grade Transitional Programs influence attendance, student
achievement, promotion rate, and the number of referrals for at-risk students?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between the perception of positive student-teacher relationship and student achievement as measured by GPA?

The participants of this study included the first-time at-risk ninth grade students from six high schools in a large metropolitan school district in the Southeastern region of the United States. Two of the schools utilized a separate Ninth Grade Academy located on the high school campus; two of the schools implemented an embedded transitional program; the remaining two schools did not use any structured program to address the at-risk ninth grade student needs. The variables of this study included the attendance rate, grade point average (GPA), End of Course Test (EOCT) scores, discipline referrals, and promotion to tenth grade for the first-time at-risk ninth grade students during the 2011-2012 school year. An additional component of the study was a survey completed by the randomly selected first-time at-risk ninth grade students measuring their perception of their school engagement, including the perception of positive student-teacher relationships. A one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the data.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study did not compare student achievement for the schools with ninth grade academies prior to the implementation of a separate building. Achievement gaps could be closing with a historical comparison of data from each school. The two schools with ninth grade academies have a larger student body population, a higher percentage of minorities, a higher percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and a lower percentage of Caucasian students. The lower socioeconomic factor contributes to a
higher transient rate for each of these schools, as well. These demographics set the two schools apart from the other four schools in the study and should be considered when analyzing the findings. A longitudinal study should be conducted to give a clear picture of the measures of student achievement, the number of discipline referrals, and the promotion rate prior to the ninth grade academies compared to the data after the implementation of the separate building.

Comparing the other four schools in the study with the two schools with the ninth grade academies can be misleading since the other four schools are not exact matches demographically or geographically. The other schools in the study can be used as a barometer or measure for where the Ninth Grade Academy schools should be in a few years with their at-risk ninth grade population. Consideration should be given to the process of implementing strategies and programs to address the achievement gaps and what improvements have been accomplished to date in the two schools with separate buildings. The two schools without any structured transitional program could benefit from the use of a transitional program to improve the student achievement measures and increase the promotion rate.

Two Research Questions guided this study with six Hypotheses proposed. Findings are outlined by the Research Questions and Hypotheses.

*RQ1*: Did Ninth Grade Transitional programs influence attendance, student achievement, promotion rate, and the number of referrals for at-risk students?

*Ho1*: There will be no difference between the number of days absent for ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.
Analysis of the data indicated the schools with no structured program had a lowest average absenteeism rate than the schools with a Ninth Grade Academy or an embedded transitional program. The results were statistically significant, indicating there is a relationship between the number of days absent and the type of transitional program. Absenteeism is a strong predictor of dropping out of school (Gates Foundation, 2010; Neild, 2009). Research indicates the correlation between attendance and student achievement is moderate to strong and ninth grade is the most significant time for this relationship (Roby, 2004). The schools with no structured transitional program had the highest average weighted GPA (M = 2.58) and the highest average score on the Math EOCT (M = 74). Another component tied to student absenteeism was the ability to catch up or successfully complete courses. Students can become discouraged as they fall behind and may become truant or drop out (Neild, 2009). The schools with no structured transitional program had the highest promotion rate (77.4%) and the fewest retained first-time at-risk ninth graders (20.9%). An interesting note is the association between absenteeism and disruptive behavior (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The schools with no structured transitional program had the lowest average number of discipline referrals (M = .78) and the schools with the ninth grade academies had the highest average amount of absenteeism (M = 14.07) and the highest average number of discipline referrals (M = 3.85). These finding support the research correlating absenteeism and student achievement as well as disruptive behavior (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Gates Foundation, 2010; Neild, 2009). As reported in Chapter III, the population and demographics of the schools with no structured transitional programs (Schools E and F) is relatively similar (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).
Both schools have a larger Caucasian population than other races/ethnicities. Other contributing factors to keep in mind common to both schools are the use of the same scheduling format, and they are geographically located in the western part of the county.

$H_{02}$: There will be no difference in the GPA for ninth grade at-risk students in a ninth grade, academy, a ninth grade transition program, or no intervention.

Analysis of the data indicated the schools with no structured transitional program had higher average GPA than the schools with a Ninth Grade Academy or an embedded transitional program. The results were statistically significant, indicating there is a relationship between the GPA and the type of transitional program. One of the four major indicators of students who drop out of school is academic failure (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Students who have positive reinforcement from academic success are more apt to stay in school. Research in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) revealed the one factor most directly related to graduation is a student’s performance in their courses (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The remedial population for the schools with no structured transitional program (School E and F) is on the lower end for all six schools used in the study. School F has less than 1% remedial population of the total number of ninth grade students enrolled. School E has 11.6% remedial population of the total number of ninth grade students enrolled. These results contradict the key initiatives in the transitional programs to increase student attendance, improve student achievement, and keep students moving towards graduation (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004). The correlation of course performance and student achievement can be seen through the data on promotion and retention for the schools with no structured transitional programs, discussed later in this chapter.
$H_{03}$: There will be no difference between the EOCT scores of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a Ninth Grade Transition Program, or no intervention.

There was a statistically significant difference between the EOCT scores of first-time at-risk ninth graders and the type of transitional program implemented. Analysis of the data indicated the average EOCT scores were higher for the schools with an embedded transitional program (Schools C and D) for 9th Literature and Composition ($M = 81$) and Biology ($M = 78$), but the schools with no structure transitional program (Schools E and F) had the higher average EOCT score for Math ($M = 73$). The schools with the ninth grade academies (Schools A and B) had the lowest average EOCT scores for all three tests. These findings contradict the key components of the transitional programs for increasing student achievement where the structural reform combines with curricular strategies to address the academic needs of the at-risk ninth graders (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). However, the ninth grade academies may have made an impact since the research did not do a comparison to average EOCT scores before the Ninth Grade Academy implementation. The use of scheduling flexibility and the ability to catch up in courses previously failed is an important aspect of transitional programs (Smith, 2007). The findings support the use of block scheduling to allow the students the opportunity to make up failed courses from first semester during the second semester; however, the Ninth Grade Academy schools use block scheduling as well. The number of retained first-time ninth graders could be substantially lower without this type of scheduling format.
There will be no difference between the number of discipline referrals of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a ninth grade transition program, or no intervention.

There was a statistically significant difference between the number of discipline referrals for first-time at-risk ninth graders and the type of transitional program implemented. Analysis of the data indicated the average number of discipline referrals was higher for the schools with ninth grade academies (M = 3.85) than the schools with an embedded transitional program (M = 1.70) or the schools with no structured transitional program (M = .78). As discussed in the review of the literature, many students who become disengaged can have an increase in school related discipline problems, which can exacerbate the loss of instructional time and falling behind (Appleton et al., 2008). The opportunity to build positive relationships increases the student’s chance to feel connected or a sense of belonging (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Srofe, 2009). One common component of a Ninth Grade Academy or transitional program is focused on strengthening relationships between students and teachers by creating small learning communities through common planning and smaller class sizes (Ringstaff, 2008; Srofe, 2009; Vandeweile, 2008). The ninth grade academies have the highest average number of first-time at-risk ninth graders retained, the highest average number of absences, and the lowest average GPA. This contradicts the research for ninth grade academies; however, the implementation of the ninth grade academies has occurred at two schools with the highest ninth grade enrollment rate in this study. Creating a separate building for ninth graders on these high school campuses has isolated the ninth graders and allowed the administration to deal with the ninth grade students
separately. This may have impacted the average number of discipline referrals reported before the implementation of the Ninth Grade Academy. This study did not compare data prior to the ninth grade academies.

$H_{05}: \text{There will be no difference between the number of students promoted to tenth grade of ninth grade at-risk students in a Ninth Grade Academy, a ninth grade transition program, or no intervention.}$

Analysis of the data indicated the schools with no structured program had a higher percentage for promotion (77.4%) than the schools with a Ninth Grade Academy (52.9%) or an embedded transitional program (52.9%) for first-time at-risk ninth graders. The results were statistically significant, indicating there is a relationship between the number of days absent and the type of transitional program. These findings support the review of literature for promotion or staying on track for graduation and student achievement (Black, 2004; Gates Foundation, 2010; Horwitz & Snipes, 2008) as the schools with the highest promotion rate also had the highest average weighted GPA and the highest average EOCT score for Math. However, the findings of this study contradict the literature concerning the key components of the transitional programs offering support and increasing student achievement (Black, 2004, Quint, 2006). A student’s opportunity to progress normally academically was increased by 59% in schools with transition support programs over the progress for students in schools without these programs (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

A higher retention rate can affect the graduation rate and increase the chance those retained students could drop out of school. The Gates Foundation (2010) reported when students lack the necessary courses or number of credits to be promoted, often they
lose hope in their ability to catch up or graduate. As a measure of AYP, graduation rate is one of the components for schools making progress. Adjustments have been made to the calculation for graduation rates for each cohort of first-time ninth graders as they enter high school as outlined in the CCRPI for the state of Georgia (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). The retention rates in the schools with ninth grade academies (41%) and embedded transitional programs (43%) indicate a growing ninth grade class with students requiring remediation and the potential for larger class sizes. The graduation rates for those schools will be impacted by the number of students repeating the ninth grade thus making the desired graduation rate goals for AYP more difficult to achieve.

**RQ2:** Is there a relationship between the perception of positive student-teacher relationship and student achievement as measured by GPA?

**H06:** There will be no relationship in the GPA of students and their perception of a positive student-teacher relationship.

The response rate for the Student Survey for School Engagement was 26% and could not be analyzed for statistical significance due to the lack of power with a small sample size (N = 13). The power of analysis prior to the study indicated the minimum sample size for completed surveys as N = 50. However, examination of the descriptive statistics yields useful patterns and trends regarding the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement scales and student achievement when separated by students who have passing and failing weighted GPA. Finding opportunities to build positive relationships increases the chance for students to feel connected or a sense of belonging to their school (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Srofe, 2009). The student responses on the four questions from the Behavior Engagement Scale responses support
the premise of positive relationships promoting academic success. The student responses indicated having trouble getting along with their teachers for the students with a failing GPA. Appleton et al. (2008) examined the empirical evidence from a study by Baumeister and Leary (1995) on the importance of affective connections to others considering the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation. The conclusions drawn from the study indicate people need positive interactions with people and the interactions need to be consistent, long-term, and caring (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The Cognitive and Emotional Engagement Scale did not reveal any significant patterns or trends. Scores were relatively the same for students who had a passing GPA or failing GPA. According to Princiotta and Reyna (2009), one of the predictors of at-risk students is school engagement. The areas of concern or indicators of students who drop out are failure academically, losing interest in school, behavior problems, and events in their lives (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). The task of educators is developing meaningful, authentic assignments for students to become engaged in all areas for improved student achievement.

Limitations

The limitations for this study included:

1. This study was conducted in a large metropolitan school district in the southeastern part of the United States with first-time at-risk ninth grade students.

2. The power analysis prior to the study indicated 50 surveys needed to be collected for statistical significance to be analyzed.
3. The response rate of this study was a 26% (N = 13) return rate for the Student Survey for School Engagement.

4. The participants of the study who completed the survey were limited to the first-time at-risk ninth grade students who voluntarily attended the credit recovery program offered after the regular school year had ended.

5. The data for this study is from the student information system from each local school. The data is considered reliable but subjective to each local school for administrations following district policies for discipline referrals and accuracy of data entered into the County Student Information System (CSIS).

6. This study did not compare the data prior to the Ninth Grade Academy; therefore, the average number of discipline referrals reported after the implementation of the Ninth Grade Academy could be impacted.

Recommendation for Policy and Practice

While the study was being conducted, two legislative initiatives were mandated for this school district. The legislative mandates are Common Core Standards and the Georgia request for Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility through the use of the College-and Career-Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). In June 2010 Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social studies, Science and Technical Subjects and Common Core State Standards for Mathematics were published by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) (Kendall, 2011). In 2011, Kendall stated the initiative’s goal was:

To develop a set of shared national standards ensuring that students in every state are held to the same level of expectations that students in the world’s highest
performing countries are, and that they gain the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for success in postsecondary education and in the global arena. (p. 1)

Georgia began the implementation of the CCRPI to address the new Common Core State Standards and the goal of the CCSSI. Each of these could impact and influence the recommendations for this study. For the purpose of this study the accountability measures for this school district was based on No Child Left Behind legislation; consequently, the results of this study could have a different impact on future studies as the state of Georgia has implemented the CCRPI as a measure for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

The results of this study regarding the relationship between ninth grade transitional programs and at-risk student achievement could impact the body of research on effective transitional programs and student achievement. This study could have an impact on federal and state policies and practices as they are rewarding school districts for implementing innovative strategies to address the dropout rate and improving student achievement. For local school districts, this study could impact the decisions to build separate Ninth Grade Academies based on cost effectiveness and student performance outcomes. Ninth Grade Academies can be used by the school district to help with population control since the schools with the largest student body are the schools with a separate building for freshman. Local school boards are faced with making decisions regarding the construction of separate ninth grade buildings and should use student achievement and discipline data for a basis in the decision-making process. The results of this study could impact the effective strategies administrators and teachers use for
increasing attendance, improving student achievement, reducing the number of discipline referrals, and increasing the promotion rate from ninth grade to tenth grade for first-time at-risk ninth graders and, ultimately, reducing the number of dropouts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, the researcher suggests the results are not generalizable to other areas of the country. The researcher suggests the replications of this study should be done across all states in the southeast and other regions of the country. Another option would be to compare the results with rural and urban communities.

Since this study was only conducted with first-time at-risk ninth grade students, another suggestion would be to include other grade levels, as well as a longitudinal study of the population included in this study. The response rate for the survey was 26%. The power of the sample size was too small to statistically analyze the data using a Pearson correlation. The researcher would suggest distributing and collecting the survey data while the first-time at-risk ninth grade students are in their home school and during the regular school year.

Conducting a longitudinal study to measure the impact on academic achievement of the ninth grade academies for all students, as well as at-risk students, would be beneficial. Data from years prior to the inception of a separate ninth grade building should be analyzed to support the cost effectiveness for future construction of other Ninth Grade Academies in the district. Student achievement and discipline data can provide the justification for using transitional programs and separate buildings as a way to help freshman make a successful transition from middle school to high school. Promotion rate
data can support the need for ninth grade academies to help reduce the number of retained freshman and ultimately eradicate the potential number of students dropping out due to academic failure.

Another suggestion for further study would be to identify the types of transitional programs and the impact each may have on academic achievement that addresses the at-risk ninth grade students (i.e., academy or embedded program). Researchers should complete a similar study to further identify factors that impact the ninth grade student success in high school and also examine what structures impact disciplinary referrals and attendance.

Concluding Remarks

For this study, the main findings were for first-time at-risk ninth graders at six high schools for the 2011-2012 school. The findings showed the schools with no structured transitional programs to have the best results in most areas of the study. Other factors could be at work in these two schools and should be investigated further. A comparison between the six schools chosen could have put the two schools with the Ninth Grade Academies at a disadvantage not detected through demographics or remedial populations.

As indicated in the review of the literature, the schools with lowest average number of absences had the highest average weighted GPA, the highest average score on the EOCT for Math, the highest percentage rate for promotion to tenth grade, and the lowest average number of discipline referrals. An interesting finding from the study was the fact that the schools with no structured transitional program were the schools showing the highest promotion rate for the first-time at-risk ninth graders to tenth grade. Further
analysis of the factors contributing to the academic success of first-time at-risk ninth graders could reveal strategies or teachers’ behaviors leading to more students being promoted to the tenth grade. These strategies could be implemented in the schools with lower promotion rates across the district.

Conversely, the schools with the highest average number of absences also had the lowest average weighted GPA, the lowest average EOCT scores for all three tests, and the highest average number of referrals. These schools were the Ninth Grade Academy schools. These findings suggest more research should be conducted to compare the student achievement, discipline, and promotion rates from the years prior to the implementation of the Ninth Grade Academy to those measures now. The study should follow the students from their entrance into ninth grade until graduation. It is interesting to note, Ninth Grade Academy schools did have the second highest percentage of promotion to the tenth grade. The findings indicate the Ninth Grade Academies promoted more students than the schools with embedded transitional programs, which suggests the separate building may provide more support than the embedded programs. As the district looks to other schools for separate ninth grade buildings, I can provide data to help in the decision-making process. Criteria can be set by using the data for proper use of county money toward the construction of a separate building and the desired student outcomes. Whether a relationship exists between the perceptions of positive student-teacher relationships affecting a student’s GPA remains undetermined. Based on accountability measures such as NCLB, is it the responsibility of educators to research the best programs. Programs of this nature should be based on research and should assess the impact on student achievement.
APPENDIX A

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12060606
PROJECT TITLE: Is There a Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and At-Risk Student Achievement?
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER/S: Susan Marie Stoddard
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership
FUNDING AGENCY: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF PROJECT APPROVAL: 06/07/2012 to 06/06/2013

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
APPENDIX B

COBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

OFFICE OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

A Community with a Passion for Learning

July 3, 2012

Ms. Susan Marie Stoddard  
2207 Heath Drive  
Ball Ground, GA 30107

Dear Ms. Stoddard:

Your research project titled, *Is There A Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and At-Risk Student Achievement?*, has been approved. Listed below are the schools where approval to conduct the research is complete. Please work with the school administrator to schedule administration of instruments or conduct interviews.

School  
Hillgrove  
Kell  
Kennesaw Mt.  
North Cobb  
South Cobb  
Sprayberry

Should modifications or changes in research procedures become necessary during the research project, changes must be submitted in writing to the Academic Division prior to implementation. At the conclusion of your research project, you are expected to submit a copy of your results to this office. Results cannot reference the Cobb County School District or any District schools or departments.

Research files are not considered complete until results are received. If you have any questions regarding the process, contact our office at 770-426-3407.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

Chief Academic Officer
APPENDIX C

PERMISSION FOR SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

My signature below indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to allow the researcher to use data from my school and my child to complete a survey on school engagement in the study titled “Is There a Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and At-Risk Student Achievement?” to be conducted at my school between the dates of May 7, 2012 and May 24, 2012.

I understand the purpose of the research project will be to determine if there is a relationship between the use of transitional programs for ninth graders on academic achievement, attendance, and discipline. Another component of the research will be to determine if there is a correlation between student perception of positive relationships and grade point average (GPA).

Potential benefits of the study are:
1. Identify if transitional programs increase academic achievement and promotion
2. Identify if transitional programs increase attendance
3. Identify if transitional programs reduce discipline referrals
4. Identify if student perception of positive relationships improves grade point average

Potential risks of the study are:
1. Students may fear answering survey questions could be used against them in a negative way.

I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw my school from the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

• Survey participation is voluntary and anonymous. The researcher will not be present while the survey is administered

• The researcher will treat all information gathered for this study as confidential. Names or identifying information will not be linked to the data in any part of the research. Information reported for the study will be reported for the entire group of subjects.

• Opinion data gathered during the study will become part of the data analysis and may contribute to published research reports and presentations.

• Participation in the study is strictly voluntary and will not affect student grades or placement decisions. If I decide to withdraw permission after the study begins, I will contact the researcher of my decision.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

If further information is needed regarding the research study, I can contact Susan M. Stoddard at Kell High School, 4770 Lee Waters Road, Marietta, GA 30066, 678 494-7844 ext 256.

Signature

____________________

Principal

____________________

Date
APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICPATE

Cobb County Parents,

I am writing to request your permission for your student to participate in a study that will research the level of school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance of ninth grade students. If you grant your permission for your student to participate, your student will be asked to fill out a survey that will take 20 minutes to complete. Your child’s participation will involve responding to a number of questions about school engagement on the following: relationships between student and teacher as well as student and peers, attitudes toward school attendance and discipline, school involvement, academic achievement, and school climate.

The results of the study “Is There A Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs And At-Risk Student Achievement?” will be to determine if there is a relationship between the use of transitional programs for ninth graders on academic achievement, attendance, and discipline. Another component of the research will be to determine if positive relationships affect grade point average (GPA).

I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw my student form the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

- The identity of participants is protected. Survey participation will be voluntary and anonymous. The researcher will not be present while the survey is administered. Names and identifying information will not be collected in any part of the research.

- The researcher will treat all information gathered for this study as confidential. Information reported for the study will be reported for the entire group of subjects.

- Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect student grades or placement decisions. If you decide to withdraw permission for your student to participate after the survey has been administered you should notify the researcher with your decision.

If you have questions or if further information is needed regarding the research study, please contact Susan M. Stoddard at Kell High School, 4770 Lee Waters Road, Marietta, GA 30066, 678 494-7844 ext 256. If you would like to inspect the student survey, a copy is on file in the principal’s office. You may keep this page for your records.

Thank you for granting permission for your student to participate in this study. It is my desire that the results of this study will help identify effective strategies and techniques to assist students transitioning into ninth grade.

Sincerely,

Susan M. Stoddard
Assistant Principal
Kell High School
Please sign below if you understand and give permission for your child to participate in the student survey.

I have read and understood the information provided regarding the descriptions of the study “Is There a Relationship Between Ninth Grade Transitional Programs and At-Risk Student Achievement”. My student and I give permission to participate in this study and we understand that we may withdraw our consent at any time. I have received a copy of the consent form.

I agree to participate in the student survey and understand the information provided will be confidential.

_________________________________  
Printed Student Name

_________________________________  
Student Signature

I understand by signing this consent I give permission for my student to participate in the student survey.

_________________________________  ________________  
Parent/Guardian Signature  Date
APPENDIX E

STUDENT SURVEY

Student Survey – Version #2 Revised 10/04

We would like to find out a little more about you and how you feel about school. Your answers to the following questions will help us to do this. It will take you about 15 minutes to complete this survey. If you are unsure of how to answer a question, please answer it as best you can and then write a comment in the margin. All the information you provide is confidential. It will only be used to help us learn about how to keep students interested in completing school.

1. Your ethnicity (please check all that apply): □ White/Anglo □ African American □ Hispanic/Latino □ American Indian □ Asian/Pacific Islander □ Other, describe__________________________

2. Your primary language: __________________ Second language: __________________

3. If your primary language IS ENGLISH SKIP this question. If your primary language IS NOT ENGLISH, how comfortable are you using English to speak with administrators and teachers at your school? Please fill in the appropriate box.

   Very comfortable □ Somewhat comfortable □ Somewhat uncomfortable □ Very uncomfortable □

4. How many friends do you have at this school? Please check the appropriate box.

   □ 0 □ 1-5 □ 6-10 □ more than 10

5. How many friends do you have that do not go to this school?

   □ 0 □ 1-5 □ 6-10 □ more than 10

6. What activities have you been involved in at this school?

   How often do you participate in each one?

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20. Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>A few times</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Almost daily</th>
<th>Daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting along with your teachers?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying attention in school?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting your homework done?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting along with other students?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. How important do you think...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Quite important</th>
<th>Fairly important</th>
<th>Slightly important</th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An education is?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is to get good grades?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The things you are learning in school are going to be to you later in life?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is to attend school every day?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is to go to college?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is to have a good job or career after finishing school?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. How much do you agree with each of the following statements? Please fill in the circle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel close to people at my school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I belong in my school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am happy to be at my school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers at my school treat students fairly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel safe in my school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like most of my teachers at school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The students at this school don't like students who are different.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am getting a good education at my school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will fail no matter how hard I try.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will graduate from high school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to go to college.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not interested in school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The discipline at my school is fair.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my classes are boring.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers care about how I'm doing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers know the subject matter well.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learn a lot from my classes.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an adult at school that I can talk to about my problems.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I respect most of my teachers.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is a waste of my time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers are always telling me what to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers understand me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my teachers expect too much of me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

Permission to Use the Survey

From: Jodi Heilbrunn <jheilbrunn@pffac.org>
To: zaxandjess <zaxandjess@aol.com>
Subject: Permission to use NCSE School Engagement Questionnaire
Date: Mon, Mar 5, 2012 5:08 pm

Dear Ms. Stoddard,

It is our pleasure to grant permission to use the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) Student Engagement Survey for your dissertation research. NCSE is an initiative of the Partnership for Families and Children.

If there is anything else I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask.

Jodi Heilbrunn
Senior Research and Policy Analyst

The Partnership for Families & Children
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Denver, CO 80203
303-837-8466, Ext. 128
jheilbrunn@pffac.org
www.pffac.org
REFERENCES


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Alliance for Excellent Education. (2010). *Graduation Rates Factsheet.*


